GOD AND THE NOVEL: RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN FICTION

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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My dissertation argues that the study of antebellum American religious novels is hindered by the secularization narrative, the widely held conviction that modernity entails the decline of religion. Because this narrative has been refuted by the growing field of secularization theory and because the novel is associated with modernity, the novel form must be reexamined. Specifically, I challenge the common definition of the novel as a secular form.

By investigating novels by Lydia Maria Child, Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Hannah Bond, I show that religion and the novel form are not opposed. In fact, scholars' unexamined and unacknowledged definitions of religion and secularity cause imprecision. For example, the Marxist definition of religion as ideology causes misrepresentations of novels with evangelical purposes, such as Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Bond's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Both novels feature protagonists who submit—one to patriarchy and the other to slavery—a stance that appears masochistic to feminist scholars and critics of slave narratives, respectively. However, attending to the biblical allusions, divine interventions, and theological arguments that saturate these texts places them in another framework altogether and reveals that they are commenting not on one's relationship with other humans but with God.

Likewise, unexamined definitions of the secular are problematic because critics often conflate two definitions: the etymological sense of "earthly" and the modern sense of "anti-religious." This slippage underlies the view that religious literature of the nineteenth century became less religious, when it simply became more grounded in daily life. Therefore, to label as "secular" an author like Stowe, who promoted an earthly, lived Christianity, is only accurate if one means "mundane."

Finally, my dissertation demonstrates that literary criticism itself relies on the secularization narrative, perceiving itself as modern and progressive. This reliance obscures the role literature has played in constructing this narrative. For example, colonial novels like *Hobomok* and *The Scarlet Letter* rewrite American religious history to exclude Calvinism. Noting how our investment in secularity has delimited interpretive possibilities, this project opens the way for increased clarity in the study of religion in literature.

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All the acts which I have done expressly to serve thee, and also all the acts which I believe to be neutral and purely human, and also all the acts which I know to be disobedience and sin, I put into thy hands, O God, my Lord and Savior; . . . use, cut, trim, reset, readjust, now that it is no longer I who can decide or know, now that what is done is done, what I have written I have written. It is thou that canst make a line true by taking it up into thy truth.

-Jacques Ellul

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: READING RELIGION IN THE SECULAR ACADEMY

This study grew out of a simple question: Is the novel secular? This question was the title of the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel conference in 2011. To answer it necessitates defining two surprisingly complex terms: "the novel" and "secularity."

In this dissertation I argue that the study of antebellum American religious novels (pre-Civil War) is hampered by the widespread acceptance of the secularization narrative—the myth that modernity entails the decline of religion. By examining novels by Lydia Maria Child, Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Hannah Bond, I show that histories of the novel that define the genre in terms of an emergent secularity obscure formal aspects of novels that do not fit this hypothesis: for example, theological arguments, biblical intertext, incorporations of the supernatural and the afterlife, and realism in the service of religious discourse. Most importantly, my dissertation demonstrates that unexamined definitions of the religious and the secular can blind scholars of American literature to the nuances of religious fiction by compelling them to interpret religion as something other than religion—typically as authorial strategy or as ideology.

Rationale: The Secular Novel and the Secularization Narrative

Two seminal works that define the novel genre assert that it is a secular form. This concept was first proposed by Georg Lukács in his 1916 *Theory of the Novel*, in which he contrasts the epic and the novel. The age of the epic was integrated and happy; being and destiny, life and essence, were one. A divinity ruled the world, and humanity

knew him as father. But the modern era is an age of “transcendental homelessness,” the novel its expression (41). In an oft-quoted line, Lukács defines the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). For him, writing at the outbreak of World War I in what he later calls “a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world,” the novel is modern humanity’s attempt to recapture a sense of totality (12). Having lost God, humanity lost its system of meaning, and it conducts the impossible but necessary search for meaning through the novel. Though he does not use the term “secular,” by associating the novel with a God-abandoned world Lukács implies that the novel takes over the meaning-making function that God or religion used to provide.

A second influential historian of the novel, Ian Watt, explicitly connects the novel with secularization. In *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) he argues that *Robinson Crusoe* is the first novel because it centers on the daily life of an ordinary person, a focus that became possible because of the “secularisation of the Calvinist conception of stewardship” (74). He expounds, “The Puritan conception of the dignity of labour helped to bring into being the novel’s general premise that the individual’s daily life is of sufficient importance and interest to be the proper subject of literature” (74). In other words, Puritan theology valued the mundane activities of laypeople as a way to serve God, and this dignifying gave birth to the novel form as the culture secularized—or moved away from Calvinism. Watt’s most important contribution to novel theory is the concept of formal realism, which he also associates with secularization:

> It is certain that the novel’s usual means—formal realism—tends to exclude whatever is not vouched for by the senses: the jury does not usually allow divine intervention as an explanation of human action. It is therefore likely that a measure of secularisation was an indispensible condition for the rise of the new genre. (84)

For Watt, formal realism is the primary characteristic of the novel and the literary equivalent of empiricist philosophy. Since the supernatural cannot be measured and explained empirically, the novel form jettisoned it. By "secularization" Watt here means declining belief in the supernatural—such that "the jury" (a stand-in for common sense) no longer accepts divine intervention. Watt concludes his analysis by quoting Lukács: "The novel, Georg Lukacs has written, is the epic of a world forsaken by God" (84).

Lukács and Watt establish the novel as the modern form that arises out of the complex conditions of modernity. They both characterize modernity as secular, which they use to refer generally to something that is the opposite of "religious." They differ, however, in that they represent opposite responses to secularization—the nostalgic and the celebratory. For Lukács, the secular novel arises to fill the existential hole left when God disappeared. For Watt, the secular novel displaces religion in the march of economic and social progress. Nevertheless, they share the assumption that religion is irrelevant to the novel.

These early definitions of the novel form have so deeply informed studies of the genre that many novel theorists take its secularity for granted. Since literary history progresses differently in different societies, Lukács' assessment of the European novel and Watt's assessment of the English novel should not be uncritically applied to all contexts. However, discussions of "the novel" as a monolithic genre tend to do just that. Writing in 2000, novelist Donna Tartt asserts that the "rather godless quality of the novel is not an aesthetic or cultural choice, but a necessity grounded in form" (25). Susanna Lee, in *A World Abandoned by God* (2006)—a title taken from Lukács—examines secularism as "an idea especially clearly articulated through the novel form," since "the

departure of God becomes the formal substance and undertone of the novel" (11). In the first chapter of Franco Moretti's two-volume edited tome *The Novel*, Jack Goody echoes Watt: "The modern novel, after Daniel Defoe, was essentially a secular tale, a feature that is comprised within the meaning of 'realistic'" (21). In this one sentence Goody, like Watt, correlates three characteristics—modernity, secularity, and realism—that are constitutive of the novel form. If the novel is the modern form, and secularity is a natural and necessary part of modernity, a close connection between the novel and the secular is not surprising.

A handful of scholars complicate the traditional view of the novel as secular by tracing its origins in religious genres. For example, two early responses to Watt point to the influence of spiritual autobiography on *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (1965), G. A. Starr offers a providential interpretation of *Robinson Crusoe* in place of Watt's focus on economics. The next year, J. Paul Hunter published a book with a similar theme, in which he traces the Puritan subliterary traditions behind *Robinson Crusoe* and concludes, "It is no coincidence that the first major early English writers of prose fiction were steeped in Puritan tradition, and I suspect that the novel as an art form owes a great deal to Puritan modes of thought" (*Reluctant* 94).

