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HOME/ECONOMICS: ENTERPRISE, PROPERTY, AND MONEY IN WOMEN'S DOMESTIC FICTION, 1860-1930

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Julia Poindexter McLeod entitled "HOME/
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1860-1930." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and
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Philosophy, with a major in English.

Mary E. Papke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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**HOME/ECONOMICS: ENTERPRISE, PROPERTY, AND MONEY IN WOMEN'S
DOMESTIC FICTION, 1860-1930**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Julia Poindexter McLeod
August 2015

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ABSTRACT

“Home/Economics: Enterprise, Property, and Money in Women’s Domestic Fiction, 1860-1930” connects American women’s literature to the ideological tensions that affected women’s participation in the development of industrial capitalism in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Working against separate spheres ideologies that largely restricted women’s activities to domestic duties as wives and mothers and discouraged them from working in the public marketplace, American women authors engaged with the contemporary economic theories of John Stuart Mill and Thorstein Veblen and promoted New Woman principles to forge new avenues of fulfilling and productive work for women.

In chapters focusing on entrepreneurial work that engages simultaneously in domestic and public spheres – the boarding house, the textile mill, and the farm – I incorporate a comparative study of American literature, economic theory, and historical documentation of women’s work. This examination of the historical network of voices shaping the conditions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century marketplace in which women writers participated reveals the connections between literary representation and economic change.

I argue that, for women writers including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Rebecca Harding Davis, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, literary representation became a form of feminist activism that promoted greater opportunities for women’s economic independence and participated in national conversations about money and resources, capitalism’s effects on the character of individuals, and ways to balance the necessity of money with social needs for promoting human sympathy and social progress. Women’s fiction critiqued prevailing social and economic inequities through portrayals of successful women entrepreneurs, demonstrating that women possessed the capacity to compete with men as successful entrepreneurial capitalists, the desire for productive work that made profitable use of their individual capacities, and the womanly attributes of sympathy and nurture that, when exercised as community-building professionalism, could help to ameliorate the exploitative outcomes of capitalist greed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ACM</i>	<i>A Certain Measure</i>
<i>BG</i>	<i>Barren Ground</i>
<i>OL</i>	<i>On Liberty</i>
<i>OP</i>	<i>O Pioneers!</i>
<i>PE</i>	<i>Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy</i>
<i>SW</i>	<i>The Subjection of Women</i>
<i>TLC</i>	<i>The Theory of the Leisure Class</i>
<i>TSP</i>	<i>The Silent Partner</i>
<i>TWW</i>	<i>The Woman Within</i>
<i>WDD</i>	<i>What Diantha Did</i>
<i>WE</i>	<i>Women and Economics</i>

INTRODUCTION

Domestic Enterprise: The Case for Traversing Separate Spheres

In *The Morgesons*, Elizabeth Stoddard writes that “[a] woman of genius is but a heavenly lunatic, or an anomaly sphered between the sexes” (242). Whether a woman of exceptional ability would be considered either mad or so unusual that no one would know where to place her is a question at the center of debate in the literature of women writers in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Operating within and against nineteenth-century separate spheres ideology – which positioned women as nurturing, virtuous caregivers inhabiting a domestic sphere of refuge separated from the degrading forces of the public marketplace sphere of men – women authors offer insights into the questions of those inhabiting the domestic space. Were the responsibilities of home and family sufficiently satisfying for the woman of genius? What about the women whose lives – from necessity or ambition – demanded participation in capitalist enterprises? What would it mean for a woman to navigate successfully between the spheres? How would she accomplish such a feat, and what would be the rewards and the repercussions? This dissertation investigates the ways that women’s domestic literature between 1860 and 1930 engaged in questions of money, economics, and property ownership for women, how these questions shaped and defined women’s participation in American economic systems, and how women authors interacted with their contemporary – and predominantly male – economic and social theorists to demonstrate both a desire to engage in the marketplace and the restrictions limiting this engagement.

After the Civil War, women writers began to renegotiate the patterns of domestic fiction popular in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Nina Baym, in *Women’s Fiction*, defines

sentimental domestic fiction as a genre that developed from the eighteenth-century sentimental novel form; popular between 1820 and 1865 in the United States, this type of domestic novel featured the following:

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 is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world. . . . [; b]y the novel's end she has developed a strong conviction of her own worth as a result of which she does ask much from herself. She can meet her own demands, and, inevitably, the change in herself has changed the world's attitude toward her, so that much that was formerly denied her now comes to her unsought. (11, 19)

Donna Campbell states on her webpage "Domestic or Sentimental Fiction, 1820-1865" that most often the final triumph for this heroine comes in the form of marriage, either to a "wild" man she has reformed or a "solid male who already meets her qualifications." This mid-nineteenth-century genre of popular fiction was written by women for a female audience, and espoused the ideals of True Womanhood that Barbara Welter identifies as "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (152). Often accused of being overly sentimental and employing extreme pathos to evoke tears of sympathy from readers, this popular form of fiction embraced woman's role as an angel overseeing domestic sites of nurture and rest. In this way, nineteenth-century domestic fiction reinforced societal expectations of women that were also reflected in religious and social constructions of separate spheres ideology, in legal restrictions that enforced married women's dependence on their husbands, and in marketplace restrictions that named women engaged in economic action in the public sphere as "unsexed" and unfeminine.

Barbara Leslie Epstein, however, notes that this fiction painted an overly idealized picture of the domestic sphere's protection for women from the harsh marketplace and that "in real life drudgery and isolation were more prominent than strawberries and cream" (75). The actual lived experience of women did not always directly reflect what these novels described: joy in the everyday duties of wife and mother, ultimate happiness as the woman presiding over her husband's prosperous household, and self-possession as the containment of excessive (feminine) emotional vicissitudes. The separate spheres ideology that defined True Womanhood also came with the implicit promise of protection and care at the hands of the men who acted in the marketplace to fund the home's operations. As many critics have noted,¹ this ideology is a particularly white, middle-class construction. But what happened when this patriarchal system failed? What about those who fell outside of this sphere of protection by choice or circumstance – widows, spinsters, working-class women, African-American and immigrant women? How did these women navigate the public-private divide to provide for themselves and their families? And what about the women of ambition (or genius) who desired to engage in American promises of success? My own foremothers were among this more cantankerous, independent group of women who actively engaged in both the domestic *and* public spheres: a professional seamstress, a general store operator, a professional bookkeeper, farmers, and educators who all maintained domestic roles while also crossing into the public sphere in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This dissertation explores women's texts that reflect the experience of the women like those in my family who successfully navigated both outside of and within the

¹ See, for example, Carol Farley Kessler's 1982 analysis of *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* in the Twayne's United States Authors Series (40), Lora Romero's 1997 *Home Fronts* (10), William Conlogue's 2001 *Working the Garden* (3), Amy Schragger Lang's 2003 *The Syntax of Class* (94), Francesca Sawaya's 2004 *Modern Women, Modern Work* (11), and Martha H. Patterson's 2005 *Beyond the Gibson Girl* (7-8).

enclosed domestic space. I locate literature that both reflects this cross-sphered life and demonstrates that late nineteenth-century women authors actively engaged with contemporary economic theories to probe the development of capitalism and consequent social constructions in the Industrial Age. In the course of that examination, it becomes clear that this fiction's portrayal of economically independent women critiques the lack of opportunities available to women in the marketplace, that women's domestic fiction demonstrates property and business ownership offered women economic and emotional independence and challenged the traditional marriage plot, and that domestic fiction articulates a vision of sympathy and community action that could ameliorate the evils of market capitalism.

Critical Conversations about Domestic Literature: A Literature Review

Contemporary critics of nineteenth-century domestic literature drew a dividing line between self-conscious literary art – produced and appreciated by the mostly male elite of the New England literary community – and the popular, self-perpetuating status quo of sentimental women's texts. In 1855, Hawthorne, in a letter to William D. Ticknor, bemoaned the proliferation of popular domestic fiction: “America is now wholly given over to a d——d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed” (75). Likewise, Melville in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” praised Hawthorne for his use of domestic themes in original and self-aware ways that set him apart from the popular – and, as Melville considered it, inferior – writing of best-selling women by observing that “there are so many books called ‘excellent,’ . . . that amid the thick stir of other things, the hint of my tasteful friend was disregarded” (125). Lora Romero notes that literary historians continued to follow Melville's line of critique, arguing

that high culture's stance of being oppositional and self-aware opposed "the accommodative nature of all matters domestic, and . . . 'feminine'" (2). This line of criticism, according to critics including Lora Romero and Jane Tompkins, continued into the Modernist era, when New Critical scholars largely ignored women's texts because they did not meet the era's aesthetic and purportedly nonpolitical aims; instead, popular women's texts stood as the opposition against which canonical high art was defined. In 1978, Henry Nash Smith still viewed popular literature as pacifying and superficial in comparison to that of Hawthorne and Melville, and designed "to relieve the anxieties aroused by rapid upward mobility, especially the fear of failure, and to provide assurance that the universe is managed for man's benefit" (15).

With the surge of feminist studies in the 1970s came renewed critical focus on women's domestic fiction. In 1978, Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* described sentimental literature as empty and shallow, doing the "dirty work" of making women complicit to – and thus perpetuating – the forces at work to contain them (11). Such "sentimental heresy," Douglas claimed, functioned as an evasion of capitalism's consequences and glorified women's only expression of economic power as consumers of fashionable clothing and domestic objects (11, 78). Despite Douglas's negative assessment, her study was instrumental in making women's fiction a subject worthy of critical attention.

During the 1980s, literary scholars focused on recovering women's texts and re-evaluating the social critique embedded therein. Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* in 1985 sparked a now-famous debate with Douglas. Tompkins valorizes women's texts, noting that domestic novels question and critique American society and that the genre needs re-interpretation for readers trained by the male-oriented education fostered during the New Critical era. The popular nineteenth-century domestic novel, Tompkins argues, "represents a

monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view" and demonstrates the writers' "mak[ing] maximum use of the one material advantage they possessed" – that is, the home (124, 165). The domestic space, the one tool offered by a culture oriented in separate spheres ideology, became a platform for women upon which to create social change that would improve society, and Tompkins claims that Douglas's overly simplistic assessment missed the counter strategies evident – even if limited –in women's novels (162).

Hazel Carby's 1987 *Reconstructing Womanhood* examines the aims of African-American women writers' texts as both employing and opposing strategies used by white authors. Writers like Harriet Jacobs, she claims, employed white middle-class conventions to gain sympathy from white readers; however, Jacobs's strategy also manages to "demystif[y] a convention that appeared as the obvious, commonsense rules of behavior and revealed the concept of true womanhood to be an ideology" (49). Such a strategy satisfied white readers' moral expectations, assuring Jacobs a public voice, while also exposing the distinctions embedded within separate spheres ideology that hindered political alliances across racial lines between women.

Literary criticism of the 1990s focused on deconstructing separate spheres binaries, exposing the patriarchal power structures at work to preserve barriers dependent upon gender, race, and class. Ann Romines's 1992 study *The Home Plot* examines the value of domestic ritual and housework that has been covered up by patriarchal privileging of individual action in the marketplace (14). The cyclical nature of housework, Romines claims, reflects the nature of women's lives and, while culture consumes the domestic woman's labors – the efforts that provide cultural continuity – it also ignores or suppresses the fact of woman's labor (6). Romines argues that domestic fiction writers were historically ignored because their works do not fit into the patriarchally determined canon's conventions for plot and "literary language" and that

women's texts actually are "potentially explosive documents of women's culture" because they expose what has been suppressed – the rhythms and substance of women's work (17, 9).

Claudia Tate, building on Carby's work, examines African-American women writers' domestic texts from the end of the nineteenth century. Tate argues that the idealized depictions of domesticity and home ownership in novels such as Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* perform the task of "racialized, ideal-family (re)formation" to inspire Reconstruction readers working to gain equal standing across racial lines (11). By demonstrating the possibilities of domestic spaces that deconstructed race and class binaries at work in the late nineteenth century, African-American women authors reveal a "masked political intentionality" that is the hope of participating as American citizens with equal access to rights of liberty, property, and happiness (21).

Lora Romero's pivotal study *Home Fronts* uses Foucault's *History of Sexuality* as a theoretical grounding from which to examine domestic texts for structures of power and resistance as well as dominant and oppositional culture, finding the domestic woman a "utility" for stabilizing the ideological binaries of dominant/marginal, political/home, and active/passive (4-5). Romero examines the tensions present in such an ideological formation and, finding most of her contemporaries' critical work too binaristic, resists privileging one half of the binary over the other. Instead, she finds that domestic texts present a "web" of multiple expressions of domesticity and ultimately concludes that "the authors [of domestic fiction] have not done the impossible, that is, discovered the one key for the liberation of all humankind" (5).

Although work such as Romero's navigates the complexities of political power structures at play in domestic fiction, much of the criticism from the 1990s, in sharply defining the separate structures that divided male and female sources of power, tends to reify the binaries it seeks to

expose. The result is reflected in new arguments among feminists and an increasing insistence that women choose between public and domestic paths – career or home, professional life or motherhood. Rather than blurring or navigating the domestic/public binary, critical studies ended up reinforcing the divisions among women.

In 1998, Cathy N. Davidson edited a special volume of *American Literature*, and her “Preface: No More Separate Spheres!” lays the foundation for alternative explorations of domestic fiction:

for all the utopic appeal of loving female worlds, the binaric version of nineteenth-century American history is ultimately unsatisfactory because it is simply too crude an instrument—too rigid and totalizing—for understanding the different, complicated ways that nineteenth-century American society or literary production functioned. (445)

Claiming that binary criticism valorizes one side of the binary while caricaturing the other, Davidson advocates nuanced readings that engage with texts’ explorations of rhetorical formulations, of women’s love for women, of a complicated – and not necessarily celebratory – focus on the female subject, of Chicano/a textual recovery, of socioeconomic elements in African-American domestic-worker texts, and of the tenuous efficacy of sentimental texts for producing sympathy that eradicates differences.

Building on Davidson’s work, the new millennium has opened other avenues for critical exploration of domestic fiction. Of particular interest here is the study of the economic conditions of women that are explored in relation to domestic texts. While *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, edited by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen and published in 1999, offers economic readings of a wide range

of American texts, none of the essays engages with domestic fiction by American women writers. English literary studies, on the other hand, has produced several groundbreaking works that consider questions of economics in women-authored texts. Tim Dolin's 1997 study, *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel*, builds upon earlier work by Mary Poovey and other Victorian scholars and serves as a model for analyses of American fiction. Dolin examines the English Victorian novel's engagement in public discourse about women's property rights and the changes between 1849 and 1887 that culminated in the passage of the Married Woman's Property Act. Dolin notes that women of property in novels – "heiresses, dowagers, old maids and embattled wives" – possess a tenuous financial independence that would be negated by the woman's marriage, since under the English law of coverture at the time, a married woman's person, material goods, and real estate all became legal possessions of her husband (3). This study also explores the link between sexual ideology and property laws; the house itself serves as a concrete and visible marker of stable economic order, and a wife positioned within it as a living demonstration of a man's wealth (11). Because, as Dolin claims, the novels could not overtly challenge the barriers to women's economic independence, the resulting texts seem "at once to be liberating and doom-laden" in their exploration of women's legal, economic, and social position (16).

More recently, Elsie B. Michie's *The Vulgar Question of Money*, published in 2011, explores the ways that novels reveal the economic basis of society and how economic considerations based on heiresses' possession of money disrupt the marriage plot in Victorian novels. The rich but greedy and vulgar woman, Michie argues, is necessary to the development of a plot in which a rich man chooses a poor but superior, "psychologically independent" bride, and this type of plot makes marriage systems part of the political discussion about the impact of

money on culture (1, 16). By examining the novel in light of political economy and anthropological systems of marriage, Michie aims to “articulate an unresolved social dilemma associated with the rise of capitalism in England” (6). Of particular interest to me in this study is Michie’s methodology: she pairs novels with contemporary political essays and treatises to demonstrate that fictional texts did not merely engage with the concerns of the domestic sphere but actively participated in political and economic concerns in England. In doing so, she demonstrates that the plot espousing marriage for love, not money, actually engages with and is inevitably shaped by the economic forces such an idealized story claims to resist (25).

In the United States, there has been a recent increase in critical studies of economic concerns in domestic novels. A study combining a comparison of domestic texts with nineteenth-century court records, Joyce W. Warren’s *Women, Money, and the Law: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Gender, and the Courts*, published in 2005, explores the connections between changing women’s property laws, women’s lives, and fiction. Warren finds that legal cases involving women support domestic fiction’s claims that women were active in the market economy, despite prevailing prejudices that women were insufficiently aggressive for the world of business and ill-suited for the “vulgar” task of handling money (62-3). Examining a wide range of nineteenth-century women’s texts that portray the lack of employment opportunities for women who needed money, Warren finds that the novels “called attention to the gender and race of American individualism: white male Americans could hope to better themselves by self-reliance and seek the American Dream, but women were left out of the equation” (74).

Mary Templin’s 2014 study entitled *Panic Fiction: Women and Antebellum Economics*, in turn, argues that women writers’ response to the country’s 1837 financial crisis marks an “explicit intersection between economics and domesticity” that reads “the uncertainties of the

antebellum marketplace . . . from the perspective of women and the home” (3). This economically focused domestic fiction, Templin notes, “allowed their authors to engage in . . . a host of larger questions about national economic growth, development, and regulation” (4). The scope of Templin’s study, covering the years 1836-1857, predates the fiction that this study will explore, but her examination of fiction as a parallel form of economic discourse serves as a useful model for this project.

Topic of Inquiry, Methodology, and Contribution to Scholarship

This dissertation study builds on the existing base of economic criticism in literature by analyzing domestic fiction written between 1860 and 1930 alongside contemporary economic texts, critical essays, and primary documents in order to reveal the connections between the rise in industrial capitalism and the American Dream of individual prosperity as they relate specifically to women. I seek to uncover the ways women’s literary works respond to and influence contemporary debates about the development of the capitalist marketplace and address fears about the uneven distribution of resources – including productive and remunerative work, material wealth, and pecuniary reputability – that subsequently limit women’s access to political and social power. My reading of primary documents supports this investigation by demonstrating the historical network of voices shaping the conditions of the nineteenth-century marketplace in which women writers participated.

For the purposes of this study, I define domestic fiction as works in which the spaces and activities of the home constitute sites of meaning and action. Because women’s writing portrays women’s lives not as one corporately shared, universal female experience but as individual expressions within a gendered situatedness, the domestic space is often prominent in works of

fiction beyond the period defined by Nina Baym as ending in 1865. In the United States, women's literature written during the period 1860 to 1930, while adhering to many domestic conventions, also reflects vast changes in the social and economic position of women and closely follows the country's developing arcs of capitalist expansion and first-wave feminism. This study explores the economic and social conditions that complicated the ability of women to traverse the ideological divide of separate spheres in order to gain access to remunerative work in the public marketplace and to the self-possession and economic independence that such work produced. I argue that women authors engaged with the theories of John Stuart Mill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Thorstein Veblen as active participants in national conversations about money and resources and, in doing so, both explored the effects of capitalism on the character of individuals and proposed ways to balance the necessity of money with the social need to perpetuate human sympathy and social progress.

Studying women's literature in the context of economics and American capitalism offers a new interpretation of domestic fiction that demonstrates how this literature challenged the socioeconomic systems blocking women's access to full participation in the world of work. Arguing that women brought particular strengths to the marketplace that could promote national well-being and economic advancement, women writers saw their literary art as a type of social reform that both communicated frustrations with social and economic inequities and offered portrayals of women's entrepreneurial potential. Through their art, they demonstrated that women possessed both the capacity and the desire for productive work that made use of their individual strengths. This literature also warned of the dangers of capitalist drive that could destroy the community relationship and noted the ways that womanly attributes of sympathy and

nurture, when expressed as cooperative workmanship, could ameliorate these exploitative outcomes of capitalist greed.

A Test Case in Domestic Enterprise: The Boarding House Owner in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*

Pauline Hopkins's 1900 novel, *Contending Forces*, provides a productive example for exploring the breaking down of divisions between domestic and marketplace spheres in literature written by women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The novel features Mrs. Smith, a widow who must support herself and her children, William and Dora, after the death of her husband. She does this by turning her most significant capital asset – her home – into a “lodging-house” that provides her with economic independence and the ability to support her family and that also establishes her as a leader who nurtures her community's progress (Hopkins 81). Only one generation removed from Reconstruction, Mrs. Smith is an African-American woman who understands the necessity of economic independence as her pathway to self-determination and a life that makes possible “the unfolding of the bud of promise in [her] offspring” (Hopkins 86).

Elizabeth Ammons, in her “Afterword” to *The Unruly Voice*, a 1996 collection of critical essays on Hopkins, makes “an overt case for Hopkins as a radical experimenter” whose goal was “venturesomeness, defiance of categories, resistance to received tradition, and determination to articulate new forms not to *contain* stories but to *release* new possibilities and paradigms” (Ammons 211, 212, emphasis in original). Hopkins's novel pushes social boundaries, and, while in the introduction she asks for the readers' “approval of whatever may impress them as being of value to the Negro race” and its advancement, her novel also promotes the aim of equal access to

economic and political power for women (13). Julie Cary Nerad's study of *Contending Forces* notes that critical work has primarily focused on race and largely neglected the economic concerns of the novel, and she argues that "the main characters in *Contending Forces* [particularly the female characters, Grace Montford and Sappho Clark] understand the complex connections among material gain, education, social equality, and political representation" (359). The venturesome, determined Hopkins uses her novel to depict new paradigms for women's lives, asserting that "[f]iction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political and social," but that it is also "a record of growth and development from generation to generation" (13-14). Her novel advocates the development of women's economic power by depicting their capacity for savvy business enterprise that makes the best use of the tools and settings available to them in the domestic sphere to accomplish the goals of productive work, self-sufficiency, and social advancement. Hopkins, then, offers a fruitful reading as part of the group of contemporary women writers, including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, who promoted similar goals in their late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fiction.

M. L. Rayne's 1885 *What Can a Woman Do?* – an instruction manual for women seeking economic independence from desire or necessity – notes that the boarding house "gives the woman . . . a chance to earn a respectable living, and it gives the people who are without homes or means to establish them a chance to live respectably" (268). The boarding house business, Rayne argues, is particularly suitable for women since "men . . . have neither the prudence or the patience to contend with the many difficulties" involved in managing the multiple demands of boarders, a task that requires a woman with "wise management" who is "sharp and shrewd[,] who can cater successfully to a half hundred different tastes, [and] serve them all with equal

partiality” (270, 269, 268). Mrs. Smith and her daughter Dora ably share the management duties of the house, creating an environment so enjoyable for the lodgers that “even in palatial homes a more inviting nest could not be found,” while at the same time earning profit sufficient to support the Smith family, pay off the mortgage, and eventually send Will to Harvard (Hopkins 88). The women’s success demonstrates a capacity for business management within the domestic sphere that reverses the socially prescribed beliefs that the home is a refuge from the competition of the capitalist marketplace. Mrs. Smith and Dora understand that hard work, productively and wisely performed, can transform the domestic site into a source of economic prosperity.

The Smiths’ boarding house, then, by turning the domestic space into a site of economic production, upends traditional ideas about women’s place and women’s work. As Rayne states, the success of a boarding house depends upon the implementation of sound business principles, more so than the romantic sensibilities of nurture and sympathy traditionally assigned to True Women: “Boarders are not guests. . . . The only way in which [the boarding house operator] can realize success is to conduct it on the best business system, making her labor yield a fair profit” (274, 275). Dora says that “this continual scrub and dig is not always the cheerful work we would like to think it,” but declares, “Still[,] I don’t care as long as the house pays” (Hopkins 81). Dora’s sunny disposition never completely masks her understanding that the family’s economic viability depends upon careful business practices, and she “prov[es] herself to be a woman of ability and the best of managers, husbanding their small income to the best advantage” (Hopkins 85). Indeed, the well-managed house provides income ample enough to give the family social reputability through the “consumption as . . . evidence of wealth,” or “conspicuous consumption,” that Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* identifies at the turn of the century (69, 68). Rayne notes that boarding houses typically have “thread-bare carpets and

worn furniture” because operating expenses leave “not even enough to give the patient over-worked landlady a new dress” or other nice things (270, 271). However, Mrs. Smith’s “pretty parlor” contains evidence of the good business management that affords the purchase of a “neat woolen carpet,” a “handsome piano lamp,”² along with “modest furniture and [a] few ornaments,” and this pleasant room is known throughout the community as a site of refinement and respectability (Hopkins 142, 103, 103, 103). In late nineteenth-century society, Veblen asserts, a wife performs the task of conspicuous consumption in order to display her husband’s wealth, but in Hopkins’s novel, the wealth displayed is earned by the women themselves through their own productive labor and successful management of the resources available to them.

Mrs. Smith is an exemplary business woman, one who not only seeks personal economic success but also uses her house to promote improved social and cultural standards in her community. Rayne notes that usually boarding house keepers, being focused on “keeping boarders, and making money out of them,” are often “not the most agreeable characters to know, . . . for entertaining guests at so much a head is certainly a rather demoralizing business” (268). However, Mrs. Smith’s kind disposition and diligent care earns her the nickname “Ma,” while her “known respectability” indicates that she also maintains necessary levels of deportment and professionalism befitting a woman of her position (Hopkins 84, 104). She is the kind of authority that Rayne describes in the well-run boarding house “where a community of ladies and gentlemen manage their housekeeping on the co-operative plan and meet at one common table, where they can enjoy each other’s company socially. . . . The landlady is the queen of the realm, and she needs to be wise and gracious in her rule if she would have loyal subjects” (275). As

² Mrs. Smith’s parlor also contains a piano, the nineteenth-century symbol of middle-class affluence, which was a birthday gift for Dora from Will, who, like his mother and sister, is hardworking and focused on social advancement (Hopkins 103).

queen of No. 500 D Street, Mrs. Smith rents rooms only to boarders who are “pretty nice,” hardworking, “respectable though unlettered people . . . [with] kindly hearts and honesty of purpose” – a wise business practice that not only creates a high demand for her rooms, but also enacts a community-building strategy (Hopkins 103, 102). Because securing a room in Mrs. Smith’s house depends on one’s being “high-toned,” living there grants boarders social capital in the form of respectability (Hopkins 103). A discerning professional woman, Mrs. Smith’s actions echo John Stuart Mill’s ideas of political economy that assert the importance of rising above an over-emphasis on pecuniary interests to the exclusion of sympathy and individual growth in a community. In *On Liberty*, Mill argues that intelligent and self-controlled individuals who foster “high thoughts and elevating feelings” and support individual growth in others ultimately “mak[e] the race infinitely better worth belonging to” (70). Mrs. Smith understands her role as such a leader, and she often sponsors “reception nights” featuring music and other “arts of a higher civilization” that cultivate community refinement and ensure that her boarders are “as happy together as possible” (Hopkins 102, 86, 102). Ultimately, Mrs. Smith’s argument “that those who were inclined to stray from right paths would be influenced either in favor of upright conduct or else be shamed into an acceptance of the right” demonstrates her aspiration to lead by example in order to improve the social and economic prospects of those around her, turning them to the cultural language and behaviors that she sees as the “right” way to gain access to the American Dream (Hopkins 102).

In particular, Mrs. Smith’s boarding house fosters economic independence in other women. Virginia Penny’s *Employments of Women* notes that, in 1863, “good boarding houses for workwomen are scarce in all large cities,” and, in locations that do have such establishments, women usually do not earn enough to be able to afford living there (416). Mrs. Smith’s boarding

house, however, counters this trend. Several of her boarders are women who find encouragement and protection within the pleasant “refuge” of the house while at the same time they engage in work that is profitable enough to allow them to pay room and board there (Hopkins 128). Sappho Clark is a stenographer who makes a living typing transcripts for a company that refuses to hire her for an office position because of her race; the boarding house provides her protection from the “complaints” of the other clerks and from “the insulting familiarity which some men assumed” toward her at the office while also supporting her efforts to begin a new life and attain self-sufficiency (Hopkins 128). Other women who live at Mrs. Smith’s are successful entrepreneurs: Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White operate “The First-[C]lass New Orleans Laundry,” and two other boarders are dressmakers (Hopkins 106). By novel’s end, when Mrs. Smith retires from business and makes plans to live with her son, she rents the property to Mrs. Davis who will carry on both the boarding house and her laundry business and, in her future position as the wife of Rev. Tommy James – a minister who advocates women’s education and equality of the sexes and who is in a position of social authority to advance such ideas – she can continue the business of promoting social and economic change for women (366).

Mrs. Smith also uses her parlor to host sewing group meetings that engage the women of her community in political activism through productive work so that “the first business [in the meetings] was to go over events of interest to the Negro race which had transpired during the week throughout the country” as they make items to sell at a fundraising fair that will pay off the mortgage on the church building, a “magnificent property” that serves as the spiritual and historical center of the community (Hopkins 143, 142). As an entrepreneur and community leader, Mrs. Smith, then, sidesteps the pitfalls of capitalist greed and exploitation that were widespread concerns voiced by opponents of feminist activism of the late-nineteenth century,

concerns that are reflected in the novel's characters who are not selfless in their economic pursuits. John Langley's "mercenary streak, which ma[kes] love of money his great passion," manifests as greedy unscrupulousness that makes him an example of "the combination of the worst features" of all races and ostracizes him from the community (91). Mary Jane Robinson represents the similar dangers of economic prosperity to women's character. Her rise in position as the heir to money enough to buy a "house out o' town" makes her arrogant, and the other women in her church community remark that she "thinks she owns this chuch an' everyone in it" and that her wealth – which she does nothing to earn – makes her "have a swell head" (Hopkins 188). Rather than supporting political activism in the community of women, Robinson becomes competitive and vengeful and stirs up contention, and her character demonstrates the destabilizing effect that money can have on the character of women who are less noble and forward-thinking than Mrs. Smith.

The woman business owner in *Contending Forces* demonstrates a specifically gendered approach to business that engages both the domestic sphere's emphasis on nurture and community and the marketplace sphere's emphasis on successful participation in capitalist systems of commerce and production. Hopkins's text argues, along with those of other women writers of her time, that women have a particular set of skills they can use to develop a profitable business, and that women need to encourage each other in the development of a professionalism that leads to economic independence. Mrs. Smith, whose success comes at great personal cost and whose happiness is "chastened by wrongs endured and griefs subdued," serves as an example of the self-possessed, confident, self-supporting woman for the readers of Hopkins's novel (373). Claudia Tate notes that the "idealized domesticity" of Hopkins's novel digressed from realist literature common during the period; rather than depicting the hardships of black

women in graphic – and discouraging – detail, the novel instead offers readers a portrayal of the possibilities for the enterprising woman to attain middle-class prosperity and the political and social power that came with it (5). Hopkins aims to affect the social and economic conditions of her time with the domestic business of Mrs. Smith’s boarding house – and to press for changes that would bring to fruition equal access for all Americans to “the greatest and brightest of principles for the elevation of mankind” (14). As Lois Lamphere Brown notes, “Like the Smiths, Hopkins’s turn-of-the-century readers are on the threshold of new societies and are invited to dream of unexplored lands that have a direct, though previously unimagined, connection to their own existence” (69). For many women ready to explore avenues of economic independence, the most productive site to begin these changes was the domestic sphere, in occupations that gained them access to full participation in the public marketplace.

The Workings of this Study

My study demonstrates that women authors used domestic fiction to explore ways that women could develop economic and personal independence from the materials at hand. Their work also shows that women were interested in more than the traditional concerns of the domestic space; they were in active dialogue with questions of political economy and the social and cultural effects of the rise in industrial capitalism being discussed by the major political economists of their time. As self-supporting working women themselves, the authors that form this study – Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow – span the period between 1860 and 1930, and their work traces the development of paths for women’s work through the culture of the New Woman. These authors saw their work as effecting social change in the status of women and responding to the need for

women's greater access to economic independence by depicting the effective exercise of women's capacity for succeeding as entrepreneurs.

Part I: The Woman Mill Owner and Women Workers in Industrial Reform Fiction

Part I explores literary representations of women's participation in American industrial capitalism between 1860 and 1870. Novelists and essayists of this period saw themselves forming the as-yet-fragmentary paradigm of women's full entry into the business sphere and exploring issues of women's capitalism in late-nineteenth-century America, including the role of the individual in a capitalist economy, limitations of access to business knowledge, paradigms for women's work in the public sphere, and the role of sympathy in the world of business. This study examines literature that portrays women who aspire to managerial or proprietary positions and engages directly with contemporary economic theorist John Stuart Mill. I argue that women authors actively participated in national economic debates of the time, and that economic theories and practices informed the ways that literature pressed against conventional nineteenth-century notions of women's role in the marketplace.

In the first section of Part I, I examine the works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, along with that of other women writers including Virginia Penny and Martha Louise Rayne, who, as vocal proponents of women's rights, focus on pioneering women in the business world in order to advocate increased options for paid productive work that would fulfill the economic and personal needs of women. Arguing that the prevailing separate spheres ideology confining women to the home was degrading and stifling, Phelps asserts that unhappy women suffering from "[m]ental hunger" need the meaningful paid occupations that she believes to be the pathway to a life of purpose, and Phelps's novel *The Silent Partner* participates in the cultural shift in which women

were increasingly drawn to the individualism and satisfaction available in the public workplace (“What Shall They Do?” 522). Advice manuals of the time, such as Penny’s *Employments of Women* and Rayne’s *What Can a Woman Do?*, also aimed at helping the increasing numbers of women who needed and wanted to work; these manuals indicate that business opportunities were slowly becoming available to women and support Phelps’s call to action. Phelps saw herself as a literary artist with the responsibility to challenge and educate readers about the conditions of the marketplace. In addition to her essays, she adapted domestic literature to suit her project, and in *The Silent Partner*, she reappropriates the domestic space as a site of business and social reform in order to redefine the standards of “respectable” behavior for women.

The second section of Part I explores the work of John Stuart Mill, whose *The Subjection of Women* and *On Liberty* Phelps uses to support her project of making a way for women into the business sphere and calling for social reforms to improve conditions of working-class women’s lives. Mill’s arguments on individuality, intellectual growth, persons of genius, and technology undergird the argument of Phelps’s novel. In particular, Phelps drew upon Mill’s conception of individual agency – that is, the full development of human potential through education and the development of higher thinking – to foster both individual happiness and, ultimately, to effect social progress that counteracts the ill effects of exploitative capitalism. Both Mill and Phelps argue that women possess the intelligence and capabilities that, when allowed full development, make them important contributors to social and economic progress.

As a key to understanding the development of ideas about women’s participation in industrial capitalism, I then examine the historical background for Phelps’s novel in early representations of working women found in Herman Melville’s “The Tartarus of Maids” and Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills.” Melville’s story demonstrates fears about

women's movement from the domestic sphere into the world of industry. His pale, voiceless "maids" demonstrate the human cost of factory production; separated from the domestic roles of wife and mother, women become sterile and machine-like even as they demonstrate capacity for new kinds of work. Rebecca Harding Davis's story attacks rational views of classical economics to show the danger of ignoring the social and emotional elements of human existence in pursuit of monetary gain; such limited vision threatens to erase the humanity of both the entrepreneurial and the working classes. By asking the "terrible question" about money, her story criticizes the American Dream that determines an individual's fate based on the possession or lack of money, and she explores the capacities and limitations of women in ameliorating the dehumanizing effects of capitalist industrialism (R. Davis, "Life in the Iron Mills" 14). Rebecca Harding Davis, like John Stuart Mill, promotes understanding and sympathy as inducements to reformative action; even though her heroine cannot yet envision what effective reforms should be, her story inspired other women authors, including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, to advance increasingly innovative reforms through literature.

In the final section of Part I, I explore Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's challenge to the social and economic structures that demanded women's adherence to the tenets of True Womanhood and blocked their access to self-sufficiency by enforcing marriage and motherhood as the only "natural" occupation of women. *The Silent Partner* demonstrates that a woman with opportunity, determination, and fortitude can become an active and contributing agent in the business sector. Phelps's heroine, I argue, engages John Stuart Mill's theories about women's rights, capabilities, and potential to demonstrate the novel's arguments for women's work: that relegating women to the domestic sphere prevented them from reaching their full potential as productive citizens, that women would exhibit capacity for occupations in the public sphere if given the opportunity, and

that humanity would benefit from the innovation and intellectual progress that such women could contribute. Depicting women's desire to transition beyond the domestic sphere to become active agents in the marketplace sphere, Phelps's novel critiques the lack of business education and opportunities as significant hindrances to women's advancement in industry.

The novel also critiques the traditional woman's public activity, philanthropy. Phelps's heroine, Perley Kelso, seeks to prevent the waste of workers' talent and intellect by educating them, encouraging the development of individual agency, and cultivating their "higher faculties," strategies that Phelps takes directly from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (84). While Perley employs the domestic space as a site for these reforms and succeeds in improving the fellow feeling between the classes, Phelps argues that a maternalist approach to problems of industrialism, while partially effective, cannot rectify all of the social and economic conflicts of the industrial community. The novel's culminating strike scene further demonstrates the complications and faltering efficacy of Mill's theories for ameliorating the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, as philanthropy ultimately fails to empower workers to act on their own behalf. Ultimately, I will argue that Phelps's novel calls for the removal of limitations to women's public agency that prevent their access to full development as individuals seeking productive and purposeful engagement in the world of work.

Part II: Down Home on the Farm: New Agriculture and the Woman Farmer

In the period between 1890 and 1930, arguments for the New Woman dominated much of the work by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, authors who challenged the separate spheres paradigm that created and reinforced women's economic displacement, stunted their self-reliance, and blocked their access to meaningful work and

financial independence. These authors' essays and novels argue that women need opportunities for remunerative work that suits their capacities so that they can care for themselves rather than live in socially enforced dependence on others (husbands, relatives, or charity), and these authors saw their work both as a critique of the status quo and as a reimagining of the domestic sphere as a site for economic activity. Because their writings portray the kinds of work women could do and the ways that this work could lead to both economic independence and personal satisfaction, these authors of New Woman fiction issue a call for change through portrayals of successful women entrepreneurs who fashion their success from the materials available to them in the domestic sphere.

This chapter contains four sections that examine fictional representations of the New Woman on the farm. Because the farm is simultaneously a domestic site (the farmhouse) and a site of marketplace participation (the farming business), the woman farmer serves as fruitful reworking of domestic discourse to demonstrate women's capacity for participating simultaneously in both spheres. Woman farmers in the works of Gilman, as well as in Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, demonstrate the challenges women face as successful business owners who cross the divide between the domestic site and the marketplace. By comparing farm stories and novels to the economic theories of John Stuart Mill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Thorstein Veblen, I explore the ways that the New Woman farmer in literature engages with changing definitions of property and work in the late-nineteenth-century move from Jeffersonian models of self-sufficient farms to agribusinesses actively participating in systems of capitalist production.

I begin with a look at Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose work as economist, feminist, and author provides a late-nineteenth-century example of renegotiating separate spheres ideologies

and challenging the period's predominant social divisions of domestic and public engagement. Gilman's vision was a form of reactionary separate spheres ideology in which women tended to create their own independence separate from men, a position that finds her pressing against the theories of John Stuart Mill and Thorstein Veblen who also criticized the social, cultural, and economic motives for the subjection of women. Through an examination of Gilman's theoretical writings, including *Women and Economics*, *Human Work*, and "Applepieville," as well as her novels *What Diantha Did* and *Herland* and the short story "Aunt Mary's Pie Plant," I argue that her alternative visions of economic and personal viability for women centered on her project to reposition domestic work as a marketable and remunerative skill and to propose solutions for isolated (and ignored) farm women that would allow them time for the more satisfying and profitable work which Gilman saw as necessary to her vision of a society that was more equitable toward women.

Next, I examine historical accounts of women farmers to substantiate the claims of Gilman's work and to argue that farm operation, though not widespread, was indeed a viable occupation for the enterprising woman who wanted to be an independent business owner. Accounts of successful experiments in farming, including Dorothea Alice Shepherd's *How Two Girls Tried Farming*, Mary Meek Atkeson's *The Woman on the Farm*, and B. F. Coen's account of Mrs. H. in *Successful Farms in Colorado*, position farm women as the modern representation of pioneer stock – indomitable, intelligent, hardworking, and adaptable – who are able to reposition the domestic sphere into the site of a larger marketplace operation, the farm. Women writers also pressed against the separate spheres ideology that tended to dominate governmental and academic discussions of farm family operations and reinforce national perceptions of farm

women as wives, and by doing so, advocated for women's increased participation in the industrial marketplace of American agriculture.

Both Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow used their fiction to forge new paths for women into the world of agribusiness – not as farm wives, but as successful independent businesswomen. Both authors conflate the domestic and public spheres and redirect women's capacity for nurture to the lands they inherit and amass. I will argue that, although Willa Cather claimed to distance herself from using the novel to address political questions, in *O Pioneers!* she demonstrates a meaningful engagement with the social and economic issues of her time. Cather's novel explores differing conceptions of work and property rights that accompanied the development of capitalism on the American frontier. The novel looks to the past – to the pioneer farm where workmanship and cooperation prevailed – to propose a remedy to the predatory effects of capitalism. In Alexandra Bergson, Cather portrays a woman who understands the demands of the late-nineteenth-century marketplace and can employ developments in agricultural science and technology for pecuniary benefit, but who also learns that economic independence alone is insufficient to satisfy the human need for community.

Finally, I examine how Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* positions the woman farmer Dorinda Oakley in a naturalist commentary on the economic and social conditions of the 1920s, creating a victorious woman who not only survives, but thrives, in the challenging business of industrial farming. As Thorstein Veblen does in "The Barbarian Status of Women," Glasgow calls for a reimagining of the social structures that place women in a disadvantaged economic and social position. Dorinda is a trailblazer who, being denied the traditional women's roles of wife and mother, must survive by her own means; as a woman farmer, she operates on a site that requires both workmanship and predation, and, by using modern technologies and scientific

farming practices to enhance her relentless and productive work, she is able to turn “her disappointment into contentment, her failure into success” (Glasgow, *Barren Ground* 370). This entrepreneurial heroine, then, demonstrates the importance of property ownership and economic independence for changing women’s access to social, cultural, and economic power. Glasgow’s redefinition of gender roles in the early twentieth century presses for women’s full access to capitalist practices that let them make their own money and pursue the meaningful benefits of purposeful activity. Because Glasgow’s realism focuses on practical matters of economics, her novel works against popular romanticized notions of farm life and instead argues that women have the capacity to excel at business and navigate the agricultural marketplace with the best of men.

Conclusion: The Woman of Business Creates a Public Life

I end this study by examining the career of Mary Putnam Gridley, who owned and operated a textile mill near Greenville, South Carolina, between 1889 and 1912 and whose life demonstrates the difficulties and possibilities for New Women seeking meaningful and profitable work. I close with a discussion of the challenges that continue in twenty-first-century women’s navigation between home and the workplace and suggest avenues for literary scholarship that further explore the relevancy of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century women’s writing to navigating these challenges.

PART I

“A preference for a business of my own”: The Woman Mill Owner and Women Workers in Industrial Reform Fiction

In the climactic scene of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner*, Perley Kelso, heiress and silent partner in the cotton mills of Five Falls, is carrying a copy of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* to the library she has established for mill workers when she comes upon an angry crowd of the “hands” threatening to strike (244). Mill's volume – which champions individual liberty, including the right to one's own opinions, the freedom to express these opinions in the public sphere, and the power of the individual for effecting social progress – has yet to be read by the restless and oppressed workers. It is Perley who has read Mill's volume and deemed it important for the workers as part of her program to improve their lives and to help them become what Mill calls “thinking beings” (Mill, *OL* 40). Until the strike occurs in the novel, Perley has positioned herself as champion of the workers' rights as individuals, and she has worked tirelessly to improve their living conditions both through philanthropic action and by educating them in the uplifting pleasures of art and literature. However, when tensions mount and the workers threaten to strike over reduced wages, Perley sides not with the workers but with her business partners. She takes the position of capitalist and unapologetically explains to the workers why market conditions necessitate a reduction in wages. Miraculously, a wave of “sudden respectability” washes over the crowd, and they back down, choosing to take the word of the “young leddy” and call off the strike – at least until the next payday, when, as the factory manager hopes, the business be back on its feet (Phelps, *TSP* 251, 250).

Perley's apparent about-face seems sudden, given the importance she has placed on sympathy for the plight of the working class until this point in the novel. Why the change? And

why does Phelps introduce John Stuart Mill into the very scene where Perley's philanthropy turns to economic self-preservation? Many critics of Phelps's novel find this strike scene to be problematic and inconsistent with the rest of the novel because Perley's actions seemingly negate any advances she has made with regard to addressing industrial reform or to navigating gender and class barriers in the novel.³ Phelps's text itself declares the strike scene is no final solution to the problems of "millions and mills," that Perley is an "experimenter" – one who learns by trying (and sometimes failing) – and that this episode is "valuable . . . rather as a hint than as history" because it is "fragmentary and incomplete" (*TSP* 7, 243, 243, 243). This scene demonstrates the focus of the novel's experiment: to explore possibilities for full female participation in the American industrial enterprise. In the economy of the United States in 1871, women's full entry into the business sphere is not an accomplished, historical feat; rather, as this novel demonstrates, the paradigm is being formed, is still fragmentary, and Perley's actions indicate that the full participation of women in the world of business was at this moment and place being written. As such an exploration, Phelps's novel responds to earlier portrayals of women and work in Herman Melville's "The Maids of Tartarus" and Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" and investigates the larger issues of female capitalism in late nineteenth-century America: the role of the individual in a capitalist political economy, access to business knowledge across gender and class barriers, paradigms for woman's work in the public rather

³ Judith Fetterley, in "'Checkmate': Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner*," argues that Perley uses the language of the capitalist but becomes "complicit in her own silencing" (29). William Lynn Watson, in "'The facts which go to form this fiction': Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner* and the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics Reports," argues that Perley is a "cultural missionary" who uses her influence to silence the workers' efforts to help themselves (12-15). Amy Schrager Lang argues in *The Syntax of Class*, Perley functions as the True Woman in this scene, and that her identification with the capitalist middle class negates any "shared womanhood" she has established with working-class Sip; ultimately, "[c]lass interest . . . outweighs gender solidarity in the end" (94, 96). In *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, Sylvia Jenkins Cook notes that Phelps fails to comment on the irony of Perley's naive (or hypocritical) actions because the ultimate goal of the novel is to demonstrate that class unity could only be accomplished on a spiritual plane (204-205).

than the domestic sphere, and the role of sympathy in industrial reform. Phelps – and Perley – have their work cut out for them.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was one of the most prolific and critically respected writers of the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Her first novel, *The Gates Ajar*, published in 1868, was such a commercial success that it was second only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in number of copies sold. Having financial success at an early age – Phelps was twenty-three at the time of the novel's publication – gave her confidence to pursue a career as an author. She went on to publish short stories, poetry, autobiography, children's books, religious fiction, and novels, and was quite proud of attaining financial independence as a working woman. In her autobiography, *Chapters from a Life*, Phelps stated, "I am proud to say that I have always been a working woman, and always had to be. . . . When the first little story appeared in 'Harper's Magazine,' it occurred to me, with a throb of pleasure greater than I supposed then that life could hold, that I could take care of myself, and from that day to this I have done so" (79). Throughout her life, Phelps was a vocal proponent of women's rights, and she encouraged women to work for both financial and personal reasons. In "What Shall They Do?," an 1867 essay published in *Harper's Magazine*, Phelps noted that work provided both intellectual and financial benefits necessary for the well-being of women: "[T]he principal cause of women's unhappiness . . . is the want of something to do. . . . Whether for self-support, or for the pure enjoyment's sake, the search for work—for successful work, for congenial work—is at the bottom of half the feminine miseries of the world. Mental hunger is quite as clamorous as the need of bread-and-butter, and neither should be hushed up with stones" (522). She encouraged women to work – to be something beyond wives

⁴ Susan S. Williams notes that Phelps "enjoyed a critical reputation as one of the best living American authors," despite being criticized by Howells for being too heavily focused on the "New England mind" of religious, ethical morality ("Writing with an Ethical Purpose" 151, 165).

and mothers – because work gave women financial independence, offered them purpose and self-respect earned through the exercise of their strengths and intelligence, and thus made their lives more fulfilling. The time of the self-negating and submissive True Woman, whom Phelps describes as “an enormous dummy,” was past (“The True Woman” 1). She tells her readers that possibilities for greater female participation in the world of work are open now that “[t]he brave pioneers . . . have broken the way for you.” (Phelps, “What” 523). Financial independence gained through daring and action, she argues, is not an exclusively male privilege but is also necessary and desirable for women.

Not that Phelps was painting a rosy picture of success without great effort. In “What Shall They Do?” she was also quite candid about the challenges that working outside of the home could bring into women’s lives, observing that managing a home and a writing career takes the “physical strength of an Amazon and talent of the highest order” (Phelps 519). Still, Phelps saw women as capable of meeting the challenge, and she criticized men who trap women in the domestic sphere and “starve and cramp and dwarf a human soul” by insisting that the only socially acceptable roles for woman are those of (financially dependent) wife and mother (“What” 522). One of the major impediments to women’s economic viability was that the traditional “lady-like” fields were miserably overcrowded, resulting in a flooded market where “women will run, and crowd, and jam, and rub into two or three channels of employment,” underbidding each other in the competitive marketplace so as to create meager wages for difficult and tedious work (Phelps, “What” 521). Phelps therefore encouraged women to try traditionally male jobs because the opportunities for gainful employment for women were dismal in a marketplace overrun with teachers, seamstresses, and hack writers. Employment that uses

one's talents and that offers financial rewards for diligent effort, she argues, gives a woman "respectability," regardless of the type of work (Phelps, "What" 521).

