

GENDER, RACE, AND SECULAR AGENCY IN AMERICAN PROTESTANT FICTION,  
1820-1870

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## ABSTRACT

Ashley Reed: *Gender, Race, And Secular Agency In American Protestant Fiction, 1820-1870*  
(Under the direction of Jane Thrailkill)

This dissertation argues that disenfranchised authors of the antebellum and early postbellum periods used fiction as an imaginative space in which to explore new forms of collaborative agency grounded in particular Protestant beliefs. In chapters on Catharine Maria Sedgwick, William Wells Brown, Susan Warner and Augusta Jane Evans, and Elizabeth Stoddard, it asserts that authors excluded not just from voting citizenship but also from the clergy and from sectarian journals explored in fiction questions of atonement, free will, and predestination that helped them to imagine into being new forms of spiritual and temporal agency. This narrative of religiously based cultural innovation has been overlooked by historicist critics working within a secularized and individualist model of self-determination. Building on recent work in the field of secularism studies that replaces inaccurate sociological models of secularization with a more nuanced description of post-Enlightenment secular society, this project illuminates how modern secular conditions offered new opportunities for the circulation and expression of religious thought and enabled nineteenth-century authors to envision collaborative action across race and gender lines. By attending to the religious concerns woven into fictional plots, this dissertation reveals how states and behaviors that look (to a secularized criticism) like passivity—expressions of belief, unconscious cognition, collective immersion, or willful submission—often represent potent forms of theological engagement that helped writers at the political margins catalyze significant cultural change in a volatile period in American history.

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## **Introduction: Reading Religious Agency in Nineteenth-Century America**

### **Believing in Belief: The Sedgwick Family and the Story of Mum Bett**

This study, focused on Protestant belief and personal agency in nineteenth-century U.S. culture, takes up a set of questions exemplified in the case of the African-American slave woman Elizabeth Freeman and in the way the story of her experiences circulated in the nineteenth-century U.S. in the writings of the white Sedgwick family. In 1781 Theodore Sedgwick, a Massachusetts lawyer and well known Federalist politician who would serve during his career as a delegate to the Continental Congress, a Massachusetts Supreme Court justice, and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, successfully argued for Freeman's emancipation before the Supreme Court of Massachusetts. Freeman, after her emancipation, joined the Sedgwick family as a hired servant and nurse to the seven Sedgwick children, many of whom would pay public tribute, as adults, to the influence of Freeman, or "Mum Bett," whom they regarded as a "second mother" and spiritual guide.

The Sedgwick siblings' divergent written accounts of Freeman's life and of her emancipation reveal the essential interplay of gender, race, and religious belief in the early antebellum public sphere and the possibilities for personal and collective agency that arose from the declaration and circulation of such beliefs. In an 1831 lecture at the Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Lyceum, Henry Sedgwick, second son of Theodore and a rising lawyer and antislavery activist, briefly related the circumstances and the aftermath of Freeman's case, highlighting Theodore Sedgwick's legal achievement in obtaining Freeman's freedom:



The case was tried at Great Barrington. Mum Bett was declared free: it being, I believe, the first instance... of the practical application of the declaration in the Massachusetts Bill of Rights, that ‘all men are born free and equal.’ The late Judge Sedgwick had the principal agency in her deliverance. She attached herself to his family as a servant.... If there could be a practical refutation of the imagined natural superiority of our race to hers, the life and character of this woman would afford that refutation. She knew her station, and perfectly observed its decorum. (16)

When Henry’s younger sister Catharine, a successful author of novels and short stories, recounted the story of Freeman’s emancipation in a short sketch for a British literary journal, her contrasting account emphasized Freeman’s agency rather than Theodore’s:

It was soon after the close of the revolutionary war, that she chanced at the village ‘meeting house,’ in Sheffield, to hear the Declaration of Independence read. She went the next day to the office of Mr. Theodore Sedgwick [sic].... “Sir,” said she, “I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, ‘all men are born equal, and that every man has a right to freedom.[?]’ I am not a dumb *critter*; won’t the law give me my freedom?”... Such a resolve as hers is like God’s messengers—wind, snow, and hail—irresistible.... Mr. Sedgwick [sic] immediately instituted a suit on behalf of the extraordinary plaintiff; a decree was obtained in her favour.... Mum-Bett immediately transferred herself to the service of her champion, in a service that could be called, which was quite as much rule as service. (“Slavery in New England” 421-422)

Henry’s and Catharine’s accounts of Freeman’s emancipation situate agency and the source of that agency in very different places. Henry’s rendition of Freeman’s tale locates agency in a series of legal and logical processes initiated and controlled by the white lawyer Theodore Sedgwick: Freeman is “declared free” by virtue of the “practical application” of the Declaration’s principles, with little to no contribution from Freeman herself. The rational workings of the democratic public sphere are displayed by way of Freeman’s passive body, and her subordination is emphasized in her single act of “attaching herself” to Theodore’s family. In Henry’s telling, Freeman’s humanity exists primarily in the negative, in her perfect suitability for the role of servant: Henry’s “Mum-Bett” paradoxically proves the “superiority” of the black race by “knowing her station” and “perfectly observing its decorum.”

Catharine's version of Freeman's story emphasizes not the impersonal agency vested in legal processes controlled by white men, but the personal and spiritual agency claimed by Freeman herself and the effect of that agency in the public sphere. In Catharine's rendition, it is Freeman's belief in her own equality that prompts her to seek out Theodore's assistance and set in motion the legal case for her freedom. Freeman's powerful belief is rooted in religious conviction applied to the principles of the Declaration: denying that she is a dumb "critter," she speaks in the voice of "God's messengers," declaring that she was "born equal" and that "every man has a right to freedom." Once free she actively "transfers herself" to a paid position in Theodore Sedgwick's family that, according to Catharine, resembles rule more than service and that Freeman holds by a "divine right." This act of "transferal" contrasts sharply with Henry's description of Freeman as "attaching herself" to Theodore's family—a formulation that emphasizes her dependence on the Sedgwicks' largesse rather than her self-determined choice to enter into their employ.

In Catharine's narrative, belief in her own God-given humanity allows the enslaved black woman Elizabeth Freeman to approach the white, wealthy, and politically powerful Theodore Sedgwick and enlist his assistance: Theodore, rather than assuming the "principal agency" as in Henry's telling, instead "meets" Mum Bett on her own moral ground and initiates a case "on her behalf." It is Freeman's "resolve"—her moral energy, not Theodore's—that initiates the cooperative effort between them that transforms the "constitutional abstraction" of legal equality into personal and historical reality. Belief, in Catharine's version of Freeman's story, is the engine that makes personal agency possible, bridging the chasms of race, class, and gender that separate Freeman from Theodore Sedgwick. Freeman's belief, in turn, led to wider social

change: the Sedgwicks credited Freeman's case with ending all forms of slavery in Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup>

The repeated narrativization of Freeman's story by members of the Sedgwick family thus provided an imaginative space in which the influential New England siblings might interrogate the relationship between religious and political belief, personal identity, and human agency. Catharine, in particular, retold Elizabeth Freeman's story throughout her 40-year career, proliferating fictional models of cross-race, cross-gender, and cross-class agency based on the religious resolve of Elizabeth Freeman. Versions of Freeman's story appear not only in "Slavery in New England" but in Catharine's 1835 novel *The Linwoods*, her unpublished antislavery story from the 1830s,<sup>2</sup> and most famously in her 1827 novel *Hope Leslie*, in which Elizabeth Freeman is immortalized in the character of Magawisca, a Pequot woman who prevents the execution of an innocent man. In each of these texts Sedgwick reenvisioned Freeman as a figure who could wield agency and effect change despite disenfranchisement, simply by virtue of the power of belief.

Once these fictional models of agentive belief entered the public sphere, they could in turn be emulated in the arenas of political agitation and moral reform. In March 1831, the African-American abolitionist Sarah Louisa Forten, writing for *The Liberator*, adopted the pen

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the legal history of this and other cases that led to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts—a far more drawn out and complex process than either Henry or Catharine describes—see Emily Blanck's "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts" and Arthur Zilversmit's "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts." Contemporary legal scholars are generally in agreement that Freeman's case, while representing an important step in the eventual abolition of slavery in Massachusetts, was not immediately responsible for it.

<sup>2</sup> Though the manuscript is undated, Karen Woods Weierman convincingly dates the composition of the story to the early 1830's. See Weierman's "A Slave Story I Began and Abandoned."

name “Magawisca” to exhort slaveholders to amend their ways and to act in accordance with their professed religious beliefs:

Awake from your lethargy; exert every nerve; cast off the yoke from the oppressed; let the bondsman go free; and cry unto your offended God to send freedom... I say, cry unto Him for aid; for can you think that He, the Great Spirit, who created all men free and equal... will always allow you to rest tranquil on your downy couches? No... He will shake the tree of liberty, and its blossoms shall spread over the earth.

Writing in a voice that invokes both the Biblical prophets of the Old Testament and Sedgwick’s fictional heroine, Forten, like Freeman, makes a cross-race and cross-gender appeal based on belief in her own equality and in God’s ultimate justice.

This dissertation examines figurations of agentic belief in the fiction of the antebellum and early postbellum United States and argues that disenfranchised authors of the early- to mid-nineteenth century—those explicitly excluded from electoral political participation, from the clergy, and from institutions of higher education—transformed the realm of published fiction into a creative laboratory in which to imagine into being new forms of collaborative agency grounded in shared Protestant beliefs. Each of my chapters investigates how the employment of theological concepts and controversies enabled female and African-American authors otherwise denied cultural power to imagine and narratively construct new models of personal and collective agency that were legible within the context of the nineteenth-century Protestant public sphere. Inhabiting and fictionalizing the terms of particular doctrinal debates, I argue, gave disenfranchised writers a language and a set of symbolic structures with which to envision new ways of being and acting in the world—ways that were simultaneously compatible with and transformative of contemporary theological principles and cultural norms.

The authors included in this study demonstrate what the religious historian Mary Bednarowski calls “theological creativity”: the willingness and ability to adapt existing

doctrines, or even to invent new ones, in ways that are meaningful for individuals and often for the community as a whole (15). I argue that women and African-American authors of the antebellum period employed the language of Protestant doctrine and theology because it was both a natural and familiar form of discourse and an accepted means by which to enter into public discussion about the role of disenfranchised persons in society and the modes of action in which they might engage. Excluded from the clergy and from the sectarian journals and institutions of higher education where formalized doctrinal debate took place, disenfranchised authors turned to fiction as a space for religious reflection and for imagining alternative ways of being, believing, and acting in the world.<sup>3</sup>

More than what individual authors believe, this project is about what *texts* believe—how novels participate in the public sphere by positing and performing historically and culturally contingent forms of belief and thereby cultivating those beliefs in readers. Investigating the role of belief in nineteenth-century texts is not simply a task of translation or explication; while the details of doctrine are important insofar as they represent cognitive structures through which individuals and communities understand the world, investigating a text’s belief system is not simply a matter of researching the details of Calvinist or Unitarian or Spiritualist doctrine and overlaying those details onto a text to produce a legible reading of its (or its author’s) theological commitments. Rather, to ask what a text believes is to investigate *both* the world from which a text emerges and the reformed world that it imagines into being, and to consider what conditions of existence and possibilities for agency that world presupposes and makes narratively viable.

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<sup>3</sup> This dissertation is in one sense a companion story to David Reynolds’s “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America,” which traces the evolution of the clerical sermon in antebellum America from a form that served primarily as a delivery mechanism for theological propositions to one that inspired and moved listeners through the medium of narrative. This dissertation demonstrates, among other things, that at the same time that the preached sermon was becoming more narratively driven, popular narrative was serving as a forum for doctrinal discussion.

This dissertation approaches nineteenth-century fiction by disenfranchised authors as a series of imaginative worlds in which the public agency of women and African Americans became imaginable precisely insofar as such agency was readable and resonant within the terms of nineteenth-century Protestant doctrinal discourse—insofar as it represented what William James called a “living option” (“Will” 3). Nineteenth-century fiction, I argue, was the arena in which the skeleton of Protestant doctrine put on the sinews of personal agency and walked forth into the world.

### **A Social History of Belief**

In “The American Scholar,” his 1837 address to the Harvard Chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted that

As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it... [I]n proportion as a man has any thing in him divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form. Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind. (86)

Emerson’s vision of a world that responds to the belief and behavior of individuals reflects not only his own intellectual experience but the cultural terms of the nineteenth-century Protestant public sphere, in which belief—and the ability to shape the beliefs of others—was indeed the most potent of cultural currencies. Emerson’s model of divinity—including human divinity—is discursive: both the heavens and human opinion are shaped by the expression of belief, and it is these expressions that distinguish great men from ordinary ones.

This dissertation project also approaches belief as a discursive process, one that inspired and informed new models of agency during the antebellum and immediately post-bellum periods. It treats belief—and the varieties of Protestant doctrine present in the nineteenth-century United States in particular—as discourse rather than ideology: as “something that you *do*... rather

than something to which you are subjected” (Mills 79). And it reveals how mastering, internalizing, and producing Protestant religious discourse enabled not only men like Emerson but also women and African Americans to imagine into being new forms of agency for themselves and their communities.<sup>4</sup> This project does not set out to prove that religious belief enables agency in all contexts and under all circumstances, but instead details how, under the cultural terms of the nineteenth-century public sphere, the exploration of doctrine through fiction enabled disenfranchised authors to imagine multiple and contingent forms of agency that were both brought into being and simultaneously bounded by the social conditions and sectarian structures from which they emerged.

Treating nineteenth-century novels as both intellectual products and imaginary worlds where new forms of belief can be explored, this project approaches belief as a set of active, though not necessarily conscious, choices: performances of the will involving mind, body, and soul that take rhetorical or textual form but at the same time cannot be reduced to the merely rational or intellectual. William James, writing of belief as an act of will, spoke of the range of beliefs available to members of a community or culture as “hypotheses” with varying degrees of “liveness”: “The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief” (“Will” 3). But to speak of belief as “hypothesis” risks over-intellectualizing an act and a state of being that involves every aspect of experience—mental,

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<sup>4</sup> In employing a discourse model of religious adherence rather than an ideological one, I am implicitly distinguishing between doctrinal agency and doctrinal determinism. Doctrinal determinism is the suggestion that religious doctrine (or any deeply held belief or group adherence including, for instance, political party identification) does not merely influence and inform but actually determines the behavior of those who hold particular beliefs, and does so in stable and predictable ways. Doctrinal determinism is a surprisingly resilient ideology in its own right—one that frequently arises, for instance, during elections, as when commentators feared that Barack Obama would follow in lockstep the dictates of Pastor Jeremiah Wright, or that Mitt Romney sought the presidency in order to fulfill the “White Horse prophecy” of Joseph Smith. Such predictions are little different from the nineteenth-century accusation that Catholics were unfit for public office because their loyalties ostensibly lay with the pope rather than with the American people.

emotional, spiritual, and physical—and sometimes operates below or beyond the level of individual consciousness.<sup>5</sup> As I will elaborate later in this introduction during my discussion of secularism theory, to approach belief as an entirely cognitive process is to misapprehend the variety of ways that belief can be experienced and enacted in the world.

As a complex aspect of human experience, belief has multiple valences, intersecting with factual knowledge and affective positions in myriad ways. The religious philosopher J.L. Schellenberg, building on James and other observers of religious experience, usefully distinguishes between propositional belief—the condition of thinking that a certain state of affairs exists and has the quality of reality—and affective belief, which involves both the acknowledgment that a certain state of affairs exists and an accompanying “affective or emotional state” related to that reality.<sup>6</sup> Schellenberg calls propositional belief “belief-that,” as in “I believe that Santa Claus is a myth,” and affective belief “belief-in,” as in “I believe in racial equality” (67-74). The different temporal registers of these formulations—“belief-that” something currently *is* so and “belief-in” the possibility that something *might be* so—index the tension between them: one may believe-in equal pay for men and women while also believing-

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that James always approaches belief as a solely cognitive process; “The Will to Believe,” *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and James’s other writings on religion are too wide-ranging to be summarized and dismissed in one quotation. I offer a more extended discussion of James in the coda to this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> Most religious historians do not make this distinction, but define all Protestant belief as “propositional” (or sometimes “creedal”). It is certainly true that Protestant sects have traditionally emphasized both the fact of belief and the correctness of one’s belief, with correct belief serving as the marker of inclusion in a particular religious community. This is why Protestant reform movements seek to realign the set of beliefs that define one as inside or outside the community while nevertheless insisting that belief itself is indispensable. This is the reform impulse that William Wells Brown invokes in *Clotel* when he labels the abolitionist woman Georgiana Peck a “true Christian” while leaving her father, an ordained but proslavery Methodist minister, outside the circle of “true Christianity.” Proper belief—in this case abolitionism—rather than ordination becomes the mark of inclusion in the Christian community.

The problem with categorizing belief as merely propositional, however, is that this oversimplifies the definition of belief, reducing it to an entirely rational and individual process—an intellectual choice that the religious adherent makes and can “unmake” at any time. This definition overlooks both the emotional and unconscious processes involved in belief formation and the often communal nature of belief.



that men and women are currently compensated unequally. Belief-in exists in an open-ended temporal space in which that which is not could be, or perhaps has been in the past. It is in the chasm between that which *is* and that which *might be* or *may have been* that new possibilities for human agency can be found.

Belief, then, is a complex interpenetration of intellectual propositions and affective investments that positions a person or group with respect to current conditions and future possibilities. As such it is a “continuing source of knowledge production” that intersects with and informs other sources of self-knowledge—including race, gender, class, and sexuality—and ways of being and acting in the world (McGarry 14). Belief, as Jenny Franchot notes, “ranges powerfully within, but always in some sense beyond the cultural, into the ethical and the mystical, braiding social and theological traditions with the interior life of the person” (834). And it can be a powerful spur to personal and collective agency, particularly for those who share beliefs in common. The effects of agentive belief are not always politically progressive or personally edifying; even among the texts discussed in this dissertation there are conflicting applications of Protestant belief, as when Augusta Jane Evans interprets free will theology in ways that bolster slavery and William Wells Brown as a means to decry it. To understand the workings of agentive belief, and of Protestant doctrinal agency in particular, it is necessary to treat human agency, the acts that arise from it, and the political content of those acts as separate but related phenomena.

The fact that belief can serve as a potent social force and a catalyst for collaborative agency is the result of historical and social processes that have shaped the Western public sphere in the centuries since the Protestant Reformation. The cultural ascendancy of belief, as the anthropologist and cultural theorist Talal Asad has shown, is neither a historical constant nor a

universal phenomenon. In order for disenfranchised persons to effectively and publicly wield the doctrinal terms in which Protestant belief is expressed, the agentive power of belief had first to be established in Western cultures, a long and complex historical process that created the religious-secular conditions of possibility for the emergence of the writers included in this dissertation.

The language of belief was disentangled from structures of clerical and political authority in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a process that reached its apex between 1790 and 1820, the period known to scholars as the Second Great Awakening. Michael Warner's current work on the history of the free thought and evangelical movements details how, in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation, public religious speech was transformed from a rare privilege closely circumscribed by considerations of rank, gender, age, wealth, or position of authority to a widely available discourse best wielded in the service of "conversionistic witness." As the salvation of human souls came to be recognized as the highest earthly good, the exigencies of conversion enabled forms of public religious speech that relied for their justification on the perception of Christian sincerity—on strong belief—rather than on official ordination or social rank (M. Warner, "Freethought"). These new forms of religious speech could be either personal—as when attendees at outdoor revivals took to the stage on no more authority than their own experiences of conversion—or textual, encompassing pamphlets, tracts, broadsides, sketches, stories, and novels. The broadening field of acceptable public religious speech was thus facilitated by the growth of print publication, since print offered the opportunity for those disadvantaged by race, class, or gender to "enter into rational-critical debate around matters common to all" by producing (often anonymously) printed texts that might circulate in

the public sphere (M. Warner, *Publics* 57).<sup>7</sup> Over time the print public sphere accordingly became “a social and ideological space for individuals to express unorthodox views and to draw together people of different persuasions” (Beneke 47). Together these historical phenomena laid the foundations that would eventually make it possible for the African-American novelist William Wells Brown, for instance, to stage a religious debate between ordained clergy and laypeople and between pro- and antislavery thinkers in his 1853 novel *Clotel*.<sup>8</sup>

The transformation of belief from a specialized language wielded by clerics and kings to a free-flowing discourse that entailed its own agentive capacities and could be transferred from

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<sup>7</sup> Warner’s recent work demonstrates how, over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the public circulation of error came to constitute a necessary condition for the formation of even privately held belief. Whereas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries theological error had been equated with plague, “threaten[ing] to deprive the inhabitants of [the colonies] not of their mortal bodies but of their immortal souls” (Beneke 26-27), under the influence of the free thought movement, which held that truth could only be reached through the widespread circulation of error, the “right of private judgment”—the precursor of the principle now called “liberty of conscience”—slowly rose to prominence as a value to be embraced rather than a heresy to be shunned (M. Warner, “Freethought”). The principle that religious truth might be collectively ascertained rather than, or in addition to, being received as revelation is the enabling condition for the forms of public religious debate examined in this dissertation.

<sup>8</sup> The rise of religious speech produced by persons of different ranks, genders, and races and the widespread circulation of such speech in the print public sphere culminated, in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, in the event known to scholars as the Second Great Awakening. Lasting from approximately 1790-1820, the Awakening saw the creation of myriad new religious movements and the rapid growth of existing ones, particularly revivalist sects like the Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ. With its emphasis on visible and narratable religious feeling and on the primacy of personal experience, the Awakening, along with the liberalization of the culturally dominant New England Congregationalist churches, began to redistribute cultural authority in a process that religious historian Nathan Hatch has called the “democratization” of American Christianity. As much as the spate of outdoor revivals that most famously characterized the Second Great Awakening (and most unnerved the leaders of settled denominations including the Congregationalists and Anglicans), the flurry of pamphlets, printed sermons, tracts, and rebuttals produced during the Second Great Awakening solidified the sense that theological debates among people of different beliefs were best conducted in the print public sphere.

Describing the spate of revivals, theological controversies, and denominational divisions that took place in the wake of the American Revolution—and the spike in religious adherence that accompanied them—Hatch notes that “within a few years of Jefferson’s election in 1800, it became anachronistic to speak of [religious] dissent in America—as if there were still a commonly recognized center against which new or emerging groups defined themselves” (7). While religious and social historians have qualified some of Hatch’s findings (see, for instance, Jon Butler’s *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, which is in many ways an extended response to Hatch), his work stands as an important repudiation of the inaccurate narratives of decline that dominated histories of American religion through at least the 1980s.

one speaker/writer to another was a long and complicated process. Those groups whose language was presumed to be irrational, incomprehensible, or irrelevant and thus beyond the pale of public discourse found it particularly difficult to achieve authority in the public sphere, even through the supposedly “disembodied” medium of print.<sup>9</sup> Inhabiting belief by accessing the discourse of Protestant theology was often a double-edged sword for the disenfranchised. On the one hand, it was the purported anonymity of print publication that made it possible for those excluded from centers of political and religious power by virtue of their gender, race, or class to nevertheless enter into the public sphere:

[T]he invention of the printing press made possible the religious and political enfranchisement of previously subjugated peoples.... They argued successfully that print’s invisibility, which allowed ideas to circulate independently of the bodies that created them, freed [them] from their [race, class, and gender] identities and thus gave them a better chance to achieve parity with [white] men. (Baym, “Women’s Novels” 339)

At the same time, however, the construction of the public sphere as a space of rationality assumed to be white and male reified gendered and raced divisions of public and private: since the public sphere was implicitly white and male and the private sphere implicitly non-white and female, those who wished to enter the print public sphere were required to “bracke[t] their embodiment and status” in order to converse on public matters.<sup>10</sup> But because “[t]he bourgeois

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<sup>9</sup> Warner refers to the weakening of rank, gender, and class qualifications for public religious speech as the rise of “disembodied address,” but this term is misleading because it suggests that there is no relationship between texts and bodies, or that readers encountering a text—even an anonymous text—will not make assumptions about the body that produced it.

<sup>10</sup> It is an axiom of feminist-inflected public sphere theory that the Western liberal public sphere has been and remains implicitly masculine. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon notes, “gender is one of the key categories through which liberalism scripts the interrelated public and private lives of citizens of the liberal state,” and “the position marked out for women—particularly white women—within liberalism is private and familial” (2, 3). As Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler note, “[t]he [antebellum] public sphere was a... masculine realm, a site of rational political discourse and economic production characterized by competition rather than sentiment, by inscrutable business practices rather than transparent moral tenets” (Chapman and Hendler 3).

public sphere consists of private persons whose identity is formed in the privacy of the conjugal domestic family,” those most closely associated with the private sphere—including wives, children, servants, and slaves—were doubly identified with the domestic and the personal, so that even as they entered into rational public debate, their areas of expertise and authority, when acknowledged at all, were assumed to be domestic and personal (M. Warner, *Publics* 57).<sup>11</sup> Any attempt to converse on topics related to politics, professionalism, business, theology, or the law—“public” subjects suitable for rational (read: white male) debate—drew forth images of the grotesque or unnatural, as when Samuel Johnson famously asserted that “a woman’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs.”<sup>12</sup> In order to “naturalize” their use of theological discourse, disenfranchised authors turned to the increasingly available realm of fiction, which offered a space—public but not overtly political—in which they might discuss theological matters and simultaneously depict the consequences of doctrinal questions for individuals’ and communities’ lives. The public space of fiction offered disenfranchised authors opportunities to prise open the doors of white-male-only religious, legal, and social debate (perhaps exemplified

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<sup>11</sup> The “separate spheres” theory that dominated much late-twentieth-century criticism of women’s writing—and that has come under considerable debate by scholars—thus describes a nineteenth-century social ideal more than an actual historical state of affairs. As Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler note, [w]ithin domestic ideology, in its classic nineteenth-century formulations such as Catharine Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, the home was a feminine realm, where a woman’s influence reigned over the affections of her children and husband. For the man, domesticity offered a ‘haven in a heartless world,’ where he could seek comfort after a day in the marketplace.... That this binary was more a class, race, and national ideology than a universal social practice made it no less effective in shaping discourse on gender, affect, and cultural space. (3)

<sup>12</sup> Boswell, *Life of Johnson*. Vol. ii. Chap. ix. 1763.

most clearly in the “pamphlet wars” of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries)<sup>13</sup> and make space for enacting new theological ideas.

Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, publicly proclaimed belief became the coin of the realm in colonial and early national America, such that deeply held beliefs came to be accorded authority precisely because they conformed to a Protestant providential worldview that linked strong belief with both personal conviction and transcendent truth.<sup>14</sup> Within a public sphere structured by this Protestant worldview, the ability to “identif[y], cultivat[e], and tes[t] belief as a verbalizable inner condition” became the requirement for entry into public life (Asad 48). To intervene in the nineteenth-century public sphere was to negotiate a

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<sup>13</sup> The most famous of these protracted theological wranglings was perhaps the “Wood and Ware” debate of the 1820s, in which the Edwardsean Calvinist Leonard Woods, of Andover Seminary, and the Unitarian minister Henry Ware conducted a two-year exchange of pamphlets on the subject of Trinitarian versus Unitarian theology. So rancorous did some of these public discussions become that Lydia Maria Child, a liberal Unitarian, eventually concluded that “religion diminishes in the same proportion that theology increases” (quoted in Holifield 208).

<sup>14</sup> Religious studies scholars have in recent decades come to recognize that the primacy of belief (and its elevation above practice, ritual, and other religious forms) is a characteristic, not of all religions, but of Protestant religions in particular. As the anthropologist Webb Keane notes (drawing on Talal Asad), “[m]any religious traditions have little interest in either individual belief or public statements of doctrine, and many accept differences of interpretation as long as practices themselves remain consistent” (“Language and Religion” 431-432). Scholars of non-Protestant and non-Christian religions have accordingly begun seeking out methodologies of study that do not begin and end with the question, “what do these people believe?” The result has been a proliferation of useful ethnographic studies that seek to enumerate and describe the social structures and ritual practices of non-Protestant religious communities. As Amy Hungerford observes, “the new religious studies, which favor the thick description of religious practice (what is now called ‘lived religion’) over efforts to parse what religious people and churches say about their beliefs, makes belief, as Robert Orsi suggests, ‘the wrong question’” (xx).

But the appropriateness of the question depends on the kind of answer one is trying to find. If one seeks to describe the many ways in which groups of human beings struggle to understand the meaning and purpose of existence in the face of the unknown or unknowable (a broad but perhaps serviceable definition of “religion”), then thick description of a plurality of practices is a fine way to do so. (Indeed, long before the anthropologist Clifford Geertz championed thick description as a method for recording and understanding the religious practices of non-Western peoples, William James founded the Gifford Lectures that would become the basis for *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on his belief “that a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas, however deep” (*Varieties* 5).) But if one seeks to understand the conditions for participating in a public sphere structured by a set of implicitly Protestant assumptions about how diverse groups of people with different beliefs should be allowed to speak to one another, then “What do these people believe?” is precisely the right question.

religious, political, and social milieu whose terms were ever changing but nevertheless firmly rooted in the principle that private belief was a matter for public debate. When Elizabeth Freeman approached Theodore Sedgwick to declare that she knew herself to be human and therefore deserved to be free, she was invoking her right to participate in a public sphere brought into being by declarations of belief. When Catharine Sedgwick invoked Freeman's story over the course of her writing career, she demonstrated how fiction might function as a powerful public space within which to debate different beliefs and their attendant possibilities for human agency.

As proscriptions against the writing and publication of fiction that had carried over from the colonial era began to fall away,<sup>15</sup> learning to verbalize the “inner condition of true religion” through the medium of published fiction offered disenfranchised authors a means to enter into a culturally dominant Protestant public sphere whose terms of discourse were often explicitly theological.<sup>16</sup> As a public space newly available to the disenfranchised, fiction provided an

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<sup>15</sup> Fiction writing, especially for women and minority writers, was not an entirely accepted vocation in the antebellum United States. But while proscriptions against fiction (as well as theatre and other forms of entertainment) were rife, would-be fabulists received cautious encouragement from a number of respected religious sources. The Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, of whom Catharine Maria Sedgwick was a great admirer, devoted many pages of his *North American Review* to calls for a uniquely American literature. (See, for instance, his “Essay on American Language and Literature” and “Reflections on the Literary Delinquency of America.”) The great evangelist George Whitefield, according to his memoirist, believed that “a pointed anecdote, or vivacious illustration, while it keeps alive attention by its variety and novelty, will oftentimes... lead unschooled men to recognize and admit a truth” (Gillies v). And the influential Common Sense philosophy of Scottish thinkers George Campbell and Hugh Blair recommended that common truths be sought in the everyday experience of individuals—the very stuff of which fiction might be made. See David Reynolds’s “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Public Storytelling in America” for a detailed discussion of the influence of these clerical pronouncements on the nineteenth-century public sphere.

<sup>16</sup> As Winnifred Sullivan, Tracy Fessenden, and other religious studies scholars have shown, the U.S. public sphere is now and has always been structured by a set of assumptions about belief and behavior that align closely with Protestant epistemologies, even in cases in which “religion” or “the religious” is not at issue. This is not to say that there were no non-Protestant individuals or religious communities in the nineteenth-century United States; religious diversity has long been a characteristic of the American experience. Rather, it is to acknowledge that persons and communities throughout American history who have wished to participate fully in the public sphere have been required to conform to Protestant models of religious adherence—models that recognize a religion as “true” only if it is expressed in ways that are

imaginative realm in which the propositional religious beliefs debated in pamphlets and sectarian journals could be explored in terms of their affective and social dimensions—in which belief-that and belief-in could be productively joined. The mediating possibilities of fiction, though they did not render women and other disenfranchised persons immune to accusations of impropriety, arrogance, and dereliction of domestic duty, nevertheless offered opportunities for exploring the consequences of particular Protestant theologies within a shared imaginary space.

The historical shift I have just described has most often been characterized by literary scholars in the language of competition or decline, most famously by Ann Douglas, whose *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) told the story of an unfortunate fall: women writers and liberal ministers brought an austere Calvinist theological tradition to an end by combining theology with fiction in a series of rhetorical transformations that “feminized” and commercialized the public sphere.<sup>17</sup> While acknowledging Douglas’s pathbreaking work on

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perceived to be “private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed” (Sullivan 8). Sullivan calls this condition of American civic life “small-p protestantism.”

The persistence of Protestant configurations of the public sphere does not imply that appropriate forms of participation in the public sphere have been stable or unchanging. “Private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed”—and their perceived opposites, “[p]ublic, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted” (Sullivan 8)—are terms that, as Michael Warner has shown, are constantly under negotiation in Western societies: “Public and private sometimes compete, sometimes complement each other, and sometimes are merely parts of a larger series of classifications that includes, say, local, domestic, personal, political, economic, or intimate” (M. Warner, *Publics* 28). Consider that activities that counted as acceptable public religious behavior in 1832—school prayer, for instance, or the public holiday sermon—are now suited only to private religious practice.

<sup>17</sup> While scholars in the fields of both religious studies and literary studies have sought to complicate Douglas’s thesis, its terms still inform much discussion of nineteenth-century religious literature. Dawn Coleman’s recent *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* (2013), for instance, while distancing its project from Douglas’s, nevertheless adopts Douglas’s assumption that there is an inherent antagonism between “religious” and “secular” sources of influence. This division makes it difficult to read disenfranchised authors as anything other than failed imitators of white, male ministers and obscures these authors’ contributions to nineteenth-century doctrinal discourse.

The anti-clerical impulse found in so much writing by disenfranchised nineteenth-century authors (a subject I elaborate further in my chapter on William Wells Brown) has contributed to the critical tendency to characterize popular authors and members of the clergy as competing with one another for public attention and influence. But an attentive reading of nineteenth-century fiction suggests that most popular



nineteenth-century women's religious influence, this project takes a more nuanced view of the antebellum public sphere as a discourse community in which theological ideas were not simply handed down from clerical authorities but instead were socially created, circulating widely and coming under continual debate both explicitly, in sectarian journals and printed sermons, and more subtly in the fictional productions that increasingly occupied the popular imagination.<sup>18</sup> As historian Gregory Jackson notes, in nineteenth-century America

elite religious discourse was shadowed—sometimes even overshadowed—by a wealth of popular narrative materials organized around sermons, novels and other homiletic spaces.... '[F]ormal' doctrine and theology coming out of synods and seminaries, churches and conclaves, and the private studies of ministers were transformed by remarkable men and women on the ground. (4)

Such transformations were significant, not only for their effect on the American religious landscape (the area with which Jackson is concerned), but because they enabled individuals and communities to imagine new ways of being and behaving in the public sphere and new ways of acting in the world.

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authors did not so much want to be preachers as they wanted to be something different and more effective than preachers. While pulpit preaching was often criticized for being pedantic and monotonous, female and African American authors saw literature as a way to appeal to the whole human organism: mind, body, heart, spirit, and soul. Literature was not simply a form of preaching; it was an improvement on preaching that could incorporate all the best aspects of pulpit instruction—appeals to the intellect, exploration of difficult ideas—while allowing for other forms of religious communication as well.

David Reynolds's *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* provides a useful taxonomy of antebellum religious fiction as well as an important counterpoint to Douglas's depiction of the "feminization" of American culture. "The argument that a strong, masculine Calvinism gave way to a shrinkingly feminine liberalism is almost a reversal of fact," Reynolds writes. Many liberal Protestant writers "saw Calvinism as a repressive system which not only thwarted human effort but created a timid languor and listlessness"; thus the effort to liberalize Calvinism through fiction could be depicted as heroic and full of masculine interest.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Braude's work on the important role of women in nineteenth-century religious communities responds to Ann Douglas's famous feminization thesis while, in a certain sense, talking past it. In "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," Braude notes that Protestant churches did not experience a sharp increase in female adherents in the nineteenth century, as the term "feminization" might suggest. But this fact leaves Douglas's larger thesis, that female religious adherents exerted an undue and unhealthy influence on nineteenth-century Protestant thought and are thus responsible for the failings of twentieth-century popular culture, largely intact.

It is the transformation of theology through the medium of fiction and the consequences of that transformation for human agency that this dissertation project details. It argues that the realm of published fiction provided a conventional space in which disenfranchised authors might safely explore theological problems and the ramifications of those problems for people's lives. I use the term "conventional," not in the derogatory sense of "hackneyed" or "lacking in originality," but in the manner delineated by Lauren Berlant in her discussion of women's culture: a conventional text offers "a profound placeholder that provides an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling can actually be lived" (Berlant 3). While white male authors also used fiction to engage with theological questions, published fiction provided a particularly welcoming space for disenfranchised authors whose exclusion from seminaries and sectarian journals left them with few other outlets for public religious discussion. But more than a last resort for religious debate, fiction provided a generic space for exploring the consequences of theological positions. When Augusta Jane Evans turned to the genre of woman's fiction to explore the consequences of free will theology for white southern women, for instance, she both intervened in an ongoing debate between Calvinist and Arminian thinkers and constructed a model of female agency grounded in Arminian theological convictions. For Evans and other female and African-American authors, the generic space of the historical novel, or woman's fiction, or the bildungsroman provided a framework within which explorations of agency became possible and where characters—and by extension authors and readers—could "negotiat[e] belonging to a world" (Berlant 3).

## The Secularization Thesis and the Study of American Literature

That nineteenth-century fiction shows an abiding concern with matters of religious belief and practice is not a new observation, but until recently most treatments of nineteenth-century religious fiction—and particularly religious fiction written by women and African Americans—have been hampered by inaccurate historical-theological models, particularly narratives of secularization. The secularization thesis is a sociological theory formulated and popularized by Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and, most famously, Max Weber that posits that Western social institutions are becoming less religious over time, that religion is a matter best suited to the private sphere, and (in some versions of the theory) that religion is destined to eventually die out entirely.<sup>19</sup> The secularization thesis traces a narrative of progress (or decline, depending on one's point of view) according to which the irrational superstitions of the past are being gradually replaced by rational certainties; Max Weber called this process “Entzauberung,” a word usually translated as “disenchantment” that has been more literally limned by religious historian Molly McGarry as “the elimination of magic from the world” (13). In critical narratives based on the secularization thesis, “religion can function only as an anachronistic invasion into public life that logically aligns with conservative and reactionary returns to moral values” (McGarry 5). The secularization thesis has thus provided a powerful sociological metanarrative, both for those who would position religion as a vestige of humanity's primitive past to be excised and forgotten and for those who would claim the spiritual downfall of America and advocate for the “return” of religion to public life. But the thesis is historically incorrect, at least in the United States, where religious adherence has held steady, and occasionally risen, over the last two hundred years and where religion remains a matter for public debate and political

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<sup>19</sup> See Jose Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* and Bryan Wilson's “The Secularization Thesis: Criticisms and Rebuttals” for succinct formulations of the thesis and its history.

concern.<sup>20</sup> It has maintained its place in scholarly discourse despite its inaccuracies because, as the religious historian R. Laurence Moore asserts, it helps historians and literary critics construct a usable past that points toward an increasingly enlightened and rational future (vii).

But in addition to its historical inaccuracy, the secularization thesis is also ideologically problematic: it can be used to justify the othering of groups not considered sufficiently secularized—those for whom magic has demonstrably *not* been eliminated from their worlds. At the global level it serves as a prop to claims of Western cultural superiority: secularized societies are “the province of an Enlightened and white majority, describing and prescribing a transparent world set apart from primitive enchantments, mystery, and things that [go] bump in the night” (Modern, *Secularism* 283). At the national and regional level it helps to define what is truly un/American: religious individuals and groups are tolerated so long as they behave in ways that do not seem particularly “religious”—so long as their beliefs and practices are “rational, word-

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<sup>20</sup> Writing in 2010, historians Kevin Schultz and Paul Harvey noted that “[i]n 1870, 35 percent of Americans considered themselves religious adherents. Today, that figure stands closer to 62 percent. In America today... people identify with religious organizations at rates higher than at any time since the Puritans ruled Massachusetts in the mid-seventeenth century” (129-130). The religious historian Jon Butler, treating Christian adherence in particular, asserts that “the story of religion in America after 1700 is one of Christian ascension rather than declension—Christianization rather than dechristianization—and of a Christianity so complex and heterogeneous as to baffle observers and adherents alike” (2).

Scholars who remain convinced of the explanatory power of the secularization thesis often argue that church attendance numbers are of little use in gauging the social processes that fall under the heading of “secularization.” The sociologist Bryan Wilson, for instance, asserts that since “[s]ecularization is concerned not simply with patterns of social behaviour, but with the principles and assumptions by which society is organized and in accordance with which it operates... it is by no means inconceivable that [church] attendance figures might remain static, or even increase in societies the organization and operation of which were simultaneously becoming manifestly more secularized” (57). Such statements leave unanswered the question of how, exactly, secularization might be measured. In the 2012 General Social Survey, a record number of Americans—20 per cent—reported that they belonged to “no religion,” a statistic that received much attention in the press. (Note that this leaves 80 per cent of the U.S. population with some religious affiliation—a number even higher than that recorded by Schultz and Harvey in 2010.) But only three per cent of survey respondents said that they did not believe in God. While the former number has risen steadily over the last two decades, the latter has barely budged since the GSS began tracking religious affiliation in 1972 (Hout et al.). It is unclear whether these statistics should be read as evidence of secularization or of continuing religiosity. It is perhaps more accurate to say, not that America is “secularized,” but that “Americans are as religious as ever, even if their affiliations to particular faith groups have somewhat faded” (Schultz and Harvey 129).

centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, [and] compatible with democracy and the liberal state” (Orsi 15).<sup>21</sup> When applied to narratives of American literary history, the secularization thesis has sometimes obscured particular forms of religious experience, including those in which ritual, emotion, and collective action take precedence over rational reflection or rugged individualism.

At the literary-critical level, the persistence of the secularization narrative has made it difficult to accurately assess the importance of religion to nineteenth-century literary history and to the works of disenfranchised and minority authors in particular. Some critics, reading religious adherence primarily as a vestigial trace of an earlier era, have turned their attention instead to other important issues, underestimating how much religious belief and practice intersect and overlap with matters of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and regional and national origin to form individuals’ identities and to produce a literary and cultural landscape.<sup>22</sup> Other critics,

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<sup>21</sup> Groups and individuals who do not fit these categories—who maintain distinctive ritual practices, engage in charismatic forms of worship, reject or defy the norms of the nuclear family (by embracing polygamy or promoting unrestricted childbearing), or are suspected of allying with non-democratic political movements—are grouped together under a “nomenclature of marginalization (cults, sects, primitives, and so on)” and expected to keep their religion private (Orsi 15).

<sup>22</sup> Recently a number of literary critics and scholars of religious studies have noted the tendency among late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century critics to overlook or ignore religion and have offered varying explanations for such oversights. Tracy Fessenden notes that “in American literary studies, a field historically given shape by its own narrative of democratization, religion receives little attention except when it figures as crucial to a progressive, emancipatory politics (Christian antislavery being the readiest example), and often not even then” (2). Susan Mizruchi argues that “in literary studies, the powerful impact of poststructuralism, with its skepticism toward universals and transcendence, created a general resistance toward religion as a subject of analysis. This was underscored by the rising visibility in the 1980’s of America’s religious right, which reinforced an earlier tendency to identify religion with the forces of reaction” (x). And Joanna Brooks attributes critical silence on religious questions to “a rigid and outmoded Marxist rejection of religion as ideological delusion” that has been gradually but not yet completely superseded by “a more contemporary cultural studies understanding of religion as a venue for creative and political agency” (18).

Criticism focused on sentimental literature is perhaps the one arena in which religion has remained consistently at the forefront of critical discussion. But in my third chapter, on Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah*, I demonstrate how the application of inaccurate religious-historical terms like “evangelical” has obscured the role of religion in sentimental texts.

while acknowledging the centrality of religion to much nineteenth-century writing, have treated religious piety and practice as problems to be explained away rather than as potential sources of agency, self-expression, companionship, and collective action. In many cases these critical works draw from a set of assumptions about the nature of religious adherence that are at best only partially accurate: that religion is primarily a tool of patriarchy rather than a matter of personal choice or a vehicle for self-expression; that gender and race are more authentic sources of personal identity than religious adherence; that religious language is a code, adopted consciously or unconsciously, behind which “real” concerns can be found; that religious belief results from ignorance or lack of education; and that nineteenth-century authors (women especially) would have been better off without religion than with it. Such assumptions frequently obscure the important role that religious adherence and belief played for disenfranchised nineteenth-century authors seeking avenues to personal and communal agency.

Underlying such critical framings of religious adherence is an often unexamined belief that criticism is itself a fully and unproblematically secularized project, a “view from nowhere” from which religious (and other) biases have been successfully eradicated (Kaufmann 614). This belief has bolstered the mode of criticism that Bruno Latour calls “iconoclastic”—a word revealingly borrowed from the Protestant Reformation—or “antifetishist,” in which the critic replaces a hermeneutic regime s/he does not believe in with one s/he does believe in; the new regime is implicitly assumed to be free from the blind spots that plagued the old (“Why Has”).<sup>23</sup> So, for instance, Julia Stern, reflecting on the religious language that characterized nineteenth-century novels of seduction and sentiment, asserts that

[i]n both Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* and Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World*, moral prescription and sentimental piety function as smokescreens for the

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<sup>23</sup> I use the word “believe” advisedly.

deep and unresolved maternal mourning that cannot be voiced because to open the channel of such grief into direct expression is to violate a cultural taboo. (“To Represent” 385)

Here, the “false” belief system signaled by sentimental piety is replaced with the “true” belief system offered by psychoanalysis; piety and moral teaching are positioned, not as sincere expressions of and outlets for maternal mourning, but as inauthentic cultural overlays that mask the real functioning of grief. It is the secular critic’s task to sweep away the ideological veil of religion to get at what is really happening below, at the level of the “real.”<sup>24</sup>

Such critiques often depend, as Michael Kaufmann has noted, on an “unquestioned characterization of religious thought as dogmatic and irrational” and of the critic as entirely rational and free from religious taint—assumptions that both underestimate the complex nature of religious adherence and overestimate the objectivity of critical regimes (623).<sup>25</sup> This results in

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<sup>24</sup> This critical pattern, Latour reminds us, is inherently unstable: the whole edifice crumbles when the new critical regime—itsself characterized by a set of beliefs about the nature of the unconscious mind, or the workings of power, or the indeterminacy of language—is subjected to the same iconoclastic processes (“Why Has” 240-241). Latour compares iconoclastic criticism to the elaborate arguments of conspiracy theorists:

What’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of... Pierre Bourdieu...? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. (“Why Has” 228-229)

<sup>25</sup> To be sure, the assumption that religion is inherently dogmatic or irrational has been reinforced in recent decades by the rise in America of the “religious right.” The “religious right” is an outgrowth of a Protestant fundamentalist movement that began, as comparative religious historian Karen Armstrong notes, in the early twentieth century as a response to the “secularist hegemony” of scientific and pluralistic discourses and the increasingly widespread assumption that religion was a primitive form of human experience destined to die out over time. (In other words, fundamentalism is a response to the pervasiveness of Enlightenment rationalism and the ideological application of secularizing programs to particular religious communities.) Fundamentalism, Armstrong notes, is a thoroughly oppositional

a literary-historical view that is always weighted in favor of the critic's knowledge over the author's and that positions historical actors as subject to ideologies that made it impossible for them to recognize how religion ostensibly "neutralize[s] dissent" and "protect[s] the givens of ordinary life" (Berlant 4). Anne Goodwyn Jones's *Tomorrow is Another Day*, for instance, poses the question of why nineteenth-century southern women did not leave their Protestant churches despite the fact that they were excluded from church leadership:

Perhaps... they needed the consolation of religion more than they wanted to see what it did to them; perhaps the perfect mesh between what God and man said about woman made religious questions taboo; perhaps the lack of education prevented the development of the habit of intellectual analysis. (28)

Assuming that religious belief can function only as an oppressive imposition on female experience—something "done to" women rather than a set of choices made by women themselves—this reading positions Protestant belief as self-imposed delusion, a sign of weakness, or evidence of ignorance. But Jones also chronicles her subjects' active and self-directed involvement in church organizations and committees and records in great detail their "habit[s] of intellectual analysis," data that would suggest that religious adherence in fact provided southern women with avenues for personal expression and community engagement.<sup>26</sup> In these examples and elsewhere, the impulse to read religious adherence as an oppressive ideological force produces a critical impasse in which the nineteenth-century author appears at one and the same time both shrewd and deluded, both canny and duped.

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position that defines itself against a putatively rational and secularized public sphere, and it has spread from the United States and Western Europe to all parts of the globe, so that now almost every religious tradition—including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and even Confucianism—has its own fundamentalist movement. Fundamentalism is a crucial area of study, but as a twentieth-century phenomenon it should not influence critical readings of early-nineteenth-century literature, which was produced under entirely different religious-secular conditions.

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the subject of Jones's first chapter (and my third), Augusta Jane Evans, was well known among nineteenth-century readers and critics both for her religious devotion and her ostentatious intellectualism.



Thus the important work of recovery that has made women's writing increasingly available to critics—work performed by scholars including Stern and Jones—has often fallen short of addressing the important role of religion in women's writing and women's lives. Recent attempts among religious historians and literary critics to give due attention to women's religious experience have provided only partial remedies. The rise of the study of "lived religion," for instance—the increasing willingness of religious historians to expand their objects of study beyond theological treatises and denominational histories to include the rituals, activities, beliefs, and superstitions of non-ordained adherents—has inadvertently reinforced the impression that women and people of color engage with religion primarily at an emotional or visceral level rather than in intellectually complex ways. As a term that describes the everyday experiences of individual believers, lived religion has "become a standard concern in religious studies, in part because it allows scholars to move beyond a singular focus on the theological debates of the learned elite or the public statements of a few leaders" (Griffith and McAlister 532). But because religious "leaders" and "elites" were, until the twentieth century, almost universally white and male, the movement away from the study of doctrinal ideas—the "flight from the possibility that a [certain] approach to 'religion' is *too theological*" (Stein and Murison 4, emphasis in original)—has resulted in a lack of attention to the theological contributions of the disenfranchised. Even as texts by female authors and persons of color from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been recovered and made available to scholars and students, the impetus to study the theological content of that literature has waned. Thus, while American literary historians from R.W.B. Lewis to Amy Hungerford have plumbed the depths of white men's writing for evidence of their theological engagements,<sup>27</sup> the religious commitments of

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955) sought the sources of American identity in the mythology of Genesis, and his representative Americans were all white and male: Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and

female authors and persons of color are generally consigned to the category of “lived religion” or “embodied experience” and assumed to exemplify the emotional or ritualistic elements of religious adherence rather than its intellectual aspects.<sup>28</sup> As Laurie Maffly-Kipp notes in her study of African-American Protestant intellectuals, the “[c]ognitive work” of forming, contemplating, and debating belief “is too seldom understood as a form of religious practice,” especially in studies of non-elite religious adherents (10-11). Scholars anxious to diversify their models of religious experience by focusing on “lived religion” rather than theology—aspects of religious experience that are “simultaneously inhabited” rather than separate and divisible—have sometimes obscured the intellectual processes that contribute to the formation of belief (Hungerford 108).

The persistent idea, reinforced by the discourse of “lived religion,” that white men approach religion rationally and theologically while women and racial minorities experience religion ritually and emotionally both obscures the intellectual engagement that women and

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Holmes. Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief* (2010) examines the ongoing if altered role of religion in post-World War II American culture, but in its race and gender demographics its reach does not extend much beyond Lewis’s: of the eight authors Hungerford addresses only two are women and only one is African American. (But Hungerford, unlike Lewis, includes Catholic and Jewish writers among her subjects.)

<sup>28</sup> A comparison of recent scholarship on Herman Melville and Harriet Beecher Stowe demonstrates this nicely. A search of the MLA International Bibliography yields 595 peer-reviewed articles about Melville and 121 about Stowe published since 2000. While scholars approach both of these authors in religious terms, Melville’s texts are read for evidence of his engagement with Biblical motifs: representative titles include “‘A Wisdom That Is Woe’: Allusions to Ecclesiastes in *Moby-Dick*,” “One’s Own Faith: Melville’s Reading of the New Testament and Psalms,” and “The Hymn in *Moby-Dick*: Melville’s Adaptation of Psalm 18.” Stowe, meanwhile, is read against the backdrop of particular social movements—an aspect of “lived religion”—or as demonstrating the “influence” of her ordained father and brother: representative titles include “‘One Language in Prayer’: Evangelicalism, Anti-Catholicism, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Minister’s Wooing*” and “Family Influences on *The Minister’s Wooing* and *Oldtown Folks*: Henry Ward Beecher and Calvin Stowe.”

I discuss this phenomenon in more detail in my chapter on Susan Warner and Augusta Jane Evans, where I demonstrate that even scholars concerned with women’s religious expression, including Jane Tompkins, Nina Baym, and Dawn Coleman, continue to align white male writers with a theologically rigorous Calvinism and female and minority writers with a vaguely defined, doctrinally vacant, and primarily emotional “evangelicalism.”

African-American authors bring to doctrine and theology—a problem this dissertation remedies—and reinforces an inaccurate “separate spheres” model of religious writing in which the religious engagement displayed by disenfranchised writers is understood to provide evidence of their expulsion from the public sphere rather than their involvement in it. Susan K. Harris’s “‘But Is It Any *Good?*’,” for instance, asserts that

one function of sentimental language was to create a sacred space dedicated to women, analogous to the private sphere in which they moved.... Religious language functions as part of a ritual intended to draw participants’ attention away from their temporal lives and make them focus on their spiritual relationship to the divine. Auditors are encouraged to conceive of their experiences metaphorically, placing them in a universal context, to reenvision themselves as part of a set of universal patterns. (273)

While this reading is intended to rescue sentimental religious language from accusations that it is “baroque” or “vacantly redundant,” it applies an anachronistic twentieth-century understanding of religious adherence as a private matter to a nineteenth-century milieu in which the ability to discuss religion intelligently signaled one’s ability to participate fully in the public sphere rather than one’s desire to withdraw from it. Equating the “private” with the “sacred” and then categorizing both as the domain of women, such readings obscure the important role that women’s writing played in nineteenth-century public religious discourse. At the same time, they position women’s religious adherence as a diminution rather than an accession of agency, one that subtly forces women into “universal” patterns over which they have little control.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Harris’s characterization of religious language as outside of time—as something that draws attention away from this world and onto the next—is also an overgeneralized definition of religious language. The kinds and functions of religious language make up one of the issues that most starkly divides religions, sects, and denominations from one another: “It is precisely the assumptions about the participants implicit in linguistic form that are often at issue when religious reformers seek to transform or forbid certain speech practices” (Keane, “Religious Language” 55). To imply that religious language functions the same way at all times and in all places for people belonging to all manner of different religious traditions is simply incorrect.