The Puritan influence is strong on the American side, as well. Daniel Shea, for one, asserts "the prevalence of the autobiographical mode in American literature" in *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (1968). In particular, he describes the influence of Quaker journals on the writings of Thoreau and Whitman and the impact of Puritan spiritual autobiography on Dickinson and Henry Adams (269). Although these revised origin stories broaden our understanding of the novel, they do not necessarily

contradict the secular-novel thesis. It is possible to see the novel form as simply replacing outmoded religious genres such as spiritual autobiography or allegory, functioning as a secularized version of them. In fact, as we will see, this is a common conception of the relationship between religion and the novel.

A second way to reexamine the novel form would be to scrutinize the assumed connection between modernity and secularity. In the past decade, scholars in multiple disciplines have shown that the relationship between the two is exceptionally complex. Up until this point, following sociologists Max Weber and Peter Berger, most scholars had assumed the secularization narrative: the idea that secularization is a natural and inevitable part of modernity and that includes rationalization, universalism, social-structural differentiation (the separation of church and state), freedom, privatization of religious belief, modernization, progress, and moral advance (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 4-5). For example, in 1968 *The New York Times* reported Berger's prediction that "by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture" ("Bleak Outlook" 3). Though this prognosis may seem to have largely come true in Western universities (see below), Berger's insistence that "the impact [of secularization] is the same everywhere" has proven untenable (3). Recognizing this, one of Berger's recent books examines what he calls *The Desecularization of the World* (1999).

In light of the flourishing of religious belief and practice in many modern non-Western countries, as well as the tenacity of religion in countries that are considered secular, such as the United States, the secularization narrative has been increasingly questioned. Just as theories of modernity have begun recognizing multiple modernities,

theories of secularization have also become more precise and diverse. The growing field called secularization theory is made up of anthropologists, political theorists, philosophers, and sociologists who question the secularization narrative, concurring that "a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable" (Asad 1).[1] The secularization theory discussion is particularly active on a website called *The Immanent Frame*, founded in 2007 as a forum for dialogue about secularism, religion, and the public sphere. The four main points of agreement in secularization theory are helpfully summarized in an article by Colin Jager, which I will paraphrase:

1) Secularization must be carefully defined. It is not just the subtraction of religion to free up the modern self who was there all along.
2) Secularism is not neutral but coercive, and it masks its force under the name of "tolerance."
3) "The religious" is not the opposite of "the secular." Rather, secularism is complexly intertwined with Christianity, and that relationship produced the categories of religious and secular at a particular point in Western history. Therefore, religion appears as a marked category against the neutral secular.
4) Secularism is a Western phenomenon and does not apply to all countries—Turkey and India being prominent counterexamples. ("Romanticism" 799)

In short, "the secular" is not just a state that naturally appears once a society undergoes the inevitable process of modernization in which it sheds religion. Instead, "the secular," "secularism," and "secularization" are all value-laden terms with histories and motivations behind them.

It is evident that the insights of secularization theory complicate traditional theories of the novel. The novel's supposed secularity rests on the premise that "the secular" is the opposite of "the religious"—since the secular novel takes over when religion dies out—but this premise also has been refuted. Secularization theory has brought to light the fallacy of what has been labeled the "Arnoldian replacement theory"

(Kaufmann "The Religious" 616). In 1880, Matthew Arnold declared, "There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable. . . . [M]uch of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" (xvii). For Arnold, religion was falling away, and poetry would stand in its place. Leland Monk articulates his twentieth-century version of this hypothesis, which still holds sway: "The autonomous aesthetic of literary realism eventually takes over the functions of spirituality in an increasingly secularized world" (45). Kevin Seidel has traced the Arnoldian replacement theory in the works of four canonical theorists of the novel: Ian Watt, John Richetti, Michael McKeon, and Cathy Davidson. For all four, the novel takes over the function of the religious, as Seidel explains: "On the one hand, religion must disappear to make room for new social or cultural forces: individualism (Watt), human agency (Richetti), crisis in epistemology and virtue (McKeon), and the reading self (Davidson). At the same time, those forces carry forward a sense of religion, albeit a transformed or distorted one" (642).

Michael Kaufmann (2007) has demonstrated that the replacement theory, which depends on the secularization narrative, has influence beyond theories of the novel. In fact, it is ingrained in the very self-definition of literary studies. In a New Literary History article (2007) he contends: "Histories of the profession of literary studies have long been underwritten by a narrative of secularization. It seems generally accepted that while the discipline and its practitioners were once more religious, literary studies is now a decidedly secular enterprise" (607). Kaufmann points out that many histories of the profession characterize literature teachers as replacing "their ministerial ancestors" as "priests and theologians of English" (quoting Gerald Graff and Robert Scholes) (616).

The replacement theory depends on viewing the secular and the religious as essential terms in an oppositional binary, but secularization theory has shown each term to be unstable—defined in different ways for different reasons. Because literary studies relies on this binary, it fails to recognize that the binary is constructed. Kaufmann clarifies,

> The conviction that religion has long ago been left behind renders the secular itself into a transcendent category—a fixed and stable view from nowhere. . . . But as we have learned about other "self-evident" categories—maleness, whiteness—it is precisely those terms . . . that have become so normative that we no longer even notice them, that continue to exert a strong control over our thinking. (614)

Tracy Fessenden summarizes the predicament: "Of all the binaries to which . . . suspicion directs our disciplined scrutiny, the secular/religious binary is last to yield to critical pressure because it lies closest to the heart of professional identity" ("The Secular" 633). Of course, literary studies is not alone among academic disciplines in its reliance on the secular/religious binary; as many have observed, the modern research university itself is underwritten by a narrative of secularization.[2]

Needless to say, the intertwining of literary studies and the secularization narrative affects the study of religion in literature. If the field views itself as replacing religion, then there is no need to study religion as such any longer. It has departed, and much of what it used to offer is now provided by literary scholars. Moreover, if literature *itself* replaced religion, then studying religion in literature is impossible because they cannot coexist. Of course, few scholars would consciously assent to these propositions. However, their influence can be seen in the way religion in literature has been studied historically. Jonathan Ebel and Justine Murison describe how in the 1980s, when the canon expanded and theoretical approaches multiplied, "religion was demoted. . . . It became . . . another ideology at play within literature, one that could be taken up, ignored,

or seen as a mystification of the economic realities or power relations behind it" (3). Likewise, in 1995 Jenny Franchot criticized how religion had "been disappeared" from scholarship on American literature, becoming an "invisible domain" (837). She noted that when scholars did treat religious themes, they tended to subordinate them (or "translate them") to the more common social categories of race, class, or gender (840). Both analyses point to how religion in literature, since it is unavoidable, had to be construed as something else. In summary, the replacement theory, which depends on the secularization narrative, undergirds three areas: theories of the novel, perceptions of literature itself, and the self-understanding of literary studies as a discipline.

Despite its shortcomings, literary studies is awakening to the challenge posed by secularization theory. The growing interest in how literature and literary study construct the religious and the secular is manifested in four special issues of journals in the last half-decade: "Methods for the Study of Religion in Early American Literature" in *Early American Literature* 45.1 (2010); "Religion and Prose," including a forum on "The Sacralization of Literature in the Nineteenth Century" in *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 39.1/2 (2012); "Reading Secularism" in *Comparative Literature* 65.3 (2013); and "American Literatures / American Religions" in *American Literary History* 26.1 (2014). In the American context, recent work on the connection between religion and print culture has challenged the idea that literature and religion work in opposition. The titles of a few recent works are themselves instructive: *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (2004) by David Nord; *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (2004) by Candy Gunther Brown; *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011) by John Lardas Modern; and

the forthcoming *The Evangelical Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* by Michael Warner. In various ways, each of these books argues the centrality of evangelicalism in shaping the American public—including the literary scene.