In her follow-up essay "Why Shall They Do It?," published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1868, Phelps asserts that the prevailing attitude of her middle-class readers – an insistence that a woman needs to be taken care of – is "degrading to the last degree" (219). Women must help themselves, not just their families, by doing something useful rather than viewing a life of leisure and idleness as a respectable occupation. Phelps asserts that every young girl needs to be encouraged to "be something true and worth the being," which includes finding a career path and preparing for a future in which she may need to support herself financially ("Why" 222). Above all, Phelps admonishes her readers: "[d]on't fritter your womanhood away into bubbles" ("Why" 223). Idleness wastes a woman's lifetime of opportunities for self-respect and growth, and it is "better to try and fail and take courage and try again, and learn and unlearn and relearn, while heart and hands are left to you, than not to have it said of you honestly by every soul whose orbit crosses yours: She hath done what she could" (Phelps, "Why" 223). Women's responsibility, according to Phelps, is to live a life of purpose, and the path is paved with meaningful, respectable – and well-paying – work.

Phelps's admonitions are reflected in the publication of advice manuals of the time period aimed at helping women find employment. Virginia Penny's 1863 *Employments of Women: A Cyclopedia of Women's Work* notes the rise in the number of women whose circumstances changed during the Civil War, and she speaks as Phelps does to the need for books that describe opportunities of gainful, respectable work outside of the occupations traditionally available to women: "The few employments that have been open to women are more than full. To withdraw a number from the few markets of female labor already crowded to excess, by directing them to

avenues where they are wanted, would thereby benefit both parties” (v). Penny’s book reflects three years of research in which she compiled over 500 possible occupations for women, though all – except for one “strong-armed, strong-backed, and . . . strong-minded” canal boat captain – depict women as employees of male business owners (478). Penny notes that societal expectations about the woman’s place in the domestic sphere, as well as the “selfish motives” of men, block women’s entry into the public workplace, but she argues that, given opportunities for education and training, women can excel in business occupations: “There is a large amount of female talent in the United States lying dormant for the want of cultivation, and . . . for the want of definite plans and opportunities of making it available. It exists like an icicle, and requires the warmth of energy, thought, and independence to render it useful” (vii, vi). Penny celebrates the possibilities for respectability and self-sufficiency that women can experience as the result of their own labors, even as she notes that some of her ideas are still hopeful speculations awaiting the proper conditions of opportunity and initiative.

Writing two decades later, Martha Louise Rayne notes the increase in women’s occupations over the period between 1840 and 1885, citing examples in *What Can a Woman Do; Or, Her Position in the Business and Literary World* of 284 non-domestic occupations being filled by women, including cashiers, bankers, clerks, lecturers, preachers, physicians, as well as commissioners of charities, prisons, and reformatory institutions (13). She observes that women are working for many reasons: some out of financial necessity or because they are single (some lacking, and others not wanting, the opportunity to marry) with no mate to support them, but others because they have “no taste or strength for domestic work, and prefer to bear the mutual burden in their own way,” or they have a desire for some profit of their own (Rayne 14). Rayne emphasizes the need to educate girls in skills that they could use to support themselves, noting

that girls who invest in practical training rather than practicing the piano “would realize a much better profit on their capital, and would never come to be regarded as dependent incumbrances [sic] by their friends and relatives” (17). In the world of business, Rayne asserts, a woman’s “moral superiority” actually makes her a better employee than a man because she is more trustworthy, less prone to vices such as gambling or stealing, and less likely to treat others with insolence (21). Such virtue – an 1870s transference of the True Woman ideal into the business sphere – will, according to Rayne, produce a new, professional woman whose lack of business knowledge can be quickly overcome through experience and educational opportunities. *What Can a Woman Do* contains an extensive list of occupations for women, information about the skills and education needed, and projected salaries for each position. Rayne also includes examples of women who hold each position in order to demonstrate that women are already making the advancements she is proposing. This book is no transgressive feminist tome, however. Rayne sees woman’s work as extending the woman’s sphere to include both marketplace and home: “The kingdom of home has not been overlooked,” she writes, “indeed the great object of the work—is to elevate and glorify the humblest home” (iv). Her opinion is that a woman can do any work that she finds personally and financially rewarding because her resourcefulness and womanly strength are powerful enough to create the opportunities she desires, an idea that Phelps both supports and pushes against in *The Silent Partner*.

As a professional writer, Phelps found work that was more than a personally and financially rewarding endeavor. She considered herself a literary artist with the “moral responsibility” to challenge and educate her readers (Phelps, *Chapters* 263). In “Art for Truth’s Sake,” from her autobiography, she asserts her belief that vivid depictions were the hallmark of the true “literary artist,” whose duty was to be “an accurate truth-teller” and “to portray life

exactly as it is,” and Phelps found that this call to truth-telling gave purpose to her work (Phelps, *Chapters* 259, 259, 258). Walter Fuller Taylor attests to Phelps’s realism, calling her “[t]he first American novelist to treat the social problems of the Machine Age seriously and at length,” and finding *The Silent Partner* to be a “vivid” depiction of the hardships of life in a New England mill town (58). Phelps imbued her novel with realism – conveying with veracity the often horrifying conditions of industrial workers’ lives, calling into question the obstacles preventing women from full participation in the business sphere, educating her mostly middle-class readers in the social and economic issues of American society, and challenging her readers to morally responsible action toward their fellow human beings. In an 1884 discussion of American women writers, Elizabeth T. Spring describes the type of activism embedded in Phelps’s writing, noting that “she would have sorrowful things show their sadness that they might be helped, and wrong things their evil that they might be righted” (569). Phelps offers a look into living conditions that exist outside of the readers’ safe domestic spaces, while also explaining the philosophical and economic debates of the time and proposing avenues of reform to ameliorate the dehumanizing effects of industrialization – reforms that she ultimately hopes her readers will enact.

Phelps was not so radical as to completely overcome the True Woman idealism so deeply embedded in the middle-class viewpoint, particularly in matters of spiritual conviction. The reforms that Phelps sought to effect were always projected through her spiritual convictions. Defining literary art as necessarily combining realism and the “moral element,” Phelps disagreed with William Dean Howells, whom she called the “chief exponent” of realism in American literature (*Chapters* 262, 260). She responded to his claim that an insistence on morality by writers of the “New England mind . . . [was] marred by the intense ethicism that pervaded . . . [and] still helplessly pointed the moral” (Phelps, *Chapters* 260). Phelps insisted that removing

any ethical stance from literature produced work that was no longer realism, since in her view “the moral struggle, the creation of character, the moral ideal, failure and success in reaching it, anguish and ecstasy in missing or gaining it . . . these exist wherever human being does” (*Chapters* 262). For Phelps, questions of morality were part of the human experience and necessary in realist literature because such questions sought the source of self-possession, compassion, and meaningful reform.

Public lectures were the predominant form of address for late nineteenth-century activists concerned with reform and the Woman Question. Although Phelps delivered a series of successful lectures on George Eliot at Boston University in 1876 – indeed, she was the school’s first woman lecturer – she was uncomfortable giving public addresses. She concluded, “Before an audience I am an abject coward . . . I am not a platform woman” (Phelps *Chapters* 254, 255). She was not a retiring wallflower, however. Her articles for *Harper’s* demonstrate that she was quite vocal about the need for change with regard to women’s economic and social status. Phelps’s chosen platform was the desk in her study, and her tools for examining “life as it is, or has been, as it might be, or as it should be” were pen and paper (*Chapters* 259). Susan S. Williams notes that in this way, Phelps “redefines creative isolation as a form of productive citizenship” (*Reclaiming Authorship* 14). From her study, Phelps broadcast a public voice that, traversing the divide between domestic and public spheres, sent her words out as a catalyst for change. But she was not, as Williams suggests, producing in isolation. Phelps was an astute observer of the world around her, she conducted extensive research on working conditions in textile factories, she regularly corresponded with other writers, and she amassed a reading public

that was so large and demanding of her attention that she had to develop a policy of refusing autographs except for charitable causes so that she would have time to write.⁵

In their afterword to *The Silent Partner*, Mari Jo Buhle and Florence Howe note that Phelps's realism broke new ground by adapting the popular mid-nineteenth-century forms of domestic literature to suit her intended audience – women who were experiencing the economic and social changes brought on by industrial capitalism (370-371). Buhle and Howe emphasize that *The Silent Partner* is the rare novel of the 1870s “in which the silence of women finds voice in public places” (382). Phelps had a vision of women who could not be contained or completed by staying home, whose energy and capacity compelled them into the workplace. Domestic scenes in the novel occur in Perley's parlor, Sip's kitchen, and the Mells' tenement apartment, but each of these presents a confining rather than nurturing space and demonstrates Phelps's argument that woman's place was sometimes in but more often out of the home. Susan Albertine notes that “Phelps writes her book to inspire young middle-class women to work,” affirming women's desire for gainful employment and demonstrating the author's “practical awareness of what women could do” (241). Filled with depictions of active, resourceful women who respond to hardship with resilience and courage, Phelps's works do not adhere to the sentimental plot that ends in marriage and perfect happiness for her heroines. Ultimately, both Perley and Sip reject

⁵ Phelps personally witnessed the events surrounding the Pemberton Mill fire, and she conducted extensive research before writing the short story “The Tenth of January” based on the event, and in the “Note” preceding *The Silent Partner*, she cites the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor Report, published in 1871, as factual verification of the novel's depictions of textile mill working conditions. To date, there is no published collection of Phelps's letters, but George V. Griffith's chapter on Phelps in *Kindred Hands: Letters on Writing by British and American Authors, 1865-1935* offers a representative collection of Phelps's letters to George Eliot, and Phelps's autobiography recounts details of her interactions with Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Celia Thaxter, Lucy Larcom, Lydia Maria Child, and others. As to autographs, Phelps wrote in *Chapters from a Life*: “I have been reluctantly forced, for dear life, to decline the distribution of autographs by mail, except for the gratification of the sick, and for charities. The demand having reached a point where I had no longer strength or time to comply with it, I was forced to adopt a course not at heart as ungracious as it may seem” (270).

marriage proposals, preferring to work as independent women. Yet, as the strike scene demonstrates, the path to woman's economic and social self-fulfillment can also end in an impasse. What is valuable for Phelps is testing the limits of women's economic activity and demonstrating the realities of life in the world of work.

Recent criticism by Amy Schrager Lang and Susan Albertine finds that Phelps's moral stance and middle-class viewpoint limit the extent to which she effects a realist portrayal.⁶ However, I argue that, as a working woman, a literary entrepreneur, and a social reformer, Phelps purposefully used her art to portray the difficulties of women who were hashing out a means of economic independence and to influence nineteenth-century intellectual and economic discourse surrounding women and work.

A letter to George Eliot dated February 16, 1873, demonstrates Phelps's energetic pursuit of issues that mattered to her: literary artistic production, women's "business" and the Woman Question, and philosophical and intellectual conversations addressing women's issues:

My dear Madam:

That the honest re-cognition [sic] of one's hard work, is never unwelcome, I have learned so well by my own small experiences, that I venture to add to "the benediction of the air" you breathe, an expression of the feeling which I have about "Middlemarch."

It is as pure as a lily, and as strong as the hills.

You have written the novel of the century—but that is one matter; you have almost analyzed a woman—and that is quite another.

⁶ See Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (93), and Susan Albertine, "Breaking the Silent Partnership: Businesswomen in Popular Fiction" (247).

I say “almost,” because I believe it remains for you to finish what you have begun, and that Middlemarch itself is the hint and proposition for the study of another problem, with a great solution. One of our leading theologians said to me: “Dorothea should never have married.” So faintly can theology comprehend her! Rather, should she never accept wifehood as a *métier*. The woman’s personal identity is a vast undiscovered country with which society has yet to acquaint itself, and by which it is yet to be revolutionized.

I cannot tell you how earnestly I feel that it will require a *great novel* to proclaim the royal lineage of the Coming Woman to the average mind, nor what a positive personal longing it has become to me, that *you* should write it—if for no other reason to prevent my writing a small one!

I will spare you any explanation of my “views”; when I say that your own Mr. Stuart Mill partly expresses them in the “Subjection of Women,” you will understand that I would fain add to your laurels, those of being the Apostle of the “Woman Question.”

If I overstep the rights, to which, a letter intended only to express my personal interest in you and your work, should limit me—why, you will remember that I am an American, and that it is the birthright of Americans to be “agitators,” and so, pardon me, I am sure?

I am, Madam,

most respectfully and sincerely yours,

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. (qtd. Griffith 126)

Phelps, writing as one artist to another, praises Eliot's realism and literary craftsmanship in *Middlemarch* and deems it the "novel of the century," pure and strong in its insightful analysis of women's lives. However, in Phelps's estimation, women still face difficulties establishing "personal identity" in a society that needs to be "revolutionized," and Eliot's protagonist Dorothea should never accept wifedom as a "*métier*" – that is, as a vocation or a business. The business of women, as Phelps argues here and elsewhere, is to engage in fulfilling and self-supporting work, and to this end, she hopes to recruit Eliot as a more vocal "Apostle of the 'Woman Question'" who will advance the cause of female independence in her future writings. *Middlemarch* was published in serial form between 1871 and 1872 (and in 1874 as a one-volume edition), after Phelps's own *The Silent Partner* had addressed the questions of woman's place in the world of business and the impediment that marriage posed for the woman seeking a personal identity. In Phelps's novel, both female protagonists refuse marriage in order to pursue their own careers. Perhaps Phelps hoped that Eliot might also depict a similar heroine as a literary model for the Coming Woman, but she was not so bold as to state this idea in her letter, and her self-deprecating closure, in which she calls herself "an American" with a birthright as one of a nation of "agitators," diffuses her opinions to keep them from being perceived as too audacious. In a move to enlist Eliot's advocacy for social and economic change for women, Phelps also states that she admires the work of John Stuart Mill, Eliot's fellow countryman, whose *The Subjection of Women* "partly expresses" her "views." Mill was the leading economic and social philosopher on both sides of the Atlantic in the mid-nineteenth century and a vocal proponent for women's rights. By referring to his work, Phelps seeks to establish both a transatlantic, gender-based connection with Eliot to advance the cause of women and a philosophical evocation of Mill's call to reform social structures – particularly marriage systems – that suppress women's capacity

for intellectual and economic self-determination. This letter did establish a seven-year correspondence between the two women authors, and Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876, does explore economic limitations on the Meyrick family of women and ends with Gwendolen's apparent decision to remain unmarried after the death of her overbearing husband Harcourt, but Eliot never assumed the office of Apostle of the Woman Question, at least not in America. Phelps, ever focused and outspoken, continued undaunted.

As the letter to Eliot and the appearance of *On Liberty* in *The Silent Partner* suggest, Phelps found in the work of John Stuart Mill an organizing philosophy that could help her flesh out her own notions of woman's potential in the public sphere. Alluding to his work demonstrates her own engagement with the economic and social philosophy of her time and strengthens her position as literary artist-as-reformer. Mill's ideas in *On Liberty* especially appealed to Phelps because he emphasizes individual agency – not just men's, but also women's – as the source of social progress and the realization of full human potential. The acts of reform at play in *The Silent Partner* – examining the real working conditions in the textile industry, taking the reader into the homes and the minds of women who struggled to define themselves, exploring the possibilities and limits of individual opinion and action in industrial-age America – do the work that Mill proposes in *On Liberty*: “To discover to the world something which deeply concerns it, and of which it was previously ignorant; to prove to it that it had been mistaken on some vital point of temporal or spiritual interest, is as important a service as a human being can render to his fellow creatures” (32). In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps answers this call to service by featuring a woman who pushes against the restrictions of gender in the business sphere, whose experiments in social reform test Mill's assertion that nurturing individual human potential can produce social progress, and who demonstrates that listening to the voices at the margins of

society exposes how the “tyranny of the majority”⁷ prohibits society’s progression (Mill, *OL* 8). Through Perley Kelso, the not-so-silent business woman, Phelps attempts to untangle the threads of the marketplace and to weave the warp and weft of business and domestic spheres into a new design that fully incorporates women. She demonstrates that women can learn and speak the language of business, she reappropriates domestic spaces as sites of business and social reform, and she redefines standards of respectable behavior for women.

John Stuart Mill’s Theories of Progressive Political Economy

John Stuart Mill was one of the leading voices in debates about political economy during the mid-nineteenth century. His *On Liberty* was published in 1859 and quickly became a standard text of political economy not only in England but also in America.⁸ In his treatise, Mill outlines a plan for society that emphasizes individuality – that is, complete liberty of individual opinion and action so long as it causes no harm to anyone else – as necessary to counteract the ill effects of laissez-faire capitalist greed, overly invasive government control, and essentialist utilitarian ideas about human capacity. Such liberty, he argues, creates conditions that develop dignified “thinking beings” capable of forming a progressive society in which all could flourish (Mill, *OL* 40). While Mill has been criticized for creating arguments that, in seeking to examine

⁷ John Gray, editor of Mill’s *On Liberty*, explains that Mill borrows this term from de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, which Mill reviewed in the *London Review* in 1836 and the *Edinburg Review* in 1840 (*OL* 583, n8).

⁸ American author George Cary Eggleston’s *How to Educate Yourself: With or Without Masters*, published in 1880 as part of *The American Home Book*, recommends texts for those seeking to educate themselves, and his frequent recommendations of Mill’s works demonstrate that they were considered foundational texts for the well-educated person of the time. Eggleston lists Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* as essential reading for the study of political economy, along with works by Adam Smith, Horace Greeley, and H[enry] C[harles] Carey (102). Eggleston’s “First List” of 500 volumes for the home library includes Mill’s *On Liberty*, *The Subjection of Women*, *Principles of Political Economy*, and *Representative Government* (121). [Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s novels made the “Third List” of 1000 additional volumes (144).] Mill’s *On Liberty* is also included in Eggleston’s list of 50 most “useful and desirable books” available in economical editions (147).

every possible angle of disputation, become fractured and self-contradictory, scholars such as John Gray describe Mill as “a methodical and programmatic thinker” whose many-layered arguments attempted to adapt utilitarianism to the complex demands of nineteenth-century economic and social changes (Gray vii).⁹ As the nineteenth century brought rapid changes in transportation, technology, population distribution, and industrial production, Mill espoused a belief in the unlimited progressive potential of humanity, and his arguments about individuality, intellectual growth, persons of genius, and technology provide an important historical and philosophical framework for investigating the social reform novels of mid-nineteenth-century American literature.

Individuality

Mill believed the individual, “that most complex being,” was an intricate combination of intellect and feeling, and that the development of both these elements in a person was necessary for forming citizens of a society that could escape the pitfalls of capitalist greed (*Dissertations and Discussions* 1:360). An astute scholar, Mill adopted the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham that the moral worth of an action is determined by its consequences, and the actions deemed worthy are those that produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. However, Mill found that this strictly rational approach overly emphasized the intellectual and material without regard to sympathy and feeling, finding that such a vision ultimately produced

⁹ Walter Berns proposes the “two Mills” hypothesis to sum up his discussions of disparities in Mill’s *On Liberty* (127). Michael R. Montgomery argues that “Mill often appears contradictory when in his own mind his position was consistent” and that historical context is necessary for understanding the complexities of his writings (181). Gray notes that Mill’s “fundamental values are sometimes uncombinable and incommensurable” because his multi-faceted arguments about individuality open the door to a plurality of conflicting definitions of human happiness (xxviii). However, Gray argues that Mill’s work nevertheless provides important historical context for understanding nineteenth-century moral and political philosophy (xxix).

fractured societies composed of “a collection of persons pursuing each his separate interest or pleasure” (*Dissertations and Discussions* 1:362).¹⁰ Thus, in Mill’s economy, “the idea is essentially repulsive of a society only held together by the regulations and feelings arising out of pecuniary interests, [and] there is something naturally attractive in a form of society abounding in strong personal attachments and disinterested self-devotion” (*Principles of Political Economy* 2:335-336). More than advantageous economic exchange was necessary for a prosperous society; people needed a sympathy that would lead to actions benefitting all. At age twenty-three, Mill discovered a source for this missing element of human fellow-feeling in Romantic poetry, finding emotional kinship in the works of Wordsworth and discovering in Coleridge’s philosophy “a principle of sympathy, not of hostility; of union, not of separation, . . . [such that] one part of the community do not consider themselves as foreigners with regard to another part” (*Dissertations and Discussions* 1:419). Mill applied this two-sided vision of human experience to political economy, arguing that individuals educated in the “higher parts of our nature” as expressed in art and poetry, would develop “high thoughts and elevating feelings” (*OL* 46, 70). These higher ideas included the ability to restrain one’s baser, selfish impulses and to act for the good of society at large. Coupled with the freedom to exercise one’s innate abilities and individual interests, such education would produce an “intellectually active people” who would not only act in their own self-interest but as agents working together to create a society in which highly developed sympathies would soften the materialist values of utilitarianism (Mill, *OL* 39).

¹⁰ Margaret Schabas describes the major shift in the theories of materialist economists such as Mill: “[t]hey cut themselves free of the Enlightenment association with physical nature that once saw the production and distribution of wealth as part of a providential order. The economy was not depicted in terms of man-made social institutions. To put it most emphatically, the economy went from a natural entity to a social one” (78).

As Montgomery notes, Mill envisioned enlightened individuals whose noble character became a kind of public capital asset (186).

In a nod to the romantic poets' connection between nature and the human soul, Mill developed his argument for individuality in *On Liberty* by comparing people to trees that required freedom in order to fully develop: "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly what the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (66). Mill opposed any doctrine or social force that overly restricted the individual and prevented full human development: "Many persons . . . think that human beings thus cramped and dwarfed, are as their Maker designed them to be; just as many have thought that trees are a much finer thing when clipped into pollards . . . than as nature made them" (*OL* 69).¹¹ Mill argued that, instead, the intellect was to be "cultivated and unfolded, not rooted out and consumed" (*OL* 69). In his shift from "man" to "tree" as an emblem of individuality, Mill also asserts what Elsie Michie describes as a "gender-neutral category of the liberal subject" (Michie 263 n45).¹² The freely branching tree, characterized as neither male nor female, extends Mill's proposed freedoms of full growth to both men and women. Mill's later work *The Subjection of Women* more fully developed his argument for the development of women's intellectual and economic capacity.

¹¹ A pollard is a tree in which new branches are pruned each year to prevent growth and to keep the tree at a determined size and shape (Hartman, Prone, and Sall 142-146). Perhaps Mill got his idea of the pollard as a symbol of the overly pruned individual from his readings of Coleridge's work. In the 1852 printing of his marginalia on Samuel Pepys's *Diary*, Coleridge states that Pepys "was a *Pollard* man, without the *Top*," who was incapable of mediating between "Reason, as the source of Ideas," and symbols of "the Imagination, or idealizing Power" [emphasis in the original] (Bonsall 215).

¹² Michie asserts that Mill's arguments about the liberal subject extend equally to men and women (263 n45).

Intellectual Growth

An important element in Mill's individuality is liberty of thought and action, and he resisted social systems that suppressed intellectual growth. Most particularly, Mill advocated continuous and active investigation of one's ideas, using the processes of experience, discussion, and debate. Such intellectual activity, he posited, helps an individual develop a life of noblest character, one that uses all of his faculties: "He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgement to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold his deliberate decision. . . . It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it" (Mill, *OL* 65-66). Active debate, which includes objectively considering all dissenting opinions, Mill argued, is necessary for helping individuals determine the veracity of their ideas. An untested idea ceases to be a "living truth," and those who settled into passive acceptance of ideas based on custom and "the tyranny of the majority" rather than on the active investigation will fail to achieve their full intellectual potential (Mill, *OL* 40, 8). Furthermore, Mill argued, even "heretical opinions" from outside the mainstream are valuable because they test and prove a person's convictions and they also uncover "suppressed and neglected truths" necessary for an intellectually active and well-developed society to consider (*OL* 52). Competing opinions did not worry Mill; he believed that eventually, though probably not in the nineteenth century, a refined humanity would reach a consensus on truth: "As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase: and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested" (*OL* 49). Until that time, Mill argued, humanity needed the social structures (including governments) that provided political security – as long as they did not

restrict the individuality that fostered creative thinking and full development of individual capacity.

Persons of Genius

Mill believed that among individual members of society, a few “persons of genius” with extraordinary character and “higher eminences of thought” would rise up as leaders and innovators (*OL* 72, 74). Such persons particularly required the freedoms of individuality, which form “the soil in which they grow” (Mill, *OL* 72). Mill found eccentricity to be a mark of the extraordinary individual: “Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained” (*OL* 74-75). Such a person was an anomaly who rose from among the ranks of the average citizens and would serve as an example for others to emulate and as a leader toward the progressive future that Mill anticipated. Often labeled as “wild” or “erratic” because of a failure to conform to socially prevalent modes of comportment, the genius’s extraordinary capacities renders him (or her) incapable of fitting “without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character” (Mill, *OL* 72). Compelled by an inner drive to question, to change, and to lead, the person of genius operates against the grain of social conformity. This kind of individual most particularly requires the liberty to develop his or her unique capacities, which Mill defines as “energy” or “more of the raw material of human nature” – capacities to be cultivated, in Mill’s intention, toward the purposes of good rather than evil (*OL* 67).

Technology

In his *Principles of Political Economy*, originally published in 1848, Mill celebrates advancements in technology as evidence of human ingenuity, noting that they brought increased prosperity and “room for improving the Art of Living” (2:332). The “legitimate effect” of “the industrial arts,” he notes, was “that of abridging labour” in order to allow time for the education and improvements he saw as necessary for human happiness (Mill, *PE* 2:332). However, Mill observes that the benefits of technological advancements were not distributed equally across all economic classes, and that machinery often doomed increasing numbers of the working class “to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment,” even as such technology expanded manufacturers’ fortunes and the middle class’s comfortable lifestyle (*PE* 2:332). Mill argues that society was in danger of becoming “engrossed by the art of getting on” instead of using technology as a means of effecting “great changes in human destiny . . . [and] improving and elevating the universal lot” (*PE* 2:332). Such elevation, Mill argues, would require “judicious foresight” and a commitment to creating “just institutions” that would foster “the increase of mankind” and extend the benefits of technology to individuals of all socioeconomic classes (*PE* 2:33).

By the time he wrote *On Liberty* in 1859, Mill’s discussion of technology centered on the dangers that increased mechanization can pose to individual happiness. Although human labor could operate more efficiently in the factory system, the repetitive and tedious nature of such work offered little to stimulate the education and thinking he advocated as necessary for living a life that is “rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings” (Mill, *OL* 70). Gray notes that, for Mill, “the good life for human beings is that in which they achieve well-being via the flourishing of their most distinctive capacities,”

and this occurs through satisfying work as well as intellectual growth (xiii). Technology that restricts access to individual liberties that foster meaningful activity and intellectual growth threatens to produce individuals who are little more than machines themselves. Mill describes the danger of “automatons in human form . . . who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce,” individuals who become “ape-like” animals with only the capacity for imitation, and people with “no character, no more than a steam engine has a character” (Mill, *OL* 66, 65, 67). While Mill asserted an unreserved faith in human capacity for social and intellectual progress, he was hesitant to embrace wholeheartedly the explosion of technological innovations that such progress produces in the nineteenth century because embracing technologies without a counterbalancing sympathy will foster loss of the individual’s humanity.

Mill’s arguments were particularly adaptable to American ideals of democracy and liberty. In *Principles of Political Economy*, he calls for a system based on the “co-operative principle” in which individual efforts ultimately produce collective good by “combin[ing] the freedom and independence of the individual, with the moral, intellectual, and economic advantages of aggregate production”; such efforts would utilize “the best aspirations of the democratic spirit, by putting an end to the division of society into the industrious and the idle, and effacing all social distinctions but those fairly earned by personal services and exertions” (Mill 2:374-375). Mill emphasizes prosperity and social advancement for any individuals who, through diligent work, “improved intelligence,”¹³ and under the jurisdiction of “just laws,” could take hold of opportunities for social and economic advancement, a concept that was crucial to

¹³ Mill emphasized the role of education, either through formal schooling or self-learning, in conjunction with the ongoing processes of experience, discussion, and debate as methods of developing higher order thinking skills. The working classes, Mill argues, could “be made rational beings” by learning business theory and practice from reading newspapers and political tracts, attending lectures, and participating in discussion and “collective deliberation” (*PE* 2:339).

those laboring “in a new country, rapidly increasing in wealth and population, like America” (*PE* 2:342).¹⁴ Although Mill ultimately envisioned a form of voluntary socialism as the most highly developed form of society, his ideas about individual capacity and class advancement resonated with nineteenth-century American ideals of independence, individualism, and productivity. Mill saw Americans as already advancing toward a prosperity that made the most of the country’s unlimited natural resources, technological advancements, and rapidly growing work force.

In *On Liberty*, Mill celebrates an individualism that resists unquestioning conformity to European social systems of the past, noting that “[t]he despotism of custom is . . . the standing hindrance to human advancement” (78). What is essential for progress and innovation, he continues, is “the spirit of liberty” which provides “the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement . . . since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals” (Mill, *OL* 78). Individual liberty of opinion and action among diverse populations forms the “great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable” and creates the conditions for dissent and discussion that Mill finds so valuable in human advancement (Mill, *OL* 80). His appeals for change particularly resonated with women such as Eliza Farnham, women’s activist and author, who found in Mill a worthy spokesman to support their efforts to obtain greater legal and economic freedoms. In her 1864 *Woman and Her Era*, Farnham praises Mill’s “manly, religious dedication” of *On Liberty* to his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, noting that such a gesture indicates that men were beginning to recognize the abilities and contributions that women were making to society (n412). Her language reflects the influence of his philosophies of

¹⁴ Mill uses American workers as the example of social and economic advancement that could come through the free exercise of individual agency: “I cannot think that they will be permanently contented with the condition of labouring for wages as their ultimate state. They may be willing to pass through the class of servants in their way to that of employers; but not to remain in it all their lives. To begin as hired labourers, then after a few years to work on their own account, and finally employ others, is the normal condition of labourers in a new country, rapidly increasing in wealth and population, like America” (*PE* 2:342).

individual liberty and intellectual development, as well as the unique leadership of the person of genius:

Now human activities begin, as we all know, in the lower strata of our nature. They follow the universal law, of first lower, next higher; and they slowly ascend to the expression of the noblest human qualities. Hence, in the ages of animal action and dominant selfishness, the Sentiment of mankind can broadly report only so much of human nature as these activities proceed from; and what is above that in any expression, will come from a few souls in whom a purer, diviner life informs a more expanded Consciousness. And these souls, in every age, affirm a more liberal, honorable judgment of human nature than the intellectual (common) standards allow. (Farnham 19-20)

Championing women's abilities to demonstrate the very capacities of intellect and genius that Mill prizes, Farnham goes on to develop her own argument that women need liberty to exercise their intrinsic, superior abilities for the benefit of society.

Because he valued individual labor as a means of both economic support and emotional satisfaction, Mill's *On Liberty* also supports the notions of the Protestant work ethic that undergirded American productivity: "In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them" (70). The notion that hard work was both personally satisfying and a service to others marked a significant revision of Bentham's utilitarian notions of work. John Gray notes that Mill's revision focuses on the idea that people experience happiness in activity, particularly the activities which are successful and satisfy the

demands of their nature because “the good life for human beings is that in which they achieve well-being via the flourishing of their most distinctive capacities” (xiii).¹⁵ The idea that one’s labors would simultaneously satisfy emotional, moral, and economic needs spread widely with the popularity of Mill’s works and fueled the myth of the American Dream in much of nineteenth-century America literature.

As a groundbreaking and noted philosopher of political economy, John Stuart Mill formed ideas that became a useful lens through which to examine the works of nineteenth-century American authors who engaged with questions of political economy, individual liberty, and human self-actualization. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, along with Herman Melville and Rebecca Harding Davis, applied Mill’s arguments to the changing conditions of the lives of women, seeking to challenge the obstacles that blocked full female participation in the world of work.

“Towards what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress?”: Early Realist Explorations of Women and the Industrial Setting in Herman Melville and Rebecca Harding Davis

In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps acknowledges that her novel is an experiment that tests her ideas for addressing the problems of industrial capitalism affecting women in the period following the Civil War: “The world gets into the dark once in a while,” she wrote, “[and] throws out a few of us for groping purposes” (241). More women were working, out of necessity and ambition, but doing so challenged the prevailing notions of True Womanhood – that woman’s place was in the home and her inherent nature especially suited her for the roles of wife

¹⁵ Gray notes that Mill’s emphasis on emotional fulfillment of work was a marked departure from the more rational philosophy of Bentham: “Unlike Bentham’s, Mill’s conception of happiness . . . is linked with successful or flourishing activity, and is not spelt out simply in terms of pleasant states of mind or feeling” (xiii).

and mother. Phelps's exploration of the issues surrounding women's participation in the marketplace built on earlier works by Herman Melville and Rebecca Harding Davis, whose stories were some of the earliest works to examine the changes in women's roles in mid-nineteenth-century America.

In "The Tartarus of Maids," Melville explores mid-nineteenth-century fears about women's moving from the domestic sphere and into the world of industry. This story, published in 1851, expresses concerns about the changing economic landscape of America and the shifting ideas about women's work that accompanied the movement from an agricultural to an industrial economy. When the male narrator makes a trip to Dragon's Den paper mill "[f]or economy's sake," in order to purchase supplies for his booming seed business, he passes through the bleak landscape of a "Mad Maid's Bellows'-pipe" and into the frigid hollow where the mill is located (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2363, 2362). The world of the paper mill is sterile – whitewashed buildings, snowy paths, and forests solidified into "one petrification" – and the employees are women "pale with work, and blue with cold," moving through their twelve-hour shifts with "blank-looking" faces (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2363, 2365, 2366). They are also voiceless, working but never speaking during the story. Laura Hapke asserts that the dehumanizing world of the paper mill is "far from an extension of a woman's proper sphere . . . a twinned nightmare of industrial over-efficiency and working-class exploitation" (73). Melville's world of industry is a far cry from the public's perceptions of healthy and happy working conditions in the Lowell mills so popularly portrayed in newspapers of the time and in works such as the *Lowell Offering* and Lucy Larcom's *Poems*. His bleak, colorless, blank women seem less human and more parts of a machine – "mere cogs to the wheels" and a personification of the human cost of factory-

produced goods that also concerned other writers, including Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2366).

The narrator's tour of the paper mill demonstrates the ways that technology – the machinery that fuels American progress toward economic prosperity – is changing women's work, drawing them away from the pastoral, agricultural, domestic ways of life, and separating them from their "natural" way of being. The dismal factory is built in an isolated wilderness where violent, shrieking winds constantly blow past the ancient site of "a crazy spinster's hut," a barren landscape that echoes with feminine misery (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2362). The mill, using the power of the torrential Blood River to run the "whirring, humming" machinery, converts the sounds of nature to the sounds of production, and the unhuman noises of industrial production silence the workers so that "not a syllable was breathed" as the women perform their tasks (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2364, 2366). This small, remote, noisy mill demonstrates Leo Marx's observation that "the image of the machine's sudden appearance in the landscape" interrupts the idealized vision of the pastoral in American literature: "Now tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety" (16). The narrator is disoriented by the machine's humming "metallic necessity, the unbudging fatality which govern[s] it" and presses the women into pulpy sameness, leaving them blank, pallid, and silent automatons (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2370). Such cruel-hearted dehumanization of workers makes them little more than slaves to a machine and seems to the narrator the image of Tartarus – the lowest level of hell – populated with specters of women.

Melville's apprehension about industrialization, however, is not simply the separation of workers from land through the mechanization of labor. He specifically describes female workers, and his anxiety is that the repercussions of separating women from the functions of maternity,

nurture, and domesticity would produce beings with eyes that are “supernatural with unrelated misery” (Melville, “The Tartarus” 2365). Separating women from the domestic roles of wife and mother that, according to nineteenth-century thought, particularly suited feminine nature, could have dangerous consequences and produce a generation of voiceless, joyless spinsters isolated from full participation in the human experience. Old Bach, the proprietor, hires only unmarried women who can be “steady workers” in the mill, explaining that married women with familial concerns are “off-and-on too much” to be reliable employees, thus comparing domestic responsibilities to unpredictable mechanical operations that interfere with industrial precision and production (Melville, “The Tartarus” 2371). Having no husbands or children, then, the “maids” are always available to work, and, held in a perpetual state of reproductive stasis, their bodies’ productive power is redirected to the manufacturing of paper. Michael Rogin asserts that the employer’s control over the women makes them “white-faced humans reduced to sterility . . . in the grip of a sexualized, mechanical power” (204, 203). The women are also separated from the feminine exercise of sympathy and nurture. Noting one particularly “sad-looking woman” tending the machine, the narrator learns that she is a nurse without any patients because “the business is poor in these parts” (Melville, “The Tartarus” 2369). Instead of caring for human beings, she now delivers paper instead of babies and nurtures an “inflexible iron animal” that has no need for her sympathy (Melville, “The Tartarus” 2370). Even when they are not at work, the women have no domestic space to call their own; instead of individual homes, they share a communal domestic space on the mill property, living in lengthy dormitories that have a “cheap, blank air, . . . gregarious windows, and comfortless expression” (Melville, “The Tartarus” 2364). The narrator does not tour the living quarters, and his description is only of the whitewashed, blank, comfortless exterior. The “gregarious” dormitory windows, however, indicate that the

women may share a measure of community apart from their work, but this is sealed inside the living space and inaccessible to men.

Despite the narrator's description of industrial oppression, the women do demonstrate a capacity for adapting to industrial occupations, and they demonstrate a new form of feminine power by enacting a reversal of the domestic arts. Instead of making shirts for "[b]achelors," the women deconstruct clothing, ripping out seams and shredding garments to rags with huge sharp scythes in order to produce an entirely different product – paper, a genderless material fit for multiple uses in the modern world (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2367). Tom Allen finds the story's images of women producing goods without the participation of men a kind of dangerous feminine power, noting that the mill is a site that repurposes women's work for the needs of industrialism and represents "a future whose feminine vitality signifies not weakness, but rather the awesome power of the machinery of historical change" (67). The "passive-looking girls" are actually hard at work, demonstrating a capacity for learning new kinds of work, and efficiently mastering the challenges of the new industrial age (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2366).

Ultimately, Melville seems to share John Stuart Mill's reticence to wholeheartedly embrace the rapid technological advances being made during the industrial era. Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, originally published in 1848, three years before Melville's story, cautions that not all technology produces the "legitimate effect . . . of abridging labor" and, therefore, increasing the general prosperity of a population (2:332). In a capitalist market that demands constant growth and ever larger accumulations of material goods and wealth, rapid technological advances can merely doom greater numbers of workers to lives "of drudgery and imprisonment" and deplete a country's natural resources (Mill, *PE* 2:332). Melville shares the same fear about the changes already happening in the American economy. The narrator is "struck" by the

factory's efficient machinery and the progressive "evolution-power in all its motions" that make the most of the workers' labor (Melville, "The Tartarus" 2370). He views capitalism's progression as inevitable and evolving – but worries about the end result of such an unstoppable force. Melville's protagonist would apparently agree with Mill, who questions the consequences of this kind of advancement: "Towards what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress? When the progress ceases, in what condition are we to expect that it will leave mankind?" (Mill, *PE* 2:326). As the maids who labor in Tartarus demonstrate, the cost of progress can be high, turning the landscape into a frigid, barren place and making humans into little more than machines.

Another author who grappled with the effects of industrial capitalism was Rebecca Harding Davis. In 1861, she published "Life in the Iron Mills," a groundbreaking story examining the intersection of prevailing economic theories and the needs of individual workers by describing in realistic – and often distressing – detail the effect of industrial systems of production on the lives of those working in the cotton and iron manufactories of her hometown of Wheeling, West Virginia.

In "Life in the Iron Mills," Rebecca Harding Davis attacks the purely rational view of economics as a natural system that, when allowed free play, would increase prosperity and raise the standard of living for society in general, a view espoused by Adam Smith and elaborated in the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham in the early nineteenth century. Bentham's utilitarianism argued that what is moral – and therefore preferable – is that which gives the most pleasure to the greatest number of people. During Rebecca Harding Davis's lifetime, economists such as John Stuart Mill began to attack this rationalist view, finding that it ignored the social

and emotional components of human existence. In “Bentham,” an 1848 essay, Mill espouses a more comprehensive view of human exertions:

Every human action has three aspects: its *moral* aspect, or that of its *right* and *wrong*; its *aesthetic* aspect, or that of its *beauty*; its *sympathetic* aspect, or that of its *loveableness*. The first addresses itself to our reason and conscience; the second to our imagination; the third to our human fellow-feeling. . . . It is not possible for any sophistry to confound these three modes of viewing an action; but it is very possible to adhere to one of them exclusively, and lose sight of the rest. (*Dissertations and Discussions* 1:387-388; emphasis in the original)

The problem with such unbalanced judgments, Mill argues, is that they fail to consider questions of social pressures upon the individual or to value the exercise of the “higher pleasures” of the intellect, feelings, and imagination (*Utilitarianism* 14). Such a detached stance also ultimately centers on the entrepreneurial class and what produces the greatest good for the greatest numbers there without adequate consideration of the separate needs of working class individuals. Rebecca Harding Davis’s story corresponds to Mill’s argument, demonstrating the dangers of adhering exclusively to reason, aesthetics, or sympathy for interpreting the conditions of industrialism; such near-sightedness, she argues, only serves to perpetuate economic inequities. In the story, as Hugh Wolfe works in the foundry at night, he is visited by three men – Kirby, the capitalist, Mitchell, the aesthete, and Doctor May, the sympathetic doctor – whose “desultory” talk about what they observe demonstrates the kind of limited vision that Mill warns about and that Rebecca Harding Davis questions (“Life” 29).

Kirby, one of the mill-owners’ sons and thus the future heir to the company, is the man of reason, a capitalist whose rational judgments about the relationship of worker and owner limit

his responsibility to an economic exchange of money for services rendered. He finds the workers “a desperate set” and a bit threatening, “a little too real . . . to fancy a close proximity in the darkness—unarmed, too” (R. Davis, “Life” 27, 31). While Kirby appreciates the myth that the “American system [is] a ladder which any man can scale,” he prefers to keep “all social ladders” in place in order to maintain his profits (R. Davis, “Life” 34). The only improvement he can imagine is one that would keep the workers under his control; he suggests that it would be “kindness” if those “who do the lowest part of the world’s work should be machines,—nothing more,—hands,” since intellect and “taste” are wasted on “creatures who must live such lives as that” (R. Davis, “Life” 34). To support his argument, he points to Deborah, the hunchbacked cotton mill picker; ironically, she is the character in the story who displays both intellectual capacity and strength of character, qualities that the man of reason easily overlooks because he views her body merely as machinery that produces goods. Kirby assumes that his obligation to workers is purely economic: “My duty to my operatives has a narrow limit,—the pay-hour on Saturday night. Outside of that, . . . I am not responsible. . . . What has a man who pays them money to do with their souls’ concerns?” (R. Davis, “Life” 35). To emphasize his point, “he tap[s] his boot with his cane” – as if to shake off the dust of the workers upon which he treads – and is silent (R. Davis, “Life” 35). Kirby can justify the workers’ conditions because their labor in the economic system is both necessary and financially compensated, but such reasoning overlooks the miserable condition and the individual viability of hands such as Wolfe and Deborah.

Kirby’s brother-in-law Mitchell is the aesthete who tours the mill “merely for amusement,” and he is struck by the theatrical quality of the scene: the Dante-esque furnaces with “heavy shadows and the amphitheater of smothered fires [that] are ghostly, unreal” seem to

him a fancy of other-worldly wild beasts and their victims (R. Davis, “Life” 28, 31). He observes with a “cool gray eye” the forms of the “half-clothed figures of the puddlers,” noting the “slow swing of their brawny muscles” as a captivating performance of despair and suffering (R. Davis, “Life” 28, 29, 29). Mitchell’s view of the iron mill reflects the education of a “thoroughbred gentleman” in aesthetics, philosophy, and science (R. Davis, “Life” 29). Although he has studied Humboldt – who said the end of man is the highest development of his powers into a complete whole¹⁶ – Mitchell’s education does little more than lead him to an indifferent acceptance of everything, and he contemplates ideas only “for what they were worth in his own scales” (R. Davis, “Life” 29). His training has failed to develop his powers of honor and action; certainly his education and self-development do little to promote action on behalf of the workers whose suffering he finds so compelling to watch. Despite his artistic leanings, Mitchell has little desire to reform the business practices that support his lavish lifestyle.

As Mitchell views Hugh Wolfe’s artwork, he is revealed as the one visitor who can appreciate the hunger and despair the korl woman portrays: “Look at that woman’s face! It asks questions of God, and says, ‘I have a right to know’” (R. Davis, “Life” 33-34). Although Mitchell discerns the profound questions raised by the statue, he is quick to give up searching for any answers when Kirby refuses his challenge to take any responsibility for assisting the artist or

¹⁶ In *On Liberty*, Mill, quoting Humboldt, defends individuality as an essential element of human well-being: “the evil is, that individual spontaneity is hardly recognized by the common modes of thinking, as having any intrinsic worth, or deserving any regard on its own account. The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they are now . . . cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everybody . . . Few persons, out of Germany, even comprehend the meaning of the doctrine which Wilhelm von Humboldt, so eminent both as a savant and as a politician, made the text of a treatise—that ‘the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole’; that, therefore, the object ‘towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development’; that for this there are two requisites, ‘freedom, and variety of situations’; and that from the union of these arise ‘individual vigour and manifold diversity’, which combine themselves in ‘originality’” (63-64).

to improve the lives of any of his employees. “Money has spoken!” Mitchell declares, and resumes his “air of an amused spectator at a play” (R. Davis, “Life” 35, 36). His appreciation of the horror and despair of the working class situation is an aesthetic pleasure, producing a perception of “insufferable disgust” from which he can easily turn away without further consideration; for him, “[t]hat was all” (R. Davis, “Life” 38). While Mitchell recognizes artistic potential in Hugh Wolfe’s art, he fails to offer the economically disadvantaged workman any assistance other than aesthetic appreciation.

Doctor May does not participate in Kirby and Mitchell’s discussion of business. However, he does respond to the human suffering he witnesses at the iron mill. The doctor is a seemingly “kind-hearted” man whose professional manner includes assuming an “affable smile” when talking to “these [working-class] people” (R. Davis, “Life” 33). He realizes that Wolfe’s statue reveals an innate artistic talent in the working man, and he admires the korl statue for its anatomical correctness, diagnosing the “clutching” muscles as “the peculiar action of a man dying of thirst” (R. Davis, “Life” 32). Once told the statue is female, Doctor May notes that Wolfe’s artwork depicts a woman who is “the very type of her class,” indicating that the doctor has seen and treated members of the working community, but he “cannot catch the meaning” of the expression carved into the korl (R. Davis, “Life” 32). Wolfe’s explanation that the woman is “hungry” baffles the doctor, who notes that the body of the statue is strong, not emaciated by starvation but instead the very depiction of “half-despairing . . . drowning” (R. Davis, “Life” 33). He perceives that the statue hides “[s]ome terrible problem,” but he is “vexed, puzzled” and troubled by what he sees (R. Davis, “Life” 34).

Doctor May cannot comprehend the statue’s emotional turmoil because he espouses romantic notions of the American myth; on his tour of the mill, he expects to see men who are

gainfully employed, with every opportunity to reap the benefits of their hard work in the expanding American economic system. Instead, he discovers troubled individuals and an artistic genius trapped in a puddler's job in a kind of economic slavery to the mill owner, Kirby. A man of "heart" who perceives himself as a "philanthropist," the doctor prefers to interpret the situation as a problem of sympathy rather than economics (R. Davis, "Life" 36). Feeling that "much good was be done here by a friendly word or two," the doctor offers Wolfe encouragement, telling him that he has the gift to be "a great sculptor, a great man" and it is his "right" to make himself anything he chooses (R. Davis, "Life" 37). His kindly spoken words of encouragement leave the doctor "glowing with his own magnanimity. And it was magnanimous," even as he refuses Wolfe's direct appeal for monetary support (R. Davis, "Life" 37). Choosing to focus only on the emotions of the situation rather than the real issue of economic disparity, the doctor feels that his inspiration can feed the soul of the man – and can assuage his own guilt – without requiring any tangible sacrifice to help Wolfe.

