

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SACRED SPACES, SECULAR FICTIONS:
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN
DOMESTIC LITERATURE

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Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions puts the feminist study of domestic literature in conversation with the study of religion and literature in order to better understand the place of secularity in nineteenth-century American domestic literature. Authors such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Herman Melville, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper represented the space of the home, among other sacred spaces, as a place to navigate a dynamic relationship between religious and secular realms. While we often think of domestic literature as a didactic mode employed to promote Christian doctrine, a significant strand of this literature encouraged readers to consider how certain secular discourses shaped and was shaped by religious belief. A novel like Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), for example, stages debates about African American national belonging that incorporate religious, legal, political, and domestic discourses. Attending to the (sometimes unruly) reciprocity of these discourses is

crucial for better understanding the Christian faith that Harper was known for, and which often characterizes *Iola Leroy*'s moral ethos.

As the title of *Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions* suggests, this project asserts the importance of space to domestic literature, as well as the impact of fiction on nineteenth-century religious culture. Domestic spaces, including but not limited to the home, were crucial for representing and negotiating conflicts between religion and such secular issues as sexuality, racial hierarchies, science and medicine, and political citizenship. From Sedgwick's Puritan homestead to Phelps's imagined houses in heaven or Harper's living-room salon, these sacred spaces merged the religious and the secular in ways that modeled a secularist morality for nineteenth-century readers. Domestic fiction, I show, could instruct readers on moral issues without proposing a single (presumably Christian) doctrine or viewpoint. While the authors in this study believed in the importance of literature for cultivating moral readers, they did not necessarily believe that Christian faith was the only worthy mode of morality. Instead, readers could take in different sources—religious and secular—in order to best navigate a modern world.

SACRED SPACES, SECULAR FICTIONS: NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN DOMESTIC LITERATURE

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Part 1: Sentimentalism’s Secular Investments.....	24
Chapter 1: Secular Domesticity: Developments in the Early National and Antebellum Novel.....	25
Chapter 2: Sentimentalism and Secularism in Herman Melville’s <i>Pierre</i>	70
Part 2: Heaven’s Domestic Dimensions	114
Chapter 3: “A very material kind of heaven”: The Postsecular Afterlife in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s <i>Gates</i> Trilogy	115
Chapter 4: Spaces of Faith and Doubt in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Poetry and Fiction	162
Notes	211
Works Cited	225

Introduction

Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions: Nineteenth-Century American Domestic Literature considers how nineteenth-century American texts represent the home as a space to negotiate tensions between religion and secularity. Through the “Sacred Spaces” of the title I suggest that nineteenth-century domestic literature often portrays the home as the locus of spirituality, morality, and faith. Other spaces, such as graveyards, churches and heaven, feature in this literature as well, granting potential spiritual development to characters who seek enlightenment. “Secular Fictions,” on the other hand, nods to the fact that literature is always “in the world, and thus worldly,” unavoidably produced by certain historical, political, and social contexts.¹ By “Secular Fictions” I do not mean “a notion of literature as a displaced or secularized form of religion” (Jager 413). Rather, I suggest that literature provides an opportunity to represent the complexity or “texture” of living in a modern secular age shaped by worldly as well as spiritual concerns (Coleman, “Spiritual Authority” 521). Further, the diptych format of the title should allow for considerations of the reverse formulation: secular spaces and sacred fictions. I am interested in the work of the comma, which bridges and encourages exchange between the sacred and the secular. Specifically, domestic literature, as critics have been discussing for decades, concerns more than “the everyday world of the home,” even if that is its main focus (Weinstein, *Family* 8). While centered on the home, these fictions engage such concerns as American imperialism, the literary marketplace, slavery, consumer culture, and political citizenship. By exploring the sacred in relation to the secular, I

hope to reconsider how nineteenth-century domestic literature addressed these cultural tensions. Through this literature's representation of the home, many authors suggest that religious and secular discourses should be viewed as reciprocal rather than competing forces.

Because it is centered on the setting of the home, my argument extends critical debate surrounding the longstanding notion of separate spheres. Whereas some historians have characterized early American culture as divided into private (feminine) and public (masculine) spheres, feminist critics such as Linda Kerber have challenged the idea that women were relegated to a separate, apolitical sphere that had no bearing on public American life. Furthermore, as Kerber and others have argued, the fallacy of separate spheres allowed historians and critics to overlook racial and class categories, because the private sphere was often described only in terms of white, middle-class female experience.² Since at least the 1990s, literary and cultural critics have contextualized the nineteenth-century female experience—and the work of women authors—in both private and public sectors. As Lauren Berlant explains, this is “the axis of sentimental *political* practice,” which “renders scenes and stories of structural injustice in the terms of a putatively nonideological nexus of vulnerability” (36). In other words, women's texts were able to expand the so-called private sphere of feminine feeling to the public sphere and ultimately to national life, coopting intimacy to enact policy. This, Berlant explains, is the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* model: “the ability of literature to engage with and have an impact on the social world” (60). Or, as Glenn Hendler puts it, the nineteenth-century novel was “a public instrument designed to play in a sentimental key” (1).³ For these and other critics, a

model of separate spheres is inaccurate: the boundaries between private and public were blurry at best, and women's domestic labor manifested itself publically.⁴ All of which is to say, domestic literature, which appears to deal with merely private matters, was also a public force.

Within the realm of domestic literature, it is important to underscore that expressions of religious faith reflect the mingling of private and public life. Early national and antebellum domestic novels in particular developed an ideology of Republican Motherhood, which celebrated the figure of the mother as a moral authority in the home who raised American children to be good citizens. Take, for example, chapter eleven of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), which introduces Governor Winthrop's mansion and his wife. The chapter opens, "We hold ourselves bound by all the laws of decorum, to give our readers a formal introduction to the government-mansion, and its inmates" (143), followed by several paragraphs describing the location of the house and a detailed description of typical pilgrim house interiors. Sedgwick then moves seamlessly to Mrs. Winthrop, who "was admirably qualified for the station she occupied," due to her "matrimonial virtue" and "feminine propriety" (144, 145). Given the structure of the chapter, Mrs. Winthrop's qualities appear to be part and parcel of the governor's mansion.⁵ One reads her matrimonial virtue alongside the house's great hall, parlor, and chambers as a structural foundation for a home.

This example of the Puritan Winthrop family supports the dominant critical narrative about nineteenth-century domesticity, which typically emphasizes Protestant values established and nurtured in the home of the nuclear family. Women like Mrs.

Winthrop, who model Christian values for younger female characters coming of age over the course of the novel, abound in domestic literature and literary criticism of this genre. In this study, I aim to recover other models of moral womanhood in the nineteenth century. Even in *Hope Leslie*, for example, the Governor and his wife represent an older model of domesticity to be replaced by the next generation. As I will discuss in chapter one, Hope Leslie, Esther Downing, Everell Fletcher, and Magawisca represent new, diverse modes of morality that could shape nineteenth-century domestic ideology. In this vein, the texts in this study challenge the possible hegemony of Christian dogma. At the same time, they also herald the home as an important space for cultivating morality in subtle and surprising ways.

My primary argument in *Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions* is that nineteenth-century American domestic literature, ranging from Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) to Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), represents the home as a place where religious and secular discourses coexist and are in productive tension. Rather than promoting Christian doctrines outright, authors such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Harriet Wilson, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and others often divest the domestic sphere of dogmatic constraints. Texts by these authors emphasize how the home—presumably a sacred space in the nineteenth century—invited Americans to rethink religion by exploring how it shaped and was shaped by secular forces. As I discuss above, this argument builds on those made about the blurriness of private/public divides. More specifically, the importance of discussing religion and secularity symbiotically is that we begin to see more clearly how nineteenth-century authors model many ways of living a moral life in a world that extends well beyond

the home. Works of domestic literature may engage with Unitarian, Methodist, or Spiritualist beliefs, but they also consider colonialism, racism, civic engagement, sexuality, and numerous other matters as they trace protagonists' coming of age into moral womanhood. The trope of the home, I argue, does not pit the religious against the secular, but rather promotes a dynamic relationship between the two realms.

While we might think of the home as a bulwark against the dangers of the outside world, I position the home of nineteenth-century American domestic literature as an important site of negotiation between religion and secularity.

Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions puts the feminist study of nineteenth-century American domesticity in conversation with religion and literature studies in order to better understand the place of secular culture in domestic literature. First and foremost, this project is concerned with the trope of the home and what kinds of interventions we imagine nominally straightforward domestic texts produce. Considering sacred spaces alongside secular fictions, this project resides in the middle ground of "religion and literature" studies. As Susan Felch suggests, the "and" between religion and literature is particularly complex, including such objects and interventions as religious readings of literature, literary readings of sacred texts, explications of religion's influence on nominally secular culture, and theoretically-inflected critical methodologies (3). While this list of interdisciplinary modes might appear to signal a certain messiness inherent to this field of study, it also shows how the study of religion and literature can be generative: a space of encounter for what might seem like disparate or even competing fields. The work of this dissertation is similar: I am invested in such spaces of encounter, where the seemingly antithetical

realms of religion and secularity comingle. The work of elaborating this coexistence thus embraces Felch's point about the "and" of religion and literature. Rather than engaging a hermeneutics of suspicion that exposes the "invisible" religious content of secular culture, *Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions* shows that the mutual exchange between religion and secularity was a significant factor of nineteenth-century domestic ideology as articulated in literature. Nineteenth-century authors inhabit, cultivate, and represent spaces of encounter between religious and secular discourses in their work. Domestic literature consistently redefines the religious and secular boundaries of faith, whether by imagining a multifaith graveyard as in *Hope Leslie* or a material heaven in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868). These works develop a domesticity grounded in hybridity rather than dogmatic certainty.

Sacred Spaces

Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions is invested in the relationship between nineteenth-century domesticity, morality, and literature. The baseline formula for such a relationship is historian Barbara Welter's theory of the Cult of True Womanhood, which argued that women had four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Perhaps counterintuitively, this restrictive ideology figured the American mother as a moral authority—an authority which eventually extended to the successful woman writer.⁶ As domestic literature became more popular and its didactic potential grew, the sentimental novel in particular became a means for women to assert moral authority through literary expression. Ann Douglas later argued that sentimental fiction thus initiated a "feminization" of religious

authority—women novelists, she maintains, were in large part responsible for the disestablishment of male clergy. This thesis has not gone unchallenged: most prominently and in Douglas’s contemporaneous moment, Jane Tompkins emphasized the feminist power of women’s participation in such a literary market. Growing out of this early debate in feminist criticism, critics such as Nina Baym, Mary Kelley, Gillian Brown, Cathy Davidson, and Susan Harris have articulated the nuances of the woman writer’s place in literary history, religious discourse, domestic ideology, and national culture.⁷

Much of this foundational criticism emphasizes the ways domestic literature extends the private realm into public discourse. In contrast, more recent criticism such as Claudia Stokes’s *The Altar at Home* focuses on how public debates were made private. Stokes argues that sentimental writers addressed fierce religious debates of the time—particularly those about the prerequisites for and manifestations of salvation—through the seemingly “tranquil” scenes of domesticity (4). In such texts, domesticity “provides both a cover and a forum” for these contentious debates (5). Indeed, just as Tompkins argues for the value of women’s participation in the public literary market, so does Stokes characterize as feminist this move of bringing the altar home. Claiming contentious religious debates for the private sphere imbued domestic women with new religious authority. Early feminist work as well as recent literary criticism pays attention to the popular works of women writers in the nineteenth century—that is, to sentimental fiction and to other forms of domestic literature not canonized in the early stages of American literary studies.⁸ In so doing, critics figure women as both objects and agents of nineteenth-century American culture.

Sentimental fiction and domestic literature broadly imagined are important expressions of what it meant to be a moral woman in the nineteenth century.

Where does the trope of the home figure into this criticism about nineteenth-century women writers and their moral authority? Maria DiBattista and Deborah Nord argue that “the home, or at least the house, is a male possession and preserve,” a fact which nineteenth-century domestic literature confronts by taking its heroines “outside the confines of the domestic into public domains” (25, 2). Their view of the home as a sacred space, then, is vexed: it is “in constant need of relocation, reinvention, and reconsecration” (109). Hendler similarly emphasizes that “sentimental narratives have a surprising tendency to disarticulate domestic spaces,” noting that in many novels, heroines start their journey by leaving home (124). Hendler’s use of “surprising” suggests that we expect sentimental novels to do one thing—depict a stable home life, perhaps—but that they often do something else entirely. On this point he is joined by Cindy Weinstein, who focuses on domestic literature’s depiction of families. As she remarks, “The making of a family is the task that awaits most sentimental protagonists, but what makes this endeavor so interesting and important...is that in the process of making a family, the family is being redefined as an institution to which one can choose to belong or not” (*Family* 8). Weinstein’s assertion that family-building was based on voluntary connections (what she calls the “paradigm of contract”) challenges the centrality of the consanguineous nuclear family to domestic literature (*Family* 9). Hendler and Weinstein share my investment in showing how domestic literature often subverts its assumed “overplot,” defined by Nina Baym as a coming of age story in which a virtuous woman

overcomes challenges and is rewarded with marriage.⁹ Whereas we might expect women protagonists who embody a cult of True Womanhood, these novels often depict women protagonists who leave home. Instead of stories that end with neat marriages, these novels often portray haphazard families of adopted sisters and uncles who accompany the young couple in their new lives.¹⁰

I join these critics in tracing domestic literature's aim to assemble families in the midst of—and in spite of—disarticulated domestic spaces. However, I will be showing how such re-articulations are neither neatly religious nor strictly secular. For example, Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, the focus of my fourth chapter, explicitly follows characters working to “gather together the remnants of [their] scattered family” following emancipation from slavery (148); by the novel's end, uncles, siblings, parents and grandparents have been reunited. The novel concludes with a vision for African American national belonging grounded in domesticity, explicitly linking the reassembled family to a national future. For my purposes, this plot of reassembly and home-building is compelling for its relationship to religion. In *Iola Leroy* and the other novels addressed in this study, Protestant Christianity is often a dominant component of plot, but it is not necessarily the force that brings families together or sustains their future. Rather, characters must reconcile the ways Christianity has negatively impacted their ability to cultivate domestic security. Spiritual growth might come second or third to citizenship, cross-racial friendship, sexuality, or, quite simply, happiness. While in most cases, religious belief is not abandoned entirely, the domestic works I discuss show how religion was a better foundation for the home when it accommodated the realities of secular living.

Secular Fictions

Because *Sacred Spaces*, *Secular Fictions* explores the relationship between the religious and the secular, it can be viewed as a postsecular project. However, the meaning of “postsecular” is highly contentious. Here I want to distinguish which aspects of the debate about “postsecular” this project is and is not invested in. At its simplest, “postsecular” refers to a methodological frame that resists secularization narratives. Secularization narratives define culture as becoming more secular as it becomes more modern. In this case, then, “postsecular” challenges this teleological view of history. Rather than assuming the latent good of society’s supposed progress, postsecular studies asserts that religion and secularity are mutually-informing rather than in competition. As Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman write in their introduction to a special issue of *American Literature* on postsecular literary criticism, more complex postsecular scholarship requires “self-interrogation,” meaning that “the postsecular might rewrite our understanding both of the objects of Americanist literary study and of our styles of addressing them” (647-648). Here, the “post” of “postsecular” refers to the fact that such scholarship arrives “after” an outmoded view of the unquestioned rightness (or even righteousness) of the present moment.

Postsecular critics have performed this “self-interrogation” by giving secularization a variety of new names, all of which assert the persistent presence of religion in modern society. In recent postsecular studies, secular does not replace, but rather cohabitates with religion. Dawn Coleman’s work on the appropriated sermonic voice of the nineteenth-century American novel insists that “this is not a

secularization narrative but one of religious fragmentation” (*Preaching* 21). Grant Shreve theorizes “fragile belief,” employing a paradigm of fragility that developed from America’s unique history of disestablishment. Critics of twentieth-century literature have told stories of “partial faiths” based on “‘weakened’ religiosity” (McClure), of fiction “beyond” secularism (Neuman), and of a “latent religiosity” that strengthens, rather than weakens faith (Torpey). These critical works share a focus on the presence of religious voices and concerns in the supposed secular form of the novel. Writing in 1981, David Reynolds asserted that “the emergence of a popular religious aesthetic has yet to be studied” (6), insisting that the stakes of such a study are huge: “The role of religious fiction in increasingly secular nineteenth-century culture is an unwritten chapter in the intellectual history of America” (6). Since Reynolds’s *Faith in Fiction*, this chapter has been written and rewritten many times over. Coleman’s *Preaching*, for instance, displays an intense commitment to theological specificity in its exploration of sermonic rhetoric, a rhetoric which she argues underwrites the rise of the American novel. The work of critics like Coleman—particularly with their emphasis on the growth of religious institutions alongside nineteenth-century secular culture—is foundational for this study. To the extent that *Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions* figures the home as a space for religious and secular approaches to social issues, it, too, is a postsecular project.

The problem with a postsecular focus on the religious within the literary, however, is that such scholarship has diminished the significance of the secular. In reorienting their scholarship toward religion, some critics have traded one master narrative for another. In the introduction to the recent essay collection *Above the*

American Renaissance, Harold Bush expresses frustration that “American literary studies has been dominated by the approach from below,” a nod to the book’s inspiration, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, and its impact on the field (14). Bush goes on to ask, “Why do scholars insist on seeing great authors as speaking merely through what comes from beneath? Is there still room for an appeal to what may come from above as well?” (14). While the essays in Bush’s edited collection do not necessarily adhere to Bush’s division of approaches, this statement in his introduction is striking for its insistence on binaries: beneath versus above, cultural versus spiritual. It is tempting to tell a coherent story based on binaries—to pinpoint modernization, to locate the spiritual turn, to define the boundaries of a secular age—but the truth is that literature representing postsecular issues rarely supports such coherence. We cannot simply trade a secular age for a religious one, and we do not need to choose one or the other side of traditional binaries.

Critics like Tracy Fessenden and Kevin Seidel have expressed frustration with postsecular methodologies as such, reflecting on the challenge of defining the term postsecular and negotiating its goals as a critical methodology.¹¹ A central issue, it seems, is that most postsecular approaches treat the religious and the secular in dialectical opposition. A more productive approach, I would argue, is to consider how literature represents a reciprocal relationship between religion and secularity. Rather than emphasizing the enmity between the religious and the secular (one must rise while the other falls) or their paradox (both realms are always bound up in one another despite fundamental tensions) we should consider the specific ramifications of their ongoing coexistence.¹²

Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions, as I have been suggesting, thinks specifically about the home as a space of unruly reciprocity between religion and secularity. In framing the home as such, my work does not pit the religious against the secular. Rather, I think about how domestic literature stages conflicts between religion and secularity as a means to consider how best to cultivate morality. Because Christian faith was so vulnerable to the hardships of nineteenth-century life—most significantly slavery and the Civil War—writers had to incorporate other, secular ways of “feeling right,” as Harriet Beecher Stowe would have it.¹³ By focusing on these secular aspects of domestic literature, I offer a fuller account of nineteenth-century morality and the ways it was modeled by sentimental authors.

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to religion as a category while concentrating primarily on Protestant Christianity, in part because that is the dominant focus of nineteenth-century American domestic literature. Tracy Fessenden argues that our definitions of secularism have often consolidated an American religious history of “manyness” (Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist, Native American faiths) into a consolidated “oneness” (Protestantism), importantly reminding critics that the secular matrix, in that formulation, is not neutral (*Culture and Redemption* 3-5). In that spirit, I acknowledge that this dissertation does not tell a complete story about all religions, all domestic fiction, or all secular discourses in nineteenth-century American literature. I do not, for example, write about secularity and representations of Mormon, Catholic, or Muslim homes.¹⁴ However, when I refer broadly to “religion,” I do so in order to discuss religion as a discourse that is different from, but in conversation with, the “secular.” Another way of putting this is to say that this

dissertation is invested in belief as well as unbelief. Domestic literature, I argue, represents belief and unbelief as modes of being that can coexist, rather than compete. The broad stakes of my argument are about how authors of domestic literature developed spaces that could accommodate ways of moral living based in religious faith and in the world.

This project offers new perspectives on well-known works of domestic literature, works that are commonly read as intently religious. In illuminating the secularity of authors like Sedgwick, Phelps, and Harper, I aim to make broader claims about the trope of the home, as I have been describing. While I have been necessarily selective, there are numerous other examples of nineteenth-century domestic literature that deal with the relationship between religion and secularity.¹⁵ Even so, I do not suggest that domestic literature as a rule promoted permeability between religious and secular realms. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), for example, is rather steadfast in its Christian morality and the ability of moral women to minister to and convert nonbelievers. Wildly popular in the nineteenth century, with over 100,000 copies sold, Warner's quintessentially sentimental novel is also oft-cited in criticism about the genre, perhaps to a fault. Bestsellers such as *The Wide, Wide World* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), with which I begin chapter one, are crucial to understanding nineteenth-century sentimentalism, but they need not be narrowly representative. While much popular writing by women was designed to teach Christian virtue, the authors in this study tell a different, but complementary story.

Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions is divided into two parts, “Sentimentalism’s Secular Investments” and “Heaven’s Domestic Dimensions.” Part one focuses on antebellum sentimentalism, a literary movement energized by the democratization of Christianity (Hatch) as well as the democratization of the written word (Davidson).¹⁶ Sentimentalism embodies a rapidly changing U.S. culture through its representations of Christian belief and unbelief, as well as its economic success in an expanding literary marketplace. In this study, sentimentalism is significant for its dual investments in morality as well as female agency. Many authors, I show, emphasize their heroines’ desire to act on their own choices, especially with regard to their romantic relationships and homebuilding. For my purposes, then, sexuality is a central secular discourse in conversation with the various religious constraints that shape the world of sentimental literature.

Functioning as a broad overview of early American and antebellum domestic literature, “Secular Domesticity: Developments in the Early National and Antebellum Novel” focuses on the ideological stakes of domesticity. What is the significance of the home to American culture? At a time when the new U.S. nation was negotiating its values, Christianity was expanding and diversifying across the U.S., and the literary marketplace was growing, authors of domestic literature were asserting the power of the novel to represent—and produce—American culture. To that end, the novels discussed in this chapter often propose an imagined, ideal home that either replaces or supplements the historical or contemporary domestic setting of the novel. While the subsequent chapters in this dissertation focus more explicitly on domestic spaces, this chapter considers what, exactly, domesticity represents. And a significant

strand of domestic literature, I argue, proposes an ideology of secular domesticity, in contrast to the overly pious domesticity we might expect.

For Hannah Webster Foster, Catharine Sedgwick, and Harriet Wilson, “secular domesticity” was centered on a heroine who considered the varied beliefs of those around her and built an inclusive home grounded in an intersection of religious and secular circumstances. The home, these writers suggest, cannot be organized by Christian ideals alone, but must rather account for the nuances of secular reality. Charles Taylor writes that in a secular age, belief and unbelief are “lived conditions, not just...theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to” (x). In their novels, the authors I discuss in this chapter develop moral heroines in the context of their lived conditions: they model morality not through belief, but through everyday life.

As early as 1797, Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* theorizes a secular domesticity. However, the novel emphasizes its protagonist’s inability to gain access to her ideally secular home. *The Coquette*’s Eliza Wharton wishes for a marriage and home built around affection and virtue, but she finds that these are mutually exclusive poles within the realm of eighteenth-century courtship. Indeed, *The Coquette* seems to subscribe to just the dialectical opposition of the religious and the secular I critiqued earlier. Represented respectively by the Reverend Boyer and the libertine Major Sanford, between whom Eliza is choosing, this dialectical formula of courtship precludes any chance at domestic happiness for Eliza. Although Foster’s novel ends with Eliza’s pregnancy and death—following the true story of the historical Elizabeth Whitman—I argue that *The Coquette* nonetheless aspires to a version of domesticity that could include Christian virtue as well as women’s agency and secular love.

Throughout the novel, Foster emphasizes that women like Eliza are drawn to virtue only when they can maintain their autonomy.

In Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, we see the power of choice come to fruition in the figure of Hope, who shares many of Eliza's ideals and is able to put them into action. Hope's secularity comes from her ability to cross between religions, including Puritanism, Catholicism, and Native American faiths, picking and choosing where and when to employ different modes of belief. This plurality fosters a different kind of sympathy in her friendships and romances. *Hope Leslie*'s ending, in which she marries Everell Fletcher, suggests that domestic ideology should be informed by the notion that doing the right thing is not necessarily the same as doing the Biblical thing. Hope and Everell measure morality not only by Puritan doctrine, but through their lived experience of racial encounter and their understanding of political and legal discourses.

Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) offers a counterpoint to the story of Hope Leslie, whose privilege as a white protagonist with powerful political ties allows her to reorient domesticity from a position of assumed belonging. *Our Nig*'s Frado, by contrast, does not belong to the home in which she resides: Frado's *Life...in a Two-Story House* is structured around her labor as an indentured servant, labor which, according to white racial and even religious ideology, precludes her from the Christian redemption she desires. Wilson emphasizes how the domestic space is prison-like when Christianity and racism are intertwined—a condition that was prevalent for slaves and free African Americans in the nineteenth century. Though Frado, like Eliza, does not obtain the more inclusive domesticity she desires, Wilson

suggests that the American home must not be organized around Christian belonging if Christianity itself is subject to racist exclusivity.

Formally, all three novels model the reciprocity of religion and secularity through an emphasis on dialogue and exchange. “Secular Domesticity” thus attends to the formal aspects of, for example, *The Coquette*’s epistolary structure in order to show how authors of domestic fiction envisioned a domesticity built around hybridity rather than enmity. In *Our Nig*, this argument is made in the reverse: while Frado wishes to participate in Christian life and attempts moments of dialogue about heaven, worship, and redemption, she is repeatedly excluded from such religious exchange. Wilson critiques Christianity as one-sided and hegemonic. Reading Wilson alongside Foster and Sedgwick shows how antebellum domestic literature asserts secularity’s centrality to the lived conditions of Christian faith.

Herman Melville’s *Pierre* (1852), the focus of chapter two, likewise makes an argument in the reverse. Melville’s domestic novel, I contend, critiques religious domesticity, tracking its apocalyptic consequences in order to make way for a different model of living. I read *Pierre* as both sentimental and subversive: Melville adopts and adapts sentimental tropes in order to reveal the pitfalls of Pierre’s excessive religiosity. Indeed, if the authors of chapter one redefine the contours of a moral heroine, in the eponymous *Pierre* Melville fashions a sentimental anti-hero. Pierre deserts his nuclear family, flouts the guidance of moral mentors, and repeatedly fails to absorb the lessons of potentially moral texts—all actions that reverse the models of sentimental women. But Melville’s most significant reworking of sentimentalism is that Pierre performs these reversals in a spirit of Christian devotion.

Through *Pierre* and his other works, Melville favors moral ambiguity over absolutism. And in the spirit of many of the authors discussed in *Sacred Spaces*, *Secular Fictions*, Melville emphasizes inquiry and dialogue when considering a moral conundrum—in the case of *Pierre*, the arrival of a supposed half-sister Isabel, evidence of his father’s possible former dalliance. *Pierre* consults and consequently ignores the advice of the Reverend Falsgrave and his mother, the lessons of *Hamlet* and *Dante*, and the philosophical pamphlet “Chronometricals and Horologicals,” as he continues a charade of feigned marriage to Isabel. Even if *Pierre* does not incorporate alternative views into his moral reasoning, Melville suggests that readers of *Pierre* might do so. In this way, Melville prepares readers for the unfinished nature of the novel. Though the ending of *Pierre* feels catastrophic, I argue that readers who have adapted Melville’s preference for ambiguity should locate in its slew of deaths a possible future—one which divorces domesticity from an inflexible Christian faith such as *Pierre*’s.

While chapters three and four continue the work of better understanding the secular dimensions of sentimentalism, they must also account for a drastically changed American culture in the Reconstruction era. The Civil War looms between parts one and two, representing the ruptures that took place in families and homes as a result of deadly warfare, slavery and emancipation, and Reconstruction. The dissertation’s organization can thus seem to embody a natural division that occurs in periodization of the nineteenth century. And yet, *Sacred Spaces*, *Secular Fictions* is an intentionally transbellum study, to borrow Cody Marrs’s term.¹⁷ While there has been much focus on the antebellum period in postsecular and religious studies of

American literature, the Civil War does not represent an endpoint to the story I am telling about religious and secular discourses and their relationship to domestic literature. Indeed, the issues raised by Foster, Sedgwick, Wilson, Melville, Phelps, and Harper are continuous before and after the Civil War. Hope Leslie discusses heaven with Magawisca as a means to bridge religious faith across racial divides; Iola Leroy embodies a Republican Motherhood reminiscent of Governor Winthrop's wife. True, the Civil War had a vast impact on Americans' sense of death and salvation, as suggested by the growing focus on heaven in later domestic literature. Emancipation gave African American families the chance to reunite after lifetimes of separation at the hands of slaveowners, which meant that domesticity—and its representation in African American literature—would change in the postbellum era. However, as *Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions* shows, the central exigencies of domestic literature persisted across the 1865 divide, as well as these large questions: What is the relationship between morality, Christian virtue, and secular life? What does it mean to live in this world, with an eye toward the next one? And what is the function of the home in American culture?

The second part of this project considers the space of the home in relation to the possibility of a Christian afterlife. In her book *Civic Longing*, Carrie Hyde studies the meaning of “citizenship in heaven,” a theological concept that “disaggregates ‘home’ from its worldly, and properly domestic, identification with the house,” because a Christian's true home will be in heaven (78). Through a reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*, Hyde argues that “the problem is precisely that home is *not* heaven, but that heaven is the true home” (83). In chapters three and four, I similarly

consider “worldly” versus heavenly representations of domesticity, emphasizing the tensions between life on earth and presumed rewards in heaven. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the two authors I study in chapters three and four, respectively, both suggest that heaven will be a true home. I argue, however, that in their writings the stakes of this heavenly belonging do not necessarily disaggregate the home from its earthly house. Instead, home and heaven become mutually-informing spaces, both operating as places of negotiation for religious and secular concerns. In the case of Phelps, these concerns are largely scientific, while for Harper, African American political citizenship is a worldly matter that shapes and is shaped by religious belief.

Chapter three considers Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s “very material kind of heaven” as depicted in her three so-called Spiritualist novels, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *Beyond the Gates* (1883), and *The Gates Between* (1887). These novels, which take place on earth and in heaven, extend a nineteenth-century cult of domesticity to the afterlife. In imagining well-decorated homes and reunited nuclear families, Phelps suggests that heaven will replicate the joys of the “human home,” which she calls “the centre of all growth and blessedness” (199). In addition to incorporating conventional homes into imagined scenes of heaven, Phelps engages scientific discourses such as physics, astronomy, and medicine in her representation of an imagined afterlife. In all three novels, Phelps blends spiritual and earthly metaphors (such as the meaning of “ascension”) in language that underscores and depicts the reciprocal relationship between the religious and the secular formally. This is to say, Phelps’s very language embodies what could be called a postsecular approach to

heaven. Ultimately, Phelps envisions an afterlife that is grounded in the material world, even as it is predicated on Christian faith. In these interrelated novels, I argue, Phelps's desire to domesticate the space of heaven ultimately secularizes the afterlife.

Unlike Phelps, Harper does not presume universal access to heaven. Instead, her poetry and fiction represents the struggle of African Americans to cultivate belonging—in their own homes and in an imagined afterlife. Chapter four focuses on the relationship between “Spaces of Faith and Doubt” for African Americans before and after the Civil War. Domesticity, in keeping with the frame of part two, is a realm that Harper represents both on earth and in heaven. For instance, in certain poems Harper suggests that home is a realm African Americans will only be able to access in the afterlife, while in works such as *Iola Leroy*, Harper imagines the future lives of African American citizens as necessarily grounded in the space of the earthly home. Chapter four is about the conceptual space between those two versions of home in Harper's work. I argue that Harper transforms the displaced domesticity (a space of doubt) of her early poetry into a nexus of political reform (a space of faith) in her turn-of-the-century fiction. What is most compelling about this transformation is that such political power does not come from God's deliverance, as we might expect, but from the everyday work of African American women. In this way, Harper's writing contributes to the idea that the nineteenth-century home was not simply an incubator for Christian morality, but a space in which to mediate the religious and the secular. No longer wishing for comforts in heaven, Harper represents African Americans building domesticity on earth as a means for national belonging. Whereas Phelps's investment in scientific discourses informs her representation of a Christian heaven,

Harper's faith in a Christian God shapes her investment in African American citizenship. For Harper, as for the other authors in this study, the religious and the secular are inextricably linked, and the home is the central space in which to convey their symbiotic influences to nineteenth-century readers primed to view literature as culturally instructive.

Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions is about authors who deployed sacred spaces such as the home and heaven to underscore important tensions between religious faith and the pull of the secular. From negative representations of Christian homes as dangerous (Wilson) to idealized depictions of a secularized afterlife (Phelps), the authors in this study thwart our expectations for neat depictions of pious womanhood. For Sedgwick, Harper, and others, domestic literature presented an opportunity to model morality for popular audiences. Morality, however, meant more than embodying Protestant Christian values. Instead, the works I discuss in this dissertation show how morality could accommodate—and participate in—such secular discourses as political citizenship, science and medicine, sexuality, and unconventional gender categories. Furthermore, this literature does not merely stage the mingling of religious and secular discourses for their characters' sake. Authors of domestic literature were also aware of their readers' desire to learn from texts, even popular fiction. In each chapter of *Sacred Spaces, Secular Fictions*, I suggest how so-called didactic literature was often far more capacious in its instruction than we realize. Rather than depicting a straight-forward Christian moral for their readers, these works invite readers to view their religious faith and their secular

circumstances as mutually informing. Morality, like literature, is open to interpretation.

Part 1: Sentimentalism's Secular Investments

Chapter 1: Secular Domesticity: Developments in the Early National and Antebellum Novel

Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale; or, Sketches of New England Characters and Manners* (1822) and *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827), and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North* (1859) show how domesticity—at a time when the idea of the American home was very much connected to the values of the American nation—was often at odds with Christianity. Rather than uphold the Christian doctrine that some theologians and religious writers believed to be the sacred foundation of the home, a significant strain of domestic fiction celebrates moral heroines who maintain a secularist approach to the changing world around them. These heroines of domestic fiction embody an ideology of pluralism and individual moral authority, and they show sympathy toward others outside of their own belief systems. Challenging the restrictive modes of Christian domesticity that exclude racial others, these protagonists choose to reject any form of family that denies them their own free will—sometimes at large costs. Through these heroines, the writers discussed in this chapter tell a story of secular domesticity's development in the early national and antebellum periods. Their novels assert that that religious and secular discourses merge in the space of the home in productive ways. Neither a totalizing secularization narrative nor a confirmation of Christianity's dominance in the American home, secularist domestic fiction illuminates how tensions between faith and family have consistently shaped domesticity from the early republic through the nineteenth century.

I would like to begin this chapter with a discussion of one of the most well-known works of American domestic fiction, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in order to provide a foil for the works of Foster, Sedgwick, and Wilson. Stowe famously proposes sympathy as the most effective model of abolitionism. In some of the novel's best-known scenes, Stowe shows northerners and southerners alike feeling deeply about the injustices of slavery for African Americans. When state senator John Bird tells his wife, Mary, about a new fugitive slave law, for instance, Stowe pits Mary's "private feelings" and interpretation of the Bible against John's duty to the law (85). Ultimately, when the Senator meets the recently escaped Eliza and Harry, he feels compelled to help because he sympathizes with the young mother's plight. Mary lovingly declares to him, "Your heart is better than your head, in this case" (92). Later in the novel, Stowe introduces Little Eva, a southern girl who likewise possesses an exemplary Christian sympathy. Eva tells her father that when she hears stories about the horrors endured by neighboring slaves, "these things *sink into my heart*" (243, emphasis original). She feels slaves' pain so strongly that she declares to Tom, "I can understand why Jesus *wanted* to die for us...I've felt that I would be glad to die, if my dying could stop all this misery. I *would die* for them [slaves], Tom, if I could" (283, emphasis original). Eva does die in a subsequent chapter, but not before evangelizing through a model of love. In particular, Eva has convinced the ill-behaved slave Topsy to try to be good, because she is loved: "'I love you!' said Eva, with a sudden burst of feeling.... 'Don't you know that Jesus loves all alike? He is just as willing to love you, as me. He loves you just as I do,—only more, because he is better. He will help you to be good'" (290, emphasis original). Stowe

calls on her readers to share Mary's and Little Eva's Christian sympathy for slaves, repeatedly invoking the power of love to combat the evils of slavery. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ends with an explicit demand for readerly sympathy:

But what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with the sympathies of Christ?
(452)

Here, Stowe specifically aligns feeling—the most powerful tool employed by many of the novel's characters—with Jesus Christ, thereby implicitly characterizing sympathy as Christian.

Critics of antebellum domestic fiction have typically regarded Stowe's model of domesticity as both a product of Christian sympathy as well as a promotion thereof. The problem is that Stowe's abolitionist novel has come to represent domestic fiction more broadly, given its status as the bestselling work of sentimental fiction of its time. The scenes outlined above are familiar to us not only because of their contemporaneous popularity, but also because, with the help of Jane Tompkins and many others, they have come to shape our understanding of antebellum women's writing broadly. Indeed, much domestic fiction *is* concerned with faith and feelings, even when abolitionism is not the impetus behind womanly sympathy. As Amy G. Richter shows through the primary sources collected in *At Home in Nineteenth-*

Century America: A Documentary History, the Victorian home of the nineteenth century was precisely the space in which American values were tested and came to be defined (2). For instance, Catharine Beecher's 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy* names women—wives and mothers—the leaders of such households, as they hold a “superior influence” over the education of children and the support of clergy, and “in all questions relating to morals or manners” (9). But is it possible for these moral women to “*feel right*” without doing so “in harmony with the sympathies of Christ?”

One of the large arguments of my dissertation is that that in many cases, heroines of domestic fiction served as exemplars of morality without closely adhering to Christian doctrine. When scholars frame antebellum domestic fiction through Stowe's bestseller, they neglect an important subset of this literary tradition that celebrates moral women even as it divorces the sacred spaces of domesticity from Christianity. Here, I will propose an alternative, more secular view of domesticity that develops from Hannah Foster in the early national period to Harriet Wilson in the antebellum period. Scholars of the interdisciplinary field of religion and literature have worked to complicate foundational studies of women's writing as a popular form that feminized—and thereby disestablished—clerical authority (Ann Douglas) or as an empowering form that recast the home as a space of authority (Jane Tompkins). Even so, contemporary scholarship operates from a baseline assumption that Protestant Christianity underwrites domestic fiction, in part because, as I discuss in the Introduction, the postsecular turn in literary studies has prompted scholars to reconsider the persistence of religious belief in the modern age. Such scholarship is persuasive in its revision and extension of early criticism, which often maintained the

status quo of a largely-male American canon or constructed domestic ideologies based on white, female, middle-class identity. It is undeniable that the nineteenth century was a time of great growth for religious institutions and an ever-expanding diversity of religious sects following the Second Great Awakening. But what critics have left largely unexplored in their recuperation of this religious history is the possibility that much domestic fiction, rather than promulgating Christian doctrines, instead develops a more secular outlook.