A few scholars of nineteenth-century British literature are also directly applying secularization theory in order to rethink literary history. Colin Jager's *The Book of God* (2007) highlights how design, a religious form, is entwined with Romantic literature—a claim that "complicates the long-standing association of romanticism with the narrative of secularization" (1). Charles LaPorte, a Victorianist, also explicates the impact of the secularization narrative on literary history of the period. He maintains that the narrative has caused critics to "favor the literary study of figures who are irreligious, anti-religious, or only ambivalently religious. . . . This can skew our sense of a culture's representative texts" not just in terms of religion but also in terms of gender, since most religious literature of the period was written by women (279). Thus, "a freethinking male novelist like Thomas Hardy becomes a representative of his age, while a churchgoing female one like Charlotte Yonge becomes a throwback" (280). In summary, "Our scholarly focus upon unbelief disproportionately marginalizes literature by women" (280). Those more familiar with American literature can insert Herman Melville and Susan Warner into LaPorte's analysis to appreciate the parallel phenomenon.

Secularization theory is making its way into nineteenth-century Americanist scholarship as well. Fessenden, for her part, has scrutinized the construction of religion in America in *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (2008). She delineates how forms of Protestantism became unmarked in American religious and literary history in order to show how a strain of post-Protestant secularism

became normative in scholarship (6). And finally, Gregory Jackson has applied both novel theory and secularization theory to expose the spiritual roots of American realism in *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (2009). Elsewhere he summarizes how trends in literary scholarship can make it difficult to see or understand the original intentions of religious novels:

> In its focus on specific paradigms of literary formalism, culturally elite aesthetic values, and critical methodologies little relevant to the religious novel's purpose of moral instruction and spiritual inculcation and its function as a devotional template, contemporary criticism has skewed literary history, projecting a modern-day aesthetic and secular hegemony onto a past in which belief systems, religious literature, genre, and generic function, to varying degrees, operated differently among class-integrated communities. ("Religion" 170)

Building on the work of Fessenden and Jackson, this dissertation studies nineteenth-century American women's fiction for the light it can shed on the relationship among religion, secularization, and the novel form. Whereas Jackson's book focuses on the post-bellum period, I examine the antebellum era because the presence and complexity of religion in texts of this era are too infrequently acknowledged.

Methodology: Reading Religion

This study considers four novels by antebellum Protestant women. I have chosen the antebellum period because, as Cathy Davidson has shown, the rise of the American novel occurred at the beginning of this era. I focus on Protestant authors because they are the best known of all the religious authors of the time, and my purpose is to offer new interpretations of books currently in discussion rather than to unearth new texts. Related to this, since one of my goals is to explore the presence of the secularization narrative in criticism, I require works with a body of scholarship already in place. It is my hope that

projects like mine will open pathways for the discovery of lesser-known texts by religious minorities of the time, such as Catholics and Jews. Lastly, I have studied works by women for a number of reasons, each of them an effort to fill a gap in criticism. As LaPorte declares, women writers have been neglected in part because of the secularization narrative. This is because, as Jackson affirms, religion often plays a central role in the structure and themes of women's fiction. However, as Franchot notes, the religion that upholds so much of this literature has either been neglected or translated into something else.

Most of the texts of women's fiction are available to us today because of the crucial recovery work of feminist scholars; however, the way these texts re-entered the critical conversation means that they have largely been analyzed from perspectives that regard institutional religions as patriarchal and therefore harmful to women. If religion is attended to, it is often recast in terms of gender. In an essay on Susan Warner, Sharon Kim summarizes the customary critical approach: "The dynamics of gender and power have provided the principal critical means for analyzing religion in *The Wide, Wide World*" (783). Many feminist readings treat the religious commitments of the writers as a means to carve out a space for female autonomy. For example, Joan Hedrick's essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe argues that, by virtue of being part of a woman's culture, Stowe "developed an egalitarian vision implicitly at odds with the pastoral model of her father and explicitly challenging the male clerical establishment" (308). The phrasing of her thesis is typical in its blending of religious and gender issues and its eventual subordination of religion to gender. Feminist scholars have done a tremendous service in recovering the works of women writers, and thanks to their work a second phase of

recovery that attends to religion and secularity as areas of study in their own right is now both possible and necessary.

Attending to the form of novels written by women is an equally crucial task. Although it has made progress, the recovery effort has not fully overcome the boundaries critics such as F. O. Matthiessen placed on women's fiction in 1941. He comments, "Such material [as popular women's novels] still offers a fertile field for the sociologist and for the historian of our taste" (xvi). In many ways, popular works have been read primarily in the way he suggests—for their sociological rather than formal interest. For example, Jane Tompkins' groundbreaking 1985 study *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* recovers certain works on these grounds. Focusing on the "cultural work" of sentimental novels, Tompkins justifies the novels' contrived plots and stereotypical characters on the basis that these characteristics "allowed [the works] to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition" (xvi). While vital in its time, this argument tends to categorize all sentimental works together and overlooks their formal uniqueness. In 1997, Joanne Dobson articulated the need to treat sentimental literature as more than simply cultural work. In "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," she asserts the need to read this body of work as *literature*, through "aesthetic and formalist investigation," rather than merely valuing it as cultural artifact (263-64). Now that these works are back in the critical discussion thanks to scholars like Tompkins, there is need for them to be revisited with closer attention to formal construction.

I situate my reading in what is turning out to be the third wave of trends in analyzing nineteenth-century American women's novels. In 1980 Nina Baym, in a study of what she called "woman's fiction," argued that much of it has the same plot, which she

termed an "overplot," in which an orphaned young girl finds her way in the world and ends the story protected in a happy marriage. A decade later, Susan Harris contended that this overplot was really a cover-plot that satisfied cultural demands of the day, and that under many novels there is also an underplot which held the actual, more subversive, message (*19th-Century*). Both approaches are still influential. In 1998, however, Judith Fetterley argued that concepts like overplot and cover-plot impose coherence on what are actually more complicated texts. Rather than fitting all women's novels into one of these molds, she called for using close reading as a critical tool to uncover the paradoxes in them.

Following Fetterley, I will also take the approach of close reading to highlight the variety of formal elements and even the variety of religious sentiments within such a small set as antebellum Protestant women novelists. Unfortunately, even such a careful reader as Tompkins can treat women writers as a monolithic group in terms of religion. For example, in order to assert the importance of writers like Stowe and Warner, she evaluates them as similar parts of a larger movement. She writes that both authors draw on tracts and religious narratives in the same way: their "novels are motivated by the same millennial commitment; they are hortatory and instructional in the same way; they tell the same kinds of stories; they depend upon the same rhetorical conventions; and they take for granted the same relationship between daily activities and the forging of a redeemer nation" ("Other" 159). Although works by both women do resemble religious narratives, we will discover that the Stowe and Warner actually differ greatly from each other in the kinds of stories they tell and how they tell them.

