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"Well, seriously, Flora, what can we women do?" Sentimentalism, Suffrage and Reform in Lillie Devereaux Blake's *Fettered for Life*

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Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Heidi. (2000). "Well, seriously, Flora, what can we women do?" Sentimentalism, Suffrage and Reform in Lillie Devereaux Blake's *Fettered for Life*. *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 27 (2), 62-78.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/lripub/26>

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looked to a vibrant discipline whose business was persuasion—the discipline of rhetoric and oratory. Largely prevented from speaking in public, barred from the colleges where rhetoric and oratory was formally taught, these "scribbling" women still took up the strategies the rhetoricians of the day counseled. Yet these "scribbling" women were not simply drawing on the work of these men; they managed to do them one better: the sentimental authors offered a solution to a crucial problem in the discipline, a problem that had stymied the professionals.

Heidi LM Jacobs, "'Well, seriously Flora, what *can* we women do?' Sentimentalism, Suffrage and Reform in Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life*"

Summoning but reconfiguring the sentimental novel, Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life* (1874) uses pathos to incite political action and begin a radical reform of patriarchal postbellum America. Of particular interest to Blake are suffrage, legal protection of women's lives and property, educational reform, and equitable pay and employment opportunities. In *Fettered for Life* there are eight suspicious or unnatural deaths which Blake links to a corrupt social order and archaic, ill-founded assumptions about women and womanhood. This article explores Blake's reform agenda and her use and revisioning of sentimentalism for rhetorical purposes.

Richard E. Joines, "Emerson's Proleptic Eloquence"

This reading of Emerson's essay "Eloquence" from *Society and Solitude* challenges the perceptions of Emerson as "the genius of American democracy" and as the sentimental, genteel, mystical Concord Sage. Read alongside Edward T. Channing's "The Orator and His Times," Emerson's ideas concerning the potential political effects of eloquence to renew ancient modes and orders, divide the many from the few, establish and maintain communities through persuasion and dissimulation, and incite fanaticism seem to anticipate Nietzsche's rhetoric of nihilism and its vulgarization in the Nazi regime. Reading Emerson according to Leo Strauss' theories of "esoteric" writing and Strauss' statements on pedagogy and persuasion in "German Nihilism," this essay attempts to clarify aspects of Emerson's political philosophy that have long been ignored, dismissed, or unread.

Darryl Dickson-Carr, "'Why Am I Called Upon to Speak Here To-day?' The Jeremiad in the Speeches and Writings of Fredrick Douglass and Malcolm X"

In this article I take a closer look at the rhetorical strategies and logic Douglass and Malcolm X use in selected speeches and writings as each developed his religious, political, and ideological bases. I argue that both Douglass and Malcolm X use the jeremiad in its uniquely American form primarily to embody a frequently apocalyptic vision of the American landscape even as it allows for the redemptive possibility of achieving social equality between white and black Americans. This latter allowance forces us to revisit the way we read both speakers, especially Malcolm X.



**"Well, seriously, Flora, what *can* we women do?"
Sentimentalism, Suffrage and Reform
in Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life***

Heidi LM Jacobs

In Susan Warner's 1852 novel *Queechy*, Hugh says to his young cousin Fleda "I didn't know you ever cared anything about politics before," and she responds with a smile: "didn't you?... You do me injustice." In this quotation, Warner confronts the assumption that lingered well into the twentieth-century, that most nineteenth-century women did not care about politics. Hugh's question is equally resonant in our own time when newly-recovered texts by nineteenth-century women dispute critical approaches that posit that, for the most part, women in the nineteenth-century did not care about political issues. Long dismissed for an apparently formulaic plot and an avoidance of the "real" political issues of their time, sentimental novels by nineteenth-century women are being reclaimed by feminist scholars and cultural historians. Lillie Devereux Blake's 1874 novel, *Fettered for Life*, reclaimed and edited by Grace Farrell in 1996, not only gives scholars insight into one woman's political vision, but it also gives literary and cultural historians another dimension of nineteenth-century women's writing to consider. Indeed, Blake's novel disproves Hugh's assumption that women in the nineteenth-century did not care about politics.

Blake's novel, while rooted within the genre of best-selling sentimental novels of the 1850s, shows a departure from the genre. Summoning the recurrent orphan motif of novels like Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and *Queechy* (1852) and Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), *Fettered for Life* depicts Laura Stanley making her way in the world. However, Blake updates Warner and Cummins' orphans, making Laura, her protagonist, an educated young woman instead of a girl. Reminiscent of male "quest" novels, Laura seeks her way in the world through a quest for gainful employment and financial independence in New York City. *Fettered for Life* is not just a feminized male quest novel, nor is it an updated version of *The Wide, Wide World* or *The Lamplighter*. Blake foregrounds the political subtext of earlier sentimental novels, making her narrative explicitly polemical.¹

Fettered for Life is historically and culturally significant as it illustrates one woman's attempt to employ suffragists' "available means"² to work toward women's legal and societal equality. Using a genre that already had a cultural following among white middle-class women, Blake uses and subverts codes of sentimentalism to work toward radical revisionings of the antebellum True Woman and the societal assumptions that affect white women's lives in the postbellum era. In *Fettered for Life*, Blake argues explicitly for legal and political reform to allow women legal status as citizens, legal protection of life and

property, equitable pay and employment opportunities, and a reform of social assumptions of womanhood.

In its earliest uses "sentimental" was a favorable term that meant the "exhibition of refined and elevated feeling." Significantly, this early definition of sentimentalism is akin to antebellum America's expectation that women (white and middle-class is usually inferred) be the guardians of the nation's emotional and moral life, embodying "refined and elevated feelings." Emerging from the Latin *sentire*, meaning "to feel," the sentimental relies upon feelings and emotions. Sentimentalism both exhibits feelings and, perhaps most importantly, inspires feelings in others. Theorizing the appeal to emotions or "pathos" dates back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which outlines the arts of persuasion.