Such treatments of the role of religious language in nineteenth-century fiction actually reify gender and race divisions in the study of American literature: while white male authors are associated with the “public” and intellectual aspects of religion, including Protestant doctrinal debate, women and people of color are studied for their contributions to ritual and other “private” forms of “lived religion.” Such divisions exoticize and quarantine the religious expressions of women and racial minorities; as historians Kevin Schultz and Paul Harvey note, “American intellectuals have... tended to relegate religious history to a history of the lower classes, or the racialized, or the marginalized—where religion may safely reside” (134-135). To offer a fairly recent example, Joanna Brooks’s *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (2003) details how subjugated peoples in the New World formed literal and literary communities around discourses of religion in response to colonial scientific and philosophical discourses that strove to position Native and enslaved peoples as inherently subhuman. “[I]f empiricist philosophy, natural science, and nationalist politics all aimed for the negation of these racialized subjects,” Brooks argues, “then it would take a supernatural and spiritual force to revive, renew and resurrect them” (46). While Brooks’s work usefully highlights the role of religion in enabling communal forms of agency (a subject this dissertation also addresses), at the same time it celebrates the “supernatural and spiritual” innovations of African-American and Native American communities precisely for their opposition to a scientific and rational public sphere, a formulation that implies a fundamental difference, not only between “rational” whites and “spiritual” persons of color, but between the secular critical “us” and the religious historical “them.” Even as their religious lives are recovered, then, disenfranchised authors have been re-othered by the critical framing of their

religious language as a foreign and exotic attribute, a relic of oppression rather than “a vital source of intertextuality, meaning, and identity” (Fox-Genovese 20).

### **Secularism and Non-liberal Agency**

Responding both to the historical inaccuracy of the secularization thesis and to the way it undergirds critical discourses that obscure and marginalize the ways religious people make meaning in/of the world, a number of religious historians, cultural theorists, and literary critics have posited *secularism theory* as a corrective to the secularization thesis. Rather than describing a decline in religious adherence or positing a putative separation between the “public” realm of disembodied rationalism and a “private” realm of emotionality, superstition, and belief, secularism, as understood by the new theorists, describes the state of affairs, present in North American history since the earliest European colonization and always in flux, that creates the conditions of possibility for religious pluralism and theological change. Secularism

names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made “religion” a recognizable and vital thing in the world. To make inquiries into secularism is to ask how certain concepts of religion (and the social formations that revolve around them) became consonant with the way things were—in essence—as portrayed by a secular political order. (Modern, *Secularism* 7-8)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Literary scholar Michael Kaufmann helpfully lays out the basic outlines of secularism studies “in the form of two linked pairs of assertions”:

(IA) There is no idea, person, experience, text, institution, or historical period that could be categorized as essentially, inherently, or exclusively secular or religious; (IB) Despite this first claim, we nevertheless act as if there is a meaningful difference between the secular and the religious; (IIA) Following the claims of (I), varying discursive contexts construct functionally meaningful differences between the two terms with differing motivations and consequences; what counts as ‘religious’ at one time and place may count as ‘secular’ in another; (IIB) Not only does the context help to define the two terms, but the difference between the two terms also helps to establish the acceptable boundaries of a given discursive context. (608)

Scholars of secularism espouse the thesis “that religion does not fall away to reveal a secular substrate [but] that in the modern world the secular and religious are fluid, interpenetrating, mutually constitutive, and culturally determined categories” (Coleman, *Preaching* 22). Our modern situation—our “secular age,” as Charles Taylor has dubbed it—is one in which individuals and religious communities “can no longer maintain religious belief without the simultaneous knowledge that others do not believe, or that others believe differently” (Hungerford xiv).<sup>31</sup> Rather than asserting the disappearance of religion from modern life, secularism theory seeks to recognize and describe the ever-shifting imbrication of “religious” and “secular” categories in the modern world.<sup>32</sup>

Among other things, secularism is the set of conditions—“emotional, epistemological, ethical”—that makes it possible to ask how and in what way one might believe in a particular representation of God as over and against another representation: God as loving father, for

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<sup>31</sup> Drawing on the work of anthropologist Talal Asad and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, who have interrogated the secularization thesis in the context of contemporary Europe, and philosopher Charles Taylor, who has offered a magisterial account of the secularity of twenty-first-century North America, literary critics including Michael Warner and religious studies scholars including Tracy Fessenden and John Modern have begun to productively apply the new premises of secularism studies to the cultural history of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States. Warner’s current work examines how the transatlantic evangelicalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave rise to Enlightenment conceptions of the public sphere; his scholarship reverses a historiographic secularization narrative according to which Enlightenment thinkers threw off the shackles of religion and emerged into the light of reason. John Modern’s work on secularism in nineteenth-century America exposes the poverty of the concept of “disenchantment” by demonstrating how secularism enables the imbrication of the material with the spiritual and facilitates the “haunting” of the modern world. And Tracy Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* demonstrates how the assumption that undergirds the secularization thesis—that religion is disappearing from the public sphere—has obscured the processes by which particular Protestant practices have been taken up in popular and political culture and redefined, not as “religious,” but as “American.”

<sup>32</sup> I place these terms in quotation marks because one of the outcomes of an epistemological shift from secularization to secularism is the increasing inability to pin down exactly what “religion” is, since every attempt to define religion as an ontological category will presuppose a recognizable nonreligious opposite and require a simplistic reduction in terms. This is one of many reasons why this dissertation treats a particular, recognizable historical instance of religiosity—doctrinal Protestantism—rather than examining nineteenth-century American “religion” as a whole.

instance, rather than God as angry arbiter of punishment (Modern, *Secularism* 3). Thus, when Catharine Maria Sedgwick used the historical novel as a medium in which to investigate the doctrine of sacrificial atonement she was not “secularizing” the question but simultaneously bringing into being and taking part in a religious-secular configuration in which fiction became an accepted public space for exploring orthodox Calvinist and liberal Unitarian understandings of God’s nature. In a larger sense, however, secularism also provides the set of conditions under which one might question the very phenomenon of belief and its role in modern life. This is the religious-secular configuration at evidence in Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, a novel that is less concerned with the kind of god one believes in (as Sedgwick’s historical novels are) than with the way religious beliefs circulate and have effects in the world. It is precisely the descriptive flexibility of secularism theory—its acknowledgment that the religious and the secular are not static categories but must be considered in light of particular historical events and human identities—that makes it a productive theoretical ground for this project.

But while secularism theory is a useful and necessary corrective to the prescriptive tendencies of the secularization thesis, with its pre-formed model of inevitable progress (or decline), its very descriptiveness means that it has little to say about the ways that agency functions within secular societies. When it comes to models of agency, in fact, the secularization thesis and secularism theory seem to occupy opposite ends of a spectrum. Secularization theory posits the decline of religion as an inevitable outcome of Western progress, a result of increasing rationalization and, with it, a decreasing need to contain or explain that which is mysterious. Secularization, then, is a process perceived to be out of human hands, a status signaled by its flagship term “disenchantment”: there is no “disenchanter,” only the process itself. Secularism theory, by contrast, shows a tendency to transform religious identity into a series of conscious

and individual choices: it offers “a conception of religion as overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) cognitive—a one-on-one psychic investment into the question of monotheistic divinity.... A choice well chosen” (Modern, “My God”). But both of these models are inadequate to describe the spiritual experiences of particular persons and groups, as they fail to account for the complex interleaving of cognition, emotion, memory, and desire as they combine to create belief, or for how the agencies enabled by belief reach beyond the perceived boundaries of individual choice and consciousness.

This dissertation brings the complex problem of agency to bear on secularism studies in order to reveal how the secular conditions present in the nineteenth-century United States—conditions specific to particular times, places, and religious communities—made possible forms of agency not previously available to disenfranchised persons. It demonstrates how the proliferation and circulation of religious fiction after the Second Great Awakening made it possible for female and African-American writers to imagine into being agentive possibilities that did not rely on political office, clerical ordination, or the franchise. Fiction became the medium for exploring these new forms of agency because it provided a space in which the religious language of disenfranchised persons might circulate in the public sphere outside of official sectarian outlets. As the cultural anthropologist Webb Keane notes, religious language is not merely descriptive but actually initiates new forms and configurations of agency: it enables “the creation or extension of agents and forms of agency beyond what is commonly available in unmarked interaction” by invoking the action of spirits, solidifying the collective identity of a religious community, or offering new interpretations of existing doctrines (“Language and Religion” 441). Religious language enfolded into popular fictional forms made fiction into a space for imagining such extended forms of agency. When Beulah Benton, the heroine of



Augusta Jane Evans's *Beulah*, offers the "divine decree that all should work" as a reason to avoid marriage and become a teacher and author, she is modeling a new form of agency in which woman's duty is not to submit to a would-be husband but to engage in paid intellectual labor, defying separate spheres ideologies that would exempt women from the labor market and from intellectual pursuits (310). *Beulah*'s religious language, based on Evans's unique interpretation of Arminian free will theology, offers a new model of female agency that made its way into the nineteenth-century popular imagination through the medium of fiction.

While Evans's particular model of religious agency advocates increasing autonomy for nineteenth-century women, this dissertation demonstrates that in order to comprehend the multiple forms of religious agency that circulated in the secular nineteenth century it is necessary to divorce the concept of agency from Western liberal ideals of self-determination and individual action. Models of Western liberal subjecthood have historically assumed the primacy of individuals above communities and assumed that agency adheres in the former rather than the latter. As Elizabeth Dillon notes, "[i]n ascribing the capacity to consent to the individual, liberalism... constructs and relies upon a strong definition of the modern subject as one who is free, autonomous, and capable of self-government and rational behavior" (2). Models of agency based on this liberal formulation import the assumption that agency can only be obtained by rejecting any authority except that to which one has consented—that which one has chosen for oneself.

Liberal philosophy thus has embedded within it an implicit secularization impulse: those who would participate fully in the liberal public sphere must abandon unquestioning allegiance to forms of authority based in tradition or revelation—including the authority of God—and learn to act independently of any oversight but their own or that of their rationally chosen governors.

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, for instance, assumes the ultimate cosmic authority of God but simultaneously asserts that man's liberty "is to be under no other legislative power, but that established, by consent, in the commonwealth" (26). Since God is not subject to election and his laws not ratified by any elected legislature, his decrees must, by Locke's definition, be despotic and his will "inconstant, uncertain, unknown, [and] arbitrary" (27). Lockean liberal models of autonomy and agency, then, cannot help but place religion (and religious persons) in the role of Other, since the Abrahamic faiths most clearly (and many other religious traditions as well) rest on the foundational belief that there is always a higher authority whose power must be acknowledged even when its dictates are questioned (Mahmood, "Agency" 183-185).

The chapters that follow eschew the liberal model of autonomous agency as inadequate to describe the needs and actions of religious persons and communities; they employ instead a model grounded in the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Butler's pathbreaking work has revealed that the liberal model of sovereign agency is a fantasy of the Western imagination; because agency is enabled by discourse, and because discourse requires, at minimum, both a speaker and a listener, "[t]he address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy" (Judith Butler 26). In other words, because "the process by which one becomes subjected to relations of power also constitutes the conditions for the exercise of one's agency," no act can be entirely autonomous or liberated (Mahmood, "Women's Agency" 575). Subjects are interpellated through discourse, including (and sometimes primarily) religious discourse, and the interpellation of the subject brings agency into being whether "the address that inaugurates the possibility of agency" is a negative one or a positive one: negative speech interpellates the subject—discursively calls the

subject into being—just as efficiently as other forms of speech. This insight is key to understanding how nineteenth-century women and African Americans reinterpreted religious doctrines that sometimes defined them as unworthy or unclean and transformed those doctrines into vehicles for exploring their own agency. Just as Frederick Douglass learned that reading and writing were worth pursuing precisely because Hugh Auld forbade him access to them, nineteenth-century women told by their ministers to “keep silence in the church” (1 Corinthians 14:34) and African Americans condemned by the curse of Ham (Genesis 9:25) intuited how powerful their own religious agency might be by noting its careful circumscription. Kept out of the pulpit, they found other discursive outlets for their religious language.

Employing a discourse model of agency makes it possible to recognize kinds of religious agency that operate, not by rejecting all forms of authority, but by inhabiting and operating within the particular structures of authority to which one is subject. In order to recognize religious agency and the new forms it might take in fiction, then, it is necessary both to understand the particular doctrinal ideas at work in fictional texts and to recognize forms of agency—both individual and collective—that do not appear to be classically willful. These actions might include religious rituals, careful ascription to rules, unregulated emotional experiences, or non-normative dis/embodiments; there may even be secular circumstances in which passivity itself becomes an act of agency. When Ellen Montgomery, the child heroine of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, submits herself to the religious teachings of Alice Humphreys rather than the nonreligious commandments of Aunt Fortune, she is exercising agency within the Calvinist doctrinal terms that give her experiences meaning—terms that do not assume that individual self-determination is the highest spiritual good.

Liberal philosophy's emphasis on the rational power of individuals to select acceptable forms of authority for themselves can also make it difficult to account for the possibility of collective religious agency or for forms of agency not based in rational choice. Most religious experience—even mainstream Protestant religious experience—is communal, involving the shared beliefs and collective practices of a group that is often (but not always) connected by a common race, region, or nation. Within such religious contexts, agency may manifest in forms that are shared, circulated, fluid, or collaborative. The will of individuals may be subordinated to the perceived wellbeing of the group, or agency may be understood as originating with immaterial beings rather than with individual men and women. In Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, the circulating forms of supernatural agency that inhere in Spiritualist ritual inform both the Morgeson sisters' relationships with each other and the relationship between author and reader. In this way the experience of reading comes to parallel the forms of collective agency exemplified in religious experience: while the act of writing and the act of reading may be performed in solitude, the creation of meaning is an act of cross-temporal collaboration engaged in by author and reader.<sup>33</sup>

This dissertation, then, examines religious agency in its historical and doctrinal specificity, revealing how particular structures of belief enabled new forms of agency that might be modeled in fictional texts. Because these forms of agency sometimes defied the assumptions

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<sup>33</sup> The limit case for discussions of non-liberal religious agency in the nineteenth century is, of course, the Catholic Church. As religious studies scholars including Winnifred Sullivan and Tracy Fessenden have detailed, Catholics have long represented the paradigmatic Other in a public sphere structured according to implicitly Protestant assumptions about what constitutes the proper exercise of religion. The authors I study in this dissertation thus walked a precarious middle way between embracing a straightforward model of Protestant liberal subjecthood that limited public religious speech to white males (and therefore made these authors' own speech incomprehensible or impossible) and a Catholic model of nonliberal subjecthood that would place their language beyond the bounds of public discourse by aligning it with an institution that openly defied the "precondition for political participation" that Protestant belief and practice had come to represent (Sullivan 7).

of implicitly white and masculine liberal discourse, they can be difficult to recognize outside of their religious contexts. Situating these texts within the secular situation of the antebellum and early postbellum United States reveals the multifaceted opportunities for agency made possible by Protestant religious belief and provides a clearer picture of the discourse network formed by the nineteenth-century public sphere.

### **Chapter Summaries**

This project begins in the 1820s, in the waning years of the Second Great Awakening, when Protestant doctrinal discourse had established itself as a matter for vigorous public debate, and ends just after the Civil War, when the overwhelming cultural, social, moral, and religious changes wrought during the first half of the nineteenth century culminated in a national cataclysm and the American public sphere was reorganized around new postwar principles. My first chapter examines the effects of the liberalization of Orthodox Calvinism in early national New England, particularly the rise and reach of the Unitarian movement and the possibilities it provided for new configurations of female agency as explored in the historical fiction of Catharine Maria Sedgwick. I then go on to discuss the role of Protestant doctrine in early African-American fiction by examining white women's abolitionist agency in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*. From there I turn to the woman's fiction of the 1850s as exemplified by Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Augusta Jane Evans's *Beulah*, demonstrating how these texts took part in ongoing debates about the relationship between free will and human action. My final chapter, on Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, investigates the circulation of female agency enabled by Spiritualist belief and practice. I conclude the project with a coda that traces the fate of religious agency in critical discourses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The first chapter of the project examines the changing nature of public religious agency in the early nineteenth century through a reading of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's historical novels *Hope Leslie* (1827) and *The Linwoods* (1835). Sedgwick was both the first internationally recognized female author from the new United States and an active participant in the religious controversies that marked early national life in the northeastern U.S., and her historical fiction intervenes in those controversies by placing nineteenth-century doctrinal questions in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century settings. For Sedgwick, I argue, historical fiction provided the imaginative space within which a woman deeply invested in questions of theology but barred from ordained ministry could explore the religious underpinnings of ritualized violence. Modern critics of Sedgwick's work, noting her 1821 move from an orthodox Calvinist congregation in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to a Unitarian church in New York, have frequently characterized her writings as uncritical attempts to disseminate Unitarian values. My chapter offers a deeper doctrinal reading of Sedgwick's historical novels, arguing that they represent an important and extended contribution to Unitarian theological thought that engages in a critical exploration of the Protestant doctrine of substitutionary atonement. My reading demonstrates how Sedgwick employed fiction to bring questions of gender and race into conversation with problems of theology, illuminating how the doctrine of sacrificial atonement justified violence by the wealthy, white, and male against the poor, women, and people of color. Having once deconstructed the doctrine of atonement, Sedgwick promoted in its place a new model of female religious agency founded on the notion that women are more valuable as active producers of language than as passive victims of sacrifice. For Sedgwick, the true American woman could defy the ancient rituals of sacrifice that solidified hierarchies of male power and initiate social

change by speaking in spontaneous and transformative language that repudiated ritual forms and inspired in others—men included—new beliefs and actions.

Drawing on Michael Warner’s theorization of the early Western public sphere as a space in which “conversionistic witness to strangers” becomes the highest moral good, I demonstrate how Sedgwick’s historical novels depict women as the natural purveyors of effective religious language and thus as worthy participants in the American public sphere, laying the groundwork for decades of women’s religious fiction to follow. Sedgwick’s model of true religious language as spontaneous, originary, and unique rather than repetitive and ritualized is explicable in terms of the twentieth-century language theories of J.L. Austin and Judith Butler; for Sedgwick, the perlocutionary speech acts performed by American women must and will supersede the illocutionary rituals modeled by now-dead Founding Fathers. *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods* thus depict the religious and political rituals performed by historical figures including John Winthrop, George Washington, and the Pequot chief Mononotto as regressive and repetitive, leading only to continued violence, while the spontaneous religious language produced by fictional figures including Magawisca, Hope Leslie, and Isabella Linwood offers a model for American moral progress.

Sedgwick’s historical novels examine moments of conflict between societies in unequal relations of power to one another, and her proposed solution to such imbalances is the transformative language of white women: in *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods* white women learn to “speak religiously” (in the words of Bruno Latour) on behalf of women of color. My second chapter examines how William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, which includes characters named for Sedgwick’s fictional Linwood family, challenges this model. *Clotel*, I argue, extends Sedgwick’s vision of women’s religious agency by disengaging doctrinal authority from clerical ordination

and relocating it in women's religious language. But whereas Sedgwick depicted female religious agency as a natural and spontaneous outgrowth of white women's putative moral superiority, Brown posits female public religious speech as the paradoxically positive outcome of women's exclusion from the clergy, since this exclusion allows them to form independent interpretations of the Bible not sanctioned by official sectarian hierarchies. Employing a Kantian model of private and public speech in which clergy are understood to be "private" citizens serving the needs of their congregants while educated but non-ordained persons are "public" citizens with the right to speak freely in public space, Brown rhetorically repositions religious agency as an outgrowth of women's increasing education and their freedom from clerical and political ties. Unburdened by ordination or elected political office, Brown's fictional white abolitionist Georgiana Peck is free not only in the sense that she is unenslaved, but in her ability to form controversial opinions and act on them—converting others to abolitionism and eventually freeing her father's 70 slaves—without invoking the wrath of congregants or constituents.

While there has been much historical work on the source materials for Brown's novel, few if any of Brown's critics have examined the particular theological arguments laid forth in his fiction. My chapter explores how Brown uses scriptural exegesis to systematically discredit particular proslavery doctrines embraced by ministers both North and South—particularly John Peck of Rochester, New York, and Charles Colcock Jones of Liberty County, Georgia—while exalting the educated woman as the paragon of "true Christianity." Problematically, however, Brown could imagine only the educated white woman in this paradigmatic leadership role; while the white heiress Georgiana Peck frees her father's slaves, the novel's mixed-race heroine Clotel Jefferson takes her own life, entrenching even further the already familiar stereotype of the



“tragic mulatta” and suggesting that even in fiction religious agency is available only to white women. *Clotel* has thus posed a problem for critics of African-American literature, who have sought an authentic representation of nineteenth-century African-American experience and found instead a text that borrows heavily from white sentimental conventions, including the “tragic mulatta” figure. My chapter addresses this critical concern by reading Brown’s novel in the context of two other African-American slave narratives, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); together these texts reveal that African-American women’s religious agency could be better imagined within the generic space of fiction than in the autobiographical space of the slave narrative. Reading *Clotel* as an intermediate step between Douglass’s *Narrative*, which denies the possibility of women’s religious agency, and Jacobs’s *Incidents*, which depicts Linda Brent as the architect of her own salvation, I reveal the process by which the fictionalization of slave experience (including the fictionalization of Jacobs’s real-life escape) made African-American women’s religious agency into a viable imaginative possibility.

While the doctrinal authority of the fictional white woman was established and solidified by Sedgwick and Brown, authors of the nineteenth-century form now known as “woman’s fiction” found that the story of an orphaned girl seeking a physical and spiritual home provided the perfect generic framework for the exploration of particular Protestant doctrines and their consequences for female agency. My third chapter, on Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1852) and Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah* (1859), argues that the 1850s sentimental novel—a genre rarely read for its contributions to American theological thought—could and did provide fertile soil for intertextual debate about the relative merits of predestinarian and free will doctrines and their practical consequences for women’s lives. In this chapter I demonstrate how

careful attention to the divergent conceptions of free will embraced by the Calvinist Susan Warner and the Arminian Augusta Jane Evans can broaden critical understandings of religious agency as a complex aspect of nineteenth-century women's lives.

The sentimental novel has offered a particularly thorny problem to critics seeking evidence of women's increasing agency in the mid-nineteenth century since sentimental fiction tends to advocate submission to the will of God rather than rebellion from it. Applying Western liberal models of the "sovereign subject" that equate agency with autonomy and identity with individuality (Judith Butler 16), critics from Ann Douglas to Jane Tompkins to Marianne Noble have obscured the doctrinal arguments at play in sentimental fiction by treating religion primarily as a cynical (and ultimately disposable) means of subverting male authority. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who questions western liberal models of agency by exploring how women in traditional religious environments exercise agency collaboratively rather than competitively, my chapter reveals the multiple models of female agency depicted in the sentimental novel—models sometimes predicated on Calvinist norms of submission and humility and at other times on an Arminian ethic of self-determination. In Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* Ellen Montgomery learns to exercise agency by conforming her will to those of her companions Alice and John Humphreys, not in order to subvert their authority but to bring her actions into alignment with a sequence of cosmic events predestined by God. In Evans's *Beulah*, by contrast, the eponymous heroine rejects the attempts of her friends and benefactors to impose their wills upon her because she sees the exercise of free will as the highest expression of earthly good. My chapter compares these Calvinist and Arminian plots to demonstrate how critical models of "sentimental power" that ignore doctrinal distinctions obscure the multiple forms of female agency depicted in sentimental texts.

While Warner's and Evans's divergent theologies demonstrate the wide range of doctrinal positions espoused by authors of "woman's fiction," fictional treatments of women's religious agency extended beyond both the generic structures of sentimental novels and the sectarian boundaries of established Protestant denominations. My fourth chapter examines the role of Spiritualist doctrine in Elizabeth Stoddard's 1862 novel *The Morgesons*, demonstrating how Stoddard's invocation of Spiritualist beliefs and practices enabled her to depict forms of collaborative cross-gender and cross-class agency that fell outside mid-nineteenth-century expectations for women's piety. Because *The Morgesons* is deeply critical of the New England clerical hierarchy that characterized its 1830s milieu, critics have long read the novel as evidence for the secularization of American culture—the evacuation of religious thought and belief from everyday life. By tracing the Spiritualist tendencies of Stoddard's novel and drawing on recent scholarship on nineteenth-century secularism by John Modern and others, I demonstrate not only that these death pronouncements were premature, but that Stoddard's text should be read as a significant contribution both to the genre of Spiritualist fiction and to nineteenth-century religious thought.

Nineteenth-century Spiritualism was a disruptive religious discourse that uncoupled agency from accepted hierarchies of authority and placed power in the joined hands of the weak, the poor, the sick, and the politically disenfranchised. Spiritualist mediumship and spirit communication thus offered opportunities for sympathetic connection and collaborative action among those with the least access to institutionalized religious and political power. I argue that *The Morgesons* employs and models shared forms of Spiritualist agency at both the textual and the metatextual levels. The Morgeson sisters' mediumistic gifts, including clairvoyance and spirit-traveling, enable them to circumvent entrenched romantic, domestic, and economic

expectations and to form sympathetic connections across boundaries of gender and class. At the same time, Stoddard's fictional invocation of Spiritualist practice freed her from the generic forms popularized by Warner, Evans, and other sentimental novelists and enabled her to inaugurate a specifically female form of Spiritualist fiction that celebrated Spiritualism's agentive possibilities for women rather than decrying or narratively defusing them.

Just as Catharine Maria Sedgwick's fictional heroine Magawisca inspired the African-American abolitionist Sarah Louis Forten, the fictional characters created by Brown, Warner, Evans, and Stoddard offered models for religious agency among the disenfranchised that began to take institutional form after the Civil War. In the postbellum era the New Thought, Christian Science, Spiritualist, Holiness, and Theosophy movements thrived under the leadership of spiritually gifted women who found the moral authority to exercise religious agency in the public sphere. And the postbellum expansion of black Protestant denominations like the African Methodist Episcopal Church, first formed in the early nineteenth century, gave black Americans access to ordained religious leadership that was largely independent of white institutional structures. The social and political achievements of these movements, and of religiously motivated groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, were not universally successful or progressive, and the institutionalization of religious leadership by the disenfranchised often introduced new problems for religious communities and new questions about the legitimacy of religious authority. Nevertheless, the forms of agency enabled by Protestant religious identification and adherence were so potent and so widely acknowledged that by the end of the nineteenth century movements including "muscular Christianity" and the Men and Religion Forward Movement arose to reclaim Protestant religious agency for white men. I conclude this dissertation with a short coda that discusses how a model of subaltern agency so

widely acknowledged in the nineteenth century became so unrecognizable in the twentieth and twenty-first—why modern critics have had such difficulty seeing the forms of religious agency modeled in nineteenth-century texts, often reading religion as an oppressive ideology rather than an opportunity for agency and expression. Drawing on the work of Vincent Pecora and Michael Kaufmann I argue that the secularization of the academy that began with the turn to the twentieth century made religious agency unreadable for literary critics employing a secularized form of criticism, and that this secularization of academic discourse is exemplified in the work of William James, particularly *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and “The Will to Believe” (1897).

## CHAPTER 1: “My Resolve is the Feminine of My Father’s Oath”: Sacrificial Violence and Religious Language in *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods*

I began this dissertation with the story of the Sedgwick family and Elizabeth Freeman, who became a “second mother” to the Sedgwick children after she was emancipated and joined their household as a paid servant. The Sedgwick children needed a “second mother” because their biological mother, Pamela Dwight Sedgwick, was frequently ill, suffering from severe depressions for which she was occasionally institutionalized. These depressions were exacerbated by her husband’s long absences from home when, serving in the U.S. House of Representatives or the Massachusetts Supreme Court, he would leave his wife and children alone for months at a time while he performed his civic duties in Philadelphia or New York. Theodore’s children recognized that his public career was enabled by the private sacrifices of his family, and as an adult Catharine would record the effect these sacrifices had on her mother Pamela, noting that “Her long separations from my father seem to have been almost cruel to her” but that Pamela never “expressed one word of remonstrance or dissatisfaction” (“Autobiography” 63).<sup>34</sup> Pamela’s chief traits, in Catharine’s memory, were her “character, her wisdom, her conjugal devotion, and self-negation.” Though Theodore “lament[ed] over”

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<sup>34</sup> For quotations from Sedgwick’s autobiography I have used Mary Kelley’s definitive print edition, found in *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journal of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*. To avoid confusion between the autobiography and others of Sedgwick’s (and Kelley’s) writings quoted here, in-text citations of the autobiography follow the format (“Autobiography” [page # in Kelley]). Quotations from Sedgwick’s letters are drawn, whenever possible, from the microfilm edition of her papers published by the Massachusetts Historical Society; these quotations are cited in the text in the format (CMS Papers, Letter to [recipient], [date of letter]). On a few occasions I have used quotations from Mary Dewey’s 1871 *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*; these are cited in the format (quoted in Dewey, [page number]). Full bibliographic information for all of these sources can be found in the list of works cited.

Pamela's frequent illnesses, he comforted himself with "the conviction of an overruling duty to his country" ("Autobiography" 58). Pamela's private "self-negation" was the corollary to Theodore's public career: Theodore's duty to his country "overruled" Pamela's physical and mental health, and her private suffering was the sacrifice that enabled his public service.

As with the story of Elizabeth Freeman, Catharine and her siblings offered varied interpretations of Pamela's sacrifices on Theodore's behalf. When Pamela died Catharine's brother Harry composed a eulogy in which Pamela appeared as a Christ-figure, led to the slaughter for the sake of her husband, her children, and her country:

It may not be profane or irreverent to suppose that, with some distant resemblance to our Redeemer, she did not suffer solely for herself...; and we may be permitted to hope that her example and her memory... will contribute to the eternal welfare of those she most loved. (Quoted in Sedgwick, "Autobiography" 66)

When Catharine wrote of her mother's death, by contrast, she was unwilling to assign redemptive power to Pamela's pain. In writing of Pamela's death she would say only that, "Her sufferings are past, and... prepared her to enjoy more keenly the rest and felicities of heaven" ("Autobiography" 63). For Catharine, Pamela's trials had "past" but they brought about no greater good and held no redemptive power. Unlike her brother, Catharine refused to depict her mother's death as the necessary sacrifice for her father's personal redemption or his political success.<sup>35</sup>

This chapter examines Catharine Sedgwick's career-long concern with questions of sacrifice and atonement and their consequences for women's religious agency. It interrogates the centrality of sacrifice in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novels *Hope Leslie* (1827) and *The*

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<sup>35</sup> The rhetorical contrast between Catharine's interpretation of her mother's death and that of her brother Harry follows the pattern I traced in my introduction, where I discussed their divergent framings of Elizabeth Freeman's antislavery suit. Henry Sedgwick seems to have viewed the Sedgwicks' personal and public affairs almost entirely from Theodore's point of view: Theodore had the "principal agency" in Mum Bett's freedom and is the primary beneficiary of Pamela's self-sacrifice.

*Linwoods* (1835) and argues that Sedgwick employed the genre of historical fiction to deconstruct Protestant doctrines predicated on sacrifice and to imagine in their place a theology of women's active religious language that might serve as a new doctrinal basis for American social progress. It shows how Sedgwick systematically dismantled the orthodox theology of sacrificial atonement and replaced it with a doctrine of religious language that both assumed and enacted the religious superiority of women. In doing so Sedgwick defined women's religious agency as a product of their active language rather than a passive attribute of their racially and sexually marked bodies.

I argue that Sedgwick's novel of colonial Massachusetts, *Hope Leslie*, mounts a sophisticated critique of atonement theology that reveals how social models based on atonement not only unfairly victimize white women and women of color but also impede social progress. Having successfully deconstructed the doctrine of atonement and the social and political constructs built upon it, Sedgwick then went on to imagine a model of women's religious agency that relied not on women's passive and victimized bodies but on their active religious language, a model she explores in her Revolutionary War novel *The Linwoods*. In *The Linwoods* Sedgwick imaginatively positions women as the rightful possessors of spontaneous religious language and worthy contributors to a public sphere structured according to the terms of Protestant debate. By situating her religious explorations in the context of America's most significant founding moments—the flowering of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the last months of the American Revolution—Sedgwick rehistoricizes women's roles in the American public sphere.

Sedgwick's repositioning of women as the possessors of religious language rather than the receptacles of ritual meaning can be productively analyzed in the terms of speech act and discourse theory. The speech acts that Sedgwick's all-American heroines Hope Leslie and



Isabella Linwood learn to perform are, in the terms posed by J.L. Austin and elaborated by Judith Butler, not illocutionary but perlocutionary: they proceed not “by way of conventions, [but] by way of consequences” (Judith Butler 17). They derive their force precisely from the fact that they are not ritualized: they are always spontaneous, always unique, and always arise, not from predetermined scripts, but from a well of sincere feeling. In Sedgwick’s imagined America, spontaneous speech acts are the agents of social change and the particular province of women, whose access to spontaneous religious speech positions them as worthy participants in an early-national public sphere in which religious and political language were thoroughly imbricated.

I begin this chapter by examining the intersection of religion and politics in the early nineteenth century in order to demonstrate how Sedgwick’s turn to religious language represented an intervention in the public sphere rather than a withdrawal from it. I then go on to discuss Sedgwick’s historical novels *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods*: I argue that *Hope Leslie* deconstructs the Protestant doctrine of atonement by revealing that it depends, like vengeance, on ritualized violence against the dispossessed. I then show how Sedgwick’s next historical novel, *The Linwoods*, substitutes an ethic of active religious language for a social model that relies on repeated violence. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of cross-cultural translation and the problems it raises for a doctrine of religious language, namely, whether it is possible to adopt a new religious language without appropriating the language of others.

### **Religion and/as Early National Public Discourse**

In April 1804, then-14-year-old Catharine Sedgwick wrote to her father, away serving in Congress, of a recent election in Stockbridge:

The town-meeting is over; the Jacobins have carried the day; they have a majority of seven for governor, ten for lieutenant governor and senator.... [T]heir most

diabolical act was endeavoring to lessen Dr. West's salary; fortunately they did not succeed. Thus you see, my dear papa, I have become quite a politician....  
(Quoted in Dewey, 80)

The new Democratic majority in Stockbridge—whom Catharine, adopting the attitude of her Federalist father, refers to disdainfully as “Jacobins”—began its tenure by addressing a pressing political matter: the local minister's salary. The minister of Stockbridge's Congregational church, Dr. Stephen West, was Catharine's uncle and the immediate clerical successor to the eminent Jonathan Edwards, and his salary, guaranteed by the state and drawn from public funds, was a matter of considerable political importance.<sup>36</sup> When Catharine described her adolescent self as “quite a politician,” she was registering the recognition that questions of ecclesiastical polity and doctrinal difference were as much matters of political debate as of religious concern.

Catharine's adult writings would reflect this early training in the imbrication of religion and politics, with her historical novels, in particular, probing the relationship between political and religious authority to reveal the way these discourses worked together to consolidate white, male power. *Hope Leslie*, set in the early years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, reveals how the Puritan fathers justified political and military action with religious reasoning, positioning Native peoples, for instance, as “sweet sacrifice[s]” on the altar of Christianity (56). *The Linwoods*, Sedgwick's novel of the Revolutionary War, analyzes the military policies of General George Washington and Sir Henry Clinton in light of their resemblance to (or difference from) those of a just deity: one character remarks that Washington is “godlike” in that “he finishes off little things as completely as great” (73). Even in short sketches like “A Reminiscence of Federalism” (1834) Sedgwick turned a canny and perceptive eye on the relationship between

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<sup>36</sup> Sedgwick's mother Pamela Dwight Sedgwick was a lifelong member of Dr. West's congregation, and Catharine was of the opinion that Pamela's strict Calvinist faith contributed to her “gloominess” and frequent bouts of depression. See Tim Kenslea's *The Sedgwicks in Love* for a thorough history of the Sedgwick family's origins, their influence in Stockbridge social life, and Theodore's political career.

religion and politics; in “Reminiscence” she depicts a Congregationalist minister whose staunch orthodox Calvinism and Federalist politics go hand in hand, driving Democratic voters out of his church and earning him the nickname “Parson Fed.”

Critical treatments of Sedgwick’s work, however, have rarely remarked on her sophisticated exploration of the intersection of religion and politics in the colonial and early national public sphere. Sedgwick’s critics and biographers generally make note of her Congregationalist upbringing and her decision to join a Unitarian church as an adult, but are more likely to characterize her as an uncritical mouthpiece for liberal Christianity than a perceptive participant in American religious and political discourse.<sup>37</sup> Those critics who have moved beyond a simple equation between Sedgwick’s Unitarian faith and her progressive fiction have shown a tendency to divorce her texts’ political and social concerns from their religious reflections and to subordinate the latter to the former. Mary Kelley, for instance, reading religion primarily as a repository for “moral” and “cultural” ideas and an arena separate from the public sphere of political action to which Sedgwick’s father and brothers belonged, positions Sedgwick’s religious adherence as a means to an end, a tool by which she can “retain power and authority in the domain of culture” by addressing her fiction to an “immense moral field” (392-393). Charlene Avallone, writing of race relations in Sedgwick’s fiction, asserts that Sedgwick’s novels “displace” questions of race and gender “from political to religious discourse” as part of an ideological scheme designed to maintain the “difference[s] essential to white American

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<sup>37</sup> This attitude characterizes the work of Sedgwick biographers Edward Halsey Foster and Jane Giles and literary historian Carolyn Karcher, who claims that Sedgwick “entered on her literary career with the aim of diffusing the blessings of Unitarianism” (Karcher xv). But Sedgwick’s relationship with the Unitarian movement was more ambivalent than these critics acknowledge; in her letters she expressed concern over the movement’s “articles of unbelief” and quarreled with Unitarian friends over the coldness of the movement’s ministers and adherents (Letter to Susan Channing, March 12, 1821). As this chapter will demonstrate, Sedgwick’s literary career was less an advertisement for Unitarianism than an interrogation of its central theological problems.

identity and the established social order” (113). In Kelley’s and Avallone’s readings, religion belongs to an apolitical private sphere onto which concerns of gender, race, and class are “displaced” and thus do not affect the public sphere where political action and real social change occur.

Such public-private formulations of nineteenth-century religious influence rely on several misconceptions: that a firm and fixed distinction can be made between the public and private spheres; that the categories of human experience that belong to each are temporally stable rather than historically determined; that politics and religion are separate discourses; and that politics is a matter for the public sphere and religion for the private. These misconceptions are grounded in the secularization thesis that I discussed in my introduction, in some versions of which secularized thought and discourse “do not so much replace religious thought and discourse as they displace them to the private domain of personal experience, belief, and practice” (Kaufmann 607). Taking for granted that religious matters are and always have been a matter for the private sphere, Sedgwick’s biographers and critics treat the religious aspects of Sedgwick’s fiction either as simple reflections of her personal beliefs or as matters unrelated to public issues. But as the young Catharine’s comments on the “Jacobins” demonstrate, in the early-nineteenth-century United States religious matters were very much a subject for public and political discussion. To tie the discourses of race, gender, and class to the public discussion of religion was to bring those topics into a public sphere already deeply concerned with doctrinal and ecclesiastical questions, not to hide them from view or denigrate their importance.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The problem with relegating matters of religion to the private sphere lies not only in the particular historical inaccuracies of such formulations but in the way such assumptions oversimplify the very terms “public” and “private.” As Michael Warner has demonstrated, the terms of the public and private spheres shift constantly despite how much they might “seem to be preconceptual, almost instinctual, rooted in the orientations of the body and common speech” (*Publics* 23). There can be no firm distinction made between the public and the private, especially in Western liberal social systems in which the idea of a

To understand the religious and political commitments of Sedgwick's texts it is necessary to situate them within the particular religious-historical configuration of the early national northeastern United States. Sedgwick's novels, sketches, and letters show particular attention to the interpenetration of religion and politics, not only because Sedgwick was personally religious, but because her adolescence and early adulthood had been marked by an ongoing controversy regarding the proper relationship between religious and political institutions in the public sphere: the disestablishment movement that sought to sever the Congregationalist church from the Massachusetts state government.<sup>39</sup> Until the official disestablishment of the Congregationalist church in 1833, the state's residents were still taxed in support of this institution—and its clergy—whether they attended or not, and political and religious affiliations often fell along predictable lines, with staunch Congregationalists supporting the Federalist party and members of other sects, or those not affiliated with a church, opposing them. As the historian Steven

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public sphere rests on the definition of private selves; instead “public and private sometimes compete, sometimes complement each other, and sometimes are merely parts of a larger series of classifications.... Almost every major cultural change—from Christianity to printing to psychoanalysis—has left a new sedimentary layer in the meaning of the public and the private” (M. Warner, *Publics* 28). And as the boundaries between the public and the private shift, the interconnected discourses of religion and politics constantly transgress them. This is true both for any given moment in time and when viewed in historical perspective: behaviors deemed essentially private in one era and under a particular political regime are considered appropriately public in another.

<sup>39</sup> By 1800 most of the states in the newly formed union had disestablished the state churches (like the Anglican Church in New York and Virginia) that marked the colonial period. But Connecticut and Massachusetts, Congregationalist mainstays since the seventeenth century, maintained their establishments into the early 1800s, with Massachusetts holding out until 1833. The Congregationalist establishment in Massachusetts, in particular, did not go down without a fight. As late as 1827, the year *Hope Leslie* was published, Congregationalist leaders were still trying to restrict voting rights in the choice of local pastors to only those citizens who were official members of the church. (Congregationalist churches were often attended by large numbers of people who chose never to officially become members—or who attempted to join but were denied admission, often because of theological disputes with the existing membership.) Such attempts flew in the face of high court decisions—including those of Judge Sedgwick, Catharine's father and one-time Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court—confirming the right of all voting citizens to choose their local pastors, and represented a clear attempt on the part of Orthodox clergy to stamp out the increasing influence of Unitarian ministers and believers (“Review: Art. V.” 124).

Green notes, scholars of American history often treat the disestablishment of religion and the separation of church and state as settled facts rather than ongoing processes, projecting a current model of church-state separation onto earlier eras in which these two institutions were vastly more intertwined than they currently are. Nineteenth-century Americans, Green notes, made far less of a distinction between the discourses of politics and religion than twenty-first-century Americans are wont to do:<sup>40</sup>

In 1800, the United States represented the only secular government on earth, revolutionary France excepted.... Yet, for most of the [nineteenth] century, the ‘wall of separation’ was more of an illusion than a reality; despite the Jeffersonian/Madisonian vision, the new republic that emerged in the early 1800s was popularly described as a ‘Christian nation’.... (9)

The official disestablishment of the Congregational Church in Massachusetts did not occur until 11 years after Sedgwick had begun her literary career. Even then, nineteenth-century America remained “a ‘Protestant empire’ where Protestant/evangelical beliefs and values dominated the nation’s culture and institutions” through “revivals and reform associations, blasphemy and Sabbath laws, religious oath requirements, and state maintenance of a Protestant-oriented public school system” (Green 9). To read religion and politics as separate discourses in early-nineteenth-century fiction is to misrepresent the makeup of the early national public sphere, in which the disestablishment of religion and its definition as a “private” discourse was accomplished neither in theory nor in practice.

The evolving role of religion in the public sphere was thus a defining fact of life in the early national milieu in which Sedgwick’s novels appeared, and to read the religious aspects of her fiction as separate from or tangential to political concerns is to misunderstand the role of women’s religious language in nineteenth-century public life. To treat religious discourse solely

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<sup>40</sup> The continuing imbrication of religion and politics in American life can be seen most starkly in the *de facto*, if not *de jure*, religious tests applied to those running for elected office. Having the “right religion” is a basic requirement for almost all political candidates, but certainly those seeking the presidency.

as an aspect of or a window onto private life is to overlook the historical conditions of the early national era, in which the proper relation between religion and politics was as much a matter for public debate as for private concern, and religious discourse provided a space, not for avoiding public and political matters, but for engaging productively with them. By invoking religious questions—particularly ongoing debates about the doctrine of atonement—Sedgwick’s novels participate in a public sphere in which religious questions were just as much a matter for public discussion as were matters of electoral politics or civic government. By situating these debates in new historical settings, Sedgwick explored their effects on the new nation’s civil institutions as well as its religious ones.

### **Deconstructing Atonement in *Hope Leslie***

Sedgwick’s historical novel *Hope Leslie*, set in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the aftermath of the Pequot War,<sup>41</sup> interrogates the Christian doctrine of atonement through the lens of Massachusetts’ colonial history. By drawing parallels between the atonement doctrines embraced by the English colonists and the rituals of revenge attributed by the Puritans to the Native population, Sedgwick suggests that the doctrine of atonement is a shaky foundation on which to build a new nation because it perpetuates violence against the weak to further the goals

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<sup>41</sup> The historical event dubbed the “Pequot War” by the Massachusetts Bay colonists is better described as a massacre. Both John Winthrop, seventeenth-century governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the nineteenth-century historians Benjamin Trumbull and William Hubbard couched the conflict as a “battle” in which the Puritans had won a righteous and hard-fought victory. Sedgwick’s retelling—which she places in the mouth of Magawisca—restores the historical reality of the scene (confirmed by twentieth-century historians), in which white settlers besieged and burned an undefended Pequot village, murdering women and children in a horrifying act of pretended retribution that was less military maneuver than vicious ambush. As Sandra Zagarell has noted, *Hope Leslie* does not merely adopt the Massachusetts Bay Colony as its setting; Sedgwick also wrote to set the record straight on the injustices of the Pequot War. Sedgwick’s account of the conflict with the Pequots “expos[ed] the repositories of the nation’s early history, the Puritan narratives, as justifications of genocide” (Zagarell, “Expanding” 235).

of the strong, who couch their violent actions in the language of the “public weal.” *Hope Leslie* thus contributes to an ongoing nineteenth-century debate about atonement (a major matter of contention between orthodox Calvinist and liberal Unitarian theologians) while simultaneously exploring the social consequences of atonement theology for a nation still in the early stages of its development.

The most famous scene in Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* is one in which the Indian maiden Magawisca, desperate to save the English colonist Everell Fletcher from beheading at the hands of her father, throws herself in front of the falling ax. The Pequot chief Mononotto, planning to avenge the death of his son Samoset by sacrificing an English boy of the same age, has kidnapped Everell Fletcher and taken him to the “sacrifice-rock” where such rituals of revenge are conducted. As the Pequot elders prepare for the ritual, Mononotto’s daughter Magawisca scales the side of the sacrifice-rock and arrives just in time to interrupt the event; throwing her arm between her father’s ax and Everell’s neck, she cries, “I have bought his life with my own.” Everell is saved but Magawisca’s arm is severed, and Everell flees east to rejoin the Puritan colonists. Magawisca disappears with her father into the western forests of Massachusetts; Everell, upon returning to the Massachusetts Bay, spreads the tale of the “sister that had redeemed his life with her own” (97).

The scene narrates an ethical shift from a religious and social model of revenge to one of atonement: Everell, whose death will avenge the murder of Mononotto’s son, is redeemed at the last moment by Magawisca’s willing self-sacrifice. Magawisca’s “redemption” of Everell—twice the narrator repeats that Magawisca has “bought” or “redeemed” Everell’s life—borrows and reverses the structure of the Indian captivity narrative, in which white colonists paid a



ransom for the return of a family member kidnapped by natives.<sup>42</sup> But Magawisca's "redemption" of Everell invokes not only the literary-historical tradition of the captivity narrative but the theological construct that lay behind the very concept of redemption: the doctrine of atonement, by which Christ's death on the cross redeems mankind from the sins of Adam and brings about human salvation.<sup>43</sup> In casting Magawisca as a redeemer who voluntarily takes Everell's place and pays for the sins of the white colonists, Sedgwick fictionalizes the scene of atonement—the crucifixion—and casts a Native American woman in the role of Christ.

The historical setting of colonial Massachusetts and the fictional story of Everell and Magawisca provided Sedgwick with an imaginative space in which to consider the doctrine of atonement so central to Protestant Christianity and to nineteenth-century public religious debates, to lift this theological construct out of its rancorous contemporary milieu, and to examine it from a different but still politically relevant point of view. The question of atonement was not under debate in the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the 1640s, when *Hope Leslie* is set, but was very much in play in the Massachusetts of the 1820s, when *Hope Leslie* was published. Atonement theology was a major bone of contention between the early-nineteenth-century New England Orthodox establishment and the small but rapidly expanding American Unitarian movement, and Sedgwick's personal history made her privy to the debates surrounding atonement theology: her

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<sup>42</sup> In her work on Indian captivity in *Hope Leslie*, Karen Woods Weierman notes that Magawisca's rescue of Everell recapitulates the legend of Pocahontas and John Smith. Weierman, following Mary Kelley, also discusses the similarities between the story of Faith Leslie—Hope's younger sister who is carried into captivity, marries Mononotto's son Oneco, and converts to Catholicism—and the captivity narrative of Eunice Williams, Sedgwick's ancestor on her mother's side ("Reading and Writing").

<sup>43</sup> Richard Slotkin details the religious archetypes that the early Indian captivity narratives illustrated for Puritan writers and readers:

The sufferer represents the whole, chastened body of Puritan society; and the temporary bondage of the captive to the Indian is dual paradigm—of the bondage of the soul to the flesh and to the temptations arising from original sin.... The captive's ultimate redemption by the grave of Christ and the efforts of the Puritan magistrates is likened to the regeneration of the soul in conversion. (94)

“Uncle West” was considered an authority on the doctrine of the atonement, and Sedgwick spent much of her childhood listening to him expound his theories in Sunday sermons and during visits to the Sedgwick home.<sup>44</sup>

Atonement, as the construct that underlies the Protestant interpretation of Christ’s crucifixion and mankind’s redemption, is one of the doctrines most central to Christian theology, and in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries it was the subject of intense debate among orthodox and Unitarian theologians. In its most general terms atonement is “the satisfying Divine Justice by Jesus Christ giving himself a ransom for us, undergoing the penalty due to our sins, and thereby releasing us from that punishment which God might justly inflict upon us” (Buck 37).<sup>45</sup> Stephen West subscribed to the “governmental” theory of the atonement laid out by the theologians of the New Divinity movement, in which the crucifixion did not satisfy a debt but instead displayed the true majesty of God:<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Raised in an Orthodox Congregationalist church in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Sedgwick joined the New York Unitarian Society in 1821 and corresponded occasionally with William Ellery Channing, the unofficial spokesperson for the Boston Unitarian movement (Giles 44).<sup>44</sup> Sedgwick’s personal writings show that she gave much thought to the question of atonement: in the 1860s, when she wrote her autobiography for her niece Alice Minot, she could still limn the differences between Stephen West’s Hopkinsian (governmental) model of the atonement and the substitutionary doctrine held by the New York clergyman John Mitchell Mason, whose church she had left over thirty years before (“Autobiography” 95, 99).

Catharine’s letters to her siblings indicate that she held a somewhat jocular attitude toward West’s Calvinist theology long before she left his church. Scolding her brother Charles in a letter she wrote: “Indeed, my dear Charles, all the sermons I hear in a month, and all the writers on human depravity, with Hopkins at their head... can not counteract the... mass of flattery you have so elegantly served up in your letter.... The next letter that you write, by way of unraveling this web of mischief, I desire may be filled with extracts from [Samuel] Hopkins’s Diary, [Jonathan] Edwards’s Meditations, and Uncle West’s Sermons” (Letter to Charles Sedgwick, February 20, 1812). “Uncle West,” of course, is Stephen West, whose sermons were in fact frequently published as pamphlets.

<sup>45</sup> This succinct definition of atonement is from the 1821 edition of Charles Buck’s *Definitions of All Religious Terms*, a standard reference work already in its sixth American edition by the time Sedgwick wrote *Hope Leslie*.

<sup>46</sup> Buck’s *Definitions of All Religious Terms* recommends West’s 1785 treatise *The Scripture Doctrine of Atonement* as an important source on the subject. West’s reputation as a theologian was respected enough

Respecting *atonement*, it is to be observed that it summarily consists in an *exhibition* of the righteous displeasure of God against sin, made in some other way than in the punishment of the sinner.... One great end of the coming and death of *Christ*, was to delineate this disposition of the divine mind, and make a full and sensible exhibition of it. In *his* sufferings and death this divine purity, and hatred of iniquity, were sensibly and gloriously expressed. (West 121-122, emphasis in original)

In other words, God requires Christ to atone for the sins of man because only by allowing his son to die can God display his hatred of sin.<sup>47</sup> For West and other adherents to the “governmental” theory, Christ’s death was necessary in order to display to mankind how God could be both infinitely just—requiring punishment for sin—and infinitely merciful—pardoning the sinner—at one and the same time.

The idea that God’s justice could be best displayed through the death of a sinless man was one of the orthodox theologies most repugnant to Unitarians (including Catharine Sedgwick’s brother Harry, who had helped found a New York Unitarian congregation in 1819). Unitarian theologians, most notably William Ellery Channing and Henry Ware, “could [not] accept the sacrificial theory of the atonement, according to which God unleashed salvific power only by demanding the violent death of his sinless son. The God whose image they hoped to embody was a perfectly loving parent who identified with, cared for, and shared the sufferings of every human individual” (McKanan 4-5).<sup>48</sup> Channing and other Unitarians’ chief objection to the

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that he was deemed worthy to succeed Jonathan Edwards at the clerical post in Stockbridge.

<sup>47</sup> The competing theory of the atonement, held by the Old Calvinists, was the “substitutionary” model, in which Christ’s death is believed to satisfy a debt that mankind has incurred by sinning against God. Both the governmental and substitutionary models interpret Christ’s death and resurrection as expressions of God’s justice and mercy, satisfying a penalty for sin while not exacting that penalty directly from sinners. (See Holifield 132-156.)