My academic concerns recall what literary scholars were interested in a generation ago. Indeed, some of my main interlocutors in this dissertation are critics writing in the 1970s and '80s—Tompkins, Lawrence Buell, and David Reynolds. One reason is that these scholars reclaimed religious literary texts that New Critics had dismissed. New Critics, in their focus on a certain type of aesthetics and the canon they created based on this, kept most women's writing in the margins for decades. A second reason is that the investigation of religion has not progressed very far since their era. In response to Kaufmann's essay, Fessenden ruminates: "A question the less-religious-over-time model of academic discourse leaves open, for example, and which I believe is worth pursuing, is: Where did inquiry into religion leave off? Where, in other words, have we been content to leave things?" ("The Secular" 634). The short answer is that we have left off with the analyses of the previous generation, which stand relatively unchallenged. The problem is that the work of these scholars, who could not take advantage of secularization theory, is steeped in the secularization narrative. We will see how their interpretations have shaped criticism on the authors in question, particularly Warner and Stowe.

My methodology may be unique in that I tend to read novels with the grain and critics against the grain. The reason for the latter has already been stated—I want to disclose the ideology of the secularization narrative that underlies so much criticism. The former derives from my grounding in the hermeneutical method, particularly the Heideggerian strain developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and taken up in different ways by Hans Robert Jauss and Paul Ricoeur. I share with these thinkers a concern for the horizon of the text—its original audience, the questions it attempted to answer, and its

original meaning. I believe the strength of the hermeneutical method is its posture of openness and humility. In *Truth and Method* (1960) Gadamer goes so far as to say that, as readers, we "open ourselves to the superior claim the text makes" and "subordinat[e] ourselves to the text's claim to dominate our minds" (311). Gadamer defends his emphasis on receptivity over critique by explaining that his "one-sidedness . . . has the truth of a corrective" (xxxvii). Indeed, literary theory is full of techniques that can too easily allow us to dominate a text and find what we want to find. If we are to encounter anything new, we must let the text guide us. Mikhail Bakhtin is similar to the hermeneutics philosophers in his insistence that truth is found in dialogue. As Caryl Emerson and Gary Morson put it in an encyclopedia piece on Bakhtin,

> The last thing one wants to do when reading literature from a different culture or epoch is to see it in terms of today's ethical or political concerns: one wants, on the contrary, to let the concerns of the work comment on and even judge us. We will thus enter into dialogue with it on terms largely not ours and will learn by responding to something genuinely other. (91)

In this dissertation, I challenge literary scholars to listen to—and even learn from—the voices of antebellum women writers by trying to attend to them closely myself.

Of course, I cannot claim to be reading without an interpretive lens. I have my own motivations for carrying out this study, which I have already set forth. I can only say that I have tried to choose lenses—narrative theory and secularization theory—that let the texts speak for themselves as much as possible. As an American Protestant, I have chosen texts whose original horizons are somewhat familiar to me. Because of my training in theology, I may be better equipped than other scholars to understand the contours and feel the force of the theological debates underlying these texts—such as Child's validation of natural religion and Stowe's agonizing about hell. As a lifelong student of

the Bible, I am apt to recognize the biblical quotations and allusions that saturate the novels of Warner and Bond, in addition to being familiar with the history of interpretation of those passages and attentive to different hermeneutical approaches to the Bible. Finally, my religious epistemology allows me to take at face value formal and thematic aspects of these novels like divine intervention and submission to God, rather than needing to explain them in some other terms. Each scholar has a perspective and experiences he or she can offer in opening up certain texts; these are mine. Hopefully my biases will also prove to be my strengths. The reader will have to judge their value based on the insights they give rise to.

Results and Conclusion: Religion Matters

In each of the four following chapters I analyze one novel, proceeding chronologically.[3] One reason for this chronological arrangement is to demonstrate that the supposed progression from religious to secular does not hold for this set of texts. The earliest novel studied, *Hobomok* (1824), is actually more invested in secularization than any of the others, while *The Bondwoman's Narrative (*written 1858) is thoroughly evangelical in its purpose. Although I characterize all four texts as "religious novels," they fall loosely into two groups: works that comment on American religious history (*Hobomok* and *The Minister's Wooing*) and works that seek to inspire Christian devotion and practice in the reader (*The Wide, Wide, World* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative*). As we will see, the authors' aims clearly influenced the formal aspects of their novels.

Chapter II serves as an extended introduction to the secularization narrative by showing it at work in Lydia Maria Child's first novel, *Hobomok*. This is the only novel I

read largely against the grain, seeking to disclose its ideology. A historical novel set in seventeenth-century Salem, *Hobomok* tells the story of Puritan Mary Conant losing and then regaining her Episcopalian lover, Charles. In between, she marries the Wampanoag Hobomok in despair over Charles' exile from the Calvinist colony. Recovered in the 1980s by feminist scholar Carolyn Karcher, *Hobomok* has usually been interpreted as Child's rejection of patriarchy and racism. However, the novel is equally concerned with rejecting Calvinism.

Hobomok is a novelistic version of the secularization narrative in that Child rewrites American religious history to exclude Calvinism. Drawing on the myth of the vanishing Indian, Child constructs the Puritan in much the same way—a dark, ignorant group whose eventual extinction is both natural and inevitable. She accomplishes this by critiquing the Calvinist doctrine of foreordination through her plot construction, characterizing Puritans as opposed to progress, and using light imagery to replace unillumined Calvinism with a natural, universal, enlightened religion. In short, Child portrays Puritanism as vanishing in order to generate a vision of America founded in natural, rather than orthodox, religion. I call this ideology the "myth of the vanishing Calvinist," noting that the same trope is at work in other texts of the period as well, such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Hope Leslie*.

Though the vanishing-Indian myth is familiar to today's scholars, most still interpret the vanishing-Calvinist myth as history rather than as ideology. In other words, overlooking the rhetorical effort that went into Child's creation of this trope, they view the demise of Calvinism as natural fact. As a result, literary criticism, particularly criticism of colonial historical novels, still uncritically inhabits the myth. The field's

devotion to the secularization narrative explains, in part, why it has been unable to perceive this narrative at work in texts like *Hobomok.* Attending to the vanishing-Calvinist myth can also illuminate the current religious scene, such as the conflation of America with liberal religion exemplified in such statements as "one nation, under God."

Chapter III examines the first American bestseller, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). Despite its popularity, this novel is little known and infrequently read today largely because of its religious worldview. Ellen, the protagonist, is a young Christian girl whose life is marked by trials that train her to submit to authority. In particular she submits to John, her teacher and eventual husband. Because of its detailed depiction of Ellen's self-abnegation, the novel is usually viewed in one of two ways: as a work that revels in masochism or as a covert rebellion against patriarchy. In contrast to interpretations that take gender hierarchy as the primary theme, I take religion as my principal area of inquiry.

The Wide, Wide World cannot be understood apart from the Bible. Placing *The Wide, Wide World* back into its original interpretive framework helps us interpret what kind of submission Warner was calling for. Submission means taking one's proper place in a larger structure, and the novel represents this idea formally by placing itself within the biblical narrative. It is saturated by Scripture on the levels of words, plot, and even its depiction of reality, which I call "evangelical realism." This formal analysis calls into question longstanding assumptions that imaginative literature and the Bible are necessarily in tension. Noting the biblical allusions associated with John also helps us see that he is not meant as an authoritarian masculine figure but as a stand-in for an all-

knowing, all-loving Christ. The novel is therefore not as interested in women submitting (or not) to men as it is in all humans submitting to the God who created them.