This chapter traces secular domesticity in early American domestic fiction as it develops from Hannah Webster Foster to Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Harriet Wilson. In many ways, the four novels discussed in this chapter exemplify the conventions of their chosen genre—be it seduction novel, sentimentalism, or spiritual autobiography—even as they subvert our expectation that those genres promote Christianity. I argue that the domestic worlds of Foster's *The Coquette*, Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* and *Hope Leslie*, and Wilson's *Our Nig* represent a broader trend of domestic novels that show Protestant Christianity—the mode of belief that is, indeed, most visible in this fiction—to be unsuited for organizing the American home. Instead, heroines in these novels yearn for a more capacious secular domestic ideology that would include religious belief but not require it.

In short, the novels that I focus on in this chapter reveal that morality is not reserved for Christian believers: each protagonist strives for a moral life, despite her hesitation to equate morality with Christianity. The instructional quality or moral thrust of domestic fiction makes it tempting to read the literature as dogmatically religious, but I read each work's moral vision differently. Although Christian writers

such as Catharine Beecher or theologians such as Horace Bushnell—whose 1847 *Christian Nurture* specifically depicts domestic space as the “church of childhood” (20)—bespeak an antebellum investment in the American home as a space for the moral development of children, it does not necessarily follow that domestic fiction likewise advocates these Christian ideals.¹⁸ Domestic fiction shares a focus on youth and young adulthood, an investment in moral goodness, and a celebration of “the elastic nature of childhood” (Sedgwick, *A New-England Tale* 20). However, writers of domestic fiction depict young protagonists who, with their “ductile” hearts, learn how to lead a moral life from a number of outlets besides Beecher’s or Bushnell’s Protestant Christianity (Bushnell 21). They do not necessarily, as Bushnell recommends a child should, “grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise” (10). *The Coquette*, *A New-England Tale*, *Hope Leslie*, and *Our Nig* reveal that nineteenth-century literature often diverged from this view of Christian domesticity, instead emphasizing how the relationship between moral development and the space of the home can accommodate worldly matters rather than simply embodying Christian doctrines. Indeed, each of these novels emphasize the home as the key space for understanding the tensions between religious and secular discourses. Foster, Sedgwick, and Wilson certainly underscore the relationship between women’s virtues and domestic ideology. More significantly, they show how morality was not merely a Christian discourse, but was also importantly shaped by sexuality, political encounters, and racial dynamics.

My use of the term “secular domesticity” merges the two frames of this project, sacred spaces and secular fictions, to emphasize the ways the home of early

national and antebellum domestic fiction increasingly welcomed the secular in its development of moral women. To briefly review my critical approach to the term “secular” for the purposes of this study: Scholars of religion and literature have come to agree that “secularization narratives,” which propose a slow waning of religion from culture, progressing to an eventual absence of faith entirely, are inaccurately reductive and teleological. In contrast to the “dichotomies nested within” these narratives (Coviello and Hickman 645), “postsecular” refers to a methodology that considers the complex relationship between the religious and the secular, belief and unbelief. This more relational view emphasizes the pluralization of belief in the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* names the nova effect. Grant Shreve, by way of José Casanova, explains that “the nova effect in the antebellum United States was not, as in the European case, produced out of a dialectic of belief/unbelief where orthodoxy and atheism are its two poles, but instead generated out of unavoidable encounters with multiple ways of believing. In the United States, unbelief has always practically been one option among many, not the pole of a spectrum” (657). Secularity, taken this way, represents choice.

Many heroines of domestic fiction model secular domesticity through their exploration of religious beliefs different from those passed down to them. Embracing their skepticism toward God, these heroines develop idiosyncratic moralities shaped by their affective, political, and economic positioning within their respective communities. But challenging faith should not immediately be read as disbelief in these novels; in fact, the term secularism was coined in the mid-nineteenth century to specify an ideology separate from atheism (Asad 23). I argue that domestic fiction

celebrates a pluralism of religious and non-religious beliefs. This pluralism is often embodied by each author's emphasis on dialogue and exchange, through such formal qualities as *The Coquette's* epistolary mode or *Hope Leslie's* multiple narrators.¹⁹ In the case of *Our Nig*, an argument for secular domesticity is made in the reverse: Frado's religious exploration and dialogue is limited to a domestic space that proves prison-like; she is physically restrained by Mrs. Belmont's refusal to allow her to attend church meetings on Sundays (89). There is no space for secular domesticity in *Our Nig* because the discourse of Christianity—which, as I discuss, often blends with the novel's representation of labor—is both exclusive and oppressive. Wilson, I argue, clearly reveals how such applications of religion in the home constrain domesticity for African Americans in the nineteenth century.

In the discussion that follows, I trace a variety of ways writers of domestic fiction promote a secular domesticity over explicitly Christian ideologies of home. First, my reading of Foster's novel focuses primarily on the role of choice in the development of female morality, especially in contrast to a more constrictive, virtuous domesticity represented by Calvinistic patriarchal figures. Published in the first decade of the new republic, Foster's most famous novel, *The Coquette*, speaks to a nation whose politics are in transition and whose domestic values are thus up for debate. The secular domesticity Eliza yearns for in *The Coquette* is not yet fully available to her, but Foster gives voice to it nonetheless. My analysis moves into the nineteenth century with two of Sedgwick's sentimental novels. In these works, Sedgwick's heroines are poised to achieve the secularist goals put forth in Foster's revolutionary-era novel. Finally, I read Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* as an important

counter to the racial dynamics of Foster's and Sedgwick's novels. Even as *Our Nig*'s Frado shares many of the same domestic and moral ideals as her fellow protagonists, the racialized quality of her labor necessarily frames her relationship to domestic spaces. Wilson suggests that Christian domesticity is unfair—dangerously so—to African American laborers. Overall, the writers in this chapter push against the boundaries of Christian dogmatism in order to develop domestic ideologies that are inclusive, sympathetic and flexible: what I call secular domesticity.

Moralism and Choice

Published in 1797, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* is both a cautionary tale and a challenge to overzealous Christian moralism. The novel focuses on the young Eliza Wharton's desire to elude the seemingly compulsory choice between a virtuous husband and a charming but dishonorable libertine. In a move that many critics hail as proto-feminist, Eliza declares a wish for a happy medium between her suitors, the Reverend Boyer and Major Sanford.²⁰ Her options for a happy domestic life are slim, and are contingent upon a religious community she characterizes as prison-like. In her letters describing a desired domestic future, Eliza appears to value many factors besides Christian virtue, the only quality her friends and elders in the novel prioritize. Eliza's wishes represent a developing secularist morality that eschews absolutes, and which later domestic novels would come to characterize more fully. In Foster's rendering, such moral middle-ground is not readily available, as Eliza's inevitable downfall reflects. Even so, Foster's depiction of Eliza's desired choice offers an allegorical proxy for the tension between religion

and secularism, told through a medium that would become a mainstay in the nineteenth century: moralizing domestic fiction.

The letters comprising *The Coquette* stage a battle between a moralistic society and a possible secularist world dreamed of by Eliza Wharton. The epistolary form of the novel models the rigid moralism of *The Coquette*'s Christian investments, as Eliza's friends consistently attempt to control her judgment through their discussion of proper—versus coquettish—behavior. Though this form of exchange would appear to be sympathetic and model pluralistic dialogue, Eliza's voice slowly wanes from the page, until she is fully silenced by her interlocutors' limited understanding of female virtue. Where Eliza's secularist vision shines through, I would suggest, is in Foster's emphasis on choice throughout the novel. Eliza's adamant wish to act on her own choices represents a key component of secular domesticity: the idea, in Taylor's words, that one has a variety of options for belief.

In its framing of Eliza's correspondence with her friends, *The Coquette* represents the possibility of expanding the scope of moral possibility in the novel's world, which is dominated by Christian dogma. Some letter writers, though, appear to have a myopic view of morality, and these women cling to their moralistic role in Eliza's life. For instance, before the voice of Lucy Freeman is even introduced to readers of *The Coquette* through her own letters, Eliza characterizes a recent note from Lucy as a "moral lecture" which proposes "monitorial lessons and advice" (7). Presumably, Lucy has weighed in on Eliza's "*coquettish*" behavior after Eliza's first fiancé, the Reverend Mr. Haly, has passed away (7). Though Eliza claims to take Lucy's words to heart, she continues to prioritize her newfound social life over

romantic commitment to another glumly serious reverend. The conflict between Eliza's behavior and her friends' criticisms is embodied in the back and forth of the epistolary mode, in which Eliza describes her recent social engagements and her friends warn against the dangers of dissolute strangers. The ongoing epistolary exchange suggests that there is only one way for a young lady to lead a moral life. As Lucy later explains to Eliza, "You will ask, perhaps, whether I would influence your judgment? I answer, no; provided you will exercise it yourself" (26). Lucy denies any wish to influence Eliza's judgment, but when she qualifies that Eliza must "exercise" judgment "herself," she refers to an implicitly correct judgment. In this way, Lucy is able to remain purportedly neutral while consistently shaming Eliza's behavior.

Such backhanded moralism intensifies when more of Eliza's friends begin to write her letters and even correspond about her to one another, further stifling any possible alternative to their definition of morality or domesticity. Eliza's flirtations with Major Sanford have escalated to such perceived deviance that the Reverend Mr. Boyer cuts ties with Eliza entirely. The number of women weighing in on Eliza's well-being then increases; in the beginning of the novel Lucy Freeman dominates the epistolary discourse, but moralism becomes multivocal as Mrs. Richman and Julia Granby enter the exchange of letters. Each of these women, like Lucy, pass judgment on Eliza before promptly claiming, "But I will not moralize" (107). The repeated phrase emphasizes that these women are, indeed, moralizing. In Julia's case, she catalogs Eliza's mistakes to Lucy, rather than Eliza herself, writing that "she is strongly blind to the vices and imperfections of this man. How prone to errors is the human mind!...But I will not moralize" (111). Julia's letter therein widens the scope

of moral judgment of Eliza to exist with or without her participation. Eliza seemingly becomes the subject, rather than the author, of her own story.

Lucy, Mrs. Richman and Julia represent a possible moralizing force of female friendship, a force which appears both sympathetic and adamantly didactic in the form of the novel. Leonard Cassuto holds up the dialogic nature of the women's correspondence as an improvement upon the "superficial moralism" of the real-life sermons and journalistic pieces written about the true story of Elizabeth Whitman on which *The Coquette* is based (105). Those texts—and religious discourse more broadly, in Cassuto's account—are monologic, voices that speak "without listening" (105). Though Cassuto's reading of the epistolary form is compelling, the repeated protestations of Eliza's friends, and in particular the letters that they begin to exchange between them rather than with Eliza, implicate these women as likewise moralistic—and borderline unsympathetic. Many critics laud Foster for giving the historical Elizabeth Whitman a sympathetic spin through Eliza's characterization, which is, for instance, how Cathy Davidson frames the novel in her introduction to the Early American Women Writers edition (x). In the end, a tradition of womanhood built around religious domesticity remains, not only because Eliza dies at the novel's close, but because she repents. Though Foster's narrative evokes sympathy for Eliza's plight, it does not yet privilege Eliza's ideals (which I will elucidate shortly) over the Christian dogma that dominates the letters of many of the female characters in the novel. Claire Pettengill writes of *The Coquette* (as compared to Foster's second novel, *The Boarding School*, published in 1798) that friendship is difficult for the women because they are "torn between loyalty to one another and to a patriarchal division of

the world” (360). These women are conflicted by their sympathy for Eliza and desire to uphold certain domestic codes. Foster herself seems to suffer from such ambivalence.

In significant ways, each woman’s impulse to influence Eliza’s judgments without possible accusation of “raillery” conveys domestic fiction’s didacticism (107). However, Foster subverts blanket moralism by subtly framing the reception of such morals as voluntary. While Foster’s second novel, *The Boarding School* (1798), is part conduct novel—a form which provides “lessons, . . . information, instruction, and advice, calculated to improve the manners, and form the character of young ladies,” as the subtitle of the novel emphasizes—*The Coquette*, a seduction novel, is arguably less straightforward. Speaking directly to readers at the end of the novel, Foster writes, “From the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton, let the American fair learn to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor. Let them despise, and forever banish the man, who can glory in the seduction of innocence and the ruin of reputation” (168). Foster takes the work out of interpretation here, naming the exactly the moral lesson the novel has taught by way of negative example. More important, though, is the sense that readers have the power to act on this moral or not. “The American fair” is the subject of these sentences, which suggests that Foster emphasizes American readers and their moral agency. Though moralizers—ministers, mothers, judgmental peers and even authors—typically hold social power over their deviant advisees, Foster reminds us that the power of choice still remains in the recipient’s hands. In the same vein, Eliza’s choice throughout *The Coquette* might transcend the severe moralism of those around her.

From the beginning, Foster introduces marital commitment as a choice that should be based solely on Eliza's ideals for married life. In the opening letter of *The Coquette*, Eliza identifies Mr. Haly first by his identity as "their choice," her family's "chosen" guardian and companion for her (5). Such a designation suggests that Mr. Haly was likely not Eliza's choice. And though Eliza "esteemed" Mr. Haly and mourns his death, she cannot deny the "pleasure, pleasure" she feels at the next stage of her life, on leaving her "paternal roof" (5). Eliza soon finds herself to be the object of affection of both Major Sanford and Mr. Boyer, a rumored seducer and a minister between whom she must choose—or in other words, between whom she has the privilege to choose. She comes to define the choice between them as between virtue and grace, a polarizing categorization that makes her choice all the more difficult. Recognizing that Sanford lacks the virtuous reputation of Mr. Boyer, Eliza reflects to Lucy, "What a pity, my dear Lucy, that the graces and virtues are not oftener united! They must, however, meet in the man of my choice" (22). Here, Eliza imagines a third ideal, the only type of man to whom she would choose to commit: a man who is both moral and charming.

Eliza's desired outcome for marriage—though it does not come to fruition—reveals how coquetry and secularity overlap in their privileging of choice. In her critical study of the figure of the coquette in British fiction, Theresa Braunschneider writes that the earliest coquette was "characterized as a woman who resists any constraint upon her choices. Offered an array of appealing options...the coquette chooses them all" (2). Braunschneider's definition of the coquette speaks to Taylor's notion of secularity in a generative way: both the coquette and the secularist pursue a

plurality of choices rather than conforming to the dominant social or religious belief system, respectively.²¹ For Eliza, her refusal to adhere to society's pious domestic ideology results in her downfall, but it also portends a developing—perhaps promiscuous—secularity.

Eliza's imagined ideal, a combination of Sanford's and Boyer's qualities, represents a secularist struggle against the restraints of religious domesticity. Throughout the novel, Foster uses language of confinement to define Eliza's relationships with the ministers Haly and Boyer. Though Eliza values morality and honor, she is loath to submit to the "duties" and "restraints" incumbent to Boyer's station, especially having just been "extricated...from those shackles" which marriage to Haly would have placed upon her (39, 13). Both marriages represent, to Eliza, "contracted ideas which would confine virtue to a cell" (13). Eliza explains her feelings directly to Mr. Boyer, to whom she admits, "I recoil at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine me to the duties of domestic life, and make me dependent for happiness...upon a class of people, who will claim the right of scrutinizing every part of my conduct; and...may render me miserable" (29). Eliza initially appears resistant to the obligations a minister's wife must undertake, but more striking is her anxiety about acceptance: marrying Boyer would mean accepting the scrutiny of Boyer's congregation, a religious class whom Eliza presumes would judge her unjustly. It is judgment, rather than virtue itself, from which Eliza withdraws.

To reiterate, it is not domesticity or the idea of marriage that deters Eliza, but the specific regulations sharing either with a religious figure would require. Eliza

admires the domestic life of her friends, the Richmans, whose marriage she believes consists of “the purest and most ardent affection, the greatest consonance of taste and disposition, and the most congenial virtue and wishes” (14). In Eliza’s admiration of the Richmans, she counts virtue third among the list of qualities their marriage possesses. She does not discount the importance of moral foundation, but she does not prioritize it above affection and taste, either. In other words, Eliza favors a domesticity arranged around affective, social and religious discourses, rather than religious alone. In this discussion of an ideal marriage, Eliza offers a theorization of secular domesticity. Her emerging secular domestic ideology, as represented by Foster and which develops further in nineteenth-century domestic fiction, privileges secular factors such as sexual compatibility and friendship over religious piety. Even as Eliza maintains an investment in morality, she cannot imagine a home arranged solely around Christian virtue.

Bearing in mind Eliza’s secular domestic ideology—the intersection of many discourses besides Christian virtue alone—it becomes clear that Eliza’s ongoing choice between Sanford and Boyer is an impossible one.²² In *The Boarding School*, Mrs. Williams seems to endorse a woman’s hesitancy to choose between men like Sanford and Boyer. She tells her students, “A union, formed without a refined and generous affection for its basis, must be devoid of those tender endearments, reciprocal attentions, and engaging sympathies, which are particularly necessary to alleviate the cares, dispel the sorrows, and soften the pains of life” (183). In addition, she remarks, “Without good principles, both of religion and morality, (for the latter cannot exist independent of the former) you cannot safely rely, either upon his fidelity

or his affection. Good principles are the foundation of a good life” (183). Foster follows the true account of Elizabeth Whitman to the novel’s conclusion, showing the downfall that results from Eliza’s continuing tryst with Sanford. Thus, reading Mrs. Wilson’s advice alongside Eliza’s dilemma shows how the tension between virtues and grace clearly persists. To put it another way, Eliza is not able to reconcile the sacred and the secular. *The Boarding School*’s insistence that morality cannot exist independent of religion challenges Eliza’s adamant belief that virtue can be found outside the confines of the religious duties incumbent upon marriage with a man like Boyer. Yet the earlier declaration that a union must also have “generous affection for its basis” also validates Eliza’s refusal to marry a man for whom she feels little affection. Foster, it appears, would be hesitant to rebuke or endorse Eliza’s behavior. But while the secular domesticity Eliza desires is not available in *The Coquette*, Foster nonetheless presents it as an imagined possibility.

In this way, *The Coquette* serves as an important precursor to nineteenth-century domestic novels, which present a wider range of domesticities available to women. Whereas Foster, through Mrs. Williams, does emphasize the dependence of morality upon religion, subsequent novelists begin to theorize morality divorced from dogma. It is Eliza’s awareness of choice—and her determination to act on her own choice—which translates to later heroines who likewise act on their own choices, often independent of their religious beliefs. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes that a central “disjuncture” inherent to *The Coquette* is that “virtue, independence, liberty and happiness are divided against themselves” (348). In the nineteenth century, novels such as Catharine Sedgwick’s develop a secular domesticity that unites these

divisions, exemplifying an emerging countercurrent to the Christian domesticity that continues to have an important role in antebellum literature and culture.

Secularist Sympathies

Twenty-five years after the publication of *The Coquette*, Catharine Maria Sedgwick published her first novel, *A New-England Tale; or, Sketches of New England Characters and Manners* (1822), beginning a decades-long, successful career as a writer of sentimental fiction, among other forms. According to Elizabeth Barnes, these twenty-five years represent a shift from republican to liberal national politics, and accordingly, she argues, from seduction to sentimentalism as the characteristic genre of domestic fiction (13). Highlighting seduction's influence on sentimentalism, a genre known for its emphasis on sympathy, Barnes argues that "in converting the hapless protagonist of seduction fiction into a new and virtuous heroine, Sedgwick attempts to reform the role of sympathy itself—to teach by positive rather than negative example" (80). Following this scheme, we recognize that whereas readers are not meant to emulate the character of Eliza Wharton, they can look to sentimental heroines like Jane Elton or Hope Leslie as positive examples of moral womanhood. I discuss in chapter two how Herman Melville's reworking of sentimentalism in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) reverses the scheme Barnes describes. Pierre, as would-be sentimental hero, actually serves as a negative example for moral behavior. Melville's reworking suggests how popular and recognizable the qualities of sentimentalism and its heroines had become. Rather than cautioning

against a fall from grace, early sentimental authors emphasize the rewards of moral life, particularly in terms of how moral woman operate in the domestic realm.

Sedgwick certainly follows this model in *A New-England Tale* and *Hope Leslie*, but I contend that the upshot of Sedgwick's sentimentalism is an endorsement of secularist sympathies over Christian dogmas as the foundation for the American home. Building on the secularist dreams of *The Coquette*, Sedgwick's novels likewise do not promote conservative Christianity, specifically Calvinism, as an organizing force for domesticity. In particular, sympathy in Sedgwick's novels is not the same as sympathy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's invocations of readers to "feel right" at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* aligns sentimental sympathy specifically with the teachings of Jesus Christ, but sympathy in Sedgwick's novels is not always so regimented. Sedgwick's works contain a multitude of Christian sects and alternative belief systems, including Calvinism, Methodism, Quakerism, Unitarianism, Catholicism and even Native American faiths. In many cases, characters cross between religions, including when Hope Leslie assumes the role of a Catholic saint while escaping the danger of inebriated sailors in *Hope Leslie*, or when Jane Elton converts to Quakerism in *A New-England Tale*. While these religious crossings shock the more conservative Calvinist characters in each novel Sedgwick ultimately promotes such crossing over the inflexibility that characterizes certain forms of Protestant Christianity. And most interestingly, the sympathy Sedgwick is so known for crops up amidst these crossings, rather than solely in prototypical Protestant figures. In *Hope Leslie*, for instance, the language of sympathy is repeatedly used in Catholic settings and vice versa. Sedgwick's inclusion of

alternative faiths—more specifically, her protagonists’ sympathy for people whose beliefs differ from their own—bespeaks a pluralistic secularism developing in the nineteenth century.

Sedgwick’s own conversion to Unitarianism, a denomination dubbed “liberal Christianity” by Calvinist Congregationalists, is at the center of this pluralism. In the midst of the Second Great Awakening and the sectarianism that arose out of its explosive pluralization of Christianity and other religions, fierce theological debates arose, in particular between the conservative and liberal poles of Protestantism. In her autobiography, Sedgwick expresses disdain for the conservatism of Calvinist doctrine, detailing the ways her two sisters “suffered from the horrors of Calvinism,” specifying that her sister Eliza “believed in its monstrous doctrines, and they made her gloomy” (*Power* 86). Sedgwick refers to the relationship between this “dismal” religion and the marriages and home life of her sisters, connecting doctrine and domesticity (*Power* 88). It is worth emphasizing that Sedgwick’s Unitarianism was very much a system of Christian belief and doctrine; “liberal” Christianity should not immediately read as rational or secular Christianity. In my readings of Sedgwick’s novels, I do not aim to reframe her own beliefs or draw easy parallels between Unitarianism and secularism. Rather, I interpret the ways Sedgwick’s ostensibly religious fiction actually challenges strict Christian dogmas in favor of secular domestic ideologies of womanhood and morality.

Like *The Coquette, A New-England Tale* features a conflict of love interests for the protagonist, Jane Elton. One young man, Edward Erskine, is a well-liked family friend but essentially a nonbeliever, while an older mentor figure, John Lloyd,

is a Quaker. Jane Elton's choice between suitors resembles Eliza's secularist dilemma, although Christianity remains at the forefront of *A New England Tale's* ethos. Whereas Eliza Wharton is not able act out her ideal domestic ideology, Jane Elton succeeds in pursuing her own interests and developing a morality that is well-informed and in tune with a variety of religious beliefs. When Jane breaks off her engagement with Erskine, he criticizes her for the qualities that, I argue, make her a moral heroine: her receptivity to a multitude of religious influences, which include Calvinism, Methodism and Quakerism. Unlike the inflexible faith critiqued in Melville's *Pierre*, Jane exhibits a faith that is curious, open-minded, and ultimately malleable.

Though Erskine initially seems to be a desirable match for Jane, he ultimately proves himself to be prejudiced against religious others, a prejudice that Sedgwick characterizes as a lack of intellectual curiosity or inquiry. Erskine provides Jane with much-needed support as her situation at the Wilsons becomes increasingly hostile; a formal engagement allows Jane to leave her aunt's house and work at a local school. But when Jane begins to learn of Erskine's varied faults—cheating the poor in legal battles, carousing in gambling clubs—she debates whether she owes him “the devotion of [her] life” (123). Echoing *The Boarding School's* Mrs. Wilson, Jane firmly feels that religion is necessary to live a principled life, and that if Erskine “speak[s] lightly of religion,” then he may not be suited for her as a husband (122). When Jane speaks to Erskine about her concerns, he lashes out: “I perceive that it is impossible for you to see things in the light I do.... Your aunt with her everlasting cant, your methodist friend with her old maid notions, and this precise quaker, above

all, have made you so rigid, have so bound and stiffened every youthful indulgent feeling” (128). Erskine’s indictment echoes Eliza Wharton’s anxieties about marrying into the rigid regulations and restraints of Mr. Boyer’s world. But it is significant that Jane’s religious makeup is multivalent. Rather than rigid, Jane is open and adaptive, learning from those around her in pursuit of moral development.

Sedgwick suggests that Jane’s curiosity about other religions is valuable because it allows her to make moral judgments without having to rely on a single set of religious dogmas. This becomes clear when Jane and Erskine discuss Mr. Lloyd’s Quakerism. Erskine has “pettishly” defended his prejudice against Quakers, explaining, “The Quakers have no creed; and though I have no great faith in the professors of any sect, yet they ought to let you know what they do think: it is fair and above board” (114). Jane coolly responds, “Have you ever read any of their books?” and he exclaims, “I read them! . . . why, my dear girl, do you take me for a theologian? No—I never read the books of any sect; and Quaker books, I believe there are not” (114). Here, Sedgwick pokes fun at Erskine, who is clearly ignorant of Quaker history, but she also makes a serious comment on the dangers of blind prejudice. Jane, in her measured response, clarifies the Quakers’ relationship to Christianity—their shared Biblical creeds—and suggests that Erskine, when he doubts the value of another’s belief, should learn more about them. Rather than turn away from those who are different from us, she says, we should inquire about their history.

In this way, Jane Elton proves herself most capable of moral judgment as she chooses her domestic future. In her flexible acceptance of those in alternative Christian sects, Jane embodies the “elastic” morality that Sedgwick names in the

novel's opening, a morality that can change as it grows and gains experience in the world (20). It is not Erskine's disbelief that excludes him from open discourse with Jane, it is his inability to learn about and sympathize with others' faith. Sedgwick's novel ends with a final act of elasticity: Jane decides to join Mr. Lloyd's "society of friends" upon their marriage (162). Sedgwick specifies that Mr. Lloyd would have been willing to leave his society in order to marry Jane, because like her, he does not "think it of the least consequence, by what name the different members of the Christian family are called" (163). In this way, Sedgwick does not cast Jane's choice as compulsory, nor does she use conversion as the means to a sentimental end. Rather, like Foster, Sedgwick promotes a domestic morality based on acceptance—not judgment—with women in charge of their own choices.

It is worth noting that the religious crossings in *A New-England Tale* take place within Protestant Christianity. In her first novel, Sedgwick's pluralism is still conservative in its limitation to these familiar sects and might more closely resemble ecumenicalism—the unity of different Christian denominations—than secularism. Even so, readers of *A New-England Tale* found its critiques of Calvinism radical, as Victoria Clements describes in her introduction to the Oxford edition of the novel (xi). In later novels, Sedgwick's approach to religion would expand to include more religious diversity. Sedgwick's sentimental heroines come to represent the secularist morality I describe through their inclusivity of others' beliefs and ability to adapt their faith to a variety of real-world scenarios. Rather than defining right and wrong by doctrine, these women do so primarily through their sympathy for others, even those outside the bounds of their assumed religious order.

In her most famous novel, *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts*, Sedgwick presents the colonial home as a sacred space in which important conflicts between religion and secularity take place. The most admirable heroines, Sedgwick shows, are those whose faith does not interfere with their navigation of secular issues such as frontier violence or sexual pressure. Notably, Hope Leslie rebels against the “puritanical guardianship” of her colonial world, a world which resembles the domestic regulations and restraints Eliza Wharton hoped to avoid in *The Coquette* (114).²³ Hope, who develops a more individualized conscience in defiance of the Calvinist principles she finds to be overly restrictive, is described to possess a genuine religion “beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith” (127). Like Jane’s, this transcendence of sects allows Hope to retain her own agency when it comes to faith, to make moral choices based on a variety of factors rather than a singular understanding of moral law. Rather than adhere to the duties and compulsions of Puritan doctrine, Hope engages with a number of belief systems, developing a pluralistic worldview that ultimately wins her the affection of Everell Fletcher, a suitor that Eliza Wharton might have classified as a true combination of virtue and grace.

Here, I focus on two of Hope Leslie’s religious crossings—her experiences with Catholic and Native American faiths—to demonstrate her secularist sympathy. Sedgwick’s treatment of these two belief systems tests the suitability of Calvinism as an appropriate domestic model. Further, Sedgwick’s novel challenges critical assumptions that Protestant values organized American domesticity, and that authors of domestic fiction typically propagated these values in their works. The story of

Hope Leslie is driven by the absence, separation and reassembly of family members, not unlike the plots of other sentimental novels in which heroines are orphaned or parents are unknown. However, Protestant Christianity is not necessarily the moral force that brings families back together or creates indissoluble bonds. Rather, Magawisca, who is motivated by her faith in the Great Spirit rather than a Christian God, facilitates many of the reunions that take place in the novel, and other important scenes of sympathy between characters are described in distinctly Catholic terms. These elements of *Hope Leslie* deepen the pluralistic secular domesticity that Sedgwick had begun to develop in *A New-England Tale*.

Though some critics read *Hope Leslie* as a strictly anti-Catholic text, Sedgwick characterizes several of the novel's most sympathetic or compassionate moments as "Romish" or Catholic. Whereas Elizabeth Fenton argues that *Hope Leslie* "presents a picture of Catholic incursion thwarted by Protestant diligence" (51), I contend that in her development of Hope Leslie, Sedgwick challenges fearful and exclusionary Protestants more than she demonizes Catholics. For example, when Hope and Esther Downing first see Everell Fletcher upon his return to Massachusetts colony, Hope wishes to hear the details of her two friends' relationship, and Sedgwick describes a metaphor of Catholic confession:

"Now Esther," she [Hope] said sportively, "fancy me to be the priest, and yourself the penitent. Confess freely, daughter—our holy church, through me, her most unworthy servant, doth offer thee full absolution."

"Stop, stop, stop, Hope Leslie—do not trifle with holy words, and most unholy rites." (134-135)

Hope likens the sympathetic confidence of friendship to the alleviating act of confession. “Our church,” the institution of friendship shared between Esther and Hope, offers the consolation of sympathy and compassion; “through” Hope, Esther can feel these salves. Esther takes umbrage with the use of “holy words” to describe such an act, and in particular Hope’s choice of “unholy rites” as a metaphor. Hope has spoken thus freely before, such as when she testifies that Nelema, who has saved Cradock from a venomous snake bite, is no witch. Hope adds to her “sin” when she quotes scripture in Nelema’s defense: “This I only know, that whereas thy servant was sick, he is now whole” (107). Mr. Fletcher chastises her “rashly misapply[ing] scripture,” suggesting that the Christian Bible does not represent Nelema’s beliefs or actions. But Hope does not limit or categorize her sympathy based on her preferences for particular religious groups. By contrast, it is not surprising that Esther, who feels Calvinistic “religious duty” to “the strictest letter” above any “earthly consideration,” cannot abide by a joke that likens friendship to a Catholic rite (277). We see a conflict between sympathy and specific religious sects, here: while Hope understands the sympathy felt between friends through Catholic language and feels comfortable extending the import of Christian scripture to non-Christians, Esther places her particular religious “loyalty” above such sympathy (277).

Sedgwick also pairs sympathy and Catholicism in scenes that show characters loving Hope to the point of metaphorical and literal worship. Hope’s tutor Master Cradock, for instance, “always felt, at the slightest notice from Hope, an emotion similar to that of a pious catholic, when he fancies the image of the saint he worships to bend propitiously towards him” (147). Here, Sedgwick casts love as worship, a

comparison that could be construed as negative—especially depending on how Hope might receive such love. For instance, in a later scene, Hope seems to take advantage of a worshipful love, when she realizes an Italian sailor has mistaken her for a “celestial visitant,” perhaps even the Virgin Mary herself (241). Hope is in danger in this scene, having barely escaped the threats of a group of drunk sailors, and though she “had recoiled from the impiety of appropriating his address to the holy mother,” she chooses, self-defensively, to pretend to be a saint (242). She blesses the sailor Antonio, upon whose devotion and obedience she calls to row her to safety (243). Though this scene is marked by Hope’s deceit, it is worth noting that the first thing she calls Antonio is “my friend” (241). This friendship, like Cradock’s, is characterized by worship, but it is such love that saves Hope and others from danger throughout the novel. (Cradock, at the end of the novel, will follow Hope’s and Everell’s directions to aid in Magawisca’s escape from prison.) Esther cringes at the unholiness of friendly sympathy that borders on worship and she pointedly disparages Hope’s actions on Antonio’s boat (272), but Sedgwick suggests on numerous occasions that diversified religious sympathies enable Hope to move through the world more freely.

Surprisingly, Magawisca serves as another model of secularist sympathy in *Hope Leslie*. Magawisca, better than anyone, recognizes “the most serious obstacle to the progress of the Christian religion, in all ages and under all circumstances; the contrariety between its divine principles and the conduct of its professors” (51). Sedgwick gives voice to this insight in Magawisca’s retelling—and revising—of the Pequod war, during which her tribe was massacred, fragmented and driven away by

English colonists. But despite Magawisca's view of Christian hypocrisy, she remains loyal throughout the novel to Everell Fletcher—whom she saves from her father's vengeance shortly after her narration of the war—and Hope Leslie. In extending the love of the Great Spirit to her Christian friends, Magawisca shows that her faith, like Hope's, transcends sectarian divisions. Sedgwick depicts this most poignantly when Hope and Magawisca meet in a graveyard under a dark night sky.

The graveyard scene emphasizes the racial divisions between Magawisca's and Hope's families, but also the sympathies and faiths they share. Hope is distraught to hear from Magawisca that her sister, Faith, has married Magawisca's brother, Oneco, and left the English colony for good. While Magawisca first feels "indignation" at this response, she later feels a "touch of tenderness," and "her indignation gave place to sympathy" (188). When Hope cries out, "There lies my mother...she lost her life in bringing her children to this wild world, to secure them in the fold of Christ" (188), Magawisca responds "in a voice of deep pathos,"

Here is my mother's grave; think ye not that the Great Spirit looks down on these sacred spots, where the good and peaceful rest, with an equal eye; think ye not their children are His children, whether they are gathered in yonder temple where your people worship, or bow to Him beneath the green boughs of the forest? (189)

The sacred space of the graveyard symbolically joins the families of Magawisca and Hope, whose mothers are both buried there. As Hope later muses, "Mysteriously have our destinies been interwoven. Our mothers brought from a far distance to rest together here—their children connected in indissoluble bonds!" (192). The bonds of

friendship are self-evident, but Magawisca also refers to an equalizing Great Spirit, who resides above the divisions of those who worship him in different temples. She describes a universal belief in one God which would minimize the importance of any denominational or religious difference. When Sedgwick writes that “there was something thrilling in Magawisca’s faith,” she seems to refer to Hope’s renewed “attention” to the conversation, but the narrative voice also suggests a broader endorsement of such a capacious view of God’s love (189). Magawisca’s belief in the Great Spirit is the most inclusive faith in the world of *Hope Leslie*—even more inclusive than Hope’s own.

Though Hope and Magawisca both exhibit non-sectarian religious values, and both feel sympathy for those outside their own belief systems, Magawisca does not possess the same mobility of religious crossing that Hope does. Whereas Hope can move between Catholic, Protestant and Native American faiths in the scenes I have described, Magawisca remains excluded from the world of the Puritan colony. At the end of the novel, when Magawisca faces punishment for her presumed collusions against the English colonists, she declares to Governor Winthrop, “Take my word, I am your enemy; the sun-beam and the shadow cannot mingle. The white man cometh—the Indian vanisheth. Can we grasp in friendship the hand raised to strike us? Nay” (292). In Magawisca’s view, sympathetic friendship is not enough to bridge the racial—and political—division between the white man and the Indian.

Sedgwick’s language here mirrors that in a description of Esther and Hope shortly after the earlier scene of “confession,” a parallel which complicates this racial dynamic. “Hope sometimes ventured to rally Esther on her over-scrupulousness,”

Sedgwick writes, “and Miss Downing often rebuked the laughing girl’s gaiety; but, however variant their dispositions, they melted into each other, like light and shade, each enhancing the beauty and effect of the other” (139). Sedgwick’s chosen metaphor of light and shade functions to contrast the relationships between Magawisca, Hope and Esther. The religious characters of Esther and Hope are quite different, but they are mutually beneficial. And yet, in the case of Magawisca, light—a sun-beam—and shade—a shadow—cannot mingle.²⁴

As such, the novel ends without Magawisca in view, but rather with a sentimental marriage between Hope and Everell. Their marriage, like that of *The Coquette*’s Richmans, embodies strong affection, disposition and virtue. Hope and Everell routinely follow their own hearts rather than the authority of others; they join together two families that have been torn apart consistently by religious and colonial conflict, and their love for one another is deemed both “natural” and “celestial” (152, 347). Throughout the novel, Everell exhibits the same cross-racial and cross-religious sympathy as Hope, matching her individualistic virtues. Indeed, when Hope writes to Everell about her testifying on Nelema’s behalf regarding Cradock’s recovery, she mentions what Everell had told her about Native American spiritual beliefs. It is with his description in mind that Hope challenges Mr. Fletcher’s biblical faith and asks, “Why not believe the one as well as the other?” (107). It is Everell’s love of Magawisca that forms the foundation for Hope’s connection with her. (We see this when Magawisca introduces herself to Hope at Governor Winthrop’s house: Hope echoes “Magawisca” before exclaiming, “Oh, Everell!” [183], thereby closely associating the two.) And when Everell and Magawisca are first separated at the

beginning of the novel, he tells her that even if his fate is death, “after death we shall meet again,” imagining a shared salvation in heaven (87). Though, as I discuss in the beginning of the chapter, the patriarchal leaders of the colony believe Hope would benefit from “the modest authority” of an older husband who could enact a “stricter watch over this lawless girl” (154), Sedgwick depicts Hope choosing an equal match, one who mirrors her in affective, social *and* religious discourses—a match such as Eliza Wharton hoped to find.

Even as the marriage of Hope and Everell would seem to perfectly close Sedgwick’s sentimental novel, the author grants the last words of *Hope Leslie* to Esther Downing, reminding readers that Esther’s marital status is valid and a matter of her own choice. Esther composes a letter to her friends in which she “resign[s] Everell to Hope” (347) and indicts the actions of all three (346). Sedgwick follows Esther’s future in the novel’s last lines, defending Esther’s choice not to marry rather than expounding upon the future family of Everell and Hope. Sedgwick, in structuring her novel in this way, subverts expectations on two counts. Celebrating the otherwise sentimental love between Everell and Hope relies upon recognizing the value of earthly affection and individualistic, secularist morality. And even as Esther’s spinsterhood seems tied to the “frosts and ice” of her religious disposition, as Sir Phillip Gardiner unfairly assesses (217), Sedgwick emphasizes that Esther’s choices are as justifiable as Everell’s and Hope’s. Though conservative, Esther remains a central figure in the evolving community of the colony. A secular domestic ideology, through which sympathy for friends of other belief systems allows one to lead a moral life with more flexibility, need not exclude the faith of an unmarried

Puritan. Esther's strict moral character serves as a foil for illuminating the appeal of Hope's flexible faith, but we must not forget that such dual characters are mutually informing: the one does not negate the other.