The visitors to the iron mill perform the misreading of human actions that John Stuart Mill warned would perpetuate the dehumanizing impulses of industrial capitalism. Reason, aesthetics, and sympathy emphasized separately fail to offer any solution for Wolfe or Deborah. The men ride off in a coach – here a symbol of class division and of privileged access to movement – and leave Wolfe and Deborah standing "in the shadow of the [iron]works" (R. Davis, "Life" 39). Kirby's rational stance limits his responsibility to financial exchange and makes workers merely working parts of the industrial machine; his offhanded assistance – tossing a few coins to Deborah as he drives away from the factory site – will have no real effect on the lives of workers or his profits from their labor. Mitchell's aesthetics make him a voyeur who retains a critical distance; because he is "not one of them," he can only look at the workers

as aesthetic objects and their lives as performances (R. Davis, "Life" 38). Although he leaves with a tip of his hat "as to an equal" and with a "look of thorough recognition," art has failed to create any desire in him to engage in solutions to human suffering (R. Davis, "Life" 39). Doctor May might feel sympathy toward the suffering of human beings, but he does not have enough money to help every one of the workers and so he helps none; his philanthropic impulse – an economic expression of sympathy – would require a change in his own financial position, a sacrifice he is unwilling to make. He holds out his hand "in a frank, generous way" and shouts empty encouraging words as he disappears into the night (R. Davis, "Life" 39). May's good will is based on fleeting emotion, and it evaporates when he later reads that at the trial Wolfe justified his keeping the stolen money by insisting that he had "rights" to money and economic power – a reinterpretation of the very words that the doctor had spoken to encourage him (R. Davis, "Life" 51). Wolfe's crime demonstrates that working-class transgressions of economic boundaries will not go unpunished and that access to capitalist language is pointless without a corresponding access to economic power – something that neither Kirby, Mitchell, nor Doctor May is willing to grant.

The story is disturbing to readers because its gritty realism takes them "right down . . . into the . . . mud and foul effluvia" as witnesses to the horrible conditions of working-class life, to the root of the problem – the "terrible question" of money (R. Davis, "Life" 13, 14). Rebecca Harding Davis was particularly disturbed by the growing importance of money as the determining measure of success in the American market economy. In her later years, she describes in "The Disease of Money-Getting" the changing way of life in the second half of the nineteenth century: "The greed for money has been developed among us since the Civil War with the force and swiftness of an epidemic. . . . The successful man is merely the rich man. The

national progress of which we boast so loudly just now does not mean advance in science, in art, or learning, or in the nobility or distinction of individual life, but simply commercial progress” (R. Davis 1458, 1459). The narrator of “Life in the Iron Mills” states that Wolfe’s fateful meeting with the rich men turns on the question of access to money: “Only a trifle, a little turn of the rudder, and the ship goes to heaven or hell” (R. Davis 26). A trifle is a miniscule amount of money, and here Rebecca Harding Davis questions the economic systems that determine an individual’s fate based on the distinction between the possession or lack of money rather than on talent, intelligence, or diligence. When Mitchell says that “money . . . [is] the cure for all the world’s diseases,” he trifles with Wolfe, toying with him by suggesting a solution to his starving soul and body to which Wolfe the puddler will never have access (R. Davis, “Life” 38). Despite the long hours of diligent work at the factory, Wolfe’s low wages will always keep him locked in subsistence mode, without enough money to purchase the training and materials that he needs to become a commercially successful artist. David Dowling notes that here “[Rebecca Harding] Davis severely criticizes the myth of self-creation and the fulfillment of success via capital accumulation” by demonstrating the desperation that such myths perpetuate (124). Because Wolfe’s participation in the American Dream is blocked by his access to capital, his ambitions merely distill into foul effluvia. As Mitchell speaks, he holds a great deal of money in his pocket – money he possesses with no thought of sharing it with Wolfe, money that is a mere trifle to Mitchell but would significantly change the course of Wolfe’s life, money that secures Mitchell’s own social status and separates him from the life of “insufferable disgust” to which Wolfe is doomed, and money that Deborah steals in hopes of solving Wolfe’s dilemma (R. Davis, “Life” 38). “Money ull do it!” and “it is hur [your] right to keep it,” she declares to Wolfe, but ill-gotten

gain is unacceptable to his “honest . . . Welsh Wolfe blood,” and he refuses to take the money and escape (R. Davis, “Life” 43, 45, 44).

In light of the economic disparities that the story emphasizes, it is significant that Wolfe kills himself on market day. From his prison cell, he sees the buying and selling of the crowd, the beautiful colors of the market stalls, the fruits and meats he cannot purchase. He hears the “clink of money [and] . . . [s]omehow, the sound, more than anything else had done, wakened him up,—made the whole real to him” (R. Davis, “Life” 54). His labor in the mill has yielded neither monetary success nor social advancement; instead, he has made the product that forms the implements of his own destruction – the iron shackles on his ankles that prevent his escape and the iron bars that imprison him and on which he sharpens the tin weapon for killing himself.¹⁷ Sharon M. Harris notes that Wolfe’s expendability is the result of naturalist market forces that determine his fate, and that his story is particularly tragic because he has “‘bought’ the marketplace’s concept of hegemony, even though he has lived its realities” – realities of ownership in which he and his working hands can only ever be objects to be possessed and exploited (*Rebecca Harding Davis* 48). In a world where economic success is the measure of an individual’s worth, the clinking money wakes Wolfe to the realization that he is without value – and without hope. He is “done with the world and the business of it” and kills himself rather than face the slow death of prison (R. Davis, “Life” 54).

Through the tragic end of the thwarted artist, Rebecca Harding Davis asks questions about the responsibility of capitalism toward the humanity of the workers: Is the paycheck the only relation between owner and worker? Is the American Dream a myth perpetuated simply to

¹⁷ See Sharon M. Harris’s *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* for a discussion of iron as naturalist symbol of Hugh’s doomed efforts (47).

keep workers locked in the mechanisms of production? Is there no agency for the working-class individual? Thirty years after his death, Wolfe's art continues to cry out from behind the narrator's curtain for "[s]ummat to make her live" (R. Davis, "Life" 33). Terrible questions, though muffled and hidden, remain: "Is this the End? . . . nothing beyond? – no more?" (R. Davis, "Life" 64). Rebecca Harding Davis explores possible answers to the questions through the actions of Deborah and the Quaker woman, both of whom demonstrate the capacities and limitations of women for ameliorating the effects of dehumanization brought on by industrialism.

Jean Pfaelzer argues that Rebecca Harding Davis "flattens working class life" with a one-dimensional portrayal that does not show "the working class [sic] capacity for self-protection" ("Rebecca Harding Davis" 241). However, I find that although the story portrays the negative consequences of industrialism on workers such as Wolfe, there is also solidarity among the working-class community of women. Deborah is "deformed, almost a hunchback" with a "ghastly" face and blue lips – descriptions that echo the automaton-maids of Melville's *Tartarus* (R. Davis, "Life" 17). She is part of a community of female mill workers who assist one another, helping Kit Small, who is "[a]lleys behind" at her job tending the spools, and expressing genuine compassion for one another; although they want to include Deborah in their after-hours socialization, they care for her by refraining from "frettin' a quite [sic] body" such as hers (R. Davis, "Life" 16).

Despite descriptions of her physical weakness, Deborah is a vibrant woman. Caught in what Pfaelzer calls the "double oppression—the paid and unpaid roles—of working class women," Deborah works full-time in the cotton mill and also tends to the domestic needs of her family (*Parlor Radical* 33). Though physically exhausted from relentless labor, Deborah possesses an inner strength that "no one had ever taken the trouble to read" (R. Davis, "Life" 22).

She has “love . . . hope . . . [and] urgent need” to compel her, and, as the working-class domestic woman, she is willing to sacrifice herself for the benefit of those she loves (R. Davis, “Life” 17). Deborah shelters Janey from an abusive father, and she frequently takes dinner to Wolfe during his night shift despite having worked a full day in the cotton mill herself. She is even willing to risk imprisonment to give Wolfe “a pure life, a good, true-hearted life” in which he can live in a “gran’ house” out where the wealthy live and “God stays all t’ time” (R. Davis, “Life” 46, 43, 43). Boldly stealing the money that “wud do all,” Deborah temporarily rights the economic inequities that oppress her family, and she undergoes a physical transformation as “her faded eyes, and wet, ragged figure caught from their frantic eagerness a power akin to beauty” (R. Davis, “Life” 42, 43). Access to money makes her hopeful, powerful, even beautiful, but the effect is only temporary. Despite her good intentions and any moral rights that she claims for keeping the money, Deborah’s actions will ultimately destroy Wolfe and tear apart their family. Rebecca Harding Davis’s realism never questions the error of Deborah’s stealing the money; it is a crime for which Wolfe takes the punishment. However, by portraying Deborah as a woman with desires and emotions that cross class boundaries, Rebecca Harding Davis asks readers to see the impact of capitalism on real, flesh-and-blood women such as Deborah and to consider carefully their own judgments of working-class women whose economic conditions increasingly navigated conflicts between the spaces of domesticity and the sphere of industry.¹⁸

Because Rebecca Harding Davis cannot envision an existence in the industrial setting that will keep Deborah’s vitality and humanity intact, particularly not after a return from serving jail

¹⁸ In *Parlor Radical*, Pfaelzer notes that Rebecca Harding Davis’s “[i]mages of womanly compassion undercut images of class isolation and confinement” and that, as a “Parlor Radical,” Davis proposes female sympathy as the basis for a “politics of interdependence,” a stance that Pfaelzer ultimately finds to be problematic because of the text’s negative representations of working-class subjects (29).

time for theft, the solution is to remove Deborah to a Quaker woman's home. There, in the community of "these silent, restful people," Deborah finds physical and emotional respite, and with this Davis voices a measured call for reform (R. Davis, "Life" 63). Rebecca Harding Davis admired the "Quaker women, honest of heart, sweet of face, soft of speech, and narrow in their beliefs," who fought in the nineteenth century to end social injustices including slavery and women's disenfranchisement (*Bits of Gossip* 191). She noted the energetic efforts of her Quaker friends Mary Grew, Margaret Burleigh, and others: "It never occurred to any of them that they had come into the world for any other purpose than to reform it" (R. Davis, *Bits* 192). In "Life in the Iron Mills," the Quaker woman acts on behalf of individuals who have suffered under the disparities of capitalist greed; she treats Hugh Wolfe's body with dignity and returns for Deborah, rescuing her from the degrading industrial workplace and sheltering her in the idyllic landscape of hills, sunshine, and fresh air. Unlike Melville's maids, Deborah escapes the ruined landscape and crippling machines of industry, yet Rebecca Harding Davis refuses to resolve the story with a sentimental happy ending. Deborah may be in more pleasant surroundings, but she still senses the loss of her situation; she is "like Esau deprived of his birthright," knowing that the blessings that were rightfully hers – the chance for love, economic reward for diligent work, access to the American Dream – have been appropriated by others (R. Davis, "Life" 64).

Rebecca Harding Davis's bleak realism elicits sympathy for the plight of workers by taking readers into the sites of industrial oppression and demonstrating the injustices that produce desperation and hopelessness. John Sturt Mill believed that accurate assessments of human actions took into account both internal motivations and the cultural and environmental factors that formed the individual character; such knowledge could be used to re-form better individuals, which action would, in turn, produce a better society. Rebecca Harding Davis shared

a similar view of the importance of sympathetic understanding as the impetus for reformative action. However, her story falls short of offering a vision of significant reform aimed at the evils of capitalism.¹⁹ Each of the characters seems to accept the economic forces that govern their lives as immutable natural laws and, though they recognize the inequities that affect individual destinies, there is no one who seeks to make changes to the systems of ownership and labor. The danger here is that while readers may feel educated (or aesthetically affected) like Mitchell or compassionate like Doctor May, they may also leave their reading satisfied that feeling noble emotions about the oppressed is sufficient and that no further action on behalf of actual workers is required.

Certainly Rebecca Harding Davis places no woman in a position to effect real change in her story about the industrial marketplace. Tillie Olsen found that although Rebecca Harding Davis “extended the realm of fiction” by introducing “pioneering firsts in subject matter” and by “incorporat[ing] social and economic problems directly, *and in terms of their effects on human beings,*” she lacked vision for what women “might be” in the world of business as agents of social change (“A Biographical Interpretation” 156, 156, 156, 139; emphasis in the original).²⁰ The Quaker woman offers respite for selected individuals in an action that brings a measure of meaningful change, but she is only one nameless and unidentifiable person who uses the domestic space as site of reform rather than directly working for sweeping changes in industry. Even though the middle-class narrator – also nameless – can explain the problems of

¹⁹ Pfaelzer comments that “information and vision lead nowhere” in the story, and she finds that Rebecca Harding Davis’s goal is compassion, rather than solutions to the problems of industrial capitalism (*Parlor Radical* 44). Since the realistic descriptions of what *is* communicates to readers that such conditions are simply to be comprehended and accepted, Pfaelzer argues, the story ultimately “suggests the futility of realism and representation as instruments of change” (*Parlor Radical* 44).

²⁰ Sharon M. Harris builds on Olsen’s argument, stating that Rebecca Harding Davis “demonstrates how an economic system aborts human potential” in her depictions of “a rapacious industrialization that corrupts human nature and crushes the human spirit (*Rebecca Harding Davis* 29).

industrialism in vivid and challenging ways, she also remains trapped in the domestic space, living in the floors above the cellar rooms that the Wolfes rented.²¹ Though the korl statue calls from behind the curtain, the narrator still has found no answers to the terrible questions of the workplace thirty years after Wolfe's death.

"Life in the Iron Mills" was Rebecca Harding Davis's first published work, written when she was young as a response to the social and economic changes she witnessed in the industrial town of Wheeling, West Virginia, where she lived. Her realist viewpoint made her refuse to perpetuate sentimental literary conventions that would gloss over the suffering that she observed; instead, she invited her readers out of their homes and into the world of industry to witness the effects of capitalist production systems on the human condition. Sharon M. Harris notes that Rebecca Harding Davis grew to see writing as a kind of reform, exposing "present-day iniquities" and "debunking mythologies of the past and present, recognizing them as the process of glossing over the harsh realities of life in favor of a romanticized vision" (*Rebecca Harding Davis* 14). People needed to know the real story, to be jolted into awareness about the darker side of industrialism, to consider the cost of American economic progress – and Rebecca Harding Davis used her art to accomplish those aims.

Rebecca Harding Davis's vision of writer-as-reformer developed over time, as did her keen business sense. She developed a strong work ethic as a writer; in later years, she wrote to her son Richard Harding Davis, who also became a successful writer, that "[a] lasting, real

²¹ Most critics interpret the narrator of "Life in the Iron Mills" as female, though not all see her as Rebecca Harding Davis's autobiographical voice. However, some have argued that the narrator is male. Jane Atteridge Rose argues that the narrator is purposely ambiguous because Rebecca Harding Davis "attempts to transcend female restrictions by acquiring male license . . . [and] assum[ing] a masculine voice. . . . Her narrator's sex is not designated in this tale and therefore, particularly in 1861, it would be assumed to be masculine" (191). Ruth Stoner argues that the sexually indeterminate narrator is an "innovation in form" which serves as "an expression of her radical sexual politics" (28).

success takes time, and patient, steady work. . . . It is not inspiration—it never was that—without practice, with any writer from Shakespeare down” (qtd. Harris, “Rebecca Harding Davis” 68). Often supporting her family with the income from her writing, Rebecca Harding Davis also depended on economic reward for her art in order to make a living. Letters to editors James Field at the *Atlantic Monthly* and F.P. Church and William Conant Church at the *Galaxy* demonstrate that she developed strong negotiation skills in order to maintain the artistic integrity of her work while also earning fair compensation for her labors (Harris, “Rebecca Harding Davis” 59-70). A prolific author, Rebecca Harding Davis’s work earned her a respectable, though not large, income. Her work appeared regularly in the leading literary periodicals of her time, including *The North American Review*, *The Independent*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s*, and *Galaxy*, and some of her serialized stories were later published as novels, including *Margaret Howth*, *Dallas Galbraith*, and *Waiting for the Verdict*. In her later career, economic pressures took their toll, sometimes forcing her to publish work before it was ready, and many critics find that “Life in the Iron Mills,” her first work, to be her best.²² Tillie Olsen argues that financial strain negatively impacted Rebecca Harding Davis’s artistry: “Mrs. Davis, in her way, was a professional workhorse in the field of letters for income, doing the best she could” (135). Rebecca Harding Davis’s career, then, testifies to the challenges facing nineteenth-century women who navigated the boundaries between the domestic duties of wife and mother and the professional calling of authorship.

²² Olsen finds that while “Life in the Iron Mills” was groundbreaking in subject matter and style, Rebecca Harding Davis failed to fulfill the literary promise predicted by her early success (150-156). Olsen’s 1972 reprinting of the story reintroduced it to American readers, who were heavily influenced by Olsen’s critical opinion. Judith Roman-Royer and Elaine Hedges, in their *Heath Anthology of American Literature* introduction to Rebecca Harding Davis’s story, state that “although she continued to write and publish prolifically, she was not to produce a literary work equal in imaginative power to her first” (2836).

In his study of Rebecca Harding Davis's business acumen, David Dowling describes her realist aesthetic as more than a groundbreaking artistic choice: it was also a savvy economic decision. He notes that women writers such as Rebecca Harding Davis were "free agents at the precipice of tremendous social and material advancement" (Dowling 109). The realist aesthetic, Dowling argues, suits the need for adapting to "the practical demands of the increasingly economic and competitive country," demonstrates the limitations of individualism in a capitalist economy and dramatizes "the precise moment when healthy ambition transforms into self-destruction" in American history (126). Rebecca Harding Davis recognized that romantic notions of artistic expression were insufficient for the demands of a market economy, creative and transcendent work did not always lead to economic security, and the social and economic changes in the American way of life demanded a closer look. As an authorial entrepreneur, using writing as a business of her own, she turned this pragmatic vision into capital.

Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" sent out a call for realism in literature and for an honest depiction of the horrors that industrial capitalism inflicted on the lives of individuals, a call that was answered by another young writer, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. In "Stories that Stay," an essay published in *The Century* that almost fifty years after "Life in the Iron Mills" first appeared, Phelps remarks on the indelible effects of Rebecca Harding Davis's writing upon her own: "Her intensity was essentially feminine, but her grip was like that of a masculine hand . . . [;] [h]er men and women breathed and suffered, loved and missed of love, won life or wasted it with an ardor that was human, and a power that was art" (120). Phelps notes that this story introduced her to problems she had not been aware of, but that after reading, "[o]ne could never say again that one did not understand" ("Stories" 120). She remembers that from her comfortable middle-class New England home, "[t]he claims of toil and suffering upon

ease had assumed a new form . . . a force which . . . has never let me go” (Phelps, “Stories” 120). Read when the young Phelps was at “a distinct crisis . . . at the point where the intellect and the moral nature meet,” Rebecca Harding Davis’s stirring story demonstrated the transformative power of the written word and suggested that, through writing, women could challenge social and economic injustice in a way that was simultaneously intellectual, artistic, and reformative (“Stories” 120).

Rebecca Harding Davis’s work, then, served as a starting point for Phelps’s own “groping” into questions about how to ameliorate the negative effects of industrial capitalism (Phelps, *TSP* 241). In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps moves beyond Rebecca Harding Davis’s sympathetic portrait of dehumanized, trapped individuals to suggest reforms in the world of work. Phelps’s heroine, Perley Kelso, leaves the domestic sphere to go out into the world, into workers’ homes, into factories, and into the company office to seek a “business of my own” in an attempt to ameliorate the negative effects of industrial capitalism by putting into practice the philosophies of John Stuart Mill (*TSP* 262).

“This young lady’s life had been a peculiar, rather a public one”: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, John Stuart Mill, and the Woman of Business

Phelps’s admiration of John Stuart Mill is evident in her frequent references to his work in her own letters and publications.²³ Their philosophies about women’s capabilities and challenges closely matched, and Phelps found in Mill an insightful exploration of the wrongs of women in

²³ Phelps directly quotes from Mill in *The Silent Partner* and “Unhappy Girls” as well as in her personal correspondence. As I will argue, she patterned many of her ideas about women’s rights, capabilities, and actions in similar ways to Mill.

the nineteenth century – issues that she addressed in her own work.²⁴ By 1869, as Phelps was writing *The Silent Partner*, Mill’s reputation as an advocate for women’s rights was firmly established on both sides of the Atlantic with the publication of his essay *The Subjection of Women*. In England, his arguments in Parliament for women’s property rights and suffrage earned him the reputation of being a “Feminine Philosopher,” and an 1873 political cartoon in *Vanity Fair* (fig. 1) reflects the controversial nature of his claims (Spy 102). The caricature pictures him as an elderly, wizened man with his hands behind his back in a posture of confidence and authority, but his bowed shoulders and pursed lips make him appear sheepish and somewhat emasculated. Roy T. Matthews and Peter Mellini note that the editor of *Vanity Fair* “was greatly impressed by Mill’s mind,” and though the portrait is a caricature that exaggerates Mill’s bumpy forehead and beaked nose, it also captures the personality of a man who “breathed charm and intellect” and who, as “a feminine philosopher,” enjoyed a reputation as a devoted husband and ardent supporter of women’s rights – ideas that were “somewhat idealistic and therefore, to his time, womanly ways of thinking” (93). Having such a respected intellect as a proponent of women’s rights encouraged writers such as Phelps to use his ideas as substantiation for their own claims. Phelps declared Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* to be “a book which no reading woman in the land should rest till she has seen” (“Unhappy Girls” 1). His work also influenced other American authors interested in women’s rights, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, after reading *The Subjection of Women*, declared herself to be so “wholly converted” by Mill’s arguments that in one of her essays for *Chimney-Corners*, she asserts:

²⁴ Phelps saw the Woman Cause as the most pressing need of her day, and she actively elicited other writers to join her in advocating reforms. In an 1871 letter to John Greenleaf Whittier, she asked him to write a poem addressing the issues facing women, stating, “I am, as perhaps you may suppose, almost *invested* in the ‘Woman Cause.’ It grows upon my conscience, as well as my enthusiasm, every day. It seems to me to be the first work God has to be done just now” (qtd. in Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* 56-57; emphasis in original).



Figure 1. "Statesmen, No. 141. 'A Feminine Philosopher.' [John Stuart Mill]."

Source: Spy. "A Feminine Philosopher." *Vanity Fair* 9.230 (Mar. 29, 1873): 102. Print.

“This question of Woman and her Sphere is now, perhaps, the greatest of the age” (qtd. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* 359).²⁵

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill declares that the “existing social relations between the two sexes,” which was marked by legal and social “subordination of one sex to the other,” was “one of the chief hindrances to human improvement” (471). Mill argues that women, confined by legal restrictions, social mandates, and prevailing notions of biological determinism, were being prevented from reaching their full potential as human beings. Marriage laws, he claims, placed women in a legal form of “bondage”; stripped of legal rights to property ownership, individuality under the law, and ownership of even their own bodies, married women were captives in their own homes: “There remain no legal slaves,” he stated, “except the mistress of every house” (Mill, *SW* 558). Mill also argues that men benefitted from such a system and acted to perpetuate it both by denying equal opportunities to women and by simultaneously finding it “necessary to say, and desirable to believe” that women were incapable of intellectual or enterprising activity (*SW* 525). Mill finds that training women to emulate the qualities of “meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man” had robbed society of great potential for advancement (*SW* 487). Instead of producing capable and

²⁵ In an 1869 article published in the *Hartford Daily Courant*, Stowe advocates reading both Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* and Bushnell’s *Women’s Suffrage: The Reform against Nature* to familiarize oneself with the arguments on both sides of the Woman Question, and she notes that her own views most closely matched those of Mill (“The Woman Question” 1). Joan Hedrick observes in *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* that Mill’s ideas about the separate spheres orthodoxy “fit neatly with the problems that Stowe was wrestling with in Reconstruction America,” including marriage and property laws, “the tensions and difficulties of woman’s conjugal duties,” and woman suffrage (359, 360). Hedrick quotes Stowe’s 1869 *Hearth and Home* article, “What Is and What Is Not the Point in the Woman Question,” in which Stowe wrote: “John Stuart Mill says all popular reforms have to go through three stages—Ridicule, Discussion, Acceptance. The question of Woman’s Rights is just passing out of the stage of ridicule into that of fair, respectful discussion” (qtd. Hedrick 360). See also Elaine Showalter’s *A Jury of Her Peers* for a discussion of Stowe’s conversion to the issue of woman’s rights after reading Mill (165-166).

active female members of society, Mill argues that such training – which he describes as simultaneous “forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others” – had produced notions about the “nature of women” that were “eminently artificial” and designed only “for the benefit and pleasure of their masters” (SW 493). He sympathizes with women who resist marriage, since under the legal conditions of coverture, “marrying is giving themselves a master, and a master too of all their earthly possessions” (Mill, SW 501). What society proposed as the natural vocation for women – marriage and motherhood – Mill asserts was actually a system in which men retained legal, economic, and social domination of women.

This suppression of “half the human race” was unnecessarily restricting the moral and intellectual advancement of everyone, and Mill argues that women possessed untapped capabilities that, given opportunity to develop, would lead to greater individual happiness for women and greater advancement of society at large (SW 524). Based on examples of strong women from the past – Queen Elizabeth I, Joan of Arc, and Queen Victoria – Mill reasons that women who were offered equal education and freedom to take on “lucrative occupations, and . . . high social functions” within the public sphere could succeed: “Women, and not a few merely, but many women, have proved themselves capable of everything, perhaps without a single exception, which is done by men, and of doing it successfully and creditably” (SW 524, 525). Widening women’s “sphere of action” would benefit society in two ways: more innovation and intellectual progress for the benefit of all humanity would occur when the greatest minds of both sexes were encouraged to reach their full capacity (Mill, SW 562). Mill also declares that, rather than exacerbating tensions between genders, intellectual and economic competition between men and women would stimulate progress “for the higher service of humanity” (SW 561).

Mill never went so far as to argue for abolishing marriage and family; in fact, he valued the home as a site of emotional viability and intellectual development. In his own life, he derived great value from his relationship with Harriet Taylor, whom he married in 1851. Mill calls Harriet a woman of “great thoughts and noble feelings,” and he dedicated *On Liberty* to her, noting that she is “the inspirer, and in part the author” of his best writings (3). However, Mill found that nineteenth-century marriage with its legal system of coverture – under which a woman forfeited her individual property and legal rights upon marriage – had become a form of enforced gender coding that prevented women from functioning as human beings with full freedoms in society. He proposed reforms advocating marriage laws that were similar to business arrangements, with equal legal rights to property and action available to each party. In the economic sphere, he advocates establishing a fair market value for the services that women could provide when allowed “by their own experience, and by the use of their own faculties” to compete in the marketplace, rather than relegating them strictly to the “natural vocation” of wife and mother (Mill, *SW* 499). Removing “bounties and protective duties” that favored men in the economic sphere would ensure that women could compete in the marketplace, in occupations that suited their individual abilities and interests (Mill, *SW* 499). To detractors who doubted women’s capacity for professional occupations, Mill counters: “There are no means of finding what either one person or many can do, but by trying — and no means by which anyone else can discover for them what it is for their happiness to do or leave undone” (*SW* 499). Allowing women the freedom to develop their interests and capacities into emotionally fulfilling work would not only contribute to the general welfare but would also provide women with economic viability, an essential right: “The *power* of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property” (Mill, *SW* 523; emphasis in original). Given sufficient freedom

and opportunities, Mill argues, women will demonstrate the capacity for making significant intellectual, political, and economic contributions to humanity.

Mill's idea that women possess capabilities equal to men and, given education and opportunity, can successfully enter the public sphere and contribute to the advancement of humanity in social, political, and economic ways was particularly appealing to Phelps, who felt that her own position as a working woman demonstrated the veracity of Mill's assertions. She explored options for women that did not include marriage, not because she was anti-domestic – she valued home – but because she, like Mill, witnessed women who were unhappy, kept from reaching their full potential by society's expectations for them to be wives and mothers, and prevented from *being something*.²⁶ She saw herself as a voice that could challenge socioeconomic structures and help to shape them into something new.

As an author, Phelps had entered the public sphere through the development of her intellectual capacities and her own diligent labor. Her first novel, *The Gates Ajar*, published in 1868 when she was twenty-three, quickly became a bestseller, and this early success gave Phelps the confidence and capital to continue her career as a literary artist. In her work, she explored the changes in economic conditions of women in America after the Civil War. As an educated and self-supporting working woman, she knew firsthand the challenges facing women who searched for meaningful and well-paying work in a time of demands for the pious, pure, domesticated, and submissive True Woman. And her position – both intellectual and geographic – situated her to write about women's participation in the world of textile manufacture. From her home in

²⁶ Carol Kessler notes in *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* that none of Phelps's works portrays a happy marriage because Phelps found that nineteenth-century marriage and property laws and social expectations created "relationships designed to benefit men to the detriment of women" (91). As a realist writer, then, Phelps could not depict a marriage that is fulfilling for a woman because it was not a "realistic 'truth'" (Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* 91).

Andover, Massachusetts, Phelps had access to important business, literary, and manufacturing centers of the time: she was twenty-four miles from Boston, twenty-three miles from Concord, and fifteen miles from Lowell, and each of these sites provided her with first-hand knowledge that she used in her writing.²⁷

In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps creates a heroine who demonstrates that a woman with opportunity, determination, and fortitude can become an active, contributing agent in the business sector. The novel is an artistic interpretation of the assertions Phelps makes more directly in her non-fiction: showing women as resourceful and enterprising, exposing and challenging greed's dehumanizing effects, opening doors for women in business. We can see this in the novel by tracing the trajectory of Perley's learning – her accumulation of knowledge about business moves her from the position of True Woman to woman capitalist.

At the beginning of the novel, Perley Kelso, the daughter of a “gentleman manufacturer,” spends her days reading, napping, and ordering dinner, without much thought to the source of her capital (Phelps, *TSP* 9). Although she has a “weakness for an occupation” – a restless spirit that finds the life of leisure a bit tedious – she is generally content to occupy herself with ladylike pursuits: reading, music, travel, and fashion (Phelps, *TSP* 12). She is the model of the idle woman that Phelps attacks in “Why Shall They Do It” as one who would “fritter [her] womanhood away into bubbles” and miss her chance “to be of use” in the world (223, 219).

As a young lady of Boston, Perley's education has been in the domestic arts: ordering dinner, playing music, arranging tasteful carriage refurbishment, dressing impeccably, providing

²⁷ In *Chapters from a Life*, Phelps recounts her month-long investigation of the fire at the Pemberton mill, the subject of her short story “The Tenth of January,” an event that took place close to her home in Andover. Phelps's research took place after the tragedy; she was not allowed to witness the disaster because she was a woman, but she could see the “red and awful glare” of the fire from her home (90).

companionship for her father, and preparing for marriage to Maverick Hayle, her father's junior partner. Perley's training in ladylike decorum begins early, as her horror at "the blunder of tuberoses" on her mother's coffin demonstrates (Phelps, *TSP* 15). Tuberoses in the Victorian language of flowers signify "dangerous pleasures" (Greenaway 41). Such a message would be quite inappropriate for remembering a beloved mother – and provides evidence that a six-year-old Perley is already well versed in "proper" manners and decorum.

When Perley's father suddenly dies in a train accident, the twenty-three-year-old young woman moves to Five Falls to "look after" her inherited property, which includes the source of her capital, a textile mill that her father owned with Mr. Hayle and his son Maverick (Phelps, *TSP* 68). Perley's intentions of becoming a capitalist fall short of her capabilities, as she has only a dim understanding of the mill's workings: "The business' [that] had been a standing mystery in [her] careless fancy . . . there was some cotton in it she felt sure; that it was a responsible business and a profitable business she understood; that there were girls in little shawls, ragged men, and bad tobacco, an occasional strike, and a mission Sunday school connected with it, she remembered" (Phelps, *TSP* 41-42). Intellectually disengaged from her source of capital, with no practical education to help her understand the management of a mill, Perley receives a hearty rebuff when she requests a full partnership in Hayle and Kelso. Her father's partners quickly inform her that the selection of a new partner is their prerogative, not part of her rightful inheritance, and that because "business obligation and responsibility are always so trying to a lady," the only position they can offer her is that of a silent partner (Phelps, *TSP* 60). Perley's shock at their derision – a reaction she had never received in her previous interactions with men in upper-class society – signals a dawning awareness of her lack of knowledge and her difficult position as a woman in the business world, prompting "[a] faint sense of degradation at being so

ignorant that she could not command the respect of two men sufficiently to the bare discussion of [a partnership] possessed her” (Phelps, *TSP* 59). With no training in how to conduct business negotiations, she asks naive questions that let the men know just how little she understands about business. When she says she wishes to “manage my mills myself,” they remind her that she has no knowledge of the workings of the market or the management of “hands” (Phelps, *TSP* 62, 64). The men who were so accommodating to her frivolous feminine fancies behave quite differently when talking business, and they bluntly remind her that she has no experience and no legal leg to stand on and that her proper mode of participation in the business will be solely as a wifely influence on Maverick. Perley serves them lunch in her parlor-turned-business-office, smiling, but she has been checkmated. The men are absolutely unwilling to extend a full business partnership to a young lady whose only qualification is inherited money.

Perley also lacks knowledge about the lives of the mill hands at Hayle and Kelso. At their first encounter in Five Falls, Sip Garth, a young woman employed in the mill, alters Perley’s knowledge about working conditions there. When Perley can only repeat what she had learned from her father – that workers receive “prompt pay” and are employed in a “health[y] occupation” that provides plenty of exercise and fresh air – Sip disputes these notions and relates the story of her mother, whose difficult working conditions and fourteen-hour shifts impaired the health of her unborn child and led to her own premature death (Phelps, *TSP* 50, 51). Perley, a pampered daughter who has been brought up in a life of ease and has never experienced the stark realities of poverty, is dumbfounded by Sip’s account. At issue is Perley’s lack of knowledge: “I only know what I know,” Sip tells her; “You’d better find out for yourself” (Phelps, *TSP* 52, 53). Perley has to go out of her house – into the world of business – and begin her education. Perley then visits the mills, and she visits Sip’s rented tenement to learn for herself.

Sites of eating and ingesting in the novel indicate moments of learning for Perley. At her “checkmate” luncheon with Mr. Hayle and Maverick, Perley must smile and fulfill her duties as the domestic woman of manners, even though she has just been put down by the men she entertains. The text mentions no food, however, only that the three eat on the table which was the site of Perley’s business blunder. At Sip’s home, Perley stays for dinner and has bread, molasses, and tea. Perley realizes the horrible diet is the result of “economizing,” a concept about which she has only vague notions – but now appears before her “thick . . . sticky . . . tangible” (Phelps, *TSP* 95). She also learns about Sip’s “peculiar, dry, rasping cough,” a condition known among the mill hands as “cotton cough,” which Sip notes “comes from sucking filling through the shuttle” (Phelps, *TSP* 82, 82, 81). In the common practice of threading new bobbins by sucking the thread through the eye of a shuttle, workers also ingested dust, lint, dye, and – on a shuttle touched by more than one worker – infectious germs.²⁸ Such ingestion of environmental dangers could damage workers’ bodies and, as Sip notes, make weavers sickly and voiceless. Outside of her home and away from her comfortable dining table, the information that Perley takes in is startling, and she searches for words to describe the situations that she has never experienced before: “You see how little I know –,” she says to Sip, “[a]bout – people who work and – have a hard time” (Phelps, *TSP* 94). She feels sympathy for the hardworking Sip’s condition, which is an emotion that recognizes both Sip’s humanity and capacity, rather than pity, which is an emotion offered to one without any agency. Her first-hand experience in Sip’s house – eating

²⁸ Janet Greenlees describes the practice, commonly known as “shuttle kissing,” as “the practice of loading new cops (bobbins) of thread into weaving shuttles. After weavers placed a fresh cop inside the wooden shuttle, they placed the end of the thread against the shuttle, put their lips over the outside of the eye and sharply inhaled, thus drawing the thread through the eye, ready for use. During this procedure, weavers directly inhaled dirt, fine lint, size[,] and potentially poisonous chemicals if the thread was dyed. Weavers repeated the process a minimum of 300 times per day and many years of weaving could cause respiratory illnesses. In addition, shuttles were rarely singular to one weaver. Other weavers or the overseer might also ‘kiss’ weavers’ shuttles, raising question about the risk of spreading disease, particularly tuberculosis” (2-3). The process, though unpopular, was not outlawed until 1952.

like a mill worker, building her first fire, feeling the dampness of the stone house – introduces Perley to the realities of working-class lives. She learns that, in addition to her eleven-hour shift at the mill, Sip does all of the household chores while also caring for a disabled sister. Sip's life thus puts a face on poverty; for the first time Perley interacts with a person living a millworker's life, and the experience changes Perley's perspective. Her ladylike training has taught her only "to feel very sorry for the poor," a sentimental response which allows her to feel compassion without requiring any action because "the poor" is an arbitrary concept with no specific human being attached to it (Phelps, *TSP* 94). Having come face to face with Sip's dismal living conditions and poor diet, Perley becomes "a puzzled scholar," witness to the exhaustion and physical strain of a mill hand's life so contradictory to her previous education (Phelps, *TSP* 91).

This new knowledge leaves Perley reeling, and leaving Sip's stone house, she feels "like a stranger setting foot in a strange land. Old, home-like boundary lines of things to which her smooth young life had rounded, wavered before her. It even occurred to her that she should never be very happy again, for knowing that factory-girls ate black molasses and had the cotton-cough" (Phelps, *TSP* 98). The "home-like" boundaries of Perley's privileged domestic tranquility, previously undisturbed by the nameless, faceless poor, are now overshadowed by the sticky knowledge that capitalism has a darker side.

Having a friend outside of her upper middle-class social circle offers Perley access to information that she cannot learn from reading her sentimental novels and poetry. As their friendship progresses, Perley invites Sip for a visit; in the parlor Perley confesses that her romantic notions of poverty have been changed by what she has witnessed in her visit to the Mell home: "I never knew until to-night what it was like to be poor. It wasn't that I didn't care . . . I didn't *know*. I thought it was a respectable thing, . . . a lazy thing, or a drunken thing; a thing that

must be, just as mud must be in April; a thing to put on overshoes for” (Phelps, *TSP* 128; emphasis in the original). She has found little romantic dignity in the suffering she has witnessed in the Mell’s tenement home. Nor is Perley satisfied with Malthusian doctrines about the base character of the poor which held that the working class was fit only for manual labor, at the mercy of their base urges, and irredeemable. She cannot accept such doctrines because she finds that view of humanity too sterile and intellectual – as well as contradicted by the noble and spirited Sip. However, while Perley has been introduced to the conditions of workers’ lives in Five Falls, she has yet to make sense of what she has seen. “Who knows what to think,” she tells Sip, “that is just waked up?” (Phelps, *TSP* 128).

By Chapter VI, Perley shows that she has become a student of business. Back in her parlor, she breakfasts with Maverick, but the conversation is no polite, cultivated discussion of art and fashion. Perley wants to talk about what she has seen in her investigations around Five Falls and in her own study of business practices. She confronts Maverick about the deplorable state of the tenement houses that he owns, and she insists that he fix the buildings so that they are “fit for human beings to inhabit” – a duty she sees as the least that a person of Christian integrity can do for fellow human beings (Phelps, *TSP* 134). The owners’ extravagant lifestyle is becoming less enjoyable for Perley now that she realizes it comes at the cost of others’ difficult and under-compensated labor, and she challenges Maverick to offer a fair product for the rent he charges. She also asks Maverick about the mill’s employment of children, an outlawed practice that she discovered is happening with children like Bub Mell, a boy younger than eight years old – the legal age at which children could be employed – who has already been set to work spooling in the mill rather than being sent to school. Perley has done her homework and confronts Maverick about the law. She asks, “do you know that every law of this State which regulates the

admission of children into factories is broken in your mills?” – a fact which he confesses not knowing (Phelps, *TSP* 137). Perley also proposes to improve the lives of the workers through reforms similar to those offered by the Pacific Mills,²⁹ including a library, a reading-room, and lectures to provide workers with intellectual pursuits to offset the monotony of factory work. When Maverick protests that unlike “[t]he great Pacific [that] can afford them,” their smaller “country mill[]” cannot, Perley quickly does the math to demonstrate that the costs of such items would not bankrupt the company (Phelps, *TSP* 136). Perley has also talked to Mr. Hayle, whose knowledge of economic theory both silences and confuses her, and she can recall only the touchstones of their conversation: “He said something about Political Economy; he said something else about Supply and Demand. He said something, too, about the State of the Market” (Phelps, *TSP* 134-135). Mr. Hayle calls on the economic principles found in John Stuart Mill’s *Political Economy* and Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* to demonstrate to Perley his belief that his laissez-faire approach to mill operations is based solely on market conditions without giving consideration to questions of sympathy and virtue. Perley still has much to learn, but she will find that Mill’s other volume, *On Liberty*, offers an approach to validate her belief that capitalist enterprise should be balanced with opportunities for full intellectual and moral development of all human beings, including mill hands. However, at this moment in the story, Perley realizes that Mr. Hayle would “tie [her] hands . . . with Adam Smith,” and that she has not yet become educated enough to reason with him, knowing only there is “*something* about the relations of rich and poor, of master and man, with which the state of the market has nothing to

²⁹ Ardis Cameron notes that the Pacific Mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, enjoyed an “international reputation as a model mill” because of their efforts to enrich the lives of workers (48).

do. There is *something*, -- a claim, a duty, a puzzle, it is all too new to me to know what to call it” (Phelps, *TSP* 141).

As Perley fumbles for words to express her newly acquired knowledge and sentiment, Maverick attempts to shut down the conversation, saying that it would be a “blunder in the political economy of Hayle and Kelso” for “comfortable and amiable engaged people” such as themselves to quarrel over business (Phelps, *TSP* 134). They are not yet married, but Maverick already considers their relationship in the light of marriage laws of the time that would make him full owner of her property and sole representative of any legal actions (including business partnerships) they would make as a married couple. He resents her challenging him with “[q]uestions which political economists spend life in disputing” that he “doesn’t care a fig about” because he finds his life of relative ease quite agreeable, and he does not want anyone, least of all a woman, pushing him to think about the ethics of his business practices (Phelps, *TSP* 140). When she questions the partners’ policies on operations during a slow market – further evidence that she has studied market conditions and business practices – he does not explain the reasons for running the works “at a dead loss half of last year” rather than downsizing operations (Phelps, *TSP* 135). Perhaps he does not know himself. Earlier Perley has noted that Maverick is well educated and that he uses the term “οἱ πολλοί”³⁰ to refer to the workers, believing that his vocabulary evinces his “keen appreciation of the finer distinctions both of life and letters” and reminds everyone that he is deserving of the “*prestige* in society” (Phelps, *TSP* 27; emphasis in original). However, when questioned about business practices, Maverick cannot – or will not – explain his operating principles. Instead he retorts that Perley is incapable of comprehending the

³⁰ “Hoi polloi” is the Greek word meaning “the many” or “plebians,” often used in a derogatory manner as a term for the working class. Here Maverick uses the term to convince everyone of his intellectual superiority.

complex world of business, saying that she “cannot understand the ins and outs of the thousand and one questions which perplex a business man” (Phelps, *TSP* 135-136; emphasis in original). As a sign that he finds her activities out of line for a decent woman, he accuses her of behaving “very improperly” by walking alone at night “all over Five Falls” and of trying to turn the employees into pampered “lap-dogs” who will no longer have any incentive to work (Phelps, *TSP* 138, 138, 139). Perley’s vividly flushing face is not that of womanly delight at the expressions of a lover; instead, she is angry and frustrated by the thinly veiled insults of her condescending fiancé.

Although Maverick finds it difficult to comprehend the reasons behind Perley’s interest in conducting business, he does find her “beautiful restlessness” something to admire, and the next day he sends the mill manager Garrick with the conciliatory offer of letting her pick out the moulding for the new factory building (Phelps, *TSP* 139). However, Perley is not interested in choosing the ornamentation for the building. Moulding is placed on the outside, for show, and to present a pleasant façade that occludes the working conditions behind the factory walls. She tells Garrick she would rather be a “brick-maker,” a person who creates building materials for new constructions (Phelps, *TSP* 144). She is also not interested in being pressed back into the “mould” of her former understanding in order to please Maverick; she wants to be the one doing the moulding now.³¹ Realizing that her fiancé will only limit her access to knowledge and keep

³¹ Here, Phelps ties directly to Mill’s argument in *On Liberty* that the extraordinary person cannot fit the “mould” of the average person: “Genius can only breathe freely in an *atmosphere* of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people—less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character. If from timidity they consent to be forced into one of these moulds, and to let all that part of themselves which cannot expand under the pressure remain unexpanded, society will be little the better for their genius. If they are of a strong character, and break their fetters, they become a mark for the society which has not succeeded in reducing them to commonplace, to point at with solemn warning as ‘wild,’ ‘erratic,’ and the like; much as if one should complain of the Niagara river for not flowing smoothly between its banks like a Dutch canal” (72; emphasis in original).

her from becoming a woman of business, Perley breaks her engagement in the next chapter and so frees her own hands to work as she pleases.

Although Perley demonstrates a woman's capacity for learning business practices, she has more difficulty making sense of the working class's condition. Coming home dirty after work in the mill, Sip looks to Perley like "some half-cleared Pompeian statue³² just dug against the face of day," an impression that demonstrates how Perley's access to knowledge about working-class lives is limited by her middle-class frame of reference (Phelps, *TSP* 81). The excavation of Pompeii became a popular tourist destination, the topic of much travel literature, and a site of imagination in the nineteenth century. Statues were cast in the voids left by bodies of people who were killed in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. The resulting plaster shapes reveal the facial expressions, the physical posture, and the clothing of the victims at the moment of their deaths and turn their suffering and death into art, an aesthetically appealing spectacle for the tourist and reader of travel literature to imaginatively excavate and interpret. William Dean Howells describes the statues in his 1867 *Italian Journeys* cast from

the molds of four human bodies, three women and a man, who fell down, blind and writhing, in the storm of fire eighteen hundred years ago; whose shape the settling and hardening ashes took; whose flesh wasted away, and whose bones lay there in the hollow of the matrix till the cunning of this time found them, and, pouring liquid plaster round the skeletons, clothed them with human form again, and drew them forth into the world once more. There [is] . . . nothing which so

³² The metaphor of workers as Pompeian statues is repeated throughout the novel. Female cotton weavers are called "beautiful moving corpses . . . the skeletons among the statues that were dug against the face of day," and the workers who gather to watch the flooding river are described as "Pompeian statues" (Phelps, *TSP* 119, 264, 270).

vividly reports the terrible manner of her death as these effigies of the creatures that actually shared it. (103)

The tourist in Pompeii can walk through the ruins and view the statues cast from the molds left by the victims of the volcano's eruption, can see their dying expressions and the signs of suffering in their final "blind and writhing" fight with death, but these human forms are only plaster, an aesthetic representation of the humans who died. Each victim's individuality and consciousness is no longer there. Who were these people, and what were their dying thoughts and feelings? The tourist can discover these only by projecting his own sensations of human pity onto the voiceless plaster molds, can only partially understand the final horror, and can turn away, as Howells did, from the statues when the imagination tires of the experience. He finishes his chapter on Pompeii by stating that he never plans to return there.

A proliferation of literature about Pompeii during the nineteenth century demonstrates a widespread fascination with the spectacle of the excavated city and its victims. For example, W. H. Davenport Adams's *The Buried Cities of Campagna*, published in 1869, demonstrates the nineteenth-century attraction to the ruins as site of imagination for the educated classes. Pompeii, he argues, provides "an ever-vivid illustration of ancient Roman life . . . hence its charm for every cultivated mind" (vi). The book includes engravings of tourists viewing the excavation site and the Pompeian statues so that readers can vicariously experience a trip to the ancient city and "see" the spectacle for themselves (fig. 2 and fig. 3).