This chapter also examines the impact different definitions of religion have on the interpretation of religious novels such as Warner's. Criticism on *The Wide, Wide World* has been dominated by critics who define religion as ideology, following Marx. This is not surprising, given that this conception is how the novel re-entered critical conversation through Jane Tompkins' chapter on it in *Sensational Designs*. There she contends that evangelicalism served as a form of cultural authority for women—a positive sort of ideology. Unfortunately, Tompkins' recovery effort relies on the secularization narrative in that she perceives religion as a relic of the nineteenth century, foreign and unavailable to modern scholars. Other critics, such as Marianne Noble, define religion as ideology in a negative way—as a patriarchal construction. In this construal, Ellen's embrace of submission—even religious submission—must appear as masochism. Since God does not exist in this reading, Ellen's handing herself over to someone like John suggests capitulation to the ideology that subjugates her. Furthermore, Ellen's self-denial, which in the Christian context signals maturity, looks like regressive self-hatred in a Freudian context that emphasizes self-actualization. For an academic community trained in Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism, then, *The Wide, Wide World* might do the cultural work of disclosing the potential pitfalls involved in writing about religious literature as part of the secular academy.

Chapter IV focuses on *The Minister's Wooing*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's serialized novel that appeared from December 1858 to December 1859 in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Like *Hobomok*, it is a historical novel that centers on a love triangle. Set in Rhode Island

in the 1790s, *The Minister's Wooing* describes the turmoil that ensues in a Calvinist community when a young unregenerate man, James Marvyn, is presumed lost at sea. His mother nearly loses her faith and her mind, and his heartbroken, beloved Mary becomes engaged to the Puritan minister Samuel Hopkins. Because Stowe is quite critical of Hopkins, who was an actual eighteenth-century theologian, scholars have long viewed this novel and Stowe herself as a secularizing force—a linchpin in the shift from Calvinist America to secular America. Underlying this reading is the view, best articulated by David Reynolds in *Faith in Fiction* (1981), that American religious literature became less religious and more secular over the course of the nineteenth century. My contribution is to delineate the unexamined definitions of "the secular" that lie behind these critical commonplaces and cause serious imprecision in Stowe scholarship.

Though many view the romantic novel as a form inherently antithetical to religion, Stowe, at least, performs theological reasoning using it. She uses the formal resources of the romance—the marriage plot, telling and showing, interactions between the narrator and implied readers, and biblical allusions—to promulgate a Christianity grounded in the experience of human love. In particular, the novel rejects the existence of hell because a loving God would not eternally separate two people who loved each other—such as Mrs. Marvyn and her son, or Mary and her lover. The outcome of Stowe's novelistic theology is the conclusion that Calvinist doctrine, because it does not conform to the consummation of earthly love the romance plot drives toward, must be modified.

It is plain why readers would view Stowe's promotion of human love as being "secular." However, critical analyses of *The Minister's Wooing* often conflate two

definitions of the secular: one being the etymological sense of "earthly," the other the modern sense of "anti-religious." Therefore, they are correct to note the mundane dimensions of Stowe's Christianity but wrong to interpret her worldly focus as a movement away from religion. In Stowe, the religious and the secular are not opposites at all—the true religion is the one that is rooted in earthly experience. Because it confuses these two meanings of "secular," Reynolds' assessment of nineteenth-century religious literature turns out to be literary history's version of the secularization narrative—a story that tells how literature became more sophisticated, more *literary*, as it broke free from religious orthodoxy.

Chapter V turns to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, written by Hannah Bond around 1858 but not published until 2002. Part slave narrative, part novel, this strange text narrates the life of Hannah, a mixed-race woman in the antebellum South who eventually escapes from slavery. Once Henry Louis Gates, Jr. published the handwritten manuscript that he had bought at auction, the search began for its supposed author, "Hannah Crafts." In September 2013 the author was identified as mixed-race ex-slave Hannah Bond, and the critical scene that has been focused on questions of race, authorship, and veracity can now widen to other concerns as well. One of the unique features of the work, noticed by scholars but not yet analyzed, is its affirmation of piety in comparison with other slave narratives.

The combination of novelistic discourse and earnest evangelical purpose in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* confounds the assumption that the novel must be a secular form. Specifically, Bond's incorporation of divine intervention, which Watt claimed was anathema to the novel form, causes us to revise the role we believe the supernatural can

play in a novel. Understandings of “realism” that equate it with plausibility, and which in turn equate plausibility with an empiricist worldview, fail to describe works like *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Equipped with only this narrative, critics tend to read divine intervention in this novel as a convenient *deus ex machina* that Bond pulls out whenever she gets into a plot quandary. However, this is far from her actual hortatory purpose. Bond’s use of Providence and the Bible are instances of theodicy—Bond’s insistence that, despite the atrocities of slavery, God is in control and will enact justice.

The second assumption *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* confutes is the idea that antebellum Southern Christianity was solely a means of slave control. In this Marxist reading, religion is nothing but oppressive ideology, and any slave who converted to it was sadly deluded. Interpretations stemming from this conception regard Hannah as parroting her masters’ religion when she decides to remain enslaved but abandoning it when she chooses to escape. On the contrary, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* gives us a rare glimpse into the lesser-known history of slave religion—the reality described by Albert Raboteau of the identity, meaning, and sense of transcendence Christianity gave to some slaves. In *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* we hear the voice of a slave who was liberated by Christianity—both spiritually and physically.

Bringing secularization theory to bear on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* reveals that Marxists and novel critics share the belief that religion is otherworldly and therefore irrelevant. Marxists see religion as an opiate that causes the oppressed to defer their desire for justice to the afterlife, which will never occur. Many novel theorists, for their part, define the genre as excluding the supernatural and afterlife because they do not belong in this world. We have seen how these definitions unknowingly rely on the

secularization narrative and obscure important, even central, aspects of religious novels. Chapter V concludes by suggesting that definitions of the novel form, because they are closely tied to definitions of life and reality, are also tied up with the metanarrative each scholar believes best explains the world—whether it be Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, or a particular religion.

In conclusion, this dissertation has two goals: to pay attention to religion and secularization in antebellum novels as formal and thematic concerns in their own right, and to demonstrate how entrenched views of religion and secularity in the academy close off certain readings. One theme that runs through all the chapters is that religion matters. It mattered to the authors I study, and our views of it deeply affect the range of interpretations available to us as literary scholars, whether we are aware of it or not. Interpreting religion as something else—authorial strategy, ideology, or a plot device—causes one to misread and misrepresent these texts. Finally, this study suggests that defining religion, the secular, and even the novel form is not simply an intellectual matter. Likewise, defining the self and reality is not a neutral exercise. All of these concepts, which lie at the heart of how we conduct literary criticism, are ultimately bound up with personal beliefs about whether or not God exists. If we desire to truly listen, and even learn from, the authors we study, we must recognize that our beliefs about God determine the interpretive possibilities we are likely to entertain.

Notes

[1] Some of the foundational texts in secularization theory are Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (2003), and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007). Casanova contends that secularization is true if it is defined as social-structural differentiation but *not* as the decline of religion or the

relegation of religion to the private sphere. Asad defines "the secular" as an epistemic category that gives rise to "secularism," a political doctrine that leads to "secularization," the redefinition of the person as a citizen of a nation. Taylor traces the history of secularity in the West. By "secularity" he does not mean secularized public space or the decline of religious belief and practice but rather the changing conditions of belief, in which the default has gone from belief in God to unbelief, and faith is always seen as one possibility among many.