Given the context of Hope's friendships with two women whose faiths differ from her own, the fact which makes Magawisca an "enemy" of the colony is not her faith, but her race. Even as Sedgwick challenges a limited view of American domesticity as strictly Protestant, the exclusion of Magawisca from the novel's ending bespeaks what Amy Kaplan calls "the racialized national subjectivity of the white-middle class woman in contested international spaces" (600). It bears repeating that while Magawisca embodies the same secularist values as Hope and Everell, she is excluded from the novel's domestic spaces. Indeed, Magawisca is sent to jail after her capture, even though Everell implores the Governor to allow her to remain in the Winthrop house—the specific domestic space that dominates the novel and represents the colony's idealized domesticity (234).

Domesticity for nonwhites is often left unaccounted for in domestic fiction penned by white women authors. In a nineteenth-century context African American women writers responded to and adapted forms of domestic literature in order to depict their own experiences of home life. In part because black womanhood is often violently defined by the conditions of slavery, African Americans, similar to Magawisca's experience, were often excluded from domestic spaces entirely. Such exclusion is even more evident within domestic ideologies constrained by Christianity. But whereas Magawisca fades from the narrative of the white-authored *Hope Leslie*, the contours of racialized domesticity are a pointed focus of the black-

authored *Our Nig*, which exemplifies the limited potential of Christian faith for a free black woman in the antebellum north.

Race, Labor, and Christian Domesticity

Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North* (1859), both autobiography and fiction, a sentimental novel and a seduction novel, straddles genres in order to reveal the limitations of Christian faith for marginalized figures like its protagonist, Frado.²⁵ Specifically, *Our Nig* reveals what it is like for a black protagonist to navigate the putatively sacred space of the nineteenth-century Christian home, a setting that is emphasized through the novel's lengthy subtitle.²⁶ Engaging with Christianity at every turn, Wilson's marginalized voice adds a layer of racial complexity to genres popularized by white women writers such as Foster and Sedgwick in earlier decades. Throughout the novel, Frado hopes that cultivating her Christian faith will help her belong to her domestic world—as well as a dream of heavenly home—but Wilson suggests that this is not the case. In *Doers of the Word*, Carla Peterson reads “religion as a source of power” (18) alongside the “empowering narrative authority” marginalized black women found in literary representation (22), but religion in *Our Nig* does not empower. Instead, it replicates existing racial and economic hierarchies, particularly within the space of the Belmont home.

Whereas Foster's and Sedgwick's novels imagine or enact secularist domestic ideologies, Wilson's novel reveals how the space of the home is oppressive when it is controlled by unfeeling Christians. Making an argument in reverse, *Our Nig* suggests

that a secular domestic ideology would be more inclusive than the Christian domesticity of the novel's central family. The crux of this argument is that Frado's desire to believe in God is precisely what traps her within the bounds of the Belmont home. An important factor of Frado's domestic dynamic is her status as an indentured laborer. Lois Leveen argues that "the racial dynamics of slavery are replicated...in part through the spatializing hierarchies of power within the private home," suggesting that the dynamics of Frado's labor are a key element in Frado's exclusion from domesticity (561). Frado's labor—an extension of her racial inferiority in the novel's world—also delimits her access to religious faith. A central aspect of the pluralistic secular domesticity championed by the other novels discussed in this chapter is the exposure of protagonists to alternative faiths and women's ability to dialogue with others about their beliefs. Frado, however, is incredibly restrained by her duties of service, and the world of *Our Nig* is almost completely homogenous. Christianity appears to Frado to be the only option for belief in her insular world of labor, but it also proves to be an additional source of oppression in the context of certain characters' racism. Wilson links Christianity to labor and oppression throughout *Our Nig*, emphasizing how Christianity is often viewed (as represented by Mrs. Belmont) as a privilege exclusive to whites. By exposing the racist potential of Christianity in antebellum America, Wilson reveals the extent to which domesticity can be made unavailable to nonwhites. In Frado, Wilson develops a heroine with goals similar to those of such earlier fictional characters as Eliza Wharton and Hope Leslie: to live a moral life and build a home that functions in both secular and

religious realms. But given the realities of nineteenth-century racism, this proves nearly impossible.

Frado's race unavoidably and importantly distinguishes her from Foster's and Sedgwick's protagonists, despite the novels' shared domestic and religious concerns. For instance, while Frado and Jane Elton find themselves similarly trapped in a new home where they are not entirely welcome, Frado's race and indentured servitude preclude her from leaving the house of her own volition or creating a life for herself, as Jane does. Mrs. Belmont, like Jane's aunt, is shown to be an unsympathetic and hypocritical Christian, but Frado's subordinate racial and class positioning means Mrs. Belmont feels free to physically and violently assert the dominance that Mrs. Wilson exercises primarily through emotional manipulation. Jane, who in many ways defines herself through the moral superiority she wields over her cousins and aunts, makes a series of choices that enable her to leave the Wilson home. She eventually begins a new life with John Lloyd, a marriage that is primarily defined by its moral character. Indeed, the first two authors discussed in this chapter celebrate the female agency inherent to the secular domesticity I describe; Eliza Wharton, Jane Elton and Hope Leslie all believe in and act on the power of their own choices as they define morality for themselves. This power is not obtainable for Frado, even as she tries to access the religious belief available to her fictive sentimental peers, because she is nearly enslaved by the implied terms of her indenture agreement.

Throughout the novel, the lessons Frado learns about God are tied directly to realizations she has about her race. The effect of these parallel discoveries is to link Christianity and oppression in Frado's understanding of faith. In an oft-quoted scene,

for instance, Frado asks James Belmont who made her, him, Aunt Abby and Mrs. Belmont. God, James answers. “Well, then I don’t like him,” Frado says, “Because he made her [Mrs. Belmont] white, and me black. Why didn’t he make us *both* white?” (51). Frado’s initial inquiries about God are related to her appraisal of the difference between her and the Bellmonts. As Frado recognizes her own inferiority—she wishes God had made her white—she also indicts the higher power that created such difference. Here, a Christian God is perceived as directly related to—or even responsible for—racial oppression. Even so, when James encourages her to attend religious meetings, Frado becomes invested in Christian redemption the more she learns about it from Aunt Abby and the minister (84). Frado begins to feel deeply about repenting, and reads her Bible any chance she gets.

But this phase of piety in Frado’s life is marked by exclusion as well. One of Frado’s main concerns is whether there “*is* a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for James, and Aunt Abby, and all good white people; but was there any for blacks?” (84). Her doubt about this aspect of Christian redemption characterizes her anxieties about Christianity in general; though she wants to believe, she finds her faith repeatedly checked by circumstances of her daily existence. James and Aunt Abby support her spiritual life, but Mrs. Belmont counters such support with constant degradation. For example, when James dies, Mrs. Belmont “would tell her [Frado] she could not go where James was; she need not try” (100). Indeed, Mrs. Belmont “hardly believed she [Frado] had a soul” (86). It seems that the attitude of Mrs. Belmont—the overarching belief that “religion was not meant for niggers”—inevitably undoes any advancements Frado makes towards redemption (68). Though

Our Nig shows a notable investment in Christian salvation, Frado's beliefs remain ambiguous. Rather than a fully-formed conversion narrative, Wilson's novel, at a time when Stowe's popular antislavery novels were suggesting otherwise, provides instead a narrative of doubt in Christianity's efficacy as a domestic ideology.

A key way the novel frames Christianity as unhelpful to Frado is through repeated mention of labor in tandem with Frado's faith. At first, Frado "eagerly anticipate[s]" attending evening meetings with Aunt Abby, because "it was such a pleasant release from labor" (69). To be expected, Mrs. Bellmont objects to such release, fearing that if Frado "should get converted she would have to go to meeting," including Sundays, when the Bellmonts "have a great deal of company...and she can't be spared" (88, 89). While this initial introduction to Christianity seems to free Frado from her work, the two soon begin to blend. What once represented an escape from the house where Mrs. Bellmont fiercely protects the "profit" of Frado's labor (90) eventually shares a similar vocabulary of work. When Frado rejoices at the departure of Mrs. Bellmont's equally abusive daughter, Mary, Aunt Abby reminds Frado of "doing good to those who hate us" (81). Wilson parses out the meanings of doing good in the exchange that follows:

"Didn't I do good, Aunt Abby, when I washed and ironed and packed her old duds to get rid of her, and helped her pack her trunks, and run here and there for her?"

"Well, well, Frado; you must finish your work, or your mistress will be after you..." (81).

Aunt Abby's initial mention of "doing good" seems to be a reminder that being a Christian involves "doing" certain things in line with the doctrine of good works; latent belief is not enough to uphold Christian doctrines. However, Frado only understands "doing good" as helping in the sense of labor. Good deeds, to Frado, are chores: ironing, packing, and running about. Aunt Abby's lack of a response to Frado's misunderstanding suggests that no other actions *are* available to Frado. Indeed, their discussion immediately halts with a reassertion of the mistress's power over Frado and an order to "finish you work." In this short conversation, Frado mistakes "doing good" for "doing work," and Aunt Abby merely affirms that the two are the same for someone in Frado's position.

Rather than elevating a servant's labor to pious acts of beneficence, the conversation only seems to recast Christian rites as work. The contrast between religious feeling and the world Frado lives in merely makes God complicit in the disparity he created, as in Frado's initial conversation with James. Wilson shows this most poignantly when she contrasts one of Mrs. Belmont's declarations of abuse with Frado's prayer: "'I'll beat the money out of her, if I can't get her worth any other way,' retorted Mrs. B. sharply. While this scene was passing, Frado was trying to utter the prayer of the publican, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'" (90). In pairing good Christian works with unpaid servant labor, violent words with prayer, Wilson suggests that there can be no mercy for Frado at home with the Bellmonts.

Frado eventually realizes the abundant power of her labor's value, but it appears that her blossoming Christian beliefs actually keep her from breaking free of her servitude. Wilson describes a pivotal moment when Frado stands up to Mrs.

Bellmont, who has threatened to hit her with a stick. Frado shouts, “Strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you,” and she “stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts” (105). Resisting her oppressor’s violence immediately registers as an act of independence to Frado, a feeling that is not lost on Mrs. Belmont. Wilson describes how the “mistress, in amazement, dropped her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement” (105). The scene teaches Frado that she “had a power to ward off assaults,” embodying the potential to reverse the power dynamic between oppressor and oppressed (105). Reminiscent of Paul Gilroy’s theory of the reworked Hegelian master-slave dialectic, Wilson shows how Frado’s threatening to withhold her labor signals Mrs. Belmont’s dependence on Frado.²⁷ From this threat alone, Mrs. Belmont responds in the reversal of power Gilroy describes; she literally takes on Frado’s “burden” when she finishes Frado’s task of bringing wood into the house (105), emphasizing Frado’s “dawning recognition of the value inhering in her labor and the latent power to which that value refers” (Santamarina 93). Mrs. Belmont does not punish Frado in the moment, and even refrains from beating Frado at a later moment, as with her favored mode of an “after-clap” (105). Though Mrs. Belmont’s violence thus seems abated by Frado’s triumph, Frado never flees from her position. Though she contemplates escape, reminding herself of “her victory at the wood-pile,” she ultimately remains with the Bellmonts (108).

We see in the subsequent pages that Frado is not only oppressed by her status as an indentured laborer, but also by her understanding of Christianity. When Frado debates leaving the Belmont house, Aunt Abby advises her that she might “fail in

finding so good friends as John and herself” (108). Frado is ultimately “retrained by an overruling Providence” and “finally decided to stay contentedly through her period of service” (109). Frado recognizes the power of her labor’s value, but her loyalty to Aunt Abby—a source of Christian support—and her understanding of God’s will persuade her to remain in a domestic space characterized by constant abuse.²⁸

Though Christianity continues to seduce Frado, her faith remains unavoidably entwined with her status as a laborer, even when she manages to leave the Bellmont home. Wilson writes in the penultimate chapter about Frado’s meeting a woman who teaches her how to sew, a skill which ultimately relates to her Christian identity:

Expert with the needle, Frado soon equalled her instructress; and she sought also to teach her the value of useful books; and while one read aloud to the other of deeds historic and names renowned, Frado experienced a new impulse. She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express. Every leisure moment was carefully applied to self-improvement, and a devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers.

(124-125)

Frado’s elevation—social and spiritual—comes from work. Indeed, “every leisure moment” becomes a moment of study for Frado as she works toward self-improvement. The result of this elevation is that Frado presumably becomes a believably “devout” Christian, but Wilson’s phrasing suggests an empty piety when she names the Christian “exterior” that Frado’s self-improvement begets. Wilson does not portray a devout Christian interior, though readers have had access to Frado’s

inner thoughts, doubts and questions about faith earlier in the novel. And when *Our Nig* concludes, even if Frado keeps “reposing on God,” her conditions have not significantly improved and she must remain “busily employed” (130). Whatever home life Frado has at the end of the novel, it is evidently still organized around her work, rather than around her faith; as Peterson argues, “Frado can find neither a safe haven in the domestic sphere nor escape from economic exploitation. . . . she must allow work to invade the private sphere” (*Doers* 169). Whereas Catharine Sedgwick theorizes a new secular domesticity, an alternative to the dogmatic Christian home, Wilson makes an argument in the negative by portraying the absence of rewarding domestic life. By showing what is unavailable to Frado because of her racialized relationship to labor, Wilson solicits something new, a domesticity that would necessarily be impervious to oppression at the hands of disingenuous Christians.

We might question whether it is Christianity or simply racism that excludes Frado from a positive domestic life, but it bears repeating that even the benevolent Bellmonts fail to offer Frado such security. Wilson never elaborates on the possibility of domesticity with non-racist Christians. James, who Wilson says “was to [Frado] a shelter” (67), repeatedly expresses his desire to take Frado with him to his home in Baltimore, but various obstacles prevent such a move. And as I have noted, Frado’s relationship to “good” Christians like Aunt Abby often keep her in the orbit of her oppressor, Mrs. Bellmont. There seems to be an odd trap by which the family members who give Frado a feeling of home or shelter necessarily tie her to a domestic space that is ultimately oppressive. Santamarina similarly argues, “Frado’s reliance on family members for the affection of which she is so remorselessly

deprived...further intensifies her vulnerability to Mrs. Bellmont's racist regime" (89). In the Appendix of *Our Nig*, Allida writes of Harriet Wilson's "happy—truly happy" months living in the home of Mrs. Walker (133). She quotes Wilson "exclaiming, 'Oh, aunt J—, I have at last found a *home*,—and not only a home, but a *mother*. My cup runneth over. What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits?'" (133). Wilson's exclamation emphasizes a happiness found through Christian belief and a quiet domestic life. Indeed, my argument in this chapter does not discount the possibility of a "joyful" domesticity built on Christian belief (133), as we have seen through *Hope Leslie*'s celebration of Esther Downing in its powerful conclusion.

However, Wilson's happiness proves fleeting. Allida's "But, alas...." following the description of Wilson's happy life with Mrs. Walker feels inevitable (133). And more to the point, the narrative of *Our Nig* notably ends without an emphasis on the "*hope—joyful hope to the future*" that Allida stresses in her Appendix (133). Rather, *Our Nig* shows Frado's continual removal from a number of homes as she encounters new burdens. The lasting physical effects on Frado's health from Mrs. Bellmont's treatment throughout the narrative leave Frado prostrated time and time again, so that even in freedom Frado is impaired by her childhood servitude. The character of Mrs. Bellmont, a "professor of religion" (104) who rules the domestic space with violence and a clearly racialized understanding of who can practice their beliefs (89), embodies the potential dangers of Christian domesticity. When the power dynamics of Christian doctrine—the seduction of redemption, for instance—intersect with those of race, domestic space can prove to be one of oppression, rather than comfort.

Wilson's critique of the practice of white northern Christianity in *Our Nig* potentially anticipates her belief in Spiritualism. In particular, Frado's concerns about whether racial divisions on earth continue in heaven echo one of the dominant Spiritualist enterprises, the ability of mediums to communicate between the living and the dead. Such focus on the afterlife, as most critics note, offered consolation during the Civil War, when families across the United States mourned the overwhelming number of soldiers' deaths. As I discuss in chapter three, the desire to maintain bonds with those lost in the war is embodied in novels like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Gates* trilogy. But Frado's interest in heaven seems larger than her friendship with the more compassionate Bellmonts, whom she "will never cease to track...till beyond mortal vision" (131). Wilson's depiction of Frado's imagined heaven embodies a space where the social hierarchies of contemporary society could potentially be undone. And in particular, as in moments when heaven is referred to as a shared "abode" (85) or "*heavenly* home" (95), the afterlife would provide an inclusive domestic space she fails to find in her lifetime. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Richard J. Ellis write that Spiritualism, for Wilson, offered "no sect, no creed, no dogma and no caste," much as Hope Leslie's faith ideally transcends sectarian boundaries in Sedgwick's novel (Appendix 1 vii). Wilson's Spiritualism thus potentially informs her desire for a domesticity based on inclusion rather than exclusion. Like Foster and Sedgwick before her, Wilson's critiques of Christianity show that any faith based on rigid doctrines and exclusive rites—especially those that could be practiced in tandem with virulent racism—could not organize the American family. Rather, Christianity fosters more divisions than reunions in *Our Nig*, and in the case of African Americans both

freed and enslaved, precludes any true sense of home or belonging. Frado's ambivalence about Christianity—seductive as it is for her—and the continued unsteadiness of her own domesticity suggest how the two can become discordant.

In this chapter, I have sketched the development of secular domesticity in works of domestic literature ranging from the early national to the antebellum period. *The Coquette's* Eliza Wharton recognizes that her choice of husband will shape her future home; she thus wishes for a marriage based on the jointly secular and religious discourses of affection, disposition and virtue. The novel, however, implies that Eliza must marry based on Christian virtue alone, suggesting that a secular domesticity is not yet available in the novel's world. By the 1820s, authors were able to more fully depict a more capacious domestic ideology. Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* broadens the rigidity of *The Coquette's* moralism through its ecumenical approach to Christianity and critique of overly dogmatic domestic ideology. Going one step further, *Hope Leslie* emphasizes how sentimental sympathy functions across sect and even across religions. Further, the novel shows how religious belief and secularist sympathies can coexist within myriad domestic ideologies; Esther Downing's conservatism is celebrated as much as Hope Leslie's liberalism. Finally, *Our Nig* shows the development of secular domesticity in the reverse. Wilson's genre-bending novel emphasizes the limitations of Christian faith, insofar as Christianity can be coopted by racism in ways that make domesticity untenable for African Americans.

But the novels in this chapter provide only a few examples from a much broader discourse. While this chapter focuses primarily on the secular stakes of

affective relationships—marriages and friendships—domestic literature stages and reconciles debates between religion and many other secular issues. In the chapters that follow, I extend my analysis by pursuing such questions as: Who is excluded from and by Christianity, and what are the political stakes of this exclusion? How is virtue defined, inside and outside of the home? In what ways does science shape domestic spaces? And while this chapter engages broadly with domestic fiction, subsequent chapters parse out the many different genres that represent domesticity in nineteenth-century writing. For instance, it bears exploring how other writers engage with sentimentalism, arguably the most popular mode of the antebellum period. This chapter reads Sedgwick's sentimentalism in a new, less strictly Christian context. Chapter two continues this approach through its comparison of Melville's *Pierre* to two of the most well-known sentimental novels, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854). I argue that Melville's revisions of the sentimental genre emphasize the pitfalls of the overly pious domesticity employed by his eponymous hero. In reading *Pierre* through a postsecular lens, the chapter reevaluates the importance of Plotinus Plinlimmon's somewhat bewildering pamphlet, a text within *Pierre* that functions both as a potential moral tract and as a hermeneutic for reading the novel's problematic ending. Whereas many critics interpret *Pierre*'s ending apocalyptically, I see it as an invitation to redefine American domesticity in secular terms.

Chapter 2: Sentimentalism and Secularism in Herman Melville's *Pierre*

Published two years after Susan Warner's wildly successful *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and two years before Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) participates in the sentimentalism of these two novels. Moving from the whaling ship of *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (1851) to the landlocked home, *Pierre* focuses on faith, family, and feelings, thematically aligning the novel with the tenets of sentimentalism. While Melville certainly frames *Moby-Dick*'s ship as a sacred space in which to consider many of the same debates tackled in this dissertation, *Pierre* is noteworthy for its attempt to frame these debates in a more conventional format. If *Moby-Dick* was a masterpiece of metaphysical thinking, *Pierre* was, from Melville's perspective, "a rural bowl of milk" (*Correspondence* 219). The domestic focus it shares with *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* suggests two things: the 1850s were the heyday of sentimental fiction that celebrated the everyday lives of virtuous children and their families, and Melville was well aware of this fact. *Pierre*, like *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter*, features a domestic setting and tells the story of a young protagonist who, separated from his family, turns to God in the face of hardships. All three novels introduce moral guides—elders, ministers, and even strangers—who advise the protagonists on their spiritual journeys. Like *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter*, the instructional content of Melville's novel hinges on characters' spiritual reading practices as guided by their superiors. Unlike its

sentimental peers, however, *Pierre* refuses to promote Christian perfection through idyllic domestic scenes. Instead, the eponymous hero's excessive religiosity speeds his family's downfall.

Perhaps influenced by the popular writing of sentimental authors, including his Berkshire neighbor Catharine Sedgwick, Melville employs the sentimental genre precisely to reveal the limitations of faith for organizing the family.²⁹ In so doing, Melville promotes a provocative alliance between secularism and domesticity—an alliance organized around a variety of beliefs and outlets for moral guidance—that can attend to the ambiguities of moral life. Like the novels discussed in chapter one, *Pierre's* secularism does not negate its moral content. Indeed, what is so compelling about the novel is how it is both emphatically secularist and deeply moral.

As Charles Taylor argues, modernity brings about a version of secularity in which belief and disbelief coexist: even as God remains an option for belief, God is no longer, as in earlier eras, an unchallenged authority (3). In this modern era individuals can find what Taylor describes as “fullness”—that is, moral or spiritual orientation—in both secular and religious outlets (6). *Pierre*, I am arguing, embodies the plurality and indeed the ambiguities of this modern secular age. However, Melville's novel makes this argument in the negative, similar to Harriet Wilson's approach. Rather than portraying a successful secular domesticity, as in the idealized marriage of Hope Leslie and Everell Fletcher, Melville illuminates the significant drawbacks of Pierre's righteous approach to faith and family, which disintegrates by the novel's end.

Pierre's rebellious spirit might appear to exemplify secular individualism and the application of personal choice to religion. John Lardas Modern writes that the "nova effect" of Charles Taylor's secularity hinges on "individual freedom" (5) and the fact that "decisions about religion are one's own" (7). This emphasis on the individualistic quality of secularism suggests Pierre's "intuitive moral faculty," which James Duban identifies as Transcendentalist (*Melville's Major Fiction* 154). But despite Pierre's individualism, his faith is decidedly Christian. Like that of most sentimental heroines, Pierre's faith is derived from his home and family. For example, the narrator describes how Mrs. Glendinning holds up Pierre's late father "as a splendid example of the polishing and gentlemanizing influences of Christianity upon the mind and manners" (98), after suggesting that Pierre's father is a "personification of perfect human goodness and virtue" and to Pierre the very foundation for "religion" (68). Pierre identifies in himself a "Christ-like feeling" (106), a feeling the narrator often refers to as an "Enthusiasm" paralleling "Christian Religion" (205), but which also signifies Pierre's self-aggrandizing and at times irrational nature. Pierre's individualism both originates in and clashes with his Christian faith.

Pierre consistently chooses God, clinging to Christianity and blindly adhering to his singular understanding of self-sacrificing morality as promulgated by the Bible. When presented with a variety of sources for moral guidance, both religious and secular, Pierre turns away from any beliefs that oppose an absolutist reading of the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, *Pierre* represents a Taylorian modern secular age in which its protagonist refuses to participate. In the end, Pierre's death and the

destruction of the Glendinning family suggest that such inflexible faith is incompatible with domesticity. Instead, *Pierre*'s dark conclusion promotes a secular domestic ideology; Melville seems to desire a more capacious pluralism in line with Taylor's secular age. *Pierre*'s nominal rejection of Christian absolutism alongside its engagement with tropes of sentimental fiction, a genre identified in part by its Christian moral content, suggests Melville's desire for a morality scrubbed of religious content. The novel's ambivalent relationship to sentimentalism represents its complex secular morality.

When considering Melville's relationship to sentimentalism, critics tend to characterize *Pierre* as trading in varying degrees of parody. Gillian Brown considers *Pierre* anti-sentimentalist because its homosocial structure removes it from the feminine sphere, and domesticity is thus centered on masculine individualism (136). As I will discuss, gender figures importantly in the ways Melville cites and subverts sentimentalism in *Pierre* and in his later works. Cindy Weinstein classifies *Pierre* as a "pre-history of the sentimental novel," a narrative which, by "negative example," proves the necessary pre-conditions of sentimental novels (*Family* 160, 184). Sheila Post-Lauria challenges critical readings of *Pierre* as a "'failed' attempt" at sentimentalism and classifies the novel as a French sensational romance (133); still others read *Pierre* in the mode of the domestic gothic.³⁰ On the other hand, as Lora Romero contends, categorizing *Pierre* as "about" sentimentalism, or as "a parody of the domestic novel rather than an *instance* of it" merely reaffirms the gendered construction of the canon through the insistence of difference (*Home Fronts* 2, "Domesticity and Fiction" 112). This chapter treats *Pierre* as neither a strict parody of

sentimentalism nor a conventional example of the genre; rather, Melville reworks the genre, calling on familiar scenes and figures of sentimentalism but also altering them, at times reversing, subverting or even exaggerating them along the way. As Samuel Otter describes, Melville takes the sentimental novel “to the *n*th degree,” both inhabiting the genre and exploding it (209). Melville’s allusions to sentimental themes and his use of familiar tropes reveal an awareness—even an appreciation—of the power that the sentimental genre holds. Melville purposefully uses sentimentalism as a vehicle for discussing his broader concerns about the pious ideology of antebellum domesticity.

The following pages pose two interrelated arguments about Melville’s use of sentimentalism in *Pierre*. First, Melville’s appropriation of particular sentimental touchstones (such as the domestic setting and the importance of moral mentors) shows his investment in engaging domesticity through the language already popularized in antebellum literature. I use *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* as foils to *Pierre*, helpful for illuminating the places where Melville deviates from sentimental convention. Second, Melville’s use of sentimentalism signals the importance of reading. The narrator’s repeated discussion of Pierre’s bad reading trains readers of *Pierre* to recognize certain lessons—just as a sentimental novel might promote Biblical doctrines through spiritual reading. Melville thus contributes to a broader trend of nineteenth-century literature that asserts literature’s role in public moral instruction. However, the message Melville presents through reading is different from the Christian morals of most sentimental novels, because it appears that Pierre’s bad reading stems from the inflexibility of Pierre’s moral

convictions. Ultimately, the ways in which Melville appropriates sentimental forms suggests his investment in a secular, rather than a Christian, domesticity. For Melville, the wedding of domesticity and secularism accounts for the ambiguities inherent to moral life and at odds with the inflexibility that characterizes Pierre's Christian faith. *Pierre*, like the novels discussed in chapter one, suggests that a moral hero(ine) should cultivate a morality that is receptive to secular, as much as religious, discourses.

In the reading that follows, I trace Pierre's domestic decisions alongside his approach to Christian morality, probing how Melville engages with sentimentalism at each turn. This interpretation enables a better understanding of the hope offered by the novel's ending, which has traditionally been perceived as bleak. Pierre departs from his home and estranges himself from his mother, abruptly breaks off his engagement to Lucy Tartan, and murders his cousin Glen before committing suicide. *Pierre* frames each of these actions both as subversions of sentimentalist tropes and as part and parcel of Pierre's Christian ethos. Despite these subversions, Melville's appropriation of sentimental tropes encourages us to consider Pierre as a would-be sentimental hero. Central to this reading is the act of reading itself: as a would-be sentimentalist novel, *Pierre* stages its own scenes of moral pedagogy, particularly through its inclusion of the oft-misunderstood pamphlet, "Chronometricals and Horologicals." The pamphlet's unfinished nature and its placement in the novel suggests an alternative interpretation of *Pierre*'s ending: whereas critics typically read the ending as bleak and pessimistic towards American domesticity, I see a provocation that—in its own unfinished way—explores the potential for secularism to

rescue domesticity from the inflexible and impractical binds of Christian piety. Rereading *Pierre* in this way rescues the novel from its critical reception as a symbol of Melville gone “crazy” with resentment about his literary career.³¹ Instead, *Pierre* can be read as a productive contribution to an ongoing conversation about how to stage important debates about faith and family within the space of the home.

Domestic Beginnings and the Glendinning Family

Like most sentimental novels, *Pierre* foregrounds family while hinting that Pierre’s domestic bliss is doomed. Through an introduction to Saddle Meadows, we learn of Pierre’s “breeding” as a Glendinning heir, an upbringing that emphasizes his Revolutionary ancestry, his inherited gentlemanly religion, and his docile relationship to his mother (6, 7, 20). However, this domestic perspective differs from that of *The Wide, Wide World* or *The Lamplighter*. Both of these novels, now accepted as hallmarks of sentimental fiction, open inside city homes as a young girl sits in her front window, watching the world outside, in contrast to *Pierre*’s pastoral opening. Both girls are enamored of the figure of the lamplighter, a man who carries a torch from lamppost to lamppost, lighting the street as evening approaches. For both novels, such an opening places the reader inside of the home of the child, prompting the reader to imagine the view the heroine faces outside. The reader’s gaze parallels Ellen Montgomery’s or Gertrude Flint’s as we enter their textual worlds, a narrative move that elicits the first instance of sympathy in novels that above all else foreground the importance of feeling.

Melville does not solicit such sympathy for Pierre; instead, he reverses such a sentimental scheme. Whereas Cummins and Warner invite us in to their heroines' homes, Melville shows Pierre "issuing from" his house; we are initially denied access to the "high-gabled old home of his fathers" (3). Rather than swiftly focusing on the perspective of Pierre as Cummins or Warner might, Melville's narrator instead describes the countryside setting at length, establishes the history of the novel's world, and introduces the broader Glendinning family. In another reversal of sentimental form, Pierre seems surrounded by familial and romantic love from the start of the novel. Gertrude lacks familial stability and Ellen Montgomery will soon be left behind by her mother and father, but Pierre is enfolded in his domestic situation. In a sense, *Pierre* begins where a novel like *The Wide, Wide World* leaves off: with domestic bliss set in a pastoral countryside. Given the narrator's tone in subsequent chapters, we become wary of such domestic bliss. The paradox of *Pierre*'s sentimentalism, as Wyn Kelley notes, is that even as the novel's central focus is on house and home—aligning it with contemporaneous popular novels by women—its revisions of these tropes seem to undermine "the idealization of domesticity" (96). The ways Melville tweaks the sentimental setting of *Pierre* foreshadow how the traditional domestic relationships of the novel—mother and son, suitor and love interest—will also thwart our expectations.

Melville unmoors our perception of Pierre's domestic bliss by undermining key sentimental relationships. For instance, Melville depicts the love between Pierre and Lucy as youthful, idyllic and inevitable, but subtle jokes hint at the familial strife to come. The situation is almost too perfect. Melville's narrator muses,

It is needless to say that [Lucy] was a beauty; because chestnut-haired, bright-cheeked youths like Pierre Glendinning, seldom fall in love with any but a beauty. And in the times to come, there must be—as in the present times, and in the times gone by—some splendid men, and some transcendent women; and how can they ever be, unless always, throughout all time, here and there, a handsome youth weds with a handsome maid? (23)

Melville frames the couple's tradition of heterosexual love with an exaggerated sense of inevitability: he refers to "all time" after having already named times to come, present times, and times gone by. Declaring that love "must" come about in a specific manner, Melville subsequently undercuts this certitude with a question: "How can they ever be . . .?" This question boils down to heterosexual reproduction: how can time continue unless a youth marries a maid? Though seemingly idealized, Melville's portrayal of the couple seems to be done in "hackneyed Romeo-and-Juliet fashion," suggesting an exaggerated convention rather than the upholding of an ideal (Higgins and Parker 32). We see the break in convention when Mrs. Glendinning reassures Pierre, "You, Pierre, are going to be married before long, I trust, not to a Capulet, but to one of our own Montagues" (18). Mrs. Glendinning means to distinguish between appropriate matches for Pierre vis-à-vis his family status, but she unwittingly predicts that Pierre will literally marry "one of his own," as he feigns betrothal to a young woman who has claimed to be his half-sister (Isabel Banford). Melville's depiction of Pierre's young romance is thus both idyllic and self-effacing, begging to be read both conventionally and ironically.

As *Pierre* unfolds, its deviations from the standard sentimental form grow increasingly wild. More importantly, this generic playfulness coincides with the novel's increased engagements with questions of faith. Melville's revision of sentimental tropes facilitates his advancement of secularism, a mode in which morality could come from outside of Christian doctrines. Sentimentalism and secularism collide in the central moral problem of the novel: how Pierre should react when he learns the story of Isabel Banford. Pierre's response to Isabel affects both sentimental family dynamics and the morality of the would-be sentimental hero himself: how Pierre should determine "whether certain vital acts of his were right or wrong," the tireless consideration of which the narrator calls Pierre's "most puzzling problem" (205).

Though he consults his mother and the Reverend Falsgrave about his moral obligations, Pierre seems determined to resolve the issue alone. In a secular age, Pierre might consider a variety of social factors for understanding the moral circumstances of his obligations to an illegitimate half-sister. However, Pierre adamantly adheres to his understanding of biblical morality, and decides that righting the sins of his father means doing right by Isabel. He commits to constructing a family that will include her in some capacity. Importantly, Pierre is not simply going along to get along; Melville emphasizes the religious nature of Pierre's perceived duty. Pierre feels "divinely dedicated" to Isabel, "with divine commands upon him to befriend and champion her" (106). He ultimately chooses to sacrifice his love for Lucy and feign marriage to Isabel in order to avoid revealing to his mother the presumed deviance of his father. When the narrator describes the true nature of this

decision as an “all-including query—Lucy or God?” the novel clearly frames Pierre’s choice as between secular and heavenly worlds (181). Pierre, with his understanding of morality and genealogical sin, consistently chooses his Christian God over other alternatives. Ultimately, in aligning that choice with his divine dedication to Isabel, Pierre convinces himself of his moral high ground for the remainder of the novel.

Despite this apparent moral high ground, such divine dedication wreaks havoc on Pierre’s existing home life; here and henceforth, Melville emphasizes how Pierre’s inflexible perception of Christian morality negatively affects domesticity. First, Pierre’s faux marriage to Isabel irrevocably alters his conventional nuclear family. His loyalty to Isabel severs his tie to Lucy, who, as the novel’s opening suggests, represents the Glendinning future through heterosexual reproduction. Second, Pierre’s marriage complicates his relationship to Mrs. Glendinning, as his devotion to Isabel is unavoidably tied to his deceased father. Pierre decides against revealing the “miserable truth” of Isabel’s history to his mother, because he would never “by one vile breath of truth, blast [his] father’s memory” (92). Though Pierre rationalizes his lie as “heavenly” because it allows him to avoid inflicting necessary pain and grief on his mother, Melville also reveals by the end of the novel that Mrs. Glendinning has, in fact, died of “an inconsolable grief” (285). Pierre’s choice to marry Isabel thus merely preserves his father’s reputation as honorable and confirms his mother’s reputation as “scornful” (92). In this way, Pierre’s moral conundrum allows Melville to complicate the domestic relationships of the novel’s opening. Whereas most sentimental novels show an isolated or even orphaned heroine’s moral development alongside—and even constitutive of—her path to domestic bliss,

Melville's novel shows instead the dissolution of family ties alongside would-be moral development. Such reversal of the sentimental plot initiates the novel's relentless questioning of what constitutes morality. In the chapters that follow, Melville shows Pierre blundering forward with his plan, clinging to his perceived understanding of God's laws despite the guidance he encounters from elders, literature and philosophy. What such blundering reveals is the unsuitability of inflexible faith for organizing and sustaining a family.

Moral Guides and Instructive Reading

Though *Pierre's* domestic opening invokes sentimentalism and at times parodies its forms, the novel's second half truly engages with and revises the genre. Ultimately, this revision is not merely formal playfulness for its own sake, but a means to create a secular reader out of would-be sentimental fiction. Culminating with "Chronometricals and Horologicals," Pierre encounters several sources for spiritual guidance that could potentially sway him from his course, but he fails to consider them, steadfast as he is in his blind devotion to his Christian God. Considering such scenes in comparison to those in other sentimental texts, each of these encounters progressively amplify the sense that Pierre's faith—in himself and in divine guidance—is at odds with the stability of his family. That Pierre's transcendent morality clearly backfires suggests Melville's interest in a more secular domesticity than that of much sentimental fiction. Specifically, through *Pierre's* representation of scenes of reading, Melville eschews the didactic, moralistic reading practices of sentimental fiction for a more capacious, secular reading.

Pierre is not unique in presenting moral guides to the young sentimental hero: *The Wide, Wide World*, for example, ushers in counsellors whenever Ellen Montgomery despairs. Most notably, Alice Humphrey serves as an exemplar of female piety, or what she names a “professor” of religion, a person who lives by “the right kind of example” (239). Alice takes up the work of Ellen’s mother, who, before leaving Ellen, hoped to instill Christian beliefs in her. The biggest challenge Ellen faces is loving and trusting God *more* than these moral guides. “I trust every word you say—entirely—I know nothing could be truer,” Ellen tells her mother at the beginning of the novel (18). “Then everything you tell or advise me to do, I know it is right, perfectly,” she continues, “You have the management of me entirely, and I needn’t manage myself” (18). Ellen embraces moral guidance; she absolves herself entirely of moral responsibility. But to her mother, this poses a problem: what will happen when Mrs. Montgomery is gone? Ellen must place such trust in God, her mother tells her. Ellen must learn to “manage” herself, through the guidance of scripture, hymns, and incessant prayer, rather than the guidance of her loved ones. Unlike Ellen, Pierre has no problem managing himself. He does not trust the advice of his moral guides, but this distrust proves to be catastrophic rather than admirable. In lampooning godly self-management, Melville reverses the hierarchy of moral guidance—the authority of God above all human counsellors—implicit in sentimental novels like Warner’s. *Pierre* illuminates the pitfalls of trusting the doctrines of a higher power above the practical guidance of one’s elders.

Melville shows Pierre’s hostility toward outside guidance through two instances of Pierre’s interactions with the reverend Falsgrave, who critics have

traditionally disregarded as weak and shallow. Most notably, Ann Douglas argues that Falsgrave does not “possess any genuine ethical system of values—his arena is social and literary, not religious,” and he thereby exemplifies the feminization of American culture, since “he must follow Mrs. Glendinning’s lead” (295).³² In the same vein, Brian Yothers employs Falsgrave as a useful measure for Pierre’s Christian faith, declaring that “Pierre is presented as a more admirable character than a figure like Reverend Falsgrave, who simply excuses himself from adhering to the demands of the Sermon on the Mount” (30). But these readings assume an investment in evaluating characters based on their adherence to Christian doctrines in the first place. In the context of secularist morality, I contend that Melville frames Falsgrave’s moderate responses to Pierre as appropriate.³³ Falsgrave’s initial “reluctance” when quoting from the Bible is explained by his subsequent clarification that “by one universal maxim, to embrace moral contingencies” is “impossible” and “seems foolish” (100, 102). Pierre’s pursuit of universal maxims proves destructive, possibly confirming Falsgrave’s comments here.