Because the volcanic ash essentially froze people in time, in the midst of their quotidian activities, Adams claims that the excavations provide "an amount of light upon the manners and customs of the Romans" far beyond any of the written historical narratives (vi). Adams also finds the ruins so fraught with "charm" that he wishes for similar representations of ancient

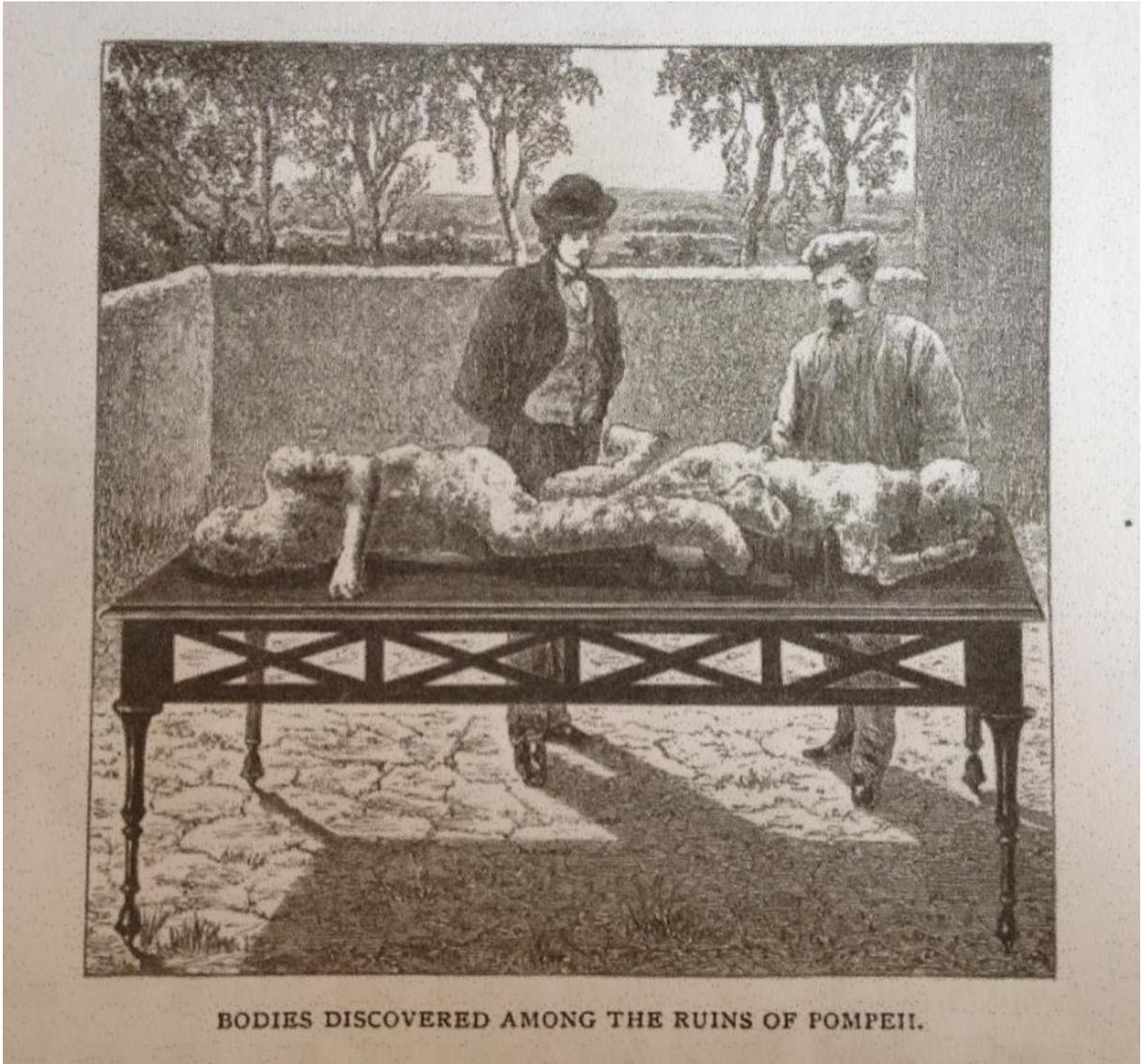


Figure 2. "Bodies Discovered Among the Ruins of Pompeii."

Source: W. H. Davenport Adams, *The Buried Cities of Campania; or, Pompeii and Herculaneum, Their History, Their Destruction, and Their Remains*. Boston: Lothrop, 1869. 266. *HathiTrust*. Web. 6 Apr. 2014.

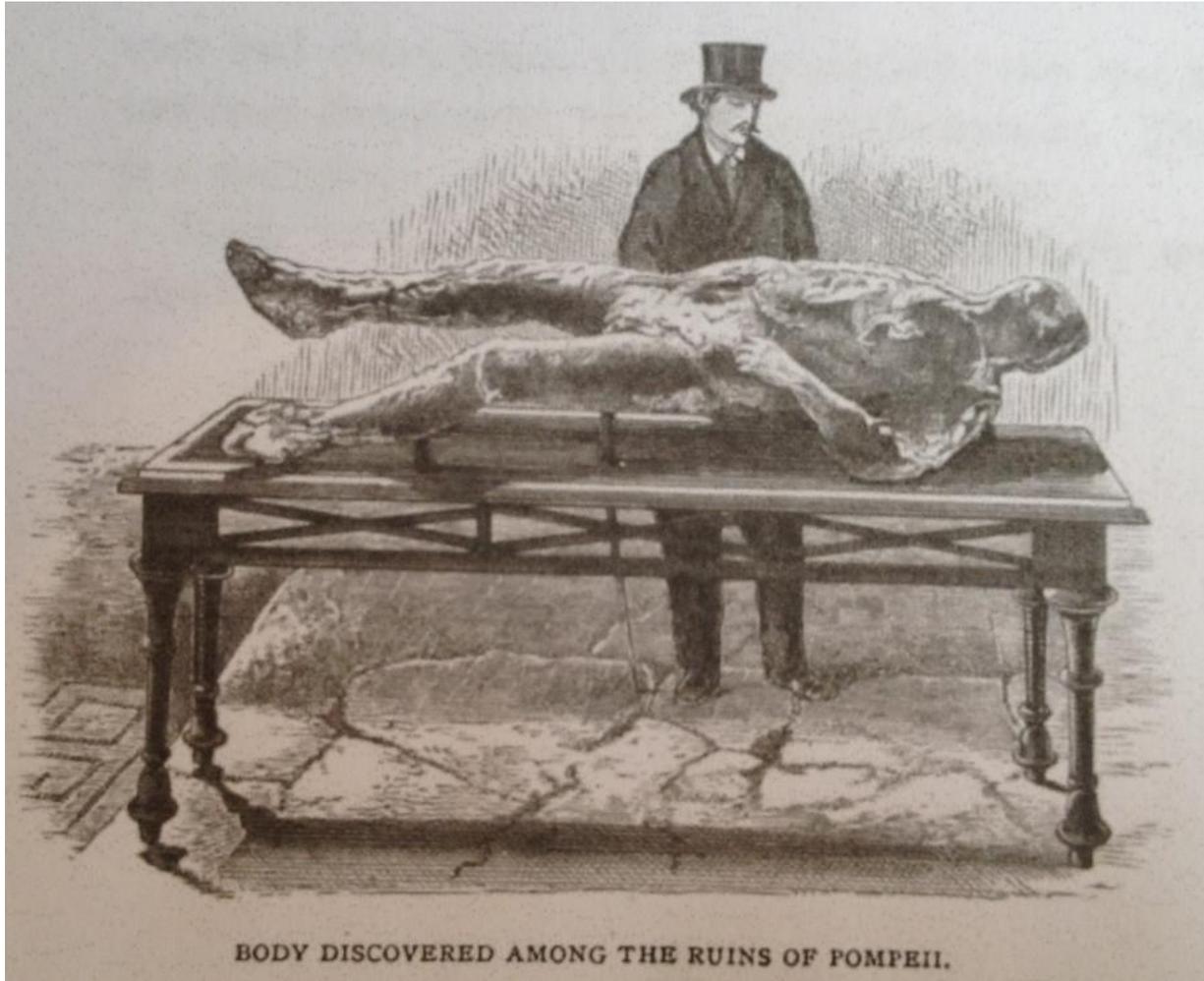


Figure 3. "Bodies Discovered Among the Ruins of Pompeii."

Source: W. H. Davenport Adams, *The Buried Cities of Campania; or, Pompeii and Herculaneum, Their History, Their Destruction, and Their Remains*. Boston: Lothrop, 1869. 267. *HathiTrust*. Web. 6 Apr. 2014.

civilizations: “How would the historian rejoice if Persepolis, or Palmyra, or Babylon, could in like manner be restored to the light of day!” (W. Adams vi). His statement demonstrates a disturbing dehumanization of Pompeian citizens that comes through an overly developed appreciation of aesthetics. By wishing for more such sites of anthropological value and aesthetic beauty, Adams distances himself from human suffering and appropriates the deaths of others for his own education and pleasure, and he teaches his readers to do the same. That is, while Adams asserts that the collection of Pompeian statues “forcibly recalls to one’s mind the terrible ‘last scene’ in the Pompeian drama,” his poetic descriptions of the statues center on his own aestheticized interpretations of the individuals’ final moments (264). Of one victim, he notes that “you perceive that she struggled in a prolonged agony; her attitude is that of suffering, not of death” (W. Adams 265). Of the male statue that Howells also had observed, he says, “There is a martial and resolute air in this fine corpse” (W. Adams 268). Adams’s book invites the reader to vicariously visit the sights of Pompeii, and his illustrations and descriptions create an appreciation for the beauty of human suffering that is revealed there, much as Mitchell is fascinated by the suffering of the iron workers in “Life in the Iron Mills.” This appreciation, however, is formed at a safe distance, requiring only wonder from the reader.

Nineteenth-century middle-class women such as Perley Kelso read the travel narratives of Howells, Adams, and others for enjoyment and for their educational value. The narratives’ mode of inquiry, based on an appreciation of aesthetic beauty, modeled an understanding of the human experience that was elevated, cultured, and middle-classed – and, perhaps, sympathetic, but always from a distance. Of course, full understanding of the agonies at Pompeii would require going back in time and dying in a similarly horrible fashion. The statues’ expressions do offer understanding, if limited, of the human experience of suffering that is one of the goals of

art. Despite the limitations, this kind of education is worthwhile to the traveler and the reader, so long as it produces a sympathy that leads to action rather than to an anesthetized tolerance of human suffering that viewing such spectacles can produce. Reading about the suffering at Pompeii and looking at the statues that portray the suffering of those that died there does influence Perley's sympathetic interpretation of Sip and the mill workers. She observes their clothes, their posture, their possessions, and she pours into these outward forms the ideas she has learned from literature and society – ideas that do in some measure help her to understand the plight of the workers. The knowledge she gains, though limited, makes her more compassionate and leads her to help relieve some of the physical suffering in Five Falls.

While Sip may resemble a Pompeian statue as she emerges from the extreme temperatures, dust, and oil of the mill, she is a speaking witness who describes a way of life that Perley can never fully comprehend. Sip continually reminds Perley that observing the mill workers' lives is a limited source of knowing, that Perley “*can't know . . . can't understand*” the “smooch” of an upbringing in the factory environment any more than she can “know of hell” (Phelps, *TSP* 201; emphasis in the original). Sip speaks in onomatopoeia, of the smooching mill machines, a sound that Perley cannot fully comprehend because she has never been compelled to work in the noise and dirt of the mills. Just as Howells could leave Pompeii and never return, Perley can escape from the horrors she witnesses in Five Falls and return to her own comfortable middle-class life. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that in the late-nineteenth century “smooch” meant a smear that dirties or sullies, and Sip realizes that although Perley is compassionate to their suffering, she sees the working class as something to excavate in order to clean up and re-form. Always limited by her middle-class education, Perley at best can see the shape of millworkers' bodies and investigate clues about their experience, but she will never

fully comprehend the material conditions of working in the mill and living in a tenement house. Projecting her own ideas onto the workers, Perley feels that their poverty is a condition she can fix by pouring into them the stuff of education and middle-class manners and remolding the people into more comfortable – and respectable – citizens.

Perley acts out her plan to do something about the “exorbitant waste” of talent and intellect that she sees in mill workers such as Sip, and her plan for improving the working class echoes the arguments about individual agency that Mill makes in *On Liberty* (Phelps, *TSP* 197). Perley designs a Millian experiment in reform through philanthropic works that include building a library for the workers and hosting educational events in her parlor. She seeks to put into practice Mill’s directive for social advancement: “Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse . . . They should be for ever [sic] stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties, and increased direction of their feelings and aims towards wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations” (*OL* 84). By teaching the workers about art, literature, and music, Perley introduces them to the higher ideals of culture, which she feels will develop their intellect, raise them out of the “mud” of ignorance, and counteract the dehumanizing effects of their tedious and relentless factory work (Phelps, *TSP* 146). Perley’s parlor evenings include readings from the literature of Dickens, Hugo, and Burns as well as the music of Beethoven and the art of Bierstadt – an inspiring mix of social reform novels and working-class poetry, music written despite adversity, and romantic landscapes depicting American possibility.

In *On Liberty*, Mill argues that a progressive society depends upon the intellectual development of its individual citizens through debate among people with multiple viewpoints, noting that “only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a

chance of fair play to all sides of the truth” (54). This rational approach to intellectual development calls for a restraint of one’s emotions so that conflicting ideas are presented “by a studied moderation of language, and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence” (Mill, *OL* 61). Perley uses her domestic space, the parlor, as a site in which to promote this kind of civilized, well-mannered fair play. Interaction between the mill workers and her upper-middle-class Society friends, she believes, will stimulate intellectual growth, create sympathy between fellow human beings, and challenge the class prejudices that preserve the injustices she sees at work in Five Falls. The workers respond to Perley’s evening with “an air of really enjoying themselves,” and Perley notes that many of them regularly attend the groups that she hosts “every fortnight,” implying that her efforts are successful and that the workers are learning and improving weekly (Phelps, *TSP* 225-226, 227). In particular, Sip benefits from the exposure to art and literature that Perley provides. The Beethoven etching in particular helps her to transcend the difficult circumstances of her life;³³ she becomes the most popular reader with the parlor meeting’s attendees and develops a sympathy in her interactions with the upper class that make her “more gentle in her judgments of ‘that kind of folks’” (Phelps, *TSP* 238). Perley’s “benevolent, democratic” evening also challenges her Society friends to interact with the workers as fellow human beings, and snobby Miss Van Doozle, Mrs. Silver, and Fly are surprised by how well the workers dress and behave (Phelps, *TSP* 222). In their “best suit[s]” – which the workers somehow own, despite being in dire poverty – they transform into middle-class personas unrecognizably different from their usual workplace selves (Phelps, *TSP* 225). The transformation, Perley argues, happens when she recognizes each person’s individuality, and

³³ Sip’s inspiration comes from the humanity depicted in Lemude’s portrait of the dreaming Beethoven, which seems to speak to Sip (Phelps, *TSP* 130, 196). The engraving also creates a “forgetting” that helps her rise above her circumstances (Phelps, *TSP* 151, 195).

she explains to Miss Van Doozle that “[o]ne does not behave till one has the chance,” and “[a]ll that I do is to treat these people precisely as I treat you” (Phelps, *TSP* 226-227). Perley fails to realize, however, that her program of reform requires the working class guests to transform themselves into something unrecognizable and disingenuous; by educating them in middle-class mores and making them more aesthetically pleasing, she actually suppresses their individual agency – or at least she tries to.

Despite the glossy atmosphere of Perley’s parlor, “some stir and stop” simmers beneath the surface of the evening’s events (Phelps, *TSP* 227). The rich people are not really impressed by this unorthodox gathering. Mrs. Silver finds Perley’s “fanatical benevolence” to be “morbid,” and Mrs. Silver’s sympathy is misdirected toward “our poor dear Perley’s life” rather than the workers’ (Phelps, *TSP* 237, 236, 236). The mill hands are also resistant to Perley’s efforts to remake them. Sip chooses a particularly confrontational reading for the evening; Victor Hugo’s letter to “The Rich” is a direct warning to the wealthy who oppress the poor: “My Lords! . . . I impart to you a novelty. The human race exists” (qtd. Phelps, *TSP* 233).³⁴ Sip also brings a newspaper article that touts the “pleasantest” working conditions of the Lorenzo mill girls, which she dismisses as “sensational and pure nonsense” that has been written by someone who has never worked in a mill (Phelps, *TSP* 235, 234). Additionally, there is simmering unrest in the

³⁴ Phelps only includes a snippet of Hugo’s work, although the implication is that Sip reads the letter in its entirety. Hugo’s letter contains violent and revolutionary language which would certainly upset the congenial atmosphere of Perley’s multi-class gathering: “Who am I? One of the people. From whence come I? From the bottomless pit. How am I named? I am Wretchedness. My lords, I have something to say to you. . . . I come to warn you. I come to denounce you in your own bliss. It is made out of the ills of the others. Your paradise is made out of the hell of the poor” (Hugo 143). The letter ends with a warning: “One day, and true society must come. Then there will be no more lords; there will be free, living men. There will be no more wealth, there will be an abundance for the poor. There will be no more masters, but there will be brothers. They that toil shall have. This is the future. No more prostration, no more abasement, no more ignorance, no more wealth, no more beasts of burden, no more courtiers, but LIGHT” (Hugo 145). A reading such as this would have done little to promote the well-behaved exchange of sympathy that Perley tries to perpetuate in her parlor meetings. Phelps acknowledges here that Mill’s ideal of voluntary socialism was more of a utopian dream than a real possibility in a capitalist market that pitted the rich against the poor.

corner where political activist Bijah Mudge sits with a petition to the Massachusetts state legislature. Even though he has “enjoyed his saucer of ice-cream as much as any other child there” – and so appears to fit neatly into Perley’s domestic enterprise – he still conducts strike talk in the corner to his “little audience” of frowning men (Phelps, *TSP* 230). He also confronts Fly’s ladylike decorum with a scripture verse from Isaiah 47:7 and accuses her of using social mores as an excuse to ignore injustice: “*And thou saidst in thine heart, I shall be a lady forever; so that thou didst not lay these things to thy heart, neither didst remember the latter end of it!*” (Phelps, *TSP* 231; emphasis in the original). Perley’s Millian experiment fails to create the desired fellow-feeling among its participants, and her maternalist approach to the problems of industrialism – offering sympathy, food, education, and good manners – cannot rectify the social and economic conflicts of the community. As Laura A. Smith notes, Perley’s plan for reform is an “inchoate model of ‘service work’” (186). Ultimately, learning does little to affect the workers’ material conditions. Dirk shows management potential, but he chooses the comfort of family over career advancement, and Bijah’s political activism only gets him blacklisted and then fired. Even Sip, the brightest prospect to learn from Perley, still cannot do anything but a mill job. Perley’s naiveté demonstrates that instruction in the higher pleasures is not going to be enough to change the problems in her mill; she still has much to learn about how the world of capitalism works.

As a silent partner, Perley has no official position in the management of the mill, but she assumes the business of philanthropy and takes on the occupation of alleviating the suffering that she sees in the lives of Five Falls’s workers. Her self-proclaimed mission is “to pick people out of the mud,” much as archaeologists had dug out the Pompeian statues, but Perley’s choice of words demonstrates that the real focus of her work is on her own agency (Phelps, *TSP* 146).

Perley does not say she wants to help the people out of the mud by encouraging workers' collective action or by granting them freedom to improve their own situations. Instead, her mission springs from the view that the poor are passive, immobile statues and hers is the hand that will clean them up and change their situation. However genuine her motives may be, Perley's efforts are always limited by her middle-class conceptions of poverty and work. Laura Hapke notes that Phelps, along with Rebecca Harding Davis and Louisa May Alcott, was "not [an] outright foe[] of capitalism," but she could never fully escape True Womanhood ideals of Christian charity and "woman's 'innate' selflessness" that pervaded the thinking of the time; as a result, she was "reluctant to implement radical change," believing rather that "women's efforts to build a more just society would ameliorate the unfair work conditions" for working class families (77).³⁵ Perley has never been desperate, overworked, starving, or ill-used, and so her understanding is always incomplete, filtered through stubborn romantic aesthetic notions of poverty and idealized conceptions of women's agency.

Her encounter in the almshouse with Bijah Mudge further exposes Perley to a level of desperation that she cannot fathom. The "troublesome character," who challenges unfair working conditions by testifying against Hayle and Kelso before the Massachusetts State Legislature, loses his job and ends up in the almshouse (Phelps, *TSP* 169). When Perley visits Bijah and offers a sympathetic ear, her questions provoke him because she cannot understand what can come only through lived experience. Bijah finds her lack of insight "a specimen o' the kind of stoopidity as always seems to be a layin' atween property and poverty, atween capital and labor,

³⁵ Hapke's work mainly focuses on representations of working-class women, and her study identifies Sip Garth as the "true silent partner" of the novel (81). Hapke argues that Phelps projected middle-class ideals of True Womanhood onto the working class rather than propose revolutionary changes to systems of industrial capitalism, so Sip's ultimate position as a preacher is necessary to Phelps's agenda: "Sip must provide a remedy for labor pain that is consonant with acceptable womanly behavior in sustaining orderly and stable families and provokes no confrontation between labor and capital" (80).

atween you settin' thar with yer soft ways and yer soft dress ag'in you, and me" (Phelps, *TSP* 177-178). Perley's soft ways offer little comfort to a man who has nothing to show for his fifty-six years of hard labor in the mills.

Perley's learning, then, has altered her ideas about the actual conditions of working class lives, but she admits that her knowledge is limited to "[f]eeling [her] way" as would a blind person or an excavating archaeologist (Phelps, *TSP* 181). Still, Garrick assures her "that is something" (Phelps, *TSP* 181). For Perley to become a successful woman of business, she must be aware of the conditions of labor. However, she is in training to be a capitalist, not a factory worker, and the genuine sympathy she feels toward the workers' plight is always tempered by her own position as a middle-class woman; her business of alleviating workers' suffering is financed out of her share of the mill's profits, which must continue to be large enough to help the workers with food, medical care, and education – and without changing her standard of living.

Perley's pieced-together business education demonstrates intelligence and initiative, but she is so limited by the effects of her aesthetics training and her lack of practical experience that she can only be partially effective as a participant in producing her own capital; as such she provides evidence supporting the argument for the education of women that both Mill and Phelps make in their writing. However, Perley's unorthodox training does allow her to contribute a womanly perspective to Hayle and Kelso's operations that proves to be valuable during the strike scene. Rayne argues in *What Can a Woman Do* that a woman of capacity and energy brings gender-specific skills to the marketplace:

She need not abate a particle of her dignity of character, or grow hard and commonplace through the service of life, any more than she need ape the manners or don the garb of her male co-worker. It is not necessary that she lose that

essential charm of womanhood, which is her natural heritage, because she turns the pages of a ledger. The whole tendency of her being is to grow in womanly strength, not to develop into some kind of a masculine nondescript. (23-24)

Phelps makes a similar argument for women's superior strength in the workplace through Perley, who establishes herself as a woman of business and demonstrates a level of savvy business management tempered by womanly ideals.³⁶

What Perley brings to the business is sympathy and compassion that seeks to ameliorate the workers' suffering and keep the peace without demanding seismic shifts in policy. She expresses her interest in the workers' humanity by worshipping with them at the mill chapel and hosting educational opportunities in her parlor to develop their intellectual potential. Her sympathy for the plight of the workers leads her to relieve some of their very real suffering – she provides food, medical care, uplifting entertainment, and a chance to express their frustrations to a sympathetic ear. In so doing, she creates a sense of community between herself and the workers. The other partners are aware of Perley's assets, even if they are reluctant to acknowledge them publicly. When Bub Mell dies in a mill accident, it is “swift, strong, helpful” Perley who goes to break the news to his dying mother when none of the male partners has the courage to do so (Phelps, *TSP* 217). Perley learns that if she can gain the workers' trust and convince them of her confidence in them and their abilities, they will be more responsive to her demands as a mill owner. Her compassion, then, becomes a business skill.

³⁶ Nina Baym notes this tension in Phelps's portrayal of the mid-nineteenth-century business woman: “Phelps's narratives give equal weight to the liberal idea that women have the same right as men to fulfill themselves individually and to the conservative idea that women naturally fulfill themselves through useful, devoted service to others” (Introduction xi).

However, by alleviating the suffering of the workers, Perley also neutralizes their impetus to organize themselves into a collective unit capable of political action to bring about workplace reform. William Lynn Watson sees Perley's work as that of a "cultural missionary" whose goal is to "colonize any working-class leisure time and space in which radical class consciousness could take shape" (12, 13). As a maternalist manufacturer, her solution to working-class suffering comes through the nurturing actions of her own hands; she wants to pull the people out of the mud, not help them to pull themselves out because that would upset the balance of economic power which favors her.

As a strike looms at Hayle and Kelso, the result of a sudden reduction in the demand for cotton fabric that accompanies the failure of the metaphorically named "Standfast Brothers" and "Smashem & Co," the novel reminds readers that the incident is "valuable chiefly as indicative of the experimenter" (Phelps, *TSP* 243, 244). The emphasis here is on Perley's education as business woman; she is still experimenting with resolutions to the problems between capital and labor. In order to compensate for the decrease in sales, the managing partners reduce the wages of the workers rather than accepting decreased profits. The demands of the market dictate the partners' actions, which they decide upon without regard to the effects upon the hands, and as the "sea-swell" of strike talk begins, they threaten to shut down the mills rather than negotiate a compromise with the workers (Phelps, *TSP* 244). The novel notes what Perley now knows: that a strike can offer several benefits to owners, including time to accumulate stock, create a quickening market for goods, repair machinery, and amuse themselves for a season. Meanwhile, hunger – something that does not affect the owners – keeps workers "under your finger, empty handed," and eventually so desperate that they will return to work rather than starve (Phelps, *TSP* 245). Perley, however, wants a resolution that will not rely on starving the workers into

submission; she has seen the effects of that and does not want to be responsible for that kind of suffering.

Perley believes she can call down the strike because of the knowledge she has acquired in her business training. She admonishes the managing partners: “I wish . . . that you had never shut me out of this firm. I belonged here! You do not one of you know now what it is for your own interest to do!” (Phelps, *TSP* 246). Perley claims special knowledge about the workers, that she “know[s] these men” better than the Hayles or Garrick (Phelps, *TSP* 247). Her plan is to explain to the workers why the changes are necessary; such a move will demonstrate trust and confidence in the workers, make them feel invested in the source of their income, tap into their reason and intelligence, and affirm their value as human beings. Win the workers with reason and affirmation, Perley asserts, and they will behave nicely and agree to lower wages. Perley’s plan reflects the arguments about individuality that John Stuart Mill makes in *On Liberty*, the text that Perley has just delivered to the employee reading room – a text that she has read and is eager to use as an experiment because it argues that offering people access to higher planes of thinking and freedom to express their personal convictions will lead to an improved society. Maverick scoffs at the plan as the “fancy of a cooperative economist”; he recognizes in her plans the ideas of John Stuart Mill but dismisses them as “fancy,” his favorite word for feminine caprice (Phelps, *TSP* 248).³⁷ Mr. Hayle, in turn, says she is “at liberty” to offer suggestions only because he is out of solutions for dealing with “such an emergency” (Phelps, *TSP* 246, 247). Phelps here emphasizes that John Stuart Mill is the foundation undergirding her experiment with

³⁷ Earlier in the novel, Maverick Hayle calls Perley’s ideas about helping mill hands “[a] little Quixotic fancy . . . and very pretty and feminine” (Phelps, *The Silent Partner* 64).

the idea of being a woman capitalist. She champions his argument that given education and opportunity, a woman will demonstrate capacity in public life.

The strike offers Perley the chance to demonstrate the language and actions of a capitalist. Because of her investigations and interactions with workers, Perley has a better understanding of what motivates the workers; the mill's partners count on hungry stomachs to break the strike because they see the workers only as hands, not as individuals. Perley understands that the workers are human beings and tries to treat them that way. She leaves the office and stands in the rain and mud among the workers, but she is "shining" – clean, womanly, in control of the situation – and she also demonstrates masculine force as she "blaze[s] out" at them and disperses the crowd (Phelps, *TSP* 251). Perley is the "young leddy" who inspires respectability among the workers and diffuses the threat of bloodshed and violence (Phelps, *TSP* 250). While Perley has established bonds of friendship and sympathy that create a sense of community – the "we" – between herself and the workers, at the same time, the young lady has established a new standard of respectability among the workers that makes them willing to act against their own best interests of demanding better wages and conditions (Phelps, *TSP* 253). In 1899, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* would describe the conditions that produce this type of conflicted action in industrial American workers:

The leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of reputability for the community. . . . The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal. On pain of forfeiting their

good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance. (84)³⁸

The workers, dazzled by Perley's standards of reputability and desirous to remain in her good opinion, follow her lead in part because they have come to desire the new codes of behavior that she has set forth. Ultimately, Perley's actions will keep Hayle and Kelso in production, at least until the next "Lord's day" (Phelps, *TSP* 253). She accomplishes the capitalist's goals: keep production moving, meet the demands of the market, and maintain the cash flow. She does this in a kinder, gentler way, based on the relationship that she has established with the workers, but ultimately her goal is to demonstrate capability as a business woman, even if that means convincing the workers to accept reduced wages and food.

Perley bumps up against the problems inherent in Mill's philosophy, issues that Phelps was too much of a realist to ignore at the end of the novel. Mill's philosophy was based on the belief that the full development of individual agency would stimulate universal human progress because he believed that rational people, acting upon the higher principles that they learned through experience, discussion, and debate, would ultimately pursue paths that would benefit society at large. The problem with such a view, as E. K. Hunt and Mark Lautzenheiser note, is that Mill's utilitarian social ethic "requires unanimity or it is nonexistent" (198). People who are granted individual liberty may choose what will ultimately benefit others, but they may also

³⁸ Veblen also notes that new standards of living set by the wealthy leisure class became equated with a life lived on a higher spiritual plain: "With the exception of the instinct of self-preservation, the propensity for emulation [of the social class above one's standing] is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper," absorbing any excess time and money in an industrial community, and that "[a]s increased industrial efficiency makes it possible to procure the means of livelihood with less labour, the energies of the industrious members of the community are bent to the compassing of a higher result in conspicuous expenditure, rather than slackened to a more comfortable pace. The strain is not lightened as industrial efficiency increases and makes a lighter strain possible, but the increment of output is turned to use to meet this want, which is indefinitely expansible, after the manner commonly imputed in economic theory to higher or spiritual wants" (*TLC* 110, 111).

(and, as Phelps demonstrates through Perley, most often will) choose only what will be personally desirable and in their own best interest. Mill's philosophy equated individual happiness with general happiness, a concept that failed to stand up to the economic forces that propelled capitalism; rarely would workers and capitalists share equal viewpoints in a system in which wage increases directly conflict with owner profits.³⁹ As the strike scene in Phelps's novel demonstrates, the clashes that are integral to the industrial systems of production are bigger than sympathy between owners and workers and the higher pleasures of art can solve. Despite the sympathy that Phelps's thought-provoking realism produces in readers – which is not the same as inspiring action – *The Silent Partner* falls short of promoting an effective solution to the dehumanizing effects of life in a textile mill.

Phelps's real work in the novel is to change attitudes about middle-class women's movement into the world of business. Phelps wants reform that will allow a "superior woman" of intelligence, compassion, and energy such as Perley to develop her individual capacity for economic enterprise, and this would require greater opportunities for education, work, and individual development than Phelps could see in mid-nineteenth-century America (Phelps, *TSP* 163). In "Women and Money," an essay Phelps published in *The Independent* in 1871, the same year as her novel, she asserts that "[i]t is not business 'qualities' which women lack. It is business 'opportunities.' As long as men monopolize the conduct of trade they monopolize women" (1). Phelps's novel dares to ask for ownership positions for women in industry as fully

³⁹ Mill himself had trouble resolving this conflict between the social and economic implications of his theories. Hunt and Lautzenheiser note that Mill's arguments acknowledged that wage systems of capitalism perpetuated "a competitive struggle between laborers and capitalists" because "the limit [of wages] was the total profits of capitalists minus what the capitalists needed [in John Stuart Mill's words] 'to maintain themselves and their families'" (191; Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions*, 5:49). In *On Liberty*, Mill admits that his vision of voluntary socialism in which the rich would be willing to give up some of their wealth in order to produce a society that was beneficial for all would not manifest "until a time in the future" (63).

participating partners with men and to claim, as Mill did in *The Subjection of Women*, the necessity for “the widening of the sphere of action for women” (562). Women, she argues, demonstrate both aspiration and capacity for business activity, and their unique contributions and womanly perspective are needed to counteract the increasingly dehumanizing conditions of the workplace.

In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps’s project, then, is to get women out of the house, into the world of work, and into the public sphere where others will respect and listen to them. Nina Baym notes that Phelps’s novel demonstrates that “bourgeois domesticity—the great ideal of antebellum women’s fiction—is a trap. Moral duty to other women, or ethical duty to one’s own abilities, strains the boundaries of the domestic” (Introduction x).⁴⁰ In *The Silent Partner*, Perley finds the domestic space too confining and lacking in intellectual stimulation or meaningful activity, and she refuses marriage to the mill owner’s son in order to pursue her own business and the philanthropic work that makes full use of her abilities. Her work leaves Perley “opulent and warm” and full of life because she has found an outlet for her superior qualities and energy (Phelps, *TSP* 302). Unlike Herman Melville’s working maids who have no voice and Rebecca Harding Davis’s narrator who, though speaking with authority, remains enclosed in the domestic space, Perley goes out into the public sphere and demands to be heard. Jill Bergman notes that Phelps does what earlier authors could not do: “By insisting on Perley’s place in the public sphere of business, she claims for women . . . an independent, self-determined life” (161).⁴¹ As a

⁴⁰ Baym’s introduction to Phelps’s *Three Spiritualist Novels* notes that this idea was developed in *The Silent Partner* as well as in Phelps’s other novels *Hedged In*, *The Story of Avis*, and *Doctor Zay* (x).

⁴¹ Bergman compares Perley Kelso to Margaret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, arguing that Phelps’s heroine rejects outdated Victorian tenets of domesticity to claim female agency in the business world. Gaskell’s heroine remains silent during a crucial strike scene, and she accepts the silent partnership of marriage as her means of affecting change in industrial workplace conditions; Phelps’s Perley Kelso offers a new paradigm for women by refusing to stay silent or to marry.

real-world example of a successful public woman, Phelps used her authorship as a forum for speaking directly to women and men in order to promote her goals for greater opportunities for women.

For Phelps, the chief impediment to women's participation in the public sphere was the perpetuation of True Womanhood ideals, which she saw as monopolizing the energies and bodies of women. If, as Mill argued in *On Liberty*, the liberal subject's freedom includes being "sovereign . . . over his own body and mind" as long as his conduct concerned only himself, women who were wives and mothers forfeited this liberty because such roles subjected their bodies to the desires and demands of others (14). Phelps hoped to change the social conditions that prevented women from pursuing interests that would help them reach their full potential, and in much of her fiction and essays, particularly *The Silent Partner*, Phelps's solution was to renounce marriage and motherhood in favor of a business of one's own. Susan Ward notes that Phelps's "career woman fiction," by resisting the marriage plot, "depart[s] from the accepted formula" of standard sentimental fiction and instead centers on "a struggle against those who would keep the heroine from exercising her right to . . . [a] professional identity" (216, 216, 217). Perley demonstrates that it is possible for a woman to live a fulfilling and happy life of independence as a single woman. The solution may be an overly simplistic and potentially isolating one, but Phelps's goal – to demonstrate non-traditional options for women that could allow them to fully develop as individuals – set the stage for later feminist utopian fiction, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, that would follow Phelps's assertions to greater extremes.

Phelps's novel also explores the increasing power of money in the social culture of America. Perley wants to take full advantage of the pecuniary opportunities in the growing

American marketplace, yet she also learns that her wealth is exacted from the labor of those in her employ. Her efforts to relieve the suffering of the workers are simultaneously charitable (she relieves their hunger and suffering) and inoculating (she removes their agency to act on their own behalf), which is a dilemma that Phelps can only partially resolve at the end of the novel through Sip's sermon about a future hope. The hard fact of business is that Perley needs the workers to work in order to support her own social and economic position. Phelps also questions the movement away from Mill's definition of success as a fully developed individual agency toward the coming Gilded Age's definition of success as the accumulation of material wealth. At the novel's end, despite Perley's efforts to engage her friend Fly in philanthropic work, there remains an "impassable" gulf between the two (Phelps, *TSP* 302). Fly, a "good-natured little lady," is content to "stay where she was" – Maverick Hayle's wife, attuned to all of the rules of "proper" conduct and a display of his wealth (Phelps, *TSP* 302, 302, 301). Phelps's contrast between the mindful, energetic woman of business and the self-absorbed, inert lady of wealth calls into question the effects of money on the character of women and anticipates the work of Thorstein Veblen in the late nineteenth century.

Noting that the important causes of her day "often thrust in my study door and dragged me out into their forays, if not upon their battle-fields," Phelps responded by using her authorship as a platform to advocate change in the opportunities for women who would cross the line from the domestic into the public sphere (Phelps, *Chapters* 249). In *The Silent Partner*, she reworks True Womanhood's ideals of virtue, piety, and sympathy into a new paradigm for the professional Coming Woman of the 1870s: diligence, respectability, and benevolence, tested against the ideals of individual agency, enlightened development, and community responsibility proposed in the works of John Stuart Mill. Phelps's novel serves "as a hint" of what could be

“rather . . . than a history” of what has already taken place, and she calls for a future in which women fully participate as thriving members of the business world (Phelps, *TSP* 243).

PART II

Down Home on the Farm: New Agriculture and the Woman Farmer

In 1925, Ellen Glasgow published *Barren Ground*, the story of Dorinda Oakley, a woman of intelligence and fortitude who, being disappointed in love after a broken engagement, focuses her life's energy battling the barren ground of her family farm in Virginia. Dorinda inherits this defunct farm and, by employing scientific agricultural methods, smart business practices, and dogged persistence, reclaims the land to become a prosperous farmer with vast landholdings. Glasgow noted that in the novel she sought to write

a complete reversal of a classic situation. For once, in Southern fiction, the betrayed woman would become the victor instead of the victim. In the end, she would triumph through that deep instinct for survival, which had ceased to be a negative quality and had strengthened into a dynamic force. She would be hardened by adversity, but hard things . . . are the last to decay. And she would never lose her inner fidelity, that vital affirmation of life, "I think, I feel, I am." (*Certain Measure* 160)

Dorinda is a heroine who breaks the rules of feminine propriety, pushing past old paradigms of women's place and demonstrating Glasgow's idea that with adequate resources and the right amount of hard work, the modern New Woman could achieve a life of emotional, intellectual, and economic independence.

Ellen Glasgow knew that "though the chief end of the novel is to create life, there is a secondary obligation which demands that fiction shall, in a measure at least, reflect the movement and tone of its age" (*ACM* 24). The ideals of the New Woman dominated feminist thinking in America between the 1890s and 1920s, the time period that paralleled Glasgow's

own publishing career as well as those of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Willa Cather, and the works of these women both reflected and shaped the conversations about women's capabilities in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴² The New Woman – independent, self-possessed, confident, transgressive – pressed against the old Victorian restrictions that had kept women in the domestic sphere, in traditional roles, and in positions of economic dependency.

This chapter examines the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, women authors who called for opening up avenues of work and economic independence to women that stretched beyond the traditional pathways of wife and mother because these authors believed that meaningful and productive work was necessary to improve the social and political position of women and to offer them a stronger sense of fulfillment, confidence, and self-possession. As savvy and well-educated public women themselves, Gilman, Cather, and Glasgow each responded to the social and economic theorists of their time, finding champions in the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, American feminist and activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and American social theorist Thorstein Veblen to support their arguments that relegating women to the domestic sphere and passive consumerism stunted women's opportunities for full development as individuals and, in turn, prevented society from reaching its full potential. Rather than advocating a reckless abandonment to predatory behavior and selfish greed for personal gain by exploiting others, however, women writers took care to retain feminine integrity, compassion, and morality, looking instead for ways that women could conduct productive, meaningful, remunerative work that would allow them to foster social

⁴² Glasgow's first novel, *The Descendant*, was published in 1897; her last novel, *In This Our Life*, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize, was published in 1941. Gilman published *In This Our World*, a poetry collection, in 1893; her last publication, an essay entitled "The Right to Die," was published in 1936. Willa Cather's *April Twilights*, a poetry collection, was published in 1903; her *On Writing* was published in 1949.

progress and to mediate the effects of unchecked capitalist exploitation. Gilman's Aunt Mary, Cather's Alexandra Bergson, and Glasgow's Dorinda Oakley may push against the boundaries of "proper" behavior and "feminine" behavior, but they are not cruel or overly selfish; they are industrious and principled and reap the rewards of such behavior.

In particular, I examine the use of the farm setting in women's literature as a unique site that allows women simultaneous access to the domestic and public spheres as part of the project to break down the barriers to women's full participation in the public economy. Studying the works of women writers alongside historical documents, I demonstrate that Gilman, Cather, and Glasgow also worked to navigate the conflicting and changing visions of agriculture – predatory capitalism, a softer and more equitable capitalism (mediated by women), a utopian communalism, and a Jeffersonian self-sufficiency – during the shift to large-scale farm production in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Their farming heroines are active in the call for meaningful work for women – which they saw as necessarily leading to meaningful lives. Aunt Mary, Alexandra, and Dorinda plow into the world of agriculture, successfully infusing their domestic space – the homeplaces and farms they inherit and expand – with entrepreneurial energy and savvy management practices to become economically independent and victorious New Woman farmers.

Economic Independence and the New Woman

In *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, Martha Patterson notes that the term "New Woman" encapsulated multiple (and sometimes conflicting) social, economic, and ideological points of feminist activism:

Signifying at once a character type, a set of distinct goals, and a cultural phenomenon, the New Woman defined women more broadly than the suffragette or settlement worker . . . Not simply shorthand for a commitment to changing gender roles, the phrase could signal a position on evolutionary advancement, progressive reform, ethnic assimilation, sexual mores, socioeconomic development, consumer culture, racial “uplift,” and imperial conquest. (2)

This multi-level definition of the New Woman demonstrates the wide-reaching dissatisfaction of women with the status quo. The New Woman was multifaceted, multi-focused, and multitalented. She was, among many things, a response to the changing economic conditions of the American marketplace, and Patterson notes that, in particular, “writers who deployed the New Woman trope . . . [used] character types classified by their ability to thrive in an economy increasingly dependent on consumer demand, technological advances, professional expertise, and capital coalitions” (2). The New Woman, however, could fully attain this self-possession only if she had access to economic resources that redressed her position of financial dependence upon men. Authors of New Woman fiction thus responded to the social changes brought on by the increasing numbers of women who were entering the workplace, and these texts tested the possibilities of female economic opportunities by exploring the kinds of work that women were capable of doing, the amount of profit that women could earn, and the social structures that restricted women’s full access to the employments and monetary systems of the public marketplace.

Nonfiction texts of the time often asserted the benefits of increased opportunities in business for women even as they reflected concerns about the effects that such an entrance into the public sphere could produce on women’s characters. In 1892, Harriet E. Paine, writing under

the pseudonym Eliza Chester, tells the readers of *The Unmarried Woman* that “a business life” can be both desirable and profitable because such a life offers “independence, useful occupation, and to those who have business capacity, a chance . . . to place themselves beyond want” (Chester 143-144). She warns, however, that while working to support oneself, particularly in any vocation that contributes to the well-being of the community at large, is commendable, women must beware of falling into greed and working “simply to get rich”; such business, she argues, “squeeze[s] the sweetness out of a woman . . . [,] does not in itself tend to enlarge or ennoble the character,” and places a woman at risk of isolating herself and “crowding out everything which makes life worth living” (Chester 145, 144, 145). Still, Chester notes, one must also be practical: “Whatever the snares of great riches may be, a little money certainly lubricates and expands life so perceptibly that it cannot be regarded with indifference even by the most philosophical among us. . . . Within certain limits, money is so good that we must rejoice that avenues of business are now open for women to accumulate it” (145-146). Chester’s argument – that women who can find an opportunity in business that suits their capacities, offers them pecuniary rewards, and maintains their moral character should have the freedom to pursue economic independence – reflects the social and economic changes being effected by New Woman activism.

In 1905, Helen M. Winslow’s *The Woman of To-morrow* assures readers who were concerned about negative effects produced by the working woman’s separation from the domestic sphere. Winslow argues that rather than creating the detrimental unsexing effect that opponents of the women’s movement predicted, advancements in business and educational opportunities actually improve the lives of women and create “humanity-lifting” benefits (14). While the working woman may be “more cautious about marriage” because she no longer needs

to marry for financial support, a “woman’s experience in the business world . . . renders her a more sympathetic, appreciative and sensible wife than the girl who waits at home for a husband” since “modern conditions make it possible for a woman to be self-supporting, and therefore not to marry unless she does it for that greatest reason in the world—*love*” (Winslow 177, 177, 178; emphasis in original). Education, Winslow adds, makes mothers who are “manifestly better fitted” for parenthood and use their knowledge “to train [their children] up to good citizenship” (177). She assures her readers that there is no reason to worry that greater opportunities for the New Woman will produce detrimental effects on the home or society; instead, she asserts, the “divine discontent” of women has led to action that is “part of the great plan of evolution concerned in the problems that beset the opening of a new century” – problems that educated, capable, and progressive working women are helping to solve (Winslow 18).

Chester’s and Winslow’s texts mostly focus on inspiring middle-class women in urban areas where social conditions could more readily confine them to the domestic sphere and to economic dependence on their husbands. Despite the optimism of texts such as Chester’s and Winslow’s, the economists of the period between 1890 and 1930 also observe the difficulties that accompanied forging new paths for women, particularly toward economic independence. Building on John Stuart Mill’s arguments for women’s advancement, both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Thorstein Veblen noted that the disparities in social and economic status between men and women reflected the predatory structure of the marketplace strata of owners and laborers so deeply engrained in the systems of American capitalism, and they proposed solutions to counter the problem.

In 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s groundbreaking *Women and Economics* established her reputation as the foremost intellectual in the woman’s movement and a leading proponent for

equal economic opportunities for women. Contemporary reviewers recognized the strength of Gilman's social and economic theories, and *The Nation* calls her text "the most significant utterance on the subject since [John Stuart] Mill's" and notes that Gilman's subject "is approached from a new point of view, with . . . a new business capacity" that should spur "reasonable and scientific discussion" ("Review"). In *Women and Economics*, Gilman argues that socially constructed gender roles blocked women's "free productive expression," that is, the ability to live out "the desire to make, to express the inner thought in outer form" through meaningful, financially compensated work (117, 116). A person's identity, she continues, is inextricable from what one produces, and allowing each person access to the fruitful use of his or her abilities results in a society in which the strengths of individuals, productively exercised, yield satisfied human beings who relate to one another, without compulsion, for the good of all. In her study of gender and the consumer, Kathleen G. Donohue notes that Gilman directly challenges mainstream Progressive Era economic discourse focused on defining male consumers as central, active players in the political and economic market-place and female consumers as passive, marginal, and politically inert participants relegated to the domestic sphere (20). Donohue argues that although Gilman was convinced that women's "marginal status" would change once they assumed the identity of producers, prevailing notions about gender died hard (28). Believing that she could promote change through her writing, Gilman set out to forge a path for enterprising women who could combine the home and the marketplace to shape a new type of women's work.

Gilman criticizes the marriage relationship at the turn of the century as enforcing gendered economic divisions, describing a "sexuo-economic relation" that kept women in a state of financial dependence on men and, by overburdening women with unpaid domestic

responsibilities, alienated them from the dignity and independence available from exercising their abilities in meaningful paid work outside of the home (*WE* 105). Although Gilman celebrates women's roles as mothers and nurturers in the domestic space, she rejects the social systems that forced a woman into these roles and turned her into a passive consumer whose only means of "get[ting] her living" – that is, food, clothing, and shelter – was marriage to an economically viable man (*WE* 110).⁴³ Echoing John Stuart Mill, she argues that the exacerbation of "brutal ferocity of excessive male energy struggling in the market-place" and its equally damaging parallel, "the unnatural greed generated by the perverted condition of female energy," promotes "elaborate" selfishness in both genders and prevents "the understanding and developing of their higher natures" (Gilman, *WE* 119). Gilman prophesies a society in which "the flow of human life," which she defines in terms of the identity obtained through one's work, was available in equal measure for all people: "We shall not move from the isolated home to the sordid shop and back again, in a world torn and dissevered from the selfish production of one sex and the selfish consumption of the other; but we shall live in a world of men and women humanly related . . . working together, as they were meant to do, for the common good of all" (*WE* 313). Only when women become producers with equal access to meaningful work and economic independence, Gilman argues, would the human race evolve into such a higher plane of social relations.

⁴³ Gilman criticizes social systems that she saw as reducing women to abnormal and crippling levels of dependence: "Man, in supporting woman, has become her economic environment. Under natural selection, every creature is modified to its environment, developing perforce the qualities needed to obtain its livelihood under that environment. Man, as the feeder of woman, becomes the strongest modifying force in her economic condition. . . . For, in her position of economic dependence in the sex-relation, sex-distinction is with her not only a means of attracting a mate, as with all creatures, but a means of getting her livelihood, as is the case with no other creature under heaven" (*WE* 38).

In identifying and critiquing the economic motives resulting in the subjection of women, Gilman directly addresses gendered conditions of the marketplace, arguing that while men display cooperative behaviors in the industrial marketplace because they must work together to attain economic benefit, women have been blocked from industry and use of creative energy and forced to compete with each other like “emulous savages” for proposals from marriageable men in order to attain advantageous economic position (Gilman, *WE* 109). Judith A. Allen notes that, in Gilman’s view, this gendered system was a “wholesale volitional stunting of the human race through the retarding of women” (290). One way that Gilman proposes women could offset this stunting was by professionalizing domestic work through centralized businesses offering food preparation, laundry, and other services that would provide pecuniary rewards for enterprising businesswomen who performed these services and would free the women who patronized the services to pursue other professional and profitable interests outside of the home. Gilman’s cooperative system does not go so far as to advocate the communal living experiments that were being tried in Progressive-Era America⁴⁴; rather, she envisions a system of individual family homes that run more efficiently using professionalized domestic services. In Gilman’s view, such a cooperative system would equalize the marketplace conditions that blocked women’s access to full participation in the public economy and free them from the reductive nature of the “openly commercial” marriage market that valued them only for their “sex-functions” as wives and mothers and wasted their time in repetitive domestic work (*WE* 108).