Because I argue that Blake uses sentimentalism as a form of rhetoric—an attempt to change or persuade through emotion—Aristotle's definition of rhetoric is worth reviewing. Aristotle lists four ways in which the art of rhetoric is "undoubtedly useful": 1) a skilled rhetorician can counterbalance when "truth and justice fail through inefficient advocates"; 2) rhetoric enables a person to state one's case in popular language, not scientific language that would be inaccessible to some hearers; 3) it allows someone to "prove opposites, and to refute an opponent who makes an unfair use of arguments"; and 4) it "provides an efficient defense" (xxxii-xxxiii). Aristotle's rhetoric is resonant when surveying the texts in this study because Blake uses sentimentalism to counter "inefficient advocates" for women, using "popular language"—the language of emotion and everyday life—refuting males who make "unfair use of arguments" against women, and using fiction as "an efficient defense" against oppressive constructions of womanhood.

Aristotle's second point, that the use of popular language makes concepts accessible to a range of auditors, is particularly important in sentimental texts. Dobson contends that subjects sentimentalists address

mandate a literary idiom designed to further sentimental ends, an idiom whose tropes are designed to elicit feelings of empathy and concern, and whose language, like the language of realism, is intended to communicate meaning with minimal impediment. Such an idiom would prove both familiar and accessible; it would replicate linguistically the relational priorities of the sentimental ethos and facilitate communication with a wide and receptive audience. (268)

The fact that novels like *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* sold thousands of copies suggests that the sentimental idiom was both familiar and accessible to an unprecedented readership.³ In this way, these novels were a highly public forum that enables political work.

Sentimentalism's rhetorical effectiveness is based on emotive connections between reader and character: the reader is made to feel acutely the character's emotions and empathize with her or his plight. As the political impact of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illustrates, when readers are emotionally engaged and affected, they are more likely to act and demand reform. Sentimentality, as Joyce W. Warren recognizes, "requires an awareness of other

people, a mental dialogue or displacement" (11). In some novels, like *The Wide, Wide World* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, readers are brought so closely into the worlds of the characters that they, in a sense, almost become the characters and are able, through empathy, to make connections between their lives and the characters. In *Fettered for Life*, readers are asked to imagine what it feels like to be a range of white postbellum American women: middle-class, upper-middle class, working-class, married, single, educated, "fallen," and so on.

In its ability to spark public sympathy and benevolence, sentimentalism is an effective rhetorical mode for enacting individual, social, or political change often across the barriers of race and class. Joanne Dobson writes that sentimental tropes

often serve as vehicles for depictions of all-too-common social tragedies and political outrages stemming from the failure of society to care for the disconnected. Thus we see the focus on advocacy of the poor, oppressed and enslaved. To the sentimental mind motifs of abandonment, orphanhood, and death do not wallow in excessive emotionality; rather they represent an essential reality and *must* be treated with heightened feeling. (272-73)

Despite its history as a primarily white, middle-class, female genre, sentimentalism makes it possible that an experience can, in Franny Nudelman's words, "communicate across boundaries of race and class, founding a coalition between diverse populations" (944). Ideally, she argues, sentimentalism can "offer readers the experience of people unlike themselves, thus supplanting social disparities with political unions" (944).

Fettered For Life was published in a tumultuous cultural period when the United States was still reeling from the political and social effects of Civil War. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage wrote in their *History of Woman Suffrage*, the social and political implications of the Civil War intensified women's desire for "their own personal, individual liberty and created a revolution in woman herself" (vol. 2:23). Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett argue that the most pressing issue women faced in the last third of the nineteenth century was "how they were to participate in an industrialized and commercial society where work increasingly meant leaving the domestic hearth ... and going out among strangers. The repercussions for domestic relations, for social policy, and for the economic well-being for the nation were enormous" (100). During the Civil War, women participated in the public work of the nation in unprecedented numbers and in diverse capacities; suffrage debates waned under the nation's preoccupation with the Civil War. Despite the radical social, political, and economic changes engendered by the Civil War, social expectations of women and women's roles in America escaped radical revision.

Constitutional reform granting citizenship and suffrage to African American men (1868 and 1870) rekindled women's suffrage activism in the postbellum period. Many women, including Stanton and Anthony, argued that the granting of African American men's suffrage made white women's lack of suffrage even more egregious.⁴ Despite the passing of the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870)

Constitutional Amendments, women in America remained outside of the Constitution and were considered "noncitizens." Politically on a par with children, criminals, and the mentally incompetent, women's political status left them ineligible for the "unalienable rights" to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness promised to American citizens. As a response to denied citizenship and their political, social, and economic exclusions, many woman's rights activists revisited the Declaration of Independence for political and rhetorical strength. The Declaration of Independence, according to Bardes and Gossett, symbolized "the natural right of every individual to freedom from oppression. As a central concept in American political culture, the Declaration was used as a rallying cry by many groups to demand recognition of their natural rights" (1). When Blake's protagonist Laura rallies her friends to "assert your independence" (43) and "make a sort of declaration of independence" (133), Blake locates women and women's lives within the framework of the Declaration of Independence, thus asserting their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To claim the Declaration of Independence and apply it to herself meant that a woman was "asserting her equality to men and her independence of male control" (Bardes and Gossett 2). Summoning constitutional authority, as Sylvia D. Hoffert writes, "served as an ideological and linguistic bridge that connected women to the political tradition of the founding fathers" (36). Suffragists and women's rights supporters returned frequently to the Declaration of Independence and the ideals described therein as a means of forwarding their cause and asserting their rights to citizenship.