Though Pierre is not receptive to Falsgrave’s practical—albeit vague—advice, he seeks out a second conversation with the reverend. By the close of this second conversation, Falsgrave must suppress his agitation before declaring, “Thou hast sought information upon a certain point, and I have given it to thee, to the best of my knowledge. All thy after and incidental questions, I choose to have no answer for,” alluding to the accusatory tone of Pierre’s initial onslaught (163). Though Pierre has asked several questions of Falsgrave, the tone of their conversation is different from their earlier conversation at Saddle Meadows: Pierre does not allow Falsgrave to

respond but has instead already assumed a position on the issue of Delly and Ned. Falsgrave's answers—when they are not cut short, punctuated by a dash—are either exclamations (“Upon my word, Mr. Glendinning!”) or questions (“Why—what can this madness mean?”), representing his inability to declare a position or provide further guidance for Pierre (163). The tenor of this interview forecasts the sentiment with which Pierre closes the conversation: Falsgrave “hast no earnest and world-disdaining counsel for me. I must seek it direct from God himself” (164). Pierre declares a superior, direct allegiance to God, from whom he will seek counsel. The petulant character of this encounter suggests not Falsgrave's weakness but rather the rigid nature of Pierre's Christian faith. While Pierre asserts here that he “perfectly comprehend[s] the whole” of the situation, later scenes in the novel show just the opposite—namely, Pierre fails to comprehend positions opposed to his own inflexible Christian presuppositions (164).

In addition to the expected figure of a minister, Pierre also encounters guidance in chanced-upon literature. Melville's introduction of Dante, Shakespeare, and even the fictional Plinlimmon comments on the role of reading in moral edification. Through these scenes, the reader of *Pierre* is privy to certain modes of moral instruction even when Pierre fails to draw conclusions from his reading. For example, when Pierre reads Dante's *Inferno* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the narrator names the specific lessons Pierre could have learned from the texts. As Pierre sits alone in his chamber, he drops *Inferno* to find *Hamlet* open in his hands and reads the famous lines, “The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” (168). In the subsequent chapter, the narrator explains the weight of

“horrible allegorical meanings” that “lie not on the surface” of *Dante*, and teaches “one particular moral” from *Hamlet*, that man should always act on his convictions (169). Though readers can see the relevance of *Hamlet* to Pierre’s own conundrum, the narrator then explains that Pierre has not heretofore been a skillful reader. He could neither surface read nor close read: “Neither his age nor his mental experience thus far, had qualified him either to catch initiating glimpses into the hopeless gloom of its [*Hamlet*’s] interior meaning, or to draw from the general story those superficial and purely incidental lessons, wherein the painstaking moralist so completely expatiates” (169). Even so, there is some ambiguity about the reading at hand: in the following chapter, the narrator names the effects of Dante and Hamlet, who “taught” and “taunted” Pierre respectively (170). Pierre has gleaned some meaning in these texts, though he appears uncertain about how to reconcile those lessons with his own deliberations. His reading inspires melodramatic feeling rather than rational action. The two texts are “torn into a hundred shreds” and “trampled,” and the chapter ends with Pierre “dabbling in the vomit of his loathed identity” (171). Even if Pierre can glean intimations of meaning through sustained exegesis, the narrator refuses to clarify how such reading ultimately shapes Pierre’s decision-making. Instead, the narrator prompts readers to judge how much each passage has “touched” Pierre (169, 170), turning from Pierre-as-reader to the readers of *Pierre*. Melville initiates a discussion of hermeneutics, linking the interpretative framework of literature with questions of influence. Should texts be instructive? And if fiction is didactic, as most sentimental novels are, how can writers account for the unruliness of a reader’s response?

Through the negative example of Pierre—an ambiguously unskilled reader Melville emphasizes the role of the reader in moral instruction. As scenes of reading build upon one another in the novel, it becomes clear that one of Pierre’s weaknesses is his inability to apply moral lessons to his own life. Just as he fails to absorb Falsgrave’s practical advice, he fails to absorb the more subtle lessons he chances upon in literature. Despite the fact that his faith is indeed quite self-centered, Pierre’s reading is not self-reflective.

Pierre’s unreflective reading distances him from heroines of sentimental fiction for whom reading was a significant, often didactic practice of spirituality. This distance speaks to Pierre’s privilege as a willful male protagonist, of course, but it also suggests that readers ought to consider the potential benefits of moralistic fiction. Even though “fiction was believed to be a pernicious and corrupting communication” in the antebellum U.S., a “true woman” could read “with purpose” if she sought “spiritual and intellectual instruction” (Ashworth 147). Such practices involved “self-application,” or instances in which the female reader reflected upon her own spiritual life vis-à-vis her scriptural, historical or literary reading (Ashworth 149). *The Wide, Wide World*’s Ellen Montgomery, for instance, reads hymns, scripture, history, and fiction, not for pleasure, but for edification. In particular, Ellen studies John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a Christian allegory that proliferates in sentimental novels—perhaps because it specifically elicits “emulative” or “imitative religious reading” (Stokes 14). Most recognizably, Louisa May Alcott’s March sisters play pilgrims throughout *Little Women* (1868), viewing their own lives as spiritual journeys toward

heaven. It is worth noting that Alcott also shows Jo March reading *The Wide, Wide World*, suggesting a developing canon of sentimental texts.

But Ashworth notes the problematic gender dynamics of reading with purpose: the ideal woman reader, she argues, reads only with “paternal sanction” (156). Her reading is guided entirely by a male mentor, such as a father or husband; in Ellen Montgomery’s case, this is John Humphrey. Reading is an important element of spiritual edification and conversion—and such emphasis on the value of reading lends sentimental literature much of its credence in the 1850s—but it can also constrain women to the lesson plan chosen by a man in her life. Seen in this light, the reading practices of Pierre are even more relevant to discussions of Melville’s sentimentalism. As a male sentimental figure, his reading is not controlled by another. Whereas Ellen Montgomery never reads entirely in private, Pierre’s chambers—where his encounter with *Inferno* and *Hamlet* takes place, where he hides the forbidden portrait of his father from his mother, and where he schemes in secret to “marry” Isabel Banford—allow him much independence. He does not suffer from the “domestic power structures” Ashworth names (156), but he also does not read well.³⁴ When Melville’s narrator pokes fun at Pierre’s bad reading, Melville reminds us that literature can—and perhaps should—be a moral force. *Hamlet* is no *Pilgrim’s Progress*, but Melville seems aware of the role reading plays in domestic fiction.³⁵ Literature, open to interpretation, need not be didactic—but it can be instructive.

Melville’s introduction of the pamphlet “Chronometricals and Horologicals” most explicitly represents a modern secular age; in both form and content the pamphlet diminishes godly authority. In “Chronometricals and Horologicals,”

Plinlimmon advocates for a philosophy of morality that is entirely relative. He begins by describing a ship, which measures its time by Greenwich; when this ship travels to China, its time is different from the local land's, but both times are correct, given their context. In the same way, a heavenly soul (which Plinlimmon names a chronometer) and a human soul (a horologe) measure moral perfection differently, but both are correct. And if heavenly standards should be separate from human behavior, it follows that the wisdom of God is "earthly folly to man" (212); it is impractical for human men to live chronometrical lives, as 1800 years of Christian history have shown (215). Most importantly, Plinlimmon maintains that it is detrimental (and inconvenient) for man to attempt to define human morality by heavenly measures, and man should never "make a complete unconditional sacrifice of himself in behalf of any other being" (214). After all, he explains, the world could never do the same for him. Plinlimmon's language is rather dense and he is inexact regarding where, precisely, on the spectrum of chronometrical versus horological man should place himself, often promising to elucidate the correspondence between God's truth and man's truth in subsequent lectures. But he does maintain that "a virtuous expediency" is "the highest desirable or attainable earthly existence for the mass of men" (214). A virtuous expediency—not unlike Falsgrave's accounting for moral contingencies—would be practical, suited to context, and efficient.

While this particular moral content of Plotinus Plinlimmon's philosophical pamphlet has been extensively critiqued, the textual qualities of the pamphlet are equally significant, particularly for understanding Melville's approaches to sentimentalism and secularism. Like the other textual references in *Pierre*, Melville

uses Plinlimmon's philosophy not necessarily to moralize, but to draw attention to self-reflexive reading practices. In this way, he reminds readers of their own interpretive authority. The novel provides readers with the tools for interpreting its ambiguous ending. The pamphlet elicits the most climactic—at times even comical—misreading Pierre commits in the novel, allowing Melville to further emphasize his discussion of both inflexible domestic morality and textual moral instruction.

As with *Hamlet* and *Inferno*, the narrator purposefully frames the reading experience of "Chronometricals and Horologicals" as potentially instructive. In fact, Melville's readers are invited to read this text for themselves, since the narrator offhandedly presents it as part of a chapter in the novel. The narrator instructs the reader that "each person can now skip, or read or rail for himself" before the chapter breaks into a new section that houses the pamphlet's text (210). The pamphlet itself undermines its own authority, referring to its content as merely a "temporary Scaffold to the Portal of [a] new Philosophy," self-conscious prefacing that importantly positions the pamphlet as one option for belief among many (210). Like Falsgrave, Shakespeare and Dante, Plinlimmon suggests a specific way to approach moral problems, outlined above, but the narrator's extensive, critical prefacing of the text minimizes the pamphlet's content and instead emphasizes the readers' agency in choosing whether or not to believe it. By including the excerpted pamphlet in the body of his novel, Melville is able to have his moral and eschew it too: rather than endorsing Plinlimmon's philosophy outright, he reiterates his investment in readers considering different avenues for moral enlightenment and applying these lessons to their own lives. The choice to "read or rail" remains in the readers' hands. Pierre,

meanwhile, remains outside of this participatory discourse, as he characteristically fails to understand a potentially helpful approach to morality.

The narrator doubts, from Pierre's first encounter with the pamphlet, that Pierre has grasped its main tenets. Whereas the pamphlet stresses moral relativism, Pierre continues to overlook this aspect of its content, fixated as he is on the chronometrical or angelic mode of morality. The narrator notes that "the more he [Pierre] read and re-read, the more this interest [in the intent of the writer] deepened, but still the more likewise did his failure to comprehend the writer increase . . . the central conceit [of the pamphlet] refused to become clear to him" (209). Though Pierre reads and re-reads the pamphlet, he is incapable of understanding a philosophical set of beliefs besides his own. In this way, Pierre is only one step ahead of a figure like Edward Erskine, whose bad reading (and bad faith) is a red flag for Jane Elton, as discussed in chapter one. *A New-England Tale* suggests that reading is a key component for exposure to the variety of faiths available to antebellum Americans. To a lesser degree, Pierre embodies Erskine's "pettish" nature. Unlike Erskine, he does attempt reading, but the impenetrability of his psyche is as absurd as Erskine's misunderstanding of Quaker creeds.

Listening only to the inner voice of his own interpretation of godliness, Pierre fails to heed the advice on Plinlimmon's pages. Indeed, a brief scene later in the novel suggests Pierre has internalized very little of the pamphlet—not even its title. At one point, when he is desperate to obtain a new copy of the pamphlet, Pierre asks an elderly bookseller, "Have you the '*Chronometrics*,' my friend?" to which the old man replies, "Very bad, very bad! . . .has had the *chronic-rheumatics* ever so long; what's

good for 'em?" (292). Pierre does not know a remedy for the man's illness, and the man warns him to "Never catch 'em!—now's the time, while you're young—never catch 'em!" (292). The errors of both men comically reveal the interior meaning that Pierre has missed. Pierre's elision of "Horologicals" in the pamphlet's title is telling, as is the old man's mistaking "Chronometricals" for rheumatism, or chronic pain. Throughout the novel, Pierre tries to accomplish just what Plinlimmon warns against: he attempts to live by a godly standard, embodied here by his forgetting entirely the "horological" import of Plinlimmon's message. The bookseller's response represents what Plinlimmon has argued: that heavenly morals are, in fact, a painful practice for man.

Pierre's Inflexible Faith

What dooms Pierre is the inflexibility of his Christian faith, which, as we have seen, Melville depicts through a revision of sentimentalist scenes both of moral guidance and of reading. The rigidity of Pierre's faith in a higher power drives his moral choices. By choosing God over Lucy, by deciding to "marry" Isabel in the name of divine duty, and by failing to comprehend the philosophies of any non-biblical sources for spiritual guidance, Pierre evinces a monomania reminiscent of Captain Ahab's in *Moby-Dick*. Indeed, Pierre ascribes an inscrutability to Isabel's face that recalls Ahab's obsession with "inscrutable malice" and the "inscrutable thing" that drives his hatred for Moby Dick (*Moby-Dick* 164). When Pierre considers his "fascination" with Isabel's face, he asks "what inscrutable thing was it that so suddenly had seized him" and caused him to withdraw from his mother (51, 50).

What links Pierre and Ahab is the inflexibility of their dedication to certain inscrutable attachments, or “fixed purpose[s]” that are “laid on iron rails” (*Moby-Dick* 168). For both characters, this inflexibility is a death sentence.

In his personal library, too, Melville evinces an interest in the concept of inflexible faith. As James Duban and Brian Yothers have shown, one transcription in the flyleaf of Melville’s personal copy of the *The New Testament and Psalms* references the idea of inflexible faith, a transcription which possibly inspires the qualities Pierre shares with contemporary sentimental heroines like Ellen Montgomery or Gertrude Flint. The quotation, which Duban has identified as originating in Thomas Carlyle’s translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*, reads:

“In Life he appears as a true Philosopher—as a wise man in the highest sense. He stands firm to his point; he goes on his way inflexibly; and while he exalts the lower to himself, while he makes the ignorant, the poor, the sick, partakers of his wisdom, of his riches, of his strength, he, on the other hand, in no wise conceals his divine origin; he dares to equal himself with God; nay, to declare that he himself is God. In this manner is he wont from youth upwards to astound his familiar friends; of these he gains a part to his own cause; irritates the rest against him; and shows to all men, who are aiming at a certain elevation in doctrine and life, what they have to look for from the world. And thus, for the nobler portion of mankind, his walk and conversation are even more instructive and profitable than his death; for to those trials every one is

called, to this trial but a few.” (Underlines original to Melville’s transcription)³⁶

Taken as a whole, as Duban and Yothers show, the passage describes a self-reliant, Christ-like figure, who becomes an exemplary philosopher for mankind. Yothers emphasizes the “non-conformist” quality of the figure described, a quality which can be found in Melville’s characters who “possess religious faith, those who reject and, and those who remain uncertain” alike, though he does not name Pierre as a possible prototype (41). Duban reminds us of Melville’s ambivalence towards Goethe and his “‘all’-feeling,” contextualizing the Emersonian, Transcendentalist nature of the passage (Visible Objects 5). Though Duban says we can infer Melville’s “appreciation” of the passage given its placement in the front flyleaf of Melville’s Bible (Visible Objects 5), Melville foregrounds in *Pierre* the risks of inflexible faith as much as Christ-like non-conformity.³⁷

Given the phrases Melville chooses to emphasize through underscoring, the “true Philosopher” described in the above passage can illuminate religious qualities that Melville treats negatively in *Pierre*. In his novel, Melville shapes a character who is ever “firm to his point,” not wavering once in his commitment to Isabel after declaring his marriage to her. Pierre “goes on his way inflexibly,” refusing to consider alternative views or alter his plans as circumstances change, and his actions “astound his familiar friends,” those who had initially endorsed Pierre’s betrothal to Lucy Tartan at the novel’s outset. More complicated, as I have suggested with Pierre’s misreading above, is the question of whether Pierre offers an example to its readers. In the passage from Goethe, philosophers show all men “what they have to

look for from the world.” It is difficult to believe that Melville holds up Pierre as such a model. In what sense are Pierre’s “walk and conversation” instructive? What does he teach us?

Pierre substitutes for the sentimental trope of a perfect woman an imperfect man as a model of instruction. A perfect woman gains authority in sentimental fiction because she teaches others how to live by example—or in Goethe’s words, her “walk and conversation” are “instructive and profitable.” However, *Pierre* transforms the Christian perfection of many sentimental novels into an imperfect—and dangerous—absolutism. In so doing, Melville shows us that an imperfect figure is just as profitable: readers of *Pierre* learn much about religion and family from Pierre’s inflexible faith and his subsequent death. The unfolding of the novel’s ending reveals the ways Melville indicts, rather than exalts, such inflexible Christian worship as Pierre’s. Even if, as Duban and Yothers suppose, Melville appreciates the figure of Jesus, Christ-like figures in his novels are often not admirable. Plinlimmon’s philosophy—one which warns against men attempting to live Christ-like lives—returns to the forefront of the novel as Melville breaks ground for a new domestic future. This future is one in which domesticity could be organized around secularism rather than the inflexible faith embodied by Pierre.

Melville’s Secular Domesticity

Though the novel’s ending initially seems apocalyptic, the abundance of deaths might also point to a much-needed transition, from an old (now dead) model of familial life to a new secular form of domesticity. The entirety of *Pierre*—its

protagonist's suffering, its catastrophic conclusion—suggests that a new domestic future will need to look different. In the end, the Glendinning family does dissolve entirely. Rather than establishing sought-after domestic tranquility—as in the touching reunions and marriages of *The Wide, Wide World* or *The Lamplighter*—Melville unravels existing domestic ties. Pierre learns that Isabel is most likely not his sister—no “real, practical, and reasonable” tests to her story stand up—and every single one of Pierre's blood relatives also meet their demise (354). But just as Plinlimmon's torn pamphlet concludes abruptly with the phrase “Moreover: if—,” so too, perhaps, is *Pierre* unfinished (215). Even though genealogical time has “run-out” by the end of *Pierre* (362), we can see that Melville characterizes the Glendinning family's demise not as an apocalypse but, like the pamphlet's “untidy termination,” as a provocation (215). In his destruction of the Glendinning family, Melville provokes readers to consider what domestic model could replace the parodied aristocratic domesticity of the novel's opening as well as Pierre's failed religious orthodoxy, both of which have so clearly failed their participants.

In *Pierre*, Melville shows that he has learned from Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) that catastrophe is often the best tool for introducing the next domestic generation. When Phoebe and Holgrave first declare their love for one another at the end of *Seven Gables*, a “terrible event” has just taken place; Judge Pyncheon has died and the “hideous shape of death” pervades the scene (212). It is an intuition of this “catastrophe” that drives Holgrave to the House of the Seven Gables, where he meets Phoebe—in a sense, their sentimental fate is aided by the grim “awfulness” of death (213). Hawthorne makes even clearer that death circumscribes

the young couple's love when he writes, "The image of awful Death, which filled the house, held them united by his stiffened grasp" (215). Their union—which Hawthorne repeatedly defines through mutual sympathy and "the development of emotions"—is both sentimental *and* morbid (215). And this makes it revolutionary: Phoebe and Holgrave "transfigured the earth, and made it Eden again" (216). The conditions of catastrophe directly enable future domesticity. In *Pierre*, the key difference is that Melville chooses to end his novel, full stop, with the scene of catastrophe. Through his ending, Melville destroys the novel's existing forms of domesticity: the American aristocracy of the novel's beginning and the martyred domesticity of Pierre's city life. Such destruction, as Dominic Mastroianni puts it, "leaves no horizon for a future, and *therefore* leaves an opening for a future whose coming is not anticipated" (415).

Such possibility should be hopeful to readers of *Pierre*, if we remember what Melville has warned us about the complexity of final insights. Melville writes, "It is the not impartially bestowed privilege of the more final insights, that at the same moment they reveal the depths, they do, sometimes, also reveal—though by no means so distinctly—some answering heights. But when only midway down the gulf, its crags wholly conceal the upper vaults, and the wanderer thinks it all one gulf of downward dark" (169-170). There are a few important takeaways from this moment, which occurs during Pierre's reading of *Hamlet* and *Inferno* discussed earlier. First, the passive phrasing of the first sentence suggests the significance of the author, who "not impartially bestow[s] privilege" on final insights. Second, these insights are special because, even as they reveal great depths, they can also subtly reveal

answering heights. However, and perhaps most importantly, a “midway” point of readerly interpretation can give the illusion of despair with only “one gulf of downward dark.” The answering heights, while present, are not visible. Whereas Pierre experiences this precise despair midway through the novel as he tears the two texts to shreds, readers of *Pierre*’s ending should work to locate the “answering heights” of the novel’s insights.

Melville hints at “answering heights” once more in his subtle reference to the afterlife of “Chronometricals and Horologicals.” Torn and incomplete, the pamphlet survives the novel’s destructive ending. While we do not learn what becomes of Fred Tartan or Charlie Millthorpe—the two figures left at the scene in “The End”—Melville does reveal to us the fate of the pamphlet after the time of the novel’s *fabula*. Years later, an old “Clothesman” will find the pamphlet tucked into the lining of a piece of Pierre’s clothing (294). In this sense, when Pierre dies, he is wearing the pamphlet—a talismanic *If* haunting the family’s demise.³⁸ This “Moreover: if—” seems to reflect, again, a hopeful space of possibility. Perhaps this explains why the pamphlet is categorized under the collected title “EI”—Greek for “if.”

The conditional nature of this “if” reflects the very experience of encountering *Pierre*, as readers must grapple with the ambiguities of its relationship to sentimental fiction. In the novel, Melville reworks the sentimental genre, calling on tropes that are familiar to readers who can then consider the role of moral guides or spiritual reading in their own domestic lives. Through scenes of reading, Melville teaches readers how to understand a novel that is not didactic, but that is nonetheless instructive in its ambiguity. Insofar as morality in sentimental fiction is tied to the domestic realm,

Melville suggests that Pierre's domestic ideology, one of self-centered faith and disregard for outside guidance, is inappropriate for the maintenance of any family. Melville suggests to his readers—who have the ability to read, reread, and interpret texts like Plinlimmon's pamphlet—that religion should not rule the domestic realm. Pierre's particular morality—in Plinlimmon's figuration, living by a heavenly chronometer, a Christian morality only meant for Jesus—prevents one from understanding the very human relationships that comprise a family. And in this way, domesticity and virtue require a fluid and flexible secularity that Pierre fails to comprehend or exhibit. Pierre is, in the narrator's apt assessment, “a peak inflexible in the heart of Time” (304). Not so *Pierre*. Melville's novel embraces ambiguity, not by undermining antebellum domesticity, but by unveiling the pitfalls of religious inflexibility.

The Gendered Dimensions of Melville's Domesticities

I have argued that in *Pierre*, Melville proposes a domestic ideology freed from inflexible religion. Melville critiques pious domesticity through his lampooning of Pierre's overly rigid sense of morality and through the Glendinning family's demise. Because *Pierre* is known as Melville's foray into domestic fiction, a literary departure from his seafaring novels, we might take it as broadly representative of the author's domestic attitudes. It is true that within his longer works, Melville's most dominant setting is the ocean, the ship his favored “sacred space.” However, many of Melville's tales are set in homes, especially those written around the time of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. Stories such as “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of

Maidens” (1855) and “I and My Chimney” (1856) are deeply invested in American home life, especially its gendered dimensions.³⁹ “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” is a diptych tale that describes a London Temple inhabited no longer by Christian knights, but by Lawyers, and a New England paper mill staffed by unmarried women whose human labor is contrasted by that of machines. “I and My Chimney” concerns an aging man who quarrels with his wife and daughters about the placement of their house’s chimney: the narrator-patriarch loves his central chimney, despite the domestic inconveniences it poses. These two tales complicate my argument about *Pierre*’s secular domesticity. After *Pierre*’s publication, Melville continues to consider issues like secularization, the literary marketplace, and family dynamics. But reading *Pierre* alongside “Paradise” and “Chimney” suggests that Melville remains uncertain about how, precisely, the American home should be organized. Questions about religion and family become broader concerns about gender, labor, and their relationship to the domestic space.

In “The Paradise of Bachelors,” Melville reprises *Pierre*’s Church of the Apostles through the setting of the Temple. Both are religious spaces that have been secularized almost to a comical degree. The Temple, formally Temple Church, was the home of the Knights-Templars, who “were so entirely secularized as to be reduced from carving out immortal fame in glorious battling for the Holy Land, to the carving of roast-mutton at a dinner-board” (137). Melville emphasizes that the religious significance of the Temple has been evacuated. He explains that only “the name remains, and the nominal society, and the ancient grounds, and some of the ancient edifices” (137). The spirit of the Temple remains merely in name and in

appearance. “Struck by Time’s enchanter’s wand,” Melville describes, “the Templar to-day is a Lawyer” (137). Melville’s tone is joking, here—to imagine the Lawyer as the vacuous opposite of the Knight—but he also suggests the secularization of the Temple as somewhat inevitable. The transformation from Templar to Lawyer is passive, and is a result of “Time,” broadly and enchantingly.

The origin of *Pierre*’s “Church of Apostles” is similar. Also an “ancient edifice,” the Church of the Apostles “had had its days of sanctification and grace” before it lost its congregation and was subsequently “divided into stores, cut into offices, and given for a roost to the gregarious lawyers” (265, 266). However, the lawyers of the Church only inhabit its lower offices, leaving vacant the many stories of attics that had been ambitiously added to the building over the years. Eventually, artists, students, philosophers and other “adventurers” fill these chambers (267). Here, the Church of the Apostles differs from the Temple: while the original Templars in “The Paradise of Bachelors” suffered from the “moral blight” of “luxury” (136), the artists of the Church are “still very fine and spiritual upon the whole” due to “the vacuity of their exchequers” (267). Indeed, as the poor artists came to be associated together “clannishly,” the Church of the Apostles became known more for its inhabitants than its edifice, and its inhabitants thus became “Apostles.” Whereas the Temple lost its Templars, *Pierre*’s Church gained a new kind of Apostle. Reading the Temple alongside the Church of the Apostles, it seems that Melville is interested in the ways secularization has occurred alongside the rise of the middle class, capitalism, and industrialism. And while both descriptions are heaped with exaggeration and humor, it appears at face value that Melville critiques the indulgent

Bachelor, even as he depicts Pierre's time as an Apostle with little romance. If *Pierre* shows the danger of religion gone too far, "Paradise" might show just the opposite.

The Temple and the Church, which are sacred spaces made secular, also represent Melville's ambivalent attitudes toward masculinity and family. "The Paradise of the Bachelors" depicts a dream of domesticity as wholly masculine, exclusive of women in its celebration of "comfort—fraternal, household comfort" (144). In its focus on exclusively masculine jollity, "Paradise" calls to mind Ishmael's "abounding, affectionate, loving feeling" while squeezing sperm aboard *The Pequod* (416). Ishmael depicts a scene of men living and working together "sentimentally," though he supposes that man cannot live this way eternally (456). At some point, he says, man must aim for happiness not "in the intellect," but "in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (416). Ishmael's list of "lower" sources of happiness is more conventionally domestic, representing a heteronormative, pastoral domesticity such as we see in *Pierre*'s beginning (416). Charlie Millthorpe, a childhood friend of Pierre's who introduces him to the Church of the Apostles, also considers the relationship between intellect, fraternity and domesticity, explicitly questioning their compatibility:

Marriage, hey!—A fine thing, no doubt, no doubt:—domestic—pretty—nice, all around. But I owe something to the world, my boy! By marriage, I might contribute to the population of men, but not to the census of the mind. The great men are all bachelors, you know. Their family is the universe. (281)

Charlie proposes a theory of separate spheres, here, distinguishing the "domestic—pretty" sphere from "the world." Furthermore, Charlie surmises that entering the

domestic life precludes one from contributing “to the census of the mind,” separating intellectual life from the private sphere. Charlie’s idea that “the great men are all bachelors” is related to his desire to influence “the universe,” and is predicated on a strict separation of the home from the public sphere. While domesticity might be “nice, all around,” he suggests, it is not significant. Charlie’s theory conflicts with the more progressive domestic ideologies represented in this dissertation. For instance, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, whose postbellum writing I discuss in chapter three, refutes separate spheres vis-à-vis motherhood in her autobiography. Phelps writes of her childhood, “I learned...that she whom the world and her children both have need of, is of more value to each, for this very reason” (19). Referring to her own mother, who was a successful writer as well as a beloved parent, Phelps disagrees with Charlie’s assertion that one cannot contribute to public intellectual life as well as the domestic sphere. For Phelps, a woman’s value increases exponentially when she crosses between spheres.

It is unclear whether Melville endorses Charlie’s viewpoint or not. While the Temple is a paradise described as heavenly—in contrast to its pair, the Tartarus of Maids, which is situated as hellish—it is also, as I have mentioned, a space of parody. And the Church of the Apostles, despite Charlie’s celebration of bachelorhood, does accommodate familial domesticity. Melville describes the domestic layout of Pierre’s rented chambers, which are comprised of three, eventually four rooms: a dining room that doubles as Delly’s sleeping quarters, succeeded by Isabel’s chambers and at the end, Pierre’s workspace. When Lucy arrives in the city, Pierre obtains the room connected to the other side of the dining room. A central issue of this linear layout is

the challenge to keep each room warm: the stove is located in the dining room (suggesting the central warmth of the most domestic space) and, while Isabel's room is heated by pipe, it is nearly impossible for that warmth to reach Pierre's chamber. Instead, Pierre writes in the cold. Though Isabel offers the easy solution of opening doors in order to let heat travel throughout the rooms, "Pierre would not listen to such a thing: because he must be religiously locked up while at work....In vain Isabel said she would make not the slightest noise, and muffle the point of the very needle she used. All in vain. Pierre was inflexible here" (297). Melville's use of "religiously" and "inflexible" to describe Pierre's writing methods suggests that his work ethic is parallel or related to his religious inflexibility. Similar to how his moral attitudes destroy family and domesticity as described in this chapter, Pierre's inflexible work ethic destroys any chance of commercial success. (Eventually, Pierre's editors will refuse to publish his work, and ask him to return the advance payments he has already received from them.) In needlessly separating Isabel's domestic labor—quiet needlework—from Pierre's writing, Pierre literally freezes, a physical manifestation of his other inflexible attitudes.⁴⁰ And in framing domestic labor as domestic warmth, Melville suggests that it is domestic life which sustains and makes possible intellectual life, refuting Charlie's attitude toward domesticity.

It is worth mentioning a female contemporary here: Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1855) likewise portrays an aspiring writer's struggle to balance domestic life with her literary labor. Ruth, like Pierre, is isolated in the city from her direct relations, and turns to literary work to support her own family. (The widow Ruth, unlike Pierre, supports two children rather than love

interests. Her youngest daughter lives with her and her eldest has been separated from her, kidnapped, in a sense, by her fraternal grandparents.) Fern describes Ruth's physical struggle to write:

It was a pity that oil was so dear, too, because most of her writing must be done at night, when Nettie's little prattling voice was hushed, and her innumerable wants forgotten in sleep. Yes, it *was* a pity that good oil was so dear, for the cheaper kind crusted so soon on the wick, and Ruth's eyes, from excessive weeping, had become quite tender, and often painful. . . .Scratch—scratch—scratch—went Ruth's pen; the dim lamp flickering in the night breeze, while the deep breathing of the little sleepers was the watchword, *On!* to her throbbing brow and weary fingers. (160-161)

I quote the passage at length to emphasize two points: the financial dimensions of creating good conditions for work, and the domestic motivation that helps to overcome those constraints. Like heat for Pierre, Ruth's need for oil affects her ability to write without mistakes that would be mortifying should they appear in print. Also like Pierre, Ruth needs quiet to write, which is why she chooses to work when her daughter is sleeping. But unlike Pierre, Ruth is motivated by her domestic condition. Whereas Pierre fails to succeed for himself or his dependents, Ruth draws on her motherhood as the reason to continue "*On!*" Though Ruth's domestic abode lacks warmth at times—she too suffers from "frozen fingers"—she is never inflexible, as Pierre is (234). Instead, she adapts to the dual responsibilities of domesticity and the literary marketplace, developing her persona as "Floy" as she raises her young daughters. Is there a particularly feminine quality that allows Ruth to harness the

warmth of domesticity, and not Pierre? Gillian Brown would likely say yes: she argues that “the crucial gender boundary the book [*Ruth Hall*] transgresses is the line between domesticity and the market” (140). Pierre, it would seem, fails to join the two realms.

Perhaps the issue of bridging domesticity and marketplace is also related to the home’s potential as a sacred and secular realm. I have been arguing in this dissertation that the heroine of domestic fiction—the moral authority of the home—did not need to be a perfect Christian woman. I have also suggested that Pierre is an imperfect man, a sentimental antihero whose steadfast Christian belief is precisely what causes his moral and domestic failures. Ruth, on the other hand, resembles a character like Hope Leslie, in that she embodies both Christian belief and secularist sympathy. Ruth “learned to pray” and “rolled at the feet of the cross” when she and her husband, Harry, first move to their own home away from his cruel parents (25). In a final line of the chapter describing this move, Fern writes, “with the baptism of holy tears, mother and child were consecrated,” linking feeling, motherhood, and holiness, as we might expect of a sentimental author (25). But Fern reverses the connotation of these “holy tears” in a later scene’s wordplay. Ruth waits for her daughter Katy to come home from an excursion to beg money of her grandfather. “Ruth’s tears fell fast” as she looks out the window and considers their financial straits (112). Eventually, Katy comes home with a gift of money from one of Harry’s friends. Ruth does not speak when she discovers the gift, but Fern narrates, “‘Hush,’ whispered Katy to Nettie, ‘mamma is praying’” (113). We might guess here that Ruth is not praying, she has merely continued to cry, overwhelmed as she is by this twist in her

worldly affairs. To express motherly emotion and to pray are related, if not interchangeable, in this novel. Does this imbue Ruth's motherhood—and her literary labor as a breadwinner for her children—with a certain sacred power that Pierre simply does not have, even as he embraces Christian belief? By the same token, it suggests that Ruth's relationship to her faith is indelibly shaped by the world around her. Pierre fails to reconcile his religious, domestic, and economic needs in this manner.

As in *Pierre* and *Ruth Hall*, "I and My Chimney" features a metaphor of warmth to stage the issue of gendered domesticity. The short story centers on the narrator's chimney, which is situated as the "grand seignior" and "centre of the house" (166, 167). Melville critiques homes that have fireplaces on opposite sides, which must have originated with "some architect afflicted with a quarrelsome family," who did not mind that such hearths meant that family members warmed themselves "back to back" (167). In contrast to the "egotistical" arrangement of multiple hearths with multiple flues, a central chimney allows for the family to share a central source of warmth (167). While the chimney can be read as phallic, suggesting masculinity at the center of the home, I find it compelling that this symbol also represents a unifying impulse.⁴¹ The house of "I and My Chimney" achieves what the lodgings of Pierre cannot: it can keep everyone warm, regardless of which room they occupy.

Even so, "I and My Chimney" pits woman against man, asserting that women are not morally superior to men. Though the chimney unites its fireplaces, it proves divisive to the house's inhabitants. The problem is that a central chimney precludes a

central hallway, and the house is impossible to navigate. The narrator's wife and daughters ultimately wish to reroute the chimney so that they may entertain at home more easily. However, the narrator holds firm: in a comical series of events, the narrator thwarts the efforts of his family and an architect, Mr. Scribe, to tear out the chimney. And in narrating these events, the story's conflict becomes gendered:

My wife...is desirous that, domestically, I should abdicate...But indeed, the chimney excepted, I have little authority to lay down. By my wife's ingenious application of the principle that certain things belong of right to female jurisdiction, I find myself, through my easy compliances, insensibly stripped by degrees of one masculine prerogative after another" (181).

The narrator describes a tyranny of separate spheres, here, but one in which women rule with impunity. On the following page, the narrator muses, "This is the poor old lady that was accusing me of tyrannizing over her," a joke which suggests that the wife is actually the tyrant of the household (182). Rather than consider the role of women in the public sphere—a central focus of this dissertation—Melville considers the place of the man within the private sphere. Emasculated within the home, the narrator of "Chimney" steadfastly holds his ground on the issue of the chimney, to the point of refraining to leave the home. In order to challenge a separate-spheres ideology that gives women power within the home, Melville's narrator becomes a sort of hermit. Whereas DiBattista and Nord describe some literary women's anti-domestic "restlessness, wandering, adventure, and homelessness" (14), challenging separate spheres by asserting women's place *At Home in the World*, Melville asserts masculine belonging at home.

This should not necessarily suggest to critics Melville's progressiveness. For example, David Dowling insists upon Melville's sympathy toward women, reading much into the satire of "Paradise," "I and My Chimney," and other tales in order to extrapolate a critique of capitalism, which Dowling claims was "the best vantage point from which to dismantle and expose the market's impact on women" (50). But his readings give too much leeway to Melville's joking tone and they center on scenes that are either absent of women entirely or feature shrewish women, such as in "I and My Chimney." Sarah Wilson is closer to the mark: she writes, "In his examinations of gendered spaces, Melville is not subverting domesticity as it represents the status quo; rather, he is subverting the domestic status quo insofar as it limits masculine identification with the spaces and labors of domesticity" (60). Melville's aim is not necessarily to sympathize with or lift up domestic women, but to reinsert men where they might feel excluded. More specifically, these and other critics discuss how Melville's effort to masculinize domesticity is related to his anxiety about his literary labors.⁴²

We see that Melville takes up gendered labor in the works I have been discussing. "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" contrasts male laziness with female factory labor, most obviously, in order to probe the compatibility of work and domesticity, especially insofar as the workplace and the home might be gendered spheres. These matters are, in some ways, replicated in *Pierre*. The Church of the Apostles, for one, is presided by Plotinus Plinlimmon, who "never was known to work with his hands; never to write with his hands," despite his profession as a philosopher (290). And though their labor is voluntary, Lucy, Isabel and Delly labor

in ways reminiscent of “The Tartarus of Maids.” Delly is most commonly associated with the domestic labor of the home, preparing meals and cleaning, while Lucy and Isabel take on more professional tasks. Lucy suggests that she begin a business of painting portraits. When she hears that Lucy aims to contribute financially, Isabel insists, “I will sell this hair; have these teeth pulled out; but some way I will earn money for thee!” (333). Both Lucy and Isabel eventually offer to be Pierre’s “amanuenses” or copyists, and even to do “the original writing” of his manuscript (349). Jonathan Cook argues that a central strand in Melville’s critique of gendered labor in “The Tartarus of Maids” is how the paper mill replicates childbirth through its mechanical production of paper (92). The “girls” who work in the mills are always maids—unmarried women—because, as the tour guide Cupid explains, married women are not “steady workers” (163). Here, then, Melville suggests that domesticity—and more specifically reproduction—and industrialization are incompatible. To return to *Pierre*, it is worth noting that Pierre’s “girls” are likewise all “maids.” While at various points each woman appears to embody a domestic relation (wife or sister), at no point does Pierre’s “family” actually function as such. The Church of the Apostles, for Pierre, is neither a successful workplace nor a happy domestic space.