[2] Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini note that the secularization narrative is adhered to "religiously" in the United States and "still forms the presumed context in many fields of study" (4). Kaufmann spells out why this might be: "The close alliances between the rise of modern research universities, the rise of professionalism, and the dominance of industry and capital in the United States have infused higher education with a discourse that is at once based on progress (leading edge research, innovation, discovery, original contribution) and progressiveness (research that will improve society, find solutions to problems, and so forth)" (620). Berger, in *The Desecularization of the World,* notes that the one exception to the desecularization he delineates is a "global elite culture" arising from Western universities: "There exists an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is indeed secularized. . . .While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the 'official' definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communication, and the higher reaches of the legal system" (10). Finally, sociologist Christian Smith, in *The Secular Revolution* (2003), tells the story of how the American university became secularized: "the historical secularization of the institutions of American public life [including higher education] was not a natural, inevitable, and abstract by-product of modernization; rather it was the outcome of a struggle between contending groups with conflicting interests seeking to control social knowledge and institutions" (vii).

[3] The order of chapters VI and V is loosely chronological, since the publication dates of both works are complicated. *The Minister's Wooing* was serialized in the new *Atlantic Monthly* from December 1858 to December 1859 and published in book form in 1859. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, on the other hand, was not published at all until 2002. However, the most recent research indicates that it was begun in 1857 or before and finished in 1858. I discuss Bond's novel last because that chapter's argument incorporates threads from the other chapters and therefore serves best as a conclusion.

CHAPTER II

THE MYTH OF THE VANISHING CALVINIST: THE SECULARIZATION NARRATIVE IN *HOBOMOK*

> The wild, fitful light shone full upon the unmoved countenance of the savage, and streamed back unbroken upon the rigid features of the Calvinist, rendered even more dark in their expression by the beaver cap which deeply shaded his care-worn brow.
> (*Hobomok* 88-89)

It took Lydia Maria Child only six weeks to compose her first novel, *Hobomok* (1824). She later explained its origins:

> One Sunday noon, I took up the N. American Review, and read Mr. Palfrey's review of Yamoyden, in which he eloquently describes the adaptation of early N. England history to the purposes of fiction. . . . I seized a pen, and before the bell rang for afternoon meeting I had written the first chapter, exactly as it now stands. (*Letters* 232)

Yamoyden is an epic poem about the relations between the English settlers and Native Americans; its title character is a Native American who marries a white woman. In his review, Palfrey emphasizes the poem's historical setting as its strength. He writes, "We are glad that somebody has at last found out the unequalled fitness of our early history for the purposes of a work of fiction" (*NAR* April 1821). He goes so far as to prophesy success for any future author who chooses the same setting: "Whoever in this country first attains the rank of a first rate writer of fiction, we venture to predict will lay his scene here" (19). Child took up Palfrey's recommendation. In *Hobomok*, her first novel, she constructs a creation myth of seventeenth-century America, adding to the stock of national literature. Child published the work anonymously but signed it "by an American," emphasizing her nationality.

Set in Salem in 1629 to 1633, *Hobomok* centers on a love triangle between Mary Conant, Charles Brown, and Hobomok. Mary is in love with the Episcopalian Charles, but her Puritan father forbids the relationship. Hobomok, a Wampanoag who is friends with the settlers, is in love with Mary. Soon Mary is abandoned by everyone she loves. Her mother dies because of the harsh conditions, her best friend Sally marries and moves away, and Charles is banished to England for his religious views. News comes of Charles's ship wrecking; crazed with grief and loneliness, Mary marries Hobomok. After weeks she regains her senses and settles into a relatively happy life with Hobomok, and they have a child. Three years later, Hobomok sees Charles in the woods—Charles has escaped captivity in Africa and returned to Salem to wed Mary. Hobomok is tempted to kill Charles because he knows Mary still loves him, but he heroically decides that Mary rightfully belongs to Charles. He leaves a note of divorce for Mary and disappears to die of a broken heart. Charles marries Mary and adopts her son, and the new family reintegrates into the Puritan settlement.

Criticism on *Hobomok* has focused on gender and race. Neglected in critical discourse after the nineteenth century, the novel was recovered in the 1980s by Carolyn Karcher. Karcher's introduction to the American Women Writers edition (1986) is still the most influential scholarship on the novel. In it, she asserts that "Child founded both a female countertradition of American literature and an alternative vision of race and gender relations," and her interpretation has set the terms for subsequent critical debate (xv). Even scholars who disagree that Child's racial vision is progressive still accept race and gender as the primary themes.

However, the novel is also heavily invested in religion. Child's version of American history comments just as much on Calvinism as it does on the woman question and the Indian question. As Carl Sederholm notes, religion in criticism of *Hobomok* is usually subordinated to other issues: "Most critics mention Child's interest in religion to spur on more discussion of her political interests" (553). I propose to take religion as a central analytical category, focusing on an overlooked motif in *Hobomok*. I draw on the myth of the vanishing Indian as it developed in the antebellum period. Philip Deloria describes the myth as an ideology "which proclaimed it foreordained that less advanced societies should disappear in the presence of those more advanced" (64). Whereas the vanishing-Indian myth was primarily concerned with race, and *Hobomok* takes part in this myth, I argue that Child also uses a similar extinction story to distinguish between religious societies. I will call Child's version the myth of the vanishing Calvinist. Like it does with Native Americans, *Hobomok* relegates "regressive" Calvinists to the past and represents their extinction as natural and inevitable. Both myths are creative accounts that present themselves as history, thus functioning ideologically.

In *Hobomok*, Child portrays Puritans as vanishing in order to construct a vision of America based in natural religion rather than orthodox religion.[1] She accomplishes this through a number of formal devices: plot, characterization, and the trope of light and dark. Child's natural religion rejects doctrine and revelation and instead endorses religious sentiments universally accessible through nature and reason. *Hobomok* thus perpetuates the traditional secularization narrative—the idea that progress and modernization necessarily involve moving away from religious dogma and toward reason, universalism, and freedom. It is significant that the vanishing of the Calvinist

appears natural and inevitable to many scholars; in contrast to the vanishing of the Indian, the vanishing-Calvinist myth is still read as history rather than ideology.[2] In other words, we are still stuck in the myth. Recognizing how the secularization narrative has influenced current thinking about nineteenth-century literature, theories of the novel, and literary scholarship itself can illuminate how it has thereby limited interpretive possibilities.

Vanishing Indians and Vanishing Calvinists

The myth of the vanishing Indian is the guilt-assuaging belief that Native Americans would gradually fade away as "civilization" advanced over the North American continent. Simply put, native peoples would vanish—either by dying or by assimilating. According to Lora Romero, approximately forty novels published between 1824 and 1834 inculcated this myth, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) being the best known. In the last lines of the novel, a prophetic chief proclaims the end of the race: "The pale-faces are masters of the earth. . . . I [have] lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans" (327). By having a Native American speak these words, Cooper implies that even the Indians recognize that the white people must rule. The myth is underscored by the novel's title, which both celebrates the Mohicans and relegates them to the past. The vanishing-Indian myth served a nationalist function for authors like Cooper, Child, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick: "They took part in the discursive construction of an American national identity that was foremost on the cultural agenda in the 1820s. The topic of interracial relations was central to this understanding because it was by excluding the savage Other that 'American' society historically defined itself"

(Opfermann 31). In other words, making the Indian vanish helped make (white) American identity visible.

By placing the Indian and his destruction in the past, the vanishing-Indian myth also removes blame for the treatment of Native Americans in the present. Romero remarks that Cooper's elegiac mode "performs the historical sleight-of-hand crucial to the topos of the doomed aboriginal: it represents the disappearance of the native as not only natural but as having already happened" (385). If something is inevitable, counteracting it is impossible—one simply mourns it. This ideology served white interests, arising just as the U.S. government was beginning to formulate its policy of Indian Removal. Given that the campaign of Indian Removal spanned sixty years and involved serious military action, Romero notes the irony of the myth: "Thus we see just how much effort went into effecting the 'inevitable'" (386n3).