In the postbellum era, woman's rights activism took a range of forms to redress their legal and political status. In addition to debates within the press, conventions, and lecture circuits, activism took shape within the legal system, drawing attention to constitutional omissions and oversights regarding women. In 1872, two years before the publication of Blake's novel, Victoria Clafin Woodhull, America's first woman stockbroker, ran for President and lectured on women's rights.⁵ Also in 1872, Susan B. Anthony led sixteen other women to the vote in the Presidential election. Anthony was subsequently arrested and tried for the offense of "knowingly, wrongfully and unlawfully" voting in the federal election. Because she was not a citizen, Anthony was unable to testify on her own account. Although an all-male jury quickly proclaimed Anthony guilty, her trial brought attention to women's legal status. In particular, Anthony's trial brought attention to the wording on the Fourteenth Amendment which stated: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States ... are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside." Running more or less concurrently with the Anthony trial, the Minor trial also took the issue of woman suffrage to the courts and drew attention to the wording of the amendments. In 1872, Virginia Minor and her lawyer husband Francis Minor contended that the Constitution and its amendments already granted women the vote and that additional legislation enabling them to vote was superfluous (Flexner and Fitzpatrick 161). Like Anthony's case, the Minors' case was rejected by the courts. Nevertheless, Woodhull, Anthony, the Minors, and others like them brought the question of women's citizenry to cultural attention.

A contemporary and fellow activist, Blake was informed about and influenced by the writings, speeches, and activism of Stanton, Anthony, Lucy Stone, and others.⁶ Like the Declaration of Sentiments, Anthony's trial, Stanton's speeches and writings, and Woodhull's campaign, Blake's novel is a form of political rhetoric arguing for women's citizenship and reform for women's lives.

In *Fettered for Life*, there are eight unnatural or violent deaths.⁷ In all cases the victims, mostly women, are innocent and the men connected with these deaths are linked to a circle of powerful, tyrannical, and morally corrupt men. Many of these deaths expose how women have little or no legal recourse or protection: if they did, Blake infers, they would have been alive at the novel's end. Not surprisingly, the men connected with the deaths are also the most vocal opponents of woman's suffrage. Mr. Moulder declares, "Women are entirely out of place when they undertake to meddle in politics; it is preposterous! their proper place is home, taking care of husbands and children" (86). Ferdinand LeRoy refers to Patient Griselda as his model wife and announces that he has "a horror of woman's rights, in every form. I think that women should be quiet and retired" (345). In the course of the novel, Blake links women's suffering with attitudes like Moulder's and LeRoy's. While Agnes Moulder and Flora Livingston LeRoy both outwardly appear to have "married well," both women suffocate within their confined existence. As long as women are expected to emulate Patient Griselda and be socially and legally silent and invisible, Blake suggests they will continue to suffer. Should women's suffering not be sufficient argument for reform, Blake shows that when women suffer, families suffer, and when families suffer, the community and, by extension, the nation suffer. The recurrence of violent or unnatural deaths and the absence of legal protection or recourse in the novel suggests the urgency of social and legal reform regarding women. Women's rights are, for women and indeed the future of the nation, a matter of life and death.

While all the deaths in the novel are worthy of analysis, I focus my discussion on five deaths which are closely linked with Blake's social reform agenda: Flora Livingston, Maggie Bertram, Rhoda Dayton, Mrs. Bludgett, and Cherry the pet bird.

Flora Livingston is a fairly typical upper-middle class woman of her time. She was educated at Essex, a prestigious woman's school, so as to prepare her to enter the marriage market. When asked why she did not finish her education, Flora says that her parents were told "the training was masculine, that the girls all wanted to vote, and so on. Pa got quite frightened at all this, and when I came home for winter vacation would not let me go back" (41). Flora is pulled out of the school before any "radical" ideas can take concrete forms of outward rebellion, but she has already seen alternatives to her mother's life, and it is difficult for her to turn back. Flora stands in a space of conflict: she has seen that there are options, but she does not have the education, resources, and support to seize an alternative life. Flora's classmate Laura Stanley, on the other hand, did finish her education at Essex and is much better prepared to live the life she desires. Laura anticipates the New Woman ideology and tries to encourage Flora to be more independent. Seeing Flora's discontent, Laura urges her to ask her lawyer father if he will train

her in his profession. Mr. Livingston responds by reminding Flora of the True Woman tenets, saying

where is your womanliness, that you are not content with your lot in life, that you wish to give up your place in society and your prospects in the future for a plan as preposterous as this...? You need not despair because you cannot be a lawyer.... Why, little girl, you can marry the richest man in New York before spring if you like. (100)

To appease her, he gives her a hundred dollars and sends her off to buy a new dress.

Not surprisingly, Flora's opinions about who and when she should marry are also silenced by her parents, and she is forced against her will to marry the wealthy and corrupt Ferdinand LeRoy. The narrator notes that as a young woman, Flora's mother had also rebelled against the confines of marriage, having "at one period of her life protested against her destiny as bitterly as did ever any revolted slave" (102-3). However, "having for years been contented with her chains, she could endure no thought of revolt in others" (102-3). Flora's resistance to her engagement to LeRoy angers her mother, who insists that Flora suppress her objections. Using the language of social "othering," Blake recasts the practice of parents marrying their daughters to men they do not love: if these parents "had read an account of how certain savages deck out their young daughters with beads and feathers, and then offer them to some great chief for sale, they would probably have been much shocked at such unchristian and barbarous practices" (103). The language of slavery, another white middle-class social "othering," is used to describe Flora's engagement and her parents' marriage. Blake likens Mrs. Livingston to a "revolted slave" with "chains" and summons metaphors of enslavement to describe Flora's courtship and marriage: "a horrible degradation had come upon her; she was no longer free, no longer belonged to herself, she had received a master, and been compelled to submit to the symbol of his power.... 'I have passed under the yoke,' she thought, 'I am a slave'" (129). Given the previous decades' debates regarding the inhumanity and cruelties of slavery, Flora's language in a post-Civil War context is richly resonant. The use of slavery as a metaphor for women's legal and social position was not new; Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft among others had used such language in the eighteenth century. What was new, however, was the cultural power of such language. Coming soon after the carnage of the Civil War and a greater awareness of the evils of slavery, Flora's language possesses great rhetorical strength. By equating middle-class parents with an "unchristian and barbarous" cultural "other" and likening marriage to slavery, Blake recasts marriage and family, cornerstones of white middle-class life, into icons of the "other."