<sup>48</sup> The rise of Unitarian thought in early America was part of a larger liberal movement among Protestant Christians that stretched back to at least the seventeenth century. The characteristics of liberal Protestant theology include “an emphasis on the immanence of the sacred; a reliance on the authority of lived experience as a counter to traditionally authoritative religious claims; a willingness to engage insights

doctrine of atonement was the monstrous god it seemed to depict: “How plain is it also, according to this doctrine, that God, instead of being plenteous in forgiveness, never forgives; for it is absurd to speak of men as forgiven, when their whole punishment is borne by a substitute? A scheme more fitted to bring Christianity into contempt, and less suited to give comfort to a guilty and troubled mind, could not, we think, be easily invented” (Channing, *Sermon* 33). Unitarians, then, objected to the doctrine of atonement for both doctrinal and practical reasons: not only was it unreasonable to expect a loving god to behave in such a way, but such beliefs had dire consequences, bringing torment rather than comfort to those who accepted them.<sup>49</sup>

It is the social consequences of atonement theology that Catharine Sedgwick, who joined All Souls Unitarian Church in New York in 1821, explored in *Hope Leslie*. Sedgwick’s fictional interrogation of atonement theology went beyond the philosophical speculations of her clerical colleagues, demonstrating in fictional form how models of collective salvation and social progress based on an atonement model disproportionately victimize the already disempowered, particularly women and Native Americans. Where William Ellery Channing “disavowed as horrendous the idea of a Grotian gallows erected at the center of the cosmos” (Williams xiv), Sedgwick brought those cosmic concerns down to earth—to the Boston and New York soil on

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from secular culture in the construction of religious ideas; and an understanding of theology as, finally, more expressive than prescriptive or even descriptive” (Bednarowski 9). The term “liberal” in this case is a theological designation, not a political one. Its antithesis in nineteenth-century parlance was not “conservative” but “Orthodox.”

The Unitarian movement’s most salient theological innovation, as its name indicates, was a rejection of the Trinity: the traditional understanding of God, codified at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., as made up of three separate but coequal attributes, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unitarians, applying reason to their readings of the Bible, found no scriptural evidence for such a doctrine, and postulated that Christ must therefore be human rather than divine.

<sup>49</sup> Unitarian thinkers, committed to the notion that God’s nature could be apprehended through reason, found orthodox explanations of the atonement nonsensical. If in order to express his true nature God must require the death of a sinless human being, then God’s true nature is not merciful but monstrous.

which nineteenth-century Unitarians set their feet.<sup>50</sup> By examining theological questions within the quasi-fictional milieu of the historical novel—by telling a story both recognizable (in its historical outlines and its inclusion of figures like John Winthrop) and original (in its invention of characters including Magawisca, Everell Fletcher, and Hope Leslie)—Sedgwick explored the real-world consequences of the theologies upon which male clerics expounded. Sedgwick’s fictional interrogation of atonement theology placed Unitarian doubts in national and historical context, depicting in a literary milieu the consequences of a society in which fathers—both family fathers and Founding Fathers—behave like monstrous gods rather than loving parents.

In *Hope Leslie* Sedgwick discredits atonement theology by highlighting how Christian models of atonement that supposedly depict a loving and merciful God are little different, in their effects, from social models based on violent revenge: both rely on an ethic of sacrifice that treats the weak and disempowered as the tools of the strong and powerful. Sedgwick draws this parallel by depicting the Massachusetts Bay colonists, who claim to love and forgive their enemies, as less moral than the Pequot Natives whose social systems ostensibly rest on an ethic of revenge. Rather than positioning the Massachusetts Bay colonists as the enlightened successors to primitive Pequot culture, as stadialist descriptions of early North American history usually did,<sup>51</sup> Sedgwick equates the rituals of the Pequots with the vengeful behavior of the English colonists to reveal how both social models rest on an ethic of sacrifice that justifies violence against the

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<sup>50</sup> Boston was the intellectual center of the Unitarian movement in America. The standard joke was that Unitarians believed in “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston.”

<sup>51</sup> George Dekker’s work discusses the stadialist ideologies that undergirded the American historical romance of the 1820s and ’30s, particularly the work of James Fenimore Cooper. (Dekker mentions Sedgwick’s work only in passing.) Stadialist historical theories posited that civilizations moved through four distinct stages of progress, each defined by “characteristic social institutions and cultural forms” (Dekker 75). *Hope Leslie*, while conforming to a stadialist model of historical progress, rejects the notion that English colonists were more enlightened than their Indian neighbors. Instead, by drawing parallels between Puritan and Pequot acts of violent sacrifice, Sedgwick discredits the sacrificial model itself.

disempowered by appealing to a higher communal good.

Sedgwick erases distinctions between revenge and atonement by emphasizing how both doctrines rely on an ethic of violent sacrifice. Sedgwick repeatedly invokes the word “sacrifice” in order to link the supposedly enlightened behavior of the white Christian colonists with the putatively primitive traditions of the Pequot Indians. Describing the unprovoked attack against the Pequots that initiated Mononotto’s act of revenge against Everell, Sedgwick’s drily ironic narrator quotes William Bradford’s account of the event, in which he characterized “the horrible scent” of burning Pequot flesh as “a sweet sacrifice” to God (56). Similarly, when Mononotto takes Everell to a sacred Pequot site to avenge the death of his son Samoset, he finds the tribal elders “seated around their sacrifice-rock—their holy of holies” (95).<sup>52</sup> In the midst of the march to the sacrifice-rock Sedgwick’s narrator inserts a long rumination on the “sacrifices” of the Puritan forefathers and “the consecrated church” that they built “on the rock of heathen sacrifice” (75). Sedgwick’s proliferation of the word “sacrifice” equates the bloody history of the English settlers with the ostensibly violent behavior of the Native Americans whose lands they appropriated, emphasizing the similarities between Christian and native histories of “sacrifice” rather than any distinction between them. The Puritan settlers who believe in atonement and the Indian natives who (in Sedgwick’s telling) valorize revenge are little different, since both of their social models require violent sacrifice to produce communal identity.

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<sup>52</sup> Sandra Zagarell notes that Mononotto’s acts align him with stereotypical portrayals of Indians, particularly those crafted by James Fenimore Cooper, as violent and vengeful. The difference between Sedgwick’s Mononotto and Cooper’s Uncas, however, is that the “acts of Cooper’s Indian have nothing to do with the whites’ policies; he is intrinsically malevolent, and the murder he commits touches off a wanton massacre of the English. *Hope Leslie*’s narrative structure, however, situates its analogous and undeniably horrifying act as part of a chain of white-initiated historical events” (“Expanding” 233-34). In providing the historical context for Mononotto’s act, Sedgwick undercuts naturalized depictions of Indians as inherently and irreparably violent (an ideology that justifies their extermination) and accords them the status of intelligent political actors who respond purposefully to the unjustifiable acts committed against them.

When Magawisca arrives at the sacrifice-rock to “redeem” Everell’s life at the expected cost of her own, her brave act alters the terms of the event from one of vengeance to one of atonement, in which an unwilling victim is replaced by a willing and self-elected one. This moment does indeed, as Christopher Castiglia suggests, juxtapose “the male world of the Old Testament—based on violence, vengeance, and ‘artificial codes of law’” with “the feminine world of the New Testament—based on mercy and love, represented by the evoked spirits of the mothers” (173). But what Castiglia’s optimistic reading fails to recognize is that in the religio-political world that *Hope Leslie* depicts there is little to distinguish an Old Testament model of vengeance—exemplified by both the Pequot elders and the Puritan fathers—and the New Testament model of atonement embodied in Magawisca’s brave act.<sup>53</sup> The possibilities for human agency under both of these systems are severely limited: one is either the perpetrator or the victim of violence, and the only choice available is whether to go willingly to one’s death or be sent there by another.

The problem of limited agency is a function of the ritual nature of sacrificial systems, whether of vengeance or of atonement. Societies built on rituals of sacrifice come to presuppose “a cult of violence or a belief that through violence (even victimization) one may regenerate or redeem the self or the group” (LaCapra 78). Sacrificial ethics are structurally similar in their dependence on the power of ritual: the sacrificial act must take place in a recognizable context if it is to properly “regenerate or redeem the self or the group.” Christ’s atonement is only meaningful within the context of Old Testament ritual practices, in which the “first fruits” of a

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<sup>53</sup> Castiglia’s own reference to the “evoked spirits of the mothers” actually reveals the limitations of such optimistic readings, since all of the mothers in *Hope Leslie* are dead, victims of patriarchal suppression and violence perpetrated in the name of vengeance or sacrifice. Hope and Faith Leslie are orphaned and sent to America when their mother, forced into a loveless marriage by her overbearing father, dies and bequeaths them to the man she once loved. Magawisca’s mother, captured during the Pequot Massacre in an act of “mercy” by one of the English soldiers, dies in English captivity. Everell Fletcher’s mother is killed when Mononotto attacks the Fletcher homestead in an act of revenge for the massacre.

harvest or a newborn animal were brought to the temple to be burned on the altar. When Bradford describes the smell of burning Pequot flesh, he too invokes these ancient rituals. Mononotto, preparing Everell for beheading, emphasizes the similarities between Everell and the son whose death he will avenge: “as Samoset died, that boy shall die” (77). And Magawisca’s act of “redemption” invokes both the Old Testament ritual of animal sacrifice and the New Testament act of redemption performed by Christ on the cross. All of these acts of sacrifice and redemption are structurally similar, Sedgwick suggests, because they rely on ancient rituals that perpetuate violence rather than preventing it.

Sedgwick’s focus on ritual language and its relationship to human agency—particularly female agency—anticipates the work of J.L. Austin and Judith Butler, whose theories of the speech act investigate how particular kinds of language bring about change in the world. Building on Austin, who distinguishes between perlocutionary and illocutionary language, Butler describes the relationship between the cross-temporal nature of ritual and the effective force of illocutionary speech acts:

[Illocutionary] utterances do what they say on the occasion of the saying; they are not only occasional, but in Austin’s words ‘ritual or ceremonial.’ As utterances, they work to the extent that they are given in the form of a ritual, that is, repeated in time, and, hence, maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the moment of the utterance itself. (3)

But even as they make agency possible, these illocutionary rituals limit the kinds and extent of the agency available to ritual participants. Religious anthropologist Webb Keane, drawing on the work of linguist Maurice Bloch, describes how ritual practices function to maintain the cultural status quo:

Since ritual... severely restricts the participants’ choices of intonation, vocabulary, syntactic forms, and acceptable illustrations (such as scriptural or mythological allusions), it wields... a highly impoverished kind of propositional language.... [I]t is coercive: once participants have entered the ritual frame, they



are committed to a pre-ordained sequence of events. (“Language and Religion” 434)

Human agency, while not obliterated by ritual forms, is restricted to those acts and utterances that are conceivable within the “ritual frame.” While the identity of those who occupy the positions may change—the sacrifice may be an animal or a person—the structures of ritual remain the same.

When Magawisca interrupts her father’s attempt to sacrifice Everell she performs an illocutionary act that, while it results in Everell’s freedom, nevertheless does not significantly disrupt the terms of the ritual. Throwing her arm between her father’s axe and Everell’s neck, Magawisca cries ““I have bought his life with my own,”” both describing and performing the act of redemption. Everell’s life is saved, not only by Magawisca’s bodily interposition, but by her illocutionary proclamation that the price for Everell’s life has been paid in full. This illocutionary pronouncement demonstrates both the possibilities for and the limits of Magawisca’s agency within the terms of Pequot ritual traditions. Magawisca chooses to take Everell’s place at the sacrifice-rock, but her brave act does not change the essential terms of the ritual, in which some body must be sacrificed to avenge the death of Samoset.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in generalized terms—in which Magawisca and Everell, in addition to being individuals and friends, are representatives of cultures at the point of violent contact, Magawisca’s act exacerbates existing inequalities: the intended sacrifice, eldest son and heir of the white colonizer, escapes unscathed, while Magawisca, doubly disempowered by virtue of her gender and race, is mutilated instead.

As *Hope Leslie* progresses Magawisca’s severed arm becomes the symbol of the ritualized violence perpetrated against her and of the limited agency available to her so long as

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<sup>54</sup> To understand the illocutionary terms of the ritual at the sacrifice-rock, imagine Magawisca standing beside her father, perfectly unscathed, shouting “I have bought his life with my own.” Under such conditions, her statement would be meaningless—Austin would say “infelicitous.”

she continues to participate in either the vengeful rituals of her father or the atoning rituals of the white Puritan colonists. Embarrassed by her “deformity,” Magawisca never removes the blanket that hides her severed arm until she is put on trial for her supposed treachery; when she does so, it is in the context of her request that Winthrop and the Puritan magistrates punish her quickly rather than returning her to prison. Revealing her “mutilated person” she invokes the memory of her dead mother—another victim of Puritan “justice”—to demand her own execution: ““I pray you, send me to death now.... Thou didst promise... to my dying mother.... In her name, I demand of thee death or liberty”” (308-309). Recognizing that the courtroom ritual of the Puritan settlers is little different from the “sacrifice-rock” of the Pequot elders—both are sites at which women and children are sacrificed to the putative needs of the state—Magawisca once again concedes to the terms of the ritual and offers her body for destruction.

Magawisca’s missing arm, then, serves as reminder, not only of her noble sacrifice, but of the inability of such sacrifice to enact lasting change—it indexes both action and impotence simultaneously. The social inefficacy of sacrifice is a frequent theme in the remaining chapters of *Hope Leslie*. (The scene at the sacrifice-rock occurs only about a quarter of the way through the novel.) Magawisca’s sacrifice, while brave and admirable, does little to alter relations between the Pequots and the Puritans, which remain marked by the same patterns of war and recrimination that preceded her act. In fact Magawisca’s sacrifice effects little change beyond the immediate circle of the Fletcher family: while Everell, his father, and Everell’s cousin Hope Leslie feel a lasting debt to Magawisca, the colony as a whole admits no obligation to her. When Magawisca returns to the colony years after the scene at the sacrifice-rock, she is captured by the English authorities and accused of planning an attack on the colony. The Fletcher family’s entreaties can do nothing to prevent her imprisonment; when Mr. Fletcher admonishes colonial

governor John Winthrop that ““certainly we owe much to this woman,” Winthrop replies, ““You owe much undoubtedly... but it yet remains to be proved, my friend, that your son’s redeemed life is to be put in the balance against the public weal”” (245). Winthrop’s statement makes clear that a single act of “redemption” can do little to alter public policies of vengeance, violence, and mistrust: ““private feelings must yield to public good,”” he insists, with the “public good” defined by Winthrop himself.<sup>55</sup> Sacrifice, the events of *Hope Leslie* reveal, is not an effective way to bring about lasting progress or intercultural understanding.

While Sedgwick’s objections to atonement theology were characteristic of her increasingly Unitarian views, *Hope Leslie* does not merely repeat the anti-atonement pronouncements of Channing and his clerical colleagues. Rather, Sedgwick’s particular political-theological insight was the recognition that within systems that valorize atonement and sacrifice the responsibility for absorbing and absolving communal guilt will fall disproportionately on the backs of those already disempowered: women, people of color, the poor, and children. Both John Winthrop and Mononotto position the disenfranchised as “natural” objects of sacrifice, ““to be mortared in like... common brick[s], wherever may best suit the purposes and views of the builders”” (169). *Hope Leslie* makes this point, not only by casting a Native American woman in the role of Christ, but by highlighting the similarities between a “law of vengeance” (349) and a

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<sup>55</sup> Critic Dan McKanan, noting Sedgwick’s suspicion of atonement theology, nevertheless classes her among a group of liberal authors who ostensibly reintroduced atonement doctrine through a back-door maneuver whereby innocent victims of violence “would be compensated with eternal felicity,” thereby reinforcing “the notion that the suffering of the innocent was itself a source of nonviolent power” (43). McKanan offers the sinless death of the Fletcher infant as an example of the reintroduction of atonement logic. But this analysis, based on a single scene in the novel, overlooks *Hope Leslie*’s larger critique of atonement theology, for the death of the Fletcher infant is another in a series of events that serves, not to echo the doctrine of the atonement, but to repudiate it. The death of the infant stops the massacre at the Fletcher cabin, as McKanan notes, but has no further salubrious effects: it does not prevent Mononotto from kidnapping Faith or from taking Everell to the sacrifice-rock. The “sacrifice” of the Fletcher infant (whom Sedgwick never even honors with a name) serves no redemptive purpose in the novel; it is merely a senseless act of violence that benefits no one—not even Mononotto, whose plans for revenge backfire against his own family.

system of atonement, a “written rule of forgiveness” in which forgiveness must nevertheless be bought with blood (349).

*Hope Leslie*, with its extended rumination on the ethic of sacrifice that links acts of revenge and acts of atonement, depicts what the critical theorist Rene Girard describes as the “sacrificial crisis”:

a “sacrificial crisis” occurs in societies whose members begin to doubt the apparently magical efficacy of the sacrificial system.... At such a time the cruel operation of sacrifice underlying society begins to be perceived.... The primary moral result of sacrificial crisis is the production, and recognition, of an essential global similarity amongst human beings, and with it the absolute need to renounce the violent designation of some supposed “Other”.... (Dennis 5)

But having reached the “sacrificial crisis” and dismantled the theological construct of atonement which she perceived to be built upon “the cruel operation of sacrifice,” Sedgwick was left with an even larger question: if American progress was not to be built on the graves of its heroes and heroines, then how was America to prosper? Sedgwick’s second historical novel, *The Linwoods*, not only demonstrates the finality of Sedgwick’s rejection of sacrifice as a basis for social cohesion—it is a Revolutionary War novel in which hardly anyone dies—but represents her sustained effort to replace a theology of violent death with one of living language: to replace women’s victimized bodies with their active voices. *The Linwoods* rejects ritual forms and instead explores possibilities for women’s spontaneous religious language—language that is perlocutionary rather than illocutionary and not bound either by ossified historical narratives or orthodox religious forms.

### **Religious Language in *The Linwoods***

It is to escape the endlessly iterative ritual conditions in which women’s bodies can occupy only the role of sacrificial victim and women’s voices can only repeat the memory of

sacrificial violence that Sedgwick begins to develop a theory of spontaneous religious language—one in which women’s language gains effective power precisely by freeing itself from illocutionary ritual forms. *Hope Leslie*, concerned as it is with deconstructing the problem of atonement while nevertheless celebrating noble acts of self-sacrifice like those performed by Magawisca, never fully develops this theological insight. It would take another historical novel, *The Linwoods*, to more thoroughly explore and depict the transformative possibilities of women’s religious language.

*The Linwoods or, “Sixty Years Since” in America* tells the story of Isabella and Herbert Linwood, siblings born in the pre-Revolutionary English colonies to a Loyalist father who regards Washington and the rest of the revolutionaries as rebellious criminals. When Herbert runs away from home to join Washington’s army, Mr. Linwood vows that Herbert will never reenter the family home. Isabella begs for leniency but Mr. Linwood strengthens his condemnation of Herbert by swearing an oath against his son: ““You know, Belle, I have sworn no rebel will enter my doors.”” Isabella’s reply highlights both her gender and her subordinate position as Mr. Linwood’s daughter: “And you know, sir, that I have—not sworn; oh, no! but resolved, and my resolve is the feminine of my father’s oath, that you shall hang me on a gallows high as Haman’s, before I cease to plead that our doors be open to one rebel at least” (113). Mr. Linwood, white, male, wealthy, and with the might of the British crown behind him, should be the more powerful speaker in the exchange: his masculine “oath” should prevail over Isabella’s feminine “resolve.” And yet it is Isabella—young, female, disenfranchised, and in rebellion against the crown—whose language is efficacious: Herbert will eventually be readmitted to the Linwood household over his father’s unheeded objections. *The Linwoods* is the story of the process by which Isabella’s feminine resolve is revealed to be more efficacious than

Mr. Linwood's masculine oath, and to be the true language of America.

In keeping with *Hope Leslie's* rejection of ritual forms, *The Linwoods*, too, denies the efficacy of ritual language. Describing the coercive force of ritual forms, Webb Keane insists that the only way to escape the "pre-ordained sequence of events" prescribed by ritual is to perform "the extreme act of rejecting the very premises of the ritual" ("Language and Religion" 434). Herbert Linwood performs this rejection by refusing to drink the toast to George III, and Isabella Linwood performs it by refusing to swear an oath. Unlike Magawisca, who in sacrificing herself for Everell affirmed her father's violence by redirecting it toward herself, Isabella repudiates ritual speech altogether, offering spontaneous feminine resolve as an alternative to her father's masculine oath.

To use the theoretical terms set forth by J.L. Austin and Judith Butler, Mr. Linwood's speech is illocutionary while Isabella's is perlocutionary. According to Butler,

Illocutionary speech acts produce effects. They are supported... by linguistic and social conventions. Perlocutionary acts, on the other hand, are those utterances that initiate a set of consequences: in a perlocutionary speech act, "saying something will produce certain consequences," but the saying and the consequences produced are temporally distinct.... Whereas illocutionary acts proceed by way of conventions, perlocutionary acts proceed by way of consequences. (17)

Mr. Linwood's illocutionary speech attempts to effect Herbert's permanent banishment from the Linwood home simply by pronouncing it so. But his speech is infelicitous because in the new American nation the "social conventions" that would make it effectual—the rituals of English society—no longer hold sway. Isabella's perlocutionary language, on the other hand, is felicitous precisely because it does not rely on preset rituals to effect change. Instead, it initiates a sequence of events that produces the desired outcome, as she later pleads with the royal governor for her brother's release from prison, then convinces her father to readmit Herbert to the family home.

What distinguishes Isabella Linwood from her father and makes her the true representative American (*The Linwoods* is in part the story of Isabella's transformation from Loyalist to rebel) is her ability to wield what the cultural theorist Bruno Latour calls "religious language": her power to transform the opinions and behavior of other people by virtue of nothing more than the sincerity and force of her language. In his essay "'Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame,' or, How Not to Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate," Latour defines "religious language" as language that transforms the persons involved.<sup>56</sup> Acts of religious language, he writes, either "transport the spirit from which they talk and they can be said to be truthful, faithful, proven, experienced, self-verifiable, or they don't reproduce, don't perform, don't transport what they talk from and immediately, without any inertia, they begin to lie, to fall apart, to stop having any reference, any ground" ("Thou Shall" 29). In addition to transporting the person (spirit) *by* whom they are spoken, acts of religious language also have the potential to transform the spirit *to* whom they are spoken: they "produce in part personhood"; they generate "new states, 'new beginnings,' as William James would say... in the persons thus addressed" (30). Latour's "religious language," then, is a type of felicitous perlocutionary act: one that is efficacious, not because of its ritual context or the authority of the speaker, but rather because of the affective transformation produced by the speech act. Religious language, for Latour, can be transformative even when its content has little or nothing to do with religion.<sup>57</sup> though religious

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<sup>56</sup> Latour contrasts religious speech with what he calls "double-click communication," which is speech that can only transmit facts rather than transforming persons. It is thus the preferred mode for speaking about scientific topics ("Thou Shall").

<sup>57</sup> Latour uses the example of love-talk: the factual content of the phrase "I love you" is irrelevant if the person saying it and the person to whom it is being said are not moved in some way by the utterance: lovers who are affectively transformed by the words "I love you" can be transformed regardless of context (the words need not be spoken as part of a larger ritual, though they sometimes are) and regardless of originality of content (the words can be transformative though they have been spoken hundreds of times.) For Latour, the couple transformed and transported by the words "I love you" is using

language is “a way of preaching, of predicating, of enunciating truth,” to produce such acts of religious language is “not to talk *about* religion, but to talk... *religiously*” (“Thou Shall” 28, emphasis in original).<sup>58</sup>

In *The Linwoods* it is Isabella’s language that most often displays this transformative power, marking her as the most powerful linguistic and religious force in the novel. When Herbert Linwood considers deserting Washington’s army in order to gain his father’s forgiveness and be readmitted to the Linwood family, one sentence from Isabella is enough to end his doubts and fix his resolve on the side of the rebellion. “Herbert, is it possible you waver?” Isabella asks in a voice that “thrill[s]” through Herbert’s soul, and the description of his response indicates the religious power of Isabella’s question: “He started as if he were electrified: his eye met hers, and the evil spirits of doubt and irresolution were overcome. ‘Heaven forgive me!... I waver no longer’” (148). Isabella’s spontaneous perlocutionary speech has temporal effects that extend beyond the moment of pronouncement, “initiat[ing] a set of consequences,” as Butler puts it, that keeps Herbert loyal to the republican cause even months later when he is starving in an English military prison: “there was one moment—but one, thank God! when, tempted by more than all the gold and honour in the king’s gift, I swerved. I was saved by a look from Isabella” (217). The religious terms that pepper these scenes—“evil spirits,” “tempted,” “Heaven forgive me,” “Thank God,” “saved”—mark Isabella’s language and actions with the imprint of spiritual

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religious language just as surely as is the priest who pronounces that “the body of Christ is broken for you” (“Thou Shall”).

<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Latour himself is attempting, in “Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame,” to talk religiously about the science and religion “debate” to an assumed audience of intellectuals, historians and critical theorists. I place the word “debate” in quotation marks because Latour himself does not see the conversation as a debate; part of his point in defining “double-click communication” as over against religious language is to emphasize that different types of language are suited to different kinds of utterances—in this case, utterances that convey facts versus utterances that “transport persons.” To expect religious language to convey facts is nonsense: it is as ridiculous as a husband who, when asked to prove that he loves his wife, presses “play” on a tape-recording of himself saying the words ten years ago. (The example is Latour’s.)



authority.<sup>59</sup>

In Sedgwick's linguistic-theological system, then, it is transformative religious language rather than an adherence to ritual forms that produces individual and social change. This transformative religious language is most fruitful when it is an expression of one's "natural" self, springing forth spontaneously from a pure heart. Because oaths and rituals, both violent (Mononotto's sacrifice of Everell) and non-violent (Mr. Linwood's banishment of Herbert) restrict the terms of human agency by reinforcing predetermined roles and hierarchies, the only truly efficacious language—the only language that might effect real change—is spontaneous, arising outside the confines of even the simplest ritual forms. While attending dinner at the home

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<sup>59</sup> It is Sedgwick's insistence on efficacious religious language—on language that produces consequences in the world—that distinguishes her most strongly from the Unitarian clergy with whom she corresponded. It was precisely the failure of Unitarian clergymen to speak or write religiously that gave Sedgwick most pause as she considered her decision to leave the Orthodox Congregational church. To her friend Susan Channing, sister-in-law of William Ellery Channing, she wrote:

[Boston Unitarians'] indifference seems to me to indicate a want of that zeal which should always be the fruit and aid of a good cause—. While those of the orthodox faith are traversing sea & land, forsaking brethren & sisters, & houses & lands, & penetrating the untrodden wilderness, those of a "purer & rational faith" seem neither to lift their hands, or breathe their prayers for its propagation. (CMS Papers, Letter to Susan Higginson Channing, February 19, 1821)

Later in 1821 she wrote again to Susan:

[I]t does seem to me there is a want of seriousness, and of holy fervor in your clergymen\_. I have sometimes felt this very painfully\_. There is among them a great ardor for intellectual attainments & superiority, but many of them want the holy devotedness that seems to me essential to their high calling\_. (CMS papers, Letter to Susan Higginson Channing, December 5, 1821)

This Unitarian failing was so disturbing to Sedgwick, and of such lasting importance, that seven years later she was still expressing her concerns—this time to William Ellery Channing himself:

When I think of all that has been done and suffered to Christianize the earth; how the ocean has been crossed, and trackless deserts penetrated, to preach to the ends of the world, I can not but wonder that there is not enough zeal to prompt some of our apostles to come to this great missionary field [New York].... There are one or two [Unitarian preachers] (and not more) who break down all barriers when they are here; the rest, as to proselyting, might as well stay at home and preach to their own people. (CMS Papers, Letter to William Ellery Channing, April 28, 1828)

The aspects that Sedgwick finds lacking in Unitarian ministers' preaching—"zeal," "fervor," and "holy devotedness,"—are precisely those that would transform mere preaching into religious language. For Sedgwick, Unitarian ministers somehow manage to speak about religion without speaking religiously. Latour would describe their words as "irrelevant, parasitical"; Sedgwick describes them simply as "preach[ing] to their own people," as they transport and transform no one—not even themselves ("Thou Shall" 29).

of Sir Henry Clinton, commander of the English forces in New York, for instance, Isabella offers a toast to “*our* native land” that is echoed by Eliot Lee, a soldier in the Continental Army who is in New York on a diplomatic errand from General Washington (132, emphasis in original). Rather than following the traditional form of the toast offered by Mr. Linwood, “The King—God bless him,” Isabella’s toast arises spontaneously and, rather than deferring to a higher authority, includes in its “our” all those at the table who identify themselves as Americans. She also breaks the normal ritual of the toast by pledging with water rather than wine. The narrator emphasizes Isabella’s refusal to conform to the ritual of the toast: “Miss Linwood violated the strict rules that governed her contemporaries. She was not a lady of saws and precedents” (132). Her spontaneous speech is transformative, transporting both herself and Eliot Lee: for Isabella it is the first sign of her eventual conversion from Loyalist to revolutionary, and for Eliot it is the beginning of his romance with Isabella.

Spontaneity, then, is the defining feature of Sedgwick’s theology of religious language, but such spontaneity is a precarious precondition that must arise from natural feelings rather than adhering to calculated ritual forms. The narrator warns that such speech acts as Isabella’s can be “afforded” only by “them to whom they are spontaneous” (132). Any speech act not marked by spontaneity—by “a burst of true feeling”—runs the risk of falling into ritual forms that reproduce existing hierarchies rather than transforming persons and events (132). After relating the circumstances of Isabella’s toast, the narrator notes drily that “[w]e would by no means recommend an imitation of [Isabella’s] spontaneous actions,” an address to the reader with multiple implications: spontaneous speech acts can be dangerous when engaged in among unsympathetic listeners, but they are also simply ineffectual. Since transformative power consists in spontaneity, any imitation of Isabella’s speech acts will be futile.

Sedgwick highlights the particular embodiment of Isabella's religious language: scenes of her transforming others' emotions and actions are always accompanied by descriptions of her "thrilling" and "delicious" voice, her "moistened eye," and "the tears... of a young and beautiful woman" (148, 132, 241). Here again, however, the movements and emanations of the body must be set free from predetermined forms; where Magawisca inserts her body into her father's violent ritual in order to save Everell Fletcher, Isabella defies ritual performances lest she be hemmed in by their implications. The avoidance of ritual in favor of spontaneity extends even to the simplest actions of Isabella's body. Isabella refuses to dance at a party that she has attended for the sole purpose of pleading with Sir Henry Clinton for Herbert's release from prison; another woman leads the dance in accordance with "the ritual of precedence" and the "rank assigned to her." In this case Isabella's body is employed not to fulfill the requirements of such "rituals of precedence" but to support her petition to Henry Clinton, who agrees to her requests only when she bursts into tears "in spite of herself" (237). Isabella's speech and actions are efficacious precisely because they are spontaneous and unpremeditated—happening "in spite of herself"—rather than predicated on conventional forms.

In addition to its spontaneity, Isabella's religious language is efficacious because it demonstrates a high level of what the philosopher (and student of J.L. Austin) Donald Evans calls "self-involvement." Self-involvement, according to Evans, is assessed in terms of the degree and variety of a speaker's investments in a particular utterance; statements can thus be categorized and analyzed, not only according to whether they are perlocutionary or illocutionary—whether they fall within ritualized frames—but by the level of personal investment shown by the speaker. Self-involvement lies along a spectrum from weak to strong so that, for example, the statement "I am six feet four inches tall" has a low degree of self-

involvement because it states a fact with few implications or consequences for the speaker. The statement “I am a follower of the prophet,” on the other hand, potentially has a high degree of self-involvement because it implies “a variety of entailments”—moral, behavioral, cultural, perhaps national—each of which reveals something important about the speaker’s personhood (Briggs 150).<sup>60</sup> The anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo has invoked a similar concept of self-involvement to describe the interpenetration of embodied and cognitive processes in the experience of human emotion. According to Rosaldo, “[e]motions are thoughts somehow ‘felt’ in flushes, pulses, ‘movements’ of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are *embodied* thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that ‘I am involved’” (143).<sup>61</sup> It is Isabella Linwood’s embodied self-involvement that gives her language religious authority and makes it efficacious even in contexts in which she, as a woman and a colonist in rebellion against her king, can claim no other right to be heard.

In *The Linwoods* the necessity for embodied self-involvement extends even to the written word; though text is itself a mediation between bodies, Sedgwick’s theology of religious language requires that even letters display the spontaneous self-involvement of the writer. Writing to Sir Henry Clinton for news of her brother’s fate, Isabella Linwood begs for “‘some kind word of relief’” but receives instead a letter expressing Sir Henry’s regret that he has “‘no absolute power by which he can remit, at pleasure, the offences of disloyal subjects’”—he cannot

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<sup>60</sup> Such entailments might be behavioral, moral, or otherwise; the salient point is that the statement involves a high degree of personal investment on the part of the speaker. Evans’s concept of self-involvement is thus similar to Latour’s concept of religious language in “Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame”: Latour’s paradigmatic piece of religious language, “I love you,” is generally a highly self-involving statement. One can also argue that Latour’s notion of “double-click communication”—language that states facts but does not transform persons—can be correlated with low self-involvement.

<sup>61</sup> June Howard notes that Rosaldo’s work has provided an important contribution to the study of women’s writing, particularly sentimental fiction, with its emphasis on the weeping, mourning, and suffering body (66-67).

act spontaneously in response to the dictates of kindness (185). Moreover, the letter is not from Sir Henry at all, but from his secretary; Sir Henry has not even signed it. Isabella's mother asserts that a letter from Sir Henry and a letter from his secretary amount to "the same thing," but scolds Isabella for overlooking ritual appurtenances like "gilt paper" and a wax seal (185-186). "I did not observe the paper, and I forget whether I sealed it at all," Isabella responds, noting bitterly that Sir Henry has observed the "courtesies" of correspondence without offering any real redress (186). Sir Henry has performed the ritual duty of replying to Isabella's letter without displaying any self-involvement whatever: he has neither composed the letter in his own hand nor signed it. Isabella's response is to transform Sir Henry's self-involvement by increasing her own. At their next meeting she extracts from him a piece of writing that is both spontaneous and embodied: "Here on the table is pen, ink, and paper; and here is a chair—sit down, and write three lines," she insists when he tries to defer her request to a "cabinet-council" (243). Isabella demands an immediate response to her request, knowing that the ritual forms of the "cabinet-council" may override Sir Henry's spontaneous act of kindness in allowing for Herbert's temporary release.

Isabella's ability to transform Sir Henry's behavior by means of her spontaneous and self-involved speech points to the political and social implications of Sedgwick's theology of religious language. Within the narrative and symbolic structure of *The Linwoods*, General George Washington and Sir Henry Clinton occupy positions similar to that occupied by John Winthrop in *Hope Leslie*: they are figures through which Sedgwick can interrogate the connection between religious and political authority. In *The Linwoods* Washington and Clinton are political "gods" with competing expectations for their subjects: Sir Henry Clinton requires deference (punishing the revolutionaries for "the offences of disloyal subjects") while

Washington commands respect (“General Washington requires no more than he performs,” Eliot Lee observes) (185, 110).<sup>62</sup> But rather than choosing one over the other, *The Linwoods* positions Isabella as superior to both by virtue of her command of spontaneous religious language. Male spontaneity, Sedgwick suggests, is dangerous and destructive, even in the best of men:

It is well known that Washington’s moderation and equanimity were the effects of the highest principle, not the gift of nature. He was constitutionally subject to gusts of passion, but he had acquired a power, almost divine (and doubtless from a divine source), by which he could direct the whirlwind and subdue the storm. (204)

Eliot Lee, the novel’s other receptacle of manly and civic virtues, has also “been trained in the school of exertion, of self-denial, and self-subjection” (321). And Herbert Linwood’s imprisonment is the result of his congenital habit of putting “action before thought” (143). Sedgwick’s ideal Americans, then—those best suited to produce and to wield the religious language that can effect social change—are women, whose spontaneous, self-involved language needs no refining.

In portraying women as the natural purveyors of religious language, and religious language as the only effectual mode of action, Sedgwick undermines the ideology, expressed so succinctly by John Winthrop in *Hope Leslie*, that “passiveness . . . , next to godliness, is a woman’s best virtue” (160). Religious language is by definition active—a “performance,” as the

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<sup>62</sup> When Isabella Linwood approaches Sir Henry to request Herbert’s release from prison, she asks him to imagine himself a benevolent and loving god: “I commend [Herbert] to your mercy; think of him as if he were your own son, and then mete out to him, for the rashness of his filial affection, such measure as a father would allot to such an offence” (185). Unitarians and other liberal Christians viewed God as a long father rather than an angry or impersonal judge: “To give our views of God in one word,” Channing asserted, “we believe in his *parental character*” (*Sermon 27*, emphasis in original). In holding to “artificial codes and traditionary abuses,” Sir Henry instead behaves like the God espoused by Orthodox theologians—one who places his imagined son in the role of scapegoat: Herbert, innocent of the charge of spying, will nevertheless be punished for it (185).

Winthrop of *Hope Leslie* would disapprovingly call it.<sup>63</sup> *The Linwoods*, then, weaves a tale of America's transformation from oppressed colony to independent nation in which it is spontaneous religious language rather than repeated ritual violence that grounds the new nation's claims to existence.<sup>64</sup> By embedding this doctrine of spontaneous religious language in a story of the American Revolution, Sedgwick transforms the colonial rebellion into a primarily rhetorical struggle, one in which England is aligned with illocutionary, ritual language and the past and America with perlocutionary language and the future. Since the strength of the new American republic was to be built on the virtue of its citizens, robbing women of their capacity for active virtue by insisting on their passivity would rob the nation of its rightful saviors; a nation without active women and their religious language would be a nation abandoned by God.

### **Conclusion: Religious Language and the Problem of Appropriation**

In addition to their tendency to perpetuate violence and existing social inequalities, ritual forms can also prevent intercultural understanding. Both *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods* are historical novels about the clash of cultures, and both suggest that outmoded ritual forms can

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<sup>63</sup> Sedgwick likewise subtly questions the doctrine that original sin entered the human race through woman: while George Washington and Eliot Lee must struggle against the unbidden "gusts of passion" that would lead them into sin, Isabella seems to have appeared on earth fully formed and already able to wield religious language.

<sup>64</sup> Sedgwick was already formulating an interest in religious language when she composed *Hope Leslie*, though in that novel religious language is marked more by its absence than by its presence. Hope's encounters with Sir Philip's servant "Roslin," really the disguised Rosa, show a terror of women whose language is either meaningless or nonexistent: when Roslin attempts to warn Hope away from Sir Philip, Hope is baffled by her cryptic words, finally bursting forth impatiently with "'What do you mean? Do you mean any thing?'" before abruptly ending the conversation (176). Rosa's eventual "conversion" is a turn not only away from sin but toward effectual religious language: as she sinks to her knees to pray that God would "'shield the innocent—save her from the hand of the destroyer,'" Rosa notes that her prayers rise to heaven though she herself is fallen, and in fact *Hope Leslie* is saved from destruction (337). Later, Rosa's final words—"it cannot be worse for any of us!"—make good her final act: the destruction of herself and Sir Philip (342).

provide no firm basis for future cultural progress. Ritual performances and ritual speech have meaning only to those who understand them—to those who recognize the ritual's terms and consent to operate within them. Ritual forms, then, can prevent intercultural communication by reifying cultural distinctions. As Sedgwick works to deconstruct ritual forms in *Hope Leslie*, the novel proliferates scenes of misrecognition and false translation in which members of different European and native cultures fail to understand one another's ritual traditions. When the Indian healer Nelema cures a colonist bitten by a poisonous snake, the Puritan patriarchs misinterpret her ritual incantations as devil-worship and imprison her. When Magawisca produces a crucifix at her trial to prove that Sir Philip Gardiner secretly conforms to the rituals of the Catholic church, the magistrates interpret it as a sign that Magawisca herself is Catholic, a member of an apostate sect.

To replace these incompatible ritual forms *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods* offer an alternative model of collective religious action: one based in the translation of religious language rather than in the repetition of religious ritual. The turn toward translation—the vision that cultures with separate ritual traditions might eschew those traditions and enter into dialogue with one another—appears first in *Hope Leslie* as an unrealized ideal. Sedgwick's concern with translation, both its importance and its failures, is emblemized in the figure of John Eliot, who produced the first complete translation of the Bible into a native North American language. Eliot appears in *Hope Leslie* at Magawisca's trial, where he offers a long prayer on her behalf meant to convince the Puritan magistrates that she is innocent of any crime against the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But his argument on Magawisca's behalf rests on the remembrance of her sacrifice and thus has, like all other invocations of sacrifice in *Hope Leslie*, only limited effectiveness, turning the court's opinion in her favor only temporarily. The closest the novel ever comes to a true act



of translation is in the parting scene between Hope Leslie, Everell Fletcher, and Magawisca. As she attempts to convince Magawisca to stay among the Puritans, Hope Leslie does not remind Magawisca of the violence perpetrated against her by the Puritans but instead attempts to adopt the idiom of the Pequot people. Though earlier in the novel Hope had refused to understand Magawisca's figurative language—"do not speak to me in these dark sayings," she commands when she first meets the Indian woman, "what is it you mean?... Speak plainer to me" (196)—at their final parting Hope adopts the metaphorical mode that Magawisca employs: "Promise us that you will return and dwell with us—as you would say, Magawisca, we will walk in the same path, the same joys shall shine on us, and, if need be that sorrows come over us, why, we will all sit under their shadow together" (349). Though Hope fails to convince Magawisca to stay in the colonies, her attempt to speak in Magawisca's language rather than her own represents a step toward true cultural translation.

Translation, though, is a treacherous process that threatens to shade into appropriation; one may adopt the language of another culture in order to more efficiently subsume or colonize that culture. Hope Leslie, after all, learns Magawisca's idiom by borrowing it from Magawisca herself. Having already won Everell Fletcher's affections away from his childhood friend, Hope now threatens, however benevolently, to steal Magawisca's voice as well.<sup>65</sup> The problem of religious language is the danger that it will repeat, in linguistic form, the violence perpetrated in sacrificial systems: the annihilation of one voice or body at the expense of another.

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<sup>65</sup> As Judith Fetterley notes, Sedgwick's construction of Hope Leslie and Everell Fletcher as representative Americans relies on an Enlightenment feminist ideal that assumes the equality of white men and women: Hope is entitled to equal status with Everell because "gender [is] the sole and hence potentially insignificant" difference between them (508). In comparison with Magawisca's overwhelming racial and religious difference, Hope and Everell appear almost identical. If Hope and Everell are the same, then Magawisca's body was sacrificed to save them both, and Hope, having made use of Magawisca's body, will now take away her voice.

In *The Linwoods* Sedgwick attempts to circumvent this problem by depicting scenes in which a white woman effects positive change through an act of translation that nevertheless does not appropriate the language of an oppressed people. When the 8-year-old Isabella Linwood finds out that the family's slave, Rose, would rather be free than have a pretty new dress, she searches for a way to fulfill Rose's wish. When Isabella's father offers her "any thing you'll ask of me" if she takes a French prize at school, Isabella wins the competition, then demands as her reward Rose's manumission (137). In a novel about the American Revolution it is fitting that Isabella would win Rose's freedom by learning the language of the only other democratic nation in the eighteenth-century world. But the scene positions emancipation as a gift granted to slaves by white benefactors (English, French, or American) rather than something to be fought for and won by African Americans themselves. As Charlene Avallone asserts, Isabella's act of benevolence "reinforces race and class differences between women and leaves the institutional structures of patriarchal authority—including slavery—intact" (116). The scene is not about Rose learning a language that would allow her to represent her own interests, but about Isabella learning a new language and then bestowing its effects upon Rose.

Isabella's individualized linguistic agency is necessary precisely because Rose does not belong to any distinctive African-American religious community that would offer opportunities for collective religious agency. By carving religious agency out of its ritual contexts Sedgwick also diminishes opportunities for collaborative agency: the ritual sacrifices performed by Sedgwick's fictionalized historical interlocutors—the Old Testament Israelites, the Massachusetts Bay colonists, and the Pequot Indians—may have reified social hierarchies, but they also provided a means of cultural cohesion and collective action grounded in the "condensed historicity" of ritual practice (Judith Butler 3). As Joanna Brooks's work on the

Brotherton community, black Freemason lodges, the AME Church, and other African-American and Native American religious groups makes clear, shared religious beliefs and rituals provided a source of strength for communities of color who had been subjected to Enlightenment narratives that “aimed for the negation of... racialized subjects” (46). By condemning the ritual practices espoused by the Puritan colonists and the Pequot Indians portrayed in *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick also undermines a particularly potent form of communal identity and agency.

My next chapter addresses William Wells Brown’s 1853 novel *Clotel* and reveals how it turns the tables on this tokenizing process by which the religious language of women of color is appropriated or marginalized by well-meaning white women. Brown was an admirer of Sedgwick, and some editions of *Clotel* include characters named for Isabella Linwood. But Brown’s depiction of white women’s religious agency avoids the appropriation of black voices: Georgiana Peck, the white minister’s daughter, comprehends but never adopts the language of her father’s slaves, and her linguistic agency is exercised not to demonstrate her own self-determination but to effect those slaves’ emancipation. At the same time Brown emphasizes the communal structures within which African-American religious agency is expressed: in *Clotel* slave communities respond to proslavery preaching by performing a collective reinterpretation of the Biblical texts that are used to justify their oppression. In Brown’s formulation of religious agency the white woman’s religious language, while efficacious, places her beyond the bounds of any sustaining sect: Georgiana Peck is an outsider even in her own home, and once she has fulfilled her abolitionist purpose in the novel she withers away, unsupported by a religious community like the one in which Brown’s African-American characters participate. In *Clotel* it is Hope Leslie, not Magawisca, who stands at the fringes of the family and the state; it is the white woman whose religious language must serve the greater good.

## CHAPTER 2: “The Bulwark of Christianity and of Liberty”: *Clotel* and (White) Women’s Religious Agency

In 1834 the black abolitionist writer Sarah Louisa Forten, writing under the pseudonym “Ada,” published her poem “An Appeal to Women” in *The Liberator*.<sup>66</sup> Forten’s verses, though addressed only to “women,” are an appeal, specifically, to white women; speaking in the first-person plural, Forten and her fellow African Americans claim kinship with white women: “Our ‘skins may differ,’ but from thee we claim/A sister’s privilege, in a sister’s name.” The privilege of sisterhood, in turn, rests on the assumption of shared belief. Forten admonishes her white sisters to “act a Christian’s part”—to let a belief in Christian unity transcend differences of color and class: “We are thy sisters,—God has truly said,/That of one blood, the nations he has made” (60-61).

Sixteen years later, William Wells Brown’s abolitionist novel *Clotel* (1853) made a similar plea in fictional form. Reflecting middle-class white women’s increasing authority over the production and interpretation of Protestant doctrine, Brown’s novel includes, intertwined with tales of virtuous women, daring escapes, and heroic self-sacrifice among African-American slaves, the story of one white woman’s doctrinal agency exercised on behalf of the enslaved. In this chapter I will investigate Brown’s choice to place at the center of his abolitionist novel the story of a white minister’s daughter, Georgiana Peck, who voices the novel’s theological arguments and provides a fictional example of antislavery doctrine put into action. I do so, not to efface the importance of *Clotel*’s African-American characters, but to reveal how Brown, a

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<sup>66</sup> Forten appeared in the introduction to this dissertation, where I noted her use of the *nom de plume* “Magawisca.”

canny observer of the pitfalls of antislavery politics, positioned white women as ideal collaborators in the struggle against slavery. In the process, Brown both reflected and hastened the increasing identification of white women with legitimate religious authority.

In crafting his abolitionist novel, Brown drew on the conventions of white sentimental fiction; as Sara Blair notes, “*Clotel* meditates... on the very limits of sentimental culture, of sympathy as a cultural politics, and of the textual forms created to give expression to both” (464). But as Ann duCille has elaborated, *Clotel*, despite its early and important place in African-American literary history, is overlooked or understudied in many critical treatments of nineteenth-century fiction. This is true even though Brown’s novel is “particularly indebted to and in deep intertextual, intercultural dialogue with what Nina Baym calls ‘women’s fiction,’” a ubiquitous nineteenth-century genre that has received much critical attention since its recovery in the 1970s (“Where” 452).<sup>67</sup> *Clotel*’s uneasy place in the pantheon of woman’s fiction (Baym’s 1977 study includes only works by white women authors) is due, according to duCille, to the ambivalent responses of various critical schools: held at arm’s length by critics of African-American literature because it is “historically inaccurate and heavily dependent on the borrowed conventions of ‘white’ sentimental fiction” (“Where” 453), Brown’s novel has also been neglected by feminist critics, the frequent champions of sentimental fiction, because it “institutionaliz[es] the image of the tragic mulatta that dominates early African-American fiction” (“Where” 455).

But another reason for the critical neglect of *Clotel* may lie in Brown’s decision to include—and celebrate—a white woman with little to no narrative connection to the novel’s

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<sup>67</sup> duCille and her respondent, Blair, wrote in 2000, and while there has been some improvement since then, with a number of important critical articles and books on *Clotel* appearing in recent years, the relative dearth of critical treatments remains surprising considering *Clotel*’s undeniably important place in African American literary history.

enslaved heroines Clotel, Curren, and Althesa. Interwoven with the primary story of Clotel—Thomas Jefferson’s beautiful slave daughter who is betrayed by her white lover and eventually commits suicide in a failed attempt to rescue her daughter from slavery—is the secondary story of Georgiana, a well-educated white woman who converts her husband to Christianity and abolitionism and frees her father’s entire slave population after she inherits his plantation. The juxtaposition of the victimized and abused black woman with the triumphant abolitionist white woman seems an inauspicious beginning for the tradition of African-American fiction, and those critics who engage with *Clotel*’s complicated form often overlook the character of Georgiana despite the fact that her story occupies a full third of the novel’s narrative space.

Those critics who do engage with Georgiana’s character correctly note that Brown draws close parallels between his eponymous African-American heroine and the white minister’s daughter. Michael Berthold, for instance, calls Georgiana Clotel’s “foil,” who as “the empowered white woman of the text who proposes to her husband and runs her own farm” wields a power that Clotel cannot (24-25). Georgiana, like Clotel, is the product of a hypocritical parent: Clotel’s father, the political patriarch Thomas Jefferson, decried slavery while profiting from slave labor; Georgiana’s father, the religious leader Reverend Peck, proclaims the liberating power of Christ while robbing seventy slaves of their freedom. Clotel and Georgiana occupy subject positions that point up the contradictions in the antebellum treatment of women: Clotel, a beautiful woman of mixed race, was raised to value sexual purity above all else, but because she is enslaved cannot even be legally married; Georgiana received a religious and abolitionist education that would fit her for the ministry, but instead returns home and submits to her father’s proslavery dictates.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Georgiana’s first words in the narrative reveal her liminal position in her father’s household: “papa will

I argue that Brown draws close parallels between the enslaved Clotel and the privileged Georgiana Peck, not to suggest that white and African-American women are equally oppressed, but to emphasize the considerable power wielded by white women in comparison with black women and to depict how that power might be used on their own and their black “sisters” behalfs. Brown drives home both the similarities between Clotel and Georgiana and the immense social gulf that separates them by depicting the two women as equally white and equally “white”—by drawing both a physical and a moral parallel between them. When Clotel is offered at auction Brown’s narrator notes that “she stood, with a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers [and] her features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon”; her price only increases when the auctioneer asserts that “the chastity of this girl is pure;... she is a virtuous creature” (49). Georgiana, too, has both fair skin and a flawless character, and yet rather than being bought by her husband at auction she chooses her own mate, even going so far as to propose to him herself. Ann duCille asserts that Brown’s mulatta figures, including Clotel, “stand in his work as hallmarks of the deep-seated hypocrisy of a world out of joint—emblems of the barbarism of a ‘civilized society’ that put white lady and ‘true womanhood’ on a pedestal and black slave and black womanhood on the auction block, *even though they looked the same*” (*Coupling* 18, emphasis in original).<sup>69</sup> But I assert that Georgiana Peck exists in the novel, not only as the symbolic counterpart of the

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overlook my differing from him, for although I am a native of the South, I am by education and sympathy a Northerner” (74). As Eva Allegra Raimon notes, Georgiana’s words parallel the contemporary discourse surrounding the figure of the mulatto, in which the mulatto “literally embod[ied] both Northern and Southern ideologies” (4). While Clotel is physically mixed, then, Georgiana is a regional and intellectual mulatta.

<sup>69</sup> By making both Clotel and Georgiana white, Brown emphasizes that it is the fact of her enslavement, not the color of her skin, that robs Clotel of legal and social equality. In doing so he successfully deconstructs what Russ Castronovo considers one of the primary functions of the white sentimental novel: “to constitute whiteness as a seemingly noncontingent, nonsocial identity” (“Incidents” 243).

beautiful and chaste Clotel, but as the figure through which Brown can interrogate a particular model of religious freedom.

Brown's novel, I argue, approaches racial and religious freedom as intersecting concerns and the white woman as the figure in whom these concerns meet and can be explored. In Brown's novel about the impact of chattel slavery on black and white women, Georgiana Peck emerges as the character with the most freedom because she is neither owned by a man nor affiliated with an organized religious or political group. Brown's particular formulation of women's religious agency, I will show, is modeled on a Kantian division between "public" and "private" citizens in which those who hold ordained or elected office—including clergymen and politicians—are less free than those who do not (or indeed cannot). While this model of women's agency can seem to reify gendered divisions of public and private by locating women's agency primarily in the nursery and the classroom, it actually represents a sophisticated response to the confused public-private relations of the plantation household and to the intertwining of religious and political arguments in the slavery debate.

In the first section of this chapter I demonstrate how Brown (and other abolitionists, including Richard Hildreth), dissatisfied with the response of Protestant clergy to the problem of slavery, deconstructed the supposed power of white, male ministers by highlighting their imbrication in sectarian systems of authority that encouraged them, not to act as moral beacons on the slavery question, but to defer to their congregants' opinions. Under such conditions, women become the only true religious authorities; their exclusion from the clergy paradoxically ensures their doctrinal independence and moral agency. By disengaging doctrinal authority from clerical ordination and envisioning fiction as a space for cross-racial religious collaboration, Brown envisioned Protestant women as members of a larger Christian community that might



transgress sectarian boundaries while maintaining the shared structures of Protestant belief that uphold communal identity and make collective action possible.