⁴⁴ Cynthia Davis notes that Gilman “applauded the theory but disdained the practice” of socialist colonies (226). Gilman visited the utopian socialist colony at Ruskin, Tennessee, in 1898, and found it to be most unpleasant. In *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, she describes the colony as a product of “high-minded idioc[y]” that “overlook[s] the necessity for a legitimate local economic base” and whose members were “of the sort who need to be taken care of, not world-builders at all” (252, 252, 253). Her poem “The Rats of Ruskin” describes the colony’s unkempt cabins and kitchen hall where “THE RATS RULE OVER THEM!” (Gilman, 24, capitalization in the original).

In her 1910 novel *What Diantha Did*, Gilman argues the possibilities for such economic advancement through the story of Diantha Bell, who, by hard work and savvy management practices, turns “co-operative housekeeping” into a booming business (*WDD* 99). Diantha’s trained and efficient staff performs cleaning, cooking, and laundry services on a contractual basis to private homes in the town of Orchardina. She also establishes a boarding house and hotel that provides comfortable accommodations for the workers, a “[c]affeteria” that serves lunches to the town’s working men, and a food delivery service that prepares and delivers complete dinners to patrons’ homes (*Gilman, WDD* 133). Because she purchases seasonal ingredients in bulk and employs a small staff to prepare the meals, Diantha can provide delicious meals at a lower cost than can individual women working in their own kitchens. Judith A. Allen notes that Diantha’s food service “disrupt[s the] cultural synonymy of ‘wife’ and ‘cook’” as part of Gilman’s project to make domestic work – housework, childcare, home maintenance – into “degendered” professional activities (291). This kind of domestic economy frees women to do productive work that makes better and more satisfying use of their talents and also more effectively manages the community’s resources, as it is much cheaper to pay for efficient and economical services than for each home to waste time and money doing them independently.

Diantha’s services have wide-reaching and positive results for the women of Orchardina who find domestic work enervating. Isabel Porne – the architect and new mother who “like[s] to work, but . . . can’t *bear* housework!” – is overjoyed to be freed from the “slow death” of domestic drudgery, and the result is greater happiness in her home life (*Gilman, WDD* 67, 73 italics in original). Diantha’s business also frees women in the community to make the best use of their creative abilities. Isabel Porne, who now has time to practice her architecture trade, designs homes, the town library, and the Hotel del las Casas. Viva Weatherstone, a wealthy

widow and “base capitalist” who “live[s] on [her] money – that is, on other people’s work,” declares that Diantha and her enterprise “seem to be good material to invest in” (Gilman, *WDD* 148). Mrs. Weatherstone profits greatly from her investments, and, inspired by Diantha’s dynamism, becomes an inventor of food delivery equipment and a properties developer. She also stocks Orchardina’s library with books that convince the town’s readers that Diantha’s success “was not the freak of an eccentric individual, but part of an inevitable business development” – that is, the coming of the entrepreneurial New Woman (Gilman, *WDD* 173).

Diantha’s employees also benefit as she provides better working conditions than they could expect as domestic servants. Because of their contractual schedules, the employees have specific work hours that guarantee time off work for self-development, refreshment, and educational benefits, and, as boarders in Diantha’s Union House, the young women workers are protected from the advances of lecherous male employers. Even Diantha’s sickly mother revives when she comes to work as accountant for Diantha’s growing enterprise. Her eyes “gr[o]w bright again” as the work restores her vigor; she “thrive[s] in the work” and declares, “I’m feeling . . . as if I’d just begun to live!” (Gilman, *WDD* 147, 147, 160). Clearly, Gilman’s novel argues, productivity, cooperation, and meaningful work will not only improve individual women’s lives, but will also make the world a better place.

Carol Farley Kessler classifies *What Diantha Did* among Gilman’s “pragmatopian stories”⁴⁵ in which Gilman uses real-time settings to suggest in fiction what she feels is possible in her readers’ lives (Kessler, “Consider Her Ways” 126). In the novel, “domestic service” becomes “world service,” creating happier homes and communities where every individual is

⁴⁵ Kessler finds the concept of pragmatopia in Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* useful for her critical study of Gilman’s utopian fiction. See Eisler, 198-203.

engaged in meaningful and fulfilling work (Gilman, *WDD* 100). As an “Amazon of Industry,” Diantha “set[s] right . . . th[e] old primitive business” of separate spheres ideology so that “[e]veryone can do their real work better” (Gilman, *WDD* 158). Charlotte J. Rich’s introduction to the 1990 reprinting of *What Diantha Did* notes that while the idealistic language in the novel echoes Horatio Alger’s starry-eyed tales of success that were popular at the turn of the century, Gilman appropriates the form for her feminist project (16-17). Indeed, through Diantha, Gilman declares her intention to “prove, *prove*, PROVE what a good business [housework] is” and to validate domestic work as “an art, a science, a business, and a handicraft” as well as a springboard for women’s economic independence, even economic prosperity, that she felt was attainable in the lives of her readers (*WDD* 161, 162; emphasis in original). Rich notes that Gilman’s evolved heroine succeeds not as a ruthless capitalist similar to those in Dreiser’s naturalist fiction; instead, Diantha is a benevolent female entrepreneur who, by “hard work, wits, kindness, and a bit of luck,” attains freedom from economic dependency and compulsory marriage (19). However, Gilman’s strategy of focusing on the benevolent female entrepreneur glosses over the reality that Diantha’s business plan can be seen as a repurposing of assembly-line production, creating a stratification of domestic work that does not free *all* women to explore creative and purposeful work. Diantha’s business depends upon a working class that never escapes the drudgery of housework, even if they seem cheerful about it. To the twenty-first-century reader, Gilman’s novel also seems idealistic and didactic, even naive, and, because she focuses on domestic work as the basis for entrance in the economic marketplace, precludes women’s participation in “men’s” occupations. Still, in 1910, Gilman’s forward-thinking novel, so firmly grounded in Progressive-Era optimism and her conviction that women’s advancement was both necessary and inevitable, seeks to initiate a shift in the social status of women by taking

advantage of their most immediately accessible avenue for economic independence – their domestic skills.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Farm Woman

Developing domestic skills into a business enterprise, however, would only help the woman who found a sense of creativity or enjoyment in such work. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman argues against employments that stifle women’s “natural output of creative energy, . . . inner power and strength,” particularly the socially prescribed domestic work that Gilman finds oppressive: “Half the human race is denied free productive expression . . . Its creative skill is confined to the level of immediate personal bodily service, to the making of clothes and preparing of food for individuals” (118, 117). Women need access to remunerative work that also fully exercises their intellectual and creative capacities, since “human labor is an exercise of faculty, without which we should cease to be human; that to do and to make not only gives deep pleasure, but is indispensable to healthy growth” (Gilman, *WE* 157). In her writings, Gilman consistently argues against the separate spheres ideology that prevents a woman’s entry into the world outside of the home – a world that needs her strength, abilities, and creative qualities to help foster a fully developed human society. Granting women full participation in the world of business helps everyone because their faculties – both domestic and extra-domestic – can become agents of personal and public benefit.

Diantha Bell, Gilman’s fictional business woman, is successful because she takes advantage of the market conditions particular to her urban setting: demand for domestic services, numbers of readily available workers, and an established social network of women. However, in *Women and Economics*, Gilman shifts her focus when writing about farm women. In addition to

sharing urban women's conditions of stifled energy, economic dependency, and unproductive overwork, Gilman argues, farm women face difficulties compounded by the problem of isolation. The situation for a farm woman is particularly challenging because she labors alone with little access to the "excitement, amusement, [and] variety" available to her urban counterparts: "[A]nywhere in lonely farm houses, the women of to-day, confined absolutely to this strangling cradle of the race, go mad by scores and hundreds" (Gilman, *WE* 267). Walter Benn Michaels notes the sense of "agrarian dread" in Gilman's discussion of farm women, and he asserts that "[f]armers' wives do not go crazy because they cannot work; they go crazy because the work they do cannot become the empowering work Gilman wants them to do," in part because her vision for women "rewrites the autonomy of self-sufficiency as the autonomy of free trade" (17). Indeed, Gilman argues the necessity for farm women's access to economic power through paying and meaningful work. Believing that individuals find self-possession through the full exercise of their productive powers, her dread was that women would remain separated from participation in the American capitalist marketplace and, as economic dependents, be kept in a subordinated social stasis.

In 1909, Gilman took up the cause of farm women when she published "That Rural Home Inquiry" in *Good Housekeeping*. Her essay responds to the *Report of the Country Life Commission*, a study appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to examine the conditions of farm life in America. Roosevelt believed that since the farmer was the backbone of a strong and rich America, the farmer's economic and social well-being was "of vital consequence to the welfare of the whole community" and that "[t]he strengthening of country life, therefore, is the strengthening of the whole nation" (United States Cong. 6). In particular, the President directed the Commission to identify "whatever will brighten home life in the country and make it richer

and more attractive for the mothers, wives, and daughters of farmers” since “[t]here is no more important person, measured in influence upon the life of the nation, than the farmer’s wife” because of her pivotal role in the country home’s nation-building function (U.S. Cong. 23-24). The commission was a group of five economic and scientific experts appointed by the President and all middle- to upper-middle class white men, a fact that Gilman found reprehensible. In her assessment of the Commission’s activities, she asks, “Why are there no women on this commission?” and argues that women deserve to be represented fairly by a commission that would investigate and make recommendations for improving the conditions of their lives (Gilman, “That Rural” 120). Instead, Gilman complains, the subjects of the commission’s study are treated as “mere feminine connections of men” or, even worse, studied as mute and unintelligent “part[s] of the live stock [sic]” (“That Rural” 120). Asserting that men should stick to scientific farming and “economics” and stay out of the “business of women” – that is, “domestic economics” – Gilman instead proposes an additional study conducted by professional and scholarly women who are experts in the nine issues that she sees as most directly affecting women’s lives: “domestic architecture and decoration, landscape gardening, household industries, sanitation, hygiene and physical culture, food preparation, aseptic cleaning, education and amusement” (“That Rural” 120). Such a study would yield information more useful to farm women and would more accurately reveal the difficult conditions of the undervalued and overworked farm woman isolated in the “sweatshop called a kitchen [that] gives no wages” (Gilman, “That Rural” 121). Gilman sought to counteract the Jeffersonian rhetoric that supported Roosevelt’s arguments – that farm families lived an idyllic and self-supporting existence – by emphasizing the harsh realities of life in the farmhouse compromised the health and the sanity of

farm wives.⁴⁶ Overemphasis on Jefferson's ideal of the self-sufficient farm that protects the husbandman from the "casualties and caprice of customers" and the sullyng influence of industry has the countereffect of isolating women (Jefferson 290).⁴⁷ Gilman argues that productive, remunerative work is women's path to public life, economic independence, and social status, and she advocates removing any force blocking access to this path.

As one of the leading feminist voices of her time, Gilman's displeasure with the Country Life Commission sprang from her mission to shine a light on issues specifically affecting women. Sociologists Julie N. Zimmerman and Olaf F. Larson note that the Commission was groundbreaking in the early twentieth century because of its focus on gender issues in the farming community, even though its holistic view focused most directly on solutions that would benefit the genders corporately rather than separately (30-31). Although Gilman does support the holistic view of community uplift that celebrates women's work as wives, mothers, and "makers of men" in the noble task of American nation-building, she more pointedly asserts that women, who in the farm community "constitute its full half, in numbers and importance," deserve specific focus on the challenges that most critically impact their lives ("That Rural" 121, 120). Furthermore, she argues that if women were supposed to promote "the improvement of society" through the active development of "intelligence and culture" – a concept that echoes economist

⁴⁶ Gilman notes that so many overworked farm wives died younger than their urban counterparts that a farmer often had three wives in his lifetime: "As farms are now run it is said to take three women to keep one man. (Four, counting his mother!) First he marries a young girl. Worn out with work and child bearing, she dies in about ten years, leaving him a young family. Then he marries a vigorous widow who lasts till he is about sixty. Then he marries another young girl, who survives him, to become another man's 'second'" ("That Rural" 122).

⁴⁷ Jefferson posits in *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue," and he praises "the husbandman" whose "own soil and industry" protects him from the "casualties and caprice of customers" that corrupt the European industrial manufactures and beget "dependance [sic] [,] . . . subservience and venality" (*Writings* 290).

and social philosopher John Stuart Mill's theories in *On Liberty*⁴⁸ – they could not do it from “a million lonesome farmhouses” (Gilman, “That Rural” 121). More than their urban counterparts, farm women – and consequently the farm community – suffered from the destructive effects of isolation, and this becomes the focus of Gilman's activism on their behalf.

Gilman's proposal for alleviating farm women's isolation was to organize circular farming communities made of individual family-owned pie-shaped properties that met at a common center, thus combining “[t]he advantages of country life” with the “[s]ocial contact, . . . healthy amusements, . . . [and] economic efficiency” of urban communities (“That Rural” 121, 122). The farm houses in this “residence center” would be built around a “common” that included a “lovely park” as well as the community's school, church, lecture hall, stores, and other public buildings (Gilman, “That Rural” 121). Outside of the ring of houses would be lawns and family gardens, then staple crops and, at the outside edge of the properties, pasturelands. Such an arrangement would allow families to enjoy both a “private, loving life together” and an opportunity to share the social and economic advantages of “group life” (Gilman, “That Rural” 122). This plan would benefit farm women in particular by providing opportunities to practice the “productive labor” of cooperative housekeeping and “local manufacture,” similar to what she proposes for urban women, while also solving their most pressing problem of laboring in weary isolation (Gilman, “That Rural” 122).

⁴⁸ Although Mill's work was published in the mid-nineteenth century, his influence as a leading economic and social philosopher and proponent for women's rights endured until the turn of the century. He argues, among other things, that education and development of sympathy in individuals yields community-wide benefits: “Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be for ever [sic] stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties, and increased direction of their feelings and aims toward wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations” (*OL* 84). I will explore Mill's influence on Gilman in more detail in the following section.

Although the Country Life Commission recommended allocating resources for household technologies that would make women's lives easier and their work more efficient, its ultimate goal was not to promote economic independence for women but to promote middle-class standards of living in the farm home. The Commission's goal of rectifying the "marked inequalities" of contemporary rural life and the promotion of "a civilization in full harmony with the best American ideals . . . [and] satisfying to intelligent, progressive people" included a focus on providing the farm wife with all the "necessary amenities" – books, musical instruments, free time – for "general elevation" and for "participating in [the community's] vital affairs" (U.S. Cong. 21, 17, 46, 47, 47). Katherine Jellison asserts that the Commission's aim was to "release women from their productive role on the farm and instead allow them to conform more closely to the role of full-time 'homemaker[s]'" and consumers engaged in "the 'elevation' of rural society" (xxi, 4). Rectifying the inequalities, then, meant introducing urban standards of living into rural life and shaping farm wives into passive, non-producing, middle-class housewives. Gilman's approach, though more women-centered, seems to advocate some of the same ideals; the women in her proposed pie-shaped communities are wives and mothers who cooperate in order to lessen the drudgery of their lives, but they do not challenge the patriarchal structure and motherhood ideology that organizes the farm community. Although Gilman does espouse women's access to the economic benefits of their "productive labor" through the sale of domestic products such as flowers, needlework, and preserved foods, this could only happen when women live in close enough proximity to one another to consolidate shared domestic tasks ("That Rural" 122). Otherwise, Gilman is forced to defend the ironic position of advocating extra work for women who were already "the hardest worked and least paid of any class we have" ("That Rural" 121). Focusing on isolation as the greatest obstacle to fulfilling lives for farm women

exposes the potential problems of translating Gilman's urban-oriented plans to rural situations where the market conditions and available employments are different from more densely populated communities.

The pie-shaped community plan that Gilman introduced in "That Rural Home Inquiry" in 1909 was one that she still espoused in 1920, and her article in *The Independent* entitled "Applepieville" offers a diagram along with more detailed and well-developed arguments about the economic benefits of her plan (fig. 4). Although she still asserts the necessity for providing the joy and stimulation of "real civilization" and "a certain minimum requirement for normal human living" (that is, the "real" and "normal" middle-class standard of living) to women in farmhouses, Gilman's article also addresses mounting concerns in the "great slow, easy-going American public" about the productivity of American farms ("Applepieville" 394, 394, 365). The issue of "immediate practical importance" for Gilman is supplying the growing American population's need for food, and, as more men and women become "discouraged" and give up farming and moving to the city, the solution hinges on the ability to address the issues besetting the farm family ("Applepieville" 393). Gilman notes that the isolated farm woman, working for no pay and replicating the efforts of hundreds of other farm women, operates in a setting "like an island," and that any industrial efficiency expert "would utterly condemn" such a system as using "a maximum of effort, [for] a minimum of result" ("Applepieville" 393). Introducing a system of pie-shaped "village farming" would not only allow families to consolidate expenses such as creamery production systems and farm machinery, but would also provide opportunities for economically beneficial interchange among neighbors (Gilman, "Applepieville" 394).

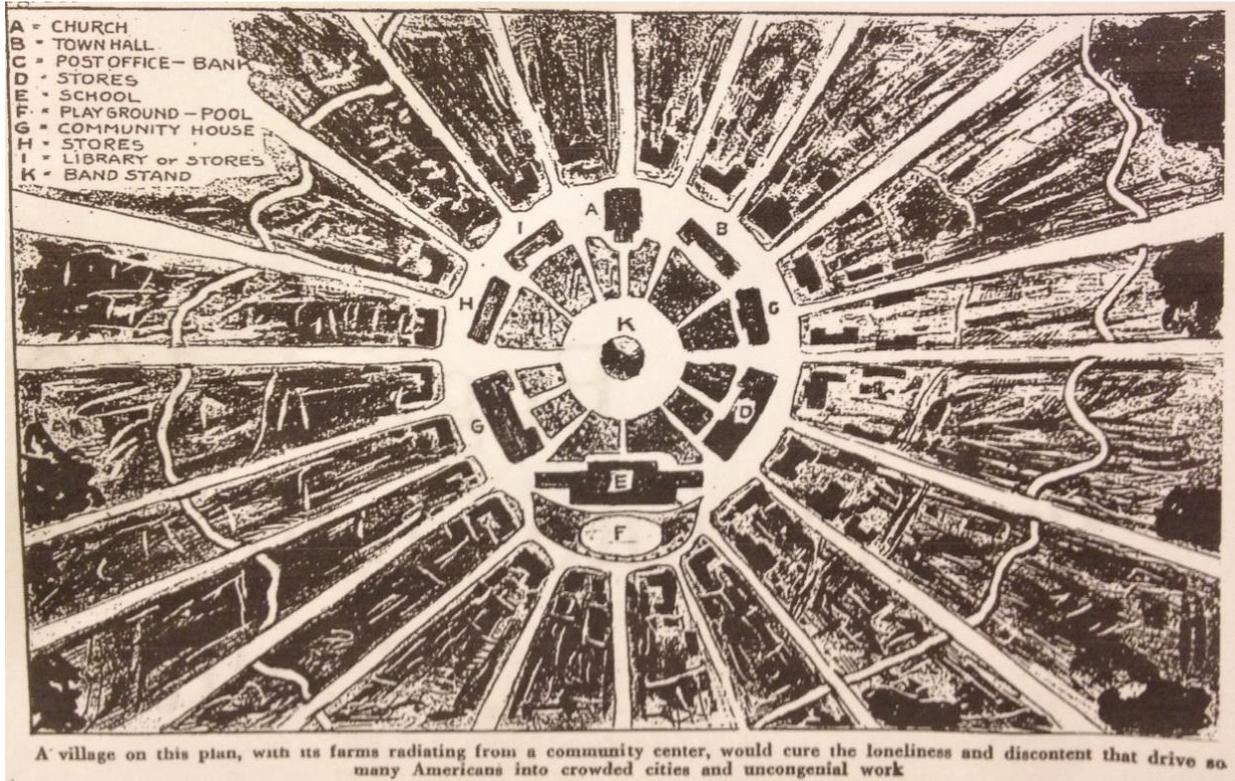


Figure 4. "A Village on This Plan."

Source: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Applepieville." *The Independent* 103.3738 (25 Sept. 1920): 365. *American Periodicals*. Web. 4 Feb. 2015.

According to Gilman, a major source of the farm woman's frustration is that her husband discounts her contribution to the household, noting that the "short-sighted farmer . . . never measures the money value of the woman's labor—because she is not paid" ("Applepieville" 394-395). Gilman's claims that farm women's work was undervalued are supported by responses to the 1913 United States Department of Agriculture's survey of farm wives, published in 1915 as *Economic Needs of Farm Women*. The survey, conducted in anticipation of the passage of the Smith-Lever Act establishing the Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service, asked farm women for suggestions about how government programs could aid in methods of "homemaking and domestic manufacturing" and how to make farm life more satisfactory (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Economic Needs* 3). Although the Commission's recommendations reinforced the separate spheres ideology that assigned women to the domestic site, most particularly the kitchen, many of the surveyed women's suggestions for change focused instead on having access to money and a bit of financial independence rather than on having more efficient strategies for domestic work. Many respondents expressed the belief that despite the long hours of work that contributed to farm operations, their husbands did not consider them to be entitled to a share of the profits. An Indiana respondent wrote that "[t]here is one thing I think causes farmers' wives to be unhappy. The wife naturally feels that she helps to make the income, but she has no claim on anything" (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Economic Needs* 17). Another farm wife from New York complained about the unpaid nature of her work: "The farm woman is about the only individual we know of who earns an income and doesn't get it" (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Economic Needs* 17). As Gilman argues in "Applepieville," the under-appreciation of women's work is a short-sighted view that harms farm families because farmers are actually

wasting one of their most valuable resources by overworking their wives in isolated households (393).

In the pie-shaped type community of one hundred farm houses that Gilman proposes, the close proximity provides the opportunity for a more efficient use of women's labor. Twenty-five women "[w]ith organization, specialization, and proper mechanical appliances" could perform the necessary domestic chores for all one hundred families by offering professionalized cooking, cleaning, and laundry services; this would free the remaining seventy-five women to pursue cottage industries that would earn extra income for their families and still have time for participation in the social life of the community ("Applepieville" 395). Earning money of their own would yield self-satisfaction and power for women as well as the respect of their husbands. In such a plan, Gilman argues, "the business sense of both man and wife can hardly fail to see its advantages" ("Applepieville" 395). By perpetuating the attitudes that undervalue the farm woman's work and keep her miserable, isolated, and without money, farmers' "pet prejudices" of "primitive individualism" actually undercut rather than create independent, productive, and profitable farms (Gilman, "Applepieville" 395, 393).

Despite her noble aims, Gilman's pie-shaped farming community proposes a utopian arrangement that would be socially and economically beneficial to women, but that was impractical for real-life application in the American countryside. Adopting her plan for "differently arranged" farm sites would require arbitrary and voluntary redrawing of property lines, a common practice for communal communities; however, this plan would likely meet with strong resistance in a population that self-identified by their acquired landholdings and capitalist notions of individual property ("Applepieville" 394). Gilman also lacked the expertise to advocate any specific scientific agricultural practices that would increase overall farm

productivity, and her arbitrary pie-shaped schematic makes no consideration of geographic limitations or equitable distribution of natural resources within the community. Instead, her arguments focus on altering the social and economic conditions that women face and propose a course that would help them create “thriving and happy” lives (“Applepieville” 395). For Gilman, this meant advocating avenues for both remunerative work and for participating in the “[h]uman work” of bettering their communities, and she saw such work springing from the domestic sphere that was woman’s place of power, influence, expertise, and identity (“That Rural” 121).⁴⁹ It is no accident that her plan for reorganizing the community to benefit women takes the shape of a domestic product – a pie – as ultimately she does not push for rural women’s attaining economic independence or refusing marriage as she does for urban women but instead proposes solutions that strengthen the importance of the home and the mother.

Llewellyn MacGarr’s 1922 examination of *The Rural Community* notes the major social and economic shifts in the farming industry, including the farmer’s new role as capitalist producer of goods, and he proposes a community design similar to the pie shape that Gilman had proposed in 1909 and 1920. However, MacGarr’s 1922 design with concentric circles (fig. 5) focuses on economic benefit of good roads and consolidated marketing systems rather than eliminating the isolation of women (196). Isolation in MacGarr’s view is the problem of longer transportation time from farm to market, which increases the price of food and decreases the farmer’s profits (197). Citing “the intricate relation of each kind of farming to the whole industrial fabric of the nation,” MacGarr argues that the farm’s position is integral to the complex national economy and that the successful farmer must adapt to capitalist systems of

⁴⁹ Julie N. Zimmerman and Olaf F. Larson argue that in studies such as the Country Life Commission’s report, farm women were seen as “interwoven into the larger landscape of social life,” an opportunity unavailable to urban women who were expected to adhere more closely to the tenets of separate spheres ideology (30 n5).

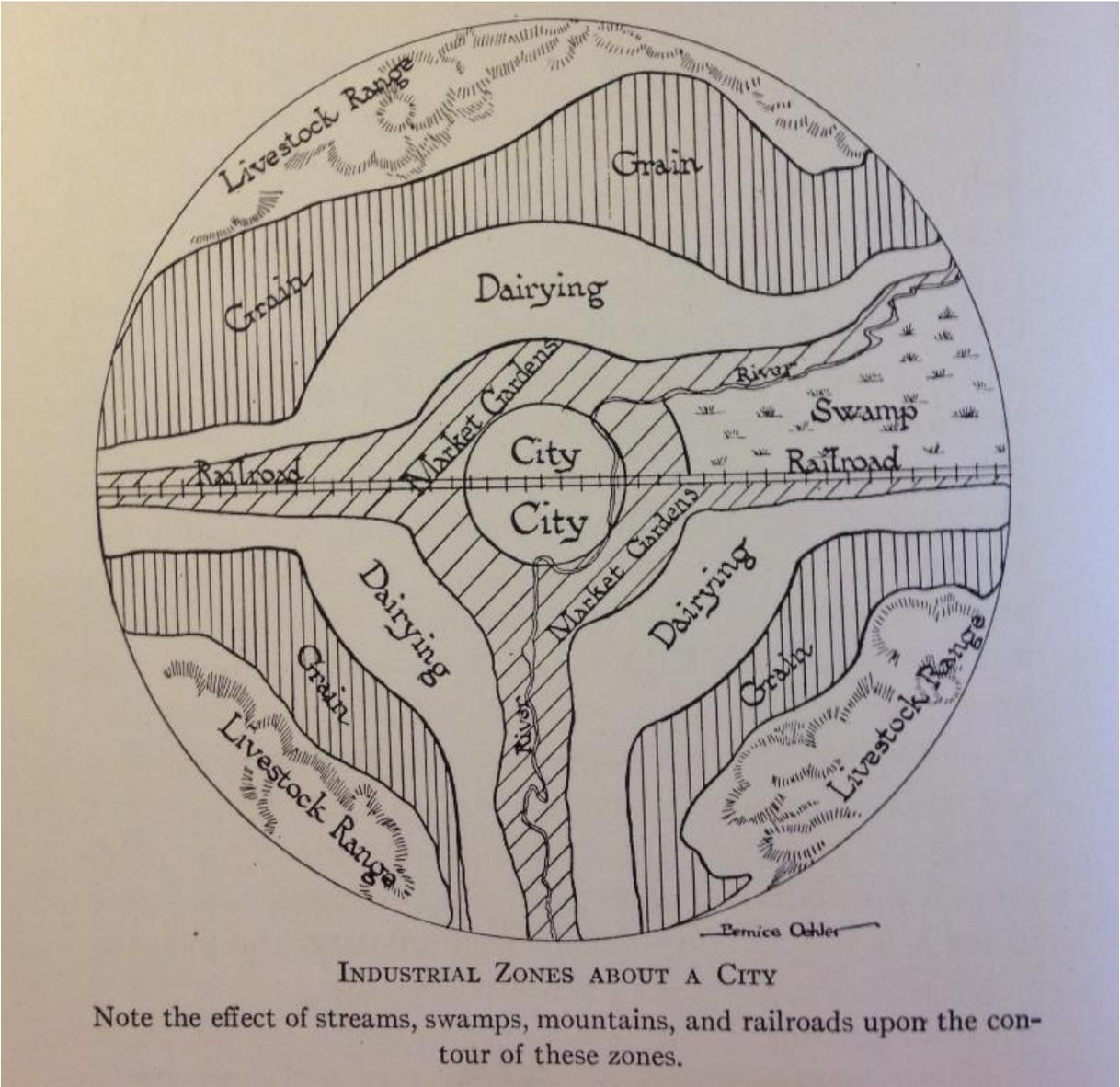


Figure 5. "Industrial Zones about a City" by Bernice Oehler

Source: Llewellyn MacGarr, *The Rural Community*. New York: Macmillan, 1922. 196. Print.

production (163). He argues that the industrialization of farming “has brought the farmer into the life of the world. . . . He has become a business man who must watch business conditions as well as the conditions of production on his farm,” including international market fluctuations the farmer must anticipate (MacGarr 163). According to MacGarr, in the hundred-year timespan between 1822 and 1922, farms shifted from functioning as self-sustaining units bartering for what they could not produce themselves to producing market commodities for sale and accumulating capital that allowed purchase of “the necessities for farm life” – that is, goods and services to perpetuate farm production (162). He never goes as far as Gilman, however, in extending access to the marketplace specifically to entrepreneurial women.

MacGarr notes, as did Gilman, the shifts that were occurring in agricultural economics. He states that “[c]oöperation in agriculture is an application of the theory of division of labor” – an idea taken from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* – to underscore the argument that farming is a capitalist enterprise (MacGarr 183). However, in MacGarr’s estimation, the division of labor continues to assign domestic work to women, and he always refers to farm women as wives, never as aspiring independent entrepreneurs. He asserts that the Smith-Lever Act was the first groundbreaking step to addressing women’s issues and that by appropriating funding for Home Economics, the Act “includes, therefore, all the people, women as well as men” (MacGarr 178). Farm women, he argues, need the latest equipment “to make their homes as comfortable and pleasant as possible, and to emancipate themselves from the perpetual tyranny of poorly planned, hand-done work both in the house and on the farm” (182). Saving labor in the home, MacGarr argues, will allow women time to develop their social function in the community, and he advocates women’s clubs as the way to improve their lives and educate them in the best practices of homemaking rather than in economic industry, arguing that “[a] healthy, happy,

well-informed woman makes a vastly better home-maker than an ignorant drudge, and the woman's club can do much in improving both the health and the mentality of the farm woman" (226). Because MacGarr's 1922 textbook would be used to educate the next generation of farmers, it perpetuates the idea of farm women as wives, not as independent entrepreneurs, a paradigm challenged by women writers of the time such as Gilman.

Jellison notes that during the Progressive Era, farm women's attitudes "did not represent a conscious feminist challenge to rural patriarchy, but [were] a way to maintain a modicum of economic power and influence within the patriarchal structure" (xxi). While Gilman's proposal for Applepieville includes a plan for cooperative housekeeping, she never foregoes the individual patriarchal home for communal living. Her insistence on individual family units supports the Jeffersonian model of independent spirit, hardworking, virtuous citizen farmers and their families as the backbone of a solid America. She rejects, however, the "primitive individualism" that this ideal spawned because it isolated women from the community and reduced their crucial, nation-building domestic labor to endless drudgery ("Applepieville" 393). Gilman's arguments demonstrate a desire to alter rather than eradicate the traditional family structure; in Applepieville, her women are wives, not farm owners, who need changes that will make the most of the resources available to them.

In the work for rural women's rights, Gilman's Applepieville scheme largely advocates rather than questions capitalism, despite her utopian plan for redrawing of property lines. She seeks ways to make farm women's lives more satisfying by proposing avenues for productive and economically rewarding work that will make the line separating the domestic and public spheres more fluid and will make economic power accessible to women in a society where

money speaks and earns respect. Gilman seeks to claim for farm women a piece of the economic pie – in fact, she wants to offer them the first and best bite.

Finding Economic Independence, or Aunt Mary's Piece of the Pie

Although Gilman's essays argue the logic behind the innovative methods that she proposes for changing the lives of farm women, her fiction more vividly depicts how these methods could lead to women's economic independence. "Aunt Mary's Pie Plant" was published in *Woman's Home Companion* in 1908 with an editorial note explaining that the story demonstrates Gilman's ideas and "show[s] in a convincing way how her beliefs and remedies would work out in practise" (14). In the fictional farm community of New Newton, women practice cooperative housekeeping similar to the methods Gilman proposes in *Women and Economics*: they operate and patronize professionalized housekeeping businesses that include laundry and meal preparation services, and the community benefits from the cooperative "gold mine" of the women's intelligence and industry ("Aunt Mary's" 48). This exploration of female industry is specifically rural, however, as the women are "farmers' wives" who have overcome the problem of isolation and have found ways to attain economic independence through work that is valuable and remunerative (Gilman, "Aunt Mary's" 14). The story's heroine, Aunt Mary, a farm-owning widow of great "energy" who operates a successful pie-making business, demonstrates Gilman's vision of the independent woman who attains prosperity by exercising her capacities, working hard, and cooperating with other similarly minded women ("Aunt Mary's" 14). As Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow will also argue in their later works of fiction, Gilman shows that a woman with a farm, opportunity, and "Genius" can attain self-possession and economic independence ("Aunt Mary's" 48).

Aunt Mary and her friends refute stereotypical images of “weary, discouraged-looking” farm women performing “endless work” on their small farms (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). No, Aunt Mary declares, the women of New Newton are “not ‘just farmers’ wives’ any longer” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). They “labor intelligently” and are “in business for themselves,” creating services and products that make fruitful use of their abilities and allow them to make “large addition[s] to the[ir] family income[s]” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48, 14, 14). Not only are the women invigorated by the productive use of their capacities and talents – as demonstrated by their “younger . . . and happier” visages – but their earnings also earn a “new respect” from their husbands (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14, 48).

In “Aunt Mary’s Pie Plant,” Gilman strengthens her argument for female enterprise by implementing tenets of economic theory drawn from the works of John Stuart Mill. As an internationally-known feminist and women’s rights activist, Gilman knew the political and economic theories of her contemporaries, and her writings demonstrate a working knowledge of Mill’s philosophies. Gilman biographer Cynthia Davis notes that during the period of her betrothal to her first husband Walter Stetson in 1884, Gilman read *The Subjection of Women*, and although the book “probably did little to quell her premarital jitters,” the introduction to the themes of Mill’s work was part of a formative period during which Gilman was discovering “her sense that her voice might be needed in the world” (74). In the story, Gilman employs Mill’s theories to support her argument for women’s enterprise, particularly in the character of Aunt Mary who demonstrates great capacity as a business woman and a leader in the farming community of New Newton.

Aunt Mary’s business begins when, after eating a piece of one of Aunt Mary’s “perfect” pies, the progressive town minister Rev. James Exeter Curtis encourages her to turn her

particular “Genius” – pie making – into an outlet for meaningful and financially beneficial work (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14, 48). “Genius” is the word that Mill uses in *On Liberty* to describe innovative persons of “energy” and “mental vigour” who are “more individual than other people—less able . . . of fitting themselves” into society’s “moulds” (78, 74, 72). Aunt Mary, the minister notes, is such an individual, as she is “too able a woman to do nothing but wait on a house and attend church meetings” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48). He sees the potential for her pies “to make money,” a vision that proves true when Aunt Mary eventually earns enough money to buy her own pie factory, renovate her house, and support community improvements such as the kindergarten (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48). Aunt Mary is indeed a woman of genius and skill who employs the resources at her disposal to become self-supporting and to encourage other women in the town to do the same. As Mill argues, in order to have persons of genius that can change society for the better, “it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow. Genius can only breathe in an atmosphere of freedom” (*OL* 72). In the town of New Newton, the women – farm women attached to the soil and following the example of Aunt Mary – demonstrate intelligence and innovation and break the molds of domestic isolation to form social and business bonds that benefit the individual women as well as their community.

Success comes to Aunt Mary because she intelligently and energetically employs rational economic principles that are drawn directly from Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*. When the young reporter investigating the changes in New Newton asks Aunt Mary to tell her “the whole thing” that explains the women entrepreneurs’ success, Aunt Mary responds, “You see, it was like this . . . [:] wealth is produced by the application of labor and intelligence to natural materials” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48). This formula is one that Mill outlines in a chapter of *Principles of Political Economy* entitled “On What Depends the Degree of Productiveness of

Productive Agents” in which he describes the conditions necessary for the production of capital. Mill asserts that superior productiveness occurs when “[e]nergy, at the call of passion, . . . is manifested in sustained and persevering labour” (*PE* 1:130). The monotonous labor of housework is not sufficiently inspiring for Aunt Mary, who is blessed with an abundance of energy and a passion for crafting pies, “the apex of that art” of baking (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). Her business flourishes because Aunt Mary becomes a producer whose creative labors are also lucrative, and, having found work that is fulfilling, she is inspired to sustained effort.

Mill notes that for hard work to be productive, it must also be paired with intelligent application of the “knowledge of natural powers and of the properties of objects” as well as the “knowledge of the arts of life[,] . . . the invention and use of tools and machinery, . . . [and] the greatest agricultural inventions . . . [and] processes” (*PE* 1:132, 132, 132, 133, 133). Employing innovation, efficiency and “practical good sense” is necessary to production of capital because it makes the best use of one’s energy (Mill, *PE* 1:134). Over a period of ten years, Aunt Mary reaps the rewards of astute application of her energy, becoming a successful businesswoman and community leader. She follows the counsel of Rev. Curtis and borrows money to open a pie shop; as demand for her product increases, she expands her business into a “pleasant-looking” pie factory that ships her products into several states and is a model of efficiency (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). Aunt Mary takes pride in showing “the bright, airy place, with its rows of ovens; its beautiful, cold mixing rooms, with the shining glass slabs and glass rolling pins; the neatly dressed women at work, the brisk packers and busy manager” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). Aunt Mary also cooperates with other women of her community, and together they are successful because they “labor intelligently,” consolidating domestic work to create time for more lucrative endeavors, organizing cooperative marketing systems for their products, and educating each

other on business and horticultural practices at meetings of the Women's Farm and Garden Club (Gilman, "Aunt Mary's" 48). Aware of the pecuniary value of their work, the women confidently and intelligently practice good business decisions and make use of available technologies, such as the railroad, the telephone, and machinery, to make their businesses grow.

As Mill notes, labor and intelligence must be applied to natural materials at hand, an idea that Aunt Mary and the farmers' wives can successfully incorporate because of their rural setting. Mill asserts that "[t]he most evident cause of superior productiveness is what are called natural advantages," which include fertile soil, a favorable climate, an "abundance of mineral productions," and any other raw materials or geographical situations that supply the ingredients for production of goods (*PE* 1:127, 128). As farm wives, the women of New Newton have direct access to the natural resources that supply their successful fresh produce, jelly making, and beekeeping businesses. Aunt Mary notes that the men have a newfound respect for a woman who could "turn in fifty or a hundred dollars a season off a little patch of currants" (Gilman, "Aunt Mary's" 48). Aunt Mary's factory gets materials for her pies "much more cheaply" because she buys directly from the growers in her neighborhood (Gilman, "Aunt Mary's" 14). This group of Millian capitalists breaks new ground and breathes life into Gilman's plan for women's economic independence because they use the materials available to them to engage intelligently and energetically in remunerative production.

Mill also notes that another element important to production is "security," the assurance that one will retain full possession of the fruits of his or her labor (*PE* 1:139). Mill writes, "All laws or usages . . . which chain up the efforts of any part of the community in pursuit of their own good, or stand between those efforts and their natural fruits—are . . . violations of the fundamental principles of political economy" and tend to reduce "the aggregate productive

powers of the community” (*PE* 1:142-143). Without protection from unjust governments or other agents that would appropriate a laborer’s products, “it is not likely that many will exert themselves to produce much more than necessities” (Mill, *PE* 1:141). Laborers whose products are appropriated by others tend to be unproductive because they do not receive financial or personal rewards for their expenditure of energy and intelligence. Unlike the farm women described in “That Rural Home Inquiry” who labor without recognition or payment, the women of New Newton understand and retain possession of the monetary value of their domestic work. “Money talks,” says Aunt Mary, and she explains the change in attitudes about women’s labor:

You see . . . the men learned that a woman’s labor had a money value . . . twenty women working on [farms] working about fourteen hours a day to wait on that family . . . Then comes Mr. Curtis and proves to them that their work was really worth a dollar and a half a day at the very lowest—that they were spending, or rather going without, nine dollars a week for housework! (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48)

The women of New Newton, confident in the value of their work, consolidate household chores so they can focus their labor on more lucrative endeavors. They enjoy earning and “handling [their] own money, same as a man does,” and they use their earnings to make “a large addition to the family income” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48, 14). Their new economic power does not make them completely independent – as wives and mothers, they contribute to the coffers of their households – but their earnings put them on a more equal financial footing with their husbands who have a new appreciation for their wives’ earning potential and industry. Because Aunt Mary is a widow, she retains sole ownership of the profits from her successful pie business, and this gives her freedom to forego marriage altogether. Because she can support herself, Aunt Mary can

choose not to marry a “new uncle,” and so the fruits of her labor buy escape from economic dependency and the marriage marketplace that Gilman disparages in *Women and Economics* (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14).

Ultimately, Mill saw that gains in individual prosperity would function as a path for community uplift, and he believed that “moral qualities” of industrious and intelligent people would awaken their interest in education, raise the community’s “standard of integrity,” and create conditions for “conjoint action” to benefit all (*PE* 1:136, 137, 137). In New Newton, the growth of “local pride” underscores economic productivity and, as the successful women work together and learn from one another, fuels the changes that make this town into a rural utopia (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 48). Aunt Mary accumulates knowledge, as evidenced by her “rows of books,” and she advocates a program of learning for the young reporter who becomes interested in adopting the progressive women’s lifestyle (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 49). Gilman’s utopian rural community of New Newton demonstrates the monetary value of women’s work and the best expenditure of resources to net the greatest personal and pecuniary benefits for women. Aunt Mary’s transformation from a “thin, sad-looking, uneasy old lady” to a “gaily bonneted” woman with a “handsome . . . effective . . . ‘up and coming’ look” reflects the confidence and self-possession she has gained as a producer and businesswoman rather than as a consumer and housewife (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). In New Newton, the free exercise of each woman’s individual talents “bring[s] out the productive energy of the place” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 49). Miss Mills the kindergarten teacher proudly says, “This is my work . . . I always loved it, and now I do nothing else. I teach these little ones, and train others to do it” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 14). In this community in which all do what they are good at, everyone wins, and Aunt Mary explains that “we have the best now—all of us” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 49). Kessler notes that

Gilman does not exclude men from the benefits of the community; rather, the story demonstrates the equal capacity of both genders to be productive (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 68). The men of New Newton gladly support the changes in the community because they have “happier wives, more money, and better food” (Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s” 49). The town is a “prancing young Utopia,” a demonstration of Millian economics at work and a celebration of the possibilities Gilman envisioned for farm women who overcome the issues of isolation and unproductive overwork (“Aunt Mary’s” 49).

Gilman’s more radical rural women in her 1915 utopian novel *Herland* live in a world without men, in a society completely separated from the predatory systems of capitalist industry and the gendered spheres that necessitate a struggle for economic independence. After centuries of developing their society in isolation, the women of Herland are beings with “practical intelligence, coupled with fine artistic feeling, and . . . [are] untrammelled by any injurious influences” such as capitalist competition and land use for profit (Gilman, *Herland* 74). Unlike the men who visit Herland from America, the women are not pitted against each other in a marketplace where “competition” serves as the “stimulus to industry” and wages are the “incentive” to get people to work (Gilman, *Herland* 62). Instead, because the women are mothers whose focus is the good of their children, they willingly work in specialized labor as “spinners and weavers, farmers and gardeners, carpenters and masons, as well as mothers” (Gilman, *Herland* 68). Their unified and voluntary work benefits the needs of the community and makes life in Herland pleasant and mutually beneficial.

The women in *Herland* are a fictional representation of the arguments Gilman outlines in her 1904 economics text *Human Work*, in which she claims that “maternal passion” is the genesis of intelligent and socially beneficial work, enabling women to perform “patient, steady

labour” without immediate reward and leading to the development of a “social passion” of cooperation that differentiates human society from animal groups (*Human Work* 149, 151, 149). Because Gilman supported the ideas of Lester Ward, who proposed that women were the beginning point of the evolutionary chain, she could state that “[s]he, first on earth, works, and she works for others” to promote the advancement of the human race (*Human Work* 207).⁵⁰ The maternal instinct for “race-preservation” includes feeding, guarding, and teaching children and requires the “cerebral action . . . of making,” planning ahead, and working for future benefits rather than merely focusing on the immediate gratification of the animal “excito-motory” instinct to “take food” to satisfy hunger (Gilman, *Human Work* 149, 207, 207, 207). Gilman supports her arguments for a woman-centric basis of human social advancement by examining the thoughtful and deliberate practice of growing food. She argues that maternal passion is best illustrated by the Native American mother’s planting seeds for the future benefit of her children; planting corn requires diligent work and patient waiting for a harvest, whereas male hunters, simply following their animal instincts, hunt only to satisfy immediate physical hunger (Gilman, *Human Work* 207).⁵¹ Gilman notes that the agricultural practices of past matrifocal societies developed into

⁵⁰ In October 1910, Gilman reviewed Ward’s *Pure Sociology* in her magazine *The Forerunner*, and notes that his “new, original, wildly startling, intensely significant, and . . . revolutionary” scientific theory states “[t]hat the female sex is the present form of the original type of life, once capable in itself of the primary process of reproduction; while the male sex is a later addition, introduced as an assistant to the original organism, in the secondary process of fertilization” (“Comment and Review” 26). Gilman recommends Chapter 14 of Ward’s book to her readers and asserts that his theory is “of more importance to the world than any put forth since the theory of evolution” (“Comment and Review” 26). Kessler notes Ward’s influence on Gilman, calling *Herland* “a thought-experiment extrapolated from Ward’s theory” (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 37).

⁵¹ Although Gilman’s focus here on early forms of human society supports her argument for returning to pre-capitalist systems in order to shape new forms of social systems that would be more inclusive of women, she uses the racially derogatory terms “humble squaw” to identify the Native American mother and “[h]er lord, the noble Red-man” to identify her instinct-driven husband (*Human Work* 207). Gilman’s arguments were for the advancement of women, but Kimmel and Aronson note in their introduction to the 1998 edition of *Women and Economics* that she “pays little attention to race,” and they reach the “inescapable conclusion that when Gilman referred to ‘the race,’ meaning humanity as a whole, she envisioned the white race” (lvi). In a 1913 article in *The Forerunner*, Gilman does acknowledge racial injustice, stating in dismay “[t]hat we have cheated the Indian, oppressed the African, robbed the Mexican and childishly wasted our great resources is ground for shame” (“Race

efficient food systems that allowed human beings time for intellectual growth and specialization necessary to highly developed society.⁵² As part of this process of advancement, men have learned to adapt women's "industrial function" – Gilman calls this process "the motherising of the male" – to advance society (*Human Work* 208). The women in *Herland*, having returned to primitive beginnings similar to the Native American population, arrive at a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist state that allows them a fresh start. Without the predatory instincts of men as an influence, they have over the course of two thousand years developed a different and more advanced social system than the one Gilman observes in her contemporary America.

The women farmers in *Herland* practice sustainable agriculture rather than farming for profit in the marketplace. Their agriculture is Edenic, non-invasive, and non-violent. The women have replanted the forest with only trees that produce edible fruits and nuts, finding that these "best food plants" produce a larger yield per acre than field crops, preserve and enrich the soil, and require less cultivation (Gilman, *Herland* 80). Since trees are a regenerative food source, they represent the women's forward-thinking view of community life; rather than focus only on

Pride" 90). However, the focus of her work centered on issues of gender in the white middle class. See also Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 73-74.

⁵² Gilman's (and Ward's) arguments differ greatly from the majority of studies in economics and anthropology that posit the hunter-gatherer society as more egalitarian than the later agricultural societies that produced oppressive hierarchies. For example, Kojin Karatani's 2014 *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange* argues that "[s]edentary life brought about . . . unintended results. . . . [With t]he adoption of fixed settlements[,] . . . the necessary production [of crops] was increasingly carried out by women. Yet it is important to note that this change led not to an elevation but to a lowering in the status of women" (44). David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* also argues that hunter-gatherer societies practiced a form of egalitarianism that emphasized community survival over individual accumulation of wealth – and that the development of agrarian societies led to predatory behaviors and the oppression of women. However, in *Debt*, Graeber notes that Lewis Henry Morgan's studies of the Six Nations of the Iroquois published in 1851, 1877, and 1881 – works that describe the Native Americans' economy in which women's councils directed complex systems of debt and exchange – were "simply ignored" by economist Adam Smith because such systems did not fit Western assumptions about the development of barter economies (29). Graeber notes that Morgan's anthropological studies, "which emphasized both collective property rights and the extraordinary importance of women, with women's councils largely in control of economic life, so impressed many radical thinkers—includ[ing] Marx and Engels—that they became the basis of a kind of counter-myth, of primitive communism and primitive matriarchy" (395 n15). Gilman's work, particularly *Herland*, participates in efforts to shape a counter-myth of primitive matriarchy such as Graeber describes, yet her work, like Morgan's, failed to produce a widely-accepted woman-centered history of humanity.