Although married to one of the richest men in town, Flora says, "I need money as much as the poorest woman in the city; I have not a penny that I can call my own.... I have nothing of my own, I am only a steward of his money" (308). Well-fed, clothed, and sheltered, Flora's need for money is hardly equal to the needs of "the poorest woman in the city"; however, she desires money of her own

and the freedom to spend it as she likes. Inspired once more by Laura, Flora decides she will become a publishing author not only for the money but also for the "food for the mind." In a discussion with Mrs. Winthrop, Flora's social equal, both women confess that upper-middle class marriages are not all they are promoted to be. Mrs. Winthrop says, "Well, seriously, Flora, what *can* we women do? I should like to have some active work, but society says No. Wear fine clothes, make visits, amuse yourself, that is your lot in life! ... I have fulfilled my destiny, by marrying a rich man, and now must kill time as well as I can" (327-28). Contrary to the True Womanhood cultural mythology, marriage and wifedom do not provide Mrs. Winthrop and Flora with the contentedness that society promises will be found in devoted wifedom. Rather than "kill time as well as [she] can," Flora takes to writing as a way of escaping the drudgery of domestic life.

Writing, Flora confesses, is "the only real pleasure I have" (327). When she gets a poem published, LeRoy is enraged: "you have deliberately outraged me, by bringing yourself before the public" (331). LeRoy forbids Flora to publish anything more, and when she refuses to obey him, he reminds her of her wedding vow to obey him. While Flora has indeed vowed to "love, honor and obey" LeRoy, Flora reminds him that he too has made a vow "to love and to cherish" (245). Just as Blake used the language of the Declaration of Independence to assert women's rights, she uses the marriage vow as a legal and social contract from which to argue that men have promises and responsibilities to keep as well as women. Even though men possess a socially-sanctioned power over women, the vows, Blake argues, do not grant men a *carte blanche* for tyranny. Reminiscent of Laura's claiming and feminizing the language of the Declaration of Independence, Flora does a rhetorical analysis of her vows: "I do not believe," she says,

that under any circumstances you have the right to thwart my aspirations, to stifle my soul, to destroy my life. You swore "to love and to cherish" me ... for the kindness, the tenderness, the gentleness I had a right to expect, I have looked in vain. My vows, so far as I uttered them, were reluctant ones, as you know. In spite of that, I have done a wife's duty to you thus far; but I absolutely refuse to yield my hopes and objects in life. (333)

LeRoy reasserts his power saying "I *will* be obeyed; I am master here and you shall know it" (333); however, Flora does not silence her thoughts as did her mother or Agnes. Flora takes her rebellion to an extreme, and when he again refuses to let her publish, she attempts suicide. Having "literally nothing on earth to do" and "no way of filling up the endless hours" (264), she sees no reason to live: "Go back to life ... endure what I have to endure! Be his obedient slave! Crush out every noble aspiration, sink down into a mere creature of his caprices! No, no! Better an endless rest!" (347). Rescued from drowning, Flora dies from complications. On her deathbed, she refuses to see her husband and makes a deathbed speech to her mother where she indicts loveless marriages and critiques her society's beliefs about marriage:

Mamma, don't let any of the other girls marry men they don't love ... don't urge them to marry any man, however rich he may be, from any motive but affection.... You thought I should be happy in my marriage, but it has killed me.... [I]f my fate can save any one else, it will not matter. There are other girls, you know, and I want you to remember this ... that women as well as men need an occupation for their energies, and that marriage without love, is worse than death. (350-51)

Flora's deathbed speech undermines the middle-class cultural narratives of devoted wifedom and is an integral part of Blake's explication of the price women pay for society's expectations of middle-class women. Here Flora echoes Margaret Fuller, who wrote in 1844 that "A house is no home unless it contain food and fire for the mind as well as for the body. ... For human beings are not so constituted that they can live without expansion. If they do not get it one way, they must another, or perish" (260). Indeed, Flora "perishes" because she does not have food for her mind and sees no way of securing it. In her suicide attempt and her eventual death, Flora fulfills Fuller's prophecy that if women do not get the means to expand their minds, "one way, they must another or perish" (260). In her "ideal" middle-class marriage, Flora finds herself silenced and caged-in by LeRoy's expectations of her "womanliness" and his insistence that she be a "Patient Griselda." Finding no legal, social, or personal recourse, she sees death as her only alternative.

Attempting to offer a cross-section of society, Blake also addresses women who cannot secure adequate food for their bodies. Maggie Bertram and Rhoda Dayton are Blake's attempt—albeit a problematic attempt—to show the double-edged exploitation emerging from the intersections of class and gender. Maggie and Rhoda come to New York hoping, like Laura, to find gainful employment. They eke out a living as best they can, working in various places including saloons where they are preyed upon by Judge Swinton and Ferdinand LeRoy. While Laura is able to negotiate around Swinton's attempted seductions, Maggie and Rhoda fall victim to LeRoy and Swinton. Inferred here is a sense that because Laura possesses middle-class privilege, she is better able to free herself from Swinton's designs upon her. Relatedly, there is an inference that because they are economically more vulnerable, Maggie and Rhoda are more likely to fall victim to sexual exploitation. In other words, Maggie and Rhoda are literally and figuratively "ruined" by the exploitive labors they perform and the dangerous workplaces they must frequent.