In the context of Brown's *Clotel* this dynamic is played out in the character of Georgiana and her slaveholding father, Reverend John Peck. While Reverend Peck, a Methodist minister, searches the Bible for ways to vindicate his own and his neighbors' slaveholding practices and hires a "missionary" to control the doctrines to which his slaves have access, Georgiana, free from the necessity of appeasing bishops or congregants, converts her father's guests to abolitionism, gives his slaves access to the Bible, and, after her father's death, frees the slaves she has inherited. These actions are made possible by Georgiana's independent reading of the Bible and her willingness to form doctrinal opinions different from those of her father and of his church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South (which had split from the northern Methodist church in 1844 over the question of slavery). Unlike her father and the southern Methodist clerical hierarchy, Georgiana reads the Bible as the "bulwark of liberty" rather than of slavery (74). The story of Georgiana and her father works to realign religious authority, not with male clerics, but with female Christians, and to position Georgiana's abolitionist interpretation of scripture as both theologically and philosophically sound. While Reverend Peck and his missionary mouthpiece, Mr. Snyder, repeat the proslavery "catechism" of the real-life Reverend Charles Colcock Jones, Georgiana voices an antislavery theology "founded in the school of Christianity" (136). The position of Georgiana-as-character parallels the position of *Clotel*-as-text: both claim membership in a transnational Protestant Christian community—Brown wrote and published *Clotel* in England—while repudiating the pronouncements of its ordained representatives. Together they present a critique-from-within that locates Christian agency, not in particular clergymen, but in the act of doctrinal interpretation itself.

Brown's figuration of white women's moral agency, however, leaves the black woman in the role of sacrificial victim: while Georgiana Peck successfully frees her father's seventy slaves before succumbing to consumption, Clotel Jefferson cannot even rescue her daughter from slavery before throwing herself from the Long Bridge in Washington, D.C.. As in Catharine Sedgwick's work, *Clotel's* white women speak *for* women of color rather than allowing them to speak for themselves, reifying the notion that effective religious language and doctrinal agency are the province of white women alone. Brown's narrative thus follows the pattern that Karen Sanchez-Eppler finds in the abolitionist speeches of Angelina Grimké and other white abolitionist women, in which "the bound and silent figure of the slave represents the woman's oppression and so grants the white woman access to... discourse denied the slave" (Sanchez-Eppler 19).<sup>70</sup> In the third section of my chapter I contextualize Brown's problematic depiction of black women's (lack of) doctrinal agency by contrasting *Clotel* with Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* and Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Reading *Clotel* in this context positions the novel not as a failure of imagination but as an important step in the development of both nineteenth-century African-American fiction and African-American religious thought. Brown, by adopting the fictional medium employed successfully by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and other religious women writers, opened up an imaginative space for women's doctrinal agency not generally offered by the slave narrative, which operated within certain expectations of authenticity and under the watchful eye of white editors like William Lloyd

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<sup>70</sup> As Sanchez-Eppler notes, and as I discussed in my introduction, the ostensibly disembodied "persons" guaranteed rights under the Constitution were assumed to be white and male, so that both white women and black slaves were excluded from representation under the law. This situation necessitated rhetorical forms that emphasized the specific embodiedness of women and slaves. But even as these interconnected discourses came into being they instantiated asymmetries of power between white women and slaves, so that the white abolitionist woman drew her authority to speak from the presumed voicelessness of the slave.

Garrison. *Clotel*'s depictions of black women's religious agency, limited though they may be, are nevertheless a marked improvement on the inarticulate female victims depicted in Douglass's nonfiction *Narrative*. But it was not until Jacobs's *Incidents* combined the personal urgency of the slave narrative with the creative possibilities of the sentimental novel that black women's religious agency received robust textual embodiment, as Jacobs's Linda Brent masters the language of Protestant doctrine and compels her "Christian" persecutor to acknowledge that she is the superior preacher.

Examining *Clotel*'s treatment of the white abolitionist woman Georgiana Peck helps to reveal the forms of agency at work in Brown's text and in other writings by African-American authors—forms predicated as much on religious adherence as racial identity. But it also demonstrates how African-American authors manipulated white literary tropes by turning the figure of the pious white woman to their own purposes. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the paired figures of the abolitionist white woman and the enslaved black woman in Forten's, Brown's, and Jacobs's texts. I demonstrate that by creating saintly but static white female figures and contrasting them with complex, clever mixed-race characters, these three authors expose the abolitionist white woman as little more than a useful narrative construct that need exist only so long as she serves her rhetorical purpose.

### **The Minister and the Lady, or the Public and Private Uses of Doctrine**

In an 1848 article in the *North Star*, Brown's influential contemporary Richard Hildreth, white abolitionist and author of the first American antislavery novel, *The Slave, or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836), pondered the question "What Can a Woman Do?" in service to the

abolitionist cause.<sup>71</sup> His answer assumed women's broad influence within domestic or semi-domestic spaces:

For instilling into the public mind, and diffusing through society those new opinions, in which all social changes must have their origin, women possess peculiar advantages. They have an access to the hearts of men, which no man has; they have an access to the hearts of children, peculiar to themselves, those children who are soon to become men and women, and to influence, for good or evil, the destinies of the race. (par. 6)

Hildreth's preferred arenas for female influence are the "village school" and the Protestant church. "Is it not notorious," he asks, "that at this moment, every Protestant sect in America, is mainly upheld, its churches built, its ministers paid, its associations and charities sustained, by the efforts and influence of the women? In every church the female members far outnumber the men; and the men who are there, seven times out of ten; are carried there and kept there by the women."<sup>72</sup> If one thinks of the church as a space outside of public life, cordoned off from the political arenas in which "real" events take place, then Hildreth's article is a patronizing attempt to limit women's influence: by confining their efforts to the domestic or pseudo-domestic spaces of the nursery, the classroom, and the Sunday school, women may guide the "sporting and prattling" of children but not the deeds of grown men.

But there is another aspect to Hildreth's argument—one that acknowledges that public influence carries limitations of its own, and that political and clerical roles, once entered into, are

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<sup>71</sup> A native of Massachusetts and a Harvard graduate, Hildreth had spent time on a Florida plantation in the 1830s in an attempt to improve his health. *Archy Moore* is notable for its depiction of slavery as an economic system that corrupts both master and slave and keeps both parties dependent on one another. Four years after the publication of *Archy Moore*, Hildreth published his *Despotism in America* (1840), which became an important sourcebook for the growing abolitionist movement. Hildreth was also active in the Temperance movement and was well known as an historian and newspaper editor.

<sup>72</sup> As Ann Braude has shown, the historians who crafted narratives of American religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would conveniently forget what Hildreth knew: that women have always made up the majority of religious adherents—of every Christian or non-Christian sect—in America, from the colonial period to the present. (See Braude's "Women's History *Is* American Religious History.")

freighted with official expectations not imposed in the semi-public spaces of the classroom and the church. In answer to his titular question, Hildreth asserts that women, though they “cannot vote... cannot preach... cannot legislate,” can nevertheless do

more than voter, preacher or legislator. Each and all of those, is but the instrument to promulgate or carry into effect, some preestablished opinion. No man can preach except as the expounder and defender of opinions already espoused by his hearers, or a part of them. If he preaches his own opinions in contradiction to theirs, he must be content to lack salary and a pulpit.... No man can legislate except in conformity to the opinions of those who make him a legislator; and the voter does only signify by his vote, his adherence to a certain principle or opinion which he thereby proclaims and vindicates. Behind all these is the opinion preached, voted for, made into law,—and whence comes that? (par. 5)

In Hildreth’s formulation, the power to hold public office is double-edged: while membership in the ministry or the congress carries built-in authority, the preacher or legislator has a limited range of moral motion, since his congregation or his voters may rescind the authority they have granted him.<sup>73</sup> His “opinions”—Hildreth’s catch-all term for religious, political, and social doctrines—are limited by the fact that he serves at the pleasure of his church or party. Women, who do not—indeed cannot—take official positions under the auspices of any organized sectarian or political authority but are free to make their own moral and theological choices, thus have more freedom to espouse new doctrines and advocate on behalf of controversial causes because they need not fear the disapprobation of congregants or constituents.

As Michael Warner details in *Publics and Counterpublics*, the notion of the constraints embedded in public office can be traced to Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay “What is Enlightenment?” in which Kant distinguishes between the “public” and “private” uses of reason and considers the role of the clergy in public and political life. In “What is Enlightenment?” Kant

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<sup>73</sup> Writing for Frederick Douglass’s abolitionist newspaper, Hildreth is not arguing against women’s political equality but in favor of women’s greater influence; granted that they cannot vote, preach, or legislate, women can nevertheless work for the abolitionist cause (or for “any great idea” they embrace) using the tools at their command.

figures clerical office as a position in which speech and public debate are necessarily limited by the sect in which one serves: in his role as an ordained officeholder “a clergyman is bound to preach to his catechistical pupils and his congregation according to the confession of the church he serves because he has been accepted under these conditions” (par. 5). In speaking to his congregation, the clergyman is speaking only to a domestic (“häusliche”) gathering: he is, in other words, a “private” citizen, bound by the expectations of his “domestic” parish. On the other hand, a scholar (“Gelehrter,” or learned one), speaking and writing from a position not bound by clerical ordination or official church duty, may criticize religious organizations as well as political and civil authorities without fear of betraying either his congregants or ecclesiastical authorities. The scholar, then, is a “public” citizen in a way that the clergyman is not, simply by virtue of his ability to speak and write for an “actual public” (“eigentlichen Publikum”) rather than for a “domestic” congregation.<sup>74</sup> Warner notes that Kant’s alignment of public and private seems counterintuitive to most modern readers: western political thought generally considers a civil officeholder to be a “public figure” and a scholar or writer to be a “private citizen” (*Publics* 44-45). But because the officeholder cannot act officially outside of his civil capacity while the scholar’s scope is the whole world, in the Kantian formulation the scholar’s effects are more public than those of the officeholder.

It is this understanding of public and private that Hildreth seems to have in mind when he encourages women to involve themselves in the antislavery cause. Whereas male clergy are hamstrung by their “private” commitments—they must “be content to lack salary and a pulpit” if they defy their proslavery congregants and colleagues—women may affect public affairs by

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<sup>74</sup> These brief translations of Kant are my own. While I am indebted to Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* for its succinct introduction to “What is Enlightenment?”, I am particularly interested in Kant’s reflections on the role of the clergyman in the public and political spheres, a topic that Warner does not address at length.

bringing their education and religious devotion to bear on matters of public concern. Women, Hildreth posits, are the “contemplative souls” whose unrestricted ideas may “leaven” the “whole lump” of public opinion precisely because female thinkers and writers need not restrict their ideas to those already approved by religious or political authorities (Hildreth par. 5). For Hildreth, educated women are the “scholars” of the nineteenth-century public sphere, those who can act and think independently precisely because they are excluded from ecclesiastical and political hierarchies.

To acknowledge women’s exclusion from the roles of “voter, preacher or legislator,” then, was not necessarily to deny their right to engage in public life. As historian Lori Ginzberg has demonstrated, William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionist writers and speakers he employed (including Brown and, occasionally, Hildreth) were heavily invested in the efficacy of “moral suasion,” a holistic method for effecting fundamental social change through authorship, public debate, and participation in abolitionist societies rather than (or sometimes in addition to) direct political action (609). Reformers committed to “moral suasion” insisted that society would improve, not when laws were changed or when everyone had the vote, but when people’s minds, hearts, and opinions were thoroughly reformed.<sup>75</sup> The means of “moral suasion” was especially available to women and disenfranchised men, whose very exclusion from the clergy and from political office would render them less susceptible to the temptations offered and the limitations imposed by sectarian and party obligations.<sup>76</sup>

William Wells Brown’s submissions to *The Liberator*, the *National Anti-Slavery*

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<sup>75</sup> Ginzberg argues that the eventual turn among radical female reformers toward electoral politics and away from “moral suasion” undercut the efficacy of their movements by narrowing their field of action and redefining non-electoral forms of civic virtue, not as universal values to which all Americans should aspire, but as “solely, even biologically, women’s responsibility” (622).

<sup>76</sup> See Henry Mayer’s *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* for a discussion of Garrison’s rejection of electoral politics as a means to end slavery.

*Standard*, and other Garrisonian news outlets show a long-standing concern with the means of moral suasion and with two other related themes: the failure of American clergy to defy the proslavery members of their denominations, and the “public” (in the Kantian sense of being unrestricted by clerical or political office) responsibilities of women. In an 1844 report on an antislavery meeting in Western New York, Brown wrote to the *Standard* that the “Clergy are opposed to me here, because I am opposed to the clergy; and I am opposed to the Clergy, because they are the deadliest enemies of our cause, of all reforms, and of Christianity. The churches are closed against us. Yes, those modern Pharisees are, as Gerrit Smith says, the most corrupted body of men on earth” (“Letter” [1844]).<sup>77</sup> A month later, in a letter written to William Lloyd Garrison from Ohio, Brown noted that the clergy’s opposition to his cause sprung from fear of their congregants’ displeasure: “I find the clergy here not as corrupt upon the subject of slavery as they are in New-York and the New-England States. I suppose it is because there are not as many clergy here, and, consequently, they are not so dependant [sic] upon the people” (“Reformatory”). Here Brown positions antislavery feeling as a question of supply and demand: clergy who have larger congregations can afford to make some of their members angry, since presumably there will remain enough faithful members to pay the minister’s salary. The minister, as a “private” citizen hired to serve a “domestic” congregation, must choose his opinions based

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<sup>77</sup> The Pharisees are the Israelite sect that come in most often for condemnation in the four gospels, where their crime is placing obeisance to law above compassion for people. Christ warns his disciples to “beware... the doctrine of the Pharisees,” who make ostentatious shows of piety (strictly observing the Sabbath, announcing their temple sacrifices aloud) while ignoring the Torah’s commandments to care for the sick and the poor (Matthew 16:12, King James Version). By comparing American clergy to “Pharisees,” then, Brown aligns them against the spirit of Christ.

Brown’s passing reference to Gerrit Smith invokes another abolitionist critical of Protestant clergy. Smith, a wealthy New York landowner and prominent antislavery advocate, rejected sectarian religion but contributed liberally to non-denominational groups like the American Tract Society, American Bible Society, and American Sunday School Union.



on the size of his church and the strength of their proslavery convictions.<sup>78</sup>

Both white and African-American clergy came in for condemnation in Brown's letters; during an 1847 visit to Philadelphia Brown wrote to Garrison:

But shame upon the colored clergymen of Philadelphia and their churches! With but two exceptions, they were shut against me. As soon as I arrived in the city, a committee was appointed by a meeting of colored citizens to secure places and get up meetings for me, and on application, they found the doors of all the churches, colored and white, closed against bleeding humanity, except the Big and Little Wesley churches. Honor to them, but shame upon the hypocritical religion of the colored man which will prompt him to shut his door against a brother slave.... ("My First")

If anything, African-American clergy were even less free to support the abolitionist cause: beholden to the white denominational hierarchy under which they had been ordained, they were bound by clerical office to ignore the plight of a "brother slave" lest their special status be revoked.

At the same time that Brown's letters condemn Protestant clergy, black and white, for their failure to support the antislavery cause, they show increasing approval for the role played by women in the abolitionist movement. Writing in 1847 to the abolitionist Samuel May, Brown noted that he was

more and more convinced of the propriety of invoking the aid of females to the slave's cause.... Nothing looks more cheering to me than to see a circle of women working with their own hands for the redemption of their enslaved countrymen. And why should they not labor for the downfall of slavery? Are not more than a million of females driven daily to the sugar, the cotton, the rice and tobacco plantations of the South? Are they not denied the marriage rite? Is not Jesus crucified every day on the plains of the South, in the person of the unprotected slave? I never fail to urge upon the women the discharge of their duty to the slave. ("Letter" [1847])

In advocating for women's antislavery involvement Brown, like Hildreth, does not recommend

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<sup>78</sup> The American clergy's culpability for slavery and their tendency to put the size of their congregations ahead of moral considerations was not a new theme for nineteenth-century abolitionists. See Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith* for a detailed discussion of the role that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century clergy played in solidifying the slave system in North America.

that women seek the vote, since political party affiliation, like clerical ordination, limits possibilities for moral action and encourages compromise. In an 1846 letter to Sydney Howard Gay, Brown had warned women against aligning themselves with any political party that would take their money even though they could not vote: “this move of the new party, to get the women with them, shows their hypocrisy: and no woman should join that ‘League,’ for it is, emphatically, a league with the devil, to cheat the women out of their money” (“New Liberty”). Brown, like other Garrisonians, refused to pledge support to any political party (even the ostensibly antislavery Liberty Party) that might be tempted to compromise with slaveholders for the sake of elective gain. And while Brown embraced women’s antislavery action, he insisted that such action should take decidedly extrapolitical forms.

Perhaps Brown’s most explicit statement of his preference for non-ordained women over ordained men is his account of a public gathering in London’s Exeter Hall in 1853. The account, given in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, was published in *The Liberator* on June 3, 1853, and subsequently reprinted in other antislavery papers. The London crowd looks forward with eagerness to a speech by the Congregationalist minister Calvin Stowe, expecting Harriet Beecher Stowe’s husband to be an antislavery orator of great power. Brown records that

Professor Stowe, as you might expect, was looked upon as the lion of the speakers; but his speech disappointed all, except those of us who knew enough of American divines not to anticipate much from them on the subject of slavery. For my own part, I was not disappointed, for I have long since despaired of anything being done by clergymen; and the Professor’s speech at Glasgow, and subsequent addresses, had prepared me to look for but little from him.... (“Letter” [1853])

To sharpen the contrast between the minister and his famous wife, Brown goes on to depict the wild greeting given Mrs. Stowe, whom he describes as a “greater lady” than the duchess she accompanies:

At this stage of the meeting, there was a degree of excitement in the room that can

better be imagined than described. The waving of hats and handkerchiefs, the clapping of hands, the stamping of feet, and the screaming and fainting of ladies, went on as if it had been in the programme.... (“Letter” [1853])

Comparing the Reverend Stowe’s spoken words with Mrs. Stowe’s written ones, already well known in London, Brown accords the greater pedagogical and persuasive force to the latter: “Mr. Stowe is not very young, yet he is only a child in the anti-slavery movement. He is now lisp[ing] his A, B, C, and if his wife succeeds in making him a good scholar, she will find it no easy thing.” In the Stowe marriage it is Harriet who is the “scholar” and Calvin who aspires to her learned status.<sup>79</sup> Calvin is a private curiosity briefly put on display for the benefit of London’s abolitionist community, while Harriet is a public citizen recognized for her intellectual contributions to the antislavery movement. In Brown’s account, all of the religious agency in the Stowe marriage is wielded by Harriet: while Calvin produces “no agitation” for the cause of Christian antislavery, London is full of “Mrs. Stowe’s converts” (“Letter” [1853]).

While this reading of Hildreth and Brown might appear to reinforce a “separate spheres” model of nineteenth-century social relations, with women relegated to the nursery and the “little village school” (Hildreth par. 7), it actually reflects a more complex model of public and private relations than does the “separate spheres” binary, which grew out of studies of white middle-class gender norms. Scholars of southern history and African-American literature have noted how the ideology of the separate spheres—the notion that in a properly organized society women

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<sup>79</sup> Critic Mary Getchell notes how Brown both built upon and complicated the model of antislavery writing offered by Stowe:

Brown is more insistent [than Stowe] on the particular political moment he represents than the universal or spiritual state of man. He draws attention to moral and political hypocrisy by relating his sentimental characters not to abstract or transcendent conditions, but to the level of genuine individual suffering and survival. And unlike Stowe, who relegates her source material to a supplementary text published as *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Brown insists on the presence of his own source material as an inseparable part of the novel itself. Brown unconventionally embeds his parable in its own referential context, thus insisting on the contingency of meaning in *Clotel*. Through this technique he is able to juxtapose the gritty brutality of realistic discourse with the sentimental and sometimes saccharine portrayals of slave experience found in the *Clotel* plot. (85)

will guard the private space of the home while men populate the public space of the marketplace—worked to obscure the realities of the slaveholding household, in which economic and personal considerations were inextricably bound together, often by means of violence. Gillian Brown notes that slavery “disregards [the] opposition between the family at home and the exterior workplace. The distinction between work and family is eradicated in the slave, for whom there is no separation between economic and private status” (505). Hortense Spillers puts it more succinctly: slavery is “the most public private institution” (28). The familial relations of the plantation economy, in which the head of household was not only the figurative father of his slaves but also often their literal father, and in which the integrity of slave families could be ruptured at any moment by the exigencies of the marketplace, reveal the inseparability of private and public economies. Hildreth’s and Brown’s seemingly paradoxical assertion that those without electoral or clerical power have greater access to moral power is a sophisticated response to the confused public/private relations instantiated by slavery—one that recognizes the “private” as a locus for particular forms of agency that might be put to use in the abolitionist cause.

### **Preaching on the Plantation: Mr. Snyder and Georgiana Peck**

Having repeatedly advocated in his antislavery letters and lectures for women’s increasing involvement in the abolitionist cause, Brown’s first work of fiction, *Clotel*, provides a literary example of white women’s doctrinal agency in the figure of Georgiana Peck. In chapters titled “The Religious Teacher,” “The Young Christian,” “The Liberator” and “The Christian’s Death,” Brown positions Georgiana as the true representative of Wesleyan Christianity and Garrisonian abolitionism, not despite the fact that she can neither be ordained by the church nor vote in elections, but precisely because of it. Brown’s figuration of female power places the

locus of women's agency outside of the sectarian structures of both the Protestant church and party politics and indicates how white women's unfettered religious speech might counter the proslavery doctrines of ordained clergy with new antislavery interpretations of both the Bible and popular proslavery texts.

In *Clotel* Georgiana Peck serves as a foil, not only to the novel's mixed-race heroine (as Berthold, duCille, and other critics have noted), but to her own father, the Methodist minister John Peck. Brown depicts Reverend Peck as a weak-minded apologist for slavery who will not denounce the institution or free his slaves because his livelihood—as both a plantation owner and a clergyman with a proslavery congregation—depends on its perpetuation. His daughter Georgiana, by contrast, argues her antislavery convictions from specific Biblical texts, including the teachings of Christ, the Ten Commandments, the assertion of monogenesis in the Book of Acts (“God has created of one blood all the nations of men”), and various admonishments and proof-texts from the Old and New Testaments. Without the burden of ordained ministry and a proslavery congregation, and having received an excellent Northern education, Georgiana is free to interpret the Bible according to antislavery principles and to share this antislavery doctrine with her future husband, Mr. Carlton. In the Peck household it is Georgiana who is the true religious scholar, Reverend Peck's “superior and teacher,” and it is her religious agency that will eventually free her father's slaves (99).

Brown's fictionalized critique of the ordained clergy extends to both the general, encompassing multiple denominations and sects, and the particular: Reverend Peck is identified as a Methodist minister, ordained in a denomination whose founder was notoriously opposed to slavery. Reverend Peck, whose first appearance in the novel finds him buying a slave at auction while dressed in the clothing that “proclaim[s] him to be a clergyman” (57), has been “educated

for the ministry, in the Methodist persuasion. His father was a strict follower of John Wesley, and spared no pains in his son's education, with the hope that he would one day be as renowned as the great leader of his sect" (71). One of the opinions for which John Wesley was most renowned was his opposition to slavery: his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, first published in England in 1774, went through numerous British and American editions, appearing in a Philadelphia printing by Joseph Crukshank almost immediately after its publication in England.<sup>80</sup> Nineteenth-century antislavery agitators in both England and America made much of the fact that the founder of Methodism had explicitly decried the practice by which so many of his American followers would grow wealthy, and in the final chapter of *Clotel* Brown lists the number of slaves owned by members of various Christian denominations in the U.S.:

It is estimated that in the United States, members of the Methodist church own 219,363 slaves; members of the Baptist church own 226,000 slaves; members of the Episcopalian church own 88,000 slaves; members of the Presbyterian church own 77,000 slaves; members of all other churches own 50,000 slaves; in all, 660,563 slaves owned by members of the Christian church in this pious

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<sup>80</sup> During his only trip to America Wesley took great interest in the treatment of slaves, and African Americans came in large numbers to hear the revivalist preaching of Wesleyan missionaries and itinerant preachers in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. But as Joanna Brooks notes, the official split between the Anglican and Methodist churches after the Revolutionary War and the growing power of slaveholders in the U.S. South "softened" antislavery sentiment among American Methodists (29), and "the original stands against slavery taken by men like Wesley and the first leader of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church, Francis Asbury, were eventually compromised and ultimately undercut, so that by the 1840's, Southern Methodist preachers... were composing biblical arguments in favor of slavery" (Painter 29). Religious historian Christopher Evans describes the historical shift in this way:

Wesley's English Methodist societies carried staunch provisions barring slaveholders from membership, and in the early years of American Methodism an effort was made to keep this antislavery ethos strong. As Methodism's primary areas of expansion were in the slave-holding South, however, the ability to enforce these antislavery provisions became untenable.... The gap between Methodism's antislavery theology and its acquiescence to slavery ultimately led to several early nineteenth-century schisms, in which free African Americans in the North created a series of black Methodist denominations that pioneered the development of African American Christianity. Although Methodism survived the generation after Asbury without a schism over slavery, at the 1844 general conference, the Methodist Episcopal Church did formally split over the issue, creating a division in the church that would not be formally healed until a merger in 1939. (688)

democratic republic! (208)<sup>81</sup>

The denominations are listed in descending order of slave ownership except for the first two: Brown lists Methodists first even though Baptists own slightly more slaves. By designating both Reverend Peck and his daughter Georgiana as Methodist, Brown highlights the hypocrisy of a sect that condones slaveowning while claiming to revere its own antislavery founder—a betrayal that parallels the hypocrisy of a nation that enslaves men and women while proclaiming that “all men are created equal.” When Georgiana enters the narrative by interrupting her father’s proslavery sermonizing with her own conviction that the Bible is an antislavery document, she is thus implicitly positioned as the true heir to John Wesley, a “strict follower” of his antislavery positions.<sup>82</sup>

Reverend Peck, so far from embracing Wesley’s antislavery principles, openly defends slavery on religious grounds and hires a “missionary,” Mr. Snyder, to preach to his slaves. Snyder’s “preaching” consists of borrowings from the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones’s *Catechism, of Scripture Doctrine and Practice, for Families and Sabbath Schools; Designed Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons*, a devotional manual published in 1837.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> According to William Edward Farrison, Brown sourced these statistics from Edward S. Matthews’s “Statistical Account of the Connection of the Religious Bodies in America with Slavery.”

<sup>82</sup> Brown’s choice to specify that Reverend Peck and his daughter are Methodists, in addition to highlighting the hypocrisy of slaveholding Wesleyans, may have also reflected his immediate audience. Brown was living in England when he wrote *Clotel*, and the novel was published by Partridge & Oakey of London, whose catalog included “material with a moral, reforming and religious content” (Winship). The Methodist sect, an offshoot of Anglicanism, was founded in London in the late-eighteenth century, and by 1840 10 per cent of the English and Welsh population were classified as “Arminian Methodists” (Field). Baptists, on the other hand, though numerous in the U.S. South, were rare in England, and Brown may have put Methodists at the top of his slaveholders’ list in order to immediately catch his audience’s attention, since his English readers were far more likely to be Methodist than Baptist.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, though a Southerner who headed a church in Georgia, had studied at the theologically conservative Andover Seminary and rose to prominence among Southern clergymen by fashioning himself as an authority on the proper Christian treatment of slaves. In addition to his *Catechism, of*

Though Mr. Snyder is fictional, Jones's *Catechism* was a well known and much circulated text, and Brown includes it as an example of how Christian instruction could be used to excuse the cruelty of masters and enforce the docility of slaves:

'Q. What command has God given to servants concerning obedience to their masters?—A. 'Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God.' ...

'Q. Is it right in a servant, when commanded to do any thing, to be sullen and slow, and answer his master again?—A. 'No.' ...

'Q. But suppose the master is hard to please, and threatens and punishes more than he ought, what is the servant to do?—A. 'Do his best to please him.'

'Q. When the servant suffers *wrongfully* at the hands of his master, and, to please God, takes it patiently, will God reward him for it?—A. 'Yes.

'Q. Is it right for the servant to *run away*, or is it right to *harbour* a runaway?—A. 'No.' (80-81)<sup>84</sup>

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*Scripture Doctrine and Practice*, Jones also penned a separate tome on *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States*. Critics of *Clotel* including M. Giulia Fabi and William Edward Farrison have attributed Snyder's sermon to Thomas Bacon, whose sermons on masters and servants were published in England in the eighteenth century and reprinted in America in the early nineteenth. While Bacon may have been an inspiration for Brown in depicting Snyder and Peck, Snyder's sermon is quoted almost word-for-word from Jones.

<sup>84</sup> Snyder predictably drops the lines from the *Catechism* in which Jones admonished masters to "give unto [their] servants that which is just and equal," including "comfortable houses, comfortable clothing, [and] wholesome and abundant food," and to "*keep their families together*" (C. Jones, *Catechism* 128, emphasis in original). Snyder also inserts a few lines that absolve Reverend Peck of guilt, and perhaps even of free will: "is the master to blame for whipping his servant?—Oh no! he is only doing his duty as a Christian" (81). Finally, Snyder adds his own pseudo-scientific flourishes to Jones's work, asking "Why may not the whites be slaves as well as blacks?" The answer is that "the Lord intended Negroes for slaves" because "their hands are large, the skin thick and tough, and they can stand the sun better than whites" (81).

Snyder's phylogenetic musings on the suitability of the black body for hard labor are not found in Jones's *Catechism* but reflect burgeoning discourses of scientific racism that often went hand in hand with religious arguments for slavery. In a discussion of how Brown uses contemporary ethnological theory in *Clotel*, Adélékè Adéèkó points out Reverend Peck's argument "that the human *natural* rights divinely endowed at creation were destroyed at the fall of Adam and Eve, and that the messiah's physical atonement on the Cross re-established the right for only *deserving* Christians" (122). Adéèkó is interested in Reverend Peck's philosophizing because it reflects the novel's larger concern with hemocentric theories of human identity that "represent kinship and social responsibility in terms of blood relationships" (131). Contemporary ethnologists claimed that humans of different races were of different, and incompatible, blood origins and that the intermixture of these different bloods led to corrupted and doomed offspring. (As Adéèkó and others have noted, this "scientific racism" gave a veneer of scientific authority to the ongoing trope of the "tragic mulatto/a," which Brown himself employed.) Unlike her father, Georgiana Peck rejects these polygenetic theories of racial origins, instead invoking the Biblical assertion that "God has created of one blood all the nations of men," a belief that leads her to the conclusion that the "Christian religion is opposed to slaveholding in its spirit and its principles... and it is



Though the *Catechism* is uncredited in *Clotel*, the narrator later identifies Jones by name as one of the Christian ministers “who regard religious instruction, such as they impart to their slaves, as calculated to make them more trustworthy and valuable as property” (111). Mr. Snyder, bound by the missionary society that employs him and by the proslavery opinions of Reverend Peck, must preach such sermons despite the fact that he is personally antislavery: he confides privately to the visiting Northerner Mr. Carlton that slavery “is the incubus that hangs over the Southern States” (87). Brown contrasts Mr. Snyder’s rote religious instruction with that offered to the slaves by Georgiana Peck, who employs a Socratic method of instruction in which she reads the Bible aloud and invites her hearers’ independent interpretations—interpretations that need not conform to a sectarian script.

Brown’s invocation of Jones’s well known and widely used *Catechism* reflects the complex generic blending that characterizes *Clotel*. Much of the critical literature on *Clotel* has been dedicated to understanding the novel’s odd form: its chronological jumpiness, its plot digressions, and its borrowings from other textual sources. While some critics of *Clotel* have approached the text as little more than a failed attempt to imitate novelistic conventions, others have read its pastiche of fictional and journalistic forms as a sophisticated negotiation of audience expectation and artistic choice. John Ernest has famously described Brown as a “cultural editor” who sought not only to compose affecting stories but to compile facts and arguments for his readers’ benefit, much in the manner of antislavery journal editors like Elijah P. Lovejoy. Peter A. Dorsey has argued in a similar vein that *Clotel* is best read, not as an example of the high literary form of the novel, but as a piece of antislavery writing that follows the conventions of that subgenre, in which Stowe, Theodore Weld, and the host of antislavery

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the duty of all who wish to meet God in peace, to discharge that duty in spreading these principles” (95).

writers and lecturers who made up Brown's acquaintance "sought to submerge their authorial roles as 'fiction' writers by presenting their work as invitations to public authentication" (258).<sup>85</sup> By placing Jones's popular *Catechism* in Mr. Snyder's mouth Brown blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction, spurring readers to consider how Christian doctrine circulated in proslavery contexts.

But more than merely reflecting nineteenth-century textual practices, Brown's use of Jones's *Catechism* actually models the process of deconstruction and reinterpretation by which antislavery Christians might counter proslavery doctrines. Brown's text manipulates the *Catechism*, turning this proslavery text from a weapon of oppression to an occasion for hermeneutic creativity and ironic commentary on white culture. Jones's self-important preface to the third edition of his book claims that "when we have a class of *grown-up children*, to instruct, it is our shortest, our wisest, and most benevolent course, *so* to instruct them as to *settle their faith*" (5, emphasis in original). The express purpose of the *Catechism*, then, is to "settle the faith" of Southern slaves—to preclude any dangerous theological questioning that might undermine their perfect servitude. But Snyder's use of the *Catechism* has the opposite effect on Reverend Peck's slaves: it leads them to question the intelligence and sincerity of white people and the validity of their own enslavement. "Dees white folks is de very dibble [devil]," says one slave, Dick, after Snyder has preached his sermon and left, "and all dey whole study is to try to fool de black people." The *Catechism* in this case confirms, not that black people were

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<sup>85</sup> M. Guilia Fabi argues that in addition to reflecting conventions for nineteenth-century antislavery writing Brown's disjointed narratorial style actually instantiates in textual form "the uncertainty and limited control that were characteristic of slave life. For instance, in having characters appear and disappear without previous notice from the text... he gives his audience a readerly experience of the familial disruption caused by slavery" (xvii). Fabi criticizes those scholars who "continue to search for a 'unifying principle'" in Brown's work, claiming that such criticism results in "a telling attempt to resist the condition of uncertainty of slave life as Brown re-creates it on a fictional level, and... an effort by such critics to recover some control in a situation of powerlessness and frustrated expectations" (xvii).

born to be slaves, but that white people are evil. Another slave, Aunt Dafney, asserts that “I got no notion of dees white folks, no how. Dey all de time tellin’ dat de Lord made us for to work for dem, and I don’t believe a word of it.” In this case the *Catechism* not only fails to “settle faith” but actually undermines it: Aunt Dafney “[doesn’t] believe a word” of the white man’s preaching. Another slave, Ned, opines that “de people dat made de Bible was great fools, [because] dey made such a great big book and put nuttin’ in it, but servants obey yer masters.” Here the *Catechism* serves to suggest, not the authority of the Bible, but the stupidity of those who believe in it; why base an entire religion on a book that says nothing but “servants obey your masters” (81-82)? In this and other scenes in which African-American characters reinterpret white religious teachings, Brown employs a technique of double-voiced discourse (Henry Louis Gates’s term) described by Carla Peterson: “African-American writers constructed a productive discourse generated from within the community that borrows the vocabulary and categories of the dominant discourse only to dislocate them from their privileged position of authority” (14).

It is the communal production of such religious discourse that makes it meaningful and valuable to Brown and to his African-American characters, who maintain an investment in Protestant doctrine even after they have heard it used to justify their enslavement. Brown is careful to preempt a complete dismissal of Biblical authority: the slave preacher Uncle Simon, a figure of religious influence in the local black community, corrects his fellow slaves’ misconceptions by asserting “Oh, thars more in de Bible den dat, only Snyder never reads any other part to us” (82). As Laurie Maffly-Kipp asserts, nineteenth-century

African-American identity was not built solely on African foundations; rather, it was anchored in a Protestant bedrock. Central to [communal understandings of African-American identity] was Protestantism as a source of belief, practice, and institutional structure. The Christian tradition gave birth to a worldview and a way of interpreting circumstances that imparted meaning and value to the incoherence of cultural removal and chattel slavery. (3)

After the “African spiritual holocaust” that colonial-era slaveowners perpetrated against their slaves in a concerted effort to destroy the religious traditions those slaves had brought with them from Africa (Jon Butler 130), the rise of a distinctly African-American Christianity in the nineteenth century offered a new source of communal identity for both free and enslaved blacks.<sup>86</sup>

Reverend Peck, though he insists that Biblical teaching justifies slavery, gives the lie to his own beliefs by refusing to allow his slaves free access to the Bible; instead, they receive an expurgated version filtered first through Jones’s *Catechism* and then through Mr. Snyder. Peck demonstrates, by omission, not only his agreement with his daughter—that the Bible does not, in fact, condone slavery—but his belief in doctrinal agency: slaves exposed to the complete teachings of the Bible might, like Elizabeth Freeman hearing the Declaration of Independence or Nat Turner hearing the “Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days” (9), decide to take matters into their own hands. Snyder, for his part, exemplifies the Kantian dynamic of professional constraints on public speech. As a missionary to the slaveholding south, Snyder is bound to preach only what wealthy plantation owners dictate, and his authority is undermined by his subordination to the will of the slaveholder. Reverend Peck’s slaves are aware that Snyder is merely Peck’s mouthpiece: ““Marser Peck give dat sermon to Snyder,”” they correctly conclude (82). Snyder’s position as representative of Reverend Peck makes hypocrisy a job requirement.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Brown may have also had personal reasons for maintaining an investment in religious agency, since his escape from slavery had been facilitated by a devout Quaker, Wells Brown, whose antislavery convictions grew out of his faith. William the escaped slave was so grateful for the Quaker’s help that he added Wells Brown’s name to his own. (See the autobiographical narrative appended to the 1853 edition of *Clotel* for the complete story.)

<sup>87</sup> Hailing from New York, Snyder is categorically opposed to slavery, but cannot say so without losing his position. But in private conversation with Mr. Carlton and the plantation’s overseer, Snyder is free to describe the stultifying effects of slavery on Southern society:

Brown drives home the uselessness of such spiritual teaching a few chapters later when Mr. Carlton, Reverend Peck's guest and Georgiana's future husband, visits one of Peck's neighbors, a slaveholder who is not a Christian, and, at Georgiana's urging, conducts a "religious interview" with his slaves (110). The neighbor, Mr. Jones, fearing that Carlton will think less of him for not educating his slaves, instructs his overseer to give them a hasty lesson in Protestant theology. This is what the overseer tells them:

Now, boys and gals, your master is coming down to the quarters tomorrow with his visitor, who is going to give you a preach, and I want you to understand what he says to you.... Preaching is to tell you that you are mighty wicked and bad at heart. This, I suppose, you all know. But if the gentleman should ask you who made you, tell him the Lord; if he ask if you wish to go to heaven, tell him yes. Remember that you are all Christians, all love the Lord, all want to go to heaven, all love your masters, and all love me. Now, boys and gals, I want you to show yourselves smart to-morrow: be on your p's and q's, and, Monday morning, I will give you all a glass of whisky bright and early. (111)

Mr. Jones clearly expects Carlton to "preach" in the manner of Mr. Snyder: to quiz the slaves according to the slaveholder's catechism. Instead of "giving [them] a preach," however, Carlton decides to "make it more of a conversational meeting," and his questions immediately expose how shallow the slaves' instruction has been. When he asks one slave if he knows who made him, the old man replies, "De overseer told us last night who made us, but indeed I forgot the gentmun's name." When he asks another slave, "Do you serve the Lord?" the man replies "No, sir, I don't serve anybody but Mr. Jones; I neber belong to anybody else." Upon questioning a "mulatto woman" about John the Baptist, she replies, "Oh yes, marser, John de Baptist; I know dat nigger bery well indeed; he libs in Old Kentuck, where I come from" (112).

These paired scenes expose the false distinction between the "real" religious instruction Peck

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[N]o white man is respectable in these slave states who works for a living. No community can be prosperous, where honest labor is not honored. No society can be rightly constituted, where the intellect is not fed. Whatever institution reflects discredit on industry, whatever institution forbids the general culture of the understanding, is palpably hostile to individual rights, and to social well-being. Slavery is the incubus that hangs over the Southern States. (87)

provides his slaves and the “fake” instruction that Jones’s slaves receive: both are meant, not to improve the servants’ temporal or spiritual lot, but to make the master seem benevolent and Christian to outside observers. The various scenes of “preaching” that Brown depicts offer a fictional deconstruction of the proslavery argument that Christian masters who educated their slaves in Protestant principles did them a service by saving their souls. Brown underscores the uselessness of such limited doctrinal instruction by naming the atheist slaveholder (Reverend Peck’s non-believing neighbor) after the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones.

Reverend Peck’s daughter Georgiana is introduced to the novel in a chapter entitled “The Religious Teacher,” in which her first act is to interject her antislavery views into her father’s conversation. Having been educated, like her father, in Connecticut, she has returned to the South, not to be “captivated” by the slave system, but to work against it. While Brown gives lip service to her “youth, beauty, and health” (74), he is far more concerned with her intellectual and spiritual qualifications than her physical ones. He describes the “philosophy” embraced by her “capacious mind”:

It was, that all men are by nature equal; that they are wisely and justly endowed by the Creator with certain rights, which are irrefragable; and that, however human pride and avarice may depress and debase, still God is the author of good to man—and of evil, man is the artificer to himself and his species. Unlike Plato and Socrates, her mind was free from the gloom that surrounded theirs;... though a devoted member of her father’s church, she was not a sectarian. (136)

The comparison to Plato and Socrates, both male, is cagey. Georgiana is both like and unlike these famous philosophers: similar to them in the “capaciousness” of her mind, but differing from them in her embrace of a Christian optimism and a democratic belief in the equality of all people. Like Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie, who “permit[s] her mind to expand beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith,” Georgiana is “not a sectarian” (Sedgwick, *Hope* 128). And yet unlike Sedgwick, who rarely revealed her characters’ denominational commitments, Brown

reiterates Georgiana's membership in her father's Methodist church, suggesting that her sectarian identification is an important aspect of her role as the novel's intellectual center.<sup>88</sup>

Brown's narrator makes it clear that Georgiana's superior piety depends on her willingness to see her father's slaves as equals rather than as subordinates, and to treat them as such. Over and over again she encourages her father and Mr. Carlton to imagine themselves in the slaves' places and to extrapolate what they would do as privileged white men should they find themselves threatened with enslavement and treated as property: "Everybody knows that slavery in its best and mildest form is wrong. Whoever denies this, his lips libel his heart. Try him! Clank the chains in his ears, and tell them they are for him; give him an hour to prepare his wife and children for a life of slavery... then look at his pale lips and trembling knees, and you have nature's testimony against slavery" (124). M. Giulia Fabi calls this "interpretive retraining," a method of antislavery pedagogy espoused by Brown and modeled by Georgiana for her father and lover (and of course for the reader):

The ethos of resistance of the slaves can be understood by outsiders who have dared to become aware of the interpretive blinders of race prejudice, who have penetrated the oxymoron of a slaveholding democracy, who have questioned the source of their own privilege, and who have emerged with new interpretive tools to reread American reality from a point of view that includes the perspective of the subaltern. As we have seen, Brown dramatizes this possibility in *Georgiana*.... She is paradigmatic of the process of interpretive retraining that Brown tries to ignite in his readers through his novel. (xix)

What Fabi and most other commentators fail to note, however, is the degree to which

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<sup>88</sup> The similarity between Sedgwick's description of Hope Leslie and Brown's of Georgiana is probably not accidental. Brown was apparently an admirer of Sedgwick's work; as Ann duCille notes, in the later versions of Brown's novel, Horatio Green becomes Henry Linwood and *Clotel* becomes Isabelle, reminiscent of Sedgwick's characters Herbert and Isabella Linwood.... [C]ross-dressing and disguise play key roles in several of Sedgwick's novels, as well as in Brown's text, as characters escape literal and figurative prisons by swapping clothes, races, genders, places, and positions in pursuit of freedom. In *The Linwoods*, the heroine Isabella engineers Herbert Linwood's escape from prison through a black woman servant who changes clothes and places with him, a scene *Clotel* reenacts in Mary's heroic, self-sacrificing rescue of her beloved George. (*Coupling* 25).

Georgiana grounds this call to reciprocity in Christian doctrine. Russ Castronovo asserts that “[i]n both speeches and writing Brown argued against slavery and racial prejudice, not by appealing to religious tenets—as many white abolitionists and slave narrators did—but by manipulating the discourses of American politics and history” (“Radical” 526). But in *Clotel* religious arguments both for and against slavery come very much to the fore: the novel engages in a metacritical dissection of contemporary doctrinal debates, pitting proslavery and antislavery theologies against one another. With fiction increasingly providing a forum for public religious debate, Brown situates his early African-American novel within this new tradition and places at its intellectual center an educated white woman who systematically deconstructs her father’s proslavery rationalizations and replaces them with her own antislavery brand of Christianity.

In contrast to her father, who forms his opinions based on self-interest and then calls upon the Bible to “throw its broad shield over them” (73), and to her future husband Mr. Carlton, an atheist who reads Rousseau, Voltaire, and Paine and, while he is “no admirer of... slavery,” cannot be bothered to do anything about it (74), Georgiana wields a “philosophy... founded in the school of Christianity” (136) that blends the best of democratic political thought with liberal-minded Biblical exegesis: “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ This single passage of Scripture should cause us to have respect to the rights of the slave. True Christian love is of an enlarged, disinterested nature. It loves all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, without regard to colour or condition” (75). (Reverend Peck’s response to this sentiment is to accuse Georgiana of fanaticism.) Instead of carefully selecting proslavery pronouncements from the Bible (“Slaves, obey your masters”), Georgiana marshals antislavery arguments from the Old Testament, from the life of Christ, and from natural law, and points out that the church’s willingness to suffer slaveholders for the sake of maintaining membership numbers is repelling



potential believers, who are disgusted with the church's hypocrisy.

In the terms laid out by Kant in "What Is Enlightenment?" and explicated by Warner in *Publics and Counterpublics*, Georgiana's speech reflects her role as a "scholar," a public citizen not bound by ordination or political office and therefore free to express controversial—even "fanatical"—opinions. Brown stresses Georgiana's education in a Northern school, which qualifies her to engage in theological and philosophical debate with her ordained father, and details her desire to educate her slaves as well. In contrast to her hypocritical father and the hamstrung Mr. Snyder, Georgiana gives the slaves a real religious education. Her first act upon her father's death is to dismiss his hired mouthpiece:

Snyder, the Dutch preacher, felt that his services would soon be dispensed with, for nothing was more repugnant to the feelings of Mrs. Carlton than the sermons preached by Snyder to the slaves. She regarded them as something intended to make them better satisfied with their condition, and more valuable as pieces of property, without preparing them for the world to come. (133)

Georgiana, rather than employing a proxy, offers her own religious instruction, and because she plays no official role in her father's church—she is not ordained and therefore not bound to preach the proslavery catechism of the Methodist Episcopal Church South—she is free to teach as she will. Georgiana and Mr. Carlton "read and explain... the Scriptures" to the slaves who, instead of sleeping as they did during Snyder's sermons, display "very great attention" that shows "plainly that they appreciated the gospel when given to them in its purity" (138).

Implementing a plan of gradual emancipation, Georgiana informs the laborers on her father's plantation that they will begin earning money for their labor and that the funds will be set aside for use when they are free. Productivity immediately increases, particularly among the bricklayers, who become "temperate, moral, [and] religious" once they are allowed to work for themselves (136). Having already demonstrated that these same slaves were prone to

drunkenness, immorality, and skepticism under the false religious instruction of Mr. Snyder and Mr. Jones, Brown shows how the promise of emancipation and Georgiana's true religious teaching work in tandem to transform the slaves into both model laborers and model Christians. Here Brown once again reverses a sacred proslavery assumption: that a "settled faith" makes good workers and contented slaves. Instead, Georgiana Peck's ex-slaves become settled and sober Christians once they have been promised their liberty. Once established, this principle makes it impossible to argue for slavery on missionary grounds. Indeed, if true religion is a product of freedom and honest work rather than an inducement to it—a salutary spiritual effect rather than an instrumental cause—then the moral impetus for abolition becomes even more urgent, since slaves cannot become true Christians *until* they are free to labor on their own behalf.

But the slaves' new freedom carries with it the complicated burden of publicity: Georgiana warns her slaves that the passage from slavery to freedom will make them more subject to scrutiny, rather than less. Though they will no longer work under the watchful eye of the overseer, they will now be treated as representative of all freed slaves, and their behavior held up as exemplary:

"From this hour," said she, "you are free, and all eyes will be fixed upon you. I dare not predict how far your example may affect the welfare of your brethren yet in bondage. If you are temperate, industrious, peaceable, and pious, you will show to the world that slaves can be emancipated without danger. Remember what a singular relation you sustain to society. The necessities of the case require not only that you should behave as well as the whites, but better than the whites; and for this reason: if you behave no better than they, your example will lose a great portion of its influence." (157)

By freeing her slaves, Georgiana Peck places them in a "singular relation" to society: a relation in which their behavior is constrained by their membership in a particular community. In fact Georgiana confers a kind of ordination upon her now freed slaves: like the clergy and politicians

who can act only as mouthpieces for their congregations and constituents, the freed former slaves of Reverend Peck are now the representatives of an entire race. They go, in Kantian terms, from being “private” citizens (if only by virtue of being held as private property) to being “public” figures: head of the congregation of freed slaves, whose possible moral, social, and economic choices are necessarily constrained by that dubious honor.

### ***Clotel in Context: Women’s Religious Agency in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative and Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl***

Brown’s model of doctrinal agency, of course, is racially problematic, in that it functions far better for white women than for black women: *Clotel*, though she shares Georgiana’s antislavery Christianity, ends her own life while fleeing reenslavement, and so solidifies the figure of the tragic mulatta for generations to come. Though aware of the activities of black female abolitionists in the North (it was Brown, after all, who brought Ellen Craft and her husband William onto the Garrisonian lecture circuit),<sup>89</sup> Brown chose to place at the center of his novel—interrupting the tales of Curren, *Clotel*, Althesa, and their children—a white woman, and to depict that single woman as effecting more real temporal change than any other character in the novel, male or female, white or black.<sup>90</sup> For critics seeking in *Clotel* an authentic, unromanticized depiction of African-American life or a model of the politically engaged black

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<sup>89</sup> See Anne M. Boylan’s essay in Yellin and Van Horne’s *The Abolitionist Sisterhood* for a description of black women’s antislavery activity in New York, where much of Brown’s lecturing took place.

<sup>90</sup> M. Guilia Fabi notes in her introduction to *Clotel* that “visibly black” women’s antislavery activities play a role only in the final, 1867 edition of *Clotel*, and then only briefly:

The greater importance of Aggy and Dinah, who help Clotel escape before she is taken to prison, is short-lived but significant. However, visibly black female characters do not fully escape their subordinate role even in the last edition of the novel. . . . Brown does not seem interested in questioning gender roles within the black community, an issue which would become central in the work of postwar African American women novelists. (xxiii)

woman, the character of Georgiana Peck—white, privileged, dying beautifully a la Eva St. Clare—is a disappointment.

Here it may be instructive to place Brown in the context of other antislavery authors; just as white women's doctrinal agency emerged in fiction as part of a long literary-historical process, black women's doctrinal agency did not arrive fully formed within the nascent field of African-American literary endeavor. Comparing Brown's depiction of black women's doctrinal agency with Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* demonstrates the incremental process by which black women also came to access doctrinal agency, a process enabled by the expansion of African-American literature into the realm of fiction.

Consider the manner in which Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, treats the intersection of Protestant doctrine and female agency. Unlike *Clotel*, Douglass's *Narrative* is thoroughly critical of Christianity—so much so that Douglass himself seems surprised by the violence of his feelings, admitting in his Appendix that “since reading over the foregoing Narrative” he has noticed “several instances” which “may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion” (75). In the Appendix Douglass makes a distinction between “Christianity proper” and “slaveholding Christianity,” and critics of the *Narrative* have generally taken Douglass's assertions at face value, striving to reconcile his critique of individual Christian slaveholders with his professed respect for “Christianity proper.”<sup>91</sup> But as Thomas Peyser cannily concludes, Douglass's Appendix, and his *Narrative*'s depiction of slaveholding

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<sup>91</sup> See, for instance, Donald B. Gibson's “Faith, Doubt, and Apostasy,” James A. Wohlpart's “Privatized Sentiment and the Institution of Christianity,” and Lisa Zeitz's “Biblical Allusion and Imagery in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*.”

Christians, actually serves to place the idea of an abolitionist Christianity outside the realm of earthly possibility:

Even though many clergy were abolitionists, and even though an entire sect, the Quakers, was dedicated to emancipation, Douglass never refers to so much as a single priest of whom he approves. His only kind words are for a shadowy entity he calls “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ,” which he elsewhere names “Christianity proper” (363). These oblique affirmations, in which one can hear an echo of sweeping Transcendentalist dismissals of Christianity, leave open the possibility that the “Christianity of Christ” is something quite distinct from everything the world calls Christian. (87)

Though Methodist clergy and class leaders come in for particular scorn in the *Narrative*, Douglass’s dismissal of American Christianity also refuses to make distinctions between denominations, congregations, or individual believers. Since “the religion of the south... is, by communion and fellowship, the religion of the north” (78), all American Christians are guilty by association. Douglass’s Appendix denies the possibility that individual churches or church members—male or female—might be exempt from condemnation, and the “pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ” becomes a Platonic ideal that can only exist separately from the earthly church.