“the hopes and ambitions of an individual life,” they plan improvements that will continue to supply food for future generations (Gilman, *Herland* 80). The women also grow “seasonal crops” so that “their fruit and nuts, grains and berries, kept on almost the year through” (Gilman, *Herland* 80). In a society focused on maternity, “[a]ll they ate was fruit of motherhood, from seed or egg or their product” (Gilman, *Herland* 61). There are no cattle, sheep, or milk industries because the women find that growing animals is a wasteful use of land that is needed to grow crops enough to feed the population, and that dairy production “robs the cow of her calf, and the calf of its true food” (Gilman, *Herland* 49, 50). The male visitors to Herland are amazed at the “intensive agriculture,” which surpasses anything they have ever seen (Gilman, *Herland* 69).

The agricultural practices of Herland demonstrate a thoughtful use of land that comments on the wasteful agricultural practices of America in the early twentieth century. The women practice a “scheme” for composting all waste materials so that “everything which came from the earth went back into it” (Gilman, *Herland* 80). In their system of deliberate resource management, “an increasingly valuable soil was being built, instead of the progressive impoverishment so often seen in the rest of the world” (Gilman, *Herland* 81). The male visitors note the “obvious common sense” of the women’s methods and sheepishly admit the “carelessness with which [they] had skimmed the cream of it” (Gilman, *Herland* 81). The women’s efficiently managed land is a “pleasant garden” valuable not for the market commodities it produces but as a source of pleasure and of sustenance and as “a cultural environment for their children” (Gilman, *Herland* 95).

Kessler notes that Gilman’s utopian fiction intends a “clearly rhetorical purpose, far closer to blueprint than guide” for advocating social change but that the strength of Gilman’s plan is “emotional authenticity, rather than logical consistency” (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 80,

81). *Herland* was originally serialized in *The Forerunner*, a magazine that Gilman wrote and edited entirely on her own and where her complete creative control offered a forum for the publication of her most radical ideas. The women's agricultural economy in *Herland* is forward-thinking, suggesting sustainable solutions for problems of food production and land use, even though most of Gilman's ideas demonstrate little working knowledge of agricultural science and were not practical in the time for which she wrote. The main focus of her novel is not to argue for harnessing natural resources for economic gain as much as to demonstrate her dream that alternative forms of community and viable social organization would be the result if women were to have access to political power.

In short stories such as "Aunt Mary's Pie Plant," published in *Woman's Home Companion*, and in essays such as "Applepieville," published in *The Independent*, Gilman targeted more mainstream audiences, offering what she envisioned as pragmatic and workable solutions for the economic problems of women in the early twentieth century. Aunt Mary is not living in an American Herland; rather, she fully participates in the capitalist system of early twentieth-century America. As Kessler notes, Aunt Mary successfully "pursue[s] the world's work in a domestic setting" (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 65). Combining her womanly pie-making talents with a robust entrepreneurial spirit that places her in a position to gain economic independence and community leadership, Aunt Mary serves as an example of the future that Gilman envisioned as possible for women.

Gilman wrote with the conviction that her literature could lead to change and action in the lives of readers. Her fiction portrays the world she envisioned for women, and by the time she wrote "Applepieville" in 1920, she had reason to hope that her ideas were making a difference in women's lives, as she writes that "mother is beginning to protest . . . [when s]he

never made any fuss before,” and the growth of rural programs, women’s club activism, and “the spread of progressive literature have pretty generally waked this lady up” (Gilman, “Applepieville” 365). The farm woman was beginning to demand change in her social and economic status, and Gilman hoped to lead the way with her stories of financially independent, property-owning women.

Beyond the “Deputy Husband”: Historical Accounts of the Woman Farmer in America

Gilman constantly assured women that their work had measurable market value and that they could obtain economic independence by diligent and intelligent use of their site of production – the domestic sphere. Farm women were an elucidative example of her argument because many of them were already producers of goods at their homesites that were for sale in the market, including butter, eggs, honey, and poultry, as well as culinary products such as jams, jellies, and baked goods. B. F. Coen’s description of “successful farm families” in a 1927 study for Colorado Agricultural College notes that “we should not be surprised to find that the chicken-and-egg money saves more unhappy situations, furnishes more new dresses, more of the store eatables, and buys more gasoline” than livestock and field crop production (7). Coen quotes a farmer as saying that “[c]hicken money keeps the house and pays the grocery bill,” though despite the admission that “[c]hickens and [c]ows [d]o the [w]ork,” Coen’s study focuses mostly on total farm production and profits, not on the efforts of the farm wives who create this revenue (7).

Allan Kulikoff’s historical study “The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America,” however, documents a move away from this notion that the farm household functioned as “an indivisible unit” and the farm wife as little more than a “deputy husband” who supported the

family by engaging in noncommercial exchange of goods with neighbors (137, 138). He notes that the transition from noncommercial and self-sufficient farming to full participation in national and international agricultural commodity markets was accompanied by a parallel shift in household gender relations as women began to insist on their own individualism and autonomy, exert a more authoritative voice within the farmhouse, and claim opportunities for access to economic systems of production and exchange (Kulikoff 144, 138-139). Kulikoff concludes that employing the ideology of individualism to support capitalist economic development of farms ultimately produced the parallel result of giving wives authority in the domestic sphere that granted them access to economic power disassociated from their husbands' authority (144). Out from under patriarchal power – at least as it applied to domestic modes of production and access to economic systems of exchange – women were set on the path toward economic independence. Literary representations of farm women such as those in Gilman's work reflect this transition in the rural domestic sphere by calling attention to the particular issues that produced isolation and stasis while at the same time proposing the changes that would promote full and profitable lives for women.

For a woman to be completely economically independent and out from under the obligation of serving as a deputy husband, she would also need to own her farm, a fact that Gilman's domestic focus sometimes asserted – Herland was female-owned, if cooperatively, and so was Aunt Mary's farm – and would be more fully asserted in the works of Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow. The land-owning and unmarried Aunt Mary is unique in Gilman's utopian fiction (and oeuvre), as Gilman's proposed conditions that allow women to best develop their individual capabilities almost always include woman's particular calling to motherhood and social uplift through influential homemaking. However, through Aunt Mary's character, Gilman does

acknowledge the presence of farm-owning women who were active and economically independent in the 1920s in America.

In 1922, the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor published *The Occupational Progress of Women*, and the report recognizes the number of women farm owners in the 1920 census and the changes since 1910 in the occupations of women. The 1920 census was the first one to recognize women owner-operators in a separate category of "farmer"; in 1910, women who lived and worked in any capacity on farms were all lumped together under the term "farm laborer" without differentiation for ownership (U.S. Dept. of Labor 8). The 1920 census reported 247,253 such women "farmers" under this new owner-operator designation (U.S. Dept. of Labor 19). During the period between 1910 and 1920, the census indicates a "tremendous decrease among women employed in agriculture" as farm laborers and an inverse increase in the number of women engaged in urban employments such as factory, retail, and clerical occupations (U.S. Dept. of Labor 2-3, 19-20). These findings support national concerns about women migrating from farms to cities, and this report notes the "upheavals in the traditions of women's employment" as a result of increased opportunities in business and industry in urban areas (U.S. Dept. of Labor 3). Although women had "achieved a deserved recognition" for their contributions made with work outside of the home during World War I, the Women's Bureau report notes that the public's perceptions about a high number of women employed in extradomestic work were incorrect and that only 21.1 percent of women 10 years of age and over reported being "gainfully occupied" outside of the home in 1922 (U.S. Dept. of Labor 1-2). Although that percentage of women is small compared to the overall population, increases in numbers of working women indicate the growing interest in women's economic independence. The Woman's Bureau report substantiates the claims running throughout Gilman's work on the

economic condition of women's lives: that women were increasingly interested in financial independence, that women desired and were capable of productive and lucrative work, and that many women in the rural community were already operating as independent farm owners. Authors such as Gilman found the woman farmer a useful model for participation in the capitalist system because farming was both historically foundational to the country's social system and also a site where hard work with diligent effort, intelligently applied, could lead to financial success – regardless of gender.

Several nonfiction texts of the time explore the challenges and accomplishments of women farm owners. One of the biggest issues that narratives about woman farmers address is establishing farming as an already-existing and viable woman's employment for the enterprising woman, since public perceptions about rural women were that they were farm wives, not independent businesswomen. The texts also wrestle with the problem of property ownership; since land ownership was key to farming, the women who qualified for this type of enterprise needed to have money enough to buy a farm or they had to have inherited one, either from family members or as a widow. The following texts note the particular challenges of women farmers within the context of contemporary shifts in women's economic activity.

In 1879, Ella Farman Pratt, under the pseudonym Dorothea Alice Shepherd, published *How Two Girls Tried Farming*, the account of two women, Dorothy (Dolly) Shepherd, a school teacher, and Louise (Lou) Burney, a house maid, who leave their urban jobs to buy a farm in Michigan and make an independent living there.⁵³ The novel was advertised as “a narrative of

⁵³ The work was originally published in the February 1875 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* and reprinted in 1879 as a volume in the “Idle Hours” series. Ella Farman Pratt was editor and author of *Wide Awake*, *Little Folks*, and other Lothrop publications devoted to providing wholesome reading materials for children. Although *How Two Girls Tried Farming* continues in the tradition of wholesome reading materials, this work and others such as her short story “A Strong-Minded Woman,” published in the August 1875 issue of *Harpers*, speak directly to adult women about issues of economic independence.

actual experience,” and the *New York Herald* recommended it “to those girls who are wearing out their lives at the sewing machine, behind counters[,] or even at the teacher’s desk” (Frémont 189). Knowing that it takes a “brave strong-brained woman” to manage a farm and desiring the “security from the ups and downs of life” that come from real estate ownership, Dolly and Lou pool their financial resources – together, they have one thousand dollars – and their “spunk” and “go West [to] buy a farm, a real farm, a man’s farm” (Shepherd 32, 50, 76, 33). The undertaking is unorthodox and ambitious, and though they seek the advice of business women in their acquaintance, Shepherd notes that “no woman ever encouraged us in our various plans for change and better times” and long hours of work and the complexities of free market competition make entrepreneurship a difficult task that most often “costs all it comes to” (8, 10). The opening chapter assures readers that the endeavor has been successful, and Shepherd notes that “we have accomplished nearly everything which they predicted we never could do” (8). Because the text seeks to encourage financial independence for women, it mirrors the work of Gilman and serves as “a ministry of hope” and uplift for women who desire the rewards of independence (Shepherd 35).

The women can succeed in part because the laws of nature – at least in the practical principles of farming – apply equally to both genders. Shepherd notes that “Nature is no gallant. She has inexorable laws which woman, in common with man, must confront,” and so the two women take care to learn all that they can about the farming business by reading publications devoted to prudent and innovative farming practices and by gaining practical experience from working on their neighboring cousins’ farm (134). The neighboring men sneer at the women’s intentions to farm with “ideas” garnered from reading the *Rural*, the *Agriculturist*, the *New York Tribune*, and *Opportunities in Farming* (Shepherd 66). In response to the men’s “sly dig[s]”

about the sources of her knowledge, Dolly replies, “Well, why not?—If I can?” (Shepherd 66). The rapidly growing body of literature in the agricultural sciences gives Dolly access to information about planting seasons, requirements for human and animal labor per acre, production costs, probable yields, and market values for field crops as well as feed costs and marketing strategies for “meat-making animals” (Shepherd 67). By incorporating strategies obtained by Dolly’s studies, the women produce yields of corn higher than their neighbors and pasture so lush that the farmers see it and “marvel” (Shepherd 76). The women also learn to do almost any work that men can do, and they clear young trees, saw up firewood, mend and build fences, plant crops and garden, set orchard trees, and raise chickens, dairy cows, and pigs. They become accustomed to the “quizzical lights” in neighboring men’s eyes and move ahead undeterred (Shepherd 79). Through careful and thrifty management of their financial resources, the women also avoid debt, instead “somehow feeling very rich” in possessing land that they own outright and living within their means (Shepherd 89).

The women invest all of their money in restoring the “neglected thirty-five acres” of their farm rather than outfitting a comfortable house because their emphasis is on establishing a profitable business, not on becoming domestic housewives in a country setting (Shepherd 45). Shepherd notes that since there is “nothing left for the house” after the costs of outfitting the farm for production, the two women must live without the consumer goods and domestic technologies that would identify them as middle-class housewives: “[D]espite all short comings [sic] in the way of market prices, we two farmers did, by cheerfully ignoring several of the items mentioned by the Labor Commission as among the necessities of the ordinary family, . . . make both ends meet” (70, 125-126). In answer to critics who would call this choice “the unfeminizing influence of following a masculine pursuit,” Shepherd asserts that being “wise, true, brave, [and]

strong” – and free from debt – is a better kind of wealth (70). Rather than aspiring to middle-class standards of pecuniary reputability, Shepherd notes that the tools of economic independence were of far greater value and that “no woman ever looked more approvingly on her new piano than we did our trim little plow” (68). In addition to their unconventional attitudes toward definitions of women’s sphere as the domestic space, Dolly and Lou also throw off impractical notions of ladylikeness by adapting their mode of dress to accommodate their work. They begin wearing “shortish dresses” layered over “trousers graceful in the cutting,” and even though they find the garments less aesthetically pleasing, Shepherd notes that “the inches . . . cut off my gown rendered out-of-door movements practicable” (53, 53. 54). Choosing practicality over fashion, Dolly and Lou support late-nineteenth-century activists’ demands for more sensible clothing, and Lou “rejoic[es] in loose bands and in shoulder-straps and blouse waists to a degree that would have delighted Miss [Elizabeth Stuart] Phelps” (Shepherd 76).⁵⁴ Economic independence gives Dolly and Lou confidence to rework nineteenth-century definitions of women’s respectability to suit their more determined notions of selfhood, and they find their new mode of life “a bit of delightful outlawry from the conventional, house-life of our sex” because they have discovered instead “the pleasure of successful toils” (Shepherd 88, 111). Their power comes from becoming active producers, rather than passive consumers, of goods.

⁵⁴ Here, Shepherd refers to the argument for sensible women's clothing that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps outlines *What to Wear*: "I wonder that women sustain, in even the wretched and disheartening fashion that they do, the strain and burden of their clothing. I wonder that any of us are left with unimpaired vitality for the pursuance of self-culture, for the prosecution of our business, for the rearing, care, and support of our families, for the whirling of the wheels within wheels of social duties which devolve dizzily upon us" (18). In particular, Phelps criticized long skirts and corsets for the health risks that they posed to women's bodies, and she encouraged women to take a stand against the elaborate and restrictive fashions of the time by asking, "Suppose, in short, that, by one subtle, strong *coup d'état*, the thinking women of America could make it *fashionable* to dress like rational creatures?" (*What to Wear* 34; emphases in original).

Shepherd's text also reflects a unique approach to farm life because Dolly and Lou display a domestic orientation toward farming. The women use their domestic skills to earn supplemental income for the farm; instead of plowing fields or doing carpentry work for extra money as many young male farmers in the community do, the women take in sewing and use the money to hire others to do the work that is too strenuous for them. Shepherd notes that "we *can* plow . . . [but] I trust that we are none the less legitimately farmers because by a bit of dressmaking, or fine sewing, we hire our plowing and mowing, and whatever other work we please" (137-138; emphasis in original). Dolly and Lou also compare clearing a field to "knitting work"; clearing the large area full of stumps, brush, and trash is a task that takes two years to complete, one little bit at the time (Shepherd 84). In the case of the spirited horse Pampas, however, Lou can make "no concessions to her womanhood" and must deal harshly rather than kindly with the animal in order to earn his respect (Shepherd 106). Having spent his early life in town pulling a buggy, Pampas is resistant to retraining for farm life, and Dolly notes that "as soon as he learned that he had probably become involved for life in the problem of women's independence, his discontent threatened us [with] serious trouble" (Shepherd 91). Pampas's attitude reflects that of the men who constantly ridicule the farming women's play for independence, and Dolly and Lou quickly learn that both the horse and their neighbors are more easily won over by bold and direct action than gentle nurturing.

Shepherd seeks to convince her readers of the applicable lessons from her own successful farm. She acknowledges that few women are suited to handling "large agricultural operations" all by themselves, and therefore she does not hold up the "brilliant successes" of a few prosperous women as universally applicable; instead, she asserts that the average woman who is willing to invest the time and effort can "'make[] a good living' off her land" (Shepherd 148). To

support her claim that many women are already successful farmers, she relates the story of a “sewing-girl” who, after inheriting her father’s farm in New Hampshire, leaves her job and becomes a successful farmer (Shepherd 148). Shepherd notes that this woman “does *all the work that any man farmer does*, . . . she enjoys her work, [and] is independent in her operations, asking no man’s advice. She feels no need of advice” (149, 150-151; emphasis in original). Her farm is an economic success, and her house is “tidy” and her land is “well kept” (Shepherd 150). Shepherd advises her readers that “mixed farming” – producing a large variety of field crops and livestock – is probably too large an undertaking, and she recommends that women farmers can most easily maintain livestock: “We think that the care of small flocks and herds is an easy, gentle, and womanly occupation” (45, 153). She notes that in exchange for losing womanly graces such as “white hands,” the independent farm woman will have broader shoulders, thicker arms, “an exquisite perception of the purity of atmospheres,” acclimation to changes in climate, and “an appetite for fruits and vegetables and nourishing steaks” (Shepherd 134, 135, 135). With this stronger body comes confidence, and she tells her readers, “you can walk where you will, lift what you will, carry for long distances, and confidently project fresh undertakings” (Shepherd 135). By sharing her own success, Shepherd hopes to inspire women to use their capabilities, intelligence, energy, and fortitude to become self-reliant and self-supporting. Her view of economic independence is not vast profits, however, but the riches of independence, self-governance, self-determination, and pride in one’s production.

Although Dolly and Lou are unmarried, *How Two Girls Tried Farming* is not a blatant attack on patriarchy, as Shepherd’s attention is more focused on the possibilities of economic independence for women than on questions of marriage and motherhood. Her project is to describe the capability and accomplishments of two women farmers in order to provide a pattern

for other “overworked women” who want something to do outside of cramped city life (Shepherd 153). Lou remarks on the purpose of sharing the women’s story:

now that men are coming more and more to share their occupations with us, I do wish that some of those women who are so tired and restless and discouraged, and haven’t brains enough to become doctors and lawyers or business women of any kind, . . . could see what a pleasant way of living this is. . . . *We* raise nearly everything we consume . . . [and] we raise the means to buy what we don’t raise. It would be such a relief, such a restoration to health and youth even, to rise in the morning their own mistresses. (Shepherd 154-155; emphasis in original)

The rewards of owning one’s own farm and of being one’s own mistress, this text argues, are worth the hard work and will yield a strong body, personal success, greater confidence, and economic independence.

Shepherd’s story originally appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and was later published as a volume in the Idle Hours Series of books. Despite her assertion that a woman-run farm was a possibility for the resourceful woman with sufficient capital, her descriptions of the joy of working on the farm perpetuate the Jeffersonian myth of rural self-sufficiency. Shepherd evokes a romantic image of independence when she states that “I don’t see why, for hundreds of overworked women, the Arcadian time of shepherdesses might not profitably come again” (153). In this comment that appears at the end of the text, Shepherd couches her argument for women’s animal husbandry in romantic language despite the work’s earlier depictions of the difficulty of farm work. The text also contains illustrations that emphasize the ladylikeness and nobility of the work rather than the sweat and fatigue, and they do not accurately depict the modified clothing that Dolly and Lou wear in the book (fig. 6 and fig. 7). The contradictions in *How Two Girls*



Dolly tests her strength.

Figure 6. "Dolly Tests Her Strength" by R. L.

Source: Dorothea Alice Shepherd (Ella Farman Pratt), *How Two Girls Tried Farming*. Boston: Lothrop, 1879. 37. *HathiTrust*. Web. 17 Sept. 2014.



Figure 7. "A Fashionable 'Train'" by R. L.

Source: Dorothea Alice Shepherd (Ella Farman Pratt), *How Two Girls Tried Farming*. Boston: Lothrop, 1879. 113. *HathiTrust*. Web. 17 Sept. 2014.

Tried Farming reflect the tensions that Ella Farman Pratt explores in other works published without her pseudonym. Her “strong-minded woman” recognizes that business is a necessity for some women and a choice for others, but she is wary of straying too far from an idealized vision of the domestic sphere (Farman 415). To the overworked woman reading Shepherd’s story and longing for an independent life, farming seems both an attainable and pleasant application of womanly capacity to the business of farming.

By 1917, when Jennie Conrad writes of the difficulties she faces as a farmer during World War I, the language of farming is direct and realistic and reflects the developments in agricultural science and industrial technology in the modern era. In her essay “Feeding the World” published in the *Woman’s National Farm and Garden Association Monthly Bulletin*, Conrad asserts that, with many men gone to fight in the war, women are quite capable of growing crops to meet the wartime food shortage: “Given the land, the facilities, the market, the demand already urgent, there is no reason why women should not make good producers . . . [and] the only way to get ahead is to buckle down to the task ourselves” (1). She advocates “intensive farming on small acreage,” using scientific methods and an organized plan of specialized “units” in order to make small farms both productive and profitable (Conrad 1, 2). While she recognizes the challenge of becoming farmers may be difficult for housewives who “have been living lives of ease and luxury,” she asserts that the national duty to feed all of America means that measures need to be taken to get the work of farming done (Conrad 1). As a woman farmer and owner of “thousands of acres of exceedingly fertile land” with access to transportation and marketing systems favorable for business, Conrad notes that her biggest difficulty is finding enough labor to hire (1). She advocates drafting a “labor army” and proposes that if the workers on farms could work with the same level of “rapidity and intense application”

as expected of factory workers, food production levels could be reached without the long hours of overwork that keep many from seeking employment as farm laborers (Conrad 1, 2).

Conrad stresses that women possess the skills, energy, and motivation to become productive farmers and fill the gap left by men who are away fighting the war or who, having been “lured by enormous wages,” have gone to work in factories in the city: “It may be, since men are so indifferent to this work, so unmindful of the world’s future needs, or so exacting, that the feeding of our own people and those of our own allies, now suffering and needy, will come through women’s hands and brains. If men will not work, women must” (1, 2). She describes a woman who supports her family by working on Conrad’s farm during the hay cutting season as “a more cheerful woman I never saw, and the work did not harm her” (2). Conrad does not disguise the hard work of farming with romantic language; instead, she encourages her readers not to get lost in the pursuit of “joy” and lose sight of the “fundamentals of living” that include appreciating the “dignity” in the “system, order and methods of work” (2). Conrad’s strategy for cooperative farming between individual units in pursuit of profits and benefits echoes the strategies proposed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and she shares Gilman’s opinion that women are the dynamic mothers and caretakers of the human race. Her focus on the community-building influence of women also challenges a shift in public focus that Henry C. Taylor describes as increasingly ignoring the “social side of farm life, and forc[ing] the food side of farm life into greater prominence” during the war (Taylor 383). Women, Conrad argues, are capable of performing the challenging physical work of farming and of using wise business strategies and a well-organized community to make a profit, but they are also motivated because they have a vision of the importance of their work to the world, their country, and their families.

Mary Meek Atkeson's 1924 book *The Woman on the Farm* celebrates the farm woman as capable and optimistic in the face of changes in modern life, changes not only in the operation of the farm home but also in women's desire for access to profitable work both on and away from the farm. Calling the farm woman the modern representation of pioneer stock that is "strong in body, quick of brain, and indomitable in spirit," Atkeson describes her as "not only energetic but highly adaptable, and when a change comes she is ready to make the most of the new conditions" (5, 7). These new conditions include higher levels of education and access to technology that free women from domestic drudgery so that they have more time to read about current events, work for the good of the community, and earn money of their own (14-15).

Atkeson's book champions the domestic sphere and the woman who takes charge there, not only as a respite from the marketplace but also as an integral part of a farm's multi-faceted business venture: "In the big and important business of farm and home the farmer and his wife are equal partners. He is the director of the general farming operations, and she of the home operations, and each acts in an advisory capacity to the other . . . [so that] the farm home must always take its part in making the farm business a profitable venture" (25, 34-35). Her enterprising farm woman is first and foremost a wife and mother, directing the farm home that is the bedrock of American ideals and energy, and whose "stabilizing influences" benefit the whole country (Atkeson 20). Atkeson claims that "every farm home is a seed-bed in which young folks are growing up until they are of an age to be transplanted to the cities and other communities" where they become social and political leaders in the larger project of American progress (21). Farm-raised young men and young women serve an ameliorating purpose in the city and "are often the saving factor in our difficult problem of the American melting pot" because they understand "the difficulties of the property owner," they are sympathetic to the plight of other

hardworking people, and they can help assimilate immigrants through the relationships they develop as they work together in factories (Atkeson 23). Atkeson's claims reflect the agrarian ideal of the farm home as the foundation of a strong and prosperous country, but she also recognizes the far-reaching effects of farm women's work in the national marketplace.

Because farm families live at the site of their economic endeavors, the farm woman is in a unique position to actively participate in the business of production both inside and outside of the domestic space, and Atkeson differentiates the farm woman from her urban counterpart by emphasizing the contributions she makes toward the family's prosperity. Besides the smooth operation of the home, she notes that farm women often manage the accounts, keep the books, and manage the inventory for the entire farm operation (Atkeson 110). Atkeson argues that women also assist in the farm's production, enjoying the participation in "outdoor work which is economically profitable" because they appreciate the escape from the confines of the house, they like being part of money-making activity, and, because their work contributes to the family's prosperity and differs little from the pursuit of outdoor sport by the "idle rich,"⁵⁵ they can work without "los[ing] caste" (Atkeson 128). Clarence Hamilton Poe, president and editor of *The Progressive Farmer* and author of *Farm Life: Problems and Opportunities*, who called Atkeson's work "the best book [written] on her subject," affirms Atkeson's assertions about the value of woman's work, noting that "we might ignore the woman's relation" to "almost any other American industry" except for farming: "On the farm the woman is full partner with the man. . . . [T]he home life and business life are so closely interwoven that they cannot be

⁵⁵ Atkeson compares the perspiration of "idle rich" ladies who "work out of doors to the very limit of their endurance" playing "fashionable sports" with the perspiration of farm women who engage in "uplifting" and "necessary and productive labor," and she finds that both meet the "new arrangement" of standards for reputable female behavior in 1927 (128).

separated” (28, 27, 27, 27-28). As part of a growing body of literature that underwrites the move to agricultural capitalism, Poe also stresses that farming is a business requiring farmers to “make themselves masters of their own industry’ not only in the production and financing of their crops but also in the marketing of them” (15). Poe’s work promotes the view that farm wives fully participate in agricultural capitalism because they are half of the “splendid partnership . . . between a husband and wife” that shapes the farming business in which the family works together as a unit comprised of individuals performing specialized labor that leads to mutual economic benefit (27). However, Atkeson challenges the patriarchal ideology that undergirds Poe’s claim that farming is equally profitable for men and women. By responding to women’s calls for money of their own, she asserts that women often had little access to the profits that their labors helped to earn.

Atkeson makes the case for farm women’s access to pecuniary gain and economic independence by advocating remunerative work that emanates from within the domestic sphere (112). She notes that the rise in “the separate career for the woman on the farm” – which Atkeson defines in terms of cottage industry products such as poultry, vegetables, butter and cheese, kitchen products, and needlework – can benefit women socially and economically by serving as “an inspiring fad as well as a source of income, and a source of interest which keeps her alert and in touch with others doing the same kind of work” (112, 113). Although she has received letters from women who criticize such undertakings and claim that “the farm woman has quite as much as she can do, without a business career of her own,” Atkeson reminds her readers that “poultry work,” women’s traditional source of “separate income,” has brought financial stability to many farm homes, saved farms from foreclosure, paid for children’s college tuitions, and “brought happiness and comfort to the home,” and therefore such productive work

cannot be wholly condemned (112). Noting that women in 1927 are more independent, better educated in business and economics, and possess technology that frees up their time for work other than household drudgery, Atkeson argues that women benefit greatly from pursuing their own business endeavors (124-127). Women need to have access to work that earns them money because money “is a great stimulant to endeavor” and serves as a visible record of a woman’s accomplishments (Atkeson 115). Besides the personal satisfaction that comes from earning one’s own money, engagement in learning about her business by reading and interacting with others creates a woman who “becomes alert and open-minded and probably gets more out of life than she would without her specialty” (Atkeson 114). Although she argues that handling her own money in a separate bank account provides “excellent training in business” and equips a woman to take over management of the farm if she is widowed, Atkeson never advises women to take on the whole of farm productions by themselves (115). While Atkeson does acknowledge farm-owning women, she points out that they are not readily accepted by the male-dominated Farm Bureau that directs men to interact with agricultural agents to discuss agricultural science and women to work with home demonstration agents to discuss efficient home management (247-248). She resists the gendered assumptions of New Agriculture, seeing women as more active participants in the move to agricultural capitalism and arguing that farm women “are not to be held to . . . strictly self-improvement program[s]” that emphasize practical housekeeping skills but never “the developing of community life”; instead, Atkeson calls for farm agent programs to address the difficulties of “low income from the farms and . . . keeping in practical touch with new scientific ideas” (248, 248, 249). Atkeson’s business-woman-on-the-farm, however, remains largely defined by her role in the domestic sphere, even as she uses this role to gain entry into the marketplace and to the independence bought by her own productive work.

Atkeson, then, makes an argument similar to Gilman's – that women desire the freedom to fully exercise their capabilities and intelligence, the access to power and self-possession through productive and remunerative work, and the development of systems for cooperation that will ultimately benefit society. However, Atkeson acknowledges that the individualist spirit that drives women to work for their own benefit can also be a deterrent to cooperatives in the non-utopian capitalist arena. As Kessler notes, Gilman's utopian vision of women's cooperation "assumes that a work ethic functions to control abusive behavior" (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 55). Atkeson's argument for cooperatives does not share Gilman's optimism because such a utopian idealism fails to account for selfish motives and differences of opinion and personality. Instead, Atkeson cautions that systems of "coöperative selling," canned goods markets, and "egg circle[s]" in which women work together to produce and market products can be successful only if all members of the group produce consistently high quality products and avoid letting "personal feeling[s] . . . creep in" (253, 256). Issues of competition and pricing can interrupt group coherence, as a member may chafe at the idea that she is "morally bound if not legally, to stay with her group even when she could receive a higher price elsewhere" (Atkeson 256). Atkeson's discussion, which is based on her interaction with the real-life farm women, demonstrates that cooperative production and marketing of products – the communal exercise of individualist expressions of production – proves difficult in a capitalist system built on competition and individualism and demonstrates that Gilman's utopian vision of communities such as New Newton and Applepieville, while inspiring, could be difficult to implement. Despite the challenges, Atkeson's *The Woman on the Farm* expresses her optimism that the modern farm woman can successfully use the resources at her disposal – energy, resourcefulness, adaptability,

ingenuity – to engage in successful enterprise that will create the path to her economic and social independence.

B. F. Coen's 1927 report *Successful Farms in Colorado: Some Facts and Factors* examines the operations of ten farms, including a "woman-run farm" where "Mrs. H." successfully combines her domestic and public responsibilities (41). She and her husband had come to Colorado and bought a 360-acre ranch, eventually expanding their holdings to 1,600 acres before he died of appendicitis. After Mrs. H. is widowed and left with four children aged ten and under, she "resolutely set about to carry on in that real job of operating a ranch . . . and raising a family of four children" (Coen 41). Mrs. H. operates seventy farmed acres of alfalfa, oats, wheat, and wild hay, and the remaining land is used for pasture and cattle. Her diversification of crops and products includes garden vegetables, hogs, chickens, and butter (Coen 41). Such a large operation requires skillful management, and she has a hired man to oversee farm operations, but she rides the range to inspect the cattle and "looks after the selling, herself," keeping up with the market reports and "rush[ing] the stock to the Denver market . . . when conditions seem favorable" (Coen 42). She also owns stock in a local creamery, a relatively new investment at the time of Coen's report, but she anticipates future dividends from the sale of the butter produced there. Mrs. H. succeeds because of her fortitude, and Coen notes that "she has too much responsibility but [says] 'I have to pull through,' and she will" (42).

While Mrs. H. succeeds as a farm owner, Coen notes that she is also able to look after the needs of her home and serves as an example of the successful farmer who "not only had succeeded in creating a real love for and appreciation of country life in the young folks, but one that was wielding a real influence in the community" (3). She has found ways to offset the isolation that Gilman describes as the biggest challenge for farm women; she participates in the

community chautauqua and church, she owns stock in a community creamery, and she reads multiple farming publications in an “effort[] to get all the help possible in the farmer’s problems” (Coen 42). Her shrewd management and hard work have afforded modern conveniences including a telephone and a family car, which Coen notes is “the difference between contentment and discontent” because it gives the family recreation and involvement in town (42). Coen notes that Mrs. H’s home contains the rewards of her successful labors: “Flowers to indicate character and love of the beautiful, the piano for the girls, violin for the hired man, sewing machine for the mother, telephone and auto and saddle horses, there is developing on this ranch . . . one of those farm families that make for American stability and democracy” (43).

Mrs. H. is an example of successful navigation up the “agricultural ladder” proposed by Henry C. Taylor, agricultural economics professor at the University of Wisconsin and Chief of the Office of Farm Management of the USDA (169). In his 1919 *Agricultural Economics*, Taylor describes the farm version of the American Dream as an “independent farmer” who achieves success by “climbing the agricultural ladder round by round from wage earner to tenant farmer, then to mortgaged owner and finally to the free owner of a farm” (H. Taylor 169). He argues that “[w]ithout this outlook and this goal the farm hand becomes a different type of man, less to be desired as a workman and as a citizen” because he does not have the pride of owning and profiting from his own land (H. Taylor 169). This vision of agricultural ladder climbers is, however, largely white – he outlined completely different possibilities for “the colored laborer” and those “of a different race” – and male, and in his view, Mrs. H. could only be a farmer by default following the death of her husband (H. Taylor 169).

Although he does acknowledge the existence of women farm owners, Henry C. Taylor devotes little attention to their particular challenges (102-103). He is not an advocate of women’s

farm ownership or economic independence, taking instead a more holistic view of rural life in which homes operate as a single unit made up of a farmer, his wife, and their children. He emphasizes that “[t]o thinking people,” the focus of New Agriculture is not a return to the agrarian “literary revival of the poetic appreciation of nature,” nor is it a site for philanthropic “‘uplift’ motive” or an “out-of-the-way slum to be cleaned out”; instead, he sees the movement toward “reorganization of rural forces” as acting “to replace poorly adjusted social relations with natural and logical adjustments [that] will free the farm population for a full and fair life,” one that fully embraces traditional divisions of labor based on separate spheres ideology (H. Taylor 384). He notes that the Country Life Commission took stock of the country’s “agricultural resources” and centered national attention on “the farm family” – wherein women participated as wives and home builders – as part of a new “determination to study seriously all phases of human life as related to the farm” (H. Taylor 383). Henry C. Taylor mentions that one pioneering survey conducted as a follow-up to the Country Life Commission in Tompkins County, New York, considered the case of women farmers in which “their labor incomes were compared with the labor incomes of men. Their help problem on the farm was inspected. Their opportunity was assessed” (385). He makes no comment on the study’s findings, however, nor does he offer his own assessment of economic opportunities for women. The feminine pronoun “she” in Henry C. Taylor’s book refers to Nature (2), the dairy cow (126, 412, 418), America (347), the housewife buying cabbages (37-8), and the “effective woman” that was a farmer’s wife – never the farm-owning woman (159). His negligible acknowledgement of women farmers reflects national perceptions of women’s role in country life as hardworking wives and mothers, not as entrepreneurs, and these were the very perceptions that women writers of fiction and nonfiction sought to challenge and change.

Forming a Plan: Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow and Writing Successful Farm Women

While farming manuals continued to celebrate the farm woman as wife, authors Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow used their art to forge a different path for women – as farm owners and successful business women. Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* demonstrate an understanding of the transition to farming as a business that MacGarr described, offering Alexandra Bergson and Dorinda Oakley as examples of what women with the right opportunities, sound judgment, and patient determination could accomplish. In the nineteenth century, when business and money were topics considered too vulgar for women to discuss, especially in literature, the move to realism and naturalism at the turn to the twentieth century made topics of everyday life – including money – into more acceptable subjects for discussion. Elizabeth Ammons notes that Gilman, Cather, and Glasgow were part of a “pioneer generation” of women writers who “found themselves, often in deep, subtle ways, emotionally stranded between worlds . . . between a past they wished to leave . . . and a future they had not yet gained” (*Conflicting Stories* 12, 10). These women writers sought to develop new literary forms and introduce subjects that focused more pointedly on issues affecting women’s lives, and in their departure from “the tradition of the domestic writer,” Ammons sees Cather and Glasgow’s fiction as art written about and for the public sphere by women who refused to be “overwhelmed by the traditional demands of marriage and motherhood” or any other demand of the domestic sphere (*Conflicting Stories* 10). I see Cather’s and Glasgow’s novels as using the domestic site – the farmhouse and the fields surrounding it – to propose a version of women’s economic activity that conflates the domestic and public spheres. Both Cather and Glasgow write women farmers who fully participate in the processes of ownership and capitalist enterprise as they redirect their

capacity for nurture to the lands that they inherit and amass rather than to children and marriage, and, in the process, they establish their independent selfhood through thriving agribusinesses.

Cather's Alexandra Bergson and the American Dream, Property, and Work

Published in 1913, Cather's *O Pioneers!* explores questions about kinds of work and ownership, questions that were necessary to ask and answer if women were going to have economic independence, freedom of action, and equal participation in the American Dream. Cather made no claim of being a political writer as did Charlotte Perkins Gilman; instead, Cather's essays on writing firmly assert her belief that literature produced by "the work of a great mind" was art of "intrinsic beauty" that "should teach, but never preach" (*The Kingdom of Art* 406). Cather criticized women writers who wrote for political objectives, noting that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so committed to a political "mission" – that is, as "a book with a direct purpose plainly stated" – that it "[would] never have a place in the highest ranks of literature" (*The Kingdom of Art* 406). Elaine Showalter claims that Cather's pastoral novels – including *O Pioneers!* – were "a reinvention of the American woman's novel as a work of art that was not political, romantic, or didactic," even as she notes that Cather broke with traditional women's subject matter and forms and wrote with "an insistence on access to any subject, any character, and any style" (288, 271). Cather often had the power to produce varied interpretations of her art, as demonstrated by the critical debates on her work. However, in insisting on access to any subject and in creating a character such as Alexandra, whose clear conception of the workings of the capitalist marketplace underwrites her journey, Cather's novel becomes art in the service of the New (Business-Savvy) Woman.

A 1913 *New York Times* review of *O Pioneers!* entitled “A Novel without a Hero” praises the artistry of the novel, while also remarking that Cather’s work is more than just a work of aesthetic beauty. Noting that unlike the hero of an American novel who usually leaves the farm for “the mysteries of politics or finance,” this story of “the splendid blond farm-woman, Alexandra . . . the harvest-goddess,” is also a novel about women’s economic power (“A Novel” BR465). The reviewer states that “[p]ossibly one might call it a feminist novel, for the two heroines [Alexandra and Marie Shabata, the “poor little spirit of love and youth”] are stronger, cleverer and better balanced than their husbands and brothers—but we are sure Miss Cather had nothing so inartistic in mind” (“A Novel” BR465). Indeed, art was Cather’s goal – but so was presenting the “inartistic” idea of an independent, intelligent, self-supporting woman.

Hermione Lee notes that Cather’s “project to take over a male tradition of writing” focused on developing an American women’s writing dedicated to “classical, heroic forms . . . with hard clear lines, strong stories and epic simplicity” rather than “female weakness and emotionalism” (13). Alexandra is Cather’s version of the female hero. Of the Bergson siblings, it is she, and not her brothers Lou or Oscar, who is forward-thinking and has the business savvy to make the family into prosperous farmers and independent land owners.⁵⁶ She understands that farming requires more than the physical work of plowing, planting, and caring for livestock; in the changing conditions of the late nineteenth century, the successful farmer must also participate in the national economy. In 1897, William Allen White describes the disappearance of “the old order . . . which seemed to decree that the farmer’s existence depended upon brawn and not upon

⁵⁶ Sharon O’Brien notes that Alexandra is not “a male-identified woman . . . in female garb. Although Alexandra possesses the seemingly contradictory traits American society divides between men and women – strength and pragmatism as well as intuition and compassion – she is not a male in disguise”; instead, Alexandra “is a woman . . . who cannot be understood if we apply our polarized categories of gender” (429).

brain” (531). Noting that “the farmer of to-day is involved in the meshes of commerce,” White writes that “[t]he successful farmer of this generation must be a business man first, and a tiller of the soil afterward. . . . He must be a capitalist, cautious and crafty; he must be an operator of industrial affairs, daring and resourceful,” and he must be a masterful handler of technology that increases efficiency and allows him to work “not necessarily [with] a strong arm, nor a powerful back. . . . [but] sitting down” (531, 531, 532). Alexandra’s brothers lack the vision to embrace the new forms of farming as Alexandra does. Lou resists Alexandra’s suggestions for innovations in crop and livestock management, thinking that her “experiments” make the family the “conspicuous” subject of neighborly gossip, and he is unpredictable and “apt to go off at half-cock,” making him prone to inefficiency (Cather, *OP* 26, 26, 30). Oscar, believing in “the sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil,” can work tirelessly, but his commitment to “work[ing] like an insect” makes him instinctually dedicated to routine and resistant to change, and, as his “empty look” demonstrates, he lacks the brains that White characterizes as necessary for innovative and successful farming (Cather, *OP* 30).

Unlike her brothers, Alexandra is highly intelligent and open to innovation. She inherits the temperament for business, the “skill and foresight,” as well as “the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out” that her grandfather had possessed (Cather, *OP* 17). Her father recognizes Alexandra’s “resourcefulness and good judgment” when, as his health fails and he is bedridden in the “the sitting-room, next to the kitchen,” he frequently calls her from baking, washing, and ironing tasks to discuss livestock production and markets (Cather, *OP* 17). Impressed by his daughter’s aptitude for the business of livestock production, he increasingly comes to rely on her decision-making abilities (Cather, *OP* 17). Besides learning from her father, Alexandra also reads the newspapers and market reports, and she observes the neighbor’s

farming practices and mistakes so that she develops sound decision-making skills. Ann Romines notes that Cather “celebrated domesticity only when it managed to get beyond the limits of dailiness; improvising, inventing, overcoming, and imagining in ways that popular literature was more likely to sanction in men” (144). In the Bergson home, Alexandra develops her capacity for imagining business as her father and grandfather have. John Bergson’s illness confines him to the house and transforms the domestic space into the site of Alexandra’s economic education, where the development of her capabilities for activity outside of the traditional women’s sphere – an education she may not have received if her father had been outside working with Lou and Oscar – earns her father’s respect and puts her in line to inherit control of the farm’s business operations rather than her mother’s kitchen.

Under Alexandra’s leadership, the Bergsons survive the difficult years of the Agricultural Depression of 1893-1896. In “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” Cather notes that the harsh conditions of life on the prairie during this time “winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents. . . . The strongest stock survived, and within ten years those who had weathered the storm came into their reward” (238).⁵⁷ The Bergsons are strong stock, and they survive by hard work, certainly, but work that is skillfully directed by Alexandra. When John Bergson dies, he leaves 640 acres of debt-free property to his family, placing Alexandra, her mother, and her brothers in a position to survive the drought and to speculate on land when others cannot. Because she has learned by observing the mistakes and successes of those around

⁵⁷ In addition to economic questions, Cather’s novels also address Darwin’s theories of evolution. Bert Bender in his 2004 study of sex and evolution in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* notes “Cather’s intellectual acuity, and her sensitivity to the swirl of scientific and philosophical issues in early twentieth-century thought”; he particularly notes the Darwinist impulse of Cather’s economic vision in which the strongest pioneers survive and prosper (163). Angus Fletcher (2013) argues that Cather’s Darwinist belief that “there are no absolutes in nature” opens up new possibilities for women in the West, an idea that forms his examination of *Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, and *One of Ours* (128). Guy Reynolds, in *Willa Cather in Context* (1996), explores the “Darwinist cartography” that overshadows *The Professor’s House* (130).

her, particularly the “rich people” and “shrewd ones” in town who buy wisely and dare to take chances, Alexandra’s plan to increase her family’s landholdings is based on more than feminine intuition (Cather, *OP* 31, 35). Her scheme for land speculation – essentially to buy up property while the price on land is low, wait five years for land values to double, and then sell a small section at a large profit to cover the mortgage – will promote the family from “struggling farmers” to “independent landowners” of 1,300 acres free and clear (Cather, *OP* 35).⁵⁸

Alexandra’s sense that the land prices will double and that the high country can be profitably farmed comes from careful research; she studies newspapers, observes the astute investments of the rich men in town, tours the river farm country that is “a few years ahead” of the Bergsons’s to discuss crops with the men and poultry with the women, and learns new developments in agricultural science from an young farmer who has been to school (Cather, *OP* 34). Alexandra’s “radiant” face may be set “with love” toward the land that seems “beautiful . . . and strong and glorious,” but at the same time, Alexandra’s business brain – her nature-taming “human will” – looks at the land with “yearning” because it is “rich” (Cather, *OP* 34). Under her learned and deliberate management, the soil will demonstrate its wealth by producing in abundance and making Alexandra and her family prosperous.

In the sixteen-year gap between the novel’s “The Wild Land” and “Neighboring Fields” sections, Alexandra and her brothers do indeed prosper. Alexandra’s land speculation scheme has paid off, and the siblings have divided the property into three individual, prosperous farms. The omission of those sixteen years acknowledges Alexandra’s success without sullyng the novel with too many vulgar details about money, which Cather finds a subject unfit for literary

⁵⁸ Chris Kraus’s endnote in the Barnes and Noble edition of *O Pioneers!* provides a detailed explanation of Alexandra’s plan for speculation (163 n2).

art. In “The Novel Démeublé,” an essay published in 1922 – the ideas of which James Woodress notes were forming during the time that Cather was writing *O Pioneers!*⁵⁹ – Cather describes the move toward realism in literature as “the cataloguing of a great number of material objects, in explaining mechanical processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations” that distract from the “attitude of mind on the part of the writer toward his material” that the novel should portray (37). In particular, she declares monetary subjects unfit for literature: “[A]re the banking system and the Stock Exchange worth being written about at all? Have such things any proper place in imaginative art? . . . [T]he game of business, the game of finance . . . [may be] a stupendous ambition – but, after all, unworthy of an artist” (Cather, “The Novel Démeublé” 37-38). Despite her insistence that economic subjects make poor literature, questions of money are inextricable from *O Pioneers!* and other works that followed, including *Song of the Lark*, *The Professor’s House*, and “The Diamond Mine.” The entire plot of *O Pioneers!* hinges on Alexandra’s successful participation in business activities that bring to fruition her vision of the land as a productive and tamed site of agricultural production.⁶⁰ In full possession of “one of the richest farms on the Divide,” Alexandra may claim that “the land did it” all by itself, and that she and her brothers “suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still,” but neither Carl nor the reader can believe that such a “great farm” that resembles more of “a tiny village” than a homestead developed without meticulous planning and prudent management (Cather, *OP* 40, 53, 40, 40). Janis P. Stout

⁵⁹ Woodress notes that Cather’s “method of severe selectivity,” which she “spell[s] out” in “The Novel Démeublé,” was one she used in both *Alexander’s Bridge* and *O Pioneers!* (175).

⁶⁰ In his 1913 review of *O Pioneers!* Frederic Taber Cooper lamented the omission of the important activities in the novel’s sixteen-year gap: “Now, the story of how Alexandra fought her battle and won it might have been well worth the telling; but this is precisely the part of her history which Miss Cather has neglected to chronicle. Instead, she has passed over it in leaps and bounds . . . somehow the reader cannot bring himself to care keenly whether the young neighbor returns or not, whether Alexandra is eventually happy or not,—whether, indeed, the farm itself prospers or not” (666-667).

argues that Cather's seeming omission of contemporary issues is, rather, an "act of averting her eyes" and of "employing techniques of indirection to write about Nebraska and midwestern life," an artistic choice that is "as self-aware as her choice of the pastoral" and one that shapes Cather's descriptions of "a place that combines at-homeness with freedom of movement," filtered through the "gilding eye" of memory (110, 110, 112, 112, 112). Through the filter of memory, Cather can place Alexandra in the West where the fight for survival made divisions of gender less distinct, requiring instead the full exercise of every individual's particular abilities.⁶¹ Alexandra's intelligence and business savvy make her better suited to nurture crops and fields rather than a husband and children, and on the prairie she can shape her life in ways not possible for the urban housewife.⁶² Angus Fletcher notes that Cather's prairie novels "embraced the possibility that women could perform traditionally masculine tasks" because her nonessentialist views about sex "did not accept that women were limited to doing domestic chores and encouraging moral behavior" (118). On the plains of Nebraska, Alexandra, a woman of "Amazonian fierceness," is capable of anything to which she sets her "slow, truthful, steadfast" mind (Cather, *OP* 11, 33).

Scenes that take place in Alexandra's house also redirect the reader's averted eyes to the economic questions of the novel. In "The Novel D meubl ," Cather argues that an artistic work captures "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named" and that, rather than populate a text with an overabundance of details, she prefers to "throw all the furniture out of the window . . .