Parallel to LeRoy's domination of Flora is the story of Maggie who, seduced and abandoned by him, lies in a garret, dying from what Farrell suggests is tuberculosis—a disease compounded by overcrowded living conditions and undernourishment of the working classes (428). While Farrell's diagnosis of Maggie's illness is convincing, Maggie's situation also hearkens Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1794) and Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, where the "fallen" woman must die as a form of retribution for her "sins."⁸ Blake uses Maggie's illness to underscore the nature of sexual double standards. On her deathbed and in considerable pain, Maggie laments, "with a moaning cry," "'My tongue is as hot as fire! If I only had a little ice to cool it!'" (270). The narrator

does not back away from the scene, but instead Blake narrows her focus and declares: "So hard! so hard! That her dying hours should be rendered more suffering for the want of this simple luxury, while the man [LeRoy] who had destroyed her, had not an ungratified wish" (270). Significantly, Blake does not use the word "ruined" and does not call Maggie "fallen": Maggie is "destroyed." Blake continues the Maggie/LeRoy juxtaposition and in so doing condemns sexual double standards: "the young girls that were [Maggie's] childhood friends, had never come to her since her return, and yet the man who was worse than she, could be the honored guest of the highest in the land" (270). Blake holds men like LeRoy and Swinton explicitly responsible for Maggie and Rhoda's demise; in so doing she exposes patriarchal society's neglect and abuse of women.

Blake does not back away from injustice but confronts it head on. When LeRoy tells Flora that he disapproves of her behavior, saying "I have a horror of anything that even suggests an impropriety," Blake's narrator seizes upon this comment and demands of him: "Did no remembrance of his own conduct to Maggie occur to him? no thought of her ruined life? no fear of the solemn words, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged'?" (231). Blake's use of the word "judge" is loaded since Rhoda's destroyer is Judge Swinton, who embodies of Blake's vision of the legal system. In Rhoda's situation, Blake makes explicit the link between economic and sexual exploitation: "Patiently, devotedly, did this girl, whom the world would call lost, endure the trials and the hardships of her lot; always gentle to her friend, hard-working, self-denying, but holding in her heart a burning revolt against the position to which misfortune and man's social laws had condemned her" (116-17). In this passage, Blake uses the language of True Womanhood: Rhoda is patient, devoted, gentle, hardworking, and self-denying, but she illustrates how sexual double standards have made her exempt from the category of True Womanhood because of economic misfortune and sexual double standards. When Rhoda applies for a job in a shop, the boss refuses to hire her, claiming that Rhoda is not virtuous because she works in the saloon. Again, Blake does not back away from exposing the double standards inherent in this situation: the boss himself "keeps a woman" and in place of Rhoda, hires a man Rhoda has seen at the saloon who she says "is not so *virtuous* as I am, yet he could have the place at fifteen dollars a week, because he is a man" (118). As Rhoda tells Maggie, "It's a cruel, bitter shame ... this damnation that waits for women, if they make one misstep. Because I have stumbled, I am a thousand times worse than the men who roll in the dust" (118). As with Maggie's situation, Blake is emphatic about the injustices women face in regard to the sexual double standard:

If [Rhoda] had been a man, her early errors would have been forgotten or unheeded, and with resolution and industry she had, a dozen remunerative occupations would have been open to her; as a woman there was no hope, the curse must follow her wherever she went, and the only means of sustaining life was to toil all day at such work she could get from shops where no questions were asked, and in the evening to be at the beck and call of the frequenters of a concert saloon. (120)

Blake presents Rhoda's situation as a downward, double-edged spiral: economic insecurity and necessity caused Rhoda's "stumble," and her "stumble" keeps her in precarious economic circumstances. When Rhoda and Frank are shipwrecked, she sacrifices her life to save Frank's saying, "My life is a wreck and a ruin, and may as well end thus as any way" (277). Though Blake is not explicit, there is a hint that, as a working-class woman, Rhoda's only choices are prostitution or death.

One of Blake's fortes is her ability to expose the nebulous ways that sexism works its way through society. Blake's ability to posit solutions is more tenuous. As a means of redressing class and gender inequities, Blake offers this solution through her suffrage spokesperson Mrs. D'Arcy:

"Now if these poor things had the ballot, they would have an individual power, which would, in itself give them a certain sense of independence. Look, for instance, at poor Rhoda; if she were a voter, with influence over voters, she would be treated very differently by men. She would feel that she had personal power and commanded respect, and the possession of this power would help her, as it has helped many a man, to earn money, and to a position of respectability." (257)

Mrs. D'Arcy's overly-simplistic solution privileges gender and eclipses class concerns: having the benefit of hindsight, we know that suffrage helped women, but it was not an instant, cure-all solution. Despite her good intentions, Blake's attempts to speak for working-class women is problematic.

Not only does Blake reemphasize middle-class notions that working-class labor is at odds with sexual purity, she takes away working-class women's agency and presents them as helpless victims who passively accept the repercussions of a sexist and classist social order. When Maggie, Rhoda, and Mrs. Bludgett tip off Laura's middle-class friends about Swinton's attempts to abduct and seduce Laura, they rush to protect her. These same friends, however, passively pity Maggie, Rhoda, and Mrs. Bludgett, but they do little to actively protect them. Ironically, Rhoda and Mrs. Bludgett risk their lives to save Laura, but Blake denies them the agency to save themselves.