With Christianity marked out as an unremittingly proslavery space, the possibility that doctrine might provide the impetus for antislavery agency is effectively foreclosed. Douglass’s stance toward the antebellum Protestant establishment has been remarked on by a number of commentators, but what these critics fail to note is the way Douglass simultaneously discredits Protestant doctrine while also effacing the women who might find in it a justification for antislavery action. In a famous passage in which Douglass deconstructs the Biblical curse against Ham as an excuse for slavery, he associates slavery with scripture and scripture, implicitly, with black mothers:

[I]t is... plain, that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the

south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the linear descendants of Ham are alone to be *scripturally enslaved*, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters. (14, emphasis added)

To be “scripturally enslaved” is to be descended from Ham, but these mixed-race slaves, including Douglass himself, are descended from Ham only on their mothers’ sides. So scripture is made equivalent to enslavement, which is then made equivalent to motherhood. At the same time, however, the passage deftly removes black mothers from the procreative process, with mixed-race slaves spontaneously generated by white slaveholders: slave-born children are “springing up at the south” and being “ushered into the world,” owing “their existence to white fathers” with mothers nowhere to be found. In this crucial passage, then, scripture—particularly the curse of Ham—is associated with black women and then both are made to disappear, rendering women’s religious agency invisible and impossible.<sup>92</sup>

When religious women do appear in the *Narrative* it is only in the aggregate and as the victims of religious white men. The *Narrative* includes a multitude of ministers, class-leaders, and church members, all male, and all depraved. The women who appear in Douglass’s *Narrative* are not the myriad women, white and black, who participated in Christian antislavery societies—not the Angelina Grimké and Sarah Louisa Fortens—but symbolic women whose abused state serves as a signifier of evil slaveholding practices. “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ,” Douglass avers in the Appendix, and “I therefore hate the

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<sup>92</sup> Sharon Carson has investigated the radical possibilities of liberation theology in the *Narrative* and argued that Douglass, rather than dismissing religion altogether, actually relocates true Christianity in the black community. Even if this is the case, however, Douglass only locates religious agency in the black *male* community: the slaves who meet secretly to teach one another to read are all male, and the conjurer who gives Douglass “the root” to help him defy Covey is also male. If Douglass “reasserts his own spirituality and his will toward freedom” (Carson 27), he simultaneously denies that will to the women who are victimized by slavery.

corrupt, slaveholding, *women-whipping*, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.... We have men-stealers for ministers, *women-whippers* for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members.... He who sells my sister, for purposes of *prostitution*, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity” (75, emphasis added). The repeated invocation of nameless whipped and prostituted women recalls (without naming) the tale of Aunt Hester—the woman whipped for daring to prefer a black lover to her master—with which Douglass had begun the *Narrative*.<sup>93</sup> The bound and whipped woman thus becomes the emblem of essentialized victimhood, and her reappearance here, in the Appendix that categorically condemns American Christianity North and South, fixes black women as the perpetual victims of a violent and patriarchal Protestantism that offers no possible avenues for female expression and agency.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Winifred Morgan notes the gender differences in slave narratives by women and men: “Black men combated the stereotype that they were ‘boys’ while black women contested the idea that they were either helpless victims or whores” (75). Douglass’s *Narrative* tells the tale of his own journey from “boy” to “man” while at the same time affirming black women’s object position as “helpless victims or whores.”

<sup>94</sup> In a useful discussion of Douglass’s *Narrative* Gordon Cunningham notes that understanding how African American texts construct gender is a complex process because the hierarchy of racial domination between master and slave must be triangulated with the gendered dominance of the masculine over the feminine. According to Cunningham, gender “as a discursively constructed difference creates places in the symbolic order that can be and are denied to slaves. Being biologically female or male does not allow the slave to claim or speak from the culturally defined position of man or woman” (116). While Cunningham recognizes that, at the symbolic level, “[w]ithin the domain of slavery, gender or culturally derived notions of man- and womanhood do not exist... [because] both male and female slave are other to the master’s male identity,” he overlooks how, at a textual level, this situation enables Douglass to subordinate the experiences of female slaves to his own narrative of subjectivity successfully achieved. If male and female positions are essentially the same under slavery, both the *Narrative* and Cunningham suggest, then the female experience of slavery can be successfully subsumed under the male, and under one particular male: Douglass.

Maurice Wallace’s psychoanalytical reading of the *Narrative*, instead of dismissing female slave experience as effectively synonymous with male experience, notes how Douglass’s struggle toward black manhood necessitates that he sever himself rhetorically from the realm of black womanhood:

The mature Douglass’s preoccupation with the masculine ideal in *Narrative* is coterminous with his fear of the feminine, of being regarded, in other words, as also woman. Perhaps he knows the risk of being classed with the sentimental subject of nineteenth-century white women’s writing by virtue of his powerlessness to resist sexual assault. To concede a feminine division of consciousness in the public

The denial of religious agency to women does not apply only to black women in the *Narrative*: even Sophia Auld, the kind white woman who is chastised by her husband for teaching young Frederick to read, can only be presented as a helpless victim denied access to agency. Douglass's initial description of Auld presents her in Christ-like terms: "When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach" (31). This description echoes Christ's commendation to the "good and faithful servant" in Matthew 25: 35-36 (King James Version): "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." Rather than drawing abolitionist agency from her faith, however, as Georgiana Peck does, Auld is robbed of her religious agency by the power of slavery: "Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness" (31). Slavery, not Sophia Auld, is granted all of the agency in this passage: it "proves its ability" to "divest" her of her initial kindness, and she is helpless to resist its encroachments, as her heart passively "becomes" stone and her disposition resistlessly "gives way." Instead of offering an avenue to antislavery action, Sophia Auld's Christianity is simply a dangerous trap she fails to avoid, leading her in the "simplicity of her soul... to treat [Douglass] as she supposed one human being ought to treat another" until she is disabused of this notion by her husband (31). While Douglass's *Narrative*, unlike *Clotel*, is autobiographical and reflects the actual conditions of his sojourn with the Aulds, his semantic framing of Sophia Auld's transformation from loving

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medium of literature is for Douglass to jeopardize his claim in *Narrative* to the virile perfectibility of black men. (245)



Christian to angry tigress suggests his doubtful opinion of the possibilities for women's religious agency.

M. Clay Hooper notes that Douglass's various autobiographies instantiate a tradition of African-American autobiography that relies on an "identificatory logic of black autobiography... that sought to authorize black protest by demonstrating the moral independence of representative black individuals" (31). Douglass's autobiographies depict him progressively liberating himself from illiteracy, from the overseer's control, from slavery, from economic dependence, from Garrisonian paternalism, and so forth, until he stands alone and independent, the archetypal self-made man. In this narrative, religion and religious leaders are among the many oppressive forces from which Douglass must free himself in his journey to manhood.<sup>95</sup> By contrast, the "pastiche-like dissonance" that surfaces in Brown's multiple autobiographies enables a "declaration of moral interdependence rather than moral independence" (30) that in turn makes possible "a type of relational complexity that allows for progressive reorganization but not idealist reduction" (31). According to Hooper, Brown's ethos is not the tale of the self-made man who frees himself from dependence on others through honest labor or physical violence, but the tale of the trickster who maneuvers between and manipulates (often competing) value systems and whose identity and progression are based, not on independence from others, but on interdependence with them.

In other words, the forms of agency that Brown's writings describe and recommend are cooperative and collaborative. Recognizing distinctions between sects and even between individual believers—proslavery and antislavery Methodists, most notably—and the complex interplay of public and private responsibilities that makes agency possible for those not bound by official duties, Brown offers models of collaborative action performed by those who share

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<sup>95</sup> Hooper observes that this trajectory provides an African-American version of Sacvan Bercovitch's "institutionalization of consensus."

antislavery beliefs grounded in the Bible. These models are made possible by the imaginative space that fiction provides; Douglass and other escaped slaves, writing of their own experiences in nonfiction form, were necessarily limited in their depictions of slaves'—particularly female slaves'—agency. But even Brown's fictional model of interdependence, as I have noted, leaves little room for black women's doctrinal agency; black women, for Brown, are sacrificial lambs rather than doctrinal agents. And here it is instructive to look to another of Brown's contemporaries: Harriet Jacobs. Merging the sentimental conventions of the fictional *Clotel* with the daring tales of concealment and escape characteristic of Douglass's and other nonfiction narratives,<sup>96</sup> *Incidents* constructs a tale in which a black heroine takes advantage of the confusion of public and private spaces under slavery and puts doctrinal agency to her own use.

Like Douglass's *Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* confines many of her observations on the relationship between religion and slavery to a single chapter. But rather than relegating the “slaveholding Christianity” of America to an afterthought, Jacobs's text demonstrates Linda Brent's doctrinal agency while subtly pointing out its revolutionary potential. Jacobs situates her religious reflections at the center of her story, just after her accounts of a watershed personal event—the birth of Linda's first child—and a well-known political uprising: Nat Turner's Rebellion. Jacobs thus places her doctrinal assertions in implicit dialogue with her own status as an independent agent—in this case a woman who has chosen her own sexual partner and the father of her child rather than succumbing to her master's harassment—and with Turner's particular brand of violent, religiously-inspired action.

Jacobs's chapter on “The Church and Slavery” begins by noting that Turner's rebellion

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<sup>96</sup> I use the terms “fiction” and “nonfiction” advisedly, knowing that neither Brown's *Clotel*, which borrows heavily from newspaper and lecture accounts of plantation abuses, nor Douglass's *Narrative*, which draws on the narrative conventions established by other escaped slaves, fits neatly into the categories of fiction and nonfiction.

had led to increased religious instruction among slaves in her native Edenton, North Carolina. Since Turner had combined prophetic verses from the Bible with his own creative form of natural mysticism and transformed this unique belief system into a justification for antislavery violence,<sup>97</sup> the slaveholders in Edenton “[come] to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters” (57). In other words, having seen how undirected religious belief has led to violent collective action among slaves, wary slaveowners have decided that the best way to head off the most dangerous effects of doctrinal agency is to control the amount and kind of doctrine made available to slaves. Accordingly, at the first Sunday school meeting Linda attends—an Episcopal gathering to which only the more “respectable” and literate blacks have been invited—Reverend Pike takes as his text Ephesians 6:5: “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.” Here one hears echoes of the fictional Mr. Snyder’s “Slaves, obey your masters” sermons and, behind him, of the real Charles Colcock Jones’s *Catechism of Scripture Doctrine and Practice* (published in Georgia in 1837, no doubt at least in part as a response to Turner’s rebellion), with its admonition to give slaves just enough religious instruction to “settle their faith.”

But as in the case of Mr. Snyder’s fictional hearers, Linda and her fellow students reject the pacifying interpretations imposed on them by Reverend Pike—“You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil”—and laugh at him behind his back. “[H]ighly

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<sup>97</sup> In his *Confessions* Turner does not mention reading the Bible, but he knew how to read, and his confessor, Thomas Gray, records him reciting Bible verses from memory. Turner claimed to have received signs from God that convinced him that the Day of Judgment depicted in Revelations was at hand: “I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven—and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighborhood—and I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens” (10). When a solar eclipse occurred in February 1831 Turner took this as a sign that the apocalypse was at hand.

amused” with Pike’s preaching, his audience returns a few more times to hear “pretty much a repetition of the last discourse” and then, tiring of these harangues, opts to attend a “Methodist shout” instead (58). At the “shout” and at Methodist class meetings (small group gatherings led by whites) the slaves note the hypocrisy of the white Christians (one “class leader” unsuccessfully attempts to hide his amusement at the sorrow of a slave woman whose last child has been sold away from her) even as they recognize the liberatory potential of Christian teaching and their own capacity to practice a piety superior to that of white Christians. “Many of them [African-American Christians] are sincere,” Jacobs’s narrator notes, “and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side.” Like Reverend Peck’s fictional slaves, who sing gleeful songs about Reverend Peck’s death, Jacobs’s free and enslaved blacks voice their awareness of white Christian hypocrisy through slyly coded songs: “Ole Satan’s church is here below./Up to God’s free church I hope to go./Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!” (60). Such ironic reinterpretations of proslavery Christian teaching were characteristic, not only of Brown’s and Jacobs’s fictional characters, but of African-American authors themselves.

In contrast with Douglass’s synthesizing tactics, in which all white Christians are interchangeable and equally culpable in the miseries endured by slaves, Jacobs is careful to distinguish good white Christians from bad, and to depict ways that white and black Christians working in concert can better their condition. When Reverend Pike leaves town he is replaced by another Episcopal priest who insists on holding a weekly service for the slaves and who preaches, not “Slaves, obey your masters,” but “simple” sermons that acknowledge the slaves’ lack of previous instruction. Jacobs does not transcribe the text of these sermons; instead, she records their most salient feature: “it was the first time [the slaves] had ever been addressed as

human beings” (60). While the priest preaches to the local slave population, his wife takes in five slaves and teaches them to read, write, and support themselves. Together this Christian couple occupy the same position in Jacobs’s narrative that Georgiana Peck and Mr. Carlton occupy in Brown’s *Clotel*, and the death of the priest’s wife parallels Georgiana’s death scene:

Her slaves gathered round her dying bed in great sorrow. She said, “I have tried to do you good and promote your happiness; and if I have failed, it has not been for want of interest in your welfare. Do not weep for me; but prepare for the new duties that lie before you. I leave you all free. May we meet in a better world.” Her liberated slaves were sent away, with funds to establish them comfortably. The colored people will long bless the memory of that truly Christian woman. (60)

After his wife’s death the Episcopal priest leaves the parish, offering his African-American congregants this last advice: ““Try to live according to the word of God, my friends. Your skin is darker than mine; but God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins.”” Jacobs’s narrator notes that this “was strange doctrine from a southern pulpit. It was very offensive to slaveholders. They said he and his wife had made fools of their slaves, and that he preached like a fool to the negroes” (61).

It is at this point that Jacobs’s depiction of doctrinal agency differs most clearly from Brown’s. In *Clotel*, when Georgiana Peck dies, female doctrinal agency seems to die with her. The plot shifts back to the tale of Clotel, who fails in her purpose to rescue her daughter and flings herself from Washington’s Long Bridge, only to be replaced in the narrative by the would-be revolutionary George Green. Brown seems incapable of envisioning black women successfully wielding religious power; only white women and black men have that faculty.

Jacobs, on the other hand, uses the tale of the kind white Episcopal priest and his wife as the backdrop for Linda Brent’s own accession of doctrinal agency. After bidding farewell to the priest and his wife, Linda agrees to teach a fellow slave, a Baptist, to read and write despite the

fact that it is “contrary to law” and that “slaves were whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read” (61). Long before she enters her own “loophole of retreat,” Linda selects “a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate” and teaches “uncle Fred” to read through the New Testament in just a few months (61). After noting his rapid progress under her tutelage, Jacobs shifts from a didactic to an exhortatory mode, addressing readers directly in a textual sermon on the hypocrisy of proselytizing abroad while ignoring the spiritual welfare of slaves:

Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother.... Are doctors of divinity blind, or are they hypocrites? (61-62)

This sermon builds to a rousing climax that, like revivalists’ depictions of hell and damnation, is rife with bloody images and pointed accusations:

What does he [the blind doctor of divinity] know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them. (62)

Claiming first-hand knowledge of slavery’s horrors and the moral authority of one who has read the Bible and taught others to do so as well, Linda adopts the “sermonic mode” (to use Dawn Coleman’s term), stepping into the vacant narrative space left by the departure of the white Episcopal priest and his wife and becoming the novel’s primary homiletic voice.

Having claimed this authority, Jacobs deftly returns to the level of plot, depicting how Linda Brent employs her spiritual assurance in her ongoing power struggle with Dr. Flint. When Flint renews his lecherous advances to her on the day after his confirmation in the Episcopal church, Linda rebuffs his suggestions with the rejoinder that “[i]f [she] could be allowed to live

like a Christian, [she] should be glad” (63). Flint takes it upon himself to instruct Linda in the ways of Christian virtue: ““You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife”” (63). When Linda replies that ““the Bible [doesn’t] say so,”” Flint’s angry reaction reveals how unprecedented her accession of scriptural and pseudo-clerical authority is: “How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!” he exclaimed. “What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like, and what you wouldn’t like? I am your master, and you shall obey me” (63). By contradicting Flint’s definition of virtue with a Biblical one—Flint explicitly calls it “preaching”—Linda declares herself the servant of another master, one whose commands she is perfectly capable of reading and interpreting on her own.<sup>98</sup>

While Brown located women’s doctrinal agency outside of the clergy but still within the church—Georgiana Peck is “a devoted member of her father’s church” but “not a sectarian” (156)—Jacobs places women’s religious independence outside of denominational structures. When Dr. Flint recommends that Linda join the church into which he has just been confirmed (presumably so he can control yet another of the spaces in which she spends her time), Linda’s response implicitly positions “liv[ing] like a Christian” as a task that, for the slave girl at least, can best be accomplished outside of the church, where she can practice her religion without fearing the mixed motives of male church leaders.

Critics of Jacobs’s work have noted how *Incidents* plays with the sentimental literary tradition, simultaneously acknowledging and undermining the demand that “true women” maintain their sexual purity at all costs. Franny Nudelman notes that “[w]hile Jacobs must

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<sup>98</sup> Ann Taves notes that, in addition to the strength offered Linda by her religion, her Christianity carries with it an enormous pressure to remain sexually pure—an expectation that the legal and social conditions of slavery rendered practically impossible. As Taves notes, “In the conflict between Jacobs and her master, Jacobs’s ideas about purity allowed her to fight, but they did not allow her to win” (67).

grapple with a cult of sexual purity that cannot account for, let alone tolerate, her experience, she is, at the same time, writing within an abolitionist tradition that relies on the revelation of the slave woman's sexual degradation" (940). But Jacobs is also writing within a nineteenth-century Protestant tradition that increasingly embraced women's religious agency as an effective medium for social change. By proclaiming her right to read and interpret the Bible's commandments while refusing to declare loyalty to any particular preacher or denomination, Jacobs found a loophole of spiritual retreat based in her own religious authority.

### **Conclusion: The White Christian Woman as Narrative Construct**

Much of the criticism that has been published on *Clotel* has bemoaned Brown's adoption of the "tragic mulatta" trope inaugurated in the antislavery writings of Lydia Maria Child. Noting the various forms of imprisonment that *Clotel* endures over the course of the novel and her tendency to speak only in the clichéd and "idealized rhetoric of the private and true woman" (Berthold 25), critics of African-American literature have long registered discomfort with Brown's choice to invoke "the politically conservative seduction plot, which features a weak, gullible woman, deceived and abandoned by a depraved seducer" (Greeson 292). Nancy Bentley reads *Clotel* as "a willing sacrificial victim" (507) and M. Giulia Fabi asserts that *Clotel*'s unhappy end "ultimately reinforce[s] the viability of the separation between blacks and whites that the mulatta's existence had temporarily called into question" (xii). But as Teresa Zackodnik notes, the history of criticism on the "tragic mulatta" is at least as fraught as the critical genealogy of the sentimental and can benefit from a similar reappraisal.<sup>99</sup> A closer look at the

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<sup>99</sup> Zackodnik notes that early formulations (always written by white men) of "tragic mulatta" fiction characterized the genre as "clichéd, unrealistic, and unoriginal" and claimed that it ignored "serious



role of the mulatta in African-American fiction reveals that “[f]ar from being a ‘whitened’ ideal, the mulatta [is] a liminal figure who transgresses racial distinctions and racialized notions of womanhood.... The mulatta is a highly ambivalent figure who enables a double-voiced address and a black feminist use of parodic performance or ‘passing’” (Zackodnik xii).<sup>100</sup> But even as recent critics have come to recognize Brown’s complex depiction of the mulatta figure, they have continued to overlook his similarly canny interrogations of the sainted white woman who appears throughout abolitionist fiction.

“[D]ouble-voiced address,” parodic performance, and passing, the acts that Zackodnik rightly attributes to Brown’s mulatta figures, are precisely those that are not available to the white female heroines of black abolitionist fiction. While Brown’s educated Georgiana Peck and Jacobs’s kindhearted minister’s wife occupy positions of privilege in southern society that enable their antislavery acts, they are also flat figures meant to display certain abolitionist traits, and they fall away from the narratives as soon as their purpose is fulfilled. Georgiana Peck is an improvement on Stowe’s Little Eva (and her father Augustine St. Clare) in that she manages to free her slaves *before* her death, but once she has achieved this feat she quickly wastes away as the narrative returns to the more emotionally affecting history of Clotel and her daughter Mary. In *Incidents* Jacobs briefly describes the sanctified death of the Episcopal minister’s wife before refocusing narrative attention on Linda Brent’s increasing religious authority and her daring and clever machinations against her heartless master. Even Sarah Louisa Forten’s “Appeal to Women” spends the last of its three short verses symbolically burying the very white woman to

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issues” while perpetuating pleasing stereotypes—the same criticisms long leveled at white sentimental fiction (xv).

<sup>100</sup> Zackodnik’s reconceptualization of the mulatta figure is based in part on a study of the public performances of William Wells Brown’s abolitionist colleague Ellen Crafts. Eva Allegra Raimon has also published a recent study that challenges readings of the tragic mulatta as emblematic of passive victimhood.

whom it appeals: the “roses and lilies” of her white cheeks “soon must wither in their kindred earth,” to be memorialized only by a “lustre, that shall live when thou art dead” (61).

The sainted white woman in these black abolitionist fictions, then, is static, public, and marked for death. Whereas the mixed-race woman employs disguise, trickery, and concealment in an effort to effect her own and others’ emancipation, the abolitionist white woman is always on display, always in the public eye, and serves only one purpose in the narrative: to demonstrate true Christian duty by freeing her slaves. The saintly abolitionist white woman, *Clotel* reveals, is as much a necessary narrative fiction as the tragic mulatta.

### **CHAPTER 3: “Unsheathe the Sword of a Strong, Unbending Will”: Protestant Doctrine and Female Agency in the 1850s Sentimental Novel**

In her 1859 novel *Beulah* the Alabama author Augusta Jane Evans includes a long rumination on the persistence of human will:

There is a mysterious yet resistless power given, which winds up and sets again in motion that marvelous bit of mechanism, the human will; that curiously intricate combination of wheels; that mainspring of action, which has baffled the ingenuity of philosophers, and remains yet undiscovered, behind the cloudy shrine of the unknown. (204-205)

*Beulah*, like other sentimental novels published in the 1850s, evinces a protracted concern with the workings of the human will and its relationship to female religious agency. This chapter compares Evans’s *Beulah* with Susan Warner’s 1850 bestseller *The Wide, Wide World* to demonstrate how these two novels, so similar in their plots and in their invocation of the central concerns of sentimental fiction—the simultaneous celebration and sundering of family ties, the concern with how women’s self-determination is curtailed by legal, political, social, and biological factors—employ different theological models that result in widely divergent depictions of women’s religious agency. It demonstrates that the theological debate that took place between Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Evans’s *Beulah* was both inseparable from a larger public discussion about human will and agency and also served as a vehicle for that discussion. While theologians and divines wrangled thorny doctrinal questions about human volition and moral responsibility on the pages of denominational and scholarly journals, the laboratory in which these theories were put to the test before the eyes of the public was the sentimental novel. *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* imagine and depict the consequences of

predestinarian and free will theologies for the real lives of young girls and women, and in the pages of these popular novels Warner and Evans explored, by means of both content and form, the same problems that occupied ordained ministers on the pages of the *Christian Advocate*, the *Princeton Review*, and the hundreds of other sectarian journals that circulated in mid-nineteenth-century America. What is more, these authors moved beyond the concerns of their clerical contemporaries by envisioning the practical consequences of theology for those who would attempt to live their lives in sincere devotion to particular theological principles.

The Calvinist-Arminian debate that took place between *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* was a crucial node in the larger discussions in mid-century Protestant U.S. culture about the role of religion in enabling or inhibiting women's agency.<sup>101</sup> Critics who have recovered and studied sentimental literature since the 1970s have recognized sentimental texts as "an important form of literary agency" that explores the consequences of unequal power relations for (most often) white middle-class women's lives (Noble 6), but these critical accounts underplay or ignore altogether the crucial ways in which questions of doctrine animated and informed debates about women's agency. While Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), for instance, characterized sentimental fiction as having little or no doctrinal content—indeed, of bringing about "The Loss of Theology"—Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1985) sought to rehabilitate the religious language of sentimental fiction without engaging very deeply with the particular doctrines held by sentimental writers, instead characterizing all sentimental fiction as vaguely "evangelical." These works have continued to shape the critical discourse about

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<sup>101</sup> While *The Wide, Wide World* has received significant critical attention since it was recovered by Baym and Douglas and then used by Tompkins to anchor her study of sentimental culture, Evans's novels have received little critical attention, in part because Southern fiction, despite the nationwide popularity of novels like *Beulah* (and Evans's later bestsellers *Macaria* and *St. Elmo*), is still read as "regional," and in part because Evans's proslavery, pro-Confederacy politics are often difficult for critics to abide. At the end of this chapter I offer a third theory as to why Evans's work has been so neglected by critics.

sentimental literature in the decades since their original publication, and their religious assumptions, as I will show, have obscured the theological work performed by sentimental texts.

This chapter argues that to understand how sentimental fiction enabled women's agency in the nineteenth century critics must bring to these novels a more sophisticated theological toolset: one that recognizes women's full and complete engagement with religion on every level—emotional, physical, and intellectual. Bringing questions of doctrine and theology to bear on sentimental fiction is essential, I argue, because doing so reveals that there is in fact no single model of “sentimental power,” but that different sentimental texts envision women's agency in different ways, and that the models of religious agency they present have not always been comprehensible by twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics. Since the exact nature of “sentimental power” remains a primary concern for scholars who study sentimental texts,<sup>102</sup> it is crucial that the doctrinal structures that helped nineteenth-century women writers to envision and embody in fiction their own ideas of agency become part of this ongoing critical discussion.

This chapter, then, is not a rehearsal of or a rebuttal to critical arguments about whether the sentimental is “good” or “bad.” Rather, it argues that the critical discourse of sentimental power that engenders such arguments has obscured the multiple models of agency at work in sentimental texts by ignoring or oversimplifying the theological underpinnings of sentimental

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<sup>102</sup> The nature of sentimental power has continued to occupy critics long after the original Douglas-Tompkins “debate.” Dan McKanan's *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States* (2002) concerns itself with the relationship between violence and sentimental power in the nineteenth-century United States, as do many of the essays in Shirley Samuels's collection *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992). Marianne Noble's *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (2000) argues that sentimental texts model a “complicitous use of power” that turns white women's agency against themselves (11). Julie Ellison's *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (1999) traces the sentimental tradition to eighteenth-century English political discourse and argues that women's sentimental writing thus represents an attempt to access male power through the language of liberal politics. This small sampling indicates how deeply concerned critical discourse on sentimentalism remains with the question of agency and power in sentimental texts.

fiction. The sentimental, as a wide-ranging literary and cultural mode, offers multiple models of female agency, each of them informed by the particular doctrinal positions that coexisted in the nineteenth-century United States. Reading Augusta Jane Evans's Arminian sentimental novel *Beulah* alongside the Calvinist sentimental novel *The Wide, Wide World* illuminates how the nineteenth-century sentimental mode could accommodate and depict different models of female agency based on different theological premises.

While this chapter investigates female religious agency as modeled in the sentimental novel, it is not concerned with demonstrating that the authors and protagonists of nineteenth-century fiction displayed the same kind of agency, or to the same ends, that twenty-first-century Western women might seek to inhabit. The kinds of agency displayed in the sentimental novel have often seemed foreign or even unrecognizable to twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics who, adhering to the Western liberal model of agency that I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, equate agency with individual acts of independence or even rebellion. When viewed through this lens the forms of agency engaged in by the heroines of sentimental novels—agency that can sometimes take the form of passivity or submission—will inevitably seem corrupt or damaged, making sentimental fiction easy to dismiss by critics seeking in the genre evidence of women's (or of America's) increasing self-determination.

I begin this chapter by detailing the limitations of our current model of sentimental power, particularly the way in which this model denigrates nineteenth-century women's intellectual commitments by classing all sentimental texts as similarly "evangelical." I then outline the crucial theological points that underlie the Calvinist-Arminian debate about the problem of free will; this debate, I then show, animates the mid-century sentimental novel and informs the models of female agency offered in *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah*. I conclude

the chapter by arguing that an increased awareness of the role of particular religious doctrines in nineteenth-century sentimental literature—one that does not treat religious belief as “epiphenomenal” (to use Tracy Fessenden’s term) or measure its usefulness according to its compliance with what anthropologist Saba Mahmood calls “the progressive-secular imaginary”—offers a new understanding of the importance of sentimental literature in nineteenth-century American fiction.

### **The Douglas-Tompkins “Debate” and the Problem of Evangelicalism**

Since the 1970s, when sentimental fiction, long left out of histories of nineteenth-century U.S. literature, was recovered and reintroduced in scholarly circles, critical treatments of this genre have been shaped by the terms of the Douglas-Tompkins “debate,” and particularly by its framing of sentimental literature as a form that propagates a feminized evangelical Protestantism. The problem with characterizing sentimental fiction as “evangelical” is that “evangelical” is a term that collapses a wide field of nineteenth-century Protestant beliefs under a single heading while simultaneously importing twentieth-century secular assumptions into a nineteenth-century religious context. As such it obscures the very real doctrinal distinctions between different Protestant sects—distinctions that have consequences for how individual authors envisioned possibilities for women’s religious agency. In this section I offer a brief history of “evangelicalism” in order to reveal how constructions of sentimental religious feeling grounded in this problematic term have obscured the multiple forms of religious agency at work in sentimental texts.

In her field changing book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, Tompkins called for serious critical attention to the role of sentimental fiction in

nineteenth-century culture. *Sensational Designs* emphasizes the necessity of assuming a certain cultural mindset when approaching sentimental novels:

The power of a sentimental novel to move its audience depends upon the audience's being in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event. That storehouse of assumptions includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions; a definition of power and its relation to individual human feeling; notions of political and social equality; and above all, a set of religious beliefs that organizes and sustains the rest. (126-27)

Tompkins refers to this cultural mindset as “evangelical” and lays out the premises on which an evangelical worldview and, thus, all sentimental literature is putatively based: “a theory of power that stipulates that all true action is not material, but spiritual; that one obtains spiritual power through prayer; and that those who know how, in the privacy of their closets, to struggle for possession of their souls will one day possess the world through the power given to them by God” (*Sensational* 151). Tompkins’s model of sentimental power thus posits that sentimental power is by definition religious, and that the religion it exemplifies is “evangelical Christianity.”

The problem with defining the sentimental novel as “evangelical” is that “evangelical” is a religious-historical term with connotations that differed considerably in the 1850s from those it had obtained by the 1980s, when Tompkins’s text was published. While in the mid-nineteenth century “evangelical” described a wide range of Protestant sects embracing distinct theological viewpoints, ecclesiastical structures, and political identities, by the late-twentieth century it had come to represent a small group of Christian adherents known primarily for a commitment to emotional revivalism and conservative political causes and a tendency to eschew the details of doctrine. By imposing a twentieth-century model of evangelical culture onto texts published in the 1850s, Douglas, Tompkins, and the critics who followed them flattened the theological distinctions between individual sentimental texts and imported these twentieth-century



connotations into their readings of sentimental culture.

The term “evangelical” became a prominent feature of Western European religious identity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was adopted by those churches that identified themselves with the Protestant reformation (the Evangelical Lutheran Church, for instance).<sup>103</sup> It maintained this relatively simple definition until the nineteenth century, when early religious historians including Robert Baird and Philip Schaff began using it to classify particular Christian sects as having either “right” or “wrong” theological ideas.<sup>104</sup> For Baird and his mid-nineteenth-century contemporaries, including the authors of sentimental fiction, “evangelical” was both an insider label for those with the “right” religion and an umbrella term that grouped together denominations and sects, like the Quakers and Presbyterians, with widely divergent doctrines and practices. But the term underwent another series of semantic shifts in the twentieth century as Christian fundamentalist movements rose to prominence, particularly in the United States. Randall Balmer, one of the foremost chroniclers of twentieth-century Protestant culture, notes that many of the Protestant movements now most closely associated with “evangelicalism” did not exist in the nineteenth century, when sentimental authors ostensibly propagated “evangelical” culture; these movements, including Pentecostalism and the

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<sup>103</sup> These churches used the word “evangelical” to mark their dissent from the Catholic tradition and their embrace of the “good news” of salvation by grace rather than by the intercession of church, priest, or saints. “Evangelium” is the Greek for “good tidings.”

<sup>104</sup> Baird’s *Religion in America*, for instance, one of the earliest works to attempt to taxonomize the welter of sects and denominations coexisting in the early U.S., drew a line between “evangelical” sects—Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Moravians and Quakers—and “unevangelical” ones, under which were grouped “for convenience’ sake... all those sects that either renounce, or fail faithfully to exhibit, the fundamental and saving truths of the gospel” (269). Baird’s “unfaithful” sects included a motley assortment of religious and reformist societies—Unitarians, Universalists, Shakers, Mormons, Swedenborgians and Tunkers, Rappists, Deists, Atheists, Fourierists, Catholics and Jews—many of which would have considered themselves every bit as Protestant—as “faithful,” in Baird’s terms—as his preferred “evangelicals.”

charismatic movement, first arose in the twentieth century.<sup>105</sup> Martin Marty has similarly observed the alterations in the term “evangelical” over the course of the last 100 years: whereas in the nineteenth century it applied to groups “in the Protestant mainstream... [i]n recent decades one conservative party in almost all the most notable denominations has taken the adjective ‘evangelical’ to apply to itself” (vii). In the twentieth century, then, “evangelical” came to be associated with a Christian fringe and with political conservatism, connotations that have often been problematically enfolded into criticism founded on the Douglas-Tompkins model.

The rise in religious revivalism that coincided with the urge to taxonomize nineteenth-century religious culture led to another development in “evangelical” history that has had implications for the study of sentimental literature: the association of evangelicalism with excessive, emotional bodies. As R. Laurence Moore notes, Robert Baird and other nineteenth-century Protestant historians favored settled, unemotional forms of Christianity, particularly those “that eschewed the revivalistic ‘excesses’ that had inflamed passions in many churches during the period of the Second Great Awakening” (5). To Baird’s chagrin, however, it was the revivalist churches, not the decorous ones, that were experiencing rapid growth, such that “evangelicalism” eventually came to be associated with the “excesses” and “inflamed passions” attributed to revivalist religion. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this trend continued, such that an “evangelical Christian” came to be defined by a non-evangelical public sphere as one who engages in particular—and particularly outré—forms of religious behavior rather than one who subscribes to a set of identifiable Protestant doctrines.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Grant Wacker’s work on early Pentecostalism and its influence on the twentieth-century evangelical movement is also germane.

<sup>106</sup> By the 1970s and 1980s, when feminist critics were recovering and reappraising sentimental literature in light of its centrality to nineteenth-century culture, the term “evangelical” had become largely an outsider designation for a group of Protestant sects that subscribe to divergent doctrines but engage in

By the time Ann Douglas published *The Feminization of American Culture* in 1977 this association between evangelicalism and anti-intellectual excess had been solidified: *Feminization* defines non-evangelical sects as those that “appreciated distinction and tradition,” that “stood for a settled ministry, for intellectual elitism,” and that “if they supported revivals at all... wished to see them cautiously conducted in orderly fashion by ministers within their own congregations” (28). The evangelicals were everyone else—those who abjured tradition and intellectualism, embraced revivalist “excesses,” and wrote sentimental fiction. In both *Feminization* and *Sensational Designs*, these excessive evangelical bodies belong to women; in fact Douglas and Tompkins are in agreement about the power of women’s bodies. For Douglas, the writers of sentimental fiction were offensively embodied—the minister and the lady “spent much of their middle-class [child]hoods prostrate on chaise longues” reading trashy fiction in a “comfortable posture” against a “domestic backdrop”—and the effect of their writing on readers was soporific: their light poetry and domestic novels were “an occupation for the unemployed” or “narcissistic self-education for those excluded from the harsh school of practical competition”

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similar behaviors toward non-adherents. “Evangelical” has come to function primarily as a label that describes a particular person’s or denomination’s interaction with American culture (as in “most evangelicals vote Republican,” or “many evangelicals don’t drink alcohol”) but gives little information about the theological premises to which that person or denomination subscribes—premises that are most salient, not in interactions between the believer and the larger culture, but in interactions between believers. (Evangelicals who agree on the importance of baptizing church members, for instance, will argue vehemently amongst themselves about the theological validity of baptizing infants rather than adults.) The result is that, from an outsider perspective, evangelicalism can seem devoid of theological content—like a group of behaviors with no intellectual or doctrinal basis.

Indeed, so confused are the prevailing definitions of the term “evangelical” that even Balmer, its foremost cultural chronicler, can define it only in the most circular of language, employing “the word *evangelical* as an umbrella term to refer broadly to conservative Protestants—including fundamentalists, evangelicals, pentecostals, and charismatics—who insist on some sort of spiritual rebirth as a criterion for entering the kingdom of heaven, who often impose exacting behavioral standards on the faithful, and whose beliefs, institutions, and folkways comprise the evangelical subculture in America” (xvi). Since there are plenty of non-evangelical situations that entail some kind of ritual of renewal as well as the imposition of new behavioral standards, the best way to judge whether someone is an “evangelical” is to see whether they belong to the “evangelical subculture.”

(10).<sup>107</sup> For Tompkins, the bodily emanations depicted in and produced by sentimental literature were efficacious rather than mere effluvium: the sentimental's fountains of tears "are the sign of redemption...; not words, but the emotions of the heart bespeak a state of grace, and these are known by the sound of a voice, the touch of a hand, but chiefly... by tears" (*Sensational* 131). In both of these formulations it is women's bodies, not their minds, that have the power to impose an evangelical ethos on American culture and to alter it for better or for worse.<sup>108</sup>

The religious-historical assumptions that undergirded the Douglas-Tompkins debate, then, were never up for debate at all: *The Feminization of American Culture* and *Sensational Designs* both posit that the religious ground of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction was Christian evangelicalism, that evangelical religiosity consists in emotional excess rather than doctrinal commitment, and that this embodied evangelicalism is the province of women. Both critics align this emotionally excessive and doctrinally vague "evangelicalism" with female writers while associating male writers with a theologically rigorous "Calvinist" tradition. In *Feminization* this alignment is explicit: the book positions sentimental authors as introducing "formerly denounced heresy" into a society once grounded in the Calvinist orthodoxy of

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<sup>107</sup> Douglas's insistence that nineteenth-century purveyors of sentimental literature be thought of primarily as consumers rather than as producers of culture requires considerable backbending. One example: "[Women] comprised the bulk of educated churchgoers and the vast majority of the dependable reading public; in ever greater numbers, they edited magazines and wrote books for other women like themselves. They were becoming the prime consumers of American culture" (8). Whereas going to church and reading could conceivably be defined as consumer activities, writing books and editing magazines should make women producers of culture rather than consumers.

<sup>108</sup> Douglas's and Tompkins's formulation of sentimental power was a necessary corrective to generations of literary critics and religious historians who had aligned the entire intellectual life of antebellum America with Calvinist theological discourse and then, because women could neither attend universities nor become ordained ministers, assumed that women's influence on nineteenth-century intellectual culture was negligible. But Douglas's and Tompkins's response was not to look for signs of women writers' engagement with theological questions, but to locate women's cultural agency in their feeling bodies rather than in their thinking minds.

theologians like Jonathan Edwards (24).<sup>109</sup> In *Sensational Designs* the distinction is made only implicitly: when discussing works by Herman Melville and Charles Brockden Brown Tompkins identifies them as “Calvinist.” When analyzing Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)—the texts she holds up as best exemplifying the workings of “sentimental power”—Tompkins identifies them as “evangelical” despite the fact that the women who wrote them were members of Calvinist sects. The implications are clear: in both *The Feminization of American Culture* and *Sensational Designs*, male authors have thinking, Calvinist minds while female authors have feeling, evangelical bodies.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> In this respect Tompkins capitulates to both the “declensionist” and the “feminization” models of American religious history that form the basis for Douglas’s argument and that, as Ann Braude demonstrates, are based on a long-standing critical tendency to ignore the crucial role of women in American religious life (“Women’s History” 92-3).

<sup>110</sup> This alignment of men with Calvinism and women with evangelicalism is particularly puzzling in light of Tompkins’s invocation of a specifically Calvinist theological concept to describe the literary form of the sentimental novel. For Tompkins, sentimental novels perform their cultural work by telling and retelling “the culture’s favorite story about itself—the story of salvation through motherly love” (125), and she identifies this repeated matriarchal myth as a “typological narrative” that follows the outlines of the “American jeremiad” famously identified by Sacvan Bercovitch.

As Perry Miller, Bercovitch, and other scholars of the “New England mind” made clear, the rhetorical form of the jeremiad relies on a specifically Calvinist theological concept called typology. Bercovitch traces typology, or figuralism, from Augustine to Aquinas to Luther to Calvin, who “reinforced” it “with legal severity,” but credits New England Puritanism with extending scriptural typology from the “realm of the spirit,” where those earlier thinkers had firmly placed it, to the material and temporal ground of New England, where “redemptive merged with secular history” (*Puritan Origins* xii-xiii). Typology assumes a Calvinist understanding of cosmic time: that events (including but not limited to the predestination of human souls) have been determined before time began, that they correspond to certain patterns, and that those patterns can be recognized in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and in the unfolding of human history.

Though Tompkins begins by describing the role of typological narrative in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she soon extends the model to the entire genre of sentimental literature, calling it a jeremiad that represents, not the interests of a Puritan theocracy, but those of middle-class women (140-41). As Jordan Stein and Justine Murison point out, “Bercovitch’s arguments... treat religion instrumentally, and they comply with a secularization thesis that imagines that rituals hold their power despite being denuded of their theological content” (11). In invoking the jeremiad, then, *Sensational Designs* reads sentimental fiction, not as reflecting the individual beliefs of those authors that produced it, but as simply borrowing and recapitulating an existing rhetorical model that, according to the critic who theorized it, can function only to produce religious and political consensus among its hearers/readers. Since this mid-century jeremiad is

In the years since the publication of *Feminization* and *Sensational Designs* critics frustrated with the parameters of the Douglas-Tompkins debate have sometimes attempted to step outside of them by adopting the terms “anti-sentimental” or “unsentimental” to describe nineteenth-century texts that display deep intellectual engagement or ironic distance. Nina Baym, for instance, has identified the sentimental as a cultural mode dedicated to “the cultivation of sympathetic relation and ready emotionality” and argued that a female character’s “pursuit of her own well-furnished mental space can be plausibly interpreted as a gesture of anti-sentimental disengagement” (“Women’s Novels” 337). Under this rubric Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, rather than being the “ur-text” of the nineteenth-century sentimental (Tompkins’s term), is actually *anti-sentimental* because the heroine strives to “perfor[m] herself to others as an intellectual, even a scholarly, being” (“Women’s Novels” 336). Similarly, Dawn Coleman’s work on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* identifies the narrator of that novel as an “unsentimental woman preacher” whose rhetoric shifts over the course of the novel from a feminine voice that recommends sympathy with the slave to a masculine one that questions the tenets of Protestant theology and even the existence of God. Both of these articles are valiant attempts to rescue the sentimental novel from accusations that it is vapid or brainless, but both represent, in June Howard’s phrase, “a maneuver within received perspectives” (64). Baym, assuming the Douglas-Tompkins position that the sentimental is empty-headed and anti-intellectual, posits that a text displaying clear intellectual and theological ambitions must be “anti-sentimental.” Coleman, accepting the Douglas-Tompkins association of the sentimental with the evangelical, demonstrates how a text can become “unsentimental” by ridding itself of its feminine qualities and taking up difficult theological problems: when the narrator of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* employs a

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emptied of theological content, there is no need to examine the specific beliefs of those who embrace it. “Sectarian diversity,” Bercovitch assures his readers, “did not weaken the consensus” (*American Jeremiad* 165).

sympathetic female voice Coleman identifies it as “evangelical”; when it assumes an intellectual male voice this new voice is “Calvinist.” The Douglas-Tompkins model of the evangelical sentimental—a model that divorces emotion from intellect and assumes that sentimental fiction is concerned only with the former—has been so influential and far-reaching that critics who wish to engage seriously with the diverse intellectual and theological concerns of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction have thought themselves obliged to abandon the sentimental category completely and to insist that the sentimental writer who wants to think hard about religion must either “disconnect” herself emotionally from those around her (according to Baym) or pretend to be a man (according to Coleman).

But it is not necessary to eschew the sentimental category in order to think critically about the intellectual investments of nineteenth-century women’s fiction; it is only necessary to abandon the troubled category of the “evangelical” and to address nineteenth-century sentimental authors according to the religious terms in which they described themselves—terms that were as much intellectual as emotional, as much theological as behavioral. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and the rest of the sentimental texts that belonged to the “other American Renaissance” were not written by committees of evangelicals but by individual persons (often, but not always, women)<sup>111</sup> with individual beliefs that are reflected in their narrative choices. An attention to the specificity of those beliefs, and to the theological debates within which sentimental novelists situated their texts, can deepen our understanding, both of the novels

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler’s edited collection *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* provides ample evidence that “canonical male writers, such as Brockden Brown, Cooper, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, Holmes, Norris, and Dreiser, all deploy[ed] the discourse of sentiment in their works” (7). But Dana Nelson notes that male sentimentalism carried different cultural valences in the mid-nineteenth century: “Quite differently from practices of female sentiment in the antebellum era, which worked to interiorize and individuate women, male sentimentalism worked to relieve men of the requirements of individuality that professionalism demanded. Instead, practices of male sentiment afforded men moments of (carefully guarded) communalization” (32).

themselves, and of the critical category of the sentimental to which they belonged.<sup>112</sup>

Approaching sentimental fiction in theological terms reveals how the religious underpinnings of particular novels shaped those novels' depictions of female agency—a subject related to, but different from, the question of female power. Critics of sentimental fiction, reading sentimental religiosity as a strategy for accruing cultural power, have often limited their discussions of sentimental fiction to analyses of whether such strategies were successful and, if so, whether the cultural consequences they brought about were desirable. They have thus exalted or denigrated sentimental fiction precisely in proportion to the ways in which they have read it as supporting or undermining a feminist politics of liberation; the religious language that permeates women's sentimental novels is usually read either as a mark of subjection to religious authority or a repudiation of it. But women's agency—particularly their religious agency—sometimes defies liberal ideals of self-determination, individual action, and rational choice that prioritize the accession of power over possibilities for individual and collective expression. To read the Protestant Christianity on display in the sentimental novel in utilitarian terms—as a means of acquiring cultural power—is to overlook the multiple forms of religious agency modeled in sentimental texts.

Sentimental religious agency can best be understood outside the terms of the “secular-progressive imaginary” defined by anthropologist Saba Mahmood. According to Mahmood, Western feminist models of human agency reflect philosophically liberal assumptions that place

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<sup>112</sup> Michael Warner's recent work on the evangelical public sphere seeks to move away from the doctrinal understandings of evangelicalism that have long dominated religious studies approaches to the phenomenon and toward an understanding of the “discourse culture” of evangelicalism (“Printing and Preaching”). While such an approach is useful for refining historical understandings of the phenomenon of evangelicalism, it can be counterproductive when applied to nineteenth-century women writers. Since critics of the sentimental novel—even those favorably disposed toward the genre—have assumed that the form carries little or no doctrinal content, applying an “evangelical” label that disregards theological difference serves to reinforce this (mis)categorization.



individual autonomy at the center of discussions about human liberty and free will. These liberal philosophies “link the notion of self-fulfillment with individual autonomy [so that] the process of realizing oneself comes to signify the ability to realize the desires of one’s ‘true will’” (“Agency” 184). Equating agency with self-will, independence, and the freedom from seemingly arbitrary structures of temporal or celestial authority, secular-liberal and progressive feminism “tend[s] to translate religious truth as force, a play of power that can be traced back to the machinations of economic and geopolitical interests.” Influenced by such ideas, liberal feminists—even those who have displayed a sensitivity to the role of religion in women’s lives—have found it nearly impossible to imagine forms of female agency, like those sometimes exemplified in the sentimental novel, that operate by inhabiting norms of religious obedience and piety rather than by subverting them (Mahmood, *Politics* xi).

Tracing a particular strain of poststructuralist thought that productively questions these rationalist assumptions about the nature of individual will, Mahmood pushes against “the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms” (“Agency” 186). Noting that “the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes ‘change’ and the means by which it is effected),” Mahmood insists on the “parochialization” of understandings of female agency, particularly in examinations of women’s agency within religious communities:

To analyze the participation of women in religious movements... I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.... As I will argue, if we want to parochialize the normative liberatory subject of feminist theory, then we must detach the concept of agency from the trope of resistance so as to be able to explore other structures of desire, political

imaginaries, social authority, and personhood. (“Agency” 179-180)<sup>113</sup>

Mahmood’s work is germane to discussions of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, not because it explains (or explains away) the peculiarities of pious women,<sup>114</sup> but because it provides both a philosophical justification and an intellectual model for the serious study of women’s religious ideas—one that does not try to squeeze women’s experiences into ill-fitting

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<sup>113</sup> Mahmood’s work particularizes the religious experience of Muslim women in increasingly secularized but still majority-Muslim communities through a study of “mosque movements” that encourage women to study the Quran and to practice traditional Muslim virtues in their daily lives. Particularly revealing is Mahmood’s discussion of *al-haya*, or modesty, and its relationship to the wearing of the veil or *hijab*. Whereas Western commentators have been inclined to read the *hijab* according to an individualist binary that assigns to it the meaning of either oppression (i.e., men force women to wear the veil) or self-determination (i.e., women choose to wear the veil as an expression of their identity), the women that Mahmood observes approach the veil and the accompanying virtue of modesty, not as an ontological sign signifying whether they are “oppressed” or “liberated” but as a part of their process of becoming. What is more, they learn to exert agency within and through the religious and social norms that mark modesty as a virtue: a woman who is habitually outspoken can learn, not to stop speaking, but “to be outspoken in a way that [is] in keeping with Islamic standards of reserve, restraint and modesty required of pious Muslim women” (“Agency” 194). For these pious women, the act of becoming modest is both facilitated and signified by the wearing of the veil—wearing the veil becomes a form of agency that, rather than being “a synonym for resistance to social norms,” becomes instead “a modality of action” contingent on the particular “structures of desire, political imaginaries, social authority, and personhood” within which these women understand themselves (“Agency” 195).

The “structure of desire” that Mahmood identifies in her subjects has much in common with the “mechanical model” of human emotion that Robyn Warhol outlines in her article “‘As You Stand, So You Feel and Are’: The Crying Body and the Nineteenth-Century Text.” According to Warhol, twentieth- and twenty-first-century notions of identity are based on a “reservoir model” of emotional existence according to which emotions felt by the individual are expressed through the body in an act of catharsis that drains the “reservoir.” Critics of sentimental literature implicitly invoke this model of identity and emotion when they assume that the reactions evoked by sentimental literature are expended through tears *instead of* through social engagement. Warhol draws on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drama theory to demonstrate that this “reservoir model” is anachronistic, and that nineteenth-century audiences were just as likely to employ a “mechanical model” of emotional life according to which the display of an emotion helped to generate that emotion and, in many cases, the forms of political action that followed. Like Mahmood, Warhol notes how anachronistic models of autonomy and mind-body relations make it difficult to recognize various models of female agency. For both Mahmood’s twentieth-century Egyptian Muslim women and Warhol’s nineteenth-century Protestant women, “it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them” (Mahmood, “Agency” 195).

<sup>114</sup> And I certainly do not mean to suggest that we read nineteenth-century American women writers’ religious commitments as somehow indistinguishable from those of twentieth-century Egyptian Muslim women. To attempt to read these women as somehow “the same” because of their mutual interest in personal piety and spiritual growth would be to fly in the face of the very particularization that Mahmood advocates.

conceptual boxes (like “evangelical”) or plot them on a continuum from “oppressed” to “liberated” but instead engages them on their own terms. As with the women that Mahmood studies, an attention to the processes of becoming that nineteenth-century women authors depict in their novels enables critics to recognize the complex forms of agency at work in sentimental fiction—forms that often have little to do with acquiring and wielding temporal power.

### **Susan Warner, Augusta Jane Evans, and the Calvinist-Arminian Divide**

The most salient theological question at issue in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah* is the problem of human will and its relationship to divine will. As nodes in an ongoing intra-Protestant debate between Calvinist and Arminian believers, *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* interrogate the consequences of predestinarian and free will theologies for women in particular, offering divergent models of female agency based in distinctive theological worldviews. *The Wide, Wide World* embraces a predestinarian model of human will in which salvation is predetermined by God and human agency consists in submission and reconciliation to divine ordinances. *Beulah*, by contrast, exemplifies an Arminian worldview in which individuals determine their own salvation by exercising freedom of choice. In order to recognize the different models of agency at work in these seemingly similar texts, it is necessary to understand the theological questions that drive their depictions of sentimental agency.

The plot outlines of *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* are roughly similar: both belong to that class of novels identified by Nina Baym as “woman’s fiction” that tells “the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and [who] is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world”

(*Woman's Fiction* 11).<sup>115</sup> The heroines are separated from their families, thrown into lives of hardship and toil from which they are rescued by kind but demanding benefactors, separated from those benefactors, and endure challenges to their faith before being reunited with their benefactors in marriage. Both *Beulah* and *The Wide, Wide World* are sentimental: both concern themselves with those “moment[s] when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible” (Howard 76) and both offer models of spiritual and temporal agency based on a specifically feminine investment in Protestant Christianity.<sup>116</sup> But the models of female agency

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<sup>115</sup> Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* is well known to critics of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction since it is the text that, along with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, forms the basis for Jane Tompkins's theorization of sentimental power. It is the story of Ellen Montgomery, a girl of about 10 years old who is separated from her ailing, compassionate mother and sent to live with her father's cold and unloving sister in upstate New York. While suffering under her aunt's imperious rule Ellen is befriended by the pious Alice and John Humphreys, who eventually take her to live with them and who educate her until Alice dies of consumption. When Ellen's father dies at sea while returning to claim her Ellen must leave the Humphreys and join her mother's relatives in Scotland, the Lindsays, who object to her religiosity but love her jealously and tyrannically. Through acts of prayer and Christian submission Ellen manages to maintain her faith while also obeying the Lindsays' wishes until John Humphreys, now a minister, comes to Scotland to rescue and marry her. (The original edition of *The Wide, Wide World* only hinted at John and Ellen's eventual marriage, but in her 1987 Feminist Press edition of the novel Jane Tompkins restored Warner's missing final chapter, drafted but never previously published, that depicts John and Ellen returning to America as a married couple.)