Hobomok is a classic deployment of the nineteenth-century ideology of the vanishing Indian.[3] When Hobomok discovers that Mary's beloved Charles has returned, he relinquishes his wife. He tells Charles he will "go far off among some of the red men in the west," who "will dig him a grave" (139). The geographic, racialized, and tragic aspects of the myth all appear here—Hobomok will travel westward, be among "red" men, and die. The chapter closes with Hobomok vanishing from sight as well as passing away (euphemism intended): "He paused on a neighboring hill, looked toward his wigwam till his strained vision could hardly discern the object . . . and forever passed away from New England" (141). Hobomok vacates his marriage to leave room for Charles just as Native Americans supposedly vacated America to leave room for white settlers. The episode in which Hobomok disappears was the most commonly extracted

piece in contemporaneous reviews, which indicates how popular the vanishing-Indian myth was at the time.[4] As J. David Stevens comments, “Hobomok’s departure enacts . . . a fantasy, his fictional flight in the mid-1600s validating the white presence in Massachusetts in Child’s own day” (44).[5] In 1828, Supreme Court justice Joseph Story articulated a version of the vanishing-Indian myth in a passage that bears striking resemblance to Hobomok’s exit from the novel: “Everywhere, at the approach of the white man, [Indians] fade away. We hear the rustling of their footsteps, like that of the withered leaves of autumn, and they are gone for ever” (qtd. in Deloria 64).

Though the novel perpetuates the vanishing-Indian myth, the presence of miscegenation in *Hobomok* marks it as racially progressive for its day. After all, the white protagonist marries a Native American man and survives. Even in *Yamoyden*, the model for *Hobomok*, the mixed-race couple dies at the end. *Hobomok* is especially revolutionary compared to Cooper’s horror of miscegenation in *The Last of the Mohicans*, in which he does everything he can to keep Cora and Uncas apart. Furthermore, the marriage in *Hobomok* is fruitful; according to Deborah Gussman, the offspring of Hobomok and Mary “legitimates their union” (67). As Karcher attests, the birth of Hobomok’s child contrasts with the barren marriage of Faith and Oneco in Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*, which is often considered more racially progressive than *Hobomok* (Introduction, xxxv).

The contemporaneous critical response to *Hobomok* also reveals how daring the young novelist was to include a multiracial marriage. The *North American Review*, for example, repeatedly singled it out as the major plot defect, calling the marriage “not only unnatural but revolting,” “in very bad taste,” and a “catastrophe” (July 1824, July 1825, April 1826). Because of such criticism, the novel’s sales were low until Child boldly

asked Harvard professor George Ticknor for his patronage. He pressured the *North American Review* to write about *Hobomok* again, this time including extracts (Karcher *First Woman* 38-39). Regarding the depiction of the Native Americans, critics' main objection was that Child made them too civilized—according to one review, if the Indians she tried to depict were still alive, they would scalp her (*NAR* July 1833).

The vanishing-Indian myth was powerful enough to cause white people to ignore the actual presence of Native Americans in the 1820s. If they were around, it was only as the last vestiges of a dying race. Child herself spent many years of her childhood living near and interacting with the Abenaki and Penobscot tribes in Maine (Karcher *First Woman* 10). Yet she depicts Native Americans as a doomed race in the 1630s, two hundred years earlier. Moreover, as Stevens points out, Child chose to make a specific change to the historical record, since the real Hobomok actually resided in New England until his death (45). In Child's creation myth of America, the only place for the Indian was in sacrificial retreat or accommodation. Hobomok disappears, and his son is incorporated into the community, but only after abandoning his father's name and his Native lineage.

Child draws on the vanishing-Indian myth, a familiar trope to her readers, to construct the Calvinist settlers as similarly dying out. Her main strategy is to associate both of them with darkness and to correlate progress with light. Native Americans are "dark children of the forest" who hold "dark and contentious councils" to decide whether to attack the white race (16, 29). The parallel symbolism used for the Puritans is hard to miss. During the nighttime hunt, Mr. Conant's rigid features are "rendered even more dark" by his beaver cap. This may mean his face is even darker than that of "the savage"

just described, or that it is darker than it usually is; either way, his face is cloaked in shadows. His face is not just obscured by the night, however; his "care-worn brow" indicates a spiritual darkness as well. Mary lives among a "stern, dark circle," and approaching ministers cast "shadows . . . on the sunny threshold"—both literally and figuratively (36, 65). Though the darkness of the Native Americans is linked to their skin color, it also bore connotations of ignorance and superstition. These characteristics also mark the Calvinists in *Hobomok*. The implication is that though they are supposedly of a superior race, the Calvinists are as retrograde as the Native Americans because they refuse to use their intellect (symbolized by light) and remain mired in belief in the supernatural.

As was true of Native Americans, Calvinists were also alive and well during Child's lifetime. In 1808, reacting to the liberalization of Harvard, Congregationalists founded Andover Seminary. Historian Mark Noll argues that Andover's curriculum became a popular model for the many other seminaries founded in the subsequent decades. These seminaries, as well as the numerous theological quarterly journals that sprang up between 1820 and 1860, caused Calvinists to be "central to the nation's formal intellectual life. . . . In the realm of elite public discourse, Presbyterians and Congregationalists reigned supreme" (Noll 254-55). According to historian Leo Hirrel, New School Congregationalists and Presbyterians also spearheaded a number of reform movements in the antebellum period, "provid[ing] critical leadership to anti-Catholic, temperance, antislavery, [and] missionary movements" (2). Though antebellum Calvinism divided into numerous denominations and did not gain the number of converts

that Baptist and Methodist churches did, its activity and influence were still considerable (Noll 255).

Child grew up in a Congregationalist church, but around the time she wrote *Hobomok* she joined her brother's Unitarian church. Though she did not remain a Unitarian, searching for a religion for the rest of her life, Child retained her loathing of Calvinism. In 1839 she wrote, "Calvinism grates and creaks harsher and harsher discord in the ears of my soul" (*Letters* 109). Given her views, it is not surprising that Child's representation of Calvinism in *Hobomok* is negative. What is noteworthy is the way she constructs Calvinism as dying out in the 1630s and as extinct by her own day, even though in actuality Congregationalism dominated most of New England through the antebellum period (Buell *New England* 39).

Child did not invent the myth of the vanishing Calvinist, nor is she its only purveyor; it is as prevalent in antebellum novels as is its racial counterpart. *A New-England Tale*, *Hope Leslie*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and many other novels also locate Calvinists in the dark, unenlightened past. Given the religious tensions of the day, it is not surprising that the negative representation of Puritans was common among Unitarians. In fact, Bruce Mills contends that to get published, Child accommodated to Boston Unitarian ideology, which included "the unfavorable portrayal of stern Calvinism" (12). Most liberal reviewers thought Child's depiction of the founding fathers was accurate. Their "mixture of good sense, piety, fanaticism, and intolerance" was considered perfectly delineated in *Hobomok* (*NAR* July 1825). Mr. Conant was believed to be "extremely characteristic of the severity of the time" (*Boston Weekly* Sept. 1824).