In *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920*, Anne Ruggles Gere describes the postbellum middle-class clubwomen's attempts to "help" working class women: "In portraying working class women as passive victims in need of help from reformers, white middle-class women ... cast themselves as possessing power and agency, and they proposed using these assets to transform working women into a closer approximation of middle-class femininity" (78). Similarly, Blake seems unable to conceptualize Maggie and Rhoda outside of middle-class constructions of womanhood and femininity. Because they cannot approximate middle-class femininity, death seems the only solution for Maggie and Rhoda in Blake's fictive universe.

Blake is on more solid ground when she argues for the necessity of legal reform to protect women. In one scene, Mrs. D'Arcy reads reports of domestic

violence in the newspaper and notes the minimal punishments the men receive compared to other crimes like robbery: "If a man take a purse from another man, and lay his hand upon his arm while committing the theft, it is highway robbery, punishable with at least five years' imprisonment. If he beat his wife almost to death, it is a mere misdemeanor, to be condoned by a few weeks in a penitentiary, or a light fine; while if he take from her all her earnings, it is not even robbery" (140). Mrs. D'Arcy concludes by saying, "it is no wonder that such atrocities are lightly punished, when we realize the general tone of our laws with regard to women" (141). In other words, since married women are legally on a par with criminals and those of unsound minds, is it any wonder that they are not protected by the law?

Lest we readers not be persuaded by Mrs. D'Arcy's analysis of domestic violence, Blake casts her readers as voyeurs of a scene of brutal abuse. Blake is extremely graphic in her depiction of Mr. Bludgett beating his wife—a rare thing in nineteenth-century texts. Here's an example: "She fell and lay without motion but even yet, the man's fury was not spent, he kicked the prostrate form more than once, his heavy boots making the strokes almost murderous" (62). Insisting that readers not look away, *Fettered for Life's* narrator acts almost as a camera, zooming in on Molly's beating. She comments, "Reader, is this scene too horrible? Are your dainty sensibilities shocked at such a recital? Think then if you shrink from the mere description, what the reality must be, and say not that it is unnatural or overdrawn when day after day, our police records are full of the accounts of the wounds, the hurts, the death-blows, that women receive from brutal husbands" (63). Should readers think that women's rights and legal reforms are abstract concepts divorced from everyday reality, Molly Bludgett is a vivid reminder of the urgency and necessity of legal reform. For women like Molly, reform is a matter of life and death.

From the outside, the Moulders appear to have an ideal middle-class life, yet death and the need for reform are also present in their home. When Laura becomes a boarder in the Moulders' home, she witnesses the kinds of mental oppression middle-class women face when granted no agency, intellectual engagement, or emotional companionship. The Moulder household functions as a microcosm of patriarchal society: Mr. Moulder is overbearing while Agnes is a version of Patient Griselda (132). According to Agnes, her husband has "strict ideas as to wifely duty and submission," but excuses his behavior, saying he "does not intend to be harsh" (105). Laura pursues this point, asking the question society seems unable to ask about postbellum, middle-class marriages: "And do you agree in these ideas?... you are as devoted a wife and mother as I ever saw; *but are you contented?*" (105, emphasis added). Here Laura draws a line between being a devoted wife and mother and being happy: contrary to anti-suffrage rhetoric, being a devoted wife and mother does not necessarily equate to contentedness. Agnes concurs: "I loved my children and my home devotedly, and yet, sometimes, it seemed to me as if I had capacity for something else beyond domestic drudgery. But I have done my best to silence these ideas" (105). Significantly, Agnes has not overcome her longing for a broader life, but instead has silenced her discontent. According to

Agnes' example, women's silence about their discontent cannot be taken for absence of discontent.

Blake's choice of family name—Moulder—is well-chosen, for "moulder" is not only one who moulds or shapes, but "moulder" also means to rot, fester, and crumble. While seemingly at odds with each other, both definitions of "moulder" work well with Blake's portrayal of this middle-class family. As parents, the Moulders do mould and shape their children's lives: we see the son indulging in dictatorial behavior and becoming a miniature of his father just as the daughter is "moulded" to be as passive, silent, and submissive as her mother. In the replication of the parents in the children, the second definition of "moulder" is also relevant since we see the family unit decaying. Neither husband nor wife is content, and Mr. Moulder's domineering actions eventually result in Agnes' miscarrying their son.

Although Agnes has silenced her resistance and quelled her rebellious nature by assuming the roles her husband (and society) desires, the death of the unborn child suggests that there is a cost to holding on to oppressive social assumptions about women and their roles as wives and mothers. Mrs. Moulder is discontent, but more disturbing, she and Mr. Moulder will raise a son and daughter who are exactly like themselves, thus continuing the cycle of female oppression and familial discontent.

Sparking the death of the unborn child is Mr. Moulder's accidental killing of Cherry, Agnes' pet bird. When Cherry gets loose from his cage, Mr. Moulder tries to recapture him; in his rashness and impatience, he kills the bird. Cherry is the smallest death in the novel, but like the death of the unborn child, the death of an innocent and vulnerable creature is highly symbolic. The caged bird is a powerful and recurrent symbol for freedom and oppression in the nineteenth century, and Cherry functions similarly in this novel. On a basic level, Cherry is analogous to Mrs. Moulder who is "caged" in her house and middle-class marriage. Like Cherry, Mrs. Moulder is unable to "fly freely" and has given up resisting the restrictions on her freedom. The symbol of Cherry does not end here: Cherry's death sends Mrs. Moulder into despair, saying "this is only the last straw that has broken me down.... Life is all so hard, so hard! Work and endure and suffer, and no hope in the future" (291). Mrs. Moulder's grief over Cherry's death and all the joy and hope he represented, results in her miscarrying her baby. Just as the birth of a child is a comedic trope, a harbinger of hope, the future, and possibility, the death of an unborn infant is a condemning image of despair and lack of possibility. Such an image does not bode well for the Moulders, the American family, and the nation as a whole.