Augusta Jane Evans's *Beulah* is less well known than *The Wide, Wide World*. It begins with the eponymous heroine's residence in an orphan asylum with her sister Lilly. When Lilly is adopted by a wealthy family that does not want Beulah, Beulah takes a job as a nurse. A few weeks later Lilly dies of scarlet fever and Beulah, fainting over her coffin, is taken in by Lilly's doctor, Guy Hartwell. They form an arrangement whereby Hartwell will provide Beulah's lodging and education until she is old enough to work as a teacher, at which time she will repay him for his expense. Beulah graduates at the top of her class and secures a teaching position, but when Hartwell asks her to give up her “foolish” plans and let him adopt her she refuses and they fall out, though she continues borrowing books of philosophy and psychology from his library while residing in a boarding-house with her friend and fellow teacher Clara. As she builds a career for herself as a teacher and, later, a writer, Beulah experiences a crisis of faith brought on largely by her voracious and promiscuous reading; when she appeals to the religiously skeptical Hartwell for help he recommends that she stop thinking and marry him instead. When Clara, realizing that her own love for Hartwell will never be requited, takes a position as governess on a plantation, Beulah rents a house with another friend and rebuffs Hartwell's offers of marriage until after she has reclaimed her Christian faith, at which point she agrees to marry him and sets herself the task of quieting his skepticism and converting him to Christianity.

<sup>116</sup> I am drawing on June Howard's helpful summation of what critics mean when they discuss “the sentimental.” It bears more extensive quotation:

that they construct are different in their theological premises—one is Calvinist and one is Arminian—and thus in their fictional manifestations. While both novels seek to “educate their readers in Christian perfection and to move the nation as a whole closer to the city of God” (Tompkins, *Sensational* 149), their recommendations for how to reach that city are radically different.<sup>117</sup>

Calvinism and Arminianism are theological systems that arose out of the Protestant Reformation, each named for the sixteenth-century European intellectual (John Calvin of Geneva and Jacobus Arminius—the Latinized name of Jakob Hermanszoon—of Leiden) most

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We can organize answers to the question “what is sentimentality?” like this. Most broadly—when we call an artifact or gesture sentimental, we are pointing to its use of some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible. Most commonly—we are recognizing that a trope from the immense repertory of sympathy and domesticity has been deployed; we recognize the presence of at least some fragmentary element of an intellectual and literary tradition. Most narrowly—we are asserting that literary works belong to a genre in which those conventions and tropes are central. But that does not undermine the importance of the recognition that sentimental works consistently engage us in the intricate impasse of the public and private, proclaiming their separation and at the same time demonstrating their inseparability. As emotion, embodied thought that animates cognition with the recognition of the self’s engagement; as sympathy, firmly based in the observer’s body and imaginatively linking it to another’s; as domestic culture, in the peculiar intimacy of the print commodity; sentimentality at the same time locates us in our embodied and particular selves and takes us out of them. (Howard 76-77)

<sup>117</sup> In asserting that *The Wide, Wide World* is a Calvinist sentimental novel I am not simply affirming Tompkins’s figuration of the sentimental. For Tompkins, the typological structure of *The Wide, Wide World* is both an unconscious ideological remnant of a declining Puritan tradition and the marker of a generic “evangelicalism.” By this definition, all sentimental literature must function in the same way, regardless of its author’s beliefs or intentions; any specific theological content must be incidental and will have little bearing either on the predetermined form of the novel or on its effects for the reader. By contrast, I am asserting that *The Wide, Wide World* is intentionally, theologically, and particularly Calvinist: that Warner, rather than mindlessly adopting an existing ideological form, intentionally embraced Calvinist theological principles and used them to structure her novel in ways that would illustrate what she perceived as their universal truth. Since the two texts that Tompkins relies on most heavily to theorize the sentimental—Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—were written, respectively, by a devout Presbyterian and the daughter of one of nineteenth-century America’s most famous and outspoken Presbyterian divines, it is hardly surprising that the model of religious power that emerges should be a specifically Calvinist one: Presbyterianism is the denomination that grew out of Scottish Calvinist religious thought.

responsible for its articulation.<sup>118</sup> Both Calvinism and Arminianism are “evangelical” in the original sense of the word—they insist on God’s free grace as the true means of human salvation—and they share some basic theological premises.<sup>119</sup> But they diverge most clearly in their understandings of God’s grace and its relationship to human will. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination posits that God has chosen, or predestined, particular human souls to salvation or damnation. Those he has saved are the “elect,” and their election is unconditional, irresistible, and irrevocable: they cannot choose to be saved, they cannot reject salvation, and they cannot lose their salvation through any fault of their own.<sup>120</sup> Arminian theology, by contrast, rejects the doctrines of predestination and unconditional election, positing instead that God gives individual persons the freedom to choose salvation or damnation. The difference between predestination and “free grace” (the doctrine claimed by Arminians, who insist that God’s grace is offered to all humans and not just to the elect) has direct bearing on the question of human will: if, as Calvinists posit, God’s grace is extended only to the elect and only for reasons unknown and mysterious to men, and if human beings can exert no influence whatsoever over their own salvation, then the question of human will and human agency becomes fraught with

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<sup>118</sup> The quickest way to learn the distinctions between Calvinism and Arminianism is to go to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the sect most responsible for the spread of Arminian ideas. Wesley’s 1798 pamphlet *The Question, What is an Arminian? Answered. By a Lover of Free Grace* is clear and to the point (if polemical).

<sup>119</sup> Both Calvinism and Arminianism accept the doctrine of total depravity: that human nature is thoroughly and inherently sinful, while the divine nature is pure and sinless. Both also accept the doctrine of the atonement: that Christ’s death and resurrection were offered in expiation of human sin, that this gift of expiation is given through God’s free grace (and not because mankind had somehow earned or deserved Christ’s sacrifice), and that it is this atoning gift that enables God to forgive mankind’s inherent sinfulness and to save some men and women from their deserved damnation. (As I noted in my chapter on Catharine Maria Sedgwick, debates about the mechanism and efficacy of the atonement preoccupied liberal and orthodox theologians of the early nineteenth century and played a major role in Sedgwick’s own evolving theological views.)

<sup>120</sup> God displays his gracious nature by saving these elect from damnation when all humankind deserve to be damned; thus only those who are among the elect are the recipients of grace, and only these benefit from Christ’s sacrifice—a doctrine known as “limited atonement.”

difficulties.<sup>121</sup>

In the early nineteenth century most Calvinist commentary on the subject of predestination and free will was grounded in the theology of Jonathan Edwards and his intellectual descendants, and particularly on Edwards's 1754 treatise, *Freedom of the Will*.<sup>122</sup> Edwards's lucid treatment of predestinarian theology depicts an ordered universe in which events are predetermined by God in a long sequence of cause and effect stretching backward to the moment of creation. Edwards insisted that human beings have free will because they are "at liberty to act from their own inclinations. What they cannot control, and what does not enter into the equation of their freedom, is *how* their inclination got to be the way it is and *why* they apprehend as they do. That was set at creation" (Gura 193-194, emphasis in original). Humans are at liberty to act according to their wills, but at the same time, as the "moral cause" of human existence and human history, God determines what all of their choices will be. Under this system, the task of the Calvinist believer is one of reconciliation and submission: since God's will is fixed and unchangeable, attempting to defy it can cause only frustration and self-harm.

As recent scholars of Edwards's legacy have detailed, it was not only Edwards's

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<sup>121</sup> As the religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom has noted, the revivalist movements that began in the late-eighteenth century and extended well into the twentieth relied implicitly on a doctrine of free grace—on man's ability to "choose" salvation for himself—and eventually contributed to the downfall of predestinarian theology. By the end of the nineteenth century, Ahlstrom contends, even the strictest and most theologically conservative denominations had adopted doctrinal principles and membership practices that were *de facto* Arminian (Ahlstrom 844-45). But debates over predestination and free grace were alive and well in the 1850s as the aftershocks of the Second Great Awakening continued to spread through the antebellum public sphere and theologians and ordinary believers alike wrestled with the problem of human will.

Strict Calvinist theology has experienced something of a resurgence lately among conservative theologians (including William Lane Craig) and ministers (including Mark Driscoll). But even amidst this revival of interest one is unlikely to find many Protestant believers who will subscribe wholeheartedly to the doctrine of unconditional election.

<sup>122</sup> The full title: *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Vertue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*.

theological achievements that influenced nineteenth-century culture, but his emphasis on the intersection of doctrine and emotion: his insistence that the foundations of religious experience rested as much on the personal experience of religious affections as on the right apprehension of theological concepts. A recent biography of Edwards's intellectual inheritor Nathaniel Taylor notes that Edwardsean theology "flourished during the first four decades of the nineteenth century, forming America's first indigenous theological movement" (Sweeney 142). This Protestant theological movement based its religious and social ambitions on Edwards's doctrine of religious affections: his *Life of David Brainerd* and selections from his "Personal Narrative" were excerpted and circulated by the American Tract Society in the early antebellum period and helped to form the pillars of sentimental Protestantism. These works "indelibly marked antebellum culture" by virtue of their emphasis on "the necessity for an individual experience of conversion, emotion as a central component to this experience and thus to the religious life, and disinterested benevolence as the sign of true spirituality" (Gura 235). It was Edwards's persistent theological influence, then, that gave rise to the powerful combination of doctrine and emotion that marked antebellum sentimental culture.

But while Edwards's influence undergirded sentimentalism's insistence that true religion must involve emotion as well as intellect, there remained considerable theological differences among both his clerical and his literary inheritors. Sectarian distinctions, particularly those between Calvinist and Arminian denominations, remained central to nineteenth-century religious discourse and to religiously inflected literary genres including woman's fiction. Arminian theology apprehends the relationship between human and divine will in ways distinctly different from the Edwardsean Calvinist model, and these differences have consequences for the models of agency offered in sentimental texts.



In his treatise on the will Edwards had rebutted the arguments of an anonymous and influential book, published in 1732 in London, called *An Essay on the Freedom of Will in God and in Creatures*, that laid out in some detail the basis of an Arminian view of human will.<sup>123</sup> In the unknown author's formulation, the understanding and the will work together (or against one another) to choose or refuse salvation. Any interference from God in determining human will—as Calvinist theology posited—would nullify the very concept of free will and make human existence meaningless: free will implies “a Power to chuse or to refuse, to chuse one thing or the contrary among several things which are proposed, without any inward or outward restraint, force or constraining byass or influence...” (8-9). Man, fallen and faulty by nature, must navigate a minefield of choice on the way to salvation or damnation:

When the Christian Revelation is proposed to Man as a rational Creature to consider the Proofs and Evidences brought to confirm it... it is the *Will* which must employ and determine the *Mind* to dwell upon these Enquiries diligently and faithfully, in proportion to the Merits of the Cause... ‘[T]is the *Will of Man* which hath the chief hand in Infidelity: It is the Will that indulges Prejudices against the Gospel...; it indulges an Aversion to it without reason, and thereby becomes culpable, and is justly punishable. *He that believeth not, shall be damned.* (58-60, emphasis in original)

The author of the *Essay* insisted that human will, so far from being predetermined by God, was self-determining and could choose arbitrarily, even perversely, simply for the pleasure of willing. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, writing in 1798, noted how human will might actually be exercised in contradiction of divine will: “The Arminians hold, that, altho’ there may be some moments wherein the Grace of God acts irresistibly, yet in general, any man may resist, and that to his eternal ruin, the Grace whereby it was the Will of God, he should have been eternally

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<sup>123</sup> This book was widely attributed to Isaac Watts, a respected Puritan minister, hymnodist and theologian. Edwards's preface to his *Careful and Strict Enquiry* expressed disbelief at this attribution, since he had trouble ascribing the Arminian doctrines outlined in the *Essay* to such an eminent Calvinist divine.

saved (6).<sup>124</sup> So far from being predetermined by God's will, human will, in the Arminian formulation, is so independent that it can actually defy the desires of an all-powerful God.

These debates, far from being merely academic or the sole province of eighteenth-century thinkers, were the subject of vociferous discussion in the periodical literature of the nineteenth-century U.S. Throughout the 1850s, as the genre of woman's fiction was reaching the apex of its popularity, the theological organs of the various Calvinist and Arminian denominations engaged in ongoing and heated exchanges about the validity of predestinarian and free will doctrines—exchanges that informed the doctrinal ideas put forth in sentimental fiction.<sup>125</sup> Debates about

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<sup>124</sup> The sticking point in many debates about predestination and free will was the question of whether the will was or could ever be self-determining. Edwards, for his part, found the idea of a self-determining will manifestly absurd, for “if the Will determines its own free Acts, then every free Act of Choice is determined by a preceding Act of Choice, chusing that Act.... Which brings us directly to a Contradiction: for it supposes an Act of the Will preceeding the first Act in the whole train, directing and determining the rest; or a free Act of the Will, before the first free Act of the Will” (33). For Arminians this objection was easily surmounted: the act that made the Will self-determining was God's choice to grant free will to mankind. Calvinist and Arminian doctrine, then, place the sovereign power of choice at opposing ends of the chain of being linking man and God. In the Calvinist formulation God's will is all-powerful and all-determining, with God's choice of whom to damn and whom to save determining all later human events and choices. Arminian doctrine places the power of choice firmly in human hands (though placed there by God): God, acting according to God's perfect nature, always wills what is right, but in man the schism between the will and the understanding makes it possible to choose what is wrong, sometimes simply for the sake of choosing it.

<sup>125</sup> These debates were not always conducted calmly or in a spirit of generosity. To offer some representative examples: in January of 1856, the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, an eminent Presbyterian journal edited by the Reverend Charles Hodge, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and one of the era's most respected and conservative Calvinist divines, published a scathing article on the errors of Arminian theology based on a reading of recent publications of the Methodist Episcopal Church, “the palladium of Arminianism in this country” (39). Claiming that it was “not our desire to wound the feelings of our Arminian brethren” (38), the article nevertheless accused Arminians of impugning God's justice and mocking the doctrine of grace. In April of that same year the *Methodist Quarterly Review* published a reply insisting that “no man, with even a tolerable knowledge of the history of theology, could have honestly written” such a spurious attack on Arminianism, and laying out proofs to demonstrate that only Arminian theology could claim to offer a true representation of God's grace.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in September of 1850 the *Puritan Recorder*, commenting on recent changes to the structure of authority in the English Methodist church, suggested that if “the Methodist reformers in England hope to do more than correct a few of the grosser abuses of their system, they must begin by reforming their creed; they must introduce the doctrines of grace” (142). A month later a commentator in the *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal* replied that, though the *Puritan Recorder* article had been short, a “greater

human will and its consequences took place not only on the pages of theological journals, but in the chapters of sentimental novels including Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Evans's *Beulah*. Warner depicts a heroine whose primary struggle is not toward self-determination or independence but toward the submissive acceptance of God's will. Evans, by contrast, offers a heroine who considers it her God-given right to strike out on her own, to throw off patriarchal domination, and to seek for spiritual truth. While each text depicts an adolescent woman seeking the correct balance between intellect and emotion and between following her own will and fulfilling divine will, the paths to agency that the novels present are wholly distinct: while Ellen Montgomery subordinates her will to God's will by submitting to godly mentors, Beulah Benton asserts her will as a means to independence and, eventually, to salvation.

#### **“Not my will, but thine be done”: Calvinist Agency in *The Wide, Wide World***

Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* is a Calvinist-inflected sentimental novel that depicts at length the proper relationship between human will and divine will. In *The Wide Wide* worldview, the godly woman must submit herself to the guidance of Christian friends who will help her to discover and enact God's will for her life. Since God's will, in the Calvinist universe of Warner's novel, is fixed and unchangeable, it is the task of the Christian believer to conform her will to the will of God and to submit to His decrees, and it is through such acts that the

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mass of false propositions and dogmatic assumptions, could not well be crowded into so small a compass" (1).

When the Presbyterian minister William B. Sprague warned his daughter, in an 1831 series of letters later published as a conduct manual, to avoid "the din and clashing of religious combatants," it was this kind of debate to which he alluded (142).

believer accesses agency.<sup>126</sup>

Learning how to properly access agency in light of God's decrees is a lifelong task, and it is Ellen Montgomery's process of conforming her will to God's will that *The Wide, Wide World* depicts. When Ellen's mother breaks the news that she and her daughter will soon be parted, she assures Ellen that "God sends no trouble upon his children but in love; and though we cannot see how, he will no doubt make all this work for our good" (12). Mrs. Montgomery's assertion that there is "no doubt" about the efficacy of divinely ordained suffering and its salutary effects reflects her belief that Ellen is among the elect and therefore cannot come to eternal grief; it is God's will that Ellen should be saved, and Ellen must arrange her actions and emotions in accordance with that eternal fate. Everyone who meets Ellen is convinced at once of her election; she exists in a Calvinist universe of foregone conclusions. When she meets a kind man on the deck of the boat on which she is traveling to her aunt's house, his advice presents in gentle, child-friendly terms the essentially deterministic doctrine of election: "You can do nothing without help, but you are sure the help will come; and from this good day you will seek to know

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<sup>126</sup> Susan Warner, daughter of a once wealthy and later bankrupt New York lawyer and businessman, began her writing career in 1848 as a way of bolstering her father's meagre income. Henry Whiting Warner had bought a pew at the fashionable Mercer Street Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1836, where his daughters frequently attended with him, but it wasn't until after their father's financial downfall (and, Susan's sister Anna reported, a particularly brutal snub from a former acquaintance) that Susan and her younger sister decided to join as well. The decision was not solely an emotional one. Susan was inclined toward the doctrinal and intellectual aspects of her new faith: while Anna was relieved that the ceremony by which they were accepted into the church required them to be "put through no strict formula" in describing their conversion experience, Susan remarked afterwards "that she could not see how we were admitted, having so little to say" (A. Warner 202).

While the Warners' biographer Edward Halsey Foster labels the "New School" Presbyterianism of the Mercer Street Church "anti-intellectual" (*Susan* 30), the split between Old School and New School Presbyterianism in the early- to mid-nineteenth century was as much about questions of ecclesiastical polity as about revivalism and doctrine. Neither side abandoned basic Calvinist principles, and both saw themselves as guardians of an American intellectual inheritance: "The degree to which Congregationalists and Presbyterians considered themselves the chosen means for bringing learning, culture, and religious sophistication... is difficult to exaggerate" (Ahlstrom 464, n. 4).

Biographical information on Warner can be found in the biography her sister Anna published after Susan's death, in Edward Halsey Foster's *Susan and Anna Warner*, and in Jane Tompkins's afterword to the Feminist Press edition of *The Wide, Wide World*.

and to do the will of God, trusting in his dear Son to perfect that which concerneth you” (74).

The stranger’s admonition leaves no doubt about whose will is guiding Ellen’s fate: “you can do nothing,” “you are sure,” “you will seek,” he insists. The “will of God” has determined Ellen’s path, and her agency consists in following the road laid out before her.<sup>127</sup>

Cosmologically, as an elected member of God’s chosen people, predestined to salvation, Ellen can have no independent will of her own. Temporally, as the female child of absent parents, Ellen has little choice in her bodily fate: she must submit to the wills of fathers, aunts, and uncles. Ellen’s major dilemma is that the latter duty must always be subordinated to the former: she must submit to the wills of those adults who have charge of her, but only when their wills do not contradict the will of God. This bifurcated calling—this lifelong requirement, not to conflate the will of God with the will of men but to distinguish between them—is, far more than the Bible and writing desk she buys, the matrilineal legacy that Mrs. Montgomery bequeaths to Ellen.

Throughout *The Wide, Wide World* Ellen’s will is represented entirely in the negative, and the discipline of resignation to divine will is modeled by Ellen’s mother, then by Alice and John Humphreys and Mrs. Vawse, and is finally internalized by Ellen herself. Ellen’s mother,

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<sup>127</sup> Anna’s biography of Susan records her sister’s lifelong struggle with “self-will,” an ongoing attempt to align herself with Calvinist doctrine by accepting the will of God as fixed and perfect while suppressing her own desires. In a letter that Anna quotes at length, Susan excoriates herself thus:

Not long ago my self-will took fast hold of a matter with which it had, lawfully, no manner of concern; inasmuch as it was no more in my power to control it than it was to make one hair white or black. What had self-will to do? But you know mine: it took hold of this matter with so firm a clasp that it has needed a long time to unloose it.... You know well enough what my self-will is, to be well convinced that it needs checking. (quoted in A. Warner 249-250)

Susan Warner showed no shortage of what one might call will power: she had uncomplainingly accepted her father’s financial ruin and set herself the task of financially supporting the family, famously rising at 4 a.m. to write by candlelight before turning to the domestic duties of keeping her father’s house. Warner understood such will, however—the will to support others through hard work and devotion to duty—as God-given; to perform these tasks was to submit to the will of God in true Calvinist fashion. Warner credited God with giving her the will to support herself and her family by writing fiction that, she hoped, would do the work of Christian conversion. Will itself was not the enemy; it was self-will—a compulsive turning of the mind to things over which it had no control—that was to be avoided.

mourning the impending separation from her daughter, falls to her knees and prays ““Not my will, but thine be done”” (30), the same words that Alice uses when informing Ellen that she (Alice) is terminally ill. Like Mrs. Montgomery’s, Alice’s act of submitting herself to the lord’s will requires superhuman self-renunciation: in order to fulfill the divine will she must surrender her very life. As Alice dies in John’s embrace “her arms [fall] languidly down; the will and the power that had sustained them were gone. *Alice* was gone” (441). John, likewise, echoes the admonishments to resignation that are Mrs. Montgomery’s legacy to her daughter: when Ellen receives no news from her absent father and mother John advises that she try ““to love [God] more, and to be patient under his will”” (344); when Aunt Fortune’s illness keeps Ellen from visiting the Humphreys John insists that ““the good Husbandman knows what his plants want... so there come clouds and rains, and ‘stormy wind fulfilling his will’” (368). John’s invocation of the “good Husbandman” recalls Mrs. Montgomery’s God who ““sends no trouble upon his children but in love,”” and when Alice dies John comforts himself and Ellen with the assurance that ““Dear Alice is well—she is well,—and if *we* are made to suffer, we know and we love the hand that has done it,—do we not Ellie?... We must weep, because we are left alone; but for her—‘I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord!’” (443-444). John’s “we must weep” echoes Mrs. Montgomery’s admonition to Ellen that “we must sorrow,” but John’s “we must weep” is unifying: Ellen and John will suffer mutually under the will of a benevolent God, and if John and Ellen are “left alone,” they are at least left alone together. Alice, John, and Ellen, as the elect chosen by God, have their fates determined for them, and exercise a collective cosmological agency through the surrender of their wills to God.

Temporally, however, Alice, Ellen, and Mrs. Montgomery are not equal to John: John, as a man and a minister, has immensely more power than any of these disenfranchised women, and

his will, far from being always represented in the negative, has earthly power that persists even in his absence. When John is away from home Alice and Ellen continue to behave in accordance with his unspoken dictates: in her letters Alice writes him that “his will seem[s] to carry all before it, present or absent” (353). When Ellen’s father’s will, reaching out from the grave, dictates that Ellen must be sent to Scotland, John takes the first opportunity to visit and then retrieve her. Though Ellen remains her father’s property even after his death, she is comforted in the knowledge that “whatever [John] pleased, nothing could hinder him from accomplishing” (500), and within months of Ellen’s arrival in Scotland John appears and promises to bring her back to America to live with him. Ellen can then rest in perfect ease because, as she tells him, “I know you will if you say so” (563). Just as God’s will guides Ellen’s cosmological path, John’s will comes to guide her temporal one.

When John finally does bring Ellen back to America it is as his wife rather than his sister, a resolution that, in the Calvinist universe of the novel, provides the perfect solution to the conundrum that Mrs. Montgomery had set before Ellen: the difficulty of discerning human will from God’s will and submitting to the former only when it conforms to the latter. John has so far aligned his own decisions with the will of God that for Ellen, to obey John is to obey God. John makes Ellen “do every thing that [he has] a mind” to, but he “always [has] a reason” (562), and she is relieved that marriage to him will allow her to “enjoy [her]self in perfect security that [he] will see the beginning of mischief and put a stop to it” (576).<sup>128</sup> Aligning her will with John’s

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<sup>128</sup> Jane Tompkins’s 1987 Feminist Press edition of *The Wide, Wide World* reprints this final chapter despite the fact that no previous edition of the novel included it. According to Tompkins, “An unsigned note in the papers of The Constitution Island Association suggests that the manuscript had gone to Putnam without the last chapter and that Putnam urged omitting it since the book had run longer in galleys than he had expected and the last chapter, in his opinion, did not contribute substantially to the novel” (“Afterword” 8). Jana Argersinger reads Warner’s refusal to publish this chapter in later editions of the novel, despite her readers’ demands for further details about Ellen’s life, as a mark of Warner’s “authorial seductiveness” (278). I include my observations on it here because I believe Warner’s

becomes a temporal method by which Ellen can assume her place in God's cosmological plan; rather than suppressing her will to unredeemed guardians like Aunt Fortune or the Lindsays, Ellen can safely conform her will to John's. Within the Calvinist universe of *The Wide, Wide World*, the alignment of one's will with those of godly companions and of God himself is the highest and best form of agency, one that ensures both temporal happiness and eternal salvation.

Agency that consists in aligning one's will with God and with godly men can be difficult for modern critics to recognize, but as Jonathan Edwards and his theological inheritors insisted, seeking God's will is not the same as having no will at all. Nor does Ellen's alignment of her will with John's "cancel out" John's worldly authority, as Jane Tompkins would have it (*Sensational* 163); rather, it enables Ellen to access John's temporal power (and protection) in a political, legal and social milieu in which her own temporal will is neither acknowledged nor respected. As Tompkins rightly points out, sentimental power is no less real for its reliance on spiritual authority; to correctly read nineteenth-century sentimental literature critics must accept that for the authors of such fiction the spiritual realm was often *more* real and immediate than the temporal. But by focusing on power rather than agency, Tompkins reduces the religiosity of *The Wide, Wide World* and other sentimental novels to a cultural power grab and religious feeling to a cynical tool for stripping away male domination.<sup>129</sup> Such readings obscure the particular form

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imagined ending to the story speaks to the novel's Calvinist worldview, even if contemporary readers were never privy to it.

<sup>129</sup> In her article on the role of typology in *The Wide, Wide World*, Sharon Kim effectively rebuts Tompkins's implicit claim that Warner's novel is devoid of intentional theological content. Kim traces a line of literary and doctrinal relationship (I am purposely avoiding the declensionist connotations of the word "descent") from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Warner's novel, arguing that both belong to a genre she calls "Puritan realism" that "unites, first, a realistic physical world with Puritan typology, and second, a realistic character development with the paradigms of spiritual biography" (784). For Kim, this structure reflects Warner's particular religious beliefs and represents Warner's conscious choice to align herself with Calvinist doctrine: regarding herself and her sister as "Puritans by faith and Pilgrims by descent" (789), Warner deliberately set out to write a novel that expressed, not vague evangelical beliefs,



of Calvinist agency at work in the novel: one in which the agency available to the elect is exercised across the gender divide and in collaboration with an all-powerful God whose will is fixed and unchanging but always for the good.

### **“What was my will given to me for?”: *Beulah* and the Arminian Sentimental**

Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah*, like Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, is primarily concerned with the role of the will in human—and particularly middle-class female—life. Like *The Wide, Wide World* it is the story of an orphan thrust into a cruel world who must learn to exercise her will within the constraints imposed on nineteenth-century women. But the model of female will depicted in *Beulah* is entirely different from—if not diametrically opposed to—that found in *The Wide, Wide World*, and it is a model based on a particularly Arminian theology in which human beings actively choose their own spiritual and temporal destinies rather than reconciling themselves to God’s predetermined will.<sup>130</sup>

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but specifically Calvinist ones. While Kim’s reading of *The Wide, Wide World* helps to correct Tompkins by restoring intentionality and specificity to Warner’s invocation of Calvinist typology, it does not address the role of human will in the novel—another of *The Wide, Wide World*’s most recognizably Calvinist features. Indeed, instead of responding to those critics who, in following Douglas and Tompkins, have rightly identified sentimental literature as being “preoccupied, even obsessed, with the nature of power” (Tompkins, *Sensational* 160), Kim tables that discussion and returns instead to formal considerations: “religion,” she insists, “comprises more in *The Wide, Wide World* than its often paradoxical role in relationships of power” (784). But these discourses, I argue, should not—indeed cannot—be separated in this way. Since religion provided nineteenth-century women with unprecedented access to agency, and since literature offered one of the only available avenues to public influence and intervention for the disenfranchised, we cannot approach religion and power as unrelated discourses in this or any sentimental novel.

<sup>130</sup> Augusta Jane Evans’s motivations for writing were similar to Susan Warner’s, though she began earlier: born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1835, her father’s financial troubles and the family’s frequent relocations led her to begin composing her first novel, *Inez: A Tale of the Alamo*, as a teenager. When the family settled in Mobile, Alabama, Evans joined the St. Francis Street Methodist Church along with her parents and remained a member there until her death. *Inez*, an anti-Catholic novel full of theological argumentation, was overlooked by critics and the public alike, but Evans’s second novel, the orphan tale

The two central conflicts at the heart of *Beulah* are the eponymous heroine's attempts to free herself from infantilizing social structures that insist that she can exist only as a child or a wife rather than as a self-supporting woman and her struggle to develop a system of religious belief by which she can reconcile her thirst for philosophical and scientific knowledge with the revelations of the Bible. These two plot trajectories are inextricable from one another, as Beulah Benton finds that the forces that would keep her economically dependent are also those that frown upon her intellectual and spiritual explorations.<sup>131</sup> Throughout the novel these oppressive forces are identified explicitly with patriarchal economic structures—*Beulah* rails against the fashionable devaluation of labor that keeps women idle and dependent—and implicitly with predestinarian Calvinism, as those who challenge Beulah Benton's self-determination invoke fate, god, or the Christian duty of submission as moral ballast for their advice. Beulah counters these attempted persuasions by insisting on the value of her own free will and her right to choose where and with whom she will live. In doing so she lives out the doctrinal tenets of Arminian Protestantism and provides a counterexample to the Calvinist sentimental heroine: instead of

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*Beulah*, found a wide audience and critical approbation, though there were those who objected to its ostentatious intellectualism.

Evans was a lifelong Methodist, a member of the most numerous Arminian sect in nineteenth-century America. According to Sara Frear, "The register of St. Francis Street Methodist Church [in Mobile, Alabama] shows that Augusta originally joined the church on December 8, 1848, at the age of thirteen, together with her father Matthew Ryan Evans and her mother Sarah Skrine Evans. She remained a member of this church until her death on May 9, 1909" (117). In a letter written (probably in 1858 or 1859) to her friend Walter Clopton Harriss (a Methodist minister), Evans informs him that she has decided to "join the church again," suggesting that at some point she had left St. Francis Street Methodist. But in examining the church's records Frear finds no evidence that Evans's membership was ever withdrawn; it is, of course, possible that Evans stopped attending the church for a time without officially ending her membership.

<sup>131</sup> *Beulah* is the crown jewel in Baym's anti-sentimental argument: its heroine's educational ambitions and fierce insistence on her own spiritual and economic independence strike Baym as so far removed from the "meshes of human connection" exemplified in sentimental writing that she places the novel beyond the pale of sentimental literature. And yet, as a story that details the heroine's lifelong mourning for her dead sister and her growing attachment to her surrogate father, it certainly seems to embrace the affective and familial concerns of sentimental culture.

aligning her will with the wills of those around her, as Ellen Montgomery must, Beulah finds salvation and happiness by repeatedly asserting her free will.<sup>132</sup>

The first thing the reader learns about Beulah Benton is that she has a “warm, hopeful heart” defended by “the sword of a strong, unfaltering will” (14). In contrast to Ellen Montgomery’s plot trajectory, Beulah’s earliest object lessons are not that submitting to the will of others will lead to happiness and peace, but that surrendering one’s will results in moral and even physical death. When a wealthy couple adopts Beulah’s sister from the orphan asylum where she lives but refuses to take Beulah as well (because, the narrator flatly reveals, she is too ugly), Beulah resolves “to bear with fortitude what she could not avert”—the asylum’s Board have decreed that it is necessary to separate the sisters—and convinces Lilly to go with her new parents (19). But when Lilly dies within weeks of this separation Beulah decides never again to bend her will to that of tyrants, and when the wealthy doctor Guy Hartwell takes her into his home she becomes embroiled in a decades-long battle of wills with her benevolent but demanding benefactor. When Hartwell questions Beulah about her origins during their first meeting, her reply to him is, ““No more. You have not the right to question, nor I the will to answer”” (36). Beulah refuses Hartwell’s offers to adopt her and then to marry her, not because

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<sup>132</sup> Arminian belief is an intellectual outgrowth of Calvinism, and in nineteenth-century America, despite the rapid growth of Arminian sects like Methodism, it remained a largely oppositional theological position—a situation exacerbated by Methodism’s association with revivalism, with the poor and laboring classes, and with slaves.<sup>132</sup> It is this oppositional position that Evans’s novel assumes; it can be read as a direct rebuttal to Calvinist sentimental novels, particularly *The Wide, Wide World*. For this reason it is both the best example with which to illustrate the wide range of theological positions that sentimental literature could espouse—it wears its Arminian attachments almost on its sleeve—and a text that should be approached with caution, since the Calvinist theological position against which Evans situates her text is as much a caricature as a characterization.

In this respect Evans’s position can seem similar to that of Douglas or Tompkins—she has a tendency to position Calvinist belief as mindless—but these similarities do not so much demonstrate the correctness of Douglas’s and Tompkins’s formulation of the sentimental as they reveal what Cindy Weinstein has noted in her study of the role of consanguinity in sentimental fiction: that “the extraordinarily rich and ideologically diverse debate about sympathy that was taking place in the antebellum period... anticipate[d] the substance of current critiques,” and that this debate took place, not just among those who repudiated sentimental novels, but within sentimental fiction itself (Weinstein 3).

she doesn't care for him, but because she recognizes the power imbalance only thinly masked by his offers of protection and love: "He wants to rule me with a rod of iron," she infers, "because I am indebted to him for an education and support for several years" (174). Beulah has a model for such tyranny in the fate of her friend Pauline Chilton: when the "strong-willed" Pauline marries an equally obstinate minister she finds him "tyrannical; and because I do not humor all his whims, and have some will of my own, he treats me with insulting indifference" (302). In *Beulah* fathers and husbands are more likely to prove themselves tyrants than helpful guides, and the repeated lesson offered by the novel is that a woman is better off consulting her own will than conforming to the wills of those who love her.

When Beulah refuses to become either Hartwell's daughter or his wife, other characters accuse her of heartlessness, stubbornness, or pride. But the narrator makes clear that Beulah's ostensible obstinacy reflects her adherence to a moral and theological system that values individual will over unquestioning submission. When Clara Sanders advises Beulah to give up her plan of teaching and to let Guy Hartwell adopt her—to align her will with someone else's—Beulah brushes off the advice with the question, "What was my will given to me for, if to remain passive and suffer others to minister to its needs?" (116). When Clara later insists that she herself cannot stop loving Guy Hartwell despite his rejection of her, Beulah's martial advice is that "there is nothing a woman cannot do, provided she puts on the armor of duty and unsheathes the sword of a strong, unbending will. Of course, you can do it, if you will" (190). This insistence on her own self-determining will guides Beulah's interactions, not only with other human beings, but with God himself: in her years-long battle with religious skepticism, as Clara advises her to return to the childlike, unquestioning faith of her youth and Hartwell informs her that a heartless skepticism and a brainless pantheism are her only legitimate religious

options, Beulah rejects these binaries—child versus adult, brain versus heart—and maintains her search through the force, once again, of her own self-determination: “Still her indomitable will maintained the conflict,” the narrator asserts (289).

The ability to remain suspended in a state of constant questioning and vigilance is a hallmark of the Arminian religious experience exemplified in *Beulah: Arminian Methodism’s* “unique doctrines made the self a work always in progress. As the founding myths [of Methodism] so dearly emphasized, spiritual decline was ever possible in a corrupt world.... Each convert also had to wage war with the self” (Lyerly 26). Beulah’s personal war is not with an overbearing father, or even with Guy Hartwell, but with her own insatiable desire for knowledge: in the climactic scene of the novel *Beulah*, having sought answers to her spiritual quandaries in works of psychology and speculative philosophy, finally decides that the “ashes” of earthly knowledge cannot effect salvation, and falls to her knees in prayer. In this scene Beulah’s “proud intellect [is] humbled,” but in appealing to God for guidance she is not surrendering her own will (371). Likewise in the scene in which she finally consents to marry Guy Hartwell, Beulah accepts his offer of marriage but makes it clear that she considers it her duty, not to bend to his will, but to convert him to her faith.

The literary trope that emblemizes the independence of Beulah’s will is that of adoption—a device that, as Cindy Weinstein has demonstrated, “constitute[s] the foundational plot mechanism upon which so many sentimental texts depend” (29). In the Calvinist cosmology of *The Wide, Wide World* adoption functions as an earthly type of divine election: Ellen’s extralegal adoption by the Humphreys siblings both provides her with a loving surrogate family and also paves the way for her eventual marriage to John, the act that enables her to fulfill both her temporal and her spiritual destinies. Ellen’s adoption by the Humphreyses, like her election

by God, is final and irrevocable; John and Alice's affective claim to her is as "irresistible" as the Calvinist convert's unconditional election. When Ellen's uncle insists that she change her last name from Montgomery to Lindsay, she reminds herself that, whatever her last name, she "can't be adopted twice" (490). In *Beulah*, by contrast, earthly adoption is treated, not as the type of God's heavenly election of the heroine—as an expression of God's will—but as a failure of self-determining human will, a refusal to exercise agency on one's own behalf. When Guy Hartwell retrieves Beulah Benton from the orphan asylum where she resides she agrees to live with him on one condition: "I am not going to be adopted" (106).<sup>133</sup> Evans makes the connection between adoption and spiritual failure explicit when Beulah asserts that her friend Eugene's "adoption was his ruin" (296): "In lieu of his gold and influence," Beulah accuses Eugene, "Mr. Graham has your will, your conscience. How can you bear to be a mere tool in his hands?" (187). When Clara Sanders, who loves Hartwell unrequitedly, advises Beulah to accept his repeated offers of adoption, Beulah demands to know whether Clara would be "willing to change places with me, and indolently wait for others to maintain you?" Clara replies, "gladly, if I had been selected as you were" (115). Beulah's repeated refusals to be selected by Hartwell indicate her commitment to an Arminian theological worldview in which the individual believer chooses his or her spiritual fate rather than submitting to a predestined election.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> He repeats his offers throughout the novel: when she graduates high school and takes a teaching job, when she begins a successful career as a writer, and when she rents a home with a friend and lives independently. When he alters his tactics slightly and proposes marriage instead of adoption Beulah continues to refuse, knowing that the shift is merely semantic.

<sup>134</sup> Weinstein considers the centrality of the adoption motif in sentimental fiction to be a reflection of nineteenth-century medical and social realities: frequent disease, the dangers of childbirth, the economic model of apprenticeship, and the separation of families on the slave market. And she notes that "much of the recent debate about sympathy produces a monolithic... account of sympathy" because it "fails to take into account the extraordinarily rich and ideologically diverse debate about sympathy that was taking place in the antebellum period... within sentimental fiction itself" (3). In contextualizing the sentimental novel, however, Weinstein makes the common critical mistake of ignoring religion despite the centrality

In its Arminian engagement with the question of human will *Beulah* touches on those “maladies of the will” examined in Jennifer Fleissner’s work on nineteenth-century psychological, medical, and theological categories.<sup>135</sup> But it is not Beulah who suffers from these maladies but her friend Eugene, who succumbs to an alcoholism that the novel frames, not as illness or inherent evil, but as moral laziness—a failure to assert one’s self-will forcefully enough to overcome temptation. Eugene fails to recognize that his “own will must govern him” in his choice of a profession (111), instead letting his adopted father choose his path for him, and like the young men portrayed in the era’s advice manuals for urban youth, he half-heartedly slides into a life of dissipation and a marriage to a heartless social climber.<sup>136</sup> Despite the fact that she has been his best friend since childhood, Beulah cannot save Eugene from these mistakes because in the Arminian worldview of the novel human will is sacrosanct and, in the

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of religious discourse to the novels she studies and the inextricable imbrication of religion with questions of racial, regional and political identity in nineteenth-century America. The “specific context from which the critique of consanguinity is launched” in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction must always include the religious worldview embraced by the author and/or characters (Weinstein 10).

Carol Singley’s *Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature* does a better job than Weinstein’s book of taking into account the religious context of nineteenth-century adoption plots. Her chapter on *The Wide, Wide World*, for instance, invokes Horace Bushnell’s 1847 *Discourses On Christian Nurture* in discussing mid-century formulations of born and created families. While Warner was no fan of Bushnell (like many strict Calvinist thinkers she believed he had “rather an erratic mind,” in part because, unlike herself, he did not believe that wives owed obedience to their husbands [A. Warner 248]), his influence was so ubiquitous that Singley is most likely correct in finding connections between his works and Warner’s.

<sup>135</sup> Though Fleissner’s ongoing work on the question of the will in nineteenth-century intellectual discourse (and in contemporary theories of the novel) has not yet been published, I have been fortunate to hear work-in-progress presentations in two talks that I cite in my bibliography.

<sup>136</sup> The characteristics that Eugene finds attractive in his wife Antoinette—wealth, beauty, and charm—are precisely those that, according to Timothy Shay Arthur (best known as the author of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* but also a writer of advice manuals for young men, among other things) warned his readers against falling prey to: “Let him disregard, totally, all considerations of wealth, beauty, external accomplishments, fashion, connections in society, and every other mere selfish and worldly end, and look into the mind and the heart of the woman he thinks of marrying. If he cannot love her for herself alone... let him disregard every external inducement, and shun a marriage with her as the greatest evil to which he could be subjected” (147).

words of the anonymous Arminian essayist, “self-determining.” When Eugene’s sister Cornelia begs Beulah to save Eugene from his alcoholism (by marrying him), Beulah insists that “[m]an’s will, like woman’s, is stronger than his affection, and, once subjugated by vice, all external influences will be futile” (222). In the Calvinist universe of *The Wide, Wide World*, aligning one’s will with that of others is rewarded with temporal protection and spiritual guidance: “I often launch out upon a sea where I dare not trust my own navigation,” Ellen Montgomery tells her new husband, “but now I will take the pilot along... and sail every whither” (577). In the Arminian universe of *Beulah* surrendering one’s will to others is both the sign and the cause of spiritual failure.

Given the insistence on self-determination in *Beulah*, the novel’s eventual capitulation to the exigencies of the marriage plot—Beulah’s assent to marry Guy Hartwell after she has spent her entire adolescent and adult life rejecting his offers—can seem like a betrayal of the novel’s doctrinal purpose. But read in comparison with *The Wide, Wide World*, the novel’s denouement once again illustrates the distinction between Ellen Montgomery’s acceptance of her “election” by John Humphreys and Beulah Benton’s choice to marry Guy Hartwell. *Beulah* has the option of marrying her own “John Humphreys”: Reginald Lindsay, the man who leads her to God and who embodies qualities of father, brother, and lover. But after Reginald has helped Beulah to overcome her skepticism Beulah marries not him but Guy Hartwell, choosing the man who enabled her self-actualization (by introducing her to music, art, philosophy, and literature) rather than the man who answers all of her spiritual questions. In choosing the skeptical Guy over the pious Reginald Lindsay, Beulah makes the choice that affirms her own spiritual freedom and gives her a task to complete: having resolved her own doubts, she can now set to work resolving



Guy's.<sup>137</sup>

In the Arminian novel *Beulah*, then, Beulah Benton achieves spiritual salvation and temporal happiness by placing the dictates of her own will above the demands of others. Conformity to the will of others, as in Eugene's case, leads to moral corruption and spiritual downfall because it involves the denial of human agency: those who submit their wills to others abdicate responsibility for their own salvation. The model of female agency at work in *Beulah* is thus entirely different from that put forth in *The Wide, Wide World*: whereas Ellen Montgomery exercises agency by aligning her will with that of God and God's servants, Beulah Benton exercises agency by imposing her will on the world around her. Both models are based in Protestant theological principles, but their outcomes are hardly the same.

### **The Sentimental Novel and the Politics of Female Will**

*Beulah* and *The Wide, Wide World* thus took up the same questions about human will that occupied the most prominent theologians and philosophers of their day and put them to the test, exploring both the doctrinal underpinnings of human agency and the practical problem of how female will might be expressed within social structures that enable certain kinds of agency while limiting others. Uniting the emotional vocabulary and concern with power that mark the sentimental novel with the vocabulary of doctrinal debate, Warner and Evans offered practical

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<sup>137</sup> Feminist critics of *Beulah* are generally reluctant to praise the heroine's choice to marry the man who has spent the whole novel trying to rob her of her independence, and indeed it does smack of romance novel fantasies of domination and surrender. (See Anne Goodwyn Jones's *Tomorrow is Another Day* for an example of this critical reluctance.) Evans was clearly aware of Guy's faults, and while he may be the perfect man for Beulah, Evans apparently did not intend him to represent the perfect man in general. In a letter to a friend, the Southern statesman J.L.M. Curry, Evans wrote: "I regret that I cannot furnish your enthusiastic Virginia friend, with the real Guy Hartwell, she has done me the honor to admire. Tell her she only has to look into the ranks of our matchless armies, to find hundreds who are nobler than my carping, self-indulgent, cynical, sceptical Guy" (Letter to J.L.M. Curry, July 15, 1863, reproduced in *A Southern Woman of Letters* 68).

depictions of how human will and agency were triangulated within an ever-shifting complex of independence and relationality. The call to Christian resignation enshrined in the Lord's prayer and in the sentimental novels of the antebellum era—"Thy will be done"—leaves unspecified the proper response of human will: resignation to events as they occur? Concerted action performed with the goal of bringing about the kingdom of God? Sentimental novels like *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* offered a practical theology that involved the reader, emotionally and intellectually, in an extended exploration of the question of how one is to live out the command to let God's will be done.

This question had implications both for the private lives of individual women and for the public debates that surrounded women's rights and women's agency. The fact that much of the context and subtext of *Beulah* and *The Wide, Wide World* is theological does not mean that these novels' concerns were private and restricted to domestic subjects. By involving themselves in theological debates Warner and Evans engaged in a public discourse about human agency in general and female agency in particular—a discourse that took place within the public space of sentimental fiction. As June Howard notes, sentimentality always engages with “the development of modern subjectivities in their intricate imbrication with belief systems and social structures” (72). By exploring Protestant belief through the medium of fiction, Evans and Warner took part in a larger debate about the role of women in the public sphere.

In keeping with this larger social question of women's public agency, part of Ellen Montgomery's and Beulah Benton's tasks (as well as the task of their readers) is to reconcile their theological beliefs with their legal and political status as citizens and subjects who cannot elect their own leaders or claim equal protection under the law.<sup>138</sup> As with their spiritual

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<sup>138</sup> As a number of critics have demonstrated, this commentary on white women's limited right to legal

maturity, their political educations are shaped by the theological systems to which they subscribe. Ellen's spiritual and temporal training under the Humphreys, for instance, includes lessons in recognizing legitimate temporal authority as well as irresistible spiritual authority: in addition to the Bible that Ellen's mother gives her and the copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* she receives from John, Ellen also receives a copy of Mason Weems's *Life of Washington*, which she absorbs with at least as much attention as she devotes to the other two. When Ellen arrives in Scotland the name of Washington comes to stand in for the name of John Humphreys: though she "disliked to speak the loved names [of Alice and John] in the hearing of ears to which she knew they would be unlovely" (509), Ellen has no trouble invoking the name of Washington at every turn. When her Uncle Lindsay asks whether she is "one of those that make a saint of George Washington," Ellen replies that "he was a great deal better than some saints" (506). When Mr. Lindsay brings up the "murder" of John André, Ellen insists that this act must have been right because if it were not, "Washington would not have done it." When Mr. Lindsay accuses Ellen of circular reasoning she explains herself by insisting that "when a person always does right, if he happen to do something that I don't know enough to understand, I have good reason to think it is right, even though I cannot understand it" (515).<sup>139</sup> This is the same

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and political self-determination cannot responsibly be read outside of the context of slavery; sectional debates about slavery had come to a head by the 1850s, when Warner and Evans wrote their novels. See in particular Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. Cindy Weinstein's *Family, Kinship and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* also does a fine job of illuminating the parallels between the slave narrative and the sentimental novel, reading *The Wide, Wide World* alongside Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Caroline Lee Hentz's proslavery novel *The Planter's Northern Bride*, Mary Hayden Green Pike's *Ida May*, and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

<sup>139</sup> Mr. Lindsay's word choice is revealing: having captured John André behind the Continental Army's lines with incriminating papers on his person, Washington's choice to try and hang him as a spy and traitor could only be termed "murder" by someone, like Mr. Lindsay, who does not acknowledge the validity of the colonists' cause. Mr. Lindsay's refusal to recognize America's right to rebel against England parallels his refusal to acknowledge Ellen's friendship with the Humphreys or even her real

reasoning that Alice had earlier applied to John: when Ellen wonders whether John was right in whipping an obstinate horse, Alice replies that “it is sometimes necessary to do such things.... You and I know John, do we not?” (377). John, like Washington, cannot be guilty of a wrong act—like the Calvinist God that Alice and Ellen worship, John’s justice is unquestionable, though his behavior sometimes seems unfathomable. John is both God and Washington to Ellen: he embodies both spiritual and temporal authority, such that Ellen need no longer consult her own will.

*The Wide, Wide World*, then, would seem to envision America as a representative republic in which women access temporal power by choosing Christian husbands who act in accordance with their properly regulated consciences. But in accordance with the novel’s Calvinist worldview, Ellen’s act of “choosing” John is predetermined by John himself and, presumably, by God. Ellen never actually chooses John: she is chosen by Alice, then given to John, then chosen by Mr. Lindsay, and then reclaimed by John in a series of “elections” over which she has little control. When John visits Ellen in Scotland in the book’s final published chapter Ellen protests that “long before I was [Mr. Lindsay’s] daughter I was [John’s] sister—I can’t undo that... and I don’t want to—it doesn’t make a bit of difference that we were not born so!” (563). Likewise, Ellen’s Americanness, so repugnant to the Lindsays, is also out of her control: when Mr. Lindsay commands Ellen to “forget that [she was] American,” Ellen’s silent rejoinder that “there are some things he cannot command.... Forget, indeed!” represents one of the only times in the novel when she does not rebuke herself for pride or rebelliousness. Ellen’s Americanness, like her Calvinist election and her adoption by the Humphreys family, is irrevocable—“irresistible,” in Calvinist parlance; it is not a matter of her own will or choosing, and she could not change it if she wished to.

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name, Montgomery.

*Beulah*, by contrast, sets forth an alternative model of male-female relations in which the narrator and protagonist urge the women of America, not to submit themselves to godly men, but to accept independence and intellectual pursuits as their God-given duty. When Beulah gives the commencement address at the public school where she has been educated she takes as her theme “Female Heroism” and sets out to demonstrate “that female intellect was capable of the most exalted attainments, and that the elements of her character would enable woman to cope successfully with difficulties of every class” (140). Beulah concludes her address by encouraging her classmates to make themselves “true women of America,” not by displaying piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, but by proving themselves “angel guardians of the sacred hearthstone, ministering spirits where suffering and want demand succor,” and women “qualified to assist in a council of statesmen, if dire necessity ever require it” (140). Americanness, for “true women” at least, is not a state into which one is born, but a distinction to which one aspires.

As she does with her Arminianism, Evans positions her model of independent and intellectual womanhood in opposition to prevailing cultural values, particularly those of the North. Evans saw herself as the torchbearer for a new brand of Southern literature that would challenge the intellectual and political hegemony of the Boston and New York elite; the Arminian free will doctrines that Beulah embraces would undergird a new era of Southern supremacy based on states’ rights and individual (white) self-determination. Evans signals her ambitions in her choice to name her eponymous heroine “Beulah”: while Anne Goodwyn Jones rightly points out that the Hebrew word “Beulah” means “married woman,” foreshadowing the romantic denouement of the novel (90), the Biblical passage in which the word “Beulah” figures does not refer to an actual woman, but to the land of Israel. Predicting a future time of glory for

the Hebrew people, the prophet Isaiah asserts that “Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.”<sup>140</sup> In associating her Southern heroine with an idealized vision of an agriculturally productive Israel, Evans intimates that the South, not the North, is that region of the country truly chosen and blessed by God. Meanwhile the association of the Southern heroine with bridal imagery invokes the tradition of the church as the bridegroom of Christ, making Southern Arminian churches the true inheritors of the American Christian mission.

### **Conclusion: Reevaluating Religious Agency in the Sentimental Novel**

Though the sentimental novel is always concerned with power—celestial, temporal, political, domestic—it is not, at bottom, about accruing it. It is, however, deeply concerned with agency, and with how agency might be enabled by and exercised in accordance with particular theological principles and under particular social conditions. But the models of religious agency offered by the sentimental novel have been difficult for critics to apprehend because they do not conform to the narrative that the anthropologist Saba Mahmood calls the “secular-progressive imaginary.” Mahmood finds in the work of “secular-liberal and progressive” scholars who turn their lenses on religion “a deep self-assurance about the truth of the progressive-secular imaginary, one that assumes that the life forms it offers are the best way out for... unenlightened souls, mired as they are in the spectral hopes that gods and prophets hold out to them” (*Politics* xi). Under these terms, in which religion can function only as a delusion from which the subjects of critical discourse must be freed, it becomes difficult for scholars to recognize and

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<sup>140</sup> Isaiah 62:4, King James Version.

acknowledge forms of agency enabled by religious belief and practice.

In the discipline of anthropology in which Mahmood works, the application of Western liberal philosophical assumptions to the lives of non-Western and non-liberal subjects leads to the suggestion that women who do not feel the need or desire to subvert cultural and religious norms—or, more fundamentally, do not recognize individual autonomy as the only legitimate ground of human action—must be reeducated in the ways of enlightened liberal thought before they can engage in acts of agency. In the case of literary criticism, particularly with regard to sentimental literature, the “progressive-secular imaginary” by which Western culture becomes increasingly enlightened/secularized hampers serious critique of nineteenth-century women writers: religious women authors of the nineteenth century take on the anthropological role of Other in the writings of twenty-first-century critics, their religion representing a primitive residue of nineteenth-century culture to be left behind on the journey toward feminist enlightenment.<sup>141</sup> But as the anthropologist and legal theorist Leti Volpp notes, when “culture and feminism are believed to be opponents in a zero-sum game, women will be presumed to be emancipated when they have abandoned their cultures” (106). Since the authors of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, now long since dead, can no longer abandon their religious cultures but have left evidence of them in their novels, critics have done the abandoning for them, writing around the question of religion or assuming that it exists only to mask other concerns—gender, race, class—more interesting to latter-day scholars.