It is clear in these stories that Melville inverts gendered spheres, mixing and even reversing traditionally masculine and feminine spaces—but to what end? Merton Sealts reads “I and My Chimney” as a story that directly references Melville’s own life; the chimney is Melville and the story an examination of his mind. Such an autobiographical reading does make sense, especially in relation to my discussion of

gendered labor and in particular, gendered writing. These stories, including *Pierre*, seem to reflect Melville's own frustrations earning a living in the literary market place. Given how the domestic sphere became a viable workplace for popular women writers—such as Susan Warner and Maria Cummins, discussed above—did Melville feel excluded from a sphere that he hoped to professionally inhabit? Are Lucy and Isabel's offers to write Pierre's book—a text he thought would “gospelize the world anew”—viewed as a threat, rather than a contribution (273)?

Following *Pierre*, it seems that Melville is unsure how to accommodate both men and women in either a sacred or secular domestic space. While I argue that *Pierre* favors a secular domesticity, Melville obviously ridicules the secularized domesticity of “Paradise,” given that secularization so clearly parallels industrialization's consumer indulgence. Melville seems to poke fun at domestic men, here, though not necessarily as a means to celebrate women. While “Tartarus” does show Melville's investment in exposing the harsh realities of female industrial labor, I find it compelling that domesticity is polarized by the diptych, configured as either homosocial or antidomestic. Melville fails to represent a domestic space successfully shared by both genders. This is why critics like Cook argue that Melville's tale is “designed to be provocative” by “undermining conventional ideas” (96). We can identify Melville's provocations, but not necessarily his solutions. Looking to the tales for the “answering heights” of *Pierre*'s provocation proves futile, perhaps because Melville himself was unsure how to arrange his home.

Coda

In the supplement to *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), Melville asks his fellow Americans to “revere that sacred uncertainty that forever impends over men and nations” (200). In the context of *Battle-Pieces*, Melville refers to a lingering dread following the Civil War. Is reconciliation possible, when the nation has learned what the cost of emancipation was? Would such a “Vesuvius” of violence erupt again? (200). Brian Yothers, whose critical study *Sacred Uncertainty* proposes the term as a paradigm defining Melville’s whole career, writes that the line I have quoted “implies a kind of respect for the precariousness of knowledge, for the ways in which differing ways of viewing the world impinge upon, conflict with, and at times even illuminate each other” (4). We see this respect for uncertainty in the texts I have discussed here: Melville consistently subverts convention, destroying existing structures such as a separate spheres ideology, but he does not often replace such structures with new ones. Embracing ambiguity, Melville accepts that he cannot know what is in store for American home life. Indeed, he does not necessarily know what should be in store. What is the place for a man with moral convictions whose faith nonetheless wavers? Can that man make a literary career rooted in the home—and if so, what is the place for a woman in that home? Perhaps through these questions Melville resembles Hannah Foster: Melville dreams of a domestic ideology that accommodates all, but he cannot yet depict it.

I write in the Introduction that the Civil War is a natural middle-point to this dissertation. *Battle-Pieces*, then, is a compelling transition to this dissertation’s second half. In “Shiloh: A Requiem,” Melville frames the battlefield as a sacred

space. Its sacred aspect stems, of course, from the existence of a log-cabin church that features in the combat between Union and Confederate soldiers. But Melville characterizes Shiloh with a more ambient spirituality after “the Sunday fight / Around the church of Shiloh— / The church so lone, the log-built one, / That echoed to many a parting groan / And natural prayer / Of dying foemen mingled there— / Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—” (8-14). In these lines, Melville pairs opposites: groan and prayer, Union and Confederate, and friend and foe. In framing the battlefield as a place where enemies “mingle” and transform, becoming friends when the fighting stops, Shiloh resembles—in a more literal, gruesome manner—the space of the home. The sacred spaces of this dissertation stage the tensions between religion and secularity in much the same manner, representing the complexity of negotiating what can seem to be competing discourses.

Asserting this parallel should not diminish the gravity of the Civil War’s violence. Melville was particularly struck by the ways the Civil War marked a transition from a more innocent past to an unknown future. “On the Slain Collegians,” for example, emphasizes the youth of soldiers, perhaps also signaling the former youth of a nation that has now endured years of bloodshed. He writes, “Youth is the time when hearts are large, / And stirring wars / Appeal to the spirit which appeals in turn / To the blade it draws” (1-4). He later elaborates, “Warred one for Right, and one for Wrong? / So be it; but they both were young— / Each grape to his cluster clung, / All their elegies are sung” (45-48). Here, Melville asserts that despite the moral magnitude of the Civil War, the North and South shared the spirit of a young nation. The “but” of line 46 and the “appeals” of line 3 suggest a certain

inevitability of the conflict. In the end, whatever the cause of the war—a seemingly inevitable loss of innocence—Melville ultimately turns to sympathy, for both Union and Confederate families. If the war started with “large” hearts, it ended with “The anguish of maternal hearts,” which “Must search for balm divine” (49-50). Melville does not focus extensively on mothers and families left behind after the Civil War, since *Battle-Pieces* centers on the battlefield rather than the home. But in lines such as 49-50, he anticipates the work of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, whose *Gates* novels do describe this familial anguish. Published two years after *Battle-Pieces*, *The Gates Ajar* considers what, exactly, the “balm divine” could be. As I discuss in chapter three, Phelps proposes that consolation for mourners is ineffective when it is only “divine.” Biblical responses to the protagonist’s grief do not help her in the slightest. Instead, Phelps promotes a worldly sympathy based on a vision of heaven that is both material and spiritual in its character.

Part 2: Heaven's Domestic Dimensions

Chapter 3: “A very material kind of heaven”: The Postsecular Afterlife in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *Gates* Trilogy

Emily Dickinson muses, “Is Heaven a Place – a Sky – / a Tree? / Location’s narrow way is for / Ourselves – / Unto the Dead / There is no Geography –.”

Distinguishing between the living and the dead, Dickinson suggests that location is a human phenomenon, while the dead surely lack “geography.” Notably, her assertion comes after she poses a question: Is heaven a place? Opening the stanza with this question represents the impulse to categorize the space of heaven in some manner—namely, with earthly locales such as the sky or a tree. Here, we see the paradox of musing on heaven: we can only imagine heaven in human terms, despite the fact that we think of it as a spiritual, supernatural dimension. Part two of this dissertation focuses precisely on this paradox, especially how the sacred space of the home, the broader subject of this study, relates to the space of heaven.

As I discuss at the end of chapter two, this second half of the dissertation also explores the impact of the Civil War on American families. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes that “perhaps the most distressing aspect of death for many Civil War Americans was that thousands of young men were dying away from home,” emphasizing that before the Civil War, Victorian death customs “centered on domestic scenes and spaces” (9). For nineteenth-century Americans, both life and death were grounded in the sacred space of the home. Even if “Unto the Dead / There is no Geography,” there were certainly important spaces, such as the home, associated with dying. Indeed, Desiree Henderson asserts that death itself was a “remarkably

spatial phenomenon,” shaped by memorials, gravesites, and other places that allow individuals to “map” their mourning (11). It makes sense, then, that postbellum Americans were concerned with the space of heaven. Mourning their family members who died in unknown and far away spaces, Americans wanted to understand the new places their loved ones might occupy.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *Gates* trilogy performs just this work of attempting to understand the place of heaven. In her 1868 novel, *The Gates Ajar*, the protagonist Mary Cabot and her Aunt Winfred spend much of their time together—often sitting at home—debating the specifics of a Christian afterlife. Their nearly obsessive focus on heaven, narrated through Mary’s diary, stems from the deaths of Mary’s brother, Winifred’s husband, and other acquaintances. Phelps explains in her memoir that she wrote *The Gates Ajar* in the hopes of consoling a country “dark with sorrowing women,” who were mourning those lost in the Civil War (*Chapters* 96). It is not surprising, then, that Phelps concerns herself with the afterlife in *The Gates Ajar*, a bestselling novel that Phelps followed with *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1887). Phelps’s depictions of the afterlife, I argue, assuage Americans’ grief because heaven in the *Gates* novels has jointly religious and secular dimensions. Though all three novels emphasize certain Christian aspects of heaven, including the presence of God, they also represent heaven as a space defined by astronomy, physics, medicine, and sexuality. In framing heaven as a sacred space of consolation for postwar mourners that still resembles the secular world, Phelps theorizes what I call a postsecular afterlife, which is both spiritual and material in its investments.

As a methodology, my “postsecular” approach in this dissertation has been to identify the ways literature represents religion and secularity as reciprocal rather than competing forces. I call Phelps’s depictions of heaven in her *Gates* trilogy a “postsecular afterlife” because she describes a heavenly realm that attempt to reconcile the religious and the secular. Chapters one and two discuss, in large part, the domestic homes of antebellum sentimental fiction. In her *Gates* novels, Phelps describes the sacred space of heaven, a space that she characterizes as an extension of earthly domesticity. While critics are in agreement that Phelps extends the domestic realm to the afterlife, and that her works parse contemporaneous theological debates from a feminist perspective, few have considered the intersection of these two investments.⁴³ Perhaps this is because critics tend to read each novel in isolation: many focus on her most famous novel, *The Gates Ajar*, some on *Beyond the Gates*, and few on *The Gates Between*. These isolated readings are often formal or rhetorical, perhaps a response to early literary criticism that categorized Phelps as a merely popular writer. Gail Smith, for example, reviews that history of criticism and makes an argument about Phelps’s sophisticated theological approach to scripture and hermeneutics in *The Gates Ajar*. Ashley Barnes similarly focuses on *The Gates Ajar*, theorizing Phelps’s “exhibitional style,” while Cindy Weinstein examines the novel’s “temporal disorderliness” (“Heaven’s Tense”). Isolated analyses of the two other *Gates* novels include Lisa Long’s reading of physics in *Beyond the Gates* and María Dolores Narbona Carrión’s celebration of Phelps’s adaptation of *The Gates Between* as a significant contribution to nineteenth-century theatre.

Though these critiques of Phelps's individual *Gates* novels have illuminated the formal and cultural dimensions of her work, critics have largely failed to consider the trilogy collectively. When we read the novels together, we see that Phelps's approach to the afterlife becomes more radical over time. As the novels progress, they move further away from a conventional Christian, domestic view of heaven. *The Gates Ajar*'s Mary Cabot and Winifred simply imagine heaven; *Beyond the Gates*'s Mary travels there herself but returns home in the end; *The Gates Between*'s Esmerald Thorne goes to heaven and never comes back. Along the way, Phelps presents an afterlife that more and more resembles the secular world. In these novels, home and heaven are mutually informing. Perhaps counterintuitively, both spaces become more secular than sacred.

But ultimately, Phelps's *Gates* trilogy does not present a postsecular afterlife as an uncomplicated solution to postbellum Americans' questions about heaven. The *Gates* novels have increasingly messy endings as the series continues, representing the quandaries of keeping faith in the face of unknowability. Even as I read Phelps's heaven as jointly religious and secular, I also see places where such reconciliation between earthly and spiritual spaces fails. My primary argument in this chapter is that Phelps's grappling with this reconciliation reveals how the postbellum era's fixation on death was a postsecular issue: to understand the afterlife, as so many mourning Americans desired, is to attempt to bring the world and heaven together. Faust writes that after the Civil War, Americans "found themselves in a new and different moral universe, one in which unimaginable destruction had become daily experience. Where did God belong in such a world?" (267). Phelps tries to represent this new moral

universe in her *Gates* novels, even if the novels cannot quite seem to answer the question of where—or to put it another way, to what degree—God belongs. I suggest that Phelps’s proposed answer to Faust’s question, even if it does not quite stick, is to present the sacred space of heaven as equally secular. In a postbellum world, it does not help to imagine heaven as a distant, idealized and wholly religious space. If we are to believe in the afterlife at all, Phelps proposes, we must believe that it can accommodate doubt as well as faith—both secular and religious ways of knowing.⁴⁴

Whether her characters are imagining heaven or traveling there themselves, Phelps describes heaven through Christian or biblical contexts as well as philosophical and scientific sources. She consistently puts the spiritual in conversation with the scientific as a means of formally rendering heaven a material space. To that end, Phelps also exports the secular aspects of home to the afterlife. Take, for instance, a conversation between *The Gates Ajar*’s Mary and Winifred in which they discuss “where [heaven] will be” (124). Initially, Winifred frames heaven biblically, differentiating “a ‘place’ in which we are promised that we shall be ‘with Christ,’” separate from “this world” that is “the great theatre of human life and battleground with Satan” (125). However, this initial framing gives way to considerations of astronomy. Winifred suggests “the old astronomical idea, stars around a sun, and systems around a centre, and that centre the Throne of God,” situating the afterlife in an already-existing solar system (125). She engages Isaac Taylor (1787-1865), an English philosopher, writer, and inventor whose speculative *Physical Theory of Another Life* (1836) theorizes “spiritual corporeity,” moral consciousness, and the materiality of the afterlife—all themes which concern Phelps in her *Gates* novels as

well. In referencing Taylor, Winifred shows that her approach to the afterlife is informed not only by biblical explication, but also by philosophy and science, discourses which Phelps employs throughout the series in tandem with her own Christian theology.

But perhaps most interestingly, in reflecting on where heaven will be, Winifred does not leave the earthly world behind. “We may live in different planets,” she says, “and some of us, after its destruction and renovation, on this same dear old, happy and miserable, loved and maltreated earth. I hope I shall be one of them. I should like to come back and build me a beautiful home in Kansas,—I mean in what was Kansas” (125). Though Winifred refers to a “destruction and renovation” of earth as it currently exists, the final sentence suggests that Winifred holds on to the earth she knows. When Winifred pauses and clarifies the locale of “what was Kansas,” Phelps blurs the lines between a present-day secular world and an imagined future heaven that replicates a beloved past.⁴⁵ In locating heaven variously among the stars and on earth, Winifred merges the earthly and the heavenly. Here and throughout the *Gates* trilogy, Phelps represents heaven as a space for reconciling conflicts between the religious and secular realms. In her version of the afterlife, Christian belief accommodates the material elements of life on earth that Phelps is reluctant to leave behind.

Phelps insists that heaven will function as “a beautiful home” for the deceased, replicating the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity in her depictions of the afterlife to position heaven as a place to negotiate religious and secular investments. Cultivating the relationship between sympathy and domesticity

characteristic of sentimentalism, Phelps extends that model to heaven through her focus on human relationships both on earth and in heaven. In an important reversal of sentimental tropes, Phelps's depictions of the afterlife secularize heaven rather than sacralize the home. Phelps's heaven derives much of its appeal from material culture, drawing in particular on worldly investments in objects, nature, the human body, and science more generally. In the following sections, I trace these investments: in section one, I argue that Phelps's focus on the power of womanly sympathy is based primarily on the human body. Insisting that human relationships persist in heaven, Phelps bridges the spiritual and the material through her celebration of sympathy. In addition to the human body, Phelps celebrates the human home. As section two proposes, the *Gates* novels link the sacred spaces of home and heaven in a mode reminiscent of Amy Kaplan's concept of "manifest domesticity."

While Kaplan's work emphasizes the imperial dimensions of domesticity, the stakes of Phelps's domestic heaven are religious. In replicating spaces of domesticity, Phelps's heaven becomes a space to tease out conflicts between religious and secular investments. This is the central argument of the chapter: through her depictions of home in heaven, Phelps insists that Christian belief can accommodate scientific belief, consumerism, and human desire—and that these secular investments can accommodate Christian belief, too. While critics like Lucy Frank, Barton Levi St. Armand, Mary Louise Kete, and Lisa Long have discussed the variously material work of Phelps's novels, this chapter proposes a new way of reading home and heaven together. Similar to how Herman Melville employs sentimentalism to make an argument in the negative, Phelps's sentimental heaven counterintuitively foregrounds

the secular rather than the spiritual. The intersection of two sacred spaces, home and heaven, surprisingly creates a secular realm, as I show in the third section.

Finally, the *Gates* trilogy joins the other texts in this dissertation in theorizing their own means of reading. In all three novels, Phelps considers what it means to learn and know, staging scenes of reading as well as conflicts of faith. Through these ruminations on reading, interpreting, and knowing, Phelps contributes to the idea that the sentimental novel can model moral living, though Phelps, like others, distinguishes literature about morality from didactic literature that teaches a specific moral. In this way, Phelps, like Melville, prompts her reader to take a secularist approach to sentimental literature.

Spiritualism, sympathy, and the space of heaven

Phelps may well emphasize the moral significance of literature in her *Gates* series, but her investment in morality did not stop with her written work. An author of short fiction, essays, poems, and novels, Phelps was also a reformer and activist, primarily contributing to the causes of women's rights, temperance, and antivivisection. Her quest for social justice was related to her strong Christian beliefs, which were shaped by a childhood steeped in the Christian community of Andover, Massachusetts. Like Catharine Maria Sedgwick's family, Phelps's included a lineage of prominent New England Protestants. Her father served as faculty at the Andover Theological Seminary, a conservative institution that broke off from the increasingly liberal Harvard in 1808. Phelps's maternal grandfather, Moses Stuart, was an early faculty member. But also like Sedgwick, Phelps did not wholly assume the

conservative Christianity of her ancestors. Just as Sedgwick names the “horrors of Calvinism” from which her sister Eliza “suffered” (*Power* 86), so does Phelps believe “that abstract religious doctrines were cruel, for they obscured the important truths of Christianity from all people, but especially women” (Duquette, “Introduction” xxiv). For Phelps, like Sedgwick, the home was a space for women’s empowerment, an empowerment that was perhaps incompatible with “creeds and commentaries...made by men” (*Chapters* 98).

While Phelps did not purport to believe in Spiritualism, many critics have characterized the *Gates* novels as Spiritualist, perhaps because that movement shared some of Phelps’s social investments.⁴⁶ Roxane Harde, for instance, argues that Phelps employed Spiritualism as a “social movement through which she could reconsider her Christian worldview” (“Christian Spiritualism” 350). We can see how Spiritualism, which was a religious movement that embodied a reciprocity between Christian belief and scientific knowledge, would appeal to Phelps.⁴⁷ Spiritualists’ belief in mediumship also firmly situated the religious movement in the realm of domesticity. The common setting for a séance was private and domestic, reinforcing Victorian domestic ideologies that placed religion in the center of the home (Braude 24). Historians Ann Braude and Brett Carroll both emphasize that the domestic nature of Spiritualism made it an opportunity for women to strengthen their authority in domestic and religious realms—certainly a characteristic of the movement that would appeal to Phelps.

However, Phelps’s novels do not bridge earthly and heavenly realms through the séance. In fact, *The Gates Ajar*’s Aunt Winifred says that the “Spiritualistic notion

of ‘circles’ of dead friends revolving over us is to me intolerable” (125). For Winifred, death must separate the living and the dead, because “If we could speak to them, or they to us, there would be no death, for there would be no separation. The last, the surest, in some cases the only test of loyalty to God, would thus be taken away” (54). In this sense, the *Gates* novels embody the scientific and feminist spirit of Spiritualism, but not its specific principles. Phelps acknowledges Spiritualism in her autobiography, briefly reviewing her grandfather’s experience of “house-possession” before declaring that he still “liked his Bible better” than the new, ghostly movement (*Chapters* 6, 8). She muses, too, that something about Spiritualism’s mysteries is not “congenial” to her (*Chapters* 9). It is curious, then, that some read the *Gates* novels as Spiritualist; neither they nor their author explicitly embrace the tenets of Spiritualism. Certainly Spiritualism can provide a lens for reading the novels’ more liberal attitudes towards salvation and the science of heaven. But if we take into account Phelps’s clear resistance to Spiritualism, a better lens for reading Phelps’s inclusive heaven is the postsecular. The afterlife in the *Gates* novels provides a space for Phelps to confront the religious and the secular together, all the while accommodating a broad spectrum of belief and doubt.

One way Phelps approaches the religious and the secular is through her emphasis on the persistence of human sympathy in the space of heaven. In all three *Gates* novels, Phelps foregrounds the significance of sympathetic bonds between loved ones, characterizing heaven as above all a space of sympathy. Replacing the work of a Spiritualist medium to connect the living with the death, sympathy provides the means for putting earthly and heavenly realms in productive conversation.⁴⁸ And

in framing sympathy through the human body, Phelps proposes a bridge between the spiritual and material aspects of heaven. While *The Gates Ajar* focuses on the forms of sympathy most effective for the pain of grief, *Beyond the Gates* stages how worldly sympathy is replicated in familial relationships in heaven. And in *The Gates Between*, the power of sympathy becomes supernatural in its strength. Critics have begun to acknowledge sentimentality's importance through the rise of realism, especially insofar as it aided the project of reunification after the Civil War.⁴⁹ We see this persistence of sentimentality in Phelps's novels, which depict familial reunions and new romances taking place in the afterlife. Heaven does become a space abstracted from the realities of nineteenth-century America; as many critics note, *The Gates Ajar* does not engage with the corpses of the Civil War, even as it remains so focused on the war's casualties.⁵⁰ At the same time, heaven facilitates bonds of sympathy that Phelps suggests offer the clearest balm for struggling Americans seeking to maintain a tangible connection between the spiritual and earthly realms.

The beginning of *The Gates Ajar* models different acts of sympathy between people on earth, many of which fail the novel's protagonist Mary Cabot. Mary's brother Royal has just died in the Civil War, a painful few weeks before he would have come home on furlough. Phelps stages varying degrees of sympathy from friends, neighbors, and ministers, and from Mary's Aunt Winifred, who ultimately moves with her daughter to live with Mary. Before Aunt Winifred arrives, Mary receives "real sorrowful sympathy" from friends and neighbors, but it is tainted by acquaintances who feel authorized to invade her grief with "their curious and jarring words" (6). Later, she characterizes this neighborhood would-be sympathy as "gossip

and sympathy” (15), pairing potentially good feeling with the negative intentions of those who are merely interested in the latest news of a grieving sister who has stopped attending church. Indeed, even the minister Deacon Quirk’s attempts to “sympathize” with Mary let her down (11). As Mary says when Quirk tries to ascertain whether Roy was redeemed, his “stolid efforts to be consolatory” are “worse than his rebukes” (13). In these opening chapters, false and misdirected sympathy from gossiping “wasps” and even well-meaning Christians outweighs any positive feeling surrounding Mary (15).

Aunt Winifred’s sympathy is different: Winifred’s success consoling Mary and other characters (not only in grief, but in adolescent heartbreak and Sunday school confusion, among other everyday quandaries) comes from her emphasis on human relationships and their persistence in the afterlife. Indeed, Winifred foregrounds human sympathy even in her discussions of Jesus Christ, whom Winifred frames more often as human than as divine. In referencing God or the Savior, Winifred often invokes Jesus’s time on earth: “Do you think He *could* have lived those thirty-three years, and be cruel to you now?” (31). The effect of framing Jesus’s human sympathy in this way is that Winifred’s God becomes one of love and understanding. “He gave you Roy, and the capacity to love him,” Winifred explains, “Would it be *like* Him to create such beautiful and unselfish loves,—most like the love of heaven of any type we know,—just for our threescore years and ten of earth?” (43). If God created human love, and Jesus felt human sympathy, Winifred suggests, then surely we will continue to experience these human feelings and cultivate our human relationships in heaven.

Winifred's emphasis on love correspondingly insists on the continued realness of our deceased loved ones. She says of Royal Cabot, "he is not any the less Roy for that [being an angel],—not any the less your own real Roy" (31). Her words emphasize to Mary that Roy has not changed, but also that Roy is still her "own." Though gone, he is not lost. Not surprisingly, this means Roy is "*only out of sight*...not lost, nor asleep, nor annihilated, he goes on loving" (50, emphasis original). Mary later notices that Winifred views her husband the same way she has taught Mary to view Roy. Upon Winifred's referring to talking with "them," Mary wonders, "'*With them?*' I started at the words; who had been in her lonely chamber? Ah, it is simply real to hear. Who, indeed, but her Savior and her husband?" (59). Winifred teaches that people can sustain real, loving relationships with the deceased in heaven.

Phelps brings the lessons of the novel full circle when the minister Dr. Bland must mourn the tragic death of his wife after a kitchen accident. Winifred is called to console Bland: "'You said some pleasant things about heaven?' he said at last, half appealingly, stopping in front of her, hesitating, like a man and like a minister, hardly ready to come with all the learning of his schools and commentators and sit at the feet of a woman" (122). Phelps draws a clear contrast here between the unsympathetic reasoning of Bland—whose "scholarly" sermon at the beginning of the novel left Mary "empty, un comforted, groping"—and the sympathetic, womanly love of Winifred (41, 42). In this moment, Bland reluctantly concedes that Winifred's "pleasant" version of the afterlife, which focuses on real love, is more appealing than his biblical sense of angelic life. In losing his wife, Bland gains sympathy. Phelps

shows the positive effect of such sympathy when Dr. Bland later gives a “good sermon,” perhaps because of “a certain indefinable *humanness* [which] softens his eyes and tones, and seems to be creeping into everything that he says” (124, emphasis original). In these scenes of comfort, Phelps characterizes sympathy as emphatically human, but also insists that this human sympathy will extend to heaven.

Whereas *The Gates Ajar* relies on imagined reunions with deceased family members who continue to love us in heaven, *Beyond the Gates* actually visits heaven to stage these reunions, showing how Phelps merges earthly and spiritual realms through her focus on human sympathy. In this second novel, a different Mary is deeply ill when her father visits her, seemingly on her deathbed, and escorts her to heaven. At this juncture, Mary narrates the love she feels from her deceased father:

He did not speak even yet, but still held out his arms with that look of unutterably restful love. I felt the elemental tie between parent and child draw me as if I had reached the foundation of all human feeling; as if I had gone down—how shall I say it?—below the depths of all other love. I had always known I loved him, but not like that. I was greatly moved. (148)

In this passage, Phelps describes the love between Mary and her father as “elemental” and “human,” building on Winifred’s sense that the deceased are real and can feel great love for us. In particular, “elemental” suggests a connection that is not merely celestial, but chemical, unchangeable, and deeply embedded in a natural order of things. And it is from this moment of human sympathy—a father visiting his sick daughter—that the rest of the novel stems, and from which develops a domesticity in heaven that I discuss in future sections.

Like *Beyond the Gates*, *The Gates Between* also features a deceased father navigating the connection he feels to his family on earth. Though the novel ostensibly traces Dr. Esmerald Thorne's evolution from scientist to faithful Christian, it correspondingly frames this conversion as most importantly a lesson about the power of sympathy—a power which also reconciles religious and secular discourses. The climax of the lesson is when Esmerald, wandering through the nebulous spaces of the afterlife with little understanding of where or what he is, meets a former patient of his, the appropriately named Mrs. Faith, who has died in the same carriage accident that killed him. Mrs. Faith hopes that Esmerald can help her son Charley, who had not yet died. Though Esmerald has not been able to control his movements—in particular, he is physically prevented from visiting his own family—this woman travels an impossible distance to be with her sick son. Esmerald tries to explain the woman's feat:

This was done by some method of locomotion not hitherto experienced by me....Perhaps it would be more exact to say, *She felt us* [to her house]. It was as if the great power of the mother's love in her, had become a new bodily faculty by which she was able, with extraordinary disregard of the laws of distance, to move herself and to draw another to the suffering child. (297, emphasis original)

Esmerald's reckoning of the event combines the language of science and sympathy to describe Mrs. Faith's power in this moment, which he later attributes to her "devout nature" (297). Esmerald cannot identify the method of locomotion that has taken place, though his effort to do so subtly alludes to the rapid modernization of

locomotion taking place in the nineteenth-century United States. But rather than some new form of modern transportation, Mrs. Faith has merely “felt” the pair to her house, where she needs to take the doctor to visit her sick son. Similar to how Phelps repeatedly characterizes sympathy as a human feeling in *The Gates Ajar*, she emphasizes here that this powerful, motherly love is a “bodily faculty.” Mrs. Faith’s spirituality seems to triumph over science as her sympathy confounds “the laws of distance,” but Phelps also frames her power not as angelic but as bodily. Rather than pitting the secular against the religious, Phelps continues to merge them—and in so doing, to celebrate the power of sympathy.

In all three *Gates* novels, Phelps stages heaven as a space of sympathy. For some characters, such a frame for the afterlife suggests that their deceased loved ones still feel sympathy—that human feeling can persist between life and death. For others, experiencing the power of sympathy teaches a lesson. Esmerald Thorne frames the entire narrative of *The Gates Between* as a lesson “about the true place of sympathy in therapeutics,” and interprets these “serious professional lessons [as] the simplest human ones” (244). Throughout all three novels, Phelps blends human, earthly issues (from the most trivial of childhood crushes, to Esmerald’s consideration of medical bedside manner, to the deepest griefs felt after the Civil War) with lofty, spiritual tenets of salvation. Phelps emphasizes that sympathy functions as a bridge between earthly and spiritual realms, because it is a human, bodily, elemental feeling that persists in the Christian afterlife. Characterizing heaven as a space of human sympathy helps Phelps develop the afterlife as a jointly secular and religious space.

Furthermore, as a cornerstone of sentimentality, sympathy is an important touchstone for Phelps's heavenly cult of domesticity.

Manifest domesticity on a vertical scale

The *Gates* novels replicate a cult of domesticity in heaven, extending Victorian ideals to an imagined afterlife. While critics recognize the ways nineteenth-century authors employed domesticity as a means to extend other, national ideologies to new territories, I am interested in the stakes of Phelps's vertical scale of extension from earth to heaven. Most explicitly in *Beyond the Gates*, Phelps places the human home at the center of life in heaven, developing physical domestic spaces and the relationships that those spaces protect. The central argument of this dissertation is that the home was a crucial space for negotiating a dynamic relationship between religious and secular discourses. For Phelps to replicate this space in heaven, then, is notable: she transforms the most sacred space of Christianity, heaven, into a place that welcomes secular ideals. Merging the material with the spiritual through heavenly homes, Phelps secularizes the Christian afterlife. And as we have seen in Sedgwick, Wilson, and Melville, this negotiation begins in the home.

When Aunt Winifred describes the domestic space of heaven in *The Gates Ajar*, she aims to depict something real, in contrast to what she views as the overly vague notions that scripture has engendered in Christian believers. She explains to Mary Cabot,

Eternity cannot be—it cannot be the great blank ocean which most of us have somehow or other been brought up to feel that it is, which shall swallow up, in

a pitiless, glorified way, all the little brooks of our delight. So I expect to have my beautiful home, and my husband, and Faith, as I had them here; with many differences and great ones, but *mine* just the same. (79, emphasis original)

In this passage, Phelps frames heaven as a delightful space, whereas the “great blank” version of eternity is pitiless. She situates delight in a “beautiful home” with all the comforts of sentimental domesticity—namely, one’s family. Phelps’s repeated use of possessive phrasing emphasizes the idiosyncrasies of heaven, that the afterlife would be tailored to each individual and the relationships they desire to persist. Indeed, Phelps’s heaven even allows for overlapping idiosyncrasies. After all, as Winifred goes on to surmise, she would like to have Faith in her heavenly home “unless Faith goes into a home of her own” because “she can’t always be a baby” (79). This domestic heaven accommodates growing families; even as Winifred imagines an ideal home shared with her husband and her daughter, she also imagines that Faith has her own version of a heavenly home. Rather than freezing families in a specific moment, Winifred imagines that domestic life evolves after death. And in that sense, Phelps asserts that life continues after death.

Beyond the Gates, even more than the other novels in the series, stages such domestic life in heaven. After an indeterminate amount of time spent traversing the different corners of heaven, Mary finds herself at “the most homelike” of any home she has ever seen (197). Walking through a vast house, the décor of which Phelps describes in great detail, Mary wonders, “Did everlasting life move on in the same dear ordered channel—the dearest that human experiment had ever found—the

channel of family love?” (198). When Mary then comes face to face with her father, Phelps suggests that the answer is yes. Mary narrates,

Presently my father took me over the house and the grounds; with a boyish delight, explaining to me how many years he had been building and constructing and waiting with patience in his heavenly home for the first one of his own to join him. Now, he too, should have “somebody to come home to.” As we dwelt upon the past and glanced at the future, our full hearts overflowed. He explained to me that my new life had but now, in the practical sense of the word, begun; since a human home was the centre of all growth and blessedness.” (199)

Here, Phelps explicitly identifies domesticity—a specifically human home—as the center of growth and blessedness. In describing the building and construction of the “heavenly home,” she characterizes the space as a physical manifestation of family love. (In the surrounding pages, Phelps names different rooms of the house, design choices, and even the home’s landscaping.) And to assert that Mary’s “new life” in heaven had only just begun after finding her heavenly home is to suggest that domestic life *is* the afterlife.

After Mary moves into the house prepared by her father, her perception of heaven changes, because she begins to participate fully in heaven’s cult of domesticity. She “lost some of the homelessness” she had felt upon first encountering heaven (which suggests Phelps’s investment in domesticity as the grounding ideology of heaven) but also felt herself participating in “an organized society, with definite duties,” among them “certain filial and domestic responsibilities, in intellectual

acquisition, in the moral support of others, and in spiritual self-culture” (202). Along with the comforts of a physical home cultivated by filial love, heaven’s domesticity includes the broader dynamics of domestic ideology that nineteenth-century readers would recognize. From the physical contours of the middle-class home to the duties of feminine labor, Phelps transfers the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity beyond the gates of heaven.

This transfer might appear to categorize the cult of domesticity as a spiritual ideology appropriate for the space of heaven. However, I want to argue for a reading of Mary’s domestic duty that addresses how her home life actually extends secular discourses (such as sexuality and gender dynamics) to heaven. Hsuan Hsu (by way of Jane Tompkins, Lora Romero, and Amy Kaplan) writes about the power of domestic discourse to “enlarge the scale of the household” (94), often at the “service of evangelism” (98). Phelps does evangelize, to some extent, in this manner: in *The Gates Ajar*, for instance, Winifred’s descriptions of the afterlife are “alluring and comforting” to the young girls who were otherwise repelled by their Christian Sunday school lessons (83). More importantly, though, the expansive cult of domesticity in the *Gates* novels functions as a stage for merging the secular with the religious. Hsu argues that the subject of his study, *Miss Tamar Allen’s Narrative of the Tientsin Massacre in China* (1870), “represents the missionary field not as a Christian home multiplying its example across a heathen landscape but rather as a site of conflicts between different social classes and domestic systems” (112). In the same way, Phelps’s heavenly home does not merely indicate a multiplying Christian home, but it helps cultivate heaven as a site of conflict.

In the case of the *Gates* novels, this encounter is between secular and religious discourses rather than social classes. Though we might suppose the religious and the secular would clash, Phelps proposes an idyllic vision of heaven where the religious and the secular productively come together. By bringing the human home into the spiritual afterlife, Phelps incorporates affective, social, and scientific discourses into a religious frame. Heaven, then, is not only a space of sympathy, but it is also a space where religious belief can accommodate secular life.

Merging the religious and the secular

In the *Gates* novels, Phelps develops a postsecular afterlife where heaven functions as a site of encounter between the religious and the secular. This engagement manifests itself differently in each novel. In *The Gates Ajar*, Aunt Winifred's focus on material rewards in heaven garners criticism from the conservative Christians of the novel, as well as from contemporary critics who view Phelps's secular vision of the afterlife as a form of consumerism. *The Gates Ajar* also features a decided focus on the human body in the afterlife, which further grounds heaven in the material and the physical. In *Beyond the Gates*, Phelps incorporates science into her vision of the afterlife, ruminating on where heaven is located within the galaxies. Indeed, her attention to space throughout the series suggests that heaven is bounded and real, much like any earthly country. Phelps engages with science most explicitly in *The Gates Between*, in which the conflict between faith and science is at the center of the novel's narrative. Even though *The Gates Between* ostensibly celebrates the protagonist's conversion to Christianity, it also presents a scientific

hermeneutic for understanding the spiritual. And in this way, it joins *The Gates Ajar* and *Beyond the Gates* in unpacking the dynamic tensions between the religious and the secular. For Phelps, an imagined postsecular afterlife is the most viable solution for an overwhelming uncertainty about death following the Civil War.

Aunt Winifred's assertion that Christians will be able to keep their favorite material items in heaven is perhaps the most commonly discussed element of Phelps's unique vision. In the novel, Winifred combats visions of "harping and praying" (41) and floating around together "like ju-jube paste" (83) with restored youth and "pretty brown hair" (74), nature's "pretty things" like rivers, sunrises, trees and gardens (80), and even long wished-for pianos (82). Winifred suggests that heaven will be full of rewards—those beloved things we have already enjoyed on earth, as well as items or appearance we could not obtain in this life. (Deacon Quirk's son Abinadab, for instance, hopes he will not be quite so awkward in the afterlife.) Whereas Mary Cabot and others find Deacon Quirk's harping and praying, thrones and wings (101) to be mere "glittering generalities, cold commonplace, vagueness, unreality," Winifred offers "something actual" to grasp (42). For the girls in Sunday school, Winifred's version is like a "fairy-land," while Deacon Quirk calls Winifred's lesson a "dreadfully material way to talk about that glorious world" (86). As discussed in section one, the novel plays out this conflict when Dr. Bland's wife dies; eventually, the Church establishment (embodied by the male ministers) comes around to Winifred's way of thinking. Contemporary criticism also registers conflicting responses to Phelps's materialism, though in an economic frame. Phelps's afterlife is dubbed a "Gilded Age heaven" (St. Armand 69) and a "consumer dream-world"

(Merish 90), but also a model of “consolatory commodities” (Frank 189). Critics disagree about the stakes of Winifred’s material heaven: does it negatively represent a changing economic landscape of the postbellum United States? Or is there a positive way to view the relationship between the novel’s sentimentalism and its latent capitalism? For Lucy Frank, quoting Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “the public and the emotional need not be viewed solely in oppositional terms. If commodification exploits feelings to yield profit, it is equally possible for emotions to use the commercial as a means of expression and a form of circulation” (179). Read in this way, Winifred’s “very material kind of heaven” is, as discussed earlier, a manifestation of sympathy (70).

More than the degree to which Winifred’s heaven embodies nineteenth-century consumerism, I am interested in how the space of heaven accommodates both the spiritual and the material. For example, Winifred refers to and prompts Mary to read the sermons of Dr. Thomas Chalmers (52, 71) a Scottish minister and theologian who theorizes spiritual materialism. His sermons are in line with Winifred’s material heaven, based on two central arguments: first, because God created the material world, “there is no essential connection between materialism and sin...the world which we now inhabit, had all the amplitude and solidity of its present materialism, before sin entered it” (196). Correspondingly, God’s goal is to “extirpate sin” rather than “sweep away materialism” (197). In this way, heaven can be a material world, but it will be a materialism purged of sin. Indeed, Chalmers asserts,

Materialism shall be perpetuated in the full bloom and vigour of immortality.

It altogether holds out a warmer and more alluring picture of the Elysium that

awaits us, when told, that there, will be beauty to delight the eye; and music to regale the ear; and the comfort that springs from all the charities of intercourse between man and man... (205)

Chalmer's Elysium and Phelps's adaptation of it in *The Gates Ajar* draws a distinction between sin and materialism. Based on the belief that God created the world (and in particular, the paradise of Eden), Chalmers suggests that God's heavenly world can likewise be filled with beauty, music, and comfort. What we have typically viewed as the secular, earthly realm has actually always held the potential to be a spiritual paradise.