Because Blake's novel is one of social reform, she insists that solutions exist alongside the problems that women face. As discussed earlier with Maggie, Rhoda, and Molly Bludgett, change such as suffrage and legal reforms in regard to women's safety are one aspect of a solution. But legal reform is not a cure-all. Concurrently, society needs to change on a personal basis, one individual at a time.

Blake presents one radical solution to women's lack of legal protection and their precarious economic status through the character of Frank Heywood, a

female crossdresser. By surrendering her female identity to live as a man, Frank "escapes" the dangers of patriarchy. Describing her arrival in New York, Frank says: "I had no friends, I was entirely unprotected. I was insulted, refused work, unless I would comply with the disgraceful propositions of my employers; in short, I had the experience which so many young women havin in the great city; poverty, temptation, cruelty. I was resolved not to sink where so many had fallen" (366). As a way of avoiding the dangers and boundaries women encountered, Frank bought a suit of boy's clothes and, as a result, she says "I could go about unquestioned. No man insulted me, and when I asked for work, I was not offered outrage.... I resolved to carve out for myself a place in the world as a man, and let death alone reveal my secret and prove what a woman can do" (366-67). Frank, however, does not only offer a creative solution to the problems women face, she also provides evidence that women are denied opportunities because of their sex. As a woman, she found doors of opportunity closed for her; as a man, doors are wide open: "my [male] dress enabled me to go to places and scenes which I could not have visited in the garb of my sex" (367). Hiding her female body, Frank is able to walk safely through society while Maggie and Rhoda are "ruined," Mrs. Bludgett is beaten repeatedly and eventually beaten to death, Laura is nearly abducted, Flora is trapped in a marriage, and Agnes Moulder is "moulded" into a quiet and submissive wife by her tyrannical husband.

In her crossdressing, Frank proves that women can do the work men do and they can succeed at it. As Anne Ruggles Gere notes, cross dressing "called the binary categories of male and female into question" and "explored and expressed the blurring definitional distinctions between women and men elsewhere in society because this form of transgression simultaneously underscored and questioned the gendered hierarchy of male and female" (234-35). Relatedly, Frank's crossdressing discloses the depth of societal sexism: she can only succeed when she denies her female body. As Farrell writes, "Through the revelations of a cross-dresser, the novel suggests that gender, like a garment, is a surface detail and the profound differences between the sexes, used to create a hierarchy and to justify social inequalities, are themselves not preordained givens, but are social constructions" ("Profile" 150). The contrast between what Frank is able to do and what the other women are not able to do is striking and says much about a world in which, as Laura is told, women are "taken care of" by men. According to Farrell, "the hidden premise within *Fettered for Life* is that men and women are essentially the same" (393). Further, Farrell argues, because Frank the female person and Frank the male persona are the same, Blake suggests that "the profound differences between the sexes, which are used to create a hierarchy and to justify social inequities, are themselves not preordained essences, but mere products of social circumstances" ("Afterword" 394). Through Frank, Blake attempts to undermine the societal assumptions and practices that wrest women's freedom and agency based on their supposed inferiority.⁹

As Gere and Farrell suggest, Frank's cross-dressing is a means by which Blake deconstructs the foundational premises of white middle-class gender constructions. Yet in presenting this premise, *Fettered for Life* suggests that to fit herself for survival and success in a world inhospitable to women, Frank must not

only deny her gender but must also desex herself. Frank is neither fully masculine nor fully feminine, and work replaces traditional domestic life: her work, she says "must be father, mother, wife and children to me" (302)—a radical if not entirely impractical solution to the postbellum Woman Question. To middle-class readers, being like Laura Stanley is a far more palatable and plausible solution than being like Frank.

Laura, though confronted daily with sexism and sexist practices, is well-suited through temperament, training, and social support networks to negotiate her way around male oppression and tyranny. In contrast to the True Womanhood standards that Agnes and Flora feel they must emulate, Laura is more akin to the emergent ideal of the Real Woman who, according to Frances B. Cogan, possessed "a survival ethic" that stressed intelligence, physical fitness, and healthy lifestyles, self sufficiency and self-reliance and, significantly, a "careful marriage" (4). Laura possesses this survival ethic and is intelligent, strong, independent, and firm in her convictions that women are equal to men. Exposing a strong middle-class bias, Blake suggests that for women to survive and to be happy, they should be more like Laura and less like Flora, Agnes, Maggie, Rhoda, and Molly. How women like Agnes or Maggie or Molly are to become more like Laura is unclear.

The "careful marriage" between Laura and the pro-suffrage Guy Bradford is Blake's attempt to reconstruct marriage into a more workable and egalitarian partnership.¹⁰ For Blake, the institution of marriage is not the problem per se, but rather what needs revisioning are the assumptions about the nature of the partnership. To show that the institution of marriage has potential for equality and life-long contentedness, Blake creates Mr. and Mrs. George Bradford, who Mrs. D'Arcy calls "my couple": "They are both people of thought and culture, and they are such a happy couple! Although they were married before woman's rights were ever talked of, they have been equal partners in all things and are lovers yet" (66). When Laura, a self-sufficient, independent, strong willed, pro-suffrage woman, marries their son Guy, it is assumed that they too will be equal partners in all things and be another model couple. By situating Guy and Laura's marriage as the comedic ending of the novel, Blake designates Laura to be the mother of the next generation. Unlike Agnes Moulder or Mrs. Livingston, Laura will raise her children differently, thus beginning a new generation of women.