⁶¹ Cather's ideas about gender neutrality in the West were reflected eight years later in Frederick Jackson Turner's essay *The Frontier in American Myth*, in which he argued that "The early society of the Middle West was not a complex, highly differentiated and organized society. Almost every family was a self-sufficing unit, and liberty and equality flourished in the frontier periods of the Middle West as perhaps never before in history. American democracy came from the forest" and spread "[o]n the prairies" (153-154, 155). Turner's account of the pioneers also echoes Veblen's language, conflating the "individual activity [and] inventiveness" of workmanship with the predatory impulse of "competition for the prizes of the rich province that awaited exploitation" (Turner 153).

⁶² As Joan Acocella notes in her discussion of *Song of the Lark*, a Cather heroine resists making "marriage [and] family . . . the boundary of her imagination" (2).

and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theater . . . bare for the play of emotions, great and little” (41, 42-43). Alexandra’s home is “curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort,” suggesting that her energies – and Cather’s – are focused on matters more pressing than home decorating (*OP* 40). The material objects that do fill the rooms – Alexandra’s desk and dining room furnishings – enact the novel’s engagement with the social and economic theories of Thorstein Veblen, whose *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and *Essays in Our Changing Order* put forth his theories explaining the opposing forces of the capitalist system that influence the actions of the Bergson family.

Furnishing the Farmhouse with Veblen: The Bergsons’ Workmanship and Predation

Veblen’s 1898 *The Theory of the Leisure Class* examines economic conditions in America and addresses what he sees as the antagonism between two competing instincts, or groups of traits, which he calls the “instinct of workmanship” and the “predatory” instinct (15-16).⁶³ The instinct of workmanship, according to Veblen, is responsible for advancements in human innovation and productivity. Based on logical thinking, cooperation, mutual aid, individual equality, independence, and human mastery over nature, workmanship helps individuals of a society find satisfaction in work and produces “peaceable . . . habits of life” (Veblen, *TLC* 220). Workmanship emphasizes production as a social process that harnesses the efficiency and serviceability of human activity to transform nature into products that serve

⁶³ Although Cather and Veblen were contemporaries writing about the social and economic climate in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, few studies have analyzed the intersections of their work. Guy Reynolds, in *Willa Cather in Context*, notes “striking parallels” between Cather and “her near contemporary, Thorstein Veblen” in his analysis of *The Professor’s House* (130). Michael Spindler also finds Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* a fruitful framework for explicating Cather’s *The Professor’s House*. I argue that, although Cather claimed to distance herself from the political questions of the time in pursuit of literary art, her work demonstrates meaningful engagement with the social and economic developments of her time.

human needs. Veblen identified the instinct of workmanship with the industrious classes of society – the workers, the engineers, and the common man.

In opposition to the instinct of workmanship, Veblen identified the “predatory” instinct, or instinct of “exploit,” as a development of advanced societies that have risen above the level of cooperation required for subsistence (*TLC* 16). The predatory instinct, Veblen argues, emphasizes “prowess, as the virtue *par excellence*,” and those who exhibit sufficient “massiveness, agility, or ferocity” attain the desirable measure of reputability and power in a capitalist society (“The Instinct of Workmanship” 93, 94). The predatory instinct calls for conspicuous displays of wealth and leisure as evidence of the worth of the individual. Veblen notes in particular that the predatory instinct makes possible the subjection of women by perpetuating beliefs about the “tabu [sic] on women and women’s employments”—that is, their domestic duties – and feelings about “the impropriety of women taking rank with men, or representing the community in any relation that calls for dignity and ritual competency” (“The Barbarian” 52). Veblen asserted that the predatory instinct typifies the members of the owner class within capitalism, a class whose goal is to accumulate wealth and to perpetuate the systems that support their social and economic status.

Veblen saw the instinct of workmanship and the predatory instincts as unassimilable and locked in a struggle of significant cultural, economic, and moral implications, and he hoped that a “reassertion of [the] ancient habits of thought” from the “peaceful, industrial mode of life” spawned by the instinct of workmanship would form the corrective to the inequities he saw in the capitalist economy (“The Barbarian” 64). Veblen himself notes that the farming community in particular remains dominated by the instinct of workmanship as the means of self-preservation and economic gain “since labour is their recognised and accepted mode of life” – and therefore a

model of the behaviors that he felt were necessary for ameliorating the effects of capitalist predation (*TLC* 35).

Alexandra's desk, which she inherits from her father, symbolizes the competing instincts that have fueled the family's homesteading enterprise. The walnut secretary is the first thing that John Bergson bought after arriving on the prairie, and, as Alexandra tells her brother Emil, the purchase was "a great extravagance in those days" (Cather, *OP* 97). The desk, which establishes a site for business activity in the domestic space, has been present from the beginning of the family's move to the Nebraska homestead, and, as the site of bookkeeping, planning, and business activity, has signified all along that the family's venture is a business one focused on amassing capital. Operating on the "Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable," Bergson intends "to make something of himself" by becoming a landholder, a position that will afford him economic power and social reputability (Cather, *OP* 17, 98). The Homestead Act of 1862 offered men such as John Bergson a unique opportunity to claim 160 acres of property through one's labor. Because the Homestead Act stated that citizens or intended citizens who filed a claim for a quarter section (160 acres) of land, lived on the property, and cultivated the land could, at the end of five years, receive the title to the land, the conditions of ownership were the ultimate demonstration of the instinct of workmanship.⁶⁴ Veblen notes that the agricultural community values the instinct of workmanship "since labour is their recognised and accepted mode of life, [and] they take some emulative pride in a reputation for efficiency in their work,

⁶⁴ As the novel notes, John Bergson leaves 640 acres of debt-free land to his family, comprised of "his own original homestead [160 acres, the maximum allowed per individual according to the Homestead Act of 1862] and timber claim [160 additional acres as determined by the Timber Culture Act of 1873], making three hundred and twenty acres, and the half-section [320 acres] adjoining, the homestead of a younger brother who had given up the fight [and] gone back to Chicago" (Cather, *OP* 16). Bergson would have received the deeds to his homestead and timber claims after cultivating and inhabiting them for five years and ten years respectively. He would have had to purchase the additional land abandoned by the younger brother, thus requiring the large mortgage that the family works for eleven years to pay off.

this being the only line of emulation that is open to them” (*TLC* 35). Successful homesteading depended on the traits of workmanship that Veblen describes – efficiency, cooperation, resourcefulness, innovation, and intelligence – as necessary in order to control nature for human use. John Bergson’s “hard fight” with the land depends on his ability to demonstrate this type of industry (Cather, *OP* 98). According to Veblen, the instinct of workmanship also manifests in a “peaceable” humanitarian impulse that seeks social cohesion over predatory exploitation of others, a quality that John Bergson demonstrates both when he elicits the cooperation of his family whose labor is necessary for his landowning quest and when he uses his desk not only for managing his own affairs but also to write letters back to the old country to make amends for the unscrupulous and predatory business practices of his father (*TLC* 16).

Although the text celebrates the instinct of workmanship that guides John Bergson’s heroic struggle with the land, less attention is focused on the predatory instinct that underwrites his life’s work. Veblen notes that “[a]mong the country population,” consumption manifests not so much in conspicuous display of consumer goods as in “savings and home comforts known through the medium of neighbourhood gossip sufficiently to serve the . . . general purpose of pecuniary repute” (*TLC* 88). Bergson wants the evidence of pecuniary reputability – debt-free land – and he is willing to spend his physical and emotional life to attain it. Although Bergson dies with little financial capital, he has amassed 640 acres to pass on to his children. Cather carefully averts the reader’s attention from another predatory aspect of John Bergson’s quest by avoiding any mention of the original owners of the land and the exploitative behaviors that made homesteading possible at the expense of Native American populations.

In Chapter 10 of “Neighboring Fields,” the desk also becomes the site of debates over work and ownership in the family’s farming enterprise. Alexandra uses the desk now in the

sitting room of her large farmhouse where she keeps the books for the expansive property that she has amassed. When Lou and Oscar confront Alexandra about her intentions to marry Carl Linstrum because they feel that such a step is “ridiculous” for a forty-year-old woman, their protestation of brotherly concern is a thinly veiled attempt to keep Carl from accessing the property which they feel rightly belongs to them (Cather, *OP* 72). The brothers argue that they have authority over Alexandra’s property and that she cannot dispose of any of it without their consent because in their original homesteading, they did the “real work” of farming the land – that is, the physical labor, plowing, and planting – while she “managed round” and “took it pretty easy” (Cather, *OP* 73). Howard Horowitz notes that “[t]he brothers’ agrarian premise, that manual labor begets value and property, epitomizes the Lockean premise that property is created by mixing with nature one’s labor, an inalienable part of the self – a property in one’s own person – because it is the expression of divinely granted reason” (65). Alexandra “shut[s] her account-book firmly” and prepares to do battle, reminding them of all the times that her business decisions, including planting new crops such as alfalfa and wheat, made their farm profitable (Cather, *OP* 72). The brothers’ argument – that, based on the claim of the Homestead Act’s promise of property purchased by work, their labor makes them the owners of all the Bergson lands, including hers – conflicts with Alexandra’s argument that she has earned her property by skillful business management. She reminds them, “I’ve made more on my farms since I’ve been alone than when we all worked together” (Cather, *OP* 72). Alexandra’s contribution to the thriving farm has been brains, not brawn, and she has done much of her work sitting down – which, as White noted, was the mark of the progressive farmer. Clearly, Cather is arguing that without Alexandra’s vision and management work, the brothers could very well still be laboring like insects, fruitlessly pouring their lives into the ground.

Alexandra's different conceptions of work and property demonstrate the change in determinations of ownership that accompanied the development of capitalism. When she challenges her brothers by saying, "Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my own property," she is asserting Bentham's argument that there is no private property outside of that established by law and protected by the state (Cather, *OP* 74).⁶⁵ Her management of a farming enterprise, which includes hiring workers to do the physical labor from which she profits, makes her a capitalist dealing in commodities rather than a subsistence farmer eking out a living by working a plot of land. In his 1972 landmark article on definitions of property, C. B. Macpherson argues that popular conceptions that define property as things (the kind of ideas that spring from Lockean definitions of labor) are incorrect; instead, he states, "in law and in the writers, property is not things but *rights*, rights in or to things," a shift that "can be traced historically to . . . the period of the rise of the full capitalist market society" (2; emphasis in original). Property, Macpherson argues, is determined not by physical possession but by the right to determine or enforce the use of something, an important distinction as capitalism increasingly displaced people from the products of their labors. Cather demonstrates her knowledge in this shift when she writes that the pioneer "should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" – a concept that both John Bergson and his daughter Alexandra understand (*OP* 27). Macpherson also explains that in the rise of a capitalist society, "property is a claim that will be enforced by society or the state, by custom or convention or law" (3). Alexandra punctuates her claims to ownership by "rapp[ing] impatiently on her desk with her knuckles" – a forceful, unfeminine action that calls up the

⁶⁵ In *Theory of Legislation*, Bentham argues that "there is no such thing as natural property . . . [; it] is entirely the work of law" (111).

authority of her father and announces both her frustration with her brothers' claims and her insistence that she alone has the legal right to determine the use of her property (Cather, *OP* 73). She challenges her brothers to consult with their lawyers, who she knows will defend her position, before "quietly, closing her desk" and telling her brothers, "the authority you exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again" (Cather, *OP* 87). From this time on, Alexandra's property claims are enforced by legal documents rather than familial ties. An out-manuevered Oscar complains, "You can't do business with women," but Lou reminds him that their sister "ain't much like other women-folks" (Cather, *OP* 74). The argument marks a shift in the family's relations; no longer governed by the spirit of cooperation and the instinct of workmanship, their behavior becomes increasingly predatory. When Alexandra had first proposed land speculation, it was because she wanted her brothers to be "not like . . . stupid fellows" who labor futilely and "always . . . have to work," but by cooperation and prudent use of resources, to become financially viable and therefore "independent" (Cather, *OP* 37). However, now that the plan has been realized, their success has brought with it feelings of self-importance, evidence that demonstrates Veblen's claim that "[a] certain standard of wealth . . . is a necessary condition of reputability, and anything in excess of this normal amount is meritorious" (*TLC* 30). In other words, the greater one's accumulation of property, the higher one's sense of importance and reputability. Lou and Oscar puff up with pride as they gain in social repute, and they become "bigoted and self-satisfied," resentful of their younger brother Emil's schooling and Alexandra's success (Cather, *OP* 123). Emil sarcastically suggests that the predatory and self-important brothers would "be better off poor" (Cather, *OP* 124).

Cather more carefully subsumes Alexandra's predatory behaviors in the descriptions of her love for the land; as one of those "who love it and understand it," Alexandra's business

motives seem more nurturing than exacting (*OP* 125). By emphasizing the nobility of Alexandra's vision for the land, Cather averts the reader's eyes from the capitalist impulse that motivates Alexandra and from the fact that Alexandra's happiness and success are directly linked to her ownership of the land and its produce.⁶⁶ Alexandra accumulates so many properties (Emil meets his sister returning from "one of her farms"), and she builds a homesite so large (it resembles "a tiny village" of which she is the mayor), that her holdings earn this woman farmer great respect, as "any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide" (Cather, *OP* 38, 40, 40; emphasis added). Alexandra successfully demonstrates Veblen's claim that in rural communities, one establishes pecuniary reputability through "savings" – that is, crops and properties – and "home comforts," and she serves as a model of predatory success that garners her social status among the farmers in her area of the country (*TLC* 88).

However predatory her motivations for land acquisition, Alexandra's behaviors do not lapse into the unscrupulousness that Veblen thought would arise in the propertied class or among the "captains of industry" (*TLC* 209). Cather's novel demonstrates the business capabilities of the woman farmer, but is not a celebration of ruthless and unchecked capitalism. As James R. Bash notes, "Cather . . . is in no way opposed to individual free enterprise or to the capitalistic system, but she does denounce any surrender of aesthetic ideal or any compromise of moral scruple as a means to profit or wealth" (161). Alexandra's vision stretches beyond property ownership; as she says to Carl, "If the world were no wider than my cornfields, if there were not something beside this, I wouldn't feel that it was much worth while [sic] to work" and to "pay a

⁶⁶ As Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin note, Alexandra's "love and yearning for 'the land' become her love and yearning for *land*" (50; emphasis in original).

high rent” of “grow[ing] hard and heavy” (Cather, *OP* 56). She also avoids the rapacity and exploitation that often accompanies the predatory instinct, and, unlike her brothers Lou and Oscar, she avoids slipping into the nastiness of such behavior. Alexandra is kind to her workers, fair in her dealings with others, generous in her support of Ivar who loses his own land “through mismanagement,” and even forgiving of her brother’s murderer, Frank Shabata (Cather, *OP* 42).

As her dining room shows, Alexandra also takes little delight in predatory displays of wealth to impress others. Veblen notes that in late nineteenth-century America, possession of property was insufficient to establish one’s social position: “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men . . . [t]he wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (*TLC* 36). This prevailing attitude led to a rise in accumulation of material goods to demonstrate the wealth – and therefore the respectability – of an individual, a practice he defines as “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, *TLC* 68). Veblen observes that the domestic sphere and the women who inhabit it become the vehicle for this evidence, in elaborately furnished homes and fashionable dress, and in the possession and display of certain “necessary” items such as a “silver table service, . . . silk hats, starched linen, many articles of jewellery and of dress” (*TLC* 99). The interior of Alexandra’s famously large house does not make the ostentatious display that Veblen describes. Instead, her home is “curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort,” with some rooms empty and only one that is “papered, carpeted, over-furnished” (Cather, *OP* 40). This dining room, the public space where she entertains her guests, is the most elaborate of the rooms, decorated with “highly varnished wood and colored glass and useless pieces of china [that] were conspicuous enough to satisfy the standards of the new prosperity” (Cather, *OP* 44). Alexandra cares little about keeping up with fashionable displays of wealth; she willingly lets the furniture dealer decorate her dining room to “look like his display window” and “frankly” says

that she “knew nothing about such things,” but she understands that her guests, including Annie Lee – Lou’s over-dressed and pompadoured wife who fully participates in conspicuous consumption – “like[] to see about them these reassuring emblems of prosperity” (Cather, *OP* 46). The rooms that Alexandra prefers to inhabit are the kitchen and sitting room, where the “old homely furniture” includes comfortable and useful items such as her father’s desk that support the work that she finds fulfilling (Cather, *OP* 41). In “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” Cather would lament the rise of “heaped-up, machine-made materialism” that values prowess and “tries to cheat its aesthetic sense by buying things instead of making anything”; she finds that such conspicuous consumption overwhelms the nobler instinct of workmanship that inspired a love of the land and motivated the pioneer (238).

Alexandra’s preference for practical furnishings and objects reflects Cather’s anti-materialism and her concerns about the troubling effects that predatory consumption could have on the character of women. Honor McKittrick Wallace examines the historical conditions of the rise of consumerism in Cather’s novels of the 1920s, noting that in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor’s House*, “Cather is only one of many social critics to condemn the results of the tying of women’s desire to consumption” (146). Exploring connections between Cather’s novels and the rise of the advertising culture of the 1920s, Wallace notes that the era’s increasing focus on consumerism conflated the public and private spheres, making the longing for material goods for the home and the body, as well as the excitement of the shopping experience, into “legitimate” public expressions of women’s desire that were necessary for the growth of capitalism but, if unchecked, could ultimately lead to licentious behavior (151). In *O Pioneers!*, Cather questions such public expressions of desire that were already beginning to subsume the premodern ideals of loyalty, diligence, and workmanship that Alexandra demonstrates. Cather’s concerns about

female integrity in the coming consumer age are personified in the greedy and competitive Annie Lee who, though predating the 1920s by a decade, nevertheless reveals the mounting dangers to the character of women who fall into predatory consumerism. Annie Lee sees money and position as things to be desired and grasped. It is Annie Lee, not Alexandra, who is reassured about the family's social standing by the ornate furnishings in Alexandra's dining room. She is greedy and conniving like her husband Lou, and while she behaves well toward Alexandra, Cather carefully notes that the politeness is not motivated by affection. Annie Lee seeks out the opportunity to question the kitchen girls about Alexandra's "domestic economy" in order to use "what she discovered . . . to her own advantage with Lou," since she knows that he will want to best his sister by acquiring the latest conveniences such as a bathtub (Cather, *OP* 49). As does her husband, Annie Lee believes that having the latest innovations in her home makes her a winner in the competition for social rank. She, then, has fallen victim to the endless (and ultimately unwinnable) competition that Veblen notes in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*: "the end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength. So long as the comparison is distinctly unfavourable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot" (31). Having given full rein to her desire for social position and the goods that demonstrate her family's wealth, Annie Lee "ha[s] reasons for not wanting her husband to cross Alexandra too openly" about assisting the "disgraceful" Ivar (Cather, *OP* 47). She defers to Alexandra, partly out of respect for her sister-in-law's powerful position within the family, but mostly because she wants to benefit from Alexandra's generosity – that is, she hopes that Alexandra will follow through on her intention to buy Milly a piano, since possessing that most iconic consumer purchase would mark Annie Lee's home as one of the most prosperous on the prairie. As a woman who values

social appearances and “being fixed up so nice” more than compassionate care of an elderly neighbor or bonds of familial love, Annie Lee is the unflattering portrait of a woman who, to the detriment of her character, too readily embraces consumerism (Cather, *OP* 47).

In contrast, Alexandra prefers to purchase consumer items for the comfort that they provide to others and for their ability to preserve the finer qualities of the past. As Wallace notes, Cather resists the “orgy of acquisition” that “emphasize[s] pleasure over practicality” (144, 151). Alexandra finds pleasure *in* practicality, and her selective consumption of material goods is self-aware and measured rather than rapacious and uncontrolled. She acknowledges the need for things but is not lustful for them and so avoids the chronic dissatisfaction and moral decline that can accompany the unchecked desire for material goods. While Alexandra is predatory in her acquisition of property, Cather is careful that her heroine avoids slipping into the pitfalls of unchecked greed; although Alexandra operates her business successfully and amasses a great amount of land, she is ultimately satisfied with her acquisitions – she tells Carl that she has “land enough, at last!” – and she continues to use her wealth to look to the interests of others, including Ivar who comes to live on her farm and the young Swedish girls who immigrate to America and work in her kitchen until they can establish homes of their own (Cather, *OP* 54). She purchases enough dining room furnishings to effectively communicate the position she has earned as head of the family and to reassure her status-seeking relatives of the family’s wealth but, in private, she herself prefers the objects that link her to her family heritage and to the land. Wallace notes that Cather values the “premodern” ideals as expressed through heroines who “succeed in combining femininity and materialism in a way that Cather views as appropriate” (154). Alexandra demonstrates the balance between purposeful consumption and self-control that Cather wishes to preserve in the American woman.

In Alexandra's nurturing relationship with her niece Milly, Cather indicates her desire that future generations of women would grow up to be more like Alexandra than Annie Lee. Alexandra has "great hopes of Milly," her bright and accomplished fifteen-year-old niece who is "a great deal more at ease [with her aunt] than she was with her mother [Annie Lee]" (Cather, *OP* 99, 47). The generous Alexandra plans to buy a piano for Milly, not because she wants to establish her niece as a prosperous young woman who can "go out into company" and attract eligible (and prosperous) suitors – that is Annie Lee's aim – but because Milly demonstrates an appreciation of the past, learning her grandfather's songs from the Swedish songbook, spending time with Alexandra reading from the "old books," and "listen[ing] to stories about the early days on the Divide" (Cather, *OP* 51, 49). The piano, then, becomes the kind of "good consumption" that Wallace notes in Cather's work, a material object that can be purchased and used to help preserve the values of the past – hard work, family loyalty, contentment, and perseverance – that Cather saw as disappearing with the encroaching practices of predatory consumption (151). Milly, who is very "uncomfortable" when Annie Lee brags to Carl about her daughter's artistic and academic accomplishments and their family possessions, shows a more temperate attitude about rank and property than her audacious mother (Cather, *OP* 51). Instead, she has her grandmother Bergson's "comfortable and comfort-loving nature," meaning that Milly can contentedly enjoy material possessions for the beauty that they add to life and home rather than for the way they boldly stake out a position of social rank (Cather, *OP* 47). As a third-generation pioneer, Milly will not have to struggle against the land, but she will face different challenges as a woman navigating a rapidly changing social environment. Alexandra plans to leave property – "the land [that] belongs to the future" – to Milly, placing the young woman in a position of financial independence that will allow her freedom to choose the life that she wants,

but Cather's unsaid hope is that Milly, the woman of the future, will be wise enough to navigate the perils of consumerism and retain a fidelity to the ideals of her pioneer past (*OP* 125).

The novel also demonstrates apprehension over the loss of community that Gilman identifies in her discussions of isolated farm women and that Veblen hoped to remedy by advocating a return to the instinct of workmanship and cooperation. The Bergson family cooperated until they became so prosperous that they had property and time enough to divide the land, pursue separate interests – and argue over money. Estranged from her brothers, Alexandra finds that her love for the land and her successful accumulation of wealth are inadequate to meet her needs for companionship, and she is even further isolated after the deaths of Marie and Emil. Although she creates a kind of community with her workers – she eats with her farmhands (unless she has visitors) and enjoys the company of kitchen girls and their entertaining tales from the Old Country – these relations are always overshadowed by the owner-worker relationship which keeps her in a predatory seat at the head of the table. In the end, she must marry Carl to prevent becoming isolated. He is the friend who has helped throughout her life “by understanding [her] . . . the only way one person ever really can help another” (Cather, *OP* 29). Again, Cather carefully averts the reader's attention from the unsaid thing; as an artist more concerned with aesthetic expression than in predatory acquisition, Carl will also not interfere with Alexandra's ability to operate her business as she pleases.

Granville Hicks famously argued that Willa Cather “never once tried to see contemporary life as it is” and instead fell into “supine romanticism because of a refusal to examine life as it is” (144, 147). Much of Cather criticism focuses on the novel as a pastoral celebration of the bygone

pioneer, an aesthetic and gentle version of the national prosperity myth.⁶⁷ Certainly the focus on the environment and agrarian elements and Alexandra's love of the land support such readings. However, recent critical studies address "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named" in Cather's work, arguing that she engaged with important political, social, and economic questions of her day (Cather, "The Novel D meubl " 41).⁶⁸ Kelley Wagers notes that Cather's "practice of brushing history against the grain . . . [as] a method of addressing historical subjects in literary narrative without making them subject to totalizing explanations" is to invite in the unsaid and allow it to quietly speak to readers (108). *O Pioneers!* goes against the historical domestic ideologies to demonstrate that hard work and fortitude can lead to economic prosperity and independence for a woman. However, as David Laird has argued, the novel "acknowledges the darker edges to which Alexandra's authority cannot reach, rebuking those readers in search of a consoling or sentimental fiction" (246). Alexandra's story ends quietly, but not without pain, acknowledging that economic independence alone is insufficient to satisfy the human heart.

More often in realist literature of the time, the pioneer woman resembled Aunt Georgiana in Cather's 1904 story "A Wagner Matin e" than the prosperous Alexandra. Aunt Georgiana is a woman with musical gifts and great spirit whose years of work on the prairie leave her a

⁶⁷Sharon O'Brien sees Cather's novel as an attempt to write a "pastoral and epic" story in which the focus of Alexandra's triumph is more communal than individual (432). In *Working the Garden*, William Conlogue argues that Cather writes a pastoral version of farm life suited to the "urban agrarians" who would be reading her book (67-68). Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin – in their historical reading of *O Pioneers!* – claim that Cather omitted financial and legal details so that the novel could be read as a myth of the American Dream (50). Rula Quawas, in turn, reads Alexandra as a female version of the mythical Western hero in "Carving an Identity and Forging the Frontier: The Self-Reliant Female Hero in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" Mary Paniccia Carden, in "Creative Fertility and the National Romance in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My  ntonia*," reads the land as reflecting Alexandra's productive body and female creativity. David Laird reads *O Pioneers!* as a "failed pastoral" (247).

⁶⁸ Stephen D. Cox explores Cather's engagement with the economic theories of Ludwig von Mises and James Madison and argues that Cather demonstrates a finely nuanced understanding of capitalism in her novels. Mark D. Noe's agricultural reading of *O Pioneers!* argues that Cather uses unsuccessful U.S. federal governmental efforts to plant white mulberry groves to establish a silk industry as a trope for failed marriages in the novel. Kelley Wagers examines racial politics and revisionist history in *One of Ours* and *The Professor's House*.

“misshapen figure” with hands that are “twisted into mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with” (Cather, “A Wagner” 197, 207). Cather valued Wagner’s ability to achieve “scenic literalness in the music drama,” but her own literal portrayal of the effects of the pioneer life on a woman’s body and spirit hit a sour note with readers who found the story’s descriptions too close for comfort (“The Novel D meubl ” 38). Woodress writes that Cather intended “A Wagner Matin e” as a tribute to the “uncomplaining,” indomitable spirit of the pioneer woman, and she was surprised by the negative reaction of readers who were used to more romantic portrayals of hardworking farm women, perhaps portrayals similar to Shepherd’s Dolly and Lou in *How Two Girls Tried Farming* (116-117). Fletcher notes that “Cather sees in nature the end of idealism” because nature is ultimately untamable, unpredictable, and unsympathetic to human travails (122). Aunt Georgiana’s final sobbing cry of “I don’t want to go!” leaves the reader asking – Go where? Away from the Wagner performance? Back to the farm? (Cather, “A Wagner” 210). In this unresolved ending, Cather reminds the reader of the things unsaid: life rarely mimics romantic literature, nature is no respecter of persons, and hard work does not always guarantee economic prosperity. Alexandra Bergson succeeds as a pioneer woman of vision and determination who, from the desk in her sitting room, amasses and operates a farming empire, but she does so only because she understands the workings of both nature and economics.

Cather wrote in 1923 that “the splendid story of the pioneers is finished and . . . no new story worthy to take its place has begun” (“Nebraska” 238). In her later years, the author shunned the materialism and technology of modernity. Chris Kraus notes that, “[a]s Cather aged, her vision of the world became considerably darker. . . . [She] shunned all tokens of modernity . . . [,] refused to ride in cars, detested Freud, and pitied younger writers who lacked a firmly rooted sense of national identity from which to write” (xxvii). Cather found comfort in looking back,

like Veblen, to a time when the instinct of workmanship prevailed, and in 1923 she wrote, “I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination” (“Nebraska” 237). This backward focus of her pioneer novels, this portrayal of the pioneer woman of worth, becomes Cather’s forward-looking call to revive the instinct of workmanship as a remedy for the predatory effects of capitalism.

Glasgow’s Dorinda Oakley and Women’s Workmanship

Elaine Showalter notes that Cather’s work planted ideas that continued to grow, and that, because of the emphasis on canon formation following World War I that emphasized the “energetic and masculine” and excluded many women writers, Glasgow was one of the “women writers in the 1920s . . . [who] were still far from harvesting the literary seeds . . . [Cather] had planted” (294, 295).⁶⁹ Glasgow’s 1925 *Barren Ground*, along with much feminist literature of

⁶⁹ Several critics compare Cather and Glasgow, often noting the similarities of themes and subject matter between two authors who competed for readers and critical accolades. In his 1930 analysis of “The Feminine Novel” in *The New American Literature*, Fred Lewis Pattee compares the two authors’ work and sees them as part of the women novelists’ “feminine assumption of leadership” in the turn toward realism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature (268). Debra D. Munn argues that Cather’s *O Pioneers!* served as a possible inspiration for Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*, noting the many parallels between the novels’ plots and characters. Elizabeth Ammons compares the pastoral bent of two novels’ heroines and notes that “Dorinda becomes the artist, the creator she is capable of being; and her medium, like Cather’s Alexandra Bergson . . . will be [to shape] the earth itself” into a new “separate all-female kingdom” (*Conflicting Stories* 174). C. Downs argues that *Barren Ground* and *O Pioneers!* feature fully formed women characters and that the authors’ rewriting of the traditional marriage plot acted as a bridge to early twentieth-century tropes that “reconnect[ed] old parts to new patterns” (51). Merrill Macguire Skaggs examines the “thirty-two year literary rivalry between . . . [the] subtle southern women writers” Glasgow and Cather, explores the representation of the “Virginia lady” in both authors’ novels, and claims that Dorinda Oakley is a rewriting of Alexandra Bergson “set . . . down in the Cather country of western Virginia” (159, 161). William Conlogue argues that both Glasgow and Cather use progressive farmers to “articulate political and social justice positions on an urban-defined agriculture” in order to “refute pastoral assumptions about rural life that obscure social upheavals” (5). Mary Weeks-Baxter notes that Glasgow’s Virginian “pioneer” characters are “spiritual kin to Willa Cather’s” (29).

the decade, focuses on a return to the soil that is often bleak and barren,⁷⁰ but the novel also regenerates conversations about women's capabilities and reworks the goals of domestic discourse to include economic enterprise. *Barren Ground* takes up the idea of the woman farmer and brings her into the twentieth century – to prosper by hard work and prowess.

Because she was writing about the South, Glasgow's woman farmer was not part of settling the West like Cather's Alexandra Bergson. Dorinda Oakley instead reaches farther back – to the pioneer history of Virginia – to find what Glasgow calls “the raw stuff of American civilization, the beginning and, one is tempted to add, the end of American democracy” (*ACM* 155). There, Dorinda finds the ingenuity and resolve needed to revive her family's barren land that has been ravaged by the Civil War and the ensuing tenancy of Reconstruction, a project that her father and brothers have failed to accomplish. According to Mary Weaks-Baxter, the novel “suggests that in order for the southern woman to regain her humanity she must have the independence and self-sustaining qualities of her ancestors, the pioneer-yeomen who settled and first planted the southern earth. . . . [with] individual power and courage” (19). Glasgow's second-wave pioneer mines her ancestral “vein of iron” to forge a new ending, one that by employing twentieth-century science and technology, business acumen, and persistence to the farm that she inherits also makes her a visionary who can help bring the Southern farmer to equal footing with the American economy at large and can carve out new avenues of economic independence for women (*BG* 81).

Barren Ground was published in 1925 with a statement on the dust jacket declaring that with the novel “realism at last crosses the Potomac” (*Scura* 255). This claim that the novel

⁷⁰ For examples of this type of bleak portrayal of women and farming, see Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* and Evelyn Scott's *Escapade*.

marked a significant shift in Southern fiction – that, finally, Southern literature took as its subject the incongruities and complexities of modern life in all of America – is an idea that Glasgow herself asserts. In *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction*, Glasgow states her intention in writing the novel: “I was, in my humble place and way, beginning a solitary revolt against the formal, the false, the affected, the sentimental, and the pretentious, in Southern writing. . . . I felt, ‘Life is not like this, . . . [w]hy must novels be false to experience?’” (8). *Barren Ground* is not a moonlight and magnolias work of Southern fiction glorifying the True Womanhood of an antebellum past; instead, it is a naturalist commentary on the economic and social conditions of the 1920s, conditions that tie Glasgow’s novel to works such as Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* and Hamlin Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads*. Glasgow’s mission in *Barren Ground* is specifically gendered and oriented toward important questions of the science and economics of the 1920s. She wrote, “In the accommodating processes of evolution, while nature is scrupulously looking after large matters and organic forms of life, even so small a body as the novel may not miss entirely the effects of [nature’s] perpetual rhythm and change,” and she intended for *Barren Ground* to portray the survival of the fittest – this time, with a woman who enacts “a complete reversal of a classic situation” and becomes “the victor instead of the victim” (Glasgow, *ACM* 23, 160, 160). In *Barren Ground*, this reversal of situations most especially occurs in sites of economics and business that demonstrate Dorinda’s ability to survive – even thrive – in the marketplace business of farming.

In *A Certain Measure*, Glasgow states that she developed an “early interest in science and economics” (57). Largely self-educated, she “virtually memorized John Stuart Mill” and learned economics under the tutelage of her brother-in-law George Walter McCormack (Godbold 26). In her autobiography *The Woman Within*, Glasgow writes that she “passed with distinction” a

privately administered exam in political economy that Dr. George Frederick Holmes from the University of Virginia gave to his male students (women at that time were not allowed to attend classes), an accomplishment that she found quite gratifying (78). Carrington C. Tutwiler, Jr., notes that Glasgow's library, which "represented the accumulation of a lifetime, and illustrated quite literally the growth of the author's mind," contained volumes by both John Stuart Mill and Thorstein Veblen (3, 10, 28). In her early fifties at the time she was writing *Barren Ground*, Glasgow was less idealistic than in her days as a youthful "eager student of John Stuart Mill" (ACM 57). By "the rootless years" of the 1920s, she had suffered disappointment and difficulty, both personally and professionally (Glasgow, *TWW* 267). Glasgow struggled with money,⁷¹ illness, failed romantic relationships, difficult family situations (an overbearing father and the death of her mother when Glasgow was twenty), and faint critical praise of her work, and her heroines reflect the difficult choices that self-supporting women face. Glasgow notes that *Barren Ground* sprung from the material "which I had gathered up, as a rich harvest, from the whole of my life" (*TWW* 270). Finding Dorinda the character to which she was "connected . . . by a living nerve," Glasgow declared that her heroine "is universal. She exists wherever a human being has learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility" (ACM 163, 154). More somber in tone than Cather's optimistic pioneer stories, Glasgow's novel recognizes both the arbitrary forces of nature and the unpredictability of life; she describes *Barren Ground* as her best work, one that is "long, thoughtful, tragic, but not melancholy . . . and saturated through and through with reality" (*Perfect Companionship* 152).

⁷¹ Glasgow's biographer E. Stanley Godbold, Jr., notes that "after the death of her father, Ellen had the responsibility to keep up a large house. Though she inherited a small trust fund from her father, and was given a larger one by her brother, she still felt insecure since she had no management ability," and she therefore depended heavily on the management skills of her housekeeper Anne Virginia Bennett (115).

As Linda W. Wagner notes, one of Glasgow's favorite situations in fiction is the "girl making good in nonconventional ways" (22). In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow's heroine Dorinda Oakley makes good by facing difficult circumstances head-on and triumphing over the social and economic realities at work against her.

Glasgow's complete reimagining of woman's situation engages with the critique of capitalist society found in Veblen's essay entitled "The Barbarian Status of Women," in which he describes the flawed American society that celebrates "honorific employments . . . involv[ing] a large element of prowess" over "industry" – that is, productive labor (50, 51). Veblen maintains that attitudes from the barbaric phase of humanity's past linger in capitalist society, perpetuating the assumption that women have an "incapacity for exploit" and are therefore fit only for "the uneventful everyday work of the group" that occurs in the domestic sphere ("The Barbarian" 51). Veblen argues, as Gilman did earlier, that in such a system marriage is an economic function, a form of "coercive ownership" and a woman's "initiation into servitude" so that her function is to consume and display goods that demonstrate the wealth and establish the pecuniary reputability of her husband's household ("The Barbarian" 55, 58). However, Veblen maintains that change occurs only when economic stressors make it necessary: "It is the individuals. . . who have the liveliest incentive to reconstruct the received scheme of life [that] are most readily persuaded to accept new standards; and it is through the need of the means of livelihood that men are placed in such a position" (*TLC* 195). In "The Barbarian Status of Women," he proposes that an increased emphasis on the instinct of workmanship such as he saw in the "communities which have departed farthest from the ancient system of status, and have . . . immediately engaged in the modern industries" would fundamentally change traditionally gendered paradigms and improve the status of women (Veblen 59, 60).

Barren Ground demonstrates Glasgow's familiarity with Veblen's theories, as she writes a reversal of traditionally gendered predatory paradigms, creating a woman who accumulates property and its accompanying cultural, social, and economic power and refuses "ownership-marriage" and a patriarchal household (Veblen, "The Barbarian" 55). Dorinda serves as the trailblazer that Veblen describes: "The evolution of society is substantially a process of mental adaptation on the part of individuals under the stress of circumstances which will no longer tolerate habits of thought formed under and conforming to a different set of circumstances in the past" (*TLC* 192). Dorinda spends the novel navigating the tension between workmanship and predation, the domestic and the public, and she battles the environmental forces and internal drives that she cannot fully control or understand in order to change what she can no longer tolerate.

Dorinda, then, is a New Woman, going against societal expectations of female piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. She both refuses and is denied the roles of wife and mother. Dorinda is robbed of the chance to assume the traditional role of wife when Jason Greylock jilts her and marries the wealthier Geneva Ellgood. Although Jason leaves Dorinda pregnant, an accident causes her to miscarry, and she never becomes a mother – in fact, motherhood is "ruinous" and fatal for many women in this novel (Glasgow, *BG* 250). Dorinda's estrangement from the domestic pushes her away from traditional women's roles and toward the economic matters at hand. She cannot believe in her mother's self-negating Calvinism, she feels no guilt or reticence about her sexual relationship with Jason, she prefers work in the barn to entrapment within the confines of the house, and, with singular focus on her goals, she orders around almost everyone in the novel. Dorinda meets life head-on as a serious business that requires diligent workmanship and a predatory temperament. She intends to reclaim the farm that

has “eaten away” the life of her mother and determines that “Old Farm must be made to pay,” and must be turned from worn-out tobacco fields and wild areas covered in broomsedge grass into a dairy that produces “the best” quality butter for sale to hotels in the city (Glasgow, *BG* 188, 190, 191).

Glasgow’s novel boldly sends Dorinda into entrepreneurial farming – to face the elements, the soil, and her own weaknesses in a battle of force that will smelt the “vein of iron” that runs through her inner being and forms her “essential self [which] would reassert its power and triumph over disaster” (*BG* 141). Mined from the ground, smelted, and tempered, iron⁷² is an element that can be made into something new – a weapon, protective armor, or a building material that supports great structures. It can also be used to make shackles for prisoners. In the novel this vein of iron links Dorinda metaphorically to the ground she works, fortifies her blood, protects her, and gives her the internal strength that makes her resilient and robust – but it is also stern, unyielding, and sometimes harsh. Glasgow’s experiment tests the difference between the instinct of workmanship and the predatory instinct in a rural economy where the two were intertwined and did not diverge in the same way as in industrial urban capitalism. Dorinda is both worker and predator, and in the naturalist environment of her novel, Glasgow tests the woman with a vein of iron in order to temper the extraordinary, the courageous, and the imperishable in her character.

⁷² Dorinda says, “No matter how hard you work it always comes back to the elements in the end” (Glasgow, *BG* 57). Iron is by mass the most common element on earth. It is the fourth most common element in the earth’s crust and is therefore present in the soil of Dorinda’s farm. Iron is also necessary for healthy body function and, as a trace element found in almost all living organisms, bodily connects Dorinda “to the land [that] she had given her heart and mind” (Glasgow, *BG* 365). Glasgow portrays Dorinda’s relationship to the land in language that resembles the flow of oxygen (as intangible “spirit”) transported through her body by the hemoglobin (composed largely of iron) in her blood: “The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out toward it again” (*BG* 408).

Dorinda must rely on her instinct of workmanship if she is to succeed where her father and brothers have not. After years of poor farming practices that have depleted the soil, Dorinda's father, "a good man and a tireless labourer," dies having "sacrificed his life to the land," and she thinks him "a member of some affectionate but inarticulate [and exhausted] animal kingdom" (Glasgow, *BG* 7, 231, 206). Her brothers fare no better. But Dorinda is armed with "unflagging enterprise" and "the courage of desperation," and her vision is to make the farm profitable by employing scientific farming methods to revitalize the exhausted soil and to establish pastures that will support a dairy and butter-making business (Glasgow, *BG* 269). During a brief move to New York City, she reads books on farming chemistry and dairy herd management, attends lectures by "a professor [from] the University of Wisconsin[is]" dairy school, and borrows start-up capital from her friends before returning to her homeplace – which she inherits from her mother, not her father – to take over the farming operations after her father's death (Glasgow, *BG* 187). Dorinda's energy seems boundless, and she works harder than any of those that she hires, knowing that "[b]ecause I am a woman the hands will expect me to shirk, and I must show them that I know what I am about" (Glasgow, *BG* 219). Indeed, her industriousness earns the respect of all who know her. Fluvanna remarks on Dorinda's "stayin' power," exclaiming that she "[has] never seen [any] man work as hard as . . . Miss Dorinda" (Glasgow, *BG* 267). Dorinda also embraces technology, using mechanized churns and separators in order to increase productive efficiency and avoid wasting valuable time and energy in her dairy and butter-making business. Mary Weeks-Baxter notes that the products of Dorinda's farm – dairy cattle, chickens, butter, and eggs – are "symbols of fertility rather than of poverty, of growth rather than of futility" (25). They also link Dorinda's business enterprise to the larger

project shared by fiction and non-fiction writers of the time period who sought to create business opportunities for women from the materials available to them in the domestic sphere.

Among the forage crops, Dorinda introduces alfalfa, a plant that demonstrates her ability to incorporate workmanship's "productive efficiency" to regenerate her farm's barren ground (Veblen, *TLC* 93). Alfalfa was introduced to American farmers in the mid-nineteenth century by immigrants to the Western states from South America and then spread to the Midwestern territories, eventually becoming "a key crop in the expanding West of the 19th Century," as Cather's Alexandra Bergson demonstrates (California Alfalfa and Forage Association 4-5).⁷³ Farming publications from the time period describe the regenerative properties of this forage crop. The U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's 1889 report recommends alfalfa as a beneficial and profitable crop, stating that "[w]hen alfalfa is grown and its products are properly utilized upon the farm it . . . fulfill[s] the proper aim of rational agriculture, which is to transform into produce the raw materials at our disposal in the atmosphere and soil. . . . It acts in the hands of the farmer as an agent for rendering locked-up capital available" (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Report* 511). Alfalfa was grown in colonial Virginia⁷⁴ but was not widely cultivated there until German immigrants introduced cold-tolerant varieties in the early twentieth century – making farmers such as those in Pedlar's Mill who planted it visionaries (California Alfalfa and Forage Association 4-5). Early in the novel, a young Jason Greylock encourages farmers to plant alfalfa,

⁷³ During Alexandra Bergson's confrontation with her brothers Lou and Oscar in *O Pioneers!*, she reminds them that her decision to plant alfalfa was visionary and productive: "When I put in our first field of alfalfa you both opposed me, just because I first heard about it from a young man who had been to the University. You said I was being taken in then, and all the neighbors said so. You know as well as I do that alfalfa has been the salvation of this country" (Cather, *OP* 86).

⁷⁴ In a May 1, 1794, letter to Tench Coxe, Jefferson wrote that he retreated from the political intrigues of the French Revolution, "preferring infinitely to contemplate the tranquil growth of my lucerne [alfalfa] & potatoes" at Monticello (1014). "Lucern[e]" is the English and Danish name for the plant; "alfalfa" is the Spanish name that is more commonly used (Wing 3).

but he tells Dorinda that most farmers are resistant to a change from the old ways: “Half daft, that’s what they call anybody who wants to step out of the mud or try a new method” (Glasgow, *BG* 88). When Nathan Pedlar plants alfalfa and gets four cuttings a year, Jason says that the other farmers “think he’s a fool because he isn’t satisfied with one poor crop of corn” (Glasgow, *BG* 88). By the time Dorinda takes over her family farm a few years later, she comes to Nathan, not Jason, for advice on the crop that eventually makes her business venture successful. Until this point in the novel, Dorinda has found Nathan dull, but in their conversation about alfalfa she discovers that “[s]he was listening to him, for the first time in her life, with attention and interest. It was surprising, she reflected, what a bond of sympathy farming could make” (Glasgow, *BG* 213). The instinct of workmanship inspires cooperation and sympathy between members of the group, and Dorinda will return to this sympathy – this forming of community through the activities of farming – later in life when prosperity leaves her wealthy but lonely.

Alfalfa’s restorative properties reflect the impact that Dorinda makes on her farmland. In his manual *Alfalfa Farming in America*, Joseph E. Wing attributes the plant’s restorative properties to its six-foot roots with “millions of . . . tap roots” that make the soil “honeycombed” and “porous” and fertilized “with nitrogen drawn from the air” (37). Wing’s own experiments with the crop show that alfalfa makes the land “more mellow and friable than usual” and, by reintroducing nitrogen into the soil, leaves it fertilized enough to double his yield of corn, even in a drought year (36). The deep roots also make alfalfa drought tolerant, and, as Wing describes it, “Deeply buried in the soil of the fields, the alfalfa roots know nothing of the vicissitudes of winter. . . Alfalfa once rooted in dry rich soil has the permanence of the wild native things” (44, 45). Dorinda “drilled her energy down into the soil,” and, much like the tap roots of her alfalfa plants, she breaks up the hardened and depleted past to generate new results and new growth

(Glasgow, *BG* 275). She also makes herself impervious to the vicissitudes and difficulties of farm life and finds great satisfaction in knowing that “by that subtle combination of prudence and imprudence which she called character, she had turned disappointment into contentment and failure into success” (Glasgow, *BG* 370). Carl Van Doren’s review of the novel notes that “Dorinda . . . is the husband of her farm,” the caretaker and prudent manager who brings the farm back to life (qtd. Scura 251). After years of energy and hard work – the diligent and prolonged demonstration of the instinct of workmanship – Dorinda brings the farm to productivity.

Alfalfa not only restores the land but also yields the harvest of triumph over her greatest disappointment, being jilted by Jason Greylock. Wing describes the healing benefits of growing alfalfa, claiming that “[a]lfalfa brings hope, courage and joy. It brings beauty to field and landscape. It covers over the scars made on the face of Nature, it stops the waste of erosion and soil leaching” (76). When Dorinda buys Jason Greylock’s defunct Five Oaks, which is “no better than waste land,” she uses alfalfa to make Jason’s farm prosper, something that he has failed to accomplish despite his advocating the crop to farmers earlier in the novel (Glasgow, *BG* 331). Dorinda succeeds where Jason fails because she has the instinct of workmanship that he lacks; she implements innovations rather than merely talking about them and understands that “only by giving herself, completely, only by enriching the land with her abundant vitality, could she hope to restore the farm” at Five Oaks (Glasgow, *BG* 317). In the process, she also stops the erosion of her emotional life as she finds a sense of triumph in being able to prosper where he has so miserably failed. Dorinda finds satisfaction, that is, in the fruits of her work and in realizing her goal to become a successful business woman, goals that spring from the workmanship-like drive “to protect, to lift up, rebuild and restore, [the] impulses [that] formed the deepest obligation her

nature could feel” (Glasgow, *BG* 271). Productive and continuous work fills the “empty shell” left by Dorinda’s youthful disappointment in love and leaves “no time for discontent” (Glasgow, *BG* 176, 319). Just as Dorinda uses her alfalfa crop to employ nature in productive ways in order to regenerate and restore her land, she is also able to reverse the classic situation of the economically dependent and victimized woman.

At the same time and although she nurtures the soil to reclaim the farm, Dorinda’s prosperity comes largely because of her predatory instinct. This is a work of naturalist fiction, one wherein hard work is often as futile as it is productive, as Dorinda well knows. She remembers that “her father, in spite of his ignorance, had possessed an industry that was tireless, while her mother was afflicted by a veritable mania of energy. Was it a matter of circumstances, after all, not of heredity? . . . Well, if the fight had narrowed down to one between herself and her surroundings, she was determined to conquer” (Glasgow, *BG* 233). Dorinda may successfully model the instinct of workmanship, but her farm is not a democratic operation. She always retains full command over her property and its productions, resembling an industrial manager more than a community builder. Although she marries Nathan Pedlar, a hard-working farmer whose visionary interest in scientific agriculture closely matches her own, she refuses to let him have access to the dairy operations, telling him, “I don’t want you. There’s plenty of work for you in the fields, but I don’t want you meddling in *my* dairy” (Glasgow, *BG* 295; emphasis added). In fact, their marriage is little more than a business merger in which Nathan is “useful . . . in the practical details of living” but “scarcely more than a superior hired man” (Glasgow, *BG* 231, 300). The vein of iron in Dorinda manifests itself as an iron fist when pecuniary repute is on the line.