Taken alone, Chalmer's "sensible delights" as they appear throughout *The Gates Ajar* might not suggest a secularized heaven as I am arguing—spiritual materialism still starts and ends with a Christian paradise (Chalmers 206). But Phelps not only incorporates sinless materialism into her vision of heaven, she also engages the scientific discourses of astronomy and medicine in the series' following two novels. In *Beyond the Gates*, Phelps repeatedly orients heaven spatially within the universe, though usually to the effect of unmooring the reader. Phelps does not choose between religious and scientific imagery when locating heaven, she blends them. For instance, when Mary first leaves her home, she narrates,

"Father, *am I DEAD?*" My hands slipped—I grew dizzy—wavered—and fluttered. I was sure I should fall. At that instant I was caught with the iron of tenderness and held, like a very young child, in my father's arms. He said nothing, only patted me on the cheek, as we ascended, he seeing, and I blind;

he strength, and I weakness; he who knew all, and I who knew nothing,
silently with the rising sun athwart the rose-lit air. (157, emphasis original)

This narration clearly draws on the Christian vision of the Father as Savior. Mary submits like a child to her father's superior vision, strength, and knowledge. In the moment the knowledge of death dawns on Mary, she fears falling, but instead she ascends. Phelps depicts a stereotypical scene of death, as the deceased floats upward toward heaven against an ethereal backdrop of a rosy sky. However, after a stark chapter break, Phelps immediately challenges the concept of ascension. She writes, "I use the words 'ascension' and 'arising' in the superficial sense of earthly imagery. Of course, carefully speaking, there can be no up or down to the motion of beings detached from a revolving globe, and set adrift in space" (157). Whereas in the first quote, Phelps's use of "ascended" is ensconced in spiritual metaphor, here Phelps categorizes ascension as "earthly imagery." Reversing our understanding of ascension's religious connotation, Phelps muddies the spiritual with the earthly, before denying that the motion of ascension is relevant at all. Instead, she says, Mary is merely "adrift in space." The effect of this reversal is that heaven seems to exist in some other, third realm—neither earth nor our conventional view of a heaven far above. Phelps anticipates her readers' investment in locating heaven when Mary says in the following paragraph,

I wish to say here, that if you ask me where this was, I must answer that I do not know. I must say distinctly that, though after the act of dying I departed from the surface of the earth, and reached the confines of a different locality, I cannot yet instruct another *where* that place might be. My impression that it

was not a vast distance (measured, I mean, by an astronomical scale) from our globe, is a strong one... (157-158)

Like Phelps's discussion of ascension, this discussion of locality is ambiguous. Mary's assertion that heaven was not at a vast astronomical distance situates the afterlife within our known universe, though it is not as if Phelps explicitly suggests it is one galaxy over. At the very least, heaven is a separate sphere from earth—and yet, it seems very much grounded in earthly science. Indeed, throughout *Beyond*, characters assure Mary that heaven is not an “unscientific nor unphilosophical” place (162).

It is worth noting that in all three *Gates* novels, Phelps employs the language of earthly boundaries to delimit heaven. Aunt Winifred describes a separate heavenly sphere when she insists that her husband must have “a place to be happy in, which is out of this woful world” (125), while *Beyond the Gates*'s Mary and *The Gates Between*'s Esmerald variously name heaven “the Happy Country” (220) and “a foreign country” (306). To specify the “place” of heaven is to assert its separation from Earth, which is certainly in line with Christian notions of the afterlife. But to refer to it as a country—whether happy or foreign, depending on one's sense of belonging—is to understand it in relation to our own earth. Perhaps this is merely a question of narrative and metaphor; Phelps explains the afterlife in terms we can comprehend. But it is also possible that Phelps—as much as she wants to keep heaven separate—wishes to categorize heaven as a place like any other, simply a new country to explore in relation to our own.

In *The Gates Between*, Phelps most consistently places the spiritual in conversation with the scientific. Indeed, given the doctor Esmerald Thorne's narration of the story, science becomes the lens through which to understand faith. As I will discuss, it would appear that Esmerald moves away from science and turns toward faith. At some points in the novel, science and spirituality seem to be irreconcilable. But *Between the Gates* does not succeed as a conversion narrative, one mode in which we may read the novel. Instead, Phelps raises important questions about different ways of knowing in a modern—arguably secular—age.

Esmerald Thorne begins his narrative by identifying himself as a doctor, with science in his genes. “I have been by profession a physician;” he explains, “the son of a chemist; the grandson of a surgeon; a man fairly illustrative of the subtler significance of these circumstances; born and bred, as the children of science are;—a physical fact in a world of physical facts” (236). In naming science as his breeding, Esmerald suggests a sort of inevitability to his character. All he has ever known is the physical world, the body, medicine. Throughout the novel, Esmerald returns to the question of facts and how one knows and interprets them: after his death, when the narrative begins to feel supernatural, he asserts that “the main business of this narrative will be the recording of facts. Explanations it is not mine to offer; and of speculations I have but few, either to give or to withhold” (281). In this way, Esmerald not only introduces the story as factual—his lived experience and empirical observations recounted—but he also suggests a way of reading. *The Gates Ajar* deals primarily in the imagination and *Beyond the Gates* hints at a scientific method,⁵¹ but *The Gates Between* explores fully what happens to a man of science when he

encounters a spiritual world he cannot explain. *The Gates Between*, then, most fully represents heaven as a space of conflict for secular and religious discourses.

Given the importance of sympathy to these novels and the stakes of Phelps's postsecular afterlife, it is not surprising that Esmerald's story about heaven begins with his falling in love. Love is Esmerald's introduction to the inexplicable. A woman named Helen finds him injured on a walk in the woods, and he falls in love with her when she crosses a brook to help him homeward. Emerald reflects,

It was not the fashion to love greatly. One of the leading scientists of my time and of my profession had written: "There is nothing particularly holy about love." So far as I had given thought to the subject, I had, perhaps, agreed with him. It is easy for a physician to agree to anything which emphasizes the visible, and erases the invisible fact. (241)

This passage accomplishes two things: first, Esmerald reiterates his physician's disposition to favor facts, and here distinguishes between the visible and the invisible. This foregrounds the novel's focus on what is observable and interpretable by Esmerald, but it also opens the door for an "invisible fact." That which cannot be seen might yet be legitimate. The passage also brings the spiritual into the equation as the leading scientist of the time separates the holy from the realm of love. Is love visible, while the holy is invisible? If love is holy—as Esmerald's past tense of "agreed" suggests—is it visible or invisible? What is the relationship between love and the spiritual? As I have already suggested, and as Esmerald will continue to learn, they are, in fact, connected. Esmerald's love for his wife is the driving force of his

supposed conversion, though the tensions inherent to this passage do not disappear. How does one navigate what one does not understand?

After dying, this is precisely what Esmerald must do: he finds himself in the afterlife and struggles to apply a scientific order to the spiritual realm. We have seen one instance of this in his response to Mrs. Faith's ability to travel by feeling, which defied the laws of distance. At another brief moment, Phelps describes how Esmerald feels about the existence of afterlife: "'I am become what we used to call a spirit,' [Esmerald] thought, bitterly, 'and this is what it means. Better might one become a molecule, for those, at least, obey the laws of the universe, and do not suffer'" (292). Esmerald's desire to become a molecule is related to his investment in the laws of the universe, or science. Without a natural order that he already understands—and which he had mastered as an acclaimed physician—Esmerald feels out of place. Indeed, Esmerald characterizes heaven as a space of confinement, a realm in which he has no freedom. Wishing that he could visit his wife, Esmerald finds his actions limited: "I was and was not free," he reflects, "All my soul turned toward her, but something stronger than my soul constrained me. . . . It was not permitted to me. It was not willed" (289). Phelps's use of passive voice in the final two sentences represents Esmerald's feeling of constraint; he lacks control over his movements and characterizes this as a lack of free will. Whereas Mary in *Beyond the Gates* views heaven as a space of "*liberty*" in contrast to the first world's "*restraint*" (161, emphasis original), Esmerald names and resents an "unknown Force which overrule[s]" him (290). (Mary also speaks of a "mysterious, celestial law of gravitation" that suggests submission to God's will is compulsory in heaven, though

she does not frame this negatively [167]). Without the comforting order of the scientific world, it seems, Esmerald is completely unmoored—and uncomfortable—in the afterlife.

And yet, the heaven of *The Gates Between* is not without order. Esmerald catalogs several “institutions” that make up the “civilization” of heaven: art and industry; homes that have been constructed, arranged and managed through “families and household devotion” (a cult of domesticity similar to that of *Beyond the Gates*); and places of worship—all institutions which, it seems, require “the plainer human duties” (313-314). In Esmerald’s description of heaven, commonly referred to as “the country” (314 et. al.) Phelps likens the spiritual realm to the secular world. Most ironically, heaven also has hospitals: Esmerald hopes that he can contribute something to his new community, and asks about whether his profession would be useful. “Sick we have,” a surgeon acquaintance explains, “and hospitals. I myself am much occupied in one of these. But the diseases that men bring here are not of the body. Our patients are chiefly...those who are at odds with the spirit of the place; hence they suffer discomfort” (317-318). In a twist, Phelps suggests that spiritual medicine regards the soul, rather than the body. And in such a setting, Esmerald is far more likely to be a patient than a doctor. He wonders, “Alas, what art had I, in that high science so far above me, that my earth-bound gaze had never reached unto it? ...Here in this world of spirits I was an unscientific, uninstructed fellow” (318). On one level, Phelps suggests that Esmerald’s dedication to secular science is what excludes him from belonging in heaven. But in another sense, Phelps inscribes the scientific onto the spiritual. By naming the “high science” of heaven and reorienting

Esmerald's identity as "unscientific," Phelps secularizes heaven. It becomes a space that is both deeply spiritual and deeply scientific. It is civilized, organized around institutions, and it even has traffic, which is surely a joking nod to the ways of the secular world (313). By reversing the meanings of medicine and science, just as she reversed the meaning of ascension in *Beyond the Gates*, Phelps melds the secular and the spiritual—these are not incompatible discourses, she insists. Rather, they are symbiotic.

Some might read Phelps's play with religious and secular connotations as troubled by Esmerald's eventual conversion. But Esmerald's transition from unbeliever to believer is ambiguous at best and is possibly incomplete. Esmerald explains the history of his faith:

Faith and the knowledge that comes by way of it were the leaves of an abandoned text-book. For so many years had the tenets of the Christian religion been put out of my practical life...I speak the simplest truth in saying that my first experience of death had not in any sense revived the vividness of lost belief to me. (290)

Esmerald shares this initial disbelief and neglect of faith with the protagonists of the other *Gates* novels. Mary Cabot calls herself "a stay-at-home Christian" (38), as she had avoided going to Church while feeling that God had "dealt very bitterly" with her (10). The Mary of *Beyond the Gates* explains that she "had been a believer in the truths of the Christian religion; not, however, a devotee" (142), and she later tells God himself that "The Bible was a hard book to accept" (185). All three protagonists express ambivalence about Christianity—its doctrines, its church leaders, and God—

and these caveats serve to frame the novels as conversion narratives, or at the very least, as relatable to nineteenth century Americans grappling with their own misgivings about Christianity. The *Gates* novels do not perform Christian perfection, but rather, navigate questions of doubt and faith in relationship to an afterlife that replicates life on earth as much as it imagines spiritual enlightenment. But as these quotes suggest, Esmerald's journey to faith is perhaps the most extreme.

From a complete distrust of the invisible, Esmerald eventually seems to embrace God when he meets Him at the end of the novel. After praying for "sight," the words of his prayer "seemed to fill [his] soul and flood it till it overflowed" (333). In the following chapter, which is the novel's last, Esmerald admits that he cannot explain the change that he underwent after this prayer, though it is clear he has found belief and trust in God. Even so, Esmerald's one wish is not granted: "I desired to be permitted to visit human homes, and set myself as well as I might, to the effort of cultivating their kindness. I longed to cherish the sacred graces of human speech" (335). Esmerald's desire to "visit human homes" and "cherish...human speech" represents a continued conflict between earthly and heavenly realms. At his most believing, Esmerald's highest investment is still secular. Additionally, it is clear that what Esmerald truly hopes for is to visit his wife's human home—he still yearns for her despite feeling fulfilled spiritually. It is especially curious, then, that Phelps ends *The Gates Between* with Helen's death.

In the final pages of the novel, Esmerald unites with Helen not on earth, as he wishes, but in heaven. Esmerald is sent to a location where he finds her, and though he does not immediately recognize her, it eventually becomes clear that Helen is in

his arms. Immediately, Esmerald asks Helen's forgiveness (on the day of his death, he had acted rudely and harshly with Helen, and his disbelief of her motherly instinct about their son's illness had resulted in the little boy's death), though Phelps never shows him asking God's forgiveness. Indeed, it seems odd that an earthly conflict has persisted in the afterlife at all. And yet, Phelps describes how Helen crept to her husband "not royally, like a wife who was wronged, but like the sweetest woman in the world, who clung to [him] because she could not help it, and would not if she could..." (339). In this odd moment that shows Helen acting against her will, Phelps suggests that Helen sees Esmerald as he was on earth, rather than as a redeemed soul. And in that case, Esmerald is not entirely converted—some earthly elements of his life remain a part of his spirit. Though Phelps concludes the novel with an idyllic scene of the whole family reuniting—the little boy is playing nearby and "smiling like the face of joy eternal"—and glorifying God (339), certain nagging details suggest that Phelps cannot tie up Esmerald's narrative neatly. A postsecular afterlife bears the complexity of human relationships. First, it feels odd that Helen must die in order for the family to reunite, given that Esmerald's ultimate wish is to visit earth, and *Beyond the Gates* allows Mary to return to her family on earth. (That novel also models visiting earth as the ultimate ambition for heavenly spirits.) And as a final postscript, Esmerald leaves another caveat: "Perceiving that inquiry will be raised touching the means by which I have been enabled to give this record to the living earth, I have this reply to make: That is my secret. Let it remain such" (unnumbered). Once again, Esmerald shows his investment in having one foot on earth and another in heaven: he reminds the reader that this narrative has reached earth, despite his

death and presence in heaven. It feels curious that Phelps includes this evasive remark, asserting that Esmerald's narration is legitimate, while masking its method in secret. Why say anything at all? Phelps's readers are perfectly happy to suspend disbelief, and the first two *Gates* novels rely on this. Therefore, it is unclear what such a postscript accomplishes. The novel's ending suggests Phelps's uncertainty (or at best ambivalence) about Esmerald's conversion. It also reminds the reader of the novel's literariness, prompting us to consider the relationship between religion and literature. Do we believe Esmerald? Do we believe in God?

Reading, interpreting, and knowing in the *Gates* trilogy

Like Herman Melville's *Pierre*, Phelps's *Gates* novels are invested in the relationship between reading and spirituality. And like Melville, Phelps ultimately considers literature a moral force. I argue in chapter two that Melville trains readers of *Pierre* to take a secularist approach to the sentimental genre. Phelps does the same. Continuing to engage with science and faith, Phelps's discussions of reading suggest more ways in which the religious and the secular are enmeshed in the nineteenth century. Her three protagonists learn about heaven in very different ways, but each is invested in some concrete way of knowing, prompting readers to question whether knowing is the opposite of faith. Phelps, in attempting to reconcile the material and the spiritual as above, also works to reconcile knowledge and faith through reading. And in so doing, she recasts moral literature—otherwise understood as didactic, a lesser form—as realist.

Ultimately, all three of the *Gates* novels propose that the afterlife grants not only “spiritual intelligence, as Esmerald calls it (333), but also scientific discovery. Indeed, as Lisa Long describes in an essay on “Postbellum Physics,” “While traditional diachronic narratives have it that science arose in the late nineteenth century as a replacement for weakening Christianity, science and religious faith were not incompatible—indeed, Phelps promotes a mutually beneficial relationship” (364).⁵² In the broadest sense, Phelps’s approach to the afterlife is invested from the start in both secular and religious knowledge. This investment plays out differently in each novel.

Long’s essay focuses on Mary’s scientific exploration of heaven in *Beyond the Gates*, but Esmerald Thorne likewise considers scientific method alongside spiritual enlightenment. Indeed, it is the scientist Esmerald Thorne who most explicitly considers what it means to know. When Esmerald finally prays to God and experiences a spiritual “revolution,” he frames the transition as newfound “spiritual intelligence” (333). He further explains,

The natural step to knowledge is through faith. Even human science teaches as much as this. The faith of the scholar in the theoretic value of his facts precedes his intelligent use of them. Invention dreams before it does.

Discovery believes before it finds. Creation imagines before it achieves. . . . the realization of knowledge was the first thing to teach me the value of faith.

(333)

Again mixing spiritual and secular metaphors, Phelps suggests that faith is at the root of all knowledge, even scientific. Esmerald believes that humans must have faith in

their ability to obtain knowledge. Interestingly, he twists this metaphor at the end of the passage. Rather than faith at the foundation of knowledge, Esmerald realizes that he had to find the knowledge of God first, before he could accept faith. In this moment, we see the ways in which the secular can be made spiritual—knowledge through faith—but also, more interestingly, the ways in which the spiritual has a secular precursor, at least for Esmerald. Realization *before* faith.

I do wonder—and as I have said, I think Phelps herself wonders—whether Esmerald is meant to be a productive model for spiritual intelligence. In fact, Esmerald shares much with Pierre Glendinning, a character that my second chapter frames as a negative exemplar of blind faith. In a particularly close (if coincidental) parallel, when Esmerald explains his upbringing at the opening of his narrative, he sounds like a Glendinning:

It ought to be said, at this point in my story, that I had never been what would be called an even-tempered man. Truth to tell, I was a spoiled boy. My mother was a saint, but she was a soft-hearted one. My father was a scholar. Like many another boy of decided individuality, I came up anyhow. Nobody managed me. (248)

An only child with a privileged upbringing, Esmerald attributes his disposition to the combined sentimentalism of his mother and presumably distant but sophisticated intelligence of his father. And as discussed earlier, Esmerald frames his identity patrilineally. Most compellingly, it is his “decided individuality” that links him with Pierre, another figure who proceeds with his quest for moral superiority without being “managed” by others. In coming up “anyhow,” Esmerald joins Pierre in a

complicated sentimental manhood that flouts spiritual advisors—as described earlier, Esmerald fears being a patient in the spiritual hospital, perhaps an equivalent to Pierre’s refusal to accept guidance from his elders and others. In contrast to the women protagonists of *The Gates Ajar* and *Beyond the Gates*, Esmerald Thorne seems to get in the way of his own enlightenment. *The Gates Between* shows, perhaps, what would happen to Pierre if he ended up in heaven.

In contrast to Esmerald and Pierre, Winifred’s faith and knowledge come from a well-informed reading of Christian scripture, theology and philosophy. Phelps, by way of Winifred, insists on the flexibility of creed. Whereas Deacon Quirk and Dr. Bland seem to interpret the Bible as fact, Winifred insists that scripture is simply symbolic: “Can’t people tell picture from substance, a metaphor from its meaning?” she asks, “That book of Revelation is precisely what it professes to be,—a vision; a symbol. A symbol of something, to be sure, and rich with pleasant hopes, but still a symbol” (45). And as she explains with regard to her parenting, “I treat Faith as the Bible treats us, by dealing in *pictures* of truth that she can understand” (104-105). In taking the Bible less literally, Winifred opens scripture up to interpretation, which allows for a more diverse set of beliefs to inhabit the same doctrinal space. This approach does not necessarily equal a complete abandonment of Christianity. Winifred explains to Deacon Quirk, “I believe, with all my heart, in the same Bible and the same creed that you believe in” (95). Where conservative Christians might see divisions between different sects of beliefs, Winifred locates a unity of creed.

Furthermore, Winifred’s approach to the Bible reinforces her material perspective on heaven. She claims that pianos and machinery in heaven, the material

items that Clo and Abinadab Quirk wish for, “may not be made of literal rosewood and steel, but will be some synonyme of the thing, which will answer just such wants of their changed natures as rosewood and steel must answer now” (105). Winifred employs the French word “synonyme,” deriving from synonym—a word that resembles another in its meaning, a parallel. We could also think of Winifred’s synonymes as earthly symbols for heavenly pleasures, much as the Bible functions symbolically in her view. As Long explains, synonymes are “heavenly versions of earthly experiences and pleasures” (“Corporeity” 791), the effect of which is to reify heaven. “Even calling her child Faith, a name Mary claims is inappropriate for a ‘solid-bodied, twinkling little bairn...with her pretty red cheeks, and such an appetite for supper,’” Long writes, “assigns physical being to an abstraction” (“Corporeity” 791). Winifred’s capacious interpretation of the Bible as symbolic underwrites her own materialist vision of heaven.

In addition to Winifred’s approach to the Bible, her faith is informed by a variety of texts and philosophies. She reads Thomas Chalmers, as mentioned, and also Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish theologian, scientist and philosopher. In responding to a rumor that Winifred is a Swedenborgian—a would-be scandal for the Congregational Church—Winifred

...broke out laughing, and laughed merrily. The Deacon frowned.

“I used to fancy that I believed in Swedenborg,” she said, as soon as she could sober down a little.

The Deacon pricked up his ears, with visions of excommunications and councils reflected on every feature.

“Until I read his books,” she finished.

This humorous moment resembles the argument between Jane Elton and Erskine in *A New-England Tale*, discussed in chapters one and two. Like Jane, Winifred makes informed decisions about her faith based on her exposure to a plurality of belief systems. Whereas Sedgwick pokes fun at Erskine’s ignorance in *A New-England Tale*, Winifred pokes fun at Deacon Quirk by teasing him with “visions of excommunication.” Staging the joke this way allows for the punchline—“Until I read his books”—to disparage the deacon’s absurdity while also lauding Winifred’s diversity of knowledge.

Throughout the *Gates* trilogy, Phelps introduces different ways of knowing beyond simply having faith. In portraying characters who read a diverse array of scriptures and philosophies, who employ scientific methods and consider the laws of the universe in tandem with the laws of God, Phelps depicts a modern world informed by discourses of astronomy, physics, and medicine alongside theology. Her version of modernity is all the more unique because it extends to heaven: incorporating material and scientific discourses in the afterlife, even as she emphasizes a Christian God, is precisely what frames heaven as a sacred space made secular. And like the other authors in this study, Phelps’s postsecular domesticity (insofar as the afterlife is domestic, which the first portion of this chapter suggests) also reflects the moral work of domestic fiction.

Like *The Coquette*’s moral didacticism, typical of the seduction novel, and *Pierre*’s secularist rewriting of the sentimental novel, the *Gates* novel attempt to model morality. Phelps discusses the moral thrust of her fiction in her autobiography:

In a word, the province of the artist is to portray life as it is, and life *is* moral responsibility. Life is several other things, we do not deny. It is beauty, it is joy, it is tragedy, it is comedy, it is psychical and physical pleasure, it is the interplay of a thousand rude or delicate motions and emotions, it is the grimmest and the merriest motley of phantasmagoria that could appeal to the gravest or the maddest brush ever put to palette; but it is steadily and sturdily always moral responsibility” (*Chapters* 263).

I quote the passage at length to illustrate Phelps’s theory of “ethical realism,” which asserts that serious art can also serve a moral function.⁵³ This view of realism supports my contention that Phelps’s novels depict a postsecular afterlife. In the passage above, Phelps emphasizes the plurality of life: beauty, joy, tragedy, comedy, pleasure, emotions, phantasmagoria, a multitude of material and secular conditions for living. But her use of “always” in the final clause quoted above places all of these secular discourses under the umbrella of “moral responsibility.” Just as she enmeshes the material with the spiritual throughout the *Gates* novels, she blends the realities of life with moral responsibility here. Indeed, she argues, this blending is the very project of realist fiction.

In theorizing realism as such, Phelps also disparages simple didacticism. “Helplessly to point the moral,” she writes, “is the last thing needful or artistic. The moral takes care of itself. Life is moral struggle. Portray the struggle, and you need write no tract” (*Chapters* 264). Phelps reiterates that moral literature is in one sense realist, because life is all about moral struggle—if you depict that struggle, you depict life. She goes further in asserting that simply pointing the moral (a common critique

of the day, evidenced by Phelps's placing the phrase in quotes) contributes little to life or art. Phelps joins the other authors in this dissertation, then: consider the moral struggles at the heart of *Hope Leslie*, *Our Nig*, or *Pierre*. These novels grapple with colonial conflict, racism and racialized labor, and sexual morality, with Christianity at the center of each conflict. To varying degrees, the authors of these novels do not "point the moral," they simply "portray the struggle." But as I have discussed in the preceding chapters, all of these novels end with varying degrees of closure. From Esther's letters to Frado's continued work and most extremely the multiple deaths of *Pierre*, these endings discomfit the resolution of moral struggle.

The *Gates* novels similarly leave readers hanging, which I interpret as Phelps's sustained investment in portraying the struggle rather than pointing to the moral. *The Gates Ajar* leaves an open place in the protagonist Mary Cabot's life—her aunt Winifred has died, and she must still wait for a reunion with her brother Roy. Some critics read this ending as proof that Mary has successfully worked through her grief.⁵⁴ Mary says as much herself: "I say it from my honest heart, I cannot grieve. In the place out of which she has gone, she has left me peace" (135). Mary accepts that she will see Winifred and Roy in heaven, and is happy to live out the rest of her life with Winifred's daughter Faith, waiting on God's will. Given Winifred's centrality to the novel and its message about heaven, though, her departure ends not only the novel but seemingly Mary's own potential to grow apart from Winifred's teaching. Mary narrates in the final paragraph,

So we are waiting for the morning when the gates shall open,—Faith and I. I, from my stiller watches, am not saddened by the music of her life. I feel sure

that her mother wishes it to be a cheery life. I feel sure that she is showing me, who will have no motherhood by which to show myself, how to help her little girl.

And Roy,—ah, well, and Roy,—he knows. Our hour is not yet come. If the Master will that we should be about His Father’s business, what is that to us? (138)

Mary’s assertion that she will not become a mother herself might be reasonable, but it feels odd. Is there no chance her life will develop past the span of the novel? Is she destined to merely inherit Winifred’s motherhood, rather than find her own? Mary’s conclusion focuses on “waiting” and an acceptance that her “time is not yet come.” Such a view casts the afterlife as real life, with her continued existence on earth as a purgatory of sorts. Carrie Hyde writes that the “cultural achievement of the kind of consolation literature exemplified by *Gates Ajar* is that it makes heaven—traditionally the locale of death—into an untroubled extension of the arena of life” (82). But does such extension diminish the lives of those left behind? Hyde contrasts *The Gates Ajar* with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred* (1859), which embodies Christian estrangement defined by the idea of citizenship in heaven, according to Hyde. Characters like Nina consider heaven to be their real home, and Tiff asserts that he needs “to find out de shortest way...to be got to heaven” (quoted in Hyde 83). As Hyde points out, Phelps literally throws the theological framework of Christian estrangement (Philippians 3:20) in the fire when Dr. Bland burns his sermon on the subject after his wife’s death. Even so, the novel’s ending suggests at least an ambivalence about the Christian’s true home.

The end of *Beyond the Gates* similarly raises more questions than answers. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed *Beyond's* cult of domesticity as centered on the human home and domestic duties. But it turns out that Mary feels she does not get to fully participate in this domesticity: when her mother arrives in heaven, Mary is somewhat displaced from her father's home. She admits, "I had lonely moments, when I realized that Heaven had yet failed to provide me with a home of my own, and that the most loving filial position could not satisfy the nature of a mature man or woman in any world" (227). Heaven's domesticity, it turns out, prioritizes heterosexual love over filial love. A few pages later, Mary has a romantic encounter with a man she had known on earth, who professes his love for eternity. Their union is blessed by God and they walk home, where Mary finds her mother—but it turns out that she and her mother are back on earth. When her mother announces "You are better child...Be quiet. You will live," the shock of this transition to earth feels more like death than survival. Mary has lost all the wonders of heaven, including true love! It is no surprise that Mary "look[s] so disappointed" (232). This twist also undermines Phelps's entire presentation of the afterlife, since it turns out Mary has merely been in a "stupor" for "thirty hours," presumably having dreamt the entire episode in heaven (231-232). Long contends that this ending is a result of heaven's cult of domesticity taking over Mary's focus:

It is not surprising that Mary is forced out of heaven once the conventional domestic demands of earth begin to occupy her, for heaven is then maintained in this novel as the site of liberating scientific inquiry—an imagined space unthinkable to earthly women, and one that Phelps, despite her support of

women scientists, cannot yet sustain even in the realm of fiction. (“Postbellum Physics” 375)

Long suggests here that science and domesticity are in competition in Phelps’s afterlife, and that Phelps cannot allow Mary to have it all. Correspondingly, I question whether Phelps’s postsecular vision is sustainable. Must she reduce the postsecular afterlife to a fever dream?

If *Beyond the Gates* balks at true love, *The Gates Between* would appear to herald it. As discussed, the end of Phelps’s third Spiritualist novel is the only one in which the narrative sees a reunion between loved ones in heaven. *The Gates Between* is also the only novel to end in heaven, rather than on earth. And yet, the novel feels dark: an entire young family has died as a result of the protagonist’s headstrong disposition. The emotional conflict between Esmerald and his wife seems to persist in the afterlife, though he is also ambiguously redeemed by God. The ambiguity of the novel is both narrative and formal, as Esmerald reminds the reader that his novel has traveled from heaven to earth. Indeed, the *Gates* series escalates its supernatural ambiguity from *The Gates Ajar*, which merely imagines heaven, to *Beyond the Gates*, which travels between the two realms, and *The Gates Between*, which does not return to earth. As the stakes of Phelps’s material and scientific investments increase, so too, does the narrative uncertainty of the novels.

Postsecular implications

My reflections on the failures of these otherwise sentimental endings do not represent an expectation that Phelps should have concluded the *Gates* novels neatly.

In depicting heaven as an ambitious space of encounter between secularity and religion, science and faith, these novels are perhaps more representative of their time for not resolving the conflicts between life and death. Even so, one result of their messiness is that contemporaneous reviews and critical responses to these novels can be very mixed. Phelps writes about the reception of *The Gates Ajar*, which was particularly polarizing:

Opinion battled about that poor little tale, as if it had held the power to overthrow church and state and family. It was an irreverent book—it was a devout book. It was a strong book—it was a weak book. It was a religious book—it was an immoral book. (I have forgotten just why; In fact, I think I never knew.) It was a good book—it was a bad book. It was calculated to comfort the comfortless—it was calculated to lead the impressionable astray. It was an accession to Christian literature—it was a disgrace to the religious antecedents of the author, and so on, and so forth. (*Chapters* 119)

Phelps lists several opposing opinions, which cast the book as either positive or negative, particularly in terms of its moral stakes. She also refers to the power of the novel, which is treated as a potential threat to church and state and family—precisely, I would argue, the realms Phelps attempts to reconcile in her novels. This passage resembles her description of life and moral struggle, quoted in section four, as it argues for literature that can accommodate both the lived conditions of material life (psychical and physical pleasure, emotion) and heavenly life.

I argue throughout this dissertation that to separate the religious and the secular is to misrepresent both realms. Phelps's fiction and nonfiction writings

support this claim, both as a theory of the Christian afterlife and as a theory of moral literature. Duquette writes of *The Gates Ajar*, “The novel intervenes in the debate about how to reconstruct the nation by rebalancing various warring pairs—reason and imagination, truth and fiction, freedom and submission, the literal and the metaphoric—in remarriages dependent on loyal submission to an inscrutable, but infallible, divine authority” (*Loyal Subjects* 86-87). The stakes of Duquette’s argument are political—the ways in which Phelps’s writing speaks to the ideals of reconstruction—but her emphasis on “rebalancing various warring pairs” resonates here. I would add the religious and the secular to Duquette’s bracketed list of warring pairs. Phelps’s *Gates* novels, then, undertake the postsecular project of turning contradiction into reciprocity.

Like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is also concerned with issues of faith and family. Though both women imagine the space of heaven extensively in their writings, Harper’s career is informed by a history of slavery and institutionalized racism that barely registers in Phelps’s works. While Winifred Forcey suggests that all deceased soldiers must “crowd up to meet” Abraham Lincoln in heaven (48), she does not consider whether there is space for deceased slaves in the afterlife, or what that space would look like. (Mary imagines in *Beyond the Gates* that the fictional Uncle Tom might be present in heaven, but the small moment seems more of a nod to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s white authoress than to African American experience.) Harper’s writing, on the other hand, is persistently invested in representing the plight and uplift of African Americans, from slavery to emancipation

and the ways in which that freedom is obstructed by racism. Through these representations, Harper contemplates the relationships between church and state and family—to borrow Phelps’s phrasing above—and the ways these realms can or cannot be reconciled for African Americans. The result is a remarkable career of poetry, fiction, essays and other writings that trouble domesticity, racial justice, and spiritual redemption—important discourses which overlap for Harper in vexed ways.

Chapter 4: Spaces of Faith and Doubt in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Poetry and Fiction

This dissertation has argued that nineteenth-century authors represent the home as a space of encounter between secular and religious forces. Hannah Foster, for example, considers whether or not romantic choice can be reconciled with the constraints of Protestant Christian virtue; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps depicts a heaven that might accommodate both science and spirituality. In my readings of these and other authors, I am for the most part emphasizing the importance of secular over religious discourses, though I am also arguing that there are productive tensions. This final chapter takes a different angle, because Harper's conception of domesticity is different from that of Foster, Wilson, Melville and Phelps. In many ways, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's writing embodies the traditional Christian domesticity that much of this dissertation has sought to critically reimagine. Harper adapts Biblical stories, celebrates her faith in Jesus Christ, and believes in the power of Christian women to uplift African American and U.S. national culture. While Harper frames domestic spaces as important for staging debates about religious and secular issues, similar to the other authors in this study, she provides an opportunity to see how religious belief can shape secular discourses, rather than the reverse. Harper's writing, which often focuses on the domestic spaces that African Americans can and cannot access, shows a reciprocal relationship between religious faith and secular life. At times, Harper depicts great faith in God's deliverance; at others, intense doubt, especially insofar as Christianity could be related to racial oppression. Throughout Harper's life, these topics—faith, doubt, and racial oppression—are mutually

informing in ways that further illuminate the tensions I have discussed in this dissertation.

Like Phelps, Harper is invested in the relationship between the sacred spaces of home and heaven. But while Phelps's characters already inhabit sentimental homes on earth, and many of them are able to access heaven directly, the personae of Harper's poetry and the protagonists of her novels are positioned far away from these spaces. Perhaps their parents have died, or they have been sold away from their families. Even after emancipation, they might remain separated from their aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters. Perhaps they are uncertain that they will make it to heaven, because, as in Wilson's *Our Nig*, their experiences of systemic oppression make it difficult to trust a God who is seemingly removed from worldly issues. In each of these scenarios, distance from home or heaven is rendered both spatially and emotionally. In *Forest Leaves*, for example, poems describe home and heaven as literally "there" rather than "here." In other works, Harper considers how God could not intervene in the crisis of slavery. This broad concern about slavery and racial injustice is related to a feeling that God, and correspondingly heaven, is inaccessible to African Americans, at least while they are on earth. Whereas Phelps's domestic heaven is a balm for grieving families after the Civil War, home and heaven do not always function as consolatory realms in Harper's works. Instead, these spaces represent a vexed relationship between Christian faith and national belonging. As is true for the other authors I have discussed, Harper stages this conflict through her representation of the home. In Harper's works, African Americans must navigate the tensions between the religious (their Christian faith) and the secular (their political

citizenship) as they work to cultivate a viable domestic ideology during the times of slavery, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras.

This chapter argues that, across her decades-long career as a poet, activist, orator, and fiction writer, Harper cultivates a domestic ideology fueled by faith but grounded in secular (namely, political) aspirations. In sections organized chronologically, I consider three phases of Harper's writing: the development of political feeling and consciousness in her first poetry collection, *Forest Leaves* (1846-1851);⁵⁵ her sentimental abolitionism in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) and *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872); and her commitment to racial uplift in *Iola Leroy* (1892). While chapters one, two, and three focus on prose fiction, this chapter looks extensively at poetry. Harper's poems provide a different lens for considering representations of Christian belief and doubt in the context of domestic spaces. Consider the title *Forest Leaves* alongside Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, which I discuss at the end of chapter two. While the forest signifies a unified whole, leaves are the smallest piece of the tree, which together comprise a forest. Poems, then, give us pieces—small glimpses of life that, when read together, can help us understand a whole issue or community.⁵⁶ Melville subtitles his collection *Aspects of the War*, suggesting that he wishes to consider only certain parts (aspects) of a broader issue (war), breaking down a monumental event into more manageable pieces. Harper takes a similar approach. For her, such breakdown happens in the form of brief lyrics depicting individual experiences as well as collective sketches, which represent African American life broadly. Of course, Harper is also comfortable with longer-form narrative, moving from lyric to epic poetry, to short fiction and full-length

novels. Across these different generic forms, Harper zooms in and out, accounting for individuals as well as entire communities. This movement is useful for considering the relationship between religion and secularity. How can an individual's Christian belief or unbelief impact collective racial uplift? How does institutional racism shape an individual's relationship to God and nation? And, central to this dissertation's argument, how are these issues related to the space of the home?

This chapter tells a story about how Harper transforms the vulnerable home of her early poetry to a nexus of political reform in her turn-of-the-century fiction. What is most compelling about this transformation is that such political power does not come from God's deliverance, as we might expect, but from the everyday work of African American women. Even as Harper increasingly depicts characters with strong Christian belief, her literature foregrounds political discourse—especially the issue of national citizenship—over Christian faith, a move which aligns her with authors like Sedgwick and Phelps. Especially through the homes of her serialized novels, such as *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889), and *Iola Leroy*, Harper emphasizes the importance of moral womanhood for both Christianity and national belonging. Morality, to Harper, is both a civic and a religious category.

In this way, by the end of the nineteenth century Harper develops what could be termed an African American domesticity reminiscent of early American Republican Motherhood, an ideology that framed moral women at the center of the home and the nation as they raised good citizens. Looking back to chapter one, we might think of Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* and the ways Esther Downing, Hope Leslie and the Governor Winthrop's wife are often framed in terms of how their moral

values will develop the colony. Nazera Wright writes similarly about Frances Harper's vision for an African-American "grand construction project" in her 1892 speech "Enlightened Motherhood": "She spoke of the home as the place where children 'should be trained for useful citizenship' and warned that if education of daughters was neglected, they would not be able to properly raise strong men and virtuous women. In Harper's vision of racial progress, women were at the center of the grand construction project the black community was engaged in" (143). Wright's analysis, paired with her reading of *Trial and Triumph*, suggests that Harper's domestic ideology resembles that of the early Republic, though oriented specifically toward the black community. Stephanie Farrar similarly frames Harper's late prose as Republican Motherhood aimed at a black audience. To a certain extent, I agree: Harper's late-career novels address the insecurities embodied in her early-career poetry, bringing African American families into the nation by way of the pious home. Jeffrey Insko characterizes *Hope Leslie* with a triple helix of colonial, revolutionary, and antebellum historical eras woven together (179), emphasizing the possibility that history is not progressive (191). In the same way, Frances Harper's "classical republican values" (Wright 143) allow her to imagine anachronistically (to borrow Insko's term) the deliverance of her people: not from slavery, but from social degradation. The result is a radical view of African American moral womanhood that emphasizes civic involvement alongside Christian piety.