Like most of its sentimental predecessors, *Fettered for Life* ends with the assumption that Laura and Guy will live happily ever after. Despite her intentions, to create an altered institution, the ideal marriage in *Fettered for Life* remains elusive and difficult to enact. Like most novels of the nineteenth century, Blake avoids discussing Laura and Guy's married life and in so doing she evades a crucial question: how exactly is the ideal marriage to function in an everyday capacity? Blake also avoids discussing in specific detail Mr. and Mrs. Bradford: how did they reconfigure societal expectations to become and remain a "model couple." Further, Mrs. D'Arcy, a female physician and Blake's icon of strong independent womanhood, is widowed but not married. Would Mrs. D'Arcy be socially acceptable if she were a single woman? Could Mrs. D'Arcy be as independent and strong if Mr. D'Arcy were still alive? At the novel's end, the ideal of marriage as a partnership remains enigmatic. Can it exist? Can marriage be an

equal partnership? Can women be independent within a marriage? Additionally, the optimism of the future, exemplified in the marriage of Laura and Guy, is tempered with the many deaths of women who die because of tyrannical men, unchecked by law and society. We can assume that Laura will likely live happily ever after, but what about the other women? The deaths of Flora, Maggie, Rhoda, Mrs. Bludgett, Cherry, and the unborn infant are specters that haunt the novel's comedic ending.

Despite its problematic and enigmatic solutions, *Fettered for Life* presents a radical rereading and reconstruction of her society's expectations and assumptions about womanhood, emphasizing the centrality of women's well being within the concerns of the nation. Blake's novel illustrates the political possibilities of pathos and the rhetorical power of sentimentalism. In the case of Mrs. Bludgett's beating or Maggie's death or the death of the unborn child, we are made to feel deeply. Blake's use of emotion is not meant to inspire passive pity but active compassion and activism. Blake's fictive lens does not pan away from emotionally-charged scenes but instead zooms in, forcing the readers not only to feel, but to react and act. When Blake makes her reader watch a woman beaten to death, she asks not only for reaction but also action. It's as if she says, How can you stand by helplessly when women are beaten every day? The power of *Fettered for Life* and, indeed, of sentimentalism, is its use of pathos for rhetorical purposes—to convince readers to work toward social and individual change.

The title of this article asks the question, "Well, seriously Flora, what *can* we women do?" In *Fettered for Life*, Blake suggests that what women need to do is *something*—something has to happen and society needs to change. Blake would also answer that women need to agitate and insist upon women's rights and reform within the nation, community, and home. As *Fettered for Life* shows, society will not change on its own—there needs to be reaction and action. Reform and rhetoric are a matter of life and death.

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Notes

¹ See Jane Tompkins' influential *Sensational Designs* and her Afterword to *The Wide, Wide World* for an analysis of the political nature of antebellum novels by women.

² For a detailed analysis of women's rhetorics, see Ritchie and Ronald's introduction to their forthcoming anthology *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetorics*.

³ The widespread success of sentimental novels was due in part to educational and technological advances. Increases in the middle-class population and increased literacy created a market for such books, while technologies made printing easier and more economical. The rise in the periodical press provided a greater forum for book reviews and advertisements. Additionally, as Susan Coultrap McQuin argues, the market for books by and about women benefited from expansions in women's education. Coultrap McQuin suggests that by 1850 "at least fifty percent of white women could read and write, and in New England literacy was almost universal" (21).

⁴ Racial issues divided suffragists and led to the formation of two rival groups, the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association. See Flexner and Fitzpatrick's *Century of Struggle*.

⁵ See Goldsmith's *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*.

⁶ See Farrell's "Profile" in *Legacy*, and "Afterword" to *Fettered for Life*, and Stanton et al's *History of Woman Suffrage* for discussions of Blake's activism.

⁷ Among the dead are Flora, Mrs. Moulder's unborn child, Maggie, Maggie's mother, Rhoda, Mrs. Bludgett, a man who displeased Judge Swinton, and Cherry the bird. Only the man's death and Mrs. Bludgett's death could legally be classified as murder; however, Blake infers that men's mistreatment of women and the social and material circumstances women live in contribute to the situations that kill women.

⁸ *Charlotte Temple* can be connected with Maggie and Rhoda through class issues. As Cathy N. Davidson notes in the introduction to Rowson's novel, "Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous editions of [*Charlotte Temple*] were specifically targeted for working-class readers, and it was particularly popular with those 'factory girls' who [like Maggie and Rhoda] left their family farms and rural villages in droves to live in workhouses with other young people—lured there by promises of better education, steady employment and a living wage" ("Introduction" xii).

⁹ That Blake never wavers from referring to Frank as a masculine entity is extremely problematic as it desexes Frank. Frank's sex is central to Blake's agenda of asserting that women can do the work of men and remain "womanly." Likely, Blake's choice of pronoun emerges from stylistic concerns: using feminine signifiers would reveal Frank's secret and destroy the element of readerly intrigue and suspense. Additionally, using feminine pronouns after her secret is revealed is stylistically awkward. By using feminine pronouns to refer to Frank, I want to reassert Frank's womanhood and suggest that although she wears men's clothes and lives and works as a man, Frank is still a woman. Most problematic about Blake's use of male pronouns for Frank is Mr. Moulder and Mr. Livingston's belief that work desexes women. Because Blake is emphatic that work is not at odds with womanhood, I use female signifiers for Frank. As I suggest above, Blake's pronoun choice is likely a stylistic or form issue. As a critic, however, I feel it important to use feminine signifiers for Frank to bolster Blake's insistence elsewhere that work is not antithetical to womanhood.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Silent Partner* (1871) and *The Story of Avis* (1877) offer more complicated discussions of how marriages work or should work.

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