Paradoxically, in arguing for the forms of female power modeled and enabled by sentimental literature, it has been easiest for critics to identify female power in texts that embrace

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<sup>141</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that “it almost appears as if faith is so foreign to modern sensibilities as to be safely assigned to the realm of the exotic. Nor does it apparently occur to critics who adopt that attitude that their practice has so much in common with the Orientalism that Said and others reprove” (16-17).

religious beliefs, like the strict Calvinism of Susan Warner, that seem especially foreign to a secularized critical stance. Critics exalt those texts whose models of self-sacrificing female power seem most opposed to the progressive-secular imaginary by which individual autonomy and self-will are the only mark of personal agency, and the very foreignness of the texts' religiosity makes it easy to dismiss that religiosity as a cultural accretion. If women like Susan Warner and her protagonist Ellen Montgomery are able to exercise agency (as critics of the sentimental insist, quite correctly, that they do) even while embracing a religion that ostensibly demonizes individual self-determination, then that religion must not be effective and can thus be dismissed as an historical artifact with little bearing on the real problem of power. Thus the critical formulations of sentimental power that have claimed to treat the religiosity of nineteenth-century women's literature with respect have actually undergirded the secularization narrative that enables the dismissal of religion from serious critical discussion.

According to this critical formulation novels like Augusta Jane Evans's *Beulah* have no place in the sentimental canon precisely because they offer a model of religious agency that aligns with liberal assumptions about autonomy and self-determination while rejecting a secularization narrative by which enlightened scientific rationalism leads to the death of religion. Beulah Benton's quest for scientific and philosophical knowledge leads her toward rather than away from religious enlightenment, and her religious beliefs bolster rather than undermining her feminist agency. She finds in her Arminian Christianity a warrant for, rather than a condemnation of, statements like this one:

"You are opening your lips to repeat that senseless simile of [male] oaks and [female] vines; I don't want to hear it; there are no creeping tendencies about me. You can wind, and lean, and hang on somebody else if you like; but I feel more like one of those old pine trees yonder. I can stand up. Very slim, if you will, but straight and high. Stand by myself; battle with wind and rain and tempest roar; be swayed and bent, perhaps, in the storm, but stand unaided, nevertheless. I feel



humbled when I hear a woman bemoaning the weakness of her sex, instead of showing that she has a soul and mind of her own inferior to none.” (116)

Because the progressive-secular imaginary that undergirds feminist criticism assumes that feminist enlightenment and religious adherence are incompatible, critics of nineteenth-century women’s fiction have found no place in their narratives for a text like *Beulah* that combines fierce religiosity with feminist sentiment.<sup>142</sup>

Criticism of sentimental literature has often overlooked those nineteenth-century sentimental texts in which religious agency functions in a manner closer to the liberatory model because these novels do not conform to a critical narrative in which a repressive religion is superseded by a presumably more progressive skepticism. Such narratives assume that agency can inhere only in acts of rebellion or resistance. But as Mahmood’s work has shown, agency is not an either-or proposition, even and perhaps especially when that agency is felt to be mandated by doctrinal considerations. If critics are to continue to assert the important role of nineteenth-century women authors in literary history and to understand the complex models of agency at work in their texts, they must adjust the critical models with which they approach these texts to include all possible avenues to female agency, liberal and nonliberal, conservative and progressive, religious and secular.

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<sup>142</sup> There are other reasons, of course, that contribute to Evans’s having been overlooked by critics of nineteenth-century women writers. One is the fact that despite decades of critical complaint about the overemphasis on New England authors in studies of nineteenth-century American literature, Southern authors are still read most often through a regional lens rather than a national one. Another is Evans’s objectionable politics: Evans was pro-slavery and pro-secession, and maintained friendships with prominent Southern politicians and military leaders like P.G.T. Beauregard and J.L.M. Curry. But since being Southern, or sympathetic to the South, or pro-slavery, or silent on the question of slavery has not led to a diminution of interest in writers like Edgar Allan Poe or Nathaniel Hawthorne, there must be more to the story in Evans’s case.

## CHAPTER 4: “I Have No Disbelief”: Spiritualism and Secular Agency in *The Morgesons*

In the preface to the 1901 reissue of her three novels (*The Morgesons*, *Two Men*, and *Temple House*), Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard laid out the origin story of her writing career: “One day when my husband was sitting at the receipt of customs... I sat by a little desk, where my portfolio lay open. A pen was near, which I took up, and it began to write, wildly like ‘Planchette’ upon her board” (“Preface” 262).<sup>143</sup> Describing the process of composition that led to each of her novels, Stoddard recalls how “the shadow of a man passed before me, and I built a visionary fabric round him” (“Preface” 263). Like the narrator of *The Morgesons*, who is frequently accused of demonic possession, Stoddard obscures the agencies at work in her writing: her “stories and novels were never in touch with my actual life” and “seem now as if they were written by a ghost of their time” (“Preface” 263). Stoddard also quotes her distant cousin Nathaniel Hawthorne’s assessment of her debut novel, written in a letter to her shortly after publication: “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 could do of ‘The Morgesons’” (“Preface” 264). *The Morgesons* was published in 1862; Hawthorne had died in

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<sup>143</sup> The planchette is a small platform used in Spiritualism as a tool to communicate with spirits. It is usually about three inches wide and four inches long, resting on three small legs. There are many different designs but an early, popular, design was heart shaped; the point of the heart was working as a pointer. On a Ouija Board, or similar talking board, the planchette slides about the surface of the board, pointing at letters to spell out messages. One, two, or more people lightly rest their finger tips on the top edges of the device, to channel into it the power to make it move. Three legs are either tipped with felt so that they will slide easily on a polished surface, or have small castor wheels on them. Sometimes, if automatic writing is to be done, one of the legs is replaced by a pencil, the point of which traces letters onto a sheet of paper over which the planchette moves. This is known as a ‘pencil planchette.’ (*Spirit Book*, 310)

1864. Thus he could not have retained his living memory of the novel very long at all. And yet Stoddard's invocation of his words suggests the eerie possibility that Hawthorne may have retained his memory of *The Morgesons* even in death, and that he might yet endorse his cousin's novels from beyond the grave.

The theory that Hawthorne might continue to exist in all of his individuality, and to hold and express literary preferences forty years after his death, can be read as a mere flight of fancy on Stoddard's part or as a cynical attempt to cash in on her family relationship with the man who was well on his way to becoming *the* major figure in American literary history.<sup>144</sup> But Stoddard's mention of her dead relative, together with her discussion of "planchette," of the "visionary" origins and "ghost"-like qualities of her novels, also frames the composition of *The Morgesons* as a tale of Spiritualist mediumship recognized and harnessed for literary purposes. This chapter examines the religious imagery of Spiritualist practice that runs throughout Stoddard's first novel and argues that Stoddard employs the phenomena associated with Spiritualist religion, including clairvoyance and spirit communication, to explore socially disruptive circulations of agency and the cross-gender and cross-class connections they enable.<sup>145</sup> While Stoddard's critics have most

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<sup>144</sup> See Jane Tompkins's "Masterpiece Theater: The Politics of Hawthorne's Literary Reputation" for the historical trajectory of Hawthorne's canonization.

<sup>145</sup> American Spiritualist practices, though emerging from European religious ideas that had circulated for centuries, began in earnest in the United States in 1848 with the "spirit rappings" in Rochester, New York. The movement, spawned by the clairvoyant gifts of precocious teenagers like Margaret and Kate Fox and the Davenport brothers, spread rapidly across the country, and the widespread acceptance of its tenets was enabled in part by the liberalization of American theology that arose during the Second Great Awakening. But the Spiritualist movement, far from being merely reactionary, was also theologically innovative, and it profoundly changed the religious landscape of nineteenth-century America.

Growing out of the dual traditions of Swedenborgian religion and mesmeric practice, many of Spiritualism's doctrines flew in the face of traditional Protestant theology. Spiritualism's Swedenborgian roots provided one of the most basic tenets of the movement's theology: the doctrine that man ascends (or "develops" or "progresses") after death through "spheres" of increasing enlightenment, with some souls taking longer to ascend (Kerr 10). This doctrine was by no means acceptable to Protestant theologians, whether Calvinist or Arminian, because it removed the need for repentance by defanging divine wrath: without "an apocalyptic worldview based on duality and damnation, the gates of

often read *The Morgesons* as indexing the decline of New England orthodoxy or the secularization of American culture, I argue that the novel reflects the conditions of secularism that characterized mid-nineteenth-century American culture, conditions in which religious authority and its attendant agentive possibilities were not in decline but rather were set free to circulate in new and non-hierarchical ways. The agencies enabled in *The Morgesons* by Spiritualist forms of communion and communication have the potential to disrupt and defy entrenched structures of power. By allowing spiritual agencies to circulate between them, rather than ceding agency to those who would dominate them, characters in the novel maintain a unique but precarious in(ter)dependence, circumventing social narratives that enforce women's economic, romantic, and spiritual dependence on men (fathers, lovers, clergy) to forge relationships in which dominance and subordination are ever shifting and always at play—in which power does not flow downward from God to men and from men to women but instead moves unpredictably between the spiritual realm and the material and between members of both sexes.

This chapter argues that *The Morgesons* is best read as a Spiritualist novel, by which I mean not only that it is a novel *about* Spiritualism, in which particular characters engage in acts of clairvoyance, trance-speaking, and spirit-traveling, but that it enacts a literary form of Spiritualist practice at the level of the text.<sup>146</sup> It does so, I argue, as a means of exploring

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heaven were opened to all. As the late-coming child of the Second Great Awakening, Spiritualism took the awakening's main tenet—salvation is universally possible—to its logical extreme: salvation is universally guaranteed” (Gutierrez 4). Besides a refusal to assign the dead to heaven or hell for all eternity, Spiritualist teaching differed most starkly from traditional Protestant beliefs about death in its insistence that human souls retain the unique characteristics they once displayed on earth—including an attachment to family and friends and a concern about ongoing political and social events—and that the dead are capable of communicating with those who remain among the living. (See Cox and Gutierrez for more thorough descriptions of the history of Spiritualism in America.)

<sup>146</sup> The question of literary genre has perplexed Stoddard's critics since her recovery in the 1970s. Though

possibilities for female self-expression and self-determination in a secular milieu in which agency inheres in sympathetic relations between persons more than in clerical ordination or doctrinal correctness. *The Morgesons* invokes the practices associated with Spiritualism in order to envision forms of female agency that might operate outside the bounds of commerce, competition, conversion, and domination represented by the various patriarchs who feature in the Morgeson sisters' lives. These practices are premised on the acceptance of certain doctrines that can be loosely defined as religious: the persistence of individual human personalities beyond

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the plot of *The Morgesons* follows the basic outlines of domestic and romantic drama, critics have found it nearly impossible to come to agreement on how the novel should be classified within the usual taxonomies of nineteenth-century literary history. In their collection of critical essays on Stoddard, Ellen Weinauer and Robert McClure Smith remark that the author has been "variously identified as a domestic novelist, an antisentimentalist, a local-color precursor of realism, a Brontë-inspired gothicist, a provincial gothicist, and a proto-modernist" and that her writing "continually abjures the definitions critics seek to impose upon it" (6-7). Sandra Zagarell similarly notes that although "commentators have pointed to several traditions that illuminate aspects of her writing, including domestic woman's fiction, feminist bildungsroman, female gothic, and New England gothic, no single tradition can account for it fully" ("Biographical Foreword" 32).

Critics have been particularly puzzled by the differences between Stoddard's novels and the sentimental, didactic fiction of many of her female contemporaries. Julia Stern reads *The Morgesons* as offering "a dialectical rebuttal to the women's tradition inaugurated by [Susan] Warner, [Harriet Beecher] Stowe, [Maria Susanna] Cummins, et al. whose works constitute its literary milieu" ("I Am Cruel" 108). Elizabeth Stockton notes that the plot of *The Morgesons* reads like a sentimental novel set on rewind: "In portraying a character who rejects self-sacrifice and duty as unfulfilling and pointlessly restraining... Stoddard reverses the trajectory of the typical sentimental novel" (426). Christopher Hager invents an entirely new subgenre for *The Morgesons*, remarking that it "stands at odds with the prevailing conventions of the sentimental" (705) and classifying it as an "industrial-sentimental novel," one in which "Stoddard constructs a domestic tale of womanhood and marriage on the skeleton of a much more masculine narrative—the story of eastern Massachusetts's industrial transformation in the late 1850s" (699).

Sabine Matter-Seibel notes the effect that this categorization problem has had on the critical reception of Stoddard's work: "Since she could neither be comfortably claimed for realism nor for regionalism nor for romanticism nor for the domestic novel nor hailed as a modernist, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard has either not been claimed at all or has been treated as an aberration" (20). While this statement is perhaps a bit exaggerated—the critics listed above have, after all, given Stoddard considerable attention—it is true that Stoddard's critics have spilt much ink writing about what her novels are not rather than what they are.

While this chapter does not directly adjudicate the question of genre, it has implications for the discussion, since attempts to classify *The Morgesons* (and its characters) according to recognizable critical terms have become part and parcel of the "monopolization of knowledge" that I discuss in the chapter's final section. The critical need to clarify exactly where *The Morgesons* belongs in a taxonomy of nineteenth-century fiction parallels the critical obsession with classifying the Morgeson sisters, and particularly Veronica, as good or bad, sick or well, liberated or oppressed.

death, the ability of the living to speak with the dead, the “magnetic” or mesmeric influence of certain spiritually gifted persons, and the possibility of clairvoyant communication between people of great emotional sensibility.<sup>147</sup> Even as it implicitly embraces these premises and practices, however, the novel avoids the ritualized (and often commercialized) trappings of the séance and the trance lecture, scenes that would subject Veronica’s and Cassandra’s mysterious powers to public scrutiny at the hands of scientific and religious authorities—some of them, perhaps, among the novel’s readers and critics—who could then pronounce judgment upon the sisters’ spirituality in the same way that various patriarchs pronounce judgment on their beauty, piety, and intelligence.<sup>148</sup>

Spiritualism is not the only symbolic force at work in *The Morgesons*; as the girls’ names suggest, ancient mythology and Catholic hagiography also offer resources for imagining possible ways of being in the world, and the welter of available spiritualities that the novel depicts is part

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<sup>147</sup> Religious historians are quick to point out that Spiritualist practitioners saw dogma as anathema, and that they required no test of belief or proof of conversion for those who would take part in séances or attend trance lectures. This, combined with Spiritualism’s empiricist ambitions—its leaders’ assertions that spiritual phenomena could be verified by experience and even according to the scientific method—often spurs scholars to claim that Spiritualism had no doctrines or articles of belief at all. But the refusal to enforce adherence to doctrine by means of public shaming or excommunication does not necessarily imply the absence of doctrinal content. Ann Braude insists that, despite its lack of a centralized ecclesiastical organization, “Spiritualism should be taken seriously as a religion making a legitimate response to nineteenth-century theological challenges” (*Radical* xv). Though Spiritualism could not be defined as a “church” in the way that Baptist or Anglican congregations could be, those who engaged seriously with Spiritualism accepted certain principles about God, the afterlife, and the fate of human souls—principles that can reasonably be called doctrines.

<sup>148</sup> The nineteenth-century text most often characterized as a Spiritualist novel is Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar* (1868), another work that eschews the particular details of Spiritualist practice—there are no séances and no audible conversations with the dead—while nevertheless accepting the basic Spiritualist premises that individual personalities persist after death and that loved ones will recognize one another in their spiritual forms. *The Gates Ajar* differs from *The Morgesons*, however, in its generic recognizability—Nina Baym calls it a “curious transmogrification of the woman’s fiction into a novel of heaven” (*Woman’s Fiction* 297)—and its straightforward dialogue. It is less a meditation on Spiritualist agency than an extended exegesis of Spiritualist beliefs as reconcilable with liberal Christian religion: Aunt Winifred, the novel’s primary proponent of Spiritualism, spends much of her narrative time explaining how the Spiritualist vision of heaven accords with a Biblical one. *The Gates Ajar* is a novel, not about exploring mystery, but about clarifying doctrine and explaining away difference.

and parcel of the secular milieu that makes agency available to the Morgeson sisters. Examining the role of Spiritualism in the novel does not offer a legend or key that will make the path of interpretation suddenly straight and narrow; *The Morgesons* is a text that embodies mystery in its form and its plot, seeking not to explain away or unmask the ineffable, but to channel it. *The Morgesons* steers a course between overt supernaturalism and sterile scientism that invokes the indeterminacy of secular agency in the tumultuous middle decades of the nineteenth century. The ethic of *The Morgesons* is not an ethic of explication or uncovering, but of obfuscation; like the saint from whom Veronica takes her name, its guiding symbol is the veil. But readings of *The Morgesons*—and of Veronica’s character in particular—have too often hinged on the unmasking or unveiling of narrative mystery, on a secularized tradition of diagnostic reading that reduces the Morgeson sisters and the novel as a whole to the status of problems to be solved. This chapter concludes by revealing the ways in which secularized reading practices have limited the available methods for approaching and interpreting *The Morgesons* and other Spiritualist fictions by obscuring the nature and possibilities of secular forms of agency.

### **Secularization and Secularism in *The Morgesons***

An early scene in *The Morgesons* finds Cassandra, at about sixteen years old, standing on the sofa in her Massachusetts home giving a mock sermon “after the manner of Mr. Boold, of Barmouth, taking... for my text, ‘Like David’s Harp of solemn sound’” (67).<sup>149</sup> Cassandra’s

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<sup>149</sup> The now-standard scholarly edition of *The Morgesons*, edited by Buell and Zagarell and published in 1984, reprints the revised text of *The Morgesons* that Stoddard’s publishers issued in 1889. For her 1889 edition, Zagarell notes, Stoddard “made no major structural changes, but she did make extensive minor revisions, mostly for the sake of greater conciseness but sometimes leading to a marked change of effect.” For instance, Stoddard altered a key piece of dialogue from “‘are you possessed?’” to “‘are you mad?’”, “‘thereby effacing the link between this passage and the motif of... possession introduced in the very first line of the book’” (“Introduction” 4). Because I am interested in how *The Morgesons* reflects the changing

parody of the local clergyman brings several members of the household to hysterical laughter, as she imitates his expressive gestures and pompous tone. When her father, Locke Morgeson, enters the room with a strange man, Cassy is neither abashed nor ashamed: she “wave[s her] hand... a la Boold” and descends from her perch to greet the newcomer who will one day become her lover (67).

Cassy’s Boold-ness—her willingness to ridicule and disregard the pronouncements of New England’s orthodox clergy—has led critics to read *The Morgesons* as a depiction of secularization and religious decline. Seeking signs of the novel’s religious commitments in details of character and setting rather than in innovations of narrative structure and form, critics have read *The Morgesons*’s satirical portrayal of orthodox Protestantism and its ordained representatives as a dismissal of or an attack on religion. Lawrence Buell, for instance, noting how Stoddard’s text eschews theological discussion in favor of an extended attention to relationships between people, discounts any religious contribution the novel might make:

Stoddard... portrays a setting in which theology is reduced to parlor conversation and the supernatural resolves itself into... offbeat bohemian charm.... The ecclesiastical politics of Cassandra’s hometown parish are also intermittently detailed. Yet such details are treated as interesting only to pious elders against whom she has defined herself.... (364-365)

Buell reads *The Morgesons* as marking the decline of New England theological rigor; the Morgeson women’s engagement with religion amounts to mere dabbling, since anyone who is not interested in orthodox Calvinist theology and “ecclesiastical politics” is not “doing” religion at all. Sandra Zagarell builds on Buell’s argument, reading Stoddard’s text as not simply recording but actively hastening the decline of religion in America. According to Zagarell *The Morgesons*’s “attacks on religion correspond with Stoddard’s critique of the Bible for assigning

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religious atmosphere of antebellum New England—particularly the mid-century prominence of Spiritualist possession—I have used the 1862 text rather than the 1889 as my source.



women inferior status” and contribute to the increasing secularization of American literary culture in the mid-nineteenth century (“Repossession” 56).<sup>150</sup> Reading “religion” as primarily the domain of ordained Protestant clergy, Buell and Zagarell assume that because the clerics who appear in *The Morgesons* are ridiculed or relegated to diegetic obscurity, religion is not a central concern of the text.

There are two unspoken—and incorrect—assumptions that undergird such readings of *The Morgesons*: first, that “religion” and “New England Protestantism” are one and the same; second, that Protestant ministers and theologians, as the putative arbiters of doctrine, are the primary representatives of religious activity in America, and that by ridiculing these authority figures Stoddard is attacking and discrediting religion as such. Both assumptions conform to the secularization narrative laid out by Max Weber and taken up by other prominent twentieth-century historians and sociologists.<sup>151</sup> According to the secularization narrative, Western societies are moving inexorably away from superstitious and primitive religious beliefs and toward an enlightened rationalism that replaces faith with evidence and belief with fact. In the particularly American version of the secularization narrative, “the public influence of the Protestant clergy is [considered] the most important measure of the role of religion in American society” (Braude, “Women’s History” 93), so that any text that questions the authority of Protestant ministers—as *The Morgesons* does—will seem to be attacking religion as an aspect of human experience and reflecting or even contributing to the secularization of American

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<sup>150</sup> For Buell this narrative is one of declension: the intellectual rigor of New England orthodoxy is lost, leaving a vague “bohemianism” in its wake. (Critics familiar with scholarship on the sentimental will recognize this narrative as the same one that undergirds Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture*.) For Zagarell the story is one of progress: religion is successfully done away with, leaving women unencumbered by its patriarchal pronouncements.

<sup>151</sup> I discussed the provenance of the secularization narrative and its effects for literary criticism in the introduction to this dissertation.

culture.<sup>152</sup>

Critical treatments of *The Morgesons* that equate the fracturing of Calvinist orthodoxy with a decline in the cultural authority of a Protestant theological worldview reveal the persistent power of the secularization narrative. In these interpretations, New England is left a spiritual wasteland once the authority of the clergy is questioned and interdenominational wrangling is no longer the norm.<sup>153</sup> But the secularization narrative is factually incorrect—at least in the United States, where surveys, census data, and historical research show relatively consistent levels of religious adherence among Americans since at least the early nineteenth century<sup>154</sup>—and, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, its influence has produced misreadings of texts like *The*

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<sup>152</sup> As Tracy Fessenden has shown, our current, putatively “secularized” American public sphere is actually structured by a set of beliefs and assumptions about human experience that are drawn directly from Protestant history and practice. The systematic identification of “religion” with “New England Protestantism” is not so much a historical fact as an ideological superstructure that assumes that attitudes, values, and institutions that do not align with mainstream Protestant assumptions are alien, not only to Protestant Christianity, but to America itself. According to Fessenden, the historical processes by which church and state have come to be increasingly separated in American civic life have paradoxically strengthened the unspoken bond between “American” values and Protestant values: “religion comes to be defined as ‘Christian’ by default, and an implicit association between ‘American’ and ‘Christian’ is upheld even by those who have, one imagines, very little invested in its maintenance” (3).

<sup>153</sup> Very few critics have examined the intimations of Spiritualist and other occult religiosity that permeate *The Morgesons*. Christopher Felker, whose work I discuss later in this chapter, has written the most thorough analysis I have found of the subject. Michelle Ann Abate, though not addressing Spiritualism specifically, details the resemblance between Veronica Morgeson’s odd behaviors and those that characterized the confessed witches executed at Salem in 1692. Abate demonstrates how Veronica’s strange eating habits, her fits of temper, her alternations between physical strength and weakness, her potions and concoctions, her ability to predict the weather, her aversion to water, and her prophetic dreams all align her with the Salem witches.

<sup>154</sup> See Ann Braude’s “Women’s History *Is* American Religious History” for a battery of research supporting this assertion. The most recent survey of religious identification and adherence in America, the Pew Research Center’s 2012 Religion and Politics Survey, found that while the number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation (the so-called “nones”) has risen by 5% in the past 5 years (from 15% to 20%), of those who were unaffiliated with a particular religious organization:

Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. (“Nones”) The secularization narrative, then, is difficult to apply even to those claiming no religious affiliation, since many of these “nones” engage in behaviors and hold beliefs in common with the religiously affiliated.

*Morgesons*, in which religious belief and practice are neither ignored nor attacked but rather are taken up as a rich narrative ground in which to explore questions of belief and agency. Critics preoccupied with the declining prestige of the New England Calvinist establishment overlook the fact that there is another religious discourse at work in the scene in which Cassy mocks Mr. Boold: the discourse of Spiritualism, in which minds separated by death and distance are nevertheless sympathetically connected and past and future are legible texts to those with the gifts to read them. When Charles Morgeson enters the room, Veronica Morgeson, whose religiosity and uncanny spiritual gifts form a major motif of the novel, solemnly predicts his approaching death—“There are six Charles Morgesons buried in our grave yard” (67)—and her clairvoyant powers signal the centrality of secular concerns to Stoddard’s text. The difference between reading *The Morgesons* as a “secularized” text and a “secular” one is crucial: it is the difference between a “singular... sensual landscape” in which agency is attributed unproblematically to individuals acting consciously and independently of one another and of purportedly supernatural forces, and “a much more complex world, one in which there are multiple agencies possible,” including forms of agency exercised nonrationally or in collaboration with other realms (Jaudon 731). *The Morgesons* adopts this latter, more complex model, and in order to properly recognize the forms of religious agency available to the Morgeson women, we must accurately assess the secular (rather than secularized) conditions that characterize the novel’s milieu.

Eschewing inaccurate models of religious history that prematurely proclaim the death of religion by pointing to a decline in clerical prestige, religious historian John Modern, building on the work of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and other social theorists, has characterized contemporary Western societies as defined, not by secularization, but by the

conditions of secularism. The term “secularism” describes, not the absence or decline of religion, or even the rise of pluralism, but a set of historical, intellectual, and cultural conditions that make “religion” into a category available for analysis and deconstruction rather than an unquestioned set of assumptions about the nature of the universe:

Rather than signal a decreasing influence of the religious, secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made ‘religion’ a recognizable and vital thing in the world. To make inquiries into secularism is to ask how certain concepts of religion (and the social formations that revolve around them) became consonant with the way things were—in essence—as portrayed by a secular political order. Such inquiry... directs attention to the styles of reasoning that determine the truth of religion and/or its falsity, that enable a person to know the world and objects within it along a religious-secular continuum. (Modern, *Secularism* 7-8)

Rather than providing evidence of the death of religion in America, *The Morgesons* dramatizes precisely the conditions of secularism that Modern and other religious historians have described as bursting into being in the early- to mid-nineteenth-century United States. For one thing, the novel is far more pluralistic than its critics have made note of: in addition to its ongoing concern with the condition of the Congregational church in mid-nineteenth-century Massachusetts, the narrative events of the tale also reflect other aspects of nineteenth-century religious change, including the increasing influence of revivalist sects like the Methodists as well as the imaginative and devotional possibilities offered by the spread of non-Protestant movements like Catholicism and Spiritualism.<sup>155</sup>

But secularism and pluralism are not identical; rather, secularism describes the set of conditions within which pluralism becomes possible and new configurations of religious agency

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<sup>155</sup> Individual nineteenth-century Americans often combined an interest in Spiritualist belief and practice with regular attendance at Protestant services; indeed, this is precisely what Cassandra and Veronica Morgeson do. So in this sense it is perhaps somewhat reductionist to refer to Spiritualism as a “non-Protestant” religious movement. Institutionally and philosophically, however, Spiritualism defined itself as a counter-movement to Protestant orthodoxy, destined to enlighten the dogmatism of entrenched ecclesiastical authorities.

are born. To read the role of religion in *The Morgesons* properly, critics must attend, not only to the static pronouncements of the clergy at the margins of the story, but to the fluid spiritual power of the women at its center.<sup>156</sup> The “styles of reasoning” modeled in and by *The Morgesons* can best be recognized, not by homing in on scenes that denigrate orthodox clergy and church rituals, but by examining tableaux that depict the intermingling of different spiritual modes and the sympathetic connections enabled by the interpenetration of coexisting systems of belief. By attending to the secular registers of the novel, I argue, we are able to discern that *The Morgesons* is a text, not about the decline of male clerical power, but about the circulation of women’s religious agency; as such, it employs Spiritualism as a symbolic force and a set of discursive practices that together enabled new visions of agency at the level of plot and character and new generic possibilities for female authorship. *The Morgesons* models a style of secular reasoning by way of a literary form that elevates indeterminacy above certainty and locates possibilities for agency in the mysterious interactions between persons. As such it offers a kind of tutorial on how to exist and act in a secular world in which agency can be grasped but not held, wielded but not owned. To recognize such styles of reasoning critics must amend their reading practices to do justice to the mysteries of a secular world rather than the certainties of a secularized one.

*The Morgesons* begins with a scene in which orthodox and Spiritualist modes of belief circulate between generations of Morgeson women in a domestic setting, demonstrating how the

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<sup>156</sup> It is true that *The Morgesons* reflects a New England milieu undergoing tectonic shifts in religious adherence within the context of the unprecedented economic, demographic, and technological changes that marked the early- to mid-nineteenth century:

The spiritual hothouse [of the antebellum United States] was in some sense a product of an unusual conjunction of social stresses, ranging from the increasing pace of geographic and social mobility and the fallout of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, ‘modernization,’ and democratization to the extension of market relations, religious diversity, and the sinuous careers of religion and science and of class, race, and gender relations.... (Cox 16-17)

The social and political role of mainline Protestant denominations was certainly under revision in nineteenth-century America, but to read *The Morgesons* as little more than a record of that revision is to misunderstand the creative force that religion represents in the novel.

secular spirit of the nineteenth century, rather than indicating an inexorable religious decline, could engender new forms of spiritual connection and female agency. Invoking the sentimental fiction of Laurence Sterne, the Puritan piety of Richard Baxter, and the Spiritualist writings of the 1860s, the scene positions *The Morgesons* at the center of a literary tradition that reaches back to eighteenth-century sentimentalism and an austere spiritual tradition characterized by both theological rigor and visionary devotionism. Detailing the reading practices of the “possessed” child Cassandra Morgeson—the semi-autobiographical avatar of the author—the scene entwines secular reading and writing practices with the markers of sentimental domesticity and female piety to paint a tableau of trans-temporal devotion in which the scene itself becomes the medium of spiritual connection between character, author, and reader.

The scene takes place in Mary Morgeson’s “winter room,” where the reading materials chosen by the Morgeson women signify the welter of religious modalities that circulate through the novel, including orthodox theological debate, clairvoyant communication with the dead, and glimpses of the afterlife. At the same time, it draws cross-temporal links between *The Morgesons*’s 1830s setting and its 1862 publication—links that disrupt narratives of secularization and religious decline. Cassandra Morgeson, ten years old and outspoken, climbs a piece of furniture to reach a shelf full of books, among them *Northern Regions* (1827) and *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (1658). The two books seemingly could not have less in common: Richard Baxter’s *The Saints’ Rest* is a Protestant devotional manual and meditation on death that describes the afterlife in symbolic terms that would later be adopted by Spiritualists and liberal Protestants. *Northern Regions* is an adventure book for children that tells the sensational stories of Arctic explorers Richard Parry and John Franklin; in the 1830s, when the earliest scenes of *The Morgesons* take place, Parry and Franklin were alive and well, but by the 1860s, when

Stoddard published the novel, the late Sir John Franklin had achieved posthumous fame as a frequent otherworldly attendant at Spiritualist séances and performances (Lehman 104-105).<sup>157</sup> The juxtaposition of the two texts allows the scene to face, Janus-like, both backward and forward, as it invokes both a long-standing tradition of liberal Christian devotionism and the modern, exploratory impulse of the nineteenth century as they met on the common ground of Spiritualist belief and practice.

Cassandra's expedition to the top of the bookshelf also yields a copy of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, the font of much nineteenth-century sentimental literature; by invoking Sterne alongside the *Saints' Rest* and the *Northern Regions*, Stoddard both situates her novel within an ongoing sentimental literary tradition and indicates the centrality of Spiritualist relations to her tale. According to Robert Cox, in the antebellum period "Spiritualist writings were suffused with the language of sentiment expressed through a peculiarly physical emotionality in which affect and sensation were integrated and extended beyond the boundaries of the individual" (3). Meanwhile, as Cassandra is climbing shelves and reading about far-off places, her mother Mary Warren Morgeson and Mary's sister Mercy are reading aloud from the *Boston Recorder* an article that describes a doctrinal debate between warring ministers of the Congregationalist church.<sup>158</sup> Though Cassandra's narrating voice mocks the terms of the debate

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<sup>157</sup> The well-known Spiritualist medium Emma Hardinge Britten was particularly famous for her clairvoyant conversations with Franklin, including her ability to accurately describe Arctic landscapes she had never visited.

<sup>158</sup> The article that Mary is reading aloud is an account of (unsuccessful) ecumenical outreach among the Congregationalist clergy: by questioning which baptismal rite (sprinkling from a font versus complete immersion in water) is salvifically efficacious and making friendly overtures toward the local Baptist minister, Thaddeus Turner has invoked the wrath of the conservative Congregationalist hierarchy. While Turner loses the debate, the discussion itself signifies the increasing liberalism of New England Calvinism in the 1830s, when the scene takes place.

At the metatextual level the specific reference to the *Boston Recorder* may be an "in joke" intended for Stoddard's friends. The editor of the *Recorder* was Nathaniel Willis, father of Nathaniel Parker Willis, the influential New York writer, editor, and literary colleague of Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard.

(she remembers the principal antagonists as “Brother Boanerges” and the “Church of Hyena”), Mary and Mercy approach it with theological seriousness, and their immersion in New England religious discourse is enmeshed, in the narrating Cassandra’s mind, with the more Spiritualist religious terms in which she understands her own existence.

Like the later preface in which Stoddard would describe the otherworldly composition of *The Morgesons*, Cassandra’s memory of Mary Morgeson’s “winter room” takes on a ghostly quality, with past, present, and future collapsing into one as Cassandra describes how “the hands of [the house’s] builders have crumbled to dust” (8). Describing the middle-class Victorian comforts of the room—its chintz chair-covers, serge curtains, “chocolate-colored” carpet, and cheerful Franklin stove, Cassandra describes a warm domestic scene in which the comingling of different literary-religious forms—the devotional manual, the Spiritualist memoir, the sectarian journal—facilitates female community and authorial agency (8-9). When Aunt Mercy declares the adventuresome Cassandra “possessed” she identifies Cassandra as the focal point for these secular circulations of belief. As reader and auditor Cassandra is possessed by the spirits of Franklin and Parry, by “Brother Boanerges,” and by the memory of those whose “hands have crumbled to dust”; as Mary’s daughter and Mercy’s niece she is possessed by their theological concerns even when she does not share them; and as narrator of the scene she is possessed by Stoddard’s authorial voice. Rather than indicating a narrative of religious decay from the doctrinal concerns of Mary and Mercy’s generation to the Spiritualist interests of Cassandra’s, the scene offers a depiction of female religious identification not bound by narratives of progress, decline, or even chronological time: Protestant devotionism, Spiritualist explorations, sentimental fiction, and sectarian debate coexist within the loose temporal framework of



Cassandra's memory and *The Morgesons*'s opening pages, offering a depiction of female community and agency enabled by a trans-temporal secular milieu.

### **Agency Unhinged: Spiritualist Practice and the Circulation of Agency in *The Morgesons***

Cassandra's "possession" is an ongoing motif of *The Morgesons*, a moniker applied to her when she performs actions deemed willful or unladylike—in other words, when she asserts unclassifiable or ostensibly inappropriate forms of agency. To be possessed by another, or to appropriate someone else's voice, is to transgress boundaries of individual identity—to deny apparent separations between unique minds and souls, and even between this world and the next. In *The Morgesons*, episodes of trance-speaking, clairvoyance, spirit-traveling, and other Spiritualist practice both indicate and simultaneously construct unique sympathetic connections between characters, while the fluid and unpredictable nature of Spiritualist agency enables new configurations of interpersonal power as well.

Such fluid agencies, John Modern notes, were a hallmark of nineteenth-century secularism. Modern describes the nineteenth-century secular situation in the language of "haunting": "Antebellum life... has everything to do with [a] street-walking God who is at once unsettling and determinative. It is a God who haunts the human subject yet erases that moment of haunting as it is happening. It is a God who incorporates... fleeting moments into the project of defining the sentience of human nature as disenchanting, thereby perpetuating its own enchantments and stability" (*Secularism* xxiii-xxiv). For Modern and other recent historians of American religion, the flowering of Spiritualist practice in the mid-nineteenth century is both effect and sign of this haunted modernity "in which one's actions are acted upon by others from a distance—people, to be sure, but also and perhaps more importantly, concepts, representations,

and words” (Modern, *Secularism* xxix). Under such spiritually destabilized conditions, the rationalized notion of agency as something unitary, proprietary, and voluntary—something owned and wielded by individuals acting consciously and independently—is neither accurate nor helpful. In a society in which ontological boundaries may shift at any moment, agency will seem to inhere in objects and organizations as much as in individuals:

To focus on the disciplinary air of the secular age is necessarily to focus on something that may seem anathema to either antebellum Americans or contemporary historians who imagine selves as having certain inherent traits. These selves have the capacity to access, immediately, their own thoughts, and they are set apart from organized forces and systemic structures, a removal that guarantees both the political and epistemological premises of the agentive self. But agency is not an either/or prospect. It is circuitous. (Modern, *Secularism* 6)

It is the circuitous functioning of secular agency—the unpredictable circulation of motive forces between sympathetic persons—that enables Cassandra and Veronica Morgeson to upend expected romantic and domestic narratives and to “come into possession” of themselves.

In *The Morgesons* the invocation of Spiritualist practices and the circuitous agencies they enable provides the possibility for defying standard romantic and sentimental plots at the level of both story and form. Spiritualist practice enables kinds of sympathetic connection among Cassandra, Veronica, and their friends that need not conform to the narratives of romantic love, sibling rivalry, sudden conversion, and economic dominance that their New England neighbors would impose upon them. Cassandra and her future brother-in-law Ben Somers, for instance, refuse to fall into the romantic rituals prescribed by their school companions at Rosville. At their first meeting Ben describes, accurately and without ever having seen her, Cassandra’s sister Veronica: “[I] fancy that the person to whom the name belongs has a narrow face, with eyes near together, and a quantity of light hair, which falls straight; that she has long hands; is fond of

Gothic architecture, and has a will of her own” (96).<sup>159</sup> Their non sequitur conversation and immediate rapport (Ben: ““Are your family from Troy?”” Cassandra: ““Do you dislike my name?””) suggest an ongoing acquaintance, though they have never met, and when Cassandra’s eyes wander Ben asks ““Are you looking for your sister?”” as though Cassandra and Veronica could communicate across the distance between Surrey and Rosville, as Ben and Veronica apparently can (96). Ben’s inexplicable clairvoyance—his ability to describe a woman he has never met, and whom he will someday marry—and the immediate psychic connection between Veronica, Cassandra, and Ben signal both the novel’s resistance to predictable romantic narratives (why talk to a beautiful woman about her distant and less attractive sister?) and a model of shared agency that can cross boundaries of time and space. Rather than imagining herself as the recipient (or victim) of Ben’s romantic attentions and placing herself in a position of dependence upon him, Cassandra and Ben form a friendship of equals in which the dominant role shifts with circumstance and need.

Ben and Cassandra’s emotional interdependence is premised on their Spiritualist forms of communication and enables them to maintain their platonic friendship in the face of social conventions that would cast them in standard romantic roles. Ben, twice described by other characters as “visionary” (179, 256), predicts the bad end to which Cassandra’s romance with Charles Morgeson will lead,<sup>160</sup> but rather than imposing his will on Cassandra he expresses his

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<sup>159</sup> Compare this description to the narrator’s depiction of the teenaged Veronica on page 136 of the novel.

<sup>160</sup> Ben twice predicts Charles Morgeson’s death. Shortly after meeting Cassandra Ben recites Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* for her benefit. When Cassandra asks her friend Helen Perkins who Agamemnon was, Helen replies, ““He gave Cassandra her last ride,”” an explanation that foreshadows the carriage accident that will kill Charles Morgeson and wound Cassandra. Later Ben hums “I drink the cup of a costly death” just as Charles is confessing his love for Cassandra, then spills a glass of wine over Charles’s injured wrist, which will figure in the carriage accident. (The line is from Tennyson’s “Eleanore,” itself a paraphrase of Sappho’s “Poem of Jealousy.”)

opinions only telepathically:

We looked at each other without speaking, but divined each other's thoughts. "You *are* as true and noble, as I think you are lovely. I must have it so. You *shall not* thwart me." "Faithful and good Ben,—do you pass a sufficiently strict examination upon yourself? Are you not disposed to carry through your own ideas without considering *me*?" Whatever our internal comments were, we smiled upon each other with the sincerity of friendship.... (204)

Cassandra's access to Ben's thoughts gives her the authority to resist his moralizing attempts to control her behavior; when Ben spouts generic platitudes about her relationship with Charles, Cassandra replies with "Chut; drop the commonplaces, for once, Ben" (129). At the same time the two friends' Spiritualist intimacy gives Cassandra the authority to advise Ben about his tendency toward alcoholism.

The Spiritualistic connections between Ben and Cassandra also enable them to defy the romantic expectations others would impose upon them. Cassandra's friendship with Ben circumvents the well-worn romantic plot—two wealthy and attractive young people related distantly by blood or marriage fall in love and unite their fortunes—and their unconventional friendship is literalized in their ability to communicate outside the bounds of spoken conversation. The uniqueness of their relationship is brought into sharp relief by the reactions of those around them, who interpret their behavior according to the expected terms of nineteenth-century sexual politics. Observing the strong but unspoken connections between them, Ben's friends assume the end of a predictable romance that never took place: "[i]t is all over with them" (204). Ben's mother, too, offers a conventional explanation for Cassandra and Ben's closeness: Cassandra is after Ben for his money. But Cassandra and Ben refuse to conform to these categorizations—the jilted man, the gold-digging woman—which assume fixed power

relations between men and women: women control sex, men control money.<sup>161</sup>

The Spiritualist abilities demonstrated by characters in *The Morgesons*, including the clairvoyant connections between them, offer explorations of shared agency and demonstrate how unpredictable agentive formulations can disrupt expected interpersonal narratives—not only those involving romance and marriage but those that depend on patriarchal family dynamics. Having found it difficult to communicate with her mother in this life, Cassandra can recall her mother's spirit from beyond the grave: “[w]hen my thoughts turned from her, it seemed as if she were newly lost in the vast and wandering Universe of the Dead, whence I had brought her” (235). Such inversions are disruptive precisely because they undermine the patriarchal traditions of inheritance and (economic) possession that structure Cassandra's and Veronica's lives: as daughters the girls are worth less than sons. When their younger brother Arthur is born, they are quickly made aware of their relative value, as one servant, Hepsey, declares that ““Locke Morgeson should have a son... to leave his money to,”” while another, Temperance, points out the orthodox underpinnings of the tradition: ““Girls are thought nothing of in this 'ligious [i.e., religious] section; they may go to the poor house, as long as the sons have plenty.”” Mrs. Morgeson herself confirms the primacy of sons when she tells Cassandra, ““I am glad it is not a woman”” (29). After Mrs. Morgeson's death, Cassandra reverses the terms of this experience, performing a Spiritualist inversion of childbirth by bringing her mother back into a world in which, like a newborn babe, she finds herself “scared and troubled by the pressure of mortal life around her” (240). Though she mourns her mother, Cassandra inherits her parents' home and comes to feel “an absolute self-possession, and a sense of occupation I had long been a stranger

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<sup>161</sup> Charles Morgeson's spirit, too, is subject to Cassy's mediumistic gifts: after his death she conducts spectral conversations with him in which she interrogates his motives, and her own, in ways that the imperious Charles would never have allowed in life. In these conversations with the dead, Cassy throws off Charles's power over her and is finally able to admit her feelings for Desmond Somers (137-38).

to” (255). “Possession” here, as elsewhere in the novel, takes on a double meaning: Cassandra comes into possession of her home and herself by way of her gift of Spiritualist possession, as the fluid agencies enabled by Spiritualist mediumship invert the power assumptions inherent in a mother-child relationship founded on patriarchal structures of inheritance and female worth.

Under nineteenth-century gender conventions, to possess one’s home as a woman is both to fulfill and to defy domestic expectations; Cassandra’s inheritance could be legitimately categorized as either progressive or conservative, since it confines her to domestic space even as it makes her master and mistress of that space. But plotting Cassandra’s “possession” along a political spectrum would reduce the complexities of her Spiritualist self-negotiation. Histories of the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement often display such an instrumental understanding of religious agency as they attempt to pin down Spiritualism’s effects by categorizing the content of spirit communications as either positive or negative, either progressive or conservative.<sup>162</sup> In the case of literary criticism such content-focused interpretation leads to misreadings of the Morgeson sisters’ spiritual agency. Christopher Felker, for instance, one of the few critics to

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<sup>162</sup> One of the earliest scholarly works to address the nineteenth-century Spiritualist phenomenon as an important historical movement, Ann Braude’s *Radical Spirits*, describes how the inverted assumptions that undergirded Spiritualist practice—that the weak and sensitive could most easily access the powers of the spirit world—enabled female trance mediums to make radical political and social assertions, including feminist and antislavery declarations, before mixed audiences of men and women. Robert S. Cox has challenged this reading of the Spiritualist movement as inherently progressive, noting that the “spirits spoke in voices that spanned nearly the entire political spectrum of midcentury America, occupying positions, for example, that ran from immediate abolition to gradualism to pro-slavery, from egalitarianism to antiegalitarianism, capitalism to socialism” (19). Cox has thus criticized Braude’s and other works of religious and social history that treat Spiritualist experience “instrumentally” as a scheme for advancing radical reformist causes. (Cox notes that many of these works are based on the findings of anthropologist I.M. Lewis, who studied cross-cultural instances of spirit communication while problematically removing them from their local and temporal contexts. Lewis concluded that “possession has the capacity to challenge and, at least on a local and personal scale, to subvert the normal relations of social power, particularly with respect to gender” (Cox 17).) While I agree with Cox on the dangers of viewing religion instrumentally, it is possible to study the effects of Spiritualist phenomena without assuming that Spiritualism’s adherents produced those effects instrumentally or even intentionally. In order to do so, however, we must make a distinction between the radical inhabitations of agency that Spiritualist practice enabled and the political content of the language uttered by the medium while under the influence of trance.

address the Spiritualist motif of *The Morgesons*, classifies the characters' Spiritualist gifts as "antinomian" and "evil."<sup>163</sup> Prompted by the same narrative of declension that guides Buell's reading of the novel, Felker codes characters' Spiritualist gifts as indicators of their corrupt natures; Felker thus reads a friendly conversation between Cassandra, Ben, and Helen Perkins about Helen's tattoo as a sign of Cassandra's "secret evil" and Ben's supposedly "Svengali-like power" over her (Felker 216). Judging the conversation in terms of its Spiritualist form rather than its content, however—by the effects produced by the psychic connections between Ben, Cassandra, and Helen rather than by the purported apostasy of Spiritualist belief—results in a different reading: one in which three strangers quickly overcome the constraints imposed by New England propriety and achieve a swift and lasting intimacy. The conversation also provides Cassandra with a new way to understand herself and her attraction to Charles Morgeson: during the conversation Cassandra is "possessed" to speak of her home in Surrey, Helen is "moved" to reveal a secret tattoo of her lover's initials, and Ben, divining Cassandra's feelings for Charles Morgeson, hints that "we shall all be tattooed," foretelling the carriage accident that will kill Charles and leave Cassandra "tattooed" with scars (103, 163).<sup>164</sup> Eschewing attempts to classify Spiritualist practice or Spiritualist gifts as inherently good or evil makes it possible to recognize the unusual and empowering nature of the platonic cross-gender friendship that secular spiritualities enable in the novel.

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<sup>163</sup> Christopher Felker's chapter on Stoddard is in his *Reinventing Cotton Mather in the American Renaissance*. In keeping with its declensionist reading of nineteenth-century religious history—difficult to avoid, perhaps, in a book on the *Magnalia Christi Americana*—Felker's chapter lumps witchcraft and Spiritualism together under the general category of "antinomian," then interprets these elements as evidence of New England's putative slide into religious apostasy rather than as expressions of religious vitality and personal agency.

<sup>164</sup> Jennifer Putzi recognizes Cassandra's scars as a sign of her agency, though Putzi reads this agency as primarily sexual: "The scars, obtained in the midst of the awakening of her sexual desires, reveal this part of her that her society teaches her must remain silent" (168).

The problem with readings like Felker's, then, is that they elevate the content of Spiritualist doctrine above the formal effects of Spiritualist practice: they privilege what Spiritualists said over what Spiritualism, as a social force, could do. Spiritualism did not progress from "a children's ghost story, [to] an after-dinner entertainment, [to] a popular national phenomenon and a powerful new religion" by virtue of its content alone (McGarry 2). Rather, Spiritualism became a transformative religious discourse not only by changing what could be said but by altering the dynamics of who was allowed to speak and how—by blurring the boundaries between the spiritual and the material and between individual minds.<sup>165</sup> Spiritualist belief and practice posited the agency that flowed through Spiritualist circles as an unpredictable and fluid force wielded collectively and adroitly by those with the least access to sources of temporal power, whether extrinsic (wealth and education) or intrinsic (maleness and whiteness). In the process, it gave those traditionally positioned as meaning's repositories—particularly women—unprecedented access to channels of communication through which meaning might travel and be changed in the process.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> "[H]uman agency," notes the anthropologist Webb Keane, "is not always something people want entirely to celebrate or claim for themselves; they may prefer to find agency in other worlds" ("Religious Language" 65-66). But to express the quest for agency in terms of "preference" is to oversimplify the model of agency at work in Spiritualist practice, as though religious agency were a tool one picked up and put down at will. Spiritualism, in fact, baffled attempts to assign preference and intention, consistently raising the question of where agency might reside and whether and to what extent individual preference and choice were involved in spiritual practice at all.

<sup>166</sup> Spiritualism's power to upend established cultural narratives of power and agency necessarily elicited vehement reproofs from religious and cultural authorities. The potential dangers of circulating agency can be inferred from the vehemence with which Spiritualism's claims were repudiated, most often through attempts to determine the "true" source of the power that lay behind acts of Spiritualist agency. Scientists, clergymen, and other cultural representatives performed investigations or logical exercises whose purpose, irrespective of their methodologies, was to deny the fluidity of Spiritualist agency and locate a stable source for Spiritualist power, whether that source was the machinations of a fraudulent medium, the overactive imagination of an impressionable teenager, or the connivings of the devil himself. The most famous of these was the so-called "Cambridge Investigations," in which Harvard professors Benjamin Peirce, Louis Agassiz, and Eben Horsford were invited to view a demonstration of and pass judgment on the Spiritualist gifts displayed by the Fox sisters and other well known mediums. Emma



It was precisely the unpredictable nature of Spiritualist agency and its consequent potential for social disruption that made Spiritualism such a controversial movement. Responses to Spiritualist practice thus often sought to pin down the nature and source of Spiritualist agency in an effort to undercut its disruptive potential; it is the logical and rationalizing tendencies of such attempts that *The Morgesons* counters with its narrative ambiguities. A representative essay in the August 1854 issue of *Putnam's Monthly*, "Spiritual Materialism," illustrates the problematics of agency that informed nineteenth-century debates over Spiritualist practice and the argumentative lengths to which its detractors would go to pin down the source of the power at work in Spiritualist activity.<sup>167</sup> According to "Spiritual Materialism," the dangers of Spiritualist belief and practice lay not in the movement's physical phenomena, but in its practitioners' refusal to locate power and agency in stable and predictable places. Seeking to deny the possibility of collective forms of agency, the essay insists that for one person to have agency, another's agency "must have been destroyed" (160).<sup>168</sup> "Spiritual Materialism," then,

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Hardinge Britten gave an account of this event in her *Modern American Spiritualism*, admitting that "the result of these meetings, whether we take the acknowledgments of the Spiritualists, or the *pro tem.* report of the professors themselves, was a decided failure" (*Modern* 186).

<sup>167</sup> Like most pieces in *Putnam's*, "Spiritual Materialism" was printed without attribution, but according to *Poole's Index of Periodicals* it was written by "A.T. Tracy." (I can find no biographical information on Tracy, though he appears to have published one other article in *Putnam's*, "Mining Vanities," in 1855.) Both Elizabeth Stoddard and her husband Richard published pieces in *Putnam's*, Richard in 1853, 1855, and 1870, and Elizabeth in 1868 and 1869. Their friends Horace Greeley and Bayard Taylor were also frequent contributors. The issue in which "Spiritual Materialism" appeared also contained Taylor's "Ethiopian Nights' Entertainments," so it is likely that both Richard and Elizabeth read it.

<sup>168</sup> "Spiritual Materialism" draws a fixed line of demarcation between the spiritual world and the material, insisting that the twain will never meet, "that it is impossible that a spirit should manifest itself physically" (159). Faced, however, with the fact that thousands of Americans claimed to have seen spinning tables and heard mysterious knockings and ghostly music apparently brought about by spiritual means, the essay goes on to explain that, if such things *are* possible, they must be achieved by the suppression of participants' wills to those of their spiritual accomplices:

There remains, so far as we can see, but the one way in which physical phenomena can be the action of spirits. If the spirits can obtain the complete control of a human agent; if the persons in a 'circle,' beneath whose fingers a table takes to its legs and perambulates, are really and truly

attempts to debunk Spiritualist claims to authority by applying to Spiritualist practice an Enlightenment liberal model of “sovereign agency” according to which agency is held and wielded individually and in competition with other sovereign subjects. The model of agency at work in Spiritualist practice and in *The Morgesons* offers an embodied and discursive critique of this western liberal model of agency, one in which “[u]ntethering the speech act from the sovereign subject... more fully acknowledges the way in which the subject is constituted in language, how what it creates is also what it derives from elsewhere” (Judith Butler 16).<sup>169</sup>

It is precisely the power of unhinged agency—the possibility of an agentive self that might travel between and among multiple persons connected by sympathetic means—that

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acting without any volition of their own, under the immediate *possession* of spirits, then, and not otherwise, may these manifestations be in a certain sense spiritual.... (160)

According to the article, agency must be located *either* in the doings of spirits, *or* in those of the séance’s participants: there can be no cooperation between the spiritual and the material realms.