Harper's anachronistic womanhood complicates an antebellum-to-postbellum distinction in her writing. In my view, Harper defies the 1865 periodization of the nineteenth century, even as I use the conventional ante- and postbellum signifiers to

distinguish Harper's early- from late-career writing.⁵⁷ Because Harper was such a prolific writer who employed a variety of genres and styles, it is easy to focus on certain categories of her texts—her serialized novels, her epic poetry, or her essays. In attending to a variety of Harper's forms in this one chapter, I hope to show an evolution of thought across Harper's career, rather than focus on a particular era. This dissertation as a whole has a transbellum frame because the very nature of a "postsecular" project resists progressive or teleological narratives in order to emphasize discourses that are in dialogue and which evolve over time. Historian Mark Noll argues in *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* that Christians entered into fierce scriptural debates leading up to and during the Civil War (about such issues as providence, salvation, and slavery itself) and that the trauma of the war shook loose the hold religion had on American culture. In contrast, Frances Harper's transbellum writings show an increased dedication to her Christian belief—in her writing, her doubt subsides over time and her faith increases in intensity. Though the Civil War was certainly a theological crisis—indeed, Harper's "Bible Defence of Slavery" embodies this crisis perfectly—it does not necessarily follow that Christians did not recover from it. If this project is predicated on a reciprocal relationship between the religious and the secular, this final chapter shows how, across the span of Harper's career, secular conflict can lead to renewed religious belief.

Harper's attention to the uplift of African Americans through a domestic ideology centered on moral women aligns with the desires of Foster, Sedgwick, Wilson, Melville, and Phelps for an American domestic space that promotes morality even as it breaks down the religious barriers that would make home a more isolated

and exclusive—indeed oppressive—space. Harper’s cultivation of moral womanhood and renewal of religious faith suggests that her writing, like Wilson’s, is very much tied up with a desire for national belonging. The white women authors discussed in this dissertation (along with Melville, who models *Pierre* on the sentimentalism of the time) are all able to challenge Christian norms because they do so from the privileged position of already belonging to such domestic ideologies. They rewrite domesticity from the inside out. When Frances Harper picks up where Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, and other African American women writers left off before the Civil War, she must break open the sacred space of the home, which was so often coopted by oppressive institutions and racist ideologies. Harper rebuilds the African American home, promoting Christian piety but also pairing her belief with a civic-minded awareness of secular society. This process of deliverance—a redemption from slavery and a renewal of Christian faith—does not confirm that domesticity in American culture has always been religious. Rather, it emphasizes that the home, especially as a literary setting, is a crucial space for negotiating interrelated religious and secular issues in American culture.

The following sections show how Harper’s representations of home evolve over time, as they address a variety of domestic scenarios (homesickness, the separation of slave families, postbellum reunions) vis-à-vis Christian faith and doubt. Harper’s thought evolves as her voice changes across different publication forms and reading formats. Section one focuses in part on the lyric “I,” for instance, reflecting Harper’s grappling with individual faith, a struggle which manifests in *Forest Leaves*’s presentation of home and heaven as inaccessible spaces. Section two, in

contrast, emphasizes Harper's abolitionist rhetoric—including a more forceful “we”—which focuses on the deliverance of African Americans from slavery, as well as God's complicity in that institution. Given the mutability of Harper's poems, which were performed by Harper herself on the lecture circuit, sung by audiences, published in pamphlet form and periodicals, and eventually collected in books that we read today, these texts are able to do a variety of cultural work. They look backward and forward, inward and outward, and consider issues small and large. Ultimately, this flexibility is a useful hermeneutic for reading the reciprocity of religion and secularity at home and provide an original lens for reading Harper's best-known work, *Iola Leroy*. Putting *Iola Leroy* in conversation with Harper's poetry shows that Harper came to understand the relationship between racial uplift and domesticity as one grounded in national life rather than the afterlife. No longer accepting the antebellum feeling that “death offers deliverance until an indifferent society changes” (Boyd 76), Harper develops in her postbellum fiction a domestic ideology for African American citizens. With the narrative space of the novel and the form of third-person narration, Harper's fiction takes on an instructive quality that her poetry does not, and which contributes to the broader tradition of instructive sentimental fiction that this dissertation has traced. Through its dual heroines, Iola and Miss Delany, *Iola Leroy* models a moral womanhood that has a spirit of Christian faith but is ultimately grounded in earthly goals. For Harper, the sacred space of the home is imbued with both the religious and the political. Rather than earning a spot in heaven, as the antebellum Frado strives for, Iola and Miss Delany work for their place in U.S.

national life, reshaping what it means to be a moral woman at the center of the African American home.

Forest Leaves's Politics of Elsewhere

This section argues that Frances Harper's first volume of poetry, *Forest Leaves*, develops what I am calling a politics of elsewhere through its sustained focus on the far away spaces of home and heaven. Harper's orientation of these spaces as distant suggests that her early career can be characterized by insecurity. Rhetorically and politically, such vulnerability is an important context for understanding the later work that critics understand as more forcefully activist. The speakers of two *Forest Leaves* poems in particular, "Yearnings for Home" and "I Thirst," portray home and heaven as distant—positioned elsewhere—and they desire the consolation they believe those spaces would provide them. However, the presence of death in these and other poems complicate a sense that the afterlife would offer comfort for a difficult life. Though death would bring a deliverance from suffering—a common theme in, for example, antebellum slave narratives—*Forest Leaves* counters this potential deliverance with ruminations on the despair of death. In this way, *Forest Leaves* is haunted by death even as it positions the afterlife as a desirable space, if a distant one. Harper's earliest poetry is also concerned with slavery: her well-known poem "The Bible Defence of Slavery" is first published in this volume, which prompts readers to consider significant political issues in the context of an otherwise sentimental collection. Indeed, *Forest Leave* grapples with sentimental feeling at the individual as well as the institutional level, suggesting that African Americans must

cover over their emotions. Reading “Bible Defence” alongside “Yearnings for Home” or “I Thirst” suggests that the collection’s politics of elsewhere—the sense that comfort and belonging can only be obtained somewhere else—is a product of slavery.

Until recently, *Forest Leaves* (published as a pamphlet in Baltimore, Maryland when then Frances Ellen Watkins was around twenty years old) was thought to be missing. Its discovery and digitization have raised many questions for scholars of Harper’s writing: do these poems possess insights into her childhood, the death of her parents, and her life in Baltimore that we have not yet understood? Should we consider *Forest Leaves* Harper’s juvenilia poetry? How do we reassess and rewrite the stories we have already told about Harper’s life and work?⁵⁸ We know that Harper was living with her aunt and uncle at the time of *Forest Leaves*’s composition; her uncle William Watkins, a prominent African American leader, raised her after her parents died when she was three. By all accounts, Watkins was the most influential figure of her childhood, educating her at his Academy for Negro Youth until she was thirteen. Harper’s later works shaped and were shaped by her status as a successful public speaker, often performing her poems orally, but *Forest Leaves* speaks to a time before Harper went public. In these poems, which employ a first-person speaker more liberally than any of her other poetry collections, we perhaps glimpse Harper’s interiority. Throughout *Forest Leaves*, Harper questions whether spaces exist where she can locate hope and build family. Heaven, and correspondingly God, orient these domestic spaces in a merely nebulous way, with insecurity reigning supreme as the poems’ central emotion.

The speaker of “Yearnings for Home” describes a desire to die elsewhere, a desire that is related to feelings of homesickness. These dual desires—to die, and to go home—frame the speaker’s feelings of emotional and spatial isolation, and characterize the politics of elsewhere through which Harper suggests the religious and social ambivalence of African American domesticity. The opening two stanzas of the poem read,

Oh let me go I’m weary here
And fevers scorch my brain,
I long to feel my native air
Breathe o’er each burning vein.

I long once more to see
My home among the distant hills,
To breathe amid the melody
Of murmuring brooks and rills. (1-8)

“Here” in the poem’s first line immediately orients the speaker and reader spatially within the poem, while the emphatic “Oh let me go” and “weary” feeling suggest that “here” as an oppressive space. Given the enjambment of the first and second lines, “here” also becomes associated with the speaker’s illness. When the speaker later specifies that where she longs to go is a “distant” home, the physical ailment of a burning fever comes to characterize the speaker’s homesickness as well. Harper’s different uses of “breathe” in the two stanzas indicate that this homesickness is unnatural and oppressive to the speaker’s body. In the first stanza, the speaker does

not breathe, but her “native air” does. In an odd formulation, the air breathes “o’er each burning vein.” O’er would suggest separation (rather than through, or in) while burning veins signify an ailment of blood, rather than lungs, which we might associate with breath. When the speaker longs to “breathe” in the second stanza, Harper employs a second twist. Rather than breathing native air, she breathes “amid the melody,” joining breath with sound. These stanzas are grounded “here,” but the homesickness the speaker feels is represented as unnatural and oppressive, both to body and spirit.

As the poem continues, Harper explicitly links death with home, developing the politics of elsewhere which frames hope as something that can only be found in distant spaces. Harper writes, “Your scenes are bright I know, / But there my mother pray’d, / Her cot is lowly, but I go / To die beneath its shade” (13-16). The displaced location of “there” in line 13 is a place where the speaker’s mother lived and prayed, the space that Harper has characterized in earlier stanzas through natural descriptions of “eternal snow” and “bright cerulean sky” (9, 16). It is “there” that the speaker wishes to die. Johanna Ortner gives a straightforward interpretation of the poem’s spaces: “Harper describes that she longs to be back home in her mother’s cot in order to pass away peacefully in the familiar surroundings of home” (“Lost no More.”) But Harper suggests that the space is separated not only geographically, but also interpersonally. The first stanza quoted begins with an emphatic “Your scenes,” distinguishing an imagined “you” from the lyric “me” of the speaker. This suggests the isolation the speaker feels, not just spatially, but in terms of her relationships. It is possible that the home Harper refers to is heaven, given the blurred lines of

temporality surrounding this mother's home and the fact that Harper's mother was deceased at the time of the poem's publication. Of course, the speaker is not necessarily Harper herself, but sentiments about future reunions with mothers and sisters (described in lines 17-42) anticipate episodes in Civil War and postbellum literature that focus on heaven's potential to reunite families, as in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's and Harriet Jacobs's works.⁵⁹ Harper's focus on "where glad scenes shall meet / My weary longing eye" (9-10) and her confidence that her mother will "cling / 'Round me her treasur'd long" (17-18) suggest a desire to reach an imagined future home in the afterlife, rather than return to a familiar one as the poem's beginning seems to describe.

Harper's use of repetition in the final stanzas of "Yearnings for Home" emphasizes the desire of the speaker to reach a distant home where she will feel more like herself, suggesting Harper's investment in domesticity as a comfort—and potential source of empowerment—for young women. The final stanza reads, "Then let me go I'm weary here / And fevers scorch my brain, / I long to feel my native air, / Breathe o'er each burning vein" (25-28). This last stanza is almost exactly the same as the first, except for the opening word "Then" and the insertion of a comma after "native air." "Then" reads as the punctuation of an argument: the preceding stanzas have set up the difference between "Your scenes" here and the speaker's home and family "there." "Then let me go," Harper writes, imploring the audience of the poem—the world? God? Some other oppressive force such as a slave master?—to release the speaker. Line 27's comma is more subtle. The effect of the comma is to create the possibility that the "I" of this line breathes in 28, rather than "native air," as

in the first stanza. This possibility suggests that the speaker “long[s] to... / Breathe.” Even more emphatically than earlier stanzas, these final lines suggest that the comforts of home, even if that home is only available in heaven, are what give life to us as individuals.

In “I Thirst,” Harper similarly frames the comforts of heaven as far away but life-giving. However, the tension between earth and heaven, life and the afterlife, grows more intense as Harper considers what it means to find solace in heaven if one wishes to continue living. I quote the short poem in full:

I thirst, but earth cannot allay
The fever coursing thro’ my veins,
The healing stream is far away,
It flows thro’ Salem’s glorious plains

The murmurs of its crystal flow
Break ever o’er this world of strife,
My heart is weary let me go
To bathe it in the stream of life.

For a worn and weary heart
Hath bath’d in this pure stream,
And felt its griefs and cares depart
Like some forgotten dream. (1-12)

“I Thirst” is centered on the speaker’s desire for heavenly comfort, a comfort which she cannot access. In the poem’s first few lines, Harper seems to align the division of here and there, employed in “Yearnings for Home,” with a division between earth and heaven. Furthermore, when she writes, “My heart is weary let me go / To bathe it in the stream of life,” she replicates the weariness and frustration of the homesick speaker in “Yearnings for Home.” This speaker, too, wishes to be elsewhere. Interestingly, “the healing stream is far away,” presumably in heaven, but it is also “the stream of life.” Harper plays with a paradox here: the speaker wishes to bathe her heart in the stream of life, which, if located in heaven, implies that she wishes to die. But does she? Or does she merely hope to see “this world of strife” cleansed by its “crystal flow”? Harper proposes a conflict between a desire to live on earth and a dream of heaven’s healing.⁶⁰

Harper more intensely considers the tensions between life and death in the poem “He Knoweth Not that the Dead Are There.” In that poem, Harper focuses on death’s unknowability, ultimately emphasizing the despair death brings. In unpacking the emotion of despair, Harper introduces uncertainty about heaven’s consolatory power. Reading “He Knoweth Not” in conversation with “Yearnings” and “I Thirst,” poems which emphasize desired comfort, further suggests the paradox of heavenly deliverance: death frees us from “this world of strife” (“I Thirst” 6) but also has the potential to bring “wild despair” (“He Knoweth Not” 18). Several moments in “He Knoweth Not” orient death spatially, as in other poems in *Forest Leaves*, though in this case, the displacement of death seems to serve people’s desire to ignore it. The spatial reference of “there” echoes at the end of each stanza, in lines that each offer a

slightly varied affirmation that “the dead are there.” In the first, “But, Oh!” seems to frame death as a surprise (4), whereas the following stanza ends “But still,” confirming the persistence of death (8). Each stanza affirms the presence of death, offering different emotional response to this fact, from surprise, through denial to acceptance. In the first line, Harper refers to “yonder halls reclining,” where beautiful forms and brilliant lights exist alongside death (1). From the beginning, the space she later reveals is a “charnal house” (11) is depicted as “yonder,” displaced from the speaker. Harper amplifies this distance when she describes death, “conceale[d]” in a vault, as “seductive venom / Hid ‘neath flowerets fair” (11, 10). Death is not only far away spatially, but it is hidden within our consciousness, Harper suggests. This physical aspect of a charnal house parallels Harper’s discussion of sons of pleasure who have “banish[ed]” their cares, and for whom a “current of despair” is hidden “‘Neath the flow of song and laughter” (6, 14, 13). Dead bodies are located elsewhere, displaced from the activity of the poem, but the metaphysical aspects of death—knowledge and despair— are also concealed or hidden.

Ultimately, the poem argues that we should always be aware of death’s presence—it is inescapable even when we try to cover over it. The end of the poem magnifies one’s eventual recognition of death’s presence through the same repeated statement that “the dead are there.” “They’ll shudder, start and tremble, / They’ll weep in wild despair, / When the solemn truth breaks on them, / That the dead, the dead are there,” Harper writes in the penultimate stanza (17-20). This imagined future moment when the “solemn truth” is realized contrasts blissful ignorance (“sons of pleasure / know not” in lines 15-16) with the declarative force of reality stated in line

20. Furthermore, Harper later characterizes the blissful ignorance of the earlier stanzas as willful. The sons of pleasure, she argues, are those “who’ve scoffed at ev’ry warning” and “turn’d from ev’ry prayer” (21-22). Unbelievers, Harper suggests, are those who place death yonder, banish their cares and conceal despair. Because of this, it is with “bitter anguish” that they will eventually learn that “the dead are there” (23, 24). If the title of the poem’s proverb suggests a Christian moral from the start, the final stanza drives home the thrust of Harper’s belief: living without faith makes death more painful.⁶¹ Read together, “Yearnings for Home,” “I Thirst” and “He Knoweth Not that the Dead Are There” cultivate a relationship between earth and heaven in which heaven paradoxically represents life, and earth merely houses the despair of death. But it is unclear whether this dynamic is a comforting one; heaven does not merely participate in a cult of domesticity (as in Phelps). Harper instead proposes a reverse dynamic: home and family feel as abstract as an imagined life in heaven.

Harper gives poetic life to this abstraction through otherwise conventional lyric poetry. Indeed, while all of the poems in *Forest Leaves* feature neat quatrains and some rhyme, the three poems discussed above are even more constrained by form. “He Knoweth Not the Dead Are There,” “Yearnings for Home” and “I Thirst” feature quatrains with short lines and a/b/a/b rhyme schemes (as opposed to rhyming couplets or a/b/c/b, employed in other poems in the collection). The tight boundaries of this poetic form house the speaker’s feelings of isolation and distance, creating a space from which to measure “here” from “there.” As I discuss in chapter one, the very title of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In*

a Two-Story White House, North delimits the domestic boundaries of Frado's life in a house, racializing the space as white and Frado's life as black. But the novel form allows Wilson to develop and push these boundaries, to represent the politics of Frado's labor, and to cultivate Frado's interiority and relationship to God. A three stanza poem like "I Thirst" literally lacks the space to do such narrative work. And yet it is precisely these constraints that help represent the speaker's feelings of longing and displacement. Carla Peterson describes Harper's "use of an 'aesthetics of restraint'" based primarily in narrative and meter, and in which emotion is contained by form (*Doers* 128). But Peterson links this aesthetics of restraint to her narrative poetry, "implicitly suggesting her desire to avoid the lyric, traditionally associated with the spontaneous expression of emotion" (*Doers* 128). *Forest Leaves* appears to employ a similar aesthetics to Harper's later narrative poetry (the focus of Peterson's reading), simultaneously containing and expressing emotion.

Indeed, if this collection's politics of elsewhere portrays the security of domesticity and salvation as far away and elusive, it also correspondingly depicts feelings as inaccessible. Emotional security is also displaced, which amplifies speakers' isolation from a spatial to a more metaphysical register. More specifically, throughout the collection feelings are concealed and covered over, which complicates our expectations for domestic literature to operate through feminine feelings and sympathy. Though Harper employs the lyric "I" in *Forest Leaves* in ways uncharacteristic of her later poetry, she develops a tension between the intimacy of that poetic voice and the inaccessibility of feeling. Even as Harper inhabits the sentimental genre, focusing on faith and feelings in her writing, she appears to

critique the utility of sympathy alone to cultivate a viable domesticity for African Americans. For example, in “Farewell, My Heart is Beating” the speaker covers over her own sadness rather than dwelling on feeling, a preservation tactic that anticipates a slave strategy Harper depicts in *Iola Leroy*. Harper begins the poem, “Farewell, my heart is beating / With feelings sad and wild, / I’ve strove to hide its heaving / And ‘mid my tears to smile” (1-4). In this poem about young lovers separated, the speaker names her “wild” feelings for readers, but hides them from the world, forcing herself to “smile.” This covering over of emotions is related to the isolation she feels: “This heart when almost breaking / Has leaned upon thy breast, / But when ‘tis again aching / On thine it may not rest” (13-16). In light of an approaching loss of intimacy, Harper suggests, the speaker must resign herself to managing her own emotions—by covering over them. In *Iola Leroy*, Marie notes that “The more intelligent of them [slaves] have so learned to veil their feelings that you do not see the undercurrent of discontent beneath their apparent good humor and jollity” (79). Concealing one’s emotions becomes a mode of survival and an effort to maintain some autonomy from one’s oppressors.⁶² In that sense, it can also function as another mode of oppression. It is only when free from such oppression, in *Iola Leroy*, that this “veil” is lifted. Notably, Iola describes such a veil when she rejects Dr. Gresham’s marriage proposal. Knowing that, as Dr. Gresham’s wife, she would have to pass as white, she says, “I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment” (117). These two quotes are concerned with the lying required to live peacefully in a white home, whether a master’s or a chosen husband’s. Freedom, Harper suggests,

comes with the power to tell the truth. As early as *Forest Leaves*, then, Harper is aware of feeling's power.

Harper shows how the nation was complicit in this crisis of feeling through the poem "Bible Defence of Slavery," published in *Forest Leaves* and revised for *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854). In the first version of the poem, Harper offers a politically-charged twist on the issue of concealment, and complicates God's relationship to human suffering. Rather than expressing an individual's feelings, "Bible Defence" joins *Forest Leaves*'s first poem, "Ethiopia," in critiquing the institution of slavery.⁶³ Though the "I" of many of *Forest Leaves*' poems bespeaks the sentimental focus of Harper's early lyrics, we clearly see the "abolitionist rhetoric" she is known for in these two poems (Sinha). In *Forest Leaves*' "Bible Defence of Slavery," Harper emphasizes how the church's hypocrisy and the nation's guilt, rather than human feeling, are concealed. The poem begins, "Take sackcloth of the darkest dye / And shroud the pulpits round, / Servants of him that cannot lie / Sit mourning on the ground" (1-4). To "shroud the pulpits" suggests that the church has, in a sense, died. In Harper's representation, the shroud or funeral covering for the pulpit should be made of "sackcloth of darkest dye." While a typical shroud would be made of white linen, Harper degrades the fabric connected with the pulpit, shrouding it in coarseness and darkness instead. From the beginning, Harper's imagery thus reverses our expectations for the holy church, setting up a harsh critique of a biblical defense of slavery.

In a stanza that Harper removes from the 1854 version of the poem, she specifically indicts Christians' attempts to cover over slavery, representing another

dark shroud at play. In lines 21-24, Harper powerfully explains, “An infidel could do no more / To hide his country’s guilty blot, / Than spread God’s holy record o’er / The loathsome leprous spot.” Here, Harper names a number of wrongs: first, she maintains that those who support slavery are, in fact, infidels. Further, she categorizes the use of the Bible (“God’s holy record”) to defend the institution as the very worst version of this pro-slavery stance. Her alliterative characterization of slavery as the “loathsome leprous spot,” rhyming with the “country’s guilty blot,” names slavery a sickness and indicts the nation for its moral stain. Spreading the Bible over the crimes of slavery, Harper suggests, is unforgivable. On a national scale, the effort to cover over guilt is a far worse concealment than the individual covering of emotion in *Forest Leaves*’ other poems. In fact, whereas the speakers of other poems in *Forest Leaves* willfully ignore despair or try to hide their heartbreak, Harper in “Bible Defence” shows how the body reveals the human pain associated with slavery. As she writes in the second stanza, “Let holy horror blanche each cheek, / Pale ev’ry brow with fears, / And rocks and stones if ye could speak / Ye well might melt to tears” (5-8). A “blanche” on each cheek and a “pale” brow would physically represent the “holy horror” and “fears” that we should feel in response to this false Christianity. In the stanza, even rocks and stones are brought to tears. Emotion, rather than being covered over, serves to accentuate the horrors of slavery in America.

Throughout *Forest Leaves*, Harper grapples predominantly with issues of individual grief, heartbreak, faith and despair. Yet poems such as “Ethiopia” and “Bible Defence of Slavery” reveal that Harper also considers broader issues of race and national culture in her earliest work. As I have discussed, place is often the

central motif of the poems in *Forest Leaves*. More specifically, the speaker muses on sacred spaces that are elsewhere. Whether the subject is a corpse, a mother, a home or heaven, the “here” or “there” of a poem is displaced. This displacement paradoxically orients the reader: we join Harper’s speaker on a quest to find solace and security. Often, this displacement involves concealment. In addition to the denial we might feel about death or the optimism we try to practice during heartbreak, *Forest Leaves* suggests that the U.S. has covered over its own guilt. In her writing leading up to the Civil War, Harper suggests that slavery is directly related to the delayed security and displaced domesticity represented in her early poems.

Deliverance from Slavery

Whereas *Forest Leaves* is a largely sentimental collection with flashes of activism, later collections such as *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) and *Sketches from Southern Life* (1872) are largely activist works with aspects of sentimentalism.⁶⁴ 1854 marks the publication of Harper’s second collection of poetry, but it also inaugurates her public commitment to the abolition movement; in that year she began her work as public speaker, traveling throughout the country on the anti-slavery lecture circuit. Thus we see in the 1854 and 1872 collections a more explicit focus on slavery and a more forceful rhetoric calling for its abolition. Even following emancipation, Harper composed slave narratives in verse form, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional Eliza Harris, to the true story of Margaret Garner, to Harper’s own fictional Aunt Chloe. Through her poetic representations of these women, Harper represents the theological stakes of the Civil War, continuing to indict Christian

complicity in the wrongs of slavery even as she celebrates God as a source of deliverance from oppression. This section attends to Harper's abolitionist rhetoric in her mid-century poetry, especially in terms of how Harper frames deliverance differently than in *Forest Leaves*. No longer inhabiting the sentimental first-person of the poems discussed earlier, Harper emphasizes the collective oppression of African Americans. In her poems that depict mothers both enslaved and emancipated, Harper shows how slavery was antithetical to domesticity. She develops a crucial tension between slavery, domesticity, and Christianity—the would-be foundation of the nineteenth-century home. Consistently critiquing Christians' complicity in the oppression of African Americans, Harper also considers the importance of faith for slaves' well-being. Harper does not condemn God, even as she wonders how God could let this worldly horror persist. In her Aunt Chloe poems, which depict slavery as well as Reconstruction, Harper's focus remains on women. In the postbellum era, the conflict between earthly racial hierarchies and religious faith remains. And it is women, rather than God, who find a way to reconcile this conflict in newly rebuilt homes that reassemble slave families. Ultimately, this section suggests that Harper's slave narrative poems represent a transition from doubt to faith, but also from faith in God's deliverance to a desire for self-deliverance in the form of racial uplift. In this way, the middle era of Harper's career embodies the evolving reciprocity of discourses of Christian faith and political belonging.

To return to "Bible Defence of Slavery," the increasingly zealous tone of the 1854 version is indicative of Harper's shifting voice in her second collection more generally. Harper more forcefully expresses outrage with multiple new exclamation

points throughout the poem.⁶⁵ She also critiques the American people more specifically in the 1854 version, as when she changes “A man” in stanza four to “A ‘reverend’ man, whose light should be / The guide of age and youth” (13-14). In the following stanza, “The fiercest wrongs that ever rose / Since Sodom’s fearful cry” becomes “the direst wrong *by man imposed*,” singling out the responsibility of human actors in this crisis (17-18, my emphasis). Though the central argument of the poem is the same—that slavery makes “heathens” of Americans—tweaks to the 1854 version more forcefully hold Christians accountable for their complicity in the institution. Meredith McGill reminds us that *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, the collection in which this revision is published, “bears in its format the traces of a strong relationship to oral performance” (57), another key factor in this poem’s (and Harper’s more generally) shifting voice. The speaker’s intensified tone signals a new rhetorical situation, one in which audiences have gathered to participate in, rather than simply read, Harper’s antislavery writings.

This activist setting also shapes Harper’s changing approach to emotions in her antebellum poetry: many poems specifically use emotions to communicate a call to action. In leaving behind the lyric “I” of *Forest Leaves*, Harper moves away from exploring individual speakers’ feelings in order to harness the power of readers’ feelings. In the poem “To Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe,” Harper thanks Stowe for that power of sympathy, which she then invokes in her own work. Harper writes, “I thank thee for the kindly words / That grac’d thy pen of fire, / And thrilled upon the living chords / Of many a heart’s deep lyre” (9-12). Harper refers to the powerful effects of Stowe’s sentimental abolitionism. “Thy pen of fire” and its rhymed pair “a heart’s

deep lyre” represent the relationship between writing and feeling, sympathy and abolitionism. Stowe’s famous invocation to readers to “feel right” resonates with Harper, who similarly calls on readers to (as another 1850s poem is titled) “Be Active.”⁶⁶

That poem, which drafts readers on a mission to combat oppression, weds sentimental imagery of slaves’ suffering to powerful activist rhetoric. Harper wields her own “pen of fire” when she writes,

See that sad, despairing mother
Clasp her burning brow in pain;
Lay your hand upon her fetters—
Rend, oh! rend her galling chain!

Here’s a pale and trembling maiden,
Brutal arms around her thrown;
Christian father, save, oh! save her,
By the love you bear your own!

...

Crush these gory, reeking, altars—
Christians, let this work be thine. (16-20, 23-24)

In the two stanzas fully quoted, two initial lines depict a weak, female slave in pain, brutalized by slavery. The following two lines immediately call for action with multiple exclamations and imperatives. Further, when read together these two stanzas suggest that to rend a slave’s chains (the imperative in line 16) is the same as loving

her (as line 20 implores). I quote lines 23-24 to emphasize that, as in the 1854 “Bible Defence of Slavery,” Harper assigns responsibility to Christian believers. In perhaps the strongest imperative of the poem, Harper asks Christian readers to “crush these gory, reeking altars.” She reminds readers that slavery is a moral wrong and must be righted by “moral forces” (37). And in a concluding line that directly echoes the ending and appendix of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harper asserts that “in the darkest conflict, / God is on the side of right!” (44). Taken together with “Bible Defence,” “Be Active” requests feelings of sympathy for the “despairing mother” and “trembling maiden,” combatting slavery through the moral force of Christian faith. These corresponding efforts emphasize the paradox of Christian belief and culpability; Harper calls on her Christian faith even as she recognizes its complicity in this worldly conflict.

By critiquing faith in the context of slave maternity, Harper highlights the impossibility of a conventional domestic life within the realm of slavery. The poems that tell stories of slave mothers emphasize the vexed relationship between slavery, Christianity, and domesticity. In contrast to a Victorian ideal that would place the mother at the center of a home founded on Christian virtue, Harper shows how neither Christian virtue nor traditional motherhood were viable for slaves. In representing that lack of viability through the sentimental mode, Harper critiques slavery on both secular and religious registers: she calls for the political abolition of slavery as well as Christian reform. Doing so challenges whether readerly sympathy in a domestic mode—a common component of the sentimental genre—is sufficient for accomplishing abolition.

In poems like “Eliza Harris” and “The Slave Mother,” Harper simultaneously calls on readers’ sympathy and exposes the limits of such sympathy. “Eliza Harris,” which retells the escape story of Stowe’s character from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, builds on the national register of “Bible Defence of Slavery” through its reflection on American ideals of independence. “The Slave Mother,” like “Be Active,” speaks directly to readers and audiences in order to bring them closer to the horrors of slavery. Both poems describe slave maternity and the destruction of slave domesticity, aligning closely with slave narratives and abolitionist novels such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, or Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. But whereas the audience for those longer-form genres were white readers whose sympathy a writer like Jacobs hoped to engender, Harper’s poetry circulated widely and to diverse audiences, as McGill emphasizes. Published in a variety of periodical newspapers and circulating alongside Harper on her lecture circuit, “Eliza Harris” has a different impact than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Instead, Harper’s antebellum poems “don’t express states of feeling, but rather ask readers to witness wrongs and to participate in their remedy” (McGill 64). Sympathy is absolutely present in these poems focused on family life, but it is subordinate to action.

“The Slave Mother,” for example, immediately makes witnesses of its readers, who are drawn into a scene of slavery from its opening line. Harper asks readers, “Heard you that shriek?” constructing a relationship between the slave mother and the reader, who becomes a witness to the horrors of slavery (1). In the first few stanzas, Harper writes in a mode of conjecture: “It seemed as if a burden’d heart / Was

breaking in despair,” she writes, later musing that the mother’s eye glanced “As if a storm of agony / Were sweeping through the brain” (3-4, 11-12). These “as if” reflections align with readers’ imagined observations. Harper speaks in the mode of a Northerner who perhaps cannot imagine the life of a slave. Though these initial thoughts are emotional and heartbreaking, they are metaphorical—not necessarily real. The tone shifts in line 13, when Harper’s lines become declarative and descriptive:

She is a mother, pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother’s pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through her veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart. (13-24)

Each stanza asserts the maternal identity of the woman even as it unveils the force with which slavery dispossesses a female slave of her maternity. “She is a mother,”

Harper writes, but her son “is not hers.” The declarative force of these sentences—which contrasts the speculation of the earlier stanzas—amplifies Harper’s critique of slavery. She pits emotion (embodied through phrases like “pale with fear” and “trembling form,” as in earlier poems) against legal possession. The extreme nature of slavery, represented through the thrice repeated “He is not hers,” becomes clear when Harper reminds readers that the mother “bore” him in “pain” and is connected with him by blood. Again, we see the emotional connection of motherhood embodied in childbirth and blood. Even so, Harper reminds us, “cruel hands / May rudely tear apart” this pair—and destroy “the only wreath of household love / That binds her breaking heart.” If domesticity is based on family love, slavery is antithetical to it.

The concluding stanzas of “The Slave Mother” deal with the paradox of slave motherhood: what does it mean to love a child if they are owned by someone else? Harper concludes, “No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks / Disturb the listening air: / She is a mother, and her heart / Is breaking in despair” (37-40). This final assertion that “She is a mother” drives home the humanity, femininity and maternity of female slaves (despite their inability to participate in conventional antebellum domesticity). However, Harper also acknowledges that the mother’s shrieks “disturb the listening air.” These shrieks—and the conditions of slave maternity more broadly—are unnatural. Furthermore, in its reference to the natural world, the phrase “disturb the listening air” subtly refers to the “storm of agony” referenced in line 11. The final line closely resembles line 4—it makes the same statement in present tense. This final stanza, then, revises and replaces the conjectures of stanzas one and three. Harper implores her readers to imagine the worst at the beginning of the poem. But by the

poem's end, she forces readers to accept that the worst—the conditions of slavery that go against nature—is true.

Though God sometimes represents consolation in *Forest Leaves* and other poems, it is unclear what—if anything—He can do about slavery. In “The Slave Mother,” Harper only refers to Christianity once: the speaker exclaims in line 32, “Oh, Father! must they part?” This apostrophe reads as a direct address to God, a turn to prayer at a moment when the poem expresses heartbreak at the prospect of mother and son parting, even as it celebrates the wonderful bond they share. God does not speak back in “The Slave Mother,” nor does the poem end with hope. In fact, the only other apostrophe in the poem occurs in the next stanza and reads “Oh! never more may her sad eyes / Gaze on his mournful face” (35-36). In a parallel rhetorical moment, Harper's second exclamation confirms that mother and son are forever parted. The absence of God in the rest of the poem represents the uncertainty about God's relationship to this institutional crisis. Whereas Harper's individual faith does not waver, faith alone cannot solve the broader, national crises of her more political poems. If Christianity and domesticity are typically linked in antebellum U.S. literature, the slave narrative and Harper's corresponding poems contend that these discourses are, in fact, contradictory. Harper's poetry represents a fierce conflict between the worldly realities of slavery at an institutional level and the religious faith of individuals. Women in Harper's poetry must navigate these realms while accommodating earthly power structures as well as a personal God, a feat that seems, at times, impossible.

It is worth noting again that the poems discussed above represent an active stage of Harper's career as an orator, and they were central to her anti-slavery work. These poems, which were reprinted throughout the 1850s, either in newspapers or reissued collections, represent an important era of intense focus on slavery's injustices, particularly within the realm of domesticity. Harper, like many other African American women writers who coopted the form and ethos of sentimental literature, emphasizes how domestic life was impossible for slave mothers. In contrast to a writer like Stowe, who calls upon Americans to feel sympathy for these slave mothers, Harper suggests that feelings are not enough to enact change. At this stage, we see a pivot in Harper's career. In later collections, Harper continues to depict slave domesticity, but following Emancipation she is able to depict actionable change. In her 1870s poetry, she reviews the slave experience through her depiction of Aunt Chloe, before focusing on the work of racial uplift.

One of the central arguments of this chapter is that Frances Harper's long, transbellum career allows us to interpret the evolution of African American domesticity across the Civil War. The Aunt Chloe poems, published in *Sketches From Southern Life* (1872), similarly provide, through Aunt Chloe's story, a bridge across antebellum and Reconstruction eras. In a way, they serve as a microcosm for Harper's collected poetry. Like *Iola Leroy* (which draws from Aunt Chloe's narrative), these poems tell both a slave narrative and a tale of freedom, cataloging this evolution alongside spiritual redemption. And as the critic Frances Foster writes, Aunt Chloe "is probably the first black female protagonist, outside the tragic mulatto tradition, to be presented as a model for life" (*Brighter Coming Day* 137). Aunt Chloe's

significance, representing Harper's civic-minded ethos more broadly, stems from her power as a moral woman, a power which extends from the domestic to the political sphere. The key to this recycled notion of womanhood is a renewed Christian faith. But as the poems depict, postbellum life cannot be built simply around religious domesticity—the religious and the secular continue to coalesce in reciprocal ways as African American families reunite and rebuild their homes post emancipation.

The Aunt Chloe poems are comprised of six long, narrative poems. While their quatrain format and a/b/c/b rhyme scheme are characteristic of Harper's style, their collective format is less so (excepting *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, an epic poem published in 1869). Additionally, if Harper's mid-century activist poetry "points at every turn *away* from the poet herself, *away* from a consistent persona" (McGill 62, emphasis original) the Aunt Chloe poems represent a notable turn back to the lyric "I" and a dedication to one speaker's voice. The effect is that the reader feels invited into Aunt Chloe's world, which, as the first stanza of "Aunt Chloe" abruptly reminds us, has been shaped by slavery. Aunt Chloe narrates,

I remember, well remember,
That dark and dreadful day,
When they whispered to me, "Chloe,
Your children's sold away!"

It seemed as if a bullet
Had shot me through and through,
And I felt as if my heart-strings

Was breaking right in two. (1-8)

Whereas “The Slave Mother” begins, “It seemed as if a burden’d heart / Was breaking in despair,” Harper has Aunt Chloe voice this parallel moment in stanza two. Again, though Harper’s focus on slave maternity remains the same, she moves fully into a slave mother’s perspective here. As the poem continues, Aunt Chloe takes her burden to God, to whom she prays for mercy. The poem ends with her spiritual enlightenment in a vein that both anticipates *Iola Leroy* and speaks to the questions raised earlier in *Forest Leaves*. “Aunt Chloe” concludes,

And a something seemed to tell me
You will see your boys again—
And that hope was like a poultice
Spread upon a dreadful pain.

And it often seemed to whisper
Chloe trust and never fear;
You’ll get justice in the kingdom,
If you do not get it here. (57-64).

Through Aunt Chloe’s reflection, Harper suggests that feeling hope is a helpful emotion for managing pain, emphasizing the comfort of imagining “justice in the kingdom” in a manner that contrasts feelings of despair in *Forest Leaves*. In *Iola Leroy*, Harper will reprise Aunt Chloe’s reflection in a different mother separated from her children. Captain Sybil defines the faith of that woman as “a patient waiting for death to redress the wrongs of life” (47). Here, Harper portrays the role of

Christian worship for oppressed slaves through the conditional “If you do not get it here.”

Building on the idea of justice through death, Harper turns to justice on earth in the poem “The Deliverance,” which tells the story of the Civil War and emancipation. It is the longest poem in the series by far, representing the war’s centrality in Aunt Chloe’s life as laid out by Harper. The long poem encompasses the antebellum and postbellum eras and depicts both Confederate and Union sides of the fight. As likewise portrayed in *Iola Leroy* (14), the slaves often read the emotions of their mistress to determine news of the war: “I used to watch old Mistus’ face, / And when it looked quite long / I would say to Cousin Milly, / The battle’s going wrong; / Not for us, but for the Rebels” (93-97). The poem also moves from the nuclear family to national politics rather swiftly when slavery is abolished and the war ends. Harper shifts to discussion of successive presidents and eventually, to the issue of women’s suffrage. When Aunt Chloe declares that she would not sell her vote before naming six men who did so for “profit or for pleasure” (243), she draws a new dividing line: between African American men and women, who remain disenfranchised. Directly following the final line just quoted, the first lines of “Aunt Chloe’s Politics” read “Of course, I don’t know very much / About these politics” (1-2). But Aunt Chloe is absolutely invested in politics, as Harper’s movements between the private and public spheres and between domestic and national life clearly indicate. As Stephanie Farrar writes, the shift in Harper’s representation of maternity is “not simply a transition from the publicity/pain of black maternity under slavery to one of privacy/joy in freedom. Rather, in Harper’s texts after the war, the private activities of black

motherhood become part of the republican sphere to which white women's maternity had already belonged" (54).