As Dorinda prospers, she continues to demonstrate predatory behaviors. In particular, she enjoys increasing satisfaction in the social power that comes from the acquisition of property. She delights in the “agreeable sense of possession” that comes from seeing her new cow-barn and increasing numbers of livestock, and as the narrator notes, at thirty-eight, Dorinda has become “arrogant with prosperity” (Glasgow, *BG* 241, 300). Her increasing wealth is visible to everyone in the community, much as Alexandra Bergson’s was, not so much in the form of material articles of conspicuous waste as in increased landholdings and abundant crops that Veblen notes establish the pecuniary repute in rural communities.

Because Dorinda belongs to one of the “good people” of Virginia – a class midway between the wealthy leisure class and the lower “poor white” class of tenant farmers – she is in “a position which encourages the useful rather than the ornamental public virtues” and so does not actively participate in the conspicuous leisure culture that her increasing wealth would afford her in the urban society that Veblen describes (Glasgow, *BG* 4, 5, 5). Like her mother, Dorinda “lives on . . . hard work” and prefers “to lavish her vital energy on permanent, not fugitive, endeavors” that reinvest her energy into her farming enterprise rather than on leisurely pursuits that would be an unprofitable waste of time (Glasgow, *BG* 12, 307). Instead, Dorinda becomes wealthy by taking advantage of the conspicuous consumption of others. When Mrs. Faraday finds a hotel to buy Dorinda’s butter and tells her to “ask a large price. People are always willing to pay for the best,” Dorinda takes her advice (Glasgow, *BG* 191). She charges twice what Nathan charges at his country store,⁷⁵ knowing that “some people are always ready to pay a high

⁷⁵ At his country store, Nathan sells butter for ninepence (12.5 cents) per pound in the summer and a shilling (17 cents) in the winter; Dorinda at first charges the Washington, D.C., hotel and dairy thirty cents per pound, but Mrs. Faraday urges her to ask for more, noting that the dairy would sell the butter to its customers for a dollar per pound (Glasgow, *BG* 240). The hotel and dairy respond to Dorinda’s first shipment with a letter that it “would take all that she could supply of that quality,” without contesting her asking price (Glasgow, *BG* 240).

price, and they value a thing more if they pay too much for it” (Glasgow, *BG* 240). Tanya Ann Kennedy argues that by stamping her butter with the image of Old Farm’s pine tree, Dorinda also “trades on the marketplace’s desire to consume southern rurality” (58). This woman farmer successfully markets the nostalgia for agrarianism even as she participates in – and profits from – industrial farming.

Dorinda does occasionally display her wealth before others. She feels a special delight in experiencing the “intoxicating flavour of power” when she arrives at church in a seal plush coat, satin dress, and feathered hat; the admiration commanded by her expensive ensemble amuses Dorinda when she remembers that “[t]en years ago they almost turned me out of church because I milked in overalls; but they forgot this morning when I went back wearing a willow-plume” (Glasgow, *BG* 284, 286). In a nod to fashion, Dorinda also wears a corset and is “prepared for any discomfort” in order to strike the most impressive figure possible (Glasgow, *BG* 278). Whereas Veblen describes the corset as a material differentiation of women from men that is “in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject’s vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work,” Dorinda finds power in the outward display of wealth that her corseted, fashionable figure enacts (*TLC* 172). Because she is demonstrating her own wealth, not that of a husband, the queen-like Dorinda reverses the paradigm of conspicuous consumption that turns women into silenced and constrained ornaments for display. As Anne-Marie Evans notes, Glasgow’s work “give[s] voice to the corseted figure” who refuses to act as an object and a decoration (12). Dorinda may be corseted, but she has diligently labored to earn the wealth that she displays, and her imposing figure elicits both admiration and respect from the “astonished eyes” of men and women (Glasgow, *BG* 284). Her

ensemble displays prowess rather than inactivity, and Glasgow's hard-working and commanding heroine finds satisfaction in having earned a privileged social position above those around her.

Dorinda's ideas about marriage and men especially demonstrate her predatory economics. Her ideas differ greatly from those of her mother Eudora, whose youthful engagement to a missionary in Africa ended when he died in the Congo before they could marry. Eudora continually dreams about the "special vocation" she missed by not going to the mission field (Glasgow, *BG* 94). Haunted by a "dream about coral sands and palm trees and ancient rivers" and saving "black babies thrown to crocodiles,"⁷⁶ she finds solace only in "driv[ing the dream] away by hard work" to press down her memory (Glasgow, *BG* 94). Not only is Eudora a picture of thwarted desire for meaningful work rather than drudgery on a farm, but her longing to be a missionary's wife is also a longing for women's economic equality. Charlotte Perkins Gilman argues that missionary wives circumvent the economically "antagonistic" marriage practices that "mak[e] the sex-functions openly commercial" (*WE* 108). Gilman states that "married missionaries of the Protestant Church . . . are supported by contributions," which places the spouses on equal economic footing since, as she notes, "[i]f the missionary were obliged to earn his wife's living and his own, he could do little mission work" (*WE* 108). Because both individuals in a missionary marriage depend on contributions from others to support their work and provide their necessities for living, the wife is released from a subordinate financial position. Ironically, Eudora owns the farm – she inherits it from her father and passes it down to Dorinda⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Tanya Ann Kennedy argues that the dream of Africa "unearths Eudora's frustrated desire to break through the agrarian narrative, and reveal its suppression of the gendered economy of unfulfilling reproduction and labor that has defined her life. . . . Eudora's inability to overcome the agrarian plot that has entrapped her bursts forth in the image of wasted life that haunts her dreams" (53).

⁷⁷ Eudora Abernethy inherits the farm from her grandfather John Calvin Abernethy when his only son and Eudora's father dies in an accident (Glasgow, *BG* 7). After Eudora's husband Joshua Oakley dies, the novel explains that the couple did not jointly own the property but that "the farm had always belonged to Mrs. Oakley" (Glasgow, *BG* 7,

– but she never claims or attains her dream of pecuniary equality in her marriage to Josiah Oakley.

Dorinda has no desire to be a missionary, but she does desire economic independence, which she interprets in terms of pecuniary prowess. Throughout the novel, she reverses the traditional paradigm of the financially dependent wife as a “trophy” of her husband’s “ceremonial capture . . . [and] gratifying evidence of [his] prowess and high standing” (Veblen, “The Barbarian” 55, 57, 59). Dorinda evaluates men not by their ability to earn their wives’ devotion and voluntary servitude but by their ability to be economically useful to their wives, a viewpoint that solidifies after Jason destroys her youthful romantic notions of love by jilting her for a wealthier bride. Disappointed in love, Dorinda redefines relations between genders in terms of money and the ability to provide material goods rather than emotional attachment. She observes that Old Dr. Greylock is “open-handed” and generous to women in the community who were in financial straits, even though he is a drunk and abusive (Glasgow, *BG* 116). She also thinks of Mr. Kettledrum as a “kind man” and a “good provider,” even though his wife is “pining away” at home and trapped in the domestic sphere (Glasgow, *BG* 149).

Dorinda’s decision to marry Nathan, whom she finds physically off-putting but whose kindness, ingenuity, and usefulness she respects, more closely resembles a business merger than a love match. He understands her well enough to word his proposal in economic, rather than emotional, terms: “If you could make up your mind to marry me, we might throw [our] two farms into one. . . . You might have things your own way just as you’re doing now. I wouldn’t want to interfere with you” (Glasgow, *BG* 282). Dorinda agrees to the marriage, thinking that “in

231). Rather than dividing the property among her three children – Josiah, Rufus, and Dorinda – after her death, Eudora leaves the entire farm to her daughter (Glasgow, *BG* 267).

exchange for his helpfulness she might learn to tolerate the things to which she objected,” but only on the condition that there will not be “any love-making,” a stipulation that Nathan apparently accepts (Glasgow, *BG* 288, 289). This businesslike marriage between friends and fellow farmers completely reverses the ownership-marriage paradigm. Nathan makes no ownership claims on Dorinda, and she retains both her dairy business and her independence. Even so, Dorinda is still irritated that her prosperity depends on Nathan’s help: “The fact that she needed Nathan on the farm was driven home to her every day of her life. Without him, she would never become anything more than a farmer who was extraordinary chiefly in being a woman as well; and this provoking disadvantage was a continual annoyance” (Glasgow, *BG* 289). Dorinda feels emotionally connected to Nathan only when they buy Jason Greylock’s defunct farm, but even then she expresses her affection in terms of economic value. As the three negotiate and sign the deed that transfers ownership to Dorinda, she realizes that Nathan “is worth twenty of Jason” (Glasgow, *BG* 311). Though she has gained a newfound appreciation for her husband, she expresses her highest praise in economic terms. When Nathan dies a hero trying to save passengers from a derailed train, Dorinda realizes how much she depended on “his kindness, his charity, his broad tolerance of her prejudices” – and only then does she truly understand his value as a human being (Glasgow, *BG* 246).

Dorinda’s ultimate predatory act is buying Jason Greylock’s Five Oaks farm at auction. While she has prospered, he has degenerated into destitution and alcoholism. The addition of Five Oaks not only makes her farm the largest in the county, but it also acts as a kind of pecuniary revenge on the man who jilted her. For all of the control and fortitude that Dorinda’s vein of iron provides, she must be protected from the corrosive effects of the desires that prey on her throughout the novel – desires for the love and happiness denied to her as a young woman.

Though many men in the community feel that she has a moral obligation to provide the destitute and dying Jason a place to stay since she bought his land so cheaply and has made a large profit from it, she tells them, “I owe him nothing. . . . If I did well, it is because I toiled like a field-hand to restore what the Greylocks had ruined” (Glasgow, *BG* 371). Her feeling for Jason is at the last reduced to an economic impulse, and she agrees to assist him not because of emotional attachment; instead “her horror of the poorhouse . . . decided his fate,” and she provides the resources and care that keep him out of the poorhouse in the last weeks of his life (Glasgow, *BG* 382). Veblen notes that “predation implies something substantial to prey upon,” but as Dorinda looks at the broken, dying man, she cannot recognize the person she loved thirty years before (“The Instinct” 87). In that moment, Dorinda thinks about the futility of a lifetime of hard work: “[T]ime had revenged her. If she had stood still, if she had not lifted a finger to help, time would still have revenged her; for time, she saw, always revenges one” (Glasgow, *BG* 393). As Jason is buried in the cemetery beside Dorinda’s freshly ploughed field, and John Abner marks the spot with two stones, she realizes that her dogged pursuit of material gain has produced little emotional satisfaction after all.

Glasgow notes that when she wrote *Barren Ground*, she identified in her imagination “a divided endowment . . . [that] has run in two separate and dissimilar veins” and she finds that “[w]hen I have worked one vein to the end, I find myself recoiling upon the other and seeking a fresh stimulus” (*TWW* 275). The novel’s heroine, having worked to the end of her vein of iron, also recoils from the predacious behavior that has driven her to such a desolate ending. As Dorinda stands by the graveside, she mourns “not the love that she had lost, but the love that she had never had,” and she regrets her “unconscious impulses which had never quivered into being” (Glasgow, *BG* 404). The death of the man who symbolized her youthful hopes – the same

hopes that she had tried to plow under with years of hard work and the pursuit of economic gain – awakens in Dorinda a need for sympathy and community. She nevertheless refuses Bob Ellgood’s proposal – which would have made them the largest landowning family in the region – because she has a “distaste for physical love” and because she is “independent” and has enough of her own money and property to say no (Glasgow, *BG* 366). Dorinda tells Bob that she is “finished with all that” business of marriage (Glasgow, *BG* 367). However, she is not finished with farming.

As Dorinda recoils from the prowess that has yielded little satisfactory triumph over disappointment, she seeks a less predatory future grounded in the “bond of sympathy that farming could make” (Glasgow, *BG* 213). When Jason jilts Dorinda as a young woman, she closes off emotionally and goes on “as blindly as a machine . . . [in which] affection, tenderness, sympathy, sentiment—all these natural approaches to experience had shrivelled up like nerves that are dead,” and she focuses all her energy on proving herself as a businesswoman who can restore the barren ground where others have failed (Glasgow, *BG* 157). Nathan reawakens Dorinda’s sympathy through their joint farming venture, and they bond – if not passionately, at least as partners who share mutual respect – while making the farms productive and prosperous.

The sympathy awakened by Nathan comes to fuller fruition with his son, Dorinda’s final farming companion and future heir John Abner. As a young boy, John Abner awakens Dorinda’s “diffused maternal instinct” (Glasgow, *BG* 287). Born with a club foot, John Abner has a “sympathetic understanding of animals” that Dorinda appreciates because his physical handicap has made his life one of learning “to suffer and endure,” just as hers had been (Glasgow, *BG* 287). This bond between the two develops into a shared love for farming. Dorinda realizes that John Abner would “rather farm than do anything else” and that he “share[s] her ardent interest in

Five Oaks” (Glasgow, *BG* 286, 318). As he grows into a young man, he becomes “a diligent farmer” who could “manage the whole business” of the farm – if Dorinda would let him (Glasgow, *BG* 325, 330). John Abner, in turn, recognizes the humanity beneath Dorinda’s harsh exterior and tells her, “[Y]ou’re a big woman, Dorinda, even if you’re trying at times. There’s an extra dimension in you somewhere” (Glasgow, *BG* 384). Knowing that John Abner will one day inherit the farm and will continue the work that she began gives Dorinda a sense of community and hope at last. A middle-aged Dorinda can face the future “without romantic glamour, but . . . with integrity of vision” – and a belief that “the best of life . . . was ahead of her” (Glasgow, *BG* 408). She still sees her future in terms of enterprise and profit – old habits die hard! – but now she can declare that diligent exercise of both her prowess and her workmanship have produced the foundation for her hope:

She saw now that the strong impulses which had once wrecked her happiness were the forces that had enabled her to rebuild her life out of the ruins. The reckless courage that had started her on the dubious enterprise of her life had hardened at last into the fortitude with which she had triumphed over the unprofitable end of her adventure. . . . “How can I tell you,” she could ask, “what I should have done if I had not been myself?” (Glasgow, *BG* 368)

Critical reviews of *Barren Ground* indicate that Glasgow planted her ideas out of season – or too early – to be fruitful because the naturalist tone and the capitalist impulse conflicted with popular notions of farm life. Many found the stark realism of the novel and the play of uncontrollable nature – in the farmer’s fight with the environment and in the untamable human spirit – too unconventional and too far removed from the Agrarian project celebrating the beautiful in rural life. Stuart P. Sherman’s 1925 review, for example, notes that Glasgow is “a

significant leader of contemporary realism” whose “firm, lucid” style contains such a “masculine rhythm” that northern critics, expecting a writer of southern romance, “haven’t known quite how to take her” because she addresses “the realest thing in American life . . . [, the] fighting virtues which . . . are in hot, eager tumult beneath the cynical and insouciant manners of the hour” (qtd. Scura 242, 244, 244, 241, 241). Other reviewers found the appropriation of masculine language and subject matter and the themes of women’s economic and social advancement unsuitable for women’s literature. H. I. Brock finds that “the tragic theme suffers from such close contact with the too, too solid stuff of scientific farming . . . [and] jangle[s] the eternal harmonies” so wretchedly that “[p]oor Dorinda never had a chance” (qtd. Scura 247). The reviewer from *Punch* praises the “masculinity of the work to which [Glasgow’s] heroine turns” but finds that “the *minutiae*” of her struggle with the land will be “wearisome to the pampered or jaded reader” (qtd. Scura 263, 263, 264). Later critical studies continue to emphasize what Dorothy Scura calls the “somber tone” of the novel, even as they celebrate Glasgow’s literary artistry (xxix). In 1971, Glasgow scholar J. R. Raper recognizes the Darwinian theories that underwrite the novel’s exploration of nature and survival and describes Dorinda as “a courageous (if stubborn) woman capable not only of endurance, but of re-creating her former environment to her liking,” even though he ultimately finds her to be an unlikeable heroine (247). Peter Nicolaisen’s more recent work notes that Glasgow’s novel was one of the few in the 1920s to realistically portray “the dire traits of a life close to the soil” at a time when more romantic agrarian philosophies were in full swing, a difficulty that he argues continues to haunt writers who take as their subject the social and economic complexities of farm life (203).

Glasgow’s work predates the 1930 publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* by the Twelve Southerners, a group of scholars from Vanderbilt University who became known as the

Agrarians and whose treatise outlines their desire for alternatives to the evils of capitalism; they found in farm life a return to a more humane system of work rooted in the pastoral traditions of the past. While Glasgow's novel also expresses a nostalgia for the South's past and the natural beauty of the farming landscape, she instead embraces capitalism – or at least she does not see it as the main source of the South's difficulties. As Dorinda argues, the problem in the South is the prevalence of “slighting” – that is, the avoidance of hard work – and a stubborn adherence to the ineffective farming systems of the past that include tenancy, with its attendant lack of property ownership that took away workers' motivation to succeed, and a stubborn refusal to try “new-fangled ways” of farming (Glasgow, *BG* 208, 91). Dorinda advocates the need for innovation in farming practices, declaring “[i]f I had my way . . . I would do everything differently. I'd try all the crops, one after another, until I found out which was best” (Glasgow, *BG* 91). Nicolaisen notes that although Glasgow's novel addresses the social and economic issues of Southern rural poverty, her aims were at odds with the Agrarians' view of capitalism, and he suggests that “[t]he system of agriculture she espoused in *Barren Ground*, . . . [combining] hard work and the shrewd use of capital . . . [and a] trust in modern, market-oriented methods of farming[,] . . . would have found little favor with her fellow southerners at Vanderbilt University” (193, 194, 194, 193). Glasgow's focus is always toward gaining a foothold in, not escaping from, the larger marketplace of the American economy.

Many of Glasgow's contemporary critics also found the theme of capitalist enterprise an unconventional (and perhaps unfit) subject for literature, particularly when a woman was doing the work. Stuart P. Sherman's analysis of Glasgow's novels argues that another of her heroines,

Gabriella Carr,⁷⁸ who overcomes financial ruin after a failed marriage, “finds a fairly satisfactory second-best in business success” – the first-best, of course, still being domestic pursuits of marriage and motherhood – and that Dorinda “fights for a successful life, as men rate success, and wins it,” a plot which he finds unusual but also “modern . . . [and] feminist with a vengeance” (qtd. Scura 243, 245, 244). Elizabeth Lay Green complains that “Dorinda’s long struggle with the land somehow resembles a success story from an agricultural magazine,” and that although *Barren Ground* makes strides toward being a southern version of Hardy, the grim novel only “prepares the way for the great work which is bound to follow” (119). Other critics have faint praise for the novel’s depiction of the hardworking business woman. Writing for the August 1925 *Atlantic Monthly*, Charles B. Dutton praises “the genuinely beautiful story” that finds a heroine “who came to see the challenge to courage and the call to high adventure in the homely duties of life,” although he finds the conflation of the ugly and domestic with farming business among the novel’s “unaccountable lapses into conventionality” and argues that “the stress laid upon Dorinda’s material success distracts attention from her spiritual triumph. Alfalfa and butter are inadequate and superfluous symbols of the soul’s victory” (qtd. Scura 267, 268, 268, 268). Dutton’s failure to grasp the importance of farming to the novel’s purpose demonstrates his orientation as an urban agrarian bent on separating the spiritual wheat from the pragmatic chaff of life. Carl Van Doren, however, finds that Glasgow is “the one important realist” among Southern writers and praises her heroine as being among the rare ones “who have been permitted to amount to something in their own right” with a resilience “so rare that Dorinda stands like a tower” among the heroes of fiction (qtd. Scura 251).

⁷⁸ Glasgow’s project to propose female economic independence stretched beyond the farm. In her 1916 novel *Life and Gabriella*, the heroine Gabriella Carr lives in New York City and makes her living as a successful milliner and business owner.

In her own analysis of the novel, Glasgow claims that “[s]ystems of agriculture were unimportant beside [Dorinda’s] human drama . . . of passion and disillusionment” (*ACM* 160-161). However, Dorinda’s complete reversal of the betrayed woman’s situation to become the “victor instead of the victim” depends upon her becoming the fully realized New Woman Farmer who can incorporate both the instinct of workmanship and the predatory instinct to carve out a place in the world of agribusiness where she can operate as the equal of her male counterparts (Glasgow, *ACM* 160). Jamie Marchant notes that “the revolutionary quality of Glasgow’s work” is that she “portrays New Women in a positive light,” as “living, breathing, active women rather than the idealized, passive statues of earlier writers” (64, 64, 66). Dorinda demonstrates that a woman can excel at business and navigate the agricultural marketplace with the best of men.

Glasgow’s novel also examines the effects of money and capitalism on the character of women. Dorinda’s predatory mindset deters her emotional growth, and, though she spends much of the novel making strides in business, her complicity with capitalist systems of predation means that she trades one restrictive paradigm for another. The predatory Dorinda realizes that the instinct of workmanship is also important, but not until both Jason and Nathan are dead and buried does she fully understand her need for community. Dianne Bunch notes that “[b]y allowing Dorinda to win in a man’s world only to find it worthless, Glasgow rejects bitterness and cynicism” and celebrates the Southern woman “who has found the ‘whole movement of life’ within herself” (26). However, Bunch also argues that Glasgow “leaves Dorinda within the embrace of an economy of expenditure and pleasure” ready to endow her possessions on John Abner and live it up (26). I would argue that Dorinda has had an epiphany, not a stroke. She is not ready to abdicate the position that she has attained, and her vein of iron – that expression of

Presbyterian fortitude – firmly anchors Dorinda in practicality and frugality, even as it enables her to look forward to a future hope that endures irrespective of human effort.

As a naturalist heroine, Dorinda also tests the definition of a sympathetic female character. Many have found Dorinda too off-putting, including Godbold who calls Dorinda “a mechanized human being totally drained of humanity” and the novel too “painfully real” to be a bestseller (137, 145). Pamela Matthews finds Godbold’s analysis “shockingly offensive,” noting that his biographical reading of Glasgow’s work reveals his male perspective and overlooked the “complexities of socially constructed representation” (160, 6). What Godbold and others who find Dorinda offputting miss is that her fortitude and orneriness are traits that she must have in order to carve out a place where none was traditionally available for women. Recent critical work offers a more sympathetic view of Dorinda. Mechel Camp argues that Dorinda’s emotional coldness is actually a rechanneling of disappointment into a determination to overcome emotional despair; the strength that manifests as emotional reticence enables Dorinda to find “a nobility of sorts” in defeating her romantic notions, even if “the strength [Dorinda] wields alienates her and makes her unfit for the society in which she finds herself” (30). Shawn E. Miller argues that Dorinda’s story is “not tragedy, only life,” because it is about a realist who simply fashions her dreams out of the materials available to her and who triumphs by finding “a separate peace with things as they are” (97).

The tensions between Dorinda’s emotional coldness and strong determination demonstrate the difficulties Glasgow faces in redefining gender roles in the new century. Glasgow imagined Dorinda as self-sufficient and resilient, an example of a victorious woman who refuses to be a victim of the social and economic conditions that would confine her to the domestic space, a woman who could face bitterest disappointment and still declare, “I will not be

broken” (*BG* 367). She also declared Dorinda to be “universal,” noting that she received letters “[f]rom many parts of the world” written by readers who identified with Glasgow’s heroine as “human being[s who have] learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility” (*BG* vi). Dorinda displays the fortitude needed to make her way in the world, a world that Glasgow, the naturalist author, portrays in all its starkness and possibility. As Mary E. Papke notes, “Naturalism . . . asks us to refuse the hand dealt to us by our histories – if not to call for a new deck, since there isn’t any other, then to reimagine the rules of the game and the order of play” (xi). In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow employs Veblen’s theories to reimagine the order of play and demonstrate the extra-domestic capabilities of women of business who could merge the opposing instincts of workmanship and predation into one powerful force – women, tested by adversity, navigating the incongruities of the modern world, who possess a strength capable of prospering in – and in spite of – that same adversity. The “vital spirit” and “eager mind,” Glasgow argues, are capable of finding the “buried treasure” that women such as Dorinda only uncover through endurance, fortitude, and purposeful activity – and a bit of predation (*BG* 408).

Women Farmers and the American Economic Enterprise: Asking for a Better Seat

In his 1898 essay on the instinct of workmanship, Veblen asserts that “[m]an’s life is activity; and as he acts, so he thinks and feels” (“The Instinct” 85). American women writers between the 1890s and 1920s, particularly Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, also claim this connection for women, advocating avenues of work that would grant economic independence and confidence to New Women who possess the intelligence, capacity, and desire to do more than traditionally gendered domestic tasks. Because their heroines are

farmers who live on the site of their business productions, they access a unique form of economic activity that incorporates both the domestic and marketplace spheres and performs a literary toppling of the divide traditionally preventing women from attaining economic independence.

William Conlogue argues that the works of Cather and Glasgow challenge agrarian assumptions that identify farmers as male and asserts that Alexandra and Dorinda “practice[] to perfection the industrial agriculture . . . which is essentially masculine in its codes and outlook” and that “removing Alexandra and Dorinda from their agricultural contexts masks the real work that they do” (65-66, 66). Placing the New Woman farmer within the historical contexts of the farming industry reintroduces those whom Jellison calls the “real-life Alexandra Bergsons” omitted and replaced with narratives of farm wives and domestic spheres logic by historians supportive of the Country Life Commission and the Smith-Lever Act (xix). Reading literary depictions of women farmers alongside historical accounts undergirds the call of women during this time period for economic independence and meaningful work, and the authors’ tone becomes more frustrated and darker as the period progresses, indicating women’s frustration with the lack of change.

The untraditional endings of “Aunt Mary’s Pie Plant,” *O Pioneers!*, and *Barren Ground* also reflect the unresolved tensions between the domestic and public spheres. In these works, economic independence obtained by extreme prowess and predation could lead women to isolation and loneliness. Knowing as Veblen did that “there is no isolated, self-sufficing individual” and that all production is a social process “in and by the help of the community,” Gilman, Cather, and Glasgow acknowledge the need for a counterbalance to predation, insisting on the need for community and cooperation that the domestic sphere continues to offer (Veblen,

“The Beginnings of Ownership” 33). They wanted to navigate – not overthrow – the capitalist marketplace in order to grant women better access to the self-sustaining and self-defining properties of meaningful work. Unresolved tension manifests most particularly in questions about motherhood. Gilman insistently claims that motherhood establishes women’s superior function in society, and her characters are often working mothers. In *O Pioneers!* and *Barren Ground*, economic independence means eschewing marriage or choosing to marry later in life after having established a successful business, and neither Alexandra nor Dorinda becomes a mother, meaning that there will be no new generation of daughters to inherit their mothers’ admirable qualities or to continue the project of economic progress for women. Cather and Glasgow leave this to their fiction – and their readers – to accomplish.

In her study of the conflicting portrayals of American capitalism in the rise of big business, Anne Mayhew discusses the importance of the railroad to the shift in the farming economy and the rise of pecuniary reputability in the late nineteenth century: “The railroads changed the measure of success . . . [;] now the measure of success was the ability to plant crops that would grow well, provide high yields, and sell at prices sufficient to cover the growing level of monetary commitments that a successful farm family could and would acquire in the new railroad age” (39). If the railroad served as a symbol of the path to prosperity – one that Gilman, Cather, and Glasgow argued should be available to women in equal measure to men – women did not want to disembark from or derail the train. Women were simply unhappy with their assigned seats and wanted the opportunity to choose better ones that afforded them equal access to economic independence and the riches of the marketplace.

CONCLUSION

The Woman of Business Creates a Public Life

The aim of this study has been to examine the conditions and difficulties surrounding women's entry into the money economy of American capitalism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, particularly as they occur in traversing the line dividing domestic and public spheres. My research demonstrates that literary representations both reflect historical changes in the situation of women and propose new paths to promote continued movement toward economic, social, and political improvement in the lives of women. Joyce Warren notes that literature of this time period challenged notions of domestic spheres ideology, but perhaps more importantly as a model for this study, she finds historical evidence of women's pursuit of economic independence in her examination of court records of the time. In her study *Money, Property, and the Law*, Warren seeks to rediscover the "lived situation" of women by examining literary representations of working women alongside court cases to demonstrate that "however emphatically the official narrative declared that women were economically dependent, functioned outside the marketplace, and were by definition excluded from direct economic involvement, the reality was different; not only were many women involved in the pursuit of money, but a large proportion of those women functioned independently" (303, 10). She states that her goal is to pursue "information about women whose stories exist nowhere else, women whose stories were in fact erased from history" (Warren 10). My study performs a similar approach, examining the texts of women authors who were writing between 1860 and 1930 alongside historical examples of women who were engaged in implementing the tenets that these authors proposed – access to fulfilling work, access to paid work, and access to social and economic power that came with such work. In closing, I offer a final historical example that

demonstrates the economic and political activism of a late-nineteenth-century woman of business, and in doing so, also participate in a project of recovering women's stories of economic activity that are in danger of being erased from history.

A “Notable” Cotton Mill Owner: The Extraordinary Case of Mary Putnam Gridley

In 1890, Mary Putnam Gridley's father George Putnam, owner of the Batesville Manufacturing Company, a cotton mill near Greenville, South Carolina, died, leaving the factory presidency to his daughter. A tiny woman not quite five feet tall, Gridley (fig. 8) had learned the textile business while working as the bookkeeper in her father's office, and for over twenty years she had the distinction of being a rare kind of woman – a factory owner-operator in the South. When she died in 1939 at age eighty-nine, a front-page obituary in *The Greenville News* declared her “one of South Carolina's most prominent women” and praised her active participation in the business, political, and social life of her community (“Mrs. M. P. Gridley” 1).

Mary Putnam grew up in Massachusetts, where she attended Boston Normal School and briefly taught school before moving with her family to the upstate of South Carolina in the 1870s when her father, seeking to profit from the area's burgeoning cotton mill industry, first built the Camperdown Mill in Greenville and eventually acquired sole proprietorship of the Batesville Manufacturing Company at Rocky Creek just outside of Greenville. George Putnam had four daughters and no sons; he employed two of his children, Mary and Emma, in the office of the Batesville Mill (Belcher 27). Mary excelled at business, and after a brief marriage to Isaac A. Gridley, who died twenty-two months after their wedding, and the death of their infant son, the young widow became bookkeeper for her father's mill. As Terry Walters states, training in her father's office left Mary Putnam Gridley “well prepared to step into the presidency of the mill”



Figure 8. Mary Putnam Gridley

Source: Choice McCain. *Greenville County: A Pictorial History*. Norfolk, VA: Donning, 1983. 53. Print.

after his death (7). Local historians note the unique position that Gridley occupied. In 1907, August Kohn's *The Cotton Mills of South Carolina* remarks that "the Batesville Mill . . . is now in successful operation by Mrs. Mary P. Gridley, the only woman I know who is the president of a factory" (14). Archie Vernon Huff, Jr., declares in his 1995 history of Greenville city and county that the Batesville Mill, one of "[a] few small, independent [and family-owned] mills" operating in the area during the late-nineteenth century, is "[n]otable" because of its woman president (239). Ray Belcher's 2006 *Greenville County, South Carolina* history states that when, for health reasons, Gridley's uncle Henry Putnam resigned as hired superintendent of the mill's operations in 1897, she "was left completely in charge of the mill, becoming one of the first female heads of a cotton mill in the South" (27). As the rare creature in Greenville – the woman of business – Gridley was well-prepared and fit for the task.

Reports of Mary Putnam Gridley's business activity emphasize that she was a force to be reckoned with – straightforward, savvy, and capable – and that she was respected by the men in her field. W. T. Adams, who married Gridley's niece, remembers her as "very opinionated" (qtd. Lesley 4-B). Gridley's nephew, Dr. Herbert P. Bailey, states that at Batesville, "[s]he had entire charge of that mill" and that she was often asked for advice by other mill owners (qtd. Lesley 4-B). Bailey also notes that Gridley "was a real businesswoman. She would look at you straight and talk straight to you. . . . [H]er voice was calm and quiet, but it carried. And she carried her weight" (qtd. Lesley 4-B). According to her niece Nell Adams, Gridley "could manage [an] all-male board of directors without ever raising her voice," and she signed her name "M. P. Gridley" in her transactions as mill president because "she thought it was no one's business that she was a woman" (24). Undoubtedly, this signature was a savvy business strategy, as Huff, Jr., notes, because "women were not generally believed capable of conducting such an extensive business"

(239). Mary Putnam Gridley defied the conventional ideas about women's capabilities in the world of manufacturing. As a young woman, Gridley believed in the South, particularly after the Civil War in which many men were killed and many others were "left crushed by the Southern defeat," that "it was a time for women to be strong and courageous" and to work for both pay and personal satisfaction (N. Adams 23). Years later, in a 1935 interview with *The Greenville Piedmont*, Gridley still found the idea that "women had no field open to them except marriage" to be "foolishness" that she was glad had disappeared with World War I; the story notes that "Mrs. Gridley is thankful. Today a young woman may choose marriage or a career or both, almost no field is closed to her" – an ambitious claim in its day and one that she had modeled for the women of Greenville (qtd. Lesley 4-B).

Gridley remained at the helm of Batesville Manufacturing Company for over twenty years, operating the factory during a rise in cotton and textile manufacturing in the Greenville area. Belcher notes, however, that a series of misfortunes – an employee strike in 1900, a warehouse fire in 1902, and a steam boiler explosion in 1903 – along with a failure to expand and update operations of the family-run business eventually led to Gridley's decision to sell the mill rather than incur the heavy cost of the "[m]ajor overhauling" of equipment needed to compete with larger manufacturers and with the demands of the developing market (51, 28).⁷⁹ Although in her early sixties, Gridley did retire from running a mill, but she did not quit working. She still had plenty to do.

⁷⁹ There is some discrepancy on the closing date of the mill. Nell B. Adams (23), Wanda Lesley (4-B), and Archie Vernon Huff, Jr. (239) say that the mill closed in 1912. Citing the Greenville County Register of Mesne Conveyance, Belcher states that the mill's last day of operation was July 1, 1913, and the equipment and real estate was sold in 1914 (51).

While Gridley was notable in her community because of her profession, she was also active in effecting social and political change for women. As a founding member and long-time president of the city's influential Thursday Club, a woman's club that emphasized education and community action – not tea and gossip – she promoted the following goals: “To look below the surface of things, and search for the truth / . . . to go outside our own homes, and put our hands to the work / we will find everywhere waiting for us” (“Organization Development”). A club member, Mrs. Medsun, describes Gridley as “a dainty little teeny weeny thing with a soft voice, but no one ever argued with her, she was so intelligent. When she was presiding [over the Thursday Club], she never raised her voice” (qtd. Walters 8). Gridley was committed to the full development of women's intellectual capacity, and, as her great-niece Nell Adams notes, she “believed conversation was for issues and not for gossip” (25). At the Thursday Club meetings, Gridley presented papers on literature and history as well as current events, including Cooperative Housekeeping (the idea espoused by Charlotte Perkins Gilman as a way to make work more profitable and productive for women), maternity insurance, and Civil Service Extension (Walters 12). In the days before women's enfranchisement, the Thursday Club engaged in political activism by passing petitions and resolutions, and, as club president, Gridley often encouraged club members to write letters to prominent men in the city advocating support for political causes, including legislation to establish an industrial reform school (Walters 14).

Gridley also campaigned for women's enfranchisement and equal rights; she is named in Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper's *History of Women's Suffrage* as a leader of the movement in South Carolina (922). Josephine K. Henry's “The New Woman of the New South,” an 1895 article in *The Arena* that asserts the social activism of “many women in the South gifted with genius and endowed with faculties for glorious work,” includes quotes from such women

“who are struggling to free themselves from the austerity of those environments which ‘the masses of average men’ have fixed for them” (354). Among the women from South Carolina whom Henry quotes is Mary Putnam Gridley, who asserts that “[t]he franchise is my right. Woman’s ballot means the enforcement of social purity and better government” (359). Archie Vernon Huff, Jr., notes that the Greenville Equal Suffrage Club, with Gridley as one of its leaders, was part of the “more militant” National Women’s Party (263).

Throughout her life, Gridley was one of Greenville’s most active civic leaders, serving on multiple boards and committees to promote social progress in the city. Walters notes that Gridley was “among the pioneers in bringing to Greenville libraries, hospitals, playgrounds, even beautification” (2). Her activism included leadership in the Women’s Bureau of the Chamber of Commerce, the Greenville Hospital Association Woman’s Board, the organizing committee for the Hopewell Tuberculosis Sanitarium, and the Greenville Lyceum (Walters 15-17). Gridley also supported nurse’s education, a city and county “Rest Room” that provided lunch for working girls, and the Girls Protective Bureau that helped “wayward and delinquent girls” (Walters 16). She even hired patients from the Hopewell Sanitarium whose tuberculosis was arrested as drivers to chauffeur her around in her Model T Ford (N. Adams 26).

Gridley serves as an example of the professional woman who gained entry into the public sphere of work during the late nineteenth century, an historical figure who lives out the independent life portrayed in the fiction of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Pauline Hopkins, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, and other authors who wrote during the same time period. As Carole Srole notes, men who were resistant to women’s participation in the business world tried to cast women as too weak to endure the “mental work” of business and called into question the morality of women who chose a public life (11). The New Woman of business,

Srole argues, needed to demonstrate individualism, ambition, and lack of sentiment – traditionally masculine characteristics – tempered by moral strength of character, modesty, and caring – traditionally feminine characteristics – into a kind of “[g]endered professionalism” appropriate for women who, then, “performed domesticity as respectability” (12). Determined and independent as she was, Gridley gained the community’s respect by demonstrating both competence as a business woman and moral integrity through civic engagement and sympathy. She also partly adhered to the social proprieties of her time that prescribed her attachment to the domestic sphere. While her married life was brief (but happy by all accounts), and she had no children to raise, Gridley chose not to maintain an independent residence but to live with her sister Flora Dill in the family home at 704 West Washington Street, a home that Nell B. Adams describes as “the pivot point for the whole family” (24). Such living arrangements provided not only the comfort and sympathy of the domestic sphere but also the relief from domestic duties that made possible Gridley’s life as a public woman. While Mary Putnam Gridley worked at the Batesville Mill and as a community activist, her sister Flora Dill managed the household until her death in 1920 so that the sisters formed a type of cooperative housekeeping arrangement that mirrors the theories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Despite her adherence to notions of domesticity and respectability – Gridley “never appeared other than well dressed” and was “very proper” about daily requirements such as “set[ting] the table for meals” – she, however, defied traditional expectations of female piety (Walters 19). Nell B. Adams notes that “the Greenville cab drivers called Gridley’s home ‘the infidel’s house’ because no cab was ever called to take someone to church” (23 n16). She attributes this inconvenient truth about her great-aunt to two early experiences as a churchgoer in Greenville. First, at the Unitarian Church, the minister “arrived so drunk he fell out of the

pulpit,” and later, at the Methodist Church, two members fought a duel in front of the church on a Sunday morning; after that, George Putnam declared his belief that “religion was different in the South, . . . [and t]his display ended the Putnams[’] involvement in organized religion” (N. Adams 17). In a 1989 interview, Nell Adams carefully notes that “while Mary and her sisters did not go to church, they all read their bibles and as educated women knew them well” (qtd. Walters 5). Concerns about Gridley’s piety, however, did not seem to mar her reputation as a community leader and exemplary citizen, at least as far as public record demonstrates.

Mary Putnam Gridley was “a doer [and] an achiever,” a woman of intelligence, capacity, and energy who was a pioneer in changing the economic, social, and political restrictions that blocked women’s access to meaningful and beneficial work in the city of Greenville, South Carolina (Walters 2). She is important to my study because she both demonstrates women’s capacity for business during the rise of industrialism in late-nineteenth-century America and serves as an historical example that women *were* in business, successfully conducting profitable, public work. It took an extraordinary woman such as Gridley, who had the opportunity and the energy to prove herself, to succeed at this time. To do so she must not only be able to do a “man’s” job, she must also translate domesticity into the modes of respectability and workplace professionalism. Yet, her life demonstrated that women were making headway into the public sphere despite the commonly held notions that they were unfit for success in the business world. Mary Putnam Gridley applied “her sharp mind and her firm purpose” to all she did – and so makes a case that supports the period’s literary arguments that women both desired and were quite capable of movement into the public sphere of work (N. Adams 26).

The Continuing Work of Literary Representations of the Enterprising Woman, 1860-1930

The literary works examined in this study demonstrate how deeply questions of money impacted women's lives during the rise of industrial capitalism between 1860 and 1930 in the United States. With the rise of the New Woman came an increased focus on access to paid and fulfilling work outside of the home in order to grant women economic independence and a share in the American Dream. The women writers that I examine – Pauline Hopkins, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Rebecca Harding Davis, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow – did not refute capitalism but, rather, sought full participation in the systems of work and property so that they could reshape these forces and produce more positive outcomes in their lives and in the lives of their readers. By portraying women's intellectual capacity for entrepreneurial action, these authors asserted the need for full access to systems of material gain and property ownership and the attending social and political status and self-possession. Their literature, however, did not encourage single-minded pursuit of material wealth, but rather called for productive and profitable work that was tempered by social-mindedness and sympathy – public expressions of womanliness that could ameliorate the evils of capitalist greed.

Women writers also participated in the reciprocal relationship between history telling and history formation. In a January 14, 2014, interview with George Stephanopoulos, Cokie Roberts, author of *Our Country's Patriot Mothers* and other books about little-known American women, asserted the importance of uncovering and preserving women's stories that are in danger of being lost: "If we don't know history, [we] don't know what's going on in the country today. And . . . [we] don't understand that women were equally important in this history." Such stories, Roberts stresses, must be passed along to future generations of girls and women as markers of women's activity and as inspiration for the future. This study's reading of literary fiction alongside

nonfiction texts and the economic writings of John Stuart Mill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Thorstein Veblen demonstrates that women authors, writing during a strategic period of women's history in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, actively participated in perpetuating the stories of women's work, in defining the problems that women faced in navigating between the domestic and the public spheres, and in proposing new paths of social, political, and economic activity to solve these problems.

The difficulties surrounding women's redefinitions of work and domesticity brought into public debate by the authors in this study continue into the twenty-first century, where persistent gender bias, a lack of widely available childcare resources, a wage gap between genders, and even "mommy wars" between stay-at-home mothers and mothers employed outside of the home continue to limit women's access to economic independence and social power. In September 2013, the *Harvard Business Review* focused on issues that persist in "closing the leadership gap" between men and women in the corporate world, a problem that editor Adi Ignatius admits is still "a formidable challenge" (12). As the several articles of this *Harvard Business Review* issue indicate, while women have gained access to the world of work, the particular issues surrounding women's advancement to positions of leadership have not been fully solved, nor have women been fully integrated into all levels of business management, in part because of persistent gendered attitudes about work that value culturally celebrated "masculine" characteristics. Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely, and Deborah Kolb identify persistent "[s]econd-generation [gender] bias" that disrupts the progression of women to leadership positions and perpetuates "organizational structures and work practices . . . designed to fit men's lives and situations" – generally understood as having a spouse who has no established career – and the persistence of beliefs that "[t]he ideal leader, like the ideal man, is decisive, assertive, and independent" while

women “are expected to be nice, caretaking, and unselfish” (64, 64, 65, 65). Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb assert that companies fail to address these gendered practices, and they call for greater training and an openness to alternative forms of conducting business that promote women’s leadership qualities (66). Boris Groysberg and Katherine Connolly’s interviews with twenty-four CEOs of companies that actively seek to create diverse and inclusive organizations found that women leaders in the workplace are perceived as “more collaborative, better listeners, more relationship-oriented, and more empathetic and reasonable” than men, but also that “[t]his tendency not to assert themselves could hold women back” (72). Such arguments about fully tapping into the different strengths that men and women bring to the business world echo M. L. Rayne’s late-nineteenth-century contention that women’s influence in the world of business has a humanizing effect, and that women’s “grow[ing] hard and commonplace” and mimicking men’s “manners” to become “masculine nondescript[s]” nullifies the progressive energy and insight that women can bring to the world of business (23, 24, 24).

In the twenty-first century, women who seek to balance family and work continue to face workplace practices that marginalize mothers. The *Harvard Business Review* issue notes a “persistent motherhood penalty” that influences hiring decisions and hinders mothers’ access to higher paying jobs (“Women in the Workplace” 88). This corroborates a 2007 study by Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik that examined workplace hiring practices and found that “mothers were penalized on a host of measures, including perceived competence and recommended starting salary”; mothers, the researchers argue, account for “most of the ‘gender gap’ in wages” whereas “[m]en were not penalized for, and sometimes benefited from, being a parent” (1297, 1298, 1297). Correll, Benard, and Paik argue that “cultural beliefs about gendered labor markets and a family wage still shape the allocation of organizational rewards” – that is,

better jobs and higher salaries – and that “evaluators rated mothers as less competent and committed to paid work than nonmothers, and consequently, discriminated against mothers when making hiring and salary decisions” (1332).

In addition to perceptions of the reduced capacity of working mothers, a lack of system-wide forms of quality childcare continues to make working difficult, as childcare arrangements can be expensive, sporadic, and largely left up to individual mothers to obtain. Furthermore, the “mommy wars” that persist in American culture continue to pit women against one another, particularly when paid work serves as the measure of individual worth and social power and marginalizes the unpaid (but still hardworking) stay-at-home mother. A Charlotte-Perkins-Gilman-inspired system of cooperative housekeeping and childcare has failed to materialize in a capitalist culture in which persistent prioritizing of individualism produces conflicting goals rather than large-scale organization within the community of women.

As for the enterprising woman who still seeks economic independence from within the domestic site, twenty-first-century advancements in technology are redefining the possibilities for the home business. A noteworthy example is Etsy online retailer Alicia Shaffer, who reports grossing between \$65,000 and \$80,000 per month selling handcrafted merchandise from her home business in Livermore, California (Lutz). In an interview, Shaffer states that “[y]ou can run any business now with the Internet,” and her home-based Three Bird Nest is one of the top five grossing businesses on Etsy, a website for artists who sell handcrafted merchandise (“California Mom”). Shaffer’s experience is unusual – 65 percent of Etsy sellers average sales of \$100 per year (“California Mom”). As Alex Williams notes in a *New York Times* article on operating a profitable Etsy business, “[a] healthy income, however, is far from guaranteed,” and he warns of the dangers of unrealistic expectations that overlook the business strategizing and long hours of

hard work that are demanded in creating a successful enterprise. However, such news stories of women's success perform the same type of inspiration that the literature in this study performs, that of demonstrating women's capacity, affirming the value of the domestic site as a potential pathway to economic independence, and portraying the possibilities available to the enterprising individual. The American Dream, it seems, persists, and the task of defining and forging paths for women's lives begun by nineteenth-century women, with the accompanying questions of domestic and public action, continues to be shaped, and the struggle for economic independence, self-possession, and social advancement continues to inform twenty-first century women in the world of work. Literary scholars and teachers of literature can do their part in advancing women's opportunities by promoting the study of women's work.

In 1873, Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* begins with a young woman's bold "new Declaration of Independence" wherein Christie Devon states the case of many women of her time: "I want work that I can put my heart into, and feel that it does me good, no matter how hard it is. I only ask for a chance to be a useful, happy woman, and I don't think that is a bad ambition" (5, 11). Alcott's work, along with many other women's texts of the time, contains portrayals of women's search for remunerative and meaningful work that would be important to the expansion of the research that I have begun in this dissertation. A study of antebellum and Civil War era texts such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, alongside Margaret Fuller's feminist theories in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and Adam's Smith's political and social theories in *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, would extend the scope of this study to trace early women's activism for full access to participation in the growing capitalist economy. I foresee such a study as exploring questions of female business acumen as practiced in speculation,

investment, and home ownership, as well as investigating the limitations that laws restricting married women's property ownership had on women's economic activity and work. In the early twentieth century, women playwrights also challenged hindrances to women's economic independence, and I also envision expanding my study to include the argument that Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, and Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* demonstrate women's mounting frustrations in response to the slow progress toward economic and political changes that were promised by the women's movement and the passage of suffrage. Each of these plays features a woman whose violence and predation reveals an acting out against the limitations impeding women's full entry into public life and blocking their access to meaningful and productive work.

With Alcott's *Christie Devon*, the women of the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century literature cry: "I only ask[] to be a useful, happy woman" because "I am not tired yet: I hope I never shall be, for without my work I should fall into despair or *ennui*. . . . I owe all I can do, for in labor, and the efforts and experiences that gr[o]w out of it, I [find] independence, education, happiness, and religion" (329, 343). The call for full access to meaningful work and debates on how to best accomplish such a goal remain integral to the study of women's literature, as these issues continue to impact the lives of women in the twenty-first century.

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