The author of “Spiritual Materialism” is not alone in distinguishing the unusual physical phenomena of the séance from the Spiritualists’ claims to communicate directly with the dead. The French Protestant cleric and diplomat Count Agénor Étienne de Gasparin wrote a two-volume treatise in which he debunked claims of spirit communication but left table-turning intact: “[t]he physical phenomenon, long suspected by thinking minds, which has been discovered but not sufficiently demonstrated by Animal Magnetism, finds its irrefutable proof in the Turning Tables” (xviii). Gasparin described a series of experiments in which he and a group of companions caused a table to turn spontaneously without ever touching it; they spread flour on the table to record the fingerprints of any who might surreptitiously try to alter the outcome of the investigation. Accepting table-turning while scoffing at spirit communication has the benefit of removing the dangerous power of the medium’s (often female) body from consideration, since table-turning could be performed by any group of people without a medium present.

<sup>169</sup> The second and third parts of “Spiritual Materialism” go on to enumerate the other distinctions that Spiritualist authors and practitioners refused to respect: the difference between material and spiritual bodies, between faith and experience, between the revelations of nature and those of the Bible, and, perhaps most offensively, between separate Christian sects:

These creatures say that the soul of man has been shockingly trammled and hemmed in by the stern religious teachings of the past—that it must now be granted the ‘freedom of unbiased thought,’ in order that it may ‘throw off all bonds of sect or denomination,’... Their wrath burns hot against all ‘sect and denomination.’ Under this head they enumerate the Church of Rome, the Church of England, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformers; all other sects and denominations of Christians are, of course, included in this category. (165-66)

The most disruptive aspect of Spiritualist belief and practice, then, was its refusal to acknowledge carefully defended social and doctrinal boundaries: not only do Spiritualists refuse to acknowledge the authority of established denominational hierarchies, but they refuse even to discriminate between Protestants, Anglicans, and Catholics.

characters in *The Morgesons* access and wield. But rather than locating these agencies in a particular spatial or temporal location—the séance or the public demonstration—*The Morgesons* situates them in the relations between people, where they cannot be merely debunked or dismissed. Veronica Morgeson, like her sister Cassandra, is possessed of Spiritualist talents, but her particular gift most resembles the Spiritualist practice of trance-speaking: the power to channel the words and feelings of others as though she herself were speaking or experiencing them. This is simultaneously the most explicit and the most paradoxical way in which Spiritualist mediumship can undermine individual and hierarchical models of agency: Veronica can actually inhabit and ventriloquize those who should have authority over her. Veronica’s first words in the novel are in the third person, as though something or someone were speaking through her: as a clumsy child she overturns a milk pan on her head and begs her mother to ““Help Verry, she is sorry,”” perhaps divining the very words that are in her mother’s mind (16). Later, when she is ill, the third-person recurs: ““It is the winter that kills little Verry”” (153); this time it may be Cassandra or the family servant Temperance, watching by her bedside, whose voice she has borrowed. Veronica’s clairvoyance also allows her to divine and express hidden emotions that defy ordinary speech. Shortly after Charles Morgeson dies Veronica expresses her sympathy for the heartbroken Cassandra (who has confessed her affair to no one) through the kind of strange and ghostly melodies associated with the Spiritualist séance: she “went to the piano, and played music so full of wild lamentation, that I again fathomed my desires, and my despair. . . . She stopped, and touched her eyelids, as if she were weeping, but there were no tears in her eyes. They were in mine” (147). On the night before her wedding Veronica dreams, not of her own future husband, but of Cassy’s: in the dream she sees Desmond Somers carving Cassandra’s name into a tree. When dream-Desmond pricks dream-Veronica with a dagger, Veronica awakes

to find a red mark on her arm; years later, when she meets Desmond for the first time, she identifies him as “the man I saw in my dream” (258).<sup>170</sup> In each of these cases, Veronica, though sick and frightened, is able to assume the thoughts and feelings of those around her in order either to enlist their sympathy or to enter more deeply into their emotional lives. This ability gives her a claim to recognition in a household in which, as the younger, less attractive, and less engaging sister—“mother... did not love her as she loved me,” the narrating Cassandra observes (16)—she has little to command attention.

Where Cassandra’s Spiritualist gifts help her defy romantic conventions and disrupt patriarchal family narratives, Veronica’s sympathetic clairvoyance embeds her more deeply within the family while simultaneously allowing her to repudiate the pieties of class that structure Surrey society and to form meaningful relationships across social divides. When Grandfather Warren dies Veronica refuses to attend his funeral, correctly intuiting that “grand’ther Warren nearly crushed” Mary and Mercy “when [they] were girls of our age” (70). Instead, she sends her custom-sewn mourning bonnet to a local widow’s daughter, who turns up at church wearing the expensive object in the “Poor Seats” (62)<sup>171</sup>—an act that highlights the arbitrariness of class distinctions artificially naturalized in the details of church seating and mourning rituals.<sup>172</sup> While the wealthy Morgesons condescendingly allow the local

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<sup>170</sup> Keane notes how such religious practices blur the boundaries of the individual subject: “In many cases where the authorship, performance, and responsibility for speech is distributed among different actors, it might be most accurate to describe the result as the creation of a supra-individual speaking subject. The reverse is also possible, the combining of distinct roles in a single bodily individual” (“Language and Religion” 442).

<sup>171</sup> Until the mid-nineteenth century many Protestant churches charged pew rental fees that supported the activities of the church. Wealthy families thus got the best seats in the house, in front near the pulpit, while those who could not afford the fees sat at the back or in the balcony, in the “poor seats.”

<sup>172</sup> Veronica’s unnerving ability to distinguish sincerity from hypocrisy—another characteristic of the Spiritualist medium, who could detect the presence of “unbelievers” at the séance table—also makes her

poor to warm themselves at the kitchen fire, only Veronica befriends them (26), and on a trip to Boston she uses her shopping allowance to buy presents for the “cadaverous” children of a missionary on his way to India (71). Veronica’s willingness and ability to empathize with others across boundaries of class is both sign and effect of her Spiritualist gifts—she channels others’ thoughts and feelings—and it widens the circle of emotional connection within which she lives. Rather than restricting herself to friends from finishing school, as Cassandra does, Veronica is able to seek out relationships with women like the seamstress Lois Randall, whose working-class origins should place her beneath the Morgesons’ notice. Veronica’s Spiritualist agency, then, finds its expression in sympathetic relationships in which agency is shared even between persons of different social classes.<sup>173</sup>

Veronica’s unique and socially unsettling ability to empathize with those outside of her class is exemplified in her relationship with the household servant Fanny, whose ambiguous class status is a constant source of unrest in the Morgeson household. The Morgeson family has “adopted” Fanny as a putative kindness to the girl’s now-dead mother, installing her as kitchen help despite the fact that she was not expected to go into service. Veronica and Fanny share an unspoken sympathetic connection that expresses itself in mutual understanding that nevertheless

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an object of fear for the clergymen who would seek to involve her in their plots. When “Mr. Thrasher’s Revival” sweeps through Surrey the ambitious minister visits the Morgesons in hopes of persuading them to his cause, but in Veronica’s presence “the man [tears] away the mask of the minister,” revealing his fear of her superior piety (and perhaps also his unrequited attraction to her) (155). Veronica’s strong Spiritualist gifts also help her defy conventional rituals when she does not find them meaningful, as when she refuses to attend Grand’ther Warren’s funeral or to greet well-meaning visitors after her mother’s death: “Veronica alone would see no one. Her room was the only one not invaded” (215).

<sup>173</sup> Christopher Hager notes that “*The Morgesons* imagines writing (not just women’s writing) as an adversary of Massachusetts’s industrialization and its changing social hierarchy—a local precursor of the larger social transformation that the Civil War would shortly usher in” (706). Oddly, however, he identifies Cassandra as the writer in the family and dismisses Veronica as “starving for meaning,” despite the fact that Veronica writes more avidly than Cassandra does (Veronica and Lois have a writing club in which they exchange and comment upon one another’s essays) and seems better prepared than Cassandra for the changes in New England’s class system that will accompany industrialization.

does not conform to the patterns (or platitudes) of simple friendship: Veronica sees through Fanny's attempts to spite Cassandra, uncovering her true motivations (“*I admire her; you do too*”), while Fanny predicts Veronica's approaching illnesses (“*you are going to be sick; I feel so in my bones*”) (151). When Mrs. Morgeson complains that she has “*never seen a spark of gratitude*” from Fanny, Veronica replies that she “*never thought of gratitude, it is true; but why must people be grateful?*” (135). The statement “*I never thought of gratitude*” could represent Fanny's own thoughts about her situation; here Veronica channels Fanny's anger and recognizes it as a legitimate response to events outside of her control. Mary Morgeson, lacking Veronica's sympathy or her clairvoyance, attributes Fanny's anger to Fanny's putatively bad character—“*her disposition is hateful. She is angry with those who are better off than herself*” (135), she claims—while ignoring the economic and class privilege that make it possible for the wealthy Morgeson family to appropriate an orphaned child and make use of her as household staff.<sup>174</sup>

While Veronica's clairvoyant gifts and unusual spirituality make possible forms of agency that would otherwise be foreclosed by the hierarchies of gender and class that structure Surrey society, critical analyses of Veronica's character generally follow the same pattern as those histories of Spiritualism that elevate content over form: they pass judgment on the positive or negative effects of Veronica's actions while overlooking the innovations of agency that make it possible for Veronica to act at all. Noting the multivalent nature of Veronica's seemingly altruistic behavior—she is occasionally “*petted*” for her kindness to the local poor, and her friendships with Lois and Fanny are tinged with patronage—critics on the whole have labeled Veronica's peculiar behaviors as cynical grabs for attention and Veronica herself as “*self-*

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<sup>174</sup> The Morgeson family performs this act of appropriation again in the novel when the captain of one of Locke Morgeson's ships sends him “*a box of shells... and a small Portuguese boy, named Manuel*” as gifts (241). Manuel, like Fanny, is installed as a servant and feels an immediate affinity with Veronica, likening her at one point to the Virgin Mary.

destructive,” “thwarted,” or “oblivious” (Putzi 172; Zagarell, “Repossession” 48; Çelikkol 48).<sup>175</sup> But the rush to classify the effects of Veronica’s spirituality as “good” or “bad” obscures the accession of agency that her Spiritualist gifts enable: Veronica’s ability to divine and channel the thoughts, words, and feelings of others gives her access to forms of agency that would otherwise be denied her. The same mysterious spiritual power that offers Veronica sympathetic access to others’ minds also gives her the moral authority to resist pressures to conform to social or familial expectations.

### **The Cultural Work of Spiritualist Fiction**

As this reading of *The Morgesons* shows, Spiritualist fiction offered a medium through which to interrogate the disruptive forms of agency enabled by and modeled in Spiritualist practice. It did not always affirm them, however: much of the nineteenth-century fiction that depicted Spiritualist belief and practice performed the same cultural work that “Spiritual Materialism” aspired to enact, seeking to assign agency in stable and predictable ways and, in so doing, to bolster sexual, domestic, and economic hierarchies with their top-down models of power.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Çelikkol claims that Veronica, of all the Morgeson family, is the one most willfully blind to market forces: “After all, it is market relations that provide the middle-class Veronica with a piano and carpets and curtains” (48). But Veronica is arguably far more aware of market forces than is the supposedly more self-aware Cassandra, who, upon returning from her extended visit with the wealthy Charles and Alice Morgeson, redecorates her room with elegant and expensive furnishings and engages in an extended power struggle with Fanny, smashing dishes for the sole purpose of making Fanny clean them up while threatening to run to Locke with tales of Fanny’s insubordination. Veronica, at least, acknowledges the presence of the poor in Surrey and in fact is the only member of the Morgeson household to take an active interest in the lives of those less fortunate than herself, or to conceive that servants might have inner lives as complex as her own. Cassandra, for instance, expresses horror when she discovers that the family’s servants are stockholders in Locke Morgeson’s shipping business, since such a connection undermines the settled power relations she has taken for granted.

<sup>176</sup> Elizabeth Stoddard and her husband Richard Henry Stoddard belonged to a circle of New York literati,

The Stoddards' close friend Bayard Taylor, for instance—to whom *The Morgesons* is dedicated—published several Spiritualist tales in the *Atlantic Monthly* at the same time that Elizabeth Stoddard was composing her novel. Unlike *The Morgesons*, Taylor's tales depict Spiritualist ritual as a banal sham and Spiritualist agency as entirely of this earth, a cynical and unnatural attempt by women to usurp men's religious and romantic power. In Taylor's stories, Spiritualism disrupts patriarchal marital relations by empowering women to make sexual advances toward men. In "Confessions of a Medium" (1860) a lascivious Swedenborgian and his drunken female medium use the dubious doctrine of "natural affinities" to justify their extramarital affair; the narrator, a hapless young bachelor, is saved from their sordid influence by the good offices of his quiet and chaste fiancée, who rejects all non-orthodox forms of belief and practice. In "The Experiences of the A.C." (1862) another idealistic bachelor joins a utopian community, where he is horrified by the bold romantic advances of an unattractive older woman. His own preference is for a homespun young woman who conforms to traditional romantic roles by waiting for the narrator to declare his feelings and then insisting on a long and proper engagement. In "The Haunted Shanty" (1861), a more gothic and ghostly tale than either of these, a spurned woman spirit-travels to the remote homestead of her ex-lover, haunting his marriage bed and eventually causing the death of his child; her depredations end only with her own death. In each of these stories Spiritualist ritual and practice are discursively linked with

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including Horace Greeley, Bayard Taylor, Kate Field, and George Ripley, whose novels and stories frequently thematized Spiritualist phenomena. Greeley did not subscribe to Spiritualism himself but wrote an open-minded essay about it in the inaugural issue of *Putnam's Monthly*, and he "defended [the Spiritualists'] integrity in the [New York] *Tribune* while his wife tried to get in touch with her dead son, 'Pickie'" (Kerr 6). Greeley sponsored the Fox sisters' 1850 relocation to New York City, paid for the eldest Fox sister, Leah, to reside in Barnum's New York Hotel (Cox 7), and reflected on Spiritualist phenomena in his 1868 autobiography, *Recollections of a Busy Life*. George Ripley and William Cullen Bryant attended séances, Kate Field experimented with planchette, and Bayard Taylor used Spiritualism and utopian movements as frequent subjects for his fiction. See Kerr for a discussion of these and other pieces on Spiritualism in the periodical press, and see James Matlack's 1968 biography of Stoddard for a discussion of the literary circle that surrounded Richard and Elizabeth.



forms of female agency—particularly romantic and sexual agency—that are dangerously unstable and operate outside of male control. Taylor’s tales defuse this threat at the level of narrative by disposing of the unruly women through death, sexual rejection, or exile.

According to Howard Kerr, whose *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals* (1972) remains one of the most thorough studies of Spiritualist fiction available, “the spiritualistic movement exercised a distinct and fairly unified influence on the American literary imagination” (4) by providing a target for humorous or satirical attacks or a storehouse of vague occult symbols—what Buell called “bohemian charm” (364). But Kerr’s definition of “nineteenth-century writers” was largely limited to male authors for whom Spiritualism’s affiliation with feminism, women’s rights, and female agency in general made it a dangerous and frightening phenomenon. Accordingly, Kerr described these authors’ “unified” approach to the Spiritualist movement, and particularly its accordance of power to female mediums, as consisting of satirical disdain, dubious warning, or frowning disapproval.<sup>177</sup> Expanding the category of Spiritualist fiction to include Stoddard and other female authors offers a different picture of the cultural work performed by Spiritualist fiction: one in which occult practices and symbols offer imaginative opportunities for exploring female agency rather than suppressing it.

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<sup>177</sup> Kerr’s treatment of nineteenth-century Spiritualist fiction, while providing detailed accounts of female Spiritualist mediums including the Fox sisters, Cora Hatch, and Emma Hardinge Britten, overlooks Spiritualist fiction by women except for an occasional reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Recent treatments of Spiritualist fiction have begun to remedy Kerr’s oversight. Bridget Bennett’s *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, for instance, treats Spiritualist practice and Spiritualist fiction as responses to the ongoing history of violence in the circumatlantic world. John Kucich’s *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* undertakes a similar project, but looks inward—at the treatment of Native Americans and slaves on U.S. soil—rather than outward to Europe and Africa. And Mitzi Schrag’s 2006 dissertation *Rei(g)ning Mediums: Spiritualism and Social Controls in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* examines fiction by male authors that, like Bayard Taylor’s Spiritualist tales, sought to narratively tamp down the dangerous possibilities for female agency raised by Spiritualist practice. But while there have been a number of treatments of English women’s Spiritualist fiction among scholars of British literature, I have yet to encounter a full-length study of women’s Spiritualist fiction in the nineteenth-century United States.

Compare Taylor's treatment of Spiritualism and sexuality, for instance, to that depicted in Stoddard's 1871 short story "A Dead-lock and Its Key"<sup>178</sup> which, like Taylor's Spiritualist tales, uses the symbology of Spiritualist ritual to comment on female agency and hierarchical marriage. Unlike Taylor's tales, "A Dead-lock and Its Key" employs the phenomena of the Spiritualist séance—flickering candles, strange atmospheric phenomena, disembodied voices, trances and fainting, and spirits that speak from locked cabinets—as emblems for women's silenced or suppressed voices rather than as a set of rituals contrived to undermine traditional structures of male authority. And unlike Taylor's tales, which raise the possibility of female religious and romantic agency only to lay such possibilities to rest by the end of the story, "Dead-lock" refuses to resolve the questions it calls forth, employing the same ethic of indeterminacy that marks *The Morgesons*.

"A Dead-lock and Its Key" introduces a Spiritualist element not found in *The Morgesons*—the "spirit-cabinet"—and uses this symbolically rich edifice to interrogate women's agency within and outside of marriage. "Dead-lock" tells the story of a young Londoner named Mary Lester who is accidentally locked in a large antique cabinet on the eve of her wedding. When the story's narrator, Saleen, arrives at the Lester home to attend the rehearsal dinner she finds carpenters and locksmiths struggling to free Mary before she silently suffocates. As Ellen Weinauer has noted in a perceptive reading of "A Dead-lock and its Key," the terrifying and impenetrable cabinet in which Mary is locked—the pride of her father's household, which he has forbidden anyone to meddle with and to which he alone holds the key, but which even he fails to open—comes to symbolize patriarchy and the indissoluble bond of marriage into which Mary is about to enter. But the cabinet also calls forth a popular Spiritualist image: the spirit-cabinet

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<sup>178</sup> "A Dead-lock and its Key" appeared without attribution in *Harper's Weekly* on November 4, 1871. It has been reprinted in Opferman and Roth's edition of Stoddard's stories.

invented and demonstrated by mediums Ira and William Davenport, who during their shows were tied fast and shut up in a large cabinet from which ghostly music and spectral hands then issued forth.<sup>179</sup> Like the supposedly impenetrable spirit-cabinet, the Lester family's armoire offers "no weak point, no crevice, no possibility of breaking into the huge thing without fear of harm to *that* which it held locked and fast, within a few inches of our light and air and living life, done to death by a bit of clever machinery, the work of a dead hand" (135). As Mary's family struggles to release her from the cabinet, Stoddard's scene takes on the characteristics of séance: there are three "telling blows" as the room grows darker and a storm begins, "strange and incongruous on this fine evening" (137). Candles are brought; Mr. Lester falls on the floor as if dead. Mrs. Lester begs him to "speak to me," but he can only beat his hand on the floor, and his knockings are repeated in the blows of the hammers and in the rappings that release the hidden spring that finally opens the cabinet. The "clever machinery" that has "done [Mary] to death" is symbolically aligned with the marriage laws that will soon render her "civilly dead,"<sup>180</sup> even as the "dead hand" that imprisons her recalls the spirit-hands that would emerge through the apertures in the Davenports' cabinet while the Davenports themselves were purportedly tied up inside.

Stoddard's tale of domestic imprisonment, then—Mary's actual entrapment in her

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<sup>179</sup> P.T. Barnum described the spirit-cabinet as "about six feet high, six feet long, and two and a half feet deep, the front consisting of three doors, opening outward.... The bolts are on the inside of the doors" (52). In "A Dead-lock and its Key" Stoddard describes the cabinet that endangers Mary as having three doors side by side, with an inner door hidden behind the central door:

The centre one, about four feet wide, and certainly six inches thick, shut in another, which again inclosed, with a space of about eight inches of waste room, a set of six drawers, of different sizes, and a sort of cupboard above them.... The two side doors opened with curious keys, which stood in the locks, chained to the armoire. (132)

<sup>180</sup> Weinauer's work on marriage law and the domestic symbolism of "A Dead-lock and its Key" was presented at the 2011 American Literature Association Conference in Boston, Massachusetts. I am grateful to her for providing me with a copy of the paper, and for allowing me to cite her unpublished work here.

father's cabinet and her potential entrapment in her impending marriage—invokes the language and symbolism of Spiritualism, not to affirm romantic narratives that reinforce hierarchical marriage, but to suggest how marriage might rob women of opportunities for agency by silencing and suffocating them. “Dead-lock” employs the props and practices of Spiritualism, particularly the spirit-cabinet and the séance, to suggest the legal and personal predicament that marriage posed for women, as it threatened to subsume their voices and their bodies under those of their fathers and husbands. Unlike Taylor's tales, however, Stoddard makes no attempt to resolve such problems at the level of narrative. “Dead-lock” ends, not with Mary's marriage or her release from the cabinet, but with narrative indeterminacy: as the cabinet is finally forced open there are “ten awful seconds” of silence, “then a cry and a heavy fall,” but it is never revealed who cried out, who fell, and, most importantly, whether Mary has survived her imprisonment. The final lines of the story extend the mystery further as they reveal that the entire incident was a dream and that the narrator Saleen, upon waking, is late for the rehearsal dinner. This “resolution” suggests nothing so much as circularity, since it opens the possibility that Saleen's dream was a premonition and that she may yet arrive at Mary's house to find her friend locked in the cabinet; formally the story provides, not narrative resolution, but an infinite and open-ended loop. Unlike Taylor's Spiritualist tales, which raise the threat of female religious agency only to narratively defuse it through the death or marriage of the would-be medium, “A Dead-lock and its Key” ends inconclusively, with neither marriage nor death, leaving open the interpretive possibilities raised by the conflation of Spiritualism, fiction, and gender. In *The Morgesons*, Ben Somers avers that “If we do not lay our ghosts, our closets will be overcrowded” (253). The closets of Stoddard's Spiritualist tales are crowded with possible endings, resolutions refused, and lessons unlearned.

## Conclusion: Misdiagnosing *The Morgesons*

The hallmark of Stoddard's literary engagement with Spiritualism, then, is mystery and indeterminacy—a refusal to collapse distinctions, provide concrete answers, or assign agency in expected ways. In *The Morgesons* it is Veronica's illnesses, standing on the line between two possible interpretive regimes, that are the embodied expression of these fluid and unpredictable forms of agency. Veronica's advanced spirituality—the impression, shared among her family and friends, that she has a particularly strong relationship with the divine—is signaled by her physical frailty and frequent bouts of debilitating illness. Spiritualist practices, rather than denying the body, placed it at the center of religious experience, positing the body rather than a particular building or book as a holy space through which spirits and their attendant agencies might circulate.<sup>181</sup> Whether in public trance lectures before a crowded hall of people, small séances in suburban parlors, or private hours between an individual and her planchette, “mediumship and the physical body became inseparable” (Cox 20). *The Morgesons* endows its characters with the supernatural abilities that underlay Spiritualist practice precisely because of the way Spiritualism foregrounded the medium's bodily experience as central to the experience of the divine. Steeped in New England orthodox traditions that define the body in general and the female body in particular as “the temporary prison of the soul” (Gutierrez 141) and the source of

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<sup>181</sup> Those among the educated and cosmopolitan, like the Stoddards and their friends, often found it difficult to embrace Spiritualist practice, not (or not only) because it defied doctrinal tradition but because its manifestations were so frustratingly *this-worldly*: performances that purported to include communications from the spirit world seemed ridiculously grounded in this one. “The overwhelming majority of antebellum spirit communications,” Robert Cox declares, were “so excruciatingly banal that Lydia Maria Child lampooned them as ‘more disappointing than the golden key which unlocked *nothing*; for they are the merest mass of old rags, saw-dust, and clam-shells’” (3). What bothered these critics was precisely the materiality of Spiritualist practice: its refusal to restrict itself to ethereal forms. The Spiritualist insistence on the centrality of the medium's body—often poor, sick, female, black, or all of the above—only heightened this impression.

temptation, Cassandra and Veronica seek out other ways of understanding their bodies as the site of both material experience and spiritual transcendence.

Cassandra sits up with her sister during one of these terrifying episodes, in which Veronica

could not speak, but shook her head at me to go away. Her will seemed to be concentrated against losing consciousness; it slipped from her occasionally, and she made a rotary motion with her arms, which I attempted to stop; but her features contracted so terribly, I let her alone. “Mustn’t touch her,” said Temperance. . . . Her breath scarcely stirred her breast. I thought more than once that she did not breathe at all. Its delicate, virgin beauty touched me with a holy pity. We sat by her bed a long time. . . . Suddenly she turned her head, and closed her eyes. . . . In a few minutes, she asked, “What time is it?” “It must be about eleven,” Temperance replied; but it was almost four. (153)<sup>182</sup>

This sickroom scene is shot through with religious language and imagery: the “virgin beauty” of Veronica’s body suggests the incorruptibility of the Virgin Mary (an association that recurs throughout *The Morgesons*),<sup>183</sup> while the misrecognition of time suggests a scene of worship removed from the temporalities of everyday life. Temperance, the Morgeson family servant, has participated in the ritual many times and knows its patterns: ““Mustn’t touch her””; instead, it is Cassandra who is “touched” with holy pity. The impersonal pronoun “its” that Cassandra employs in this description—does it refer to Veronica’s breath? Her illness? Veronica herself?—reiterates the mysteriousness of these attacks and Veronica’s otherworldliness. The narrating Cassandra, like the reader, stands outside of the scene, puzzling through its possible

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<sup>182</sup> Veronica’s malady is not the wasting-but-beautiful consumption of Alice Humphreys or Little Eva, but neither is it the mean-spirited malingering of Marie St. Clare. Indeed, Veronica’s illnesses seem almost a parody of the death-scenes that mark sentimental fiction: rather than gathering her family and servants around her she tries to lock them out of her room, and though she does cut off her hair, the act is more compulsive than comforting—she bestows no locks on her family and continues cutting for so long that by the time she has recovered she is nearly bald.

<sup>183</sup> On the day of Veronica’s wedding Manuel, seeing her with her bouquet, exclaims ““Santa Maria!”” (248). When Veronica and Desmond meet for the first time, Desmond tells her ““you are like the Virgin I made an offering to, only not quite so bedizened”” (258). These are only a few of the points at which Veronica, in addition to her Spiritualist gifts, is also linked with Catholicism.

interpretations: is Veronica imprisoned in this unruly body, or acting through it? Is she physically ill or spiritually inspired? Is Veronica the agent or object of these attacks—a “she” or an “it”? Does Veronica, Cassandra, or Stoddard herself even know?

The multiple valences of the scene reflect the hermeneutic indeterminacy of nineteenth-century Spiritualist practice: the same symptoms welcomed by Spiritualist mediums and their followers as signs of divine anointment were diagnosed by medical professionals as debilitation and as evidence of women’s inherent delusion and disorderliness (or, in the case of male mediums, of the unnatural feminization of men). Compare the description of Veronica’s inexplicable illness to the features of the Spiritualist trance outlined by Molly McGarry:

There were two main variations...: falling into a fainting trance, sometimes called catalepsy, and uncontrolled thrashing, jerking, or trembling.... The sufferer alternately sobbed and laughed violently, complained of palpitations of the heart, clawed her throat as if strangling, and at times abruptly lost the power of hearing or speech. A deathlike trance might follow, lasting hours, even days. (126-127)

The uncontrollable “rotary motion” of Veronica’s arms, her prolonged breathless unconsciousness, and her voiceless protests against Cassandra’s nursing mark her seizure-like attacks of illness as similar to Spiritualist trances. But rather than come down on one side of the question or the other—the only diagnosis the novel will make is that Veronica is “delicate”—*The Morgesons* leaves the mystery of Veronica’s illness unsolved.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics, on the other hand, have rushed to diagnose Veronica’s illnesses as psychosomatic delusion, “the hysterical reaction of a young woman who does not want to grow up and face her anger at her severely restricted life” (Matter-Seibel 31).<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Christopher Hager and Sabine Matter-Seibel both offer the anorexia diagnosis, and Julia Stern remarks on the “automaternal dimensions” of Veronica’s adolescent habit of “subsist[ing] on a regressive diet of milk and buttered toast” (“I Am Cruel” 108). (Indeed, Stern makes quick work of the Morgesons’ various psychological afflictions: Locke Morgeson has “compulsive shopping and speculating disorders,” Alice Morgeson is “occupied monomaniacally by child-rearing,” Charles Morgeson “expresses an exclusionary passion for hothouse gardening and horse-breaking,” and the various Pickersgill-Somerses are “notorious

Rather than consider the possibility that Veronica's religiously inflected illnesses might point to the centrality of the body to her Spiritualistic construction of the self, critics have sought to explain away her "self-destructive" behavior (Putzi 172), most often by diagnosing it as anorexia nervosa.<sup>185</sup> Such diagnoses accord with Jenny Franchot's observation that literary critics employing Marxist, psychoanalytic, or poststructuralist theoretical principles have tended to approach religion as though it were disease: "About those who 'had it' in the past, scholars often write either 'around' the belief (as if belief stays bottled up within a denominational container and never tinctures a person's greater reality) or isolate it as a deviant element to be extracted for diagnostic analysis" (837). The critical discourses Franchot invokes are all subject to the larger (a)historical narrative of secularization, in which the scientific processes of rationalization and disenchantment promise emancipation from superstition and, by extension, a solution to all the spiritual mysteries a text might hold.

Such readings have obscured how Veronica's spirituality—signaled, in part, by her frequent illnesses—enables her to experience her body, not as an opaque signifier of identity

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for alcoholic self-immolation" or "control their kindred by means of inappropriate sexuality and economic tyranny" ("I Am Cruel" 108.) Jennifer Putzi compares Veronica's illnesses unfavorably to Cassandra's scars: while the scars are "crucial to [Cassandra's] sense of self and her redefinition of womanhood as the result of experience," Veronica's delicate constitution symbolizes "blissful ignorance or self-destructive illness" (172). Ayse Çelikkol accuses Veronica of symbolic complicity with the forces of market capitalism, reading Veronica's illnesses as identifying her with an ethos of the sublime that paradoxically reinforces market relations by refusing to participate in them. Whatever their diagnosis, though, the critics are agreed that Veronica's illnesses are marks of her selfishness or symbols of her failed character: she is "thwarted" and "reclusive" (Zagarell, "Repossession" 48), "a twisted specimen of the angel-child" (Matter-Seibel 31). In *The Morgesons*, Cassandra's father gives her some advice: "Let me tell you something; don't get sick. If you are, hide it as much as possible. Men do not like sick women" (107). Neither, apparently, do critics.

<sup>185</sup> Veronica's cryptic assertion that she "need[s] all the illnesses that come" (73) has led critics including Stacy Alaimo and Ayse Çelikkol to claim that her illnesses are self-inflicted—that they are cultivated grabs for attention and props to her own self-importance, or at the very least signs of her conformity to separate spheres ideology. But the fact that Veronica finds a way to make meaning out of her recurring illnesses—that she puts these long periods of pain and paralysis to some sort of spiritual use—does not necessarily mean that she brings them on herself.



(male or female, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, sick or well) or the source of temptation to men, but as a fluid medium for accessing the possibilities of the mysterious and the divine. Like her Spiritualist gifts and her acts of cross-class charity, Veronica's illnesses are multivalent: while it is possible to read them as selfish grabs for attention and attempts to make herself the center of family life, they also provide opportunities for those around her to act on their best impulses, as when Fanny claims that Veronica's illnesses give Fanny the chance to "be somebody" (154).

They also help Veronica herself to make sense of her existence. Cassandra-as-narrator notes that,

We did not perceive the process, but Verry was educated by sickness; her mind fed and grew on pain, and at last mastered it. The darkness in her nature broke; by slow degrees she gained health, though never much strength. Upon each recovery a change was visible; a spiritual dawn had risen in her soul: moral activity blending with her ideality made her life beautiful, even in the humblest sense.  
(65)

It is the creativity of Veronica's life—the way that spirituality enables her to imagine ways of being in the world that are not defined by patriarchy and privation—that critics who ignore her spiritual aspirations, or diagnose them as delusion or selfishness, simply cannot see.

The rush to diagnose Veronica (as well as Cassandra) is a symptom of a secularized critical tradition in which "the real problem is that women, persons of color, and other members of historically oppressed groups are not generally allowed to be both subject and object at once" (Fleissner, "Feminism" 55). Like Spiritualism's detractors, including the early psychologists that McGarry discusses, modern-day critics seem anxious to assign agency and hold it fast, so that "[t]he moment [fictional figures] display characteristics not conforming to absolute rationality and dignity, they seem inexorably reduced to pure objects, sheer victims of determining forces beyond their individual control" (Fleissner, "Feminism" 55). Such assumptions make it impossible to understand religious phenomena, including Spiritualist mediumship, that offer a "psychic double play of... subjectivities that blu[r] the boundaries between active, speaking

subject and passive object” (McGarry 126).

At the same time, the diagnostic move recapitulates the “monopoli[zation] of all knowledge” that nineteenth-century Spiritualists complained of: the mania among lawyers, physicians, clergy, scientists, and educators to pass judgment upon and dismiss the embodied experiences of Spiritualist mediums and their fellow seekers (Britten, *Nineteenth Century* 192). One outgrowth of this monopolization of knowledge was a phenomenon that William James called “medical materialism”—the rage to reduce all strong spiritual feeling to a product or symptom of disease:

Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Theresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate. George Fox’s discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. Carlyle’s organ-tones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental over-tensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably), due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover.

And medical materialism then thinks that the spiritual authority of all such personages is successfully undermined. (*Varieties* 14-15)<sup>186</sup>

As a cultural discourse emphasizing first-hand knowledge of the universe gained through collective, shared seeking, Spiritualism offered a vociferous challenge to “the incipient professionalism of science [and] medicine,” whose practitioners claimed the authority to assign meaning to existence by appealing to scientific principles “which to most people [were] as invisible as ghosts” (Cottom 772, 774). As such, it offered opportunities for personal and

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<sup>186</sup> Charles Dickens, too, had his suspicions of “medical materialism,” though he did not call it by that term. In *A Christmas Carol* (1843) Ebenezer Scrooge says to the ghost of Jacob Marley, come to beg him to repent of his sins:

“You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!... You see this toothpick?... I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my own creation.” (“Marley’s Ghost”)

Both James and Dickens found the materialist explanation of spiritual phenomena so unsatisfying as to provoke ridicule.

collective self-definition that were not defined by the binaries of professional discourse.

Susan Gubar notes how the assumption that women and other disempowered persons must be either rational *or* irrational, either agents *or* victims, either subjects *or* objects, and that these attributes manifest themselves through physical signs diagnosable by experts, impoverish critical understandings of literature by women by whittling down the number of acceptable ways that women may negotiate their existences in the world. Tellingly, she offers her own diagnosis for this tendency, one that mirrors the interpretation that contemporary critics have most often applied to Veronica: “critical anorexia.” Narrowing our readings of nineteenth-century religious women in ways that diagnose their embodied religiosity as mental or physical illness reinscribes the same limiting cultural discourses that, even in the 1860s, already sought to narrow the ways in which women’s minds, bodies, and voices might legitimately be defined.<sup>187</sup>

By invoking the embedded indeterminacies of Spiritualist practice and refusing to resolve them at the level of narrative, *The Morgesons* challenges totalizing discourses that would seek to reduce human experience and human agency to singular and mutually exclusive explanations. Like Spiritualist leaders, Veronica and Cassandra complain about the monopolization of knowledge—the foreclosing of mystery that diagnosis entails. When Locke Morgeson quizzes Veronica about her impending marriage to Ben with the question, ““Do you know each other?”” Veronica replies, ““We do not know each other at all. What is the use of making *that* futile attempt?”” (169). Cassandra, facing the prospect of life as the mediator of Ben and Veronica’s marriage, muses that her sister and soon-to-be brother-in-law “would have annihilated my personality, if possible, for the sake of comprehending me” (163). Complete and total

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<sup>187</sup> In an essay provocatively titled “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” Gubar answers the titular question in this way: “I could call the problem a bad case of critical anorexia, for... identity politics made the word *women* slim down to stand only for a very particularized kind of woman, whereas poststructuralists obliged the term to disappear altogether” (901).

knowledge—the kind provided by the professional discourses of doctors, clergy, and modern literary critics—is framed within the novel as an annihilation that must prove fruitless precisely because of its thoroughness. When Ben Somers probes Cassandra’s feelings for his brother Desmond he dismembers a book in his agitation: “taking up a book, which he leaned his head over, and whose covers he bent back till they cracked,” Ben performs the action that later critics would perform on the book of Veronica and Cassandra. ““You would read me that way,”” Cassandra avers, and she could be speaking to twenty-first-century critics as much as to Ben (232). Like Cassandra’s mythical namesake, who foresaw the future but was unable to change it, Elizabeth Stoddard predicted the dissection to which her text would be subjected—a future in which critics, like surgeons, would probe her novel for signs of spiritual disease.

## **CODA: Religious Agency and the Secularized Academy**

In the years following the Civil War the forms of Protestant religious-secular agency modeled in antebellum fiction moved beyond the imaginative space of fiction and received more concrete embodiment in the rise of new religious movements and in the growth of social and political causes grounded in the reform impulses of the antebellum era. Religiously driven organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union offered women a form of collective intervention in social affairs that was grounded in particular Protestant visions of agency similar to those modeled earlier in the century in fiction by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Susan Warner, and Augusta Jane Evans. The growth of denominations like the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in the early nineteenth century and providing a locus for black religious leadership throughout the postbellum period, gave African-American Protestants a venue for independent theological thought and coordinated social action that was not beholden to the white Protestant hierarchies William Wells Brown had complained of in his letters to *The Liberator*. And the unhinging of religious authority and the new forms of secular agency performed in Stoddard's *The Morgesons* became part of postbellum life as new religious groups including the Christian Science, Theosophy, Holiness, and New Thought movements arose with women either at their heads or in important positions of leadership.

The social effects brought about by the collective political achievements of female and African-American Protestants after the Civil War seem, in retrospect, to be of varied social utility. The historian Edward Blum credits white Protestant women with consolidating white

identity and solidifying Jim Crow segregation in the years following the Civil War; the greatest success of the Temperance movement, the nationwide prohibition of alcohol, lasted only fourteen years. But divorcing the concept of agency from specific political outcomes—resisting the impulse to classify agency itself as good or bad by reading its effects according to anachronistic historical evaluations—reveals that the forms of religious agency displayed by women and African Americans after the Civil War included an expanded field of social and political action not previously available.

So successful were the new forms of religious agency modeled in fiction and taken up by social activists that already in the 1860s and 1870s white, male religious leaders were on the defensive, attempting to reclaim religious influence for themselves. In an 1866 essay on “Pulpit Talents” the liberal theologian Horace Bushnell advocated sermons that exemplified “a mediating combination of scholarship, stylistic talent, effective vocalizing, human feeling, and vigor,” the very characteristics found in novels by Sedgwick, Warner, Evans, Brown, and Stoddard (Reynolds 491). In 1877 Henry Ward Beecher, contemplating the growing influence of women within the church, insisted that “manhood is the best sermon” and that men needed to assert their positions in their religious communities (quoted in Reynolds 493-494). Such reactionary calls for white male religious involvement culminated in the turn-of-the-century phenomena of “muscular Christianity” and the Men and Religion Forward Movement, a nationwide revival that sought to draw white men back into Protestant churches by aligning Protestant values with the “masculine” world of business and competition rather than the “feminine” world of domesticity, nurture, and social reform (Bederman 432).

By the end of the nineteenth century, then, the role of Protestant religious adherence in providing a source of communal identity and collective agency for the disenfranchised was so commonly acknowledged that it became necessary to “reclaim” Protestant agency for white men. How, then, did it become so difficult for twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary critics, so concerned with the question of agency, to recognize religion as a legitimate field for individual and collective action? How did religion, in the modern literary-critical narratives discussed throughout this project, become something “done to” the disenfranchised rather than something chosen and experienced by them?

This question brings us back to the secularization thesis that I discussed in my introduction and, intermittently, throughout this dissertation—not the putative secularization of American culture as a whole, but the secularization of academic discourse in particular. It is the secularization of critical discourse that has made it difficult for literary historians and critics to recognize religion as a legitimate source of agency for the disenfranchised. As Vincent Pecora has argued, the forms of criticism valued by twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics—most famously Edward Said’s model of “secular criticism”—base their claims to objectivity on an implicit or explicit characterization of all religious belief as irrational, primitive, and dogmatic. In this way secularized criticism is “forged in opposition to religion and, in that way, irremediably marked by it” (Seth 305). The modern research university has thus become one of the primary producers of secularized twentieth-century discourse: since

the story of secularization narrates a triumph of empiricism over superstition, reason over faith, and the emancipation of all spheres—science, knowledge, the market, the state—from the oppressive and authoritarian ‘yoke of religion’ . . . secular institutions—such as the emerging research university—become the place for a public discourse based on scientific evidence, objective reason, and disciplined methodology. (Kaufmann 607)

As religion becomes a secularized criticism’s putative “other,” and as that secularized criticism

legitimizes itself by claiming to deconstruct and strip away unexamined beliefs and oppressive dogmas, it becomes all but impossible to recognize how religion itself might provide a source of agency for its adherents.

The most extended critique of the secularized academy has come from historian George M. Marsden, who claims in *The Soul of the American University* (1994) that the progress narrative of the rationalized university, set forth in the 1960s by historians including Frederick Rudolph and Lawrence R. Veysey, should properly be read as a narrative of declension. Marsden claims that the twentieth-century university's commitment to rationalized scientific inquiry has robbed the institution of its "soul," such that the university no longer produces moral leaders but instead churns out "value-free scientific inquiry" (265). Marsden's text sparked an extended debate on the role of the research university in the modern world—a debate that I will not recapitulate here—but what both Marsden and his interlocutors overlook is the way that academic discourse, both pre- and post-secularization, has always been positioned to exclude those modes of discourse most accessible to the disenfranchised. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early-nineteenth centuries, when theological discourse took place in venues from which women and people of color were excluded—namely the pulpit and sectarian journals—the university was in the business of educating clergy and publishing such journals. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as women, African Americans, and other disenfranchised persons gained access to the discourse of doctrine and to (mostly non-ordained) forms of religious leadership, the university gradually transformed itself from an institution concerned with theology and religious leadership to an institution in which religion was merely one subject among many, to be relegated to Religious Studies departments or divinity schools.

Transformational narratives like those of Marsden, Rudolph, and Veysey—whether they



posit a model of progress or decline—thus obscure the overarching consistency of the American academy: it privileges and produces whatever form of discourse—religious or secularized—is least accessible to women and people of color.<sup>188</sup> This consistency-through-transition is most obvious at the turn of the twentieth century when, just as the Men and Religion Forward movement was struggling to reclaim Christianity for men, American academics were working to reposition religion as a subject of rationalized scientific inquiry rather than a vital language that offered opportunities for collective agency to the disenfranchised.

William James’s turn-of-the-century work on belief and religious experience encapsulates this set of changes, exemplifying the transformation of religious language from an effective source of agency to a corpus suitable for professional dissection by psychologists and practitioners of other incipient academic disciplines. James’s 1897 essay “The Will to Believe” and his 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (based on his Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh) define legitimate religious experience in terms that dismiss collective and communal forms of religiosity while celebrating individualistic and originary acts of religious creation, particularly those performed and codified by men. While not directly denigrating the religious experiences of women and persons of color, James’s classification of “true” and “false” religion privileges those experiences that conform to an individualistic, liberal model of religious belief and practice. And because, as this dissertation has shown, the religious agency demonstrated by disenfranchised persons is often at its most potent when it defies or avoids the atomizing tendencies of liberal individualism, defining valid religious experience as

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<sup>188</sup> The fact that the student population of most universities is now majority-female and far more racially diverse than in past centuries does not undermine this consistency. The recent “crisis” in higher education, in which states have systematically defunded public higher education and the majority of university courses are now taught by contingent faculty, has coincided with the rise in enrollment of women and people of color. Once women and people of color gain access to a discourse, that discourse is no longer considered worthy of public debate; once women and people of color gain ascendancy in a public institution, that institution is no longer considered worthy of public funding.

essentially internal and individual, as James does, delegitimizes the very forms of communal religious agency most likely to empower the disenfranchised.

“The Will to Believe” and the *Varieties*, like the larger secularization narrative in which they form an important node, are both descriptive and normative, excluding certain kinds of religious experience by setting narrow boundaries for what should be regarded by psychologists (James’s primary professional audience) as “true religion.” In James’s formulation, “true religion” is practiced individually rather than communally, because communal religious experience is necessarily rote and dull. True religion is originary and “pattern-setting”; religious experience that is not original can only be vacantly imitative. True religion is practiced by leaders—recognizable by virtue of their spiritual enthusiasms—rather than by those who follow them. True religion is primarily an internal, psychological experience rather than an external, social one, and can be recognized by its tendency to produce abnormal psychological phenomena. Despite such abnormalities, however, true religion can best be recognized by reading rational explications of doctrine rather than by examining the myths and stories of a particular religious culture. Taken together, these conditions for true religiosity work to exclude those who would experience religion communally, ritually, submissively, interdependently, or nonrationally—namely, in all of the ways that women and African American characters experience religion in the texts this dissertation has engaged.

James begins the *Varieties* by delineating how his auditors, students of the new field of psychology, can recognize true religious tendencies in their fellow men:

I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested

feeling and imitated conduct. (10)

James positions religious persons as existing in only two possible types: the “conventional” adherent who has inherited his religion “second-hand” from his community, and the “genius” whose religious experience marks him as “abnormal”—separate from the community and then, later, grudgingly acknowledged as its leader (10). The “ordinary” believer, who may think that he is consciously participating in meaningful, sacred rituals with important cultural significance, is really only an automaton, reproducing a religion “made for him by others,” “retained by habit,” and suitable only for “imitation” (a word James repeats twice). This privileging of leaders and originators over followers and communities of believers positions true religion as an experience that can only be authentic when *not* shared with others; it is the originator’s very “eccentricity”—his removal from common experience—that marks his religion as “true.” This formulation not only privileges religious traditions that value individual self-awareness and striving but classes any form of communal religious experience as inauthentic and beneath notice. It thus renders invisible forms of religious adherence and agency that are not obviously ordinary and creative.

James’s descriptions of the “ordinary” believer imply inactivity rather than action: “made for him,” “communicated to him,” “determined” by others, and “retained” passively, by habit. Religious observances that follow “conventional” forms (the connotation is derogatory) are hardly worth calling “religion” at all, since they are passively received rather than actively engaged in. Communal religious experience thus cannot provide a source of agency; only the solitary believer, acting alone, has agentive power. Though James’s pronouns class all religious adherents—leaders and followers—as male, in practice his classifications are implicitly gendered. Since the ordained leaders of most religious movements were largely male even at the

end of the nineteenth century, and since female religious adherents often find comfort and companionship in communities of faith, James's elevation of religious leaders above religious followers implicitly denigrates the religious experiences of women.

Once religious leaders have been distinguished from followers, the next distinction to be made is between those with "normal" religious tendencies and those with "abnormal" ones. The true religious innovator will demonstrate "exalted emotional sensibility" but also a disturbing tendency toward "abnormal psychical visitations" including "fixed ideas," "trances," and "visions":

These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather.... Even more perhaps than other kinds of genius, religious leaders have been subject to abnormal psychical visitations.... They have known no measure, been liable to obsession and fixed ideas; and frequently they have fallen into trances, heard voices, seen visions, and presented all sorts of peculiarities which are ordinarily classed as pathological. (*Varieties* 10)

Religious persons, in James's formulation, can be one of two things: dull or unstable. The former are not worth dwelling upon; the latter can best be approached as psychological specimens.

Paradoxically, however, the historical evidences of these abnormal religious tendencies must be judged according to standards of reasonableness and self-consciousness determined by academic professionals like James and his students:

I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography.... It follows from this that the documents that will most concern us will be those of the men who were most accomplished in the religious life and best able to give an intelligible account of their ideas and motives. (*Varieties* 8)

True religion, despite its classification as an abnormal psychological state, can be recognized by its tendency to produce works of piety and autobiography—never fiction or myth—that are self-evidently both rational and professional. The only religious adherents worth studying are those

who have reached the top of their field—the CEO’s, as it were—and can describe their religious experience “articulately” and “self-consciously.” Forms of religion that cannot be expressed rationally and systematically, or that can be best expressed in narrative forms like fiction and myth, are imperfect or unevolved. James, then, aligns true religion with the implicitly white, male, and Protestant conditions of the American public sphere: “true religion,” though it might originate in abnormal psychological forms like trances or visions, will eventually prove itself rational, textual, and fully compatible with burgeoning social scientific discourses that privilege description and classification over creative narration. Any religion or religious adherent that cannot be understood within these terms is false, imitative, rote, and unworthy of notice.

The implicitly gendered and raced terms of James’s classificatory scheme are made even clearer in his 1897 essay “The Will to Believe” in which, in addition to thinking through a theory of religious belief, he addresses the increasing division of Western experience into public and private realms. Decrying a modern tendency to elevate the putatively public discourse of science over ostensibly private religious feelings, James makes the case for a robust public religious presence by aligning religion with a competitive, scientific masculinity and distancing it from any association with communal experience or personal sentiment. As in the *Varieties*, the gendered terms of this dichotomy are fairly clear. James argues for the continuing relevance of religion to a properly constituted public sphere by arguing that it be reclassified as science rather than sentiment:

When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations;... then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths? (“Will” 7)

The physical sciences, and scientists themselves, are “manly,” “rugged,” and “austere,” while religious belief is “sentimental”—a term synonymous, by the end of the nineteenth century, with the weak and feminine. The purpose of bringing religion into the public sphere, then, is to “masculinize” it, to rid it of its feminine sentimentality and put it on an equal footing with the sciences. James imagines a battle royal in which “religious hypotheses” are pitted against one another in a public sphere defined according to the terms of empirical science and competitive capitalism: “the freest competition of the various faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed” (“Will” xii). The faiths that emerge from this Darwinian challenge will be those which most resemble (or force themselves to resemble) science: “Those faiths will best stand the test which adopt also [the scientist’s] hypotheses, and make them integral elements of their own” (xii). In this new twentieth-century public sphere, defined by rationalism and the triumph of scientific thinking, religious agency will consist not in communal acts of meaning making but in a *mano a mano* competition to conform to scientific methods of interpretation. Women and persons of color, still largely excluded from the sciences and from the halls of higher education, will have little to contribute to this competitive discourse.

James, then, wishes religion to remain a matter of public debate, not because religion will transform the public sphere, but because the public sphere will transform religion, first by eliminating “lesser” forms (those that do not conform to a “widening knowledge of the world” [“Will” xi]) and finally by absorbing it within the discourses of science. The actions of religious people and communities, in James’s formulation, should be properly subsumed within and subordinated to the expectations of a rationalized public sphere. While James’s language is generally gendered rather than raced, Laurie Maffly-Kipp has recently described how James’s

Harvard student W.E.B. DuBois performed a similar act of division in creating histories of African-American social life: turn-of-the-century black intellectuals presented black history, “especially its religious elements, as a romantic but vestigial remnant of a dying way of life,” a primarily emotional experience characterized by “the frenzy of the Southern preacher, the croonings of the spirituals, and the ecstatic ravings of the congregation.” DuBois, Carter Woodson, and other black intellectuals thus positioned the communal religious experiences of African Americans as aspects of a superseded past no longer applicable to a black community that would soon join the ranks of “academic and elite audiences” (Maffly-Kipp 4). If African Americans were to enter into an increasingly rationalized public sphere they would have to do so as secularized individuals rather than religious communities.

The consolidation of the secularized university that took place at the turn to the twentieth century thus relied implicitly on intellectual models that either denied the generative power of religious agency or relegated it to the distant past. The public sphere was reimagined, not as the proper place for doctrinal debate, but as a secularized space in which religious discourse and agency must either conform to scientific standards or disappear altogether. The assumption that the public sphere is a fully secularized space and that the forms of agency most appropriate to and effective within it must therefore also be secularized became so pervasive over the course of the twentieth century that when religious agency did appear in the public sphere it was quickly removed from official histories. Ann Braude’s study of the National Organization for Women, for example, notes the critical role played in the group’s founding in the 1960s by Catholic nuns, Methodist lay leaders, and other religious feminists, who established “an Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion that organized worship services as well as supporting women’s rights in religious contexts” (“Religious Feminist” 559-560). Braude goes on to demonstrate how feminist

historiographies that appeared during the 1980s and 1990s erased these religious origins, “portraying religion exclusively as an enemy of feminism” (“Religious Feminist” 556) and emphasizing the success of the “secular feminist” movement. Feminism, then, had to be stripped of its religious roots in order to claim its proper place in a secularized public sphere.

Such revisionism, as this dissertation has shown, has obscured critical understandings, not only of the twentieth-century social movements that Braude studies, but of nineteenth-century history and literature. To remedy the continued misreading of the power of religious agency in the nineteenth-century public sphere, critics must seek out secular models of criticism rather than secularized ones: models of nineteenth-century culture (and twenty-first-century culture as well) that account for the complex interplay of religious and non-religious discourses instead of assuming that the latter take precedence over the former in any given text or context. An attention to the interleaving of the religious and the secular—and to the shifting values embedded in these terms at different cultural and historical moments—can reveal the many ways that religion functions to enable agency in both the public and private spheres, and lead to better understanding of the role of religion in past eras and our own.



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