However, the series does end with an explicit return to the space of the home and to questions of family, creating a domestic frame for Harper's investment in political life. In "The Reunion," Aunt Chloe's son Jakey returns home and brings news of his brother Ben. Aunt Chloe sums up free domesticity when she says "Then, Jakey, you will stay with me, / And comfort my poor heart; / Old Mistus got no power now / To tear us both apart" (25-28). She asks Jakey to write Ben and tell him to bring his family home: "We'll make the cabin bigger, / And that will hold us all" (35-36). Aunt Chloe's plan to "make the cabin bigger" signifies an important dream of domestic life—not only would Aunt Chloe's family be reunited, making up for the losses incurred in slavery and during the war, but it would increase. It would grow. This parallels the social uplift Harper also strives for, as when a church is built in the previous poem ("Church Building"). The domestic focus of the series' beginning and end—from domesticity's destruction to its reinstatement and, ultimately, its growth—figuratively houses the political work of the middle poems.

The swift move between public and private spheres in the Aunt Chloe poems also represents the scale of racial uplift in Harper's work, from personal aspiration to divine intervention. If the slave narrative poems identify a problem of domesticity, and if the Aunt Chloe poems begin to model a new kind of African American woman, then another type of poem focuses more broadly on the work of African Americans as a collective race. In subsequent poems, Harper variously depicts God or the people themselves uplifting the African American race. Put another way, Harper considers

whether deliverance comes from above or from within. And whereas in *Forest Leaves* heaven and even God are distant from people, poems like “Moses: A Story of the Nile” and “Retribution” describe a nation’s retribution at God’s hand. *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, published in 1869, and “Retribution,” published in the 1871 *Poems* portray the plight of an oppressed race retrospectively. Like the slave narrative poems published post-1865, these reflections come at a moment when slaves have already been freed. Of course, as Foster notes, Harper had referenced Moses in her antebellum poetry as well, consistently drawing on Moses as a model of spiritual leadership.⁶⁷ In relating the enslavement of African Americans to that of the Jews in Egypt, “Moses: A Story of the Nile” emphasizes that “the God / Our fathers loved and worshipped—shall break our chains, / And lead our willing feet to freedom” (23-25).

The poem “Retribution” describes this awaited intercession from God. Its first line, which pauses with an emphatic period in its middle, emphasizes the power of God’s judgment: “Judgment slumbered. God in mercy / Stayed his strong avenging hand” (1). Harper’s poems are rarely structured this way. To my knowledge, Harper never uses a period in the middle of a line—let alone the first—in another poem as here, and such enjambment is also rare. This punctuation forces the reader to consider the weight of God’s judgment and immediately frames God as merciful, ending the line with “mercy,” though the phrase “God in mercy stayed his strong avenging hand” has not concluded. It takes four stanzas for God’s judgment to reach “the guilty land,” but in the following three stanzas his wrath is felt (16). “Oh! the terror, grief and anguish; / Oh! the bitter, fearful, strife,” Harper writes (17-18). God’s Judgment

causes terror and guilt, and in the end—presumably after the Civil War, which is imagined as blood and fire—the nation is left as a warning to others, a “once oppressing nation, / Smitten by God’s fearful ire” (25-28). This sense of God’s role in national conflict—and in individual freedom—feels different from the God described in Harper’s earlier poetry. This is the God at the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, one who participates in earthly injustice and intercedes on behalf of the oppressed. Though heaven is yet distant, God’s hand touches the nation.

This scale of God’s intercession changes again in “Deliverance,” a poem published in the 1893 edition of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. In this poem, deliverance is still told through a Biblical story of oppression, but Harper shifts her focus from God’s hand to the actions of the oppressed themselves. In the context of Reconstruction, Harper’s invocation to “Rise up! rise up! Oh Israel” calls on people to uplift themselves. The poem looks both ways: “redeemed” from slavery, Harper asks if the people should forget their “broken chains... / ... the wondrous change / That to our people came” (48-51). Harper surely suggests no: instead, she calls on her people to “go forth,” to move on. “Rise up with one accord, / And in the name of Christ go forth / To battle for the Lord,” she writes, “Go forth, but not in crimson fields, / With fratricidal strife, / But in the name of Christ go forth / For freedom, love and life” (58-64). In this new frame of movement and uplift—for these are a redeemed people—Harper reminds her readers that they no longer reside in crimson fields of bloodshed and war. In contrast to “human gore,” Harper celebrates the pursuit of “freedom, love and life.” In a parallel transformation, “the storms of war” at the hands of God’s justice transition to a “battle for the Lord.” Rather than working

toward redemption from slavery, African Americans can work toward the redemption of their race “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

“We Are Rising,” a poem published in the *Christian Recorder* in 1876, signals an evolution from trusting God to glorifying Him. Harper emphasizes racial uplift from the beginning, writing “We are rising, as a people, / We are rising, to the light” (1-2). She attributes this rising to God: “For our God has changed the shadows / Of our dark and dreary night” (3-4). Notably, in keeping with Harper’s mixed metaphors of light and darkness/sunshine and shadow throughout her poetry, God has not removed the shadows of slavery but only changed them. Slavery and its effects will not disappear, but God has interceded in the conflict and changed the course of history. Harper traces African Americans’ religious faith from slavery, writing that it was “In the prison house of bondage” (5) that “We first learned to trust in God” (8). The first stanza ends with this trust, which also seems to encapsulate the past, an era of oppression of shadows. In the next stanza, Harper changes the rhythm of the lines to embody the marching she describes: “We are marching along, we are marching along, / The hand that broke our fetters was powerful and strong. / We are marching along, we are marching along, / We are rising as a people, and we are marching along” (9-12). These lines describe the evolution I traced above in “Deliverance.” Harper acknowledges that God “broke our fetters” but then primarily emphasizes the communal “We” and its movement forward. These lines serve as a refrain that is repeated at the end of each stanza following. In the final two stanzas of the poem, Harper emphasizes that for any progress forward, “Unto God, be *all* the glory” (22). After deliverance and through uplift, she implores her people to continue marching

along and to glorify God through faith in Him. “Be the freemen of the Lord,” she writes (32), connecting freedom to God through the possessive preposition “of.” Moving from trust in God—something Harper grappled with in her early poems—to glorifying God parallels evolving depictions of redemption, from emancipation to racial uplift. And as we see in the Aunt Chloe poems and more fully in *Iola Leroy* below, glorifying God is grounded in the realms of morality and domesticity.

Across her works, Harper’s representation of African American domesticity, Christian faith, and national belonging changes. While her earliest writings convey an insecurity about the spaces of home and heaven, by the 1890s Harper confidently records God’s intercession in the injustices of slavery, depicting retribution at his hand even as she emphasizes the work of African Americans to glorify God through their own work. In this way, Harper asserts that African American social deliverance should be centered on (an increasingly stable) home life. Throughout Harper’s writing, domesticity is an important lens for understanding the vexed relationship between religious and secular forces. Harper conveys significant arguments—such as the perceived impact of God’s will on earthly life and the ways the institution of slavery shapes religious faith—through her discussions of African American domesticity.

Re-reading *Iola Leroy*

In *Iola Leroy*, Harper focuses on the relationship between Christian faith and political citizenship, discourses which she anchors in the home. Domestic spaces

likewise mediate the relationship between African American community and national belonging. As Carla Peterson has written, for African Americans of the Reconstruction period domesticity served as “an instrument of family and community empowerment,” an empowerment which contributed to nation building and conversely transformed the nation into a home (*Doers* 199, 209). This section builds on Peterson’s and others’ readings of *Iola Leroy* as a work of African American female empowerment. In her postbellum fiction, Harper transforms religious belief into social reform. No longer oriented toward Christian salvation—a comforting home in heaven—Harper works toward national belonging through domesticity on earth. If *Forest Leaves* embodied a yearning for the comforts of heaven, and later collections suggested that deliverance would come from God, *Iola Leroy* asserts that African Americans need not wait for God’s intercession for deliverance on earth or in heaven. They could accomplish that uplift on their own.

It is worth noting that *Iola Leroy* incorporates the domestic anxiety of *Forest Leaves* through scenes of slavery that similarly emphasize feelings of vulnerability. The speaker of a poem like “Yearning for Home” feels displaced from her home and family; the drama of *Iola Leroy*’s first half is predicated on the fact that Iola and Henry go to school in the north, separated from their family even when they are technically free. After Iola’s enslavement and Harry’s escape into the army, there is no semblance of home until after the war, when “remnants of broken families” eventually come back together (179). Harper depicts an even more complicated sense of displaced domesticity in the character of Robert Johnson, who turns out to be

Iola's uncle. Harper narrates how he feels upon learning that slaves can join the Union army when they pass through town:

Had that army, with freedom emblazoned on its banners, come at last to offer them deliverance if they would accept it? Was it a bright, beautiful dream, or a blessed reality soon to be grasped by his willing hands?...All the ties which bound him to his home were as ropes of sand, now that freedom had come so near. (35)

Here, Harper reverses the meanings of deliverance and domesticity that we might expect. Rather than Christian deliverance, Robert wonders if the army can offer an escape from slavery—deliverance would be freedom on earth, rather than salvation in heaven. The consequence of such deliverance, ironically and significantly, is a displacement from home. Robert feels released from ties that bind him to home and he willingly chooses to leave. The unspoken context, here, is that the “home” he names is not a home, but a space of enslavement. In that sense, Harper creates a sort of double negative. The Civil War feels like both a destructive and a redemptive force in the novel. Ultimately, the Union officers who enlist slaves take on the divine significance of deliverance, defeating the power of masters to bind slaves to a false home. And as the novel shows, the war completes this process of deliverance: “The silver lining of our war cloud,” Harper writes, “is the redemption of a race and the reunion of severed hearts” (216).

And yet, a later use of deliverance as a metaphor emphasizes the inequality that persists in the postbellum United States. Iola tells a story of an “outcast” African

American woman in need of help but turned away from an asylum for fallen women.

In contrast, for

an outcast white girl...the door was freely opened and admittance readily granted. It was as if two women were sinking in the quicksands, and on the solid land stood other women with life-lines in their hands, seeing the deadly sands slowly creeping up around the hapless victims. To one they readily threw the lines of deliverance, but for the other there was not one strand of salvation. (232)

In naming both girls outcasts, Harper emphasizes that they are equally victimized, and that only the color of their skin determines the degree to which help is available. Ultimately, charity is stratified by race. Here Harper's use of a metaphor of deliverance and salvation connects this scene of discrimination to the novel's earlier scenes of slavery. In a similar scene in her serialized novel *Trial and Triumph*, Harper raises questions about what this kind of treatment means for American identity. "Are these people Christians who open the doors of charitable institutions to sinners who are white and close them against the same class who are black?" Harper writes. "I do not call such people good patriots, let alone clear-sighted Christians" (212). Here, Harper links patriotism to Christianity, suggesting that a good American patriot should embody ideals of Christian charity. American identity and religious faith are linked. At the same time, she critiques those Christians who withhold their service based on racial difference. Indeed, in the passage from *Iola Leroy*, Harper doubles down on the religious implication of "salvation" from this kind of victimhood when she specifies that no other charity "talks more religion than the managers of this

asylum” (232). The moment feels similar to Harper’s abolitionist critique of Christians who defend slavery. Christian hypocrisy was not eradicated by the Civil War, it seems. And in that sense, Harper’s ambivalence about Christian faith and its place in the African American community persists, even in this ostensibly religious novel.

To be sure, there are explicit references to the joys of Christian faith throughout *Iola Leroy*. After all, Iola’s family is reunited through a series of meetings at Methodist churches, often recognizing one another through hymns or shared Christian references (193, 194, 140). If a novel like *Pierre* argues that inflexible Christian faith has the potential to destroy domesticity, *Iola Leroy* argues that Christian faith can bring dispersed families back together. Perhaps this difference is because, as I discuss in chapter two, Melville’s approach to domesticity is bound up in gender and the literary marketplace. In contrast, Harper’s approach to faith and family underscores the systemic oppression of an entire race. Facing the monumental hurdle of Reconstruction, Iola tells Robert and Dr. Gresham that “there is but one remedy by which our nation can recover from the evil entailed upon her by slavery....A fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their application to our national life” (216). Harper tells us here that Iola’s focus—and thereby one model of black womanhood—is based on faith. But in the rest of the novel, she shows us something different. Where we might expect a simple application of religious faith to domestic ideology, Harper develops a more nuanced model of the African American home, centered on moral women who contribute to both civic and Christian realms.

Iola Leroy models racial uplift through work, reform, and morality, rather than faith alone. We do not see any of the novel's central characters attend a church service, but we do see Iola pursuing work outside of the home, based on her "theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living" (205). We see Miss Delany likewise at work, developing a school from the ground up:

One day she saw in the newspapers that colored women were becoming unfit to be servants for white people. She then thought that if they are not fit to be servants for white people, they are unfit to be mothers to their own children, and she conceived the idea of opening a school to train future wives and mothers. She began on a small scale, in a humble building, and her work was soon crowned with gratifying success. She had enlarged her quarters, increasing her teaching force, and had erected a large and commodious schoolhouse through her own exertions and the help of others. (199-200)

This passage is well-known for its ethos of Republican Motherhood. Miss Delany aims to "train future wives and mothers," presumably because—as other moments in the novel suggest—women are at the center of racial uplift. And yet this passage does not elaborate on the content of Miss Delany's lessons, but rather on the success of her charity. Harper contrasts a "small scale" and "humble building" with "gratifying success," "enlarged...quarters," "increasing...force" and "large and commodious schoolhouse." In this lengthy description of Miss Delany's success, Harper emphasizes that her "exertions" literally pay off—there is physical proof of her success. A key moment in the Aunt Chloe poems is when she must "make the cabin bigger" ("The Reunion" 35) to accommodate her growing family. Something similar

is happening here with Miss Delany's school, but it is not a domestic dream—Miss Delany's work is public and institutional. If the school were a small business rather than what I assume is a charitable endeavor, this passage would read as a capitalist success.

As working women, Iola and Miss Delany do not proselytize. Rather than conversion, they model moral living. I read *Iola Leroy's* focus on reform as concerned with a crisis of morality, rather than a crisis of faith. At one of many intellectual debates staged in the novel, Professor Gradnor asserts, "I do not think that our moral life keeps pace with our mental life and material progress" (250). Gradnor puts moral life on the same plane as mental and material life here; morality is a human enterprise rather than divine. When the Honorable Digdale presents a paper on the "Moral Progress of the Race," he discusses morality in the context of "an undue proportion of colored people in prisons," bringing law into the discourse (254). Indeed, it is worth noting that this and other "*conversazione*" events include ministers, teachers, judges, and doctors—men and women of both secular and religious professions. These salons, which take place in homes, embody this dissertation's model of sacred space/secular fiction more literally than any other space in the study. While similar in effect to the epistolary format of *The Coquette* or the conversations transcribed in Mary Cabot's diary in *The Gates Ajar*, the *conversazione* is different in that it actually stages a debate between religious and secular thinkers on the topic of morality. *Iola Leroy* comes at the issue from all angles, rather than developing a singularly Christian morality, as a conduct novel or generic sentimental novel might. And as I emphasize throughout the dissertation,

literature represents this negotiation of morality's religious and secular dimensions as mediated within the space of the home.

As we have seen in Harper's later poetry, a moral life aims at glorifying God. Miss Delany's contribution to the debate at hand suggests that such glory is also tied to national belonging. She responds to Professor Gradnor,

I would have our people...more interested in politics. Instead of forgetting the past, I would have them hold in everlasting remembrance our great deliverance. Hitherto we have never had a country with tender, precious memories to fill our eyes with tears, or glad reminiscences to thrill our hearts with pride and joy. We have been aliens and outcasts in the land of our birth. But I want my pupils to do all in their power to make this country worthy of their deepest devotion and loftiest patriotism. I want them to feel that its glory is their glory, its dishonor their shame. (250-251)

This passage draws together the many threads of Harper's transbellum writings—Miss Delany brings morality into politics, broadening the *conversazione* into the realm of national citizenship. She embodies the spirit of shadows, through which the past remains visible in the present moment, but celebrated as a sign of light. She reshapes a former trial as “our great deliverance,” a rhetorical move which transforms “aliens and outcasts” into American citizens. In glorifying God through their own uplift, Miss Delany suggests, African Americans can also claim the glory of the United States as their own nation. That, it appears, is Harper's ultimate dream.

What I have been trying to show is that Harper's well-known novel is both traditional and quite new. Even as Harper emphasizes faith in God, she develops a

morality (grounded in temperance and hard work) that straddles religious realms alongside law and politics. Throughout *Iola Leroy*, Harper emphasizes that women, as good wives and mothers, should spearhead the racial uplift efforts. When Iola presents on this theory of moral womanhood in her paper “Education of Mothers,” her audience responds with agreement:

“I agree,” said Rev. Eustace, of St. Mary’s parish, “with the paper. The great need of the race is enlightened mothers.”

“And enlightened fathers, too,” added Miss Delany, quickly. “If there is anything I chafe to see it is a strong, hearty man shirking his burdens, putting them on the shoulders of his wife, and taking life easy for himself.” (253)

The Reverend takes the idea of “Education of Mothers” at face value: enlightened mothers had long been celebrated in the nineteenth century as figures of moral instruction. But Miss Delany’s quick rejoinder productively complicates a simple return to early American theories of Republican Motherhood—she insists that men, too, should participate in racial uplift. Instead of “shirking his burdens” and “taking life easy,” man must strive to be a figure of morality as well. What Miss Delany theorizes, then, is a Republican Personhood. Harper proposes what Melville fails to represent in his antebellum tales: a domestic ideology that cultivates religious *and* civic belonging, for both domestic men *and* women.

On the surface, *Iola Leroy* seems to offer a straightforward renewal of Christian faith, which celebrates the reunion of families in the bosom of the church and the marriages of a new generation. While Harper signals Christian faith at crucial moments in the text, Iola and Miss Delany complicate what might appear to be a

return to sentimental Christian domesticity. Like Eliza Wharton and Hope Leslie before them, these women recoil at the constraints domesticity might impose, instead celebrating their own potential as breadwinners and contributors to a broader public society. Furthermore, even as they celebrate the importance of women for shaping the moral life of their community, they insist that men must hold themselves to the same standard, impugning male intemperance and laziness. And finally, while they assert that moral living is the most important factor in building a brighter future for the African American race, they understand that morality cannot stem from Christian faith alone—it must function in the realms of politics, the law, and the workplace.

Yet, Harper does not sacrifice a strong Christian faith in order to make these claims. I discuss in chapter one how Sedgwick allows the conservative Puritan Esther Downing to get the last word in a novel that celebrates Hope Leslie's secularist sympathy. Sedgwick therein suggests that many domestic ideologies are viable, and that Hope's and Esther's characters are mutually constitutive, representing a reciprocity between religious and secular realms. Yet Esther does not necessarily get her fair shake—she has been duped and neglected in the romantic plot of the novel, and her secondary narrative role as a foil for celebrating Hope is clear. Harper, then, accomplishes what Sedgwick attempts: in *Iola Leroy*, Christian faith and political, secular work are even more radically reciprocal than in *Hope Leslie*. Faith and citizenship coexist as foundations for domesticity. In scenes that literally stage debates about religious and secular investments, Harper represents the space of the home as a sphere that brings together these investments. Chapter three describes how Elizabeth Phelps brings the material to heaven through an extension of domesticity

into the afterlife. Here, Harper brings a spirit of divinity to earth, as she develops an African American domesticity that cultivates racial uplift through moral living. No longer wishing to reach heaven and home elsewhere, Harper develops a domesticity in the here and now—a realm that is both sacred in its nature and secular in its practice.

Notes

¹ See Elliott and Stokes, Introduction to *American Literary Studies: A Methodological Reader*, and their discussion of Edward Said's *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (10).

² See also Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Destiny,"; Lora Romero, *Home Fronts*; Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence*; Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, *No More Separate Spheres!*, especially the section of essays in "Domesticity Undone: Case Studies"; and Linda Kerber's "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," also published in *No More Separate Spheres!*

³ Hendler admits that his monograph, *Public Sentiments*, is largely male-focused, but his model for the sentimental narrative is nonetheless relevant to a discussion of woman-authored texts.

⁴ See also Lori Merish, whose *Sentimental Materialism* frames women's domestic labor and consumer culture within Marxist feminism.

⁵ Though the opening line promises introduction of the mansion's inmates, the chapter excludes any details about the governor's children, "as they were in no way associated with the personages of the story" (145). In that sense, Sedgwick only emphasizes Mrs. Winthrop as an integral part of the home.

⁶ Susan Coultrap-McQuin calls this the "paradoxical" position of the woman writer from around 1840-1880 (7). For more on the profession of writing in the context of True Womanhood, see Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*.

⁷ See Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction* and "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women"; Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage*; Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism*; Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*. For an introduction to early feminist literary criticism of American women's literature, see Susan Harris's *19th-Century American Women's Novels*. Sandra Gustafson's "Religion, sensibility and sympathy" also provides a short history of this criticism. For more recent work on sentimental literature and religion, see Claudia Stokes's *The Altar at Home*.

⁸ See Harris for more on the reception of domestic literature in twentieth-century criticism.

⁹ Summarized by Harris, 9.

¹⁰ It is also worth noting that in many cases, the young couple is in some way already related. For more on incest in domestic literature, see for instance Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy*.

¹¹ See Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular" and Siedel, "Beyond the Religious and the Secular in the History of the Novel."

¹² Enmity, paradox, and reciprocity are the stages of secularization theory laid out by Kevin Seidel in "A Secular for Literary Studies." I owe my clarity on the postsecular debate to Seidel's presentation at MLA 2018, where he shared a portion of this essay, published in *Christianity and Literature* 67.3.

¹³ As in the ending to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in which Harriet Beecher Stowe invokes Christian sympathy, writing, "There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*" (452).

¹⁴ Other critics have done great work on depictions of these faiths, including postsecular perspectives. On Catholicism and American literature, see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome* and Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties*. Elizabeth Fenton also writes on *The Book of Mormon* and American literature. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* for foundational work on Islam and secularity, as well as Molly Robey's work on Elizabeth Champney's *Three Vassar Girls* in the contexts of Islam and the Holy Land.

¹⁵ Similar work by other critics suggests a broader trend than my dissertation can document. See, for instance, Ashley Reed on Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons* (1862) in *J19*. A panel on "Postsecular Heroines" at the 2017 MLA Convention largely aligned with what I am saying, particularly Dawn Coleman's presentation on Henry Adams's *Esther* (1884).

¹⁶ Drawing on the foundational texts of Nathan O. Hatch and Cathy N. Davidson, Tracy Fessenden argues that the democratization of Christianity and the democratization of the written word proceeded together (*Culture and Redemption* 6). Hatch's scheme of democratization refers to the period between 1780 and 1830 during which the population of the United States drastically grew, mass movements expanded and thereby diversified American Christianity, and religion took on a populist quality as these movements grew from the ground up and centered on "ordinary" people rather than "high culture" (5). Hatch argues that such democratization brings "the church into popular culture" and away from orthodoxy (10). He emphasizes the role print culture has in such a shift, increasing the accessibility of the church as "pamphlets, booklets, tracts, hymnbooks,

journals and newspapers” flood American culture (11); this booming print culture is precisely the focus of Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word*. In this context, sentimentalism represents a new, democratic religious landscape in which books were widely distributed and read, and had significant cultural impact.

¹⁷ See Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*.

¹⁸ In 1847, Congregationalist minister and theologian Horace Bushnell published *Christian Nurture*, a new theory of the relationship between childhood and Christian redemption. Bushnell maintains that children have the capacity for goodness from birth, and should not wait until an adult conversion to know Christian life. It necessarily follows, he argues, that “The house, having a domestic Spirit of grace dwelling in it, should become the church of childhood” (19-20). And given the “simple, ingenuous age of childhood,” Bushnell suggests that children are poised for moral education (21).

¹⁹ In her Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Hope Leslie*, Carolyn L. Karcher argues that Sedgwick “shares narrative authority with her characters,” emphasizing that all of the novel’s characters, even those otherwise marginalized, are allowed to voice their perspectives (xxxiii). She specifically notes letters from Esther Downing, Bertha Grafton and Philip Gardiner that narrate action and even “alter” it (xxxiii). Magawsica, through oral narration rather than written, likewise shares in the storytelling. *Hope Leslie*, Karcher maintains, “enacts” democracy through this “multivocal” narration, providing a “dialogue that addresses...the place Native Americans, religious dissenters, sexual transgressors and women (among others) ought to occupy in a utopian America” (xxxiii). The multivocal spirit of *Hope*

Leslie's narration embodies the dialogic quality of the secularist sympathy I describe in this chapter.

²⁰ Laura Korobkin catalogs such criticism in the opening paragraphs of her essay "'Can Your Volatile Daughter Ever Acquire Your Wisdom': Luxury and False Ideals in *The Coquette*," citing Elizabeth Barnes, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Gillian Brown and Sharon Harris. Korobkin, however, pushes critics to "attend as carefully to what Eliza *wants* as to what she *resists*," and argues in her essay that what we label Eliza's "self-sufficiency" is instead "self-indulgence" (80). Korobkin's evaluation of Eliza's "volatility" is convincing, but I am less interested in Eliza's character flaws specifically than in the domestic landscape of the novel.

²¹ Dawn Coleman makes a compelling case against Taylor's "voluntaristic model" in her essay, "The Spiritual Authority of Literature in a Secular Age." Coleman asserts "our relative *inability* to choose our religion or spirituality," citing Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Augusta Jane Evans's *Beulah* as literary representations of spiritual determinism (526). However, my reading of *The Coquette* is not centered on a crisis of faith, as in the novels Coleman cites. Eliza's desire for agency within the realm of courtship functions as a useful analog for secularist choice.

²² As Cassuto points out, "Eliza's desperate swinging from one extreme to the other shows that women have no in-between option to turn to" (112). Cathy Davidson similarly argues that a sentimental heroine's predicament like Eliza's "demonstrates the postulated dichotomy of the clearly virtuous and the clearly vicious central to this fiction is itself a fiction" (*Revolution and the Word* 220). Both critics attend to a

necessary domestic middle ground not available to Eliza, the absence of which Foster fiercely laments.

²³ Quotations are taken from the Rutgers University Press edition of *Hope Leslie* edited by Mary Kelley.

²⁴ Laura Doyle asserts that Magawisca's heroic status in the novel actually enables the removal of her and Indian Americans generally in the novel. Her dissenting power is coopted at the service of an Anglo-American cultural narrative. See *Freedom's Empire*, chapter eleven.

²⁵ Since Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s recovery of the text in 1983, critics have worked to uncover the history of Harriet Wilson to substantiate its autobiographical elements. As P. Gabrielle Foreman writes, "Readers must acknowledge that the text functions as an autobiography characterized by its complex novelistic qualities just as surely as it can be considered a brilliant novel that makes substantial autobiographical claims" (125).

²⁶ Beth Doriani points out that a core subject revealed by the novel's original subtitle is "Life...in...a...House," emphasizing *Our Nig*'s domestic focus (213). Lois Leveen likewise shows how the full subtitle "Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North" indicts the idealized American house through antonymic relationships between black and white and free and house: "The very designation of [Frado] as 'free,'" she writes, "seems nullified within the confines of the house" (562).

²⁷ Whereas Hegel's allegory is contingent upon the slave's submission to the master's "version of reality," Frederick Douglass (Gilroy's exemplary figure) shows a

preference for death over submission in his 1845 *Narrative*, which upends the scheme.

²⁸ Foreman and Pitts explain that the line “She was restrained by an overruling Providence” likely refers to the story of Hagar in Genesis: “Hagar, Sarai/Sarah’s black Egyptian handmaid, flees from her mistress’s harsh treatment. An angel meets her and tells her that the Lord hears her affliction, and that her seed shall be multiplied, but that she should nonetheless go back to Sarah, saying ‘Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.’ Gen. 16:8-10” (95, note 6.)

²⁹ For more on Melville’s relationship to Sedwick, see Balaam.

³⁰ See for instance Weinauer and Levine.

³¹ I refer here to the oft-cited contemporaneous review of *Pierre* titled “Herman Melville Crazy.” See “Contemporary Responses” in Robert Levine’s edition of the novel, 431.

³² Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture* claims that Melville resists and critiques feminization through Pierre’s “suffocat[ion] in the feminine sensibility” (313).

³³ My reading of Falsgrave is in part indebted to conversations with Dawn Coleman at the “Sacred Literature, Secular Religion” conference in October 2015 and to her discussion of Falsgrave in “Melville and the Unitarian Conscience.”

³⁴ For more on Melville’s relation to women’s reading practices in the nineteenth-century, see Avallone.

³⁵ Gillian Silverman defines Melville’s approach to reading (and authorship) in *Pierre* as textual sentimentalism, “the desire for interpersonal attachment facilitated by and

organized around writing” (99). (That interpersonal attachment is a version of the material and neurological communion that reading affords.) Silverman claims that Melville, even as he championed autonomy, nonconformity and individuality, also “imagined the writer as spiritually and physically merged with a select sympathetic audience” (85).

³⁶ The copy was given to Herman Melville by his Aunt Jean in 1846 and had been published by the American Bible Society in 1844. Digital versions can be found at *Melville’s Marginalia Online* and the Harvard University Library Online; the original is housed by the Houghton Library under accession number *AC85 M4977 Zz844b.

³⁷ In *Melville’s Bibles*, which catalogs and interprets Melville’s biblicism and exegesis, Illana Pardes argues that Melville “rejects all notions of character consistency,” emphasizing the duplications and splittings of both human and divine characters across Melville’s works (9).

³⁸ Sacvan Bercovitch writes of Pierre’s wearing the rag pamphlet through “the various stages of his agon,” which makes him “an incarnation of its ‘lettering,’ a walking emblem of the correspondence it insinuates between horologicals and chronometricals” (300).

³⁹ Quotations from these short stories are taken from the HarperCollins Publishers collection titled *The Happy Failure: Stories*.

⁴⁰ Sarah Wilson calls this Pierre’s “paralysis-by-stifling” (67).

⁴¹ See Dowling, 47.

⁴² David Dowling notes that many of Melville’s settings, including *Moby-Dick*’s whaling ship, are domestic spaces as well as workplaces. Sarah Wilson discusses how

Melville's male characters require domestic spaces for identity formation, and how Melville could not separate his own work from his domestic sphere. Wyn Kelley similarly focuses on the possibility of domesticity to support writing (and vice versa).

⁴³ The consolatory work of domesticity is a nearly ubiquitous critical frame for the *Gates* novels. See, for instance, Nina Baym's introduction to her edition of *Three Spiritualist Novels*; Williams also cites this conversation in *Reclaiming Authorship*, 162 note 18. For works that address Phelps's approach to Protestant Christianity, see Barnes, Bergman, Harde, and Smith.

⁴⁴ Faust also writes about heaven's significance as a hermeneutic for understanding the Civil War and its overwhelming death toll. See *This Republic of Suffering*, in particular the chapter "Believing and Doubting," in which Faust engages Phelps, 185-187.

⁴⁵ For more on the significance of Kansas as a location for heaven, see Samuels, "Mourning and Substitution."

⁴⁶ For example, Nina Baym's collected edition of *The Gates Ajar, Beyond the Gates, and The Gates Between* is subtitled *Three Spiritualist Novels*.

⁴⁷ Along with the proliferation of new religious denominations that came out of the Second Great Awakening, Spiritualism arose from the intersections of Enlightenment thinking and Romanticism, as Americans strove to understand the world in a rational way and do so from a place of individual feeling. Spiritualism's central belief that spirits could communicate with human mediums and reveal truths about life after death represents this tension well: the séance, the setting for such communication, was based on the scientific principle of the circle, essentially believed to create an

electrical circuit that supported a connection between spirit and human life. As historian Brett Carroll describes, in their “worshipful attitude toward science and technology,” Spiritualist developed “a technology of religious devotion” centered on the emotional vulnerability of the individual medium (135).

⁴⁸ Kete calls this reconciliation a sentimental collaboration, or “an ongoing economy of affection and sentiment” (94).

⁴⁹ See Duquette, *Loyal Subjects* 66, quoting Noble.

⁵⁰ See Long, “The Corporeity of Heaven.”

⁵¹ See Long, “Postbellum Physics” 361, 362-363.

⁵² See also Faust for more on the relationship between science and religion vis-à-vis the Civil War.

⁵³ See Williams, *Reclaiming Authorship* 174-178 for further discussion of Phelps’s realism, especially with regard to William Dean Howells.

⁵⁴ See Weinstein, “Heaven’s Tense” 68.

⁵⁵ Johanna Ortner, who discovered *Forest Leaves* in the Maryland Historical Society archives, places the publication date of *Forest Leaves* between 1846 and 1851, based on details about the publisher, James Young, and Harper’s biography (“Lost no More”). In this chapter, I quote from the online edition published by *Common-Place: The Journal of Early American Life* as a part of the Just Teach One: Early African American Print project.

⁵⁶ Eric Gardner emphasizes the “forest” of black print culture, for example (“Leaves, Trees, Forests”). See also Peterson, who discusses the nineteenth-century trend of using “Leaves” to describe poetry collections, perhaps because of its derivation from

the Latin word *folium*. Peterson also suggests that Harper viewed her early poetry as “simply the natural and spontaneous expression of her thoughts,” inspired by nature (“Searching for Frances”).

⁵⁷ Cody Marris coins the term “transbellum” to accommodate what he calls the Long Civil War, and indeed, he closes out *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* (2015) with a brief sketch of Harper’s work (156-157). Marris points out that many authors we think of as antebellum were bound up in the Civil War and its effects, and that their careers continued into the so-called postbellum era. His book relies on four canonical writers to illustrate the transbellum: Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson. Harper shares much with Whitman, whose poetry is likewise characterized by extensive revision and curation. She also fits neatly into Marris’ description of the “unyielding production” of African American writers, which “followed up” on antislavery writings, composed “African American history,” sketched “late-nineteenth-century Southern society,” and continued to tell slave narratives (7). Her writing absolutely tells a story of “multilinear upheaval” (3). Yet, Harper is absent from Marris’s text until that brief conclusion. Marris acknowledges that many authors could be classified as transbellum (7), and he makes a convincing case for his decision to focus on these four, canonical authors (8). In a sense, the canon and the 1865 periodization of the nineteenth century are symbiotically defined; they are “‘relational’ categories” (8, quoting Marshall Brown). Marris elaborates in particular on the phenomenon of the American Renaissance with regard to the period and the canon (11-16).

⁵⁸ See essays by Carla Peterson, Meredith McGill, Eric Gardner, et al in a special issue of *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life: The Journal of Early American Life*, “On the Recovery of Frances Ellen Watkin Harper’s *Forest Leaves: Archives, Origins and African-American Literature*.”

⁵⁹ Take, for instance, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Given its emphasis on the malleability of Christian doctrines to oppress slaves and the evidence of hypocritical church leaders and members, it would appear that the promise of afterlife in heaven is a central, if not the sole appeal of Christianity to slaves. In the “Aunt Nancy” chapter, Jacobs describes the appeal of heaven as a space for reunion. Several of Nancy’s children died as infants, and it is clear that her children’s deaths and Nancy’s own illnesses were a direct result of her status as a slave. But Nancy maintains focus on anticipated reunions with these deceased babies: “It is not the will of God that any of my children should live,” she says, “But I will try to be fit to meet their little spirits in heaven” (161).

⁶⁰ Interestingly, a revision of “I Thirst” in 1872 resolves the 1840s speaker’s isolation by introducing the spirit of God within each heart, which suggests that Harper’s faith grows stronger over time. In the version published in *Sketches of Southern Life*, Harper places the slightly revised text of the original poem under the heading “First Voice” and adds a second section titled “Second Voice.” Many of the minor revisions are punctuation changes, though in the third stanza Harper notably changes “a worn and weary heart” to “many worn and weary hearts,” suggesting that the feelings expressed in the early version are actually collective. The “Second Voice,” importantly, offers solace that the speaker of “I Thirst” does not receive. The very

dialogic nature of a second voice represents the shift from isolation to consolation.

“Second Voice” explains that the first speaker should not seek someone else to “bring unto thy fever’d lips / The fount of joy and love” (15-16), nor should she “vainly delve” into death—presumably where the healing stream is located (17). Rather, the voice explains, “Within, in thee is the living fount, / Fed from the springs above; / There quench thy thirst till thou shalt bathe / In God’s own sea of love” (21-24). In this later version of the poem, there is a solution to the fever of a weary heart: the knowledge of God within you. Faith, Harper suggests, bridges the distance between here and there, earth and heaven.

⁶¹ Harper’s revision of the poem as “The Revel” in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) shifts the focus even more explicitly onto the subjects of the poem. In “The Revel,” the stanza describing the charnal house instead amplifies the role of drinking alongside the mirth of song and dance. “The wine cup’s glow,” Harper suggests, cannot cover over the fact of death, which is repeated in each stanza’s final line, as in the original (9). Carla Peterson suggests that this specification of intemperance in the later poem might indeed be the “hidden source of grief” in Harper’s early poems, a grief “so raw that she could not directly address it at the time” (“Searching for Frances”).

⁶² The forced smile in “Farewell” and the slaves’ emotions in *Iola Leroy* both embody Carrie Bramen’s descriptions of “black niceness” in the context of slavery (102). Like the speaker’s smile in “Farewell,” black niceness can denote an “absence of emotion,” a “veil” or “mask of concealment,” a “mandated

cheerfulness” that is “coerced,” and even an “open wound” or “traumatic mark” (102, 123).

⁶³ It is worth noting that in “Ethiopia,” help is portrayed as coming from “abroad,” a displaced location. Harper writes in the first and essentially repeats in the final stanza that Ethiopia (or enslaved African Americans) “yet shall stretch / Her bleeding hands abroad, / Her cry of agony shall reach / The burning throne of God” (1-4). As in my earlier discussion, the poem frames security taking place in the future and coming from elsewhere.

⁶⁴ Poems not published in *Forest Leaves* are quoted from Frances Smith Foster’s *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*.

⁶⁵ Harper likewise revises “Ethiopia” to begin “Yes!” instead of “Yes,” for *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. Her abolitionism clearly becomes more forceful in the later poetry. These punctuation changes might seem minor, but they represent Harper’s increasing investment in abolitionism. More to the point, they bespeak the emotional force of such an investment.

⁶⁶ “Be Active” was published in *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* on January 11, 1856, and in the *Weekly Anglo-African* on July 30, 1859.

⁶⁷ Foster names Moses a “key figure in Harper’s personal mythology,” noting Harper’s 1856 poem “The Burial of Moses” and the 1859 essay “Our Greatest Want” (*Brighter Coming Day* 135-136).

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