A few modern scholars are beginning to note the fabricated nature of this portrayal of Calvinism.[6] In his study of minister characters in American fiction, Douglas Walrath comments:

> The bigoted Orthodox Calvinist pastor who appears in fiction by James Paulding, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, James Fenimore Cooper, Lydia Maria Child, and others is not a historical recollection; he is a seventeenth-century character constructed intentionally to embody a nineteenth-century cultural image. . . . Roger Conant is an unusually transparent reflection of the nineteenth-century cultural image of the fanatical Calvinist. (24, 25)

Walrath maintains that *Hobomok* is not unique in its religious stereotyping, but it is a rather blatant example. Noting a similar trend, Lawrence Buell comments that Sedgwick and Hawthorne "strategically banish Puritanism to the dark ages" (*New England* 247). Child does the same. This chapter seeks to go beyond the observations of Walrath and Buell to consider not only the negative typecast of Puritans but also the rhetorical complex that makes the victory of one group over another seem inevitable. If Child, Sedgwick, and Hawthorne are "strategically" excluding Calvinists, what are the components of that strategy? Studying this dynamic in *Hobomok* reveals the contours of the vanishing-Calvinist myth, an understanding of which will also illuminate other texts.

What I call the myth of the vanishing Calvinist is a specific instance of the traditional secularization narrative. In this version of history, religion decreases as modernity increases. The story goes like this: "Implicit in the narrative is the idea that each step forward in time also marks a moral advance: a move away from religious authority and toward greater intellectual freedom and knowledge, leading eventually to governance by reasoned debate and ultimately to democracy and peace" (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 4). In this way the secularization narrative plots a timeline that is also a value

system, placing religion in the oppressive past and freedom, democracy, and peace in the enlightened future, as the goal of all modern societies. This ideology thus views reasoned inquiry, universalism, and progress in opposition to religious dogma.

Since *Hobomok* depicts Calvinism being replaced by natural religion—which is, after all, its own type of religion—it might seem strange to compare this depiction to secularization. I do not mean to conflate liberal religion with secularism, as historian David Hollinger maintains some evangelical critics have done (382). Rather, I want to point out that the difficulty of describing what is going on in *Hobomok* arises from our tendency to see the religious and the secular as stable, opposed, categories. As Talal Asad has demonstrated, the secular is neither a continuation of the religious nor its opposite. In other words, the two are not fixed categories but an unstable binary, always in flux (25). Gauri Viswanathan summarizes the situation: “words like ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ have lost their descriptive value and function instead as signposts to given attitudes” (xv). A useful parallel may be the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” which have different meanings in each context and for each person. Given the slipperiness of the terms, my goal is not to label Child’s perspective “religious” or “secular” but to highlight the cluster of concepts and values her novel shares with the traditional secularization narrative.

Hobomok’s dependence on the secularization narrative is evident in Nancy Sweet’s account of it: the novel “elucidates a progressive transformation of America from its unrefined and unenlightened Calvinist origins to a glorious present in which it models the Enlightenment values of reason, order, and toleration” (116). Child uses the formal materials of the novel to depict America’s Calvinist origins as unrefined and unenlightened. Through plot construction, she contrasts Calvinist doctrine with reason;

through characterization, she represents Calvinists as stuck in the past and opposed to progress.

Vanishing the Calvinist

Hobomok critiques the Reformed doctrine of foreordination through its plot construction. Predestination or election, the idea that God has chosen some people to be saved, is both central to John Calvin's theology and a major theme of the men's discussions in the novel. Foreordination is a related belief applied more broadly—the idea that God ordains certain occurrences before they happen. The novel comments on this belief in the way it ascribes causation, particularly in what causes marriages.

Mary's marriage to Hobomok is presented by the narrator as a disaster attributable to her belief in foreordination. Mary believes God has ordained her to marry Hobomok; this belief sets the novel's action in motion. In the first chapter, she performs a ceremony in the woods to find out whom she will marry. She makes a circle and chants, "Whoe'er my bridegroom is to be, / Step into the circle after me" (13). Hobomok leaps in, and she thereafter believes she is destined to marry Hobomok. Mary's ritual is far from orthodox Calvinism—it is witchcraft, and she later fears God's wrath for seeking the devil's help. But she also sees the result of the ritual as predestined by God. She tells Sally, "I must submit to whatever is fore-ordained for me," shuddering at the thought of marrying Hobomok (21). After her mother dies and she hears of Charles's death, in despair Mary offers herself to Hobomok, believing that she merely "submits to her fate" (123). The narrator states the moral, explaining that Mary "sunk under the stupefying influence of an ill directed belief in the decrees of heaven" (122). In sum, Mary's reasoning abilities are

destroyed by her wrong, "ill-directed," belief that God had ordained her marriage. The text also refers to her tragic flaw as "a blind belief in fatality" and a powerful "superstition" (121, 122). By equating it with fatalism and associating it with a ritual of witchcraft, the novel strips belief in foreordination of its theological weight. In effect, it classifies the belief with superstition and senselessness. The text bears this out: when Mary decides to marry Hobomok she literally loses her mind, becoming "insensible," her "reason hurled from its throne" (121). She undergoes the ceremony like a sleepwalker and does not regain mental faculties for several weeks. Taken as a whole, the scenario conveys that Mary's belief in the devil and her belief in the foreordaining Calvinist God are equally destructive to her reason.[7]

The novel depicts foreordination not only as a misguided belief but also as a relic of the past. One further event leading to the marriage is the appearance of a cloud that looks like a sinking ship, which everyone in the colony interprets as an omen. Mary believes it signals Charles's death. After describing the colonists' reaction, the narrator weighs in on their worldview: "At that credulous period, it is not surprising that superstition exerted her full force" (116). That gullible time is contrasted with "these enlightened days, when reason sits almost sole arbiter of the human mind" (116). This classic articulation of the secularization narrative, with its emphasis on the improvements made by the passage of time, renders the Puritan forefathers blinded by false belief and nineteenth-century readers enlightened and reasonable.

A subplot of *Hobomok*, Sally's courtship, also seeks to demonstrate the falseness of foreordination. Throughout the novel, Sally is characterized as active and irreverent. Her marriage comes about because of her own agency; she, in effect, proposes to the man

she loves. He later denies her role in the engagement in order to protect her, which shows how daring her initiative was. But after a few years, Sally tells Mary, "I believe matches are foreordained" (137). She seems to have forgotten how much effort she put into getting her mate. Having got what she wanted, she credits God with the match. Her supposed belief in foreordination is simply an after-the-fact convenience that affords her comfort.

Mary, on the other hand, has learned her lesson through what she sees as the tragedy of her marriage to Hobomok: "I don't know concerning [foreordination of marriage]," she says (137). Child's critique of Reformed theology in these lines of dialogue is attested by the fact that changing her mind on foreordination is the only way Mary's character alters in the novel. In other words, she has been perfect except for the obscuring influence of Calvinism. Lucy Maddox puts it this way: "Evidently Mary has soaked up enough Calvinism to complement her susceptibility to superstition, and the result is a rash, thoughtless decision that completely severs her from home and community" (100). Mary learns her lesson and sheds her belief in foreordination, a move that allows her to become the mother of enlightened America.

The novel's final blow to foreordination is its characterization of the doctrine as self-serving ideology rather than true belief. In a flash of illumination, the staunch Calvinist Mr. Conant "acknowledged that christians were too apt to mistake the voice of selfishness for the voice of God" (119). In other words, what one thinks is God's will is likely one's own will. Though Conant sees this for a moment, it passes. The next minute, he "tried hard to be convinced, and did at last verily believe, that earthly motives had nothing to do with his hatred of Episcopacy" (119). This scene depicts belief as self-

delusion; Conant tries to convince himself of his correctness, and when he is successful, his self-perception hardens into a belief. Second, the scene also draws a parallel between hating Episcopacy and knowing what God ordains, associating a belief in foreordination with intolerance.

Hobomok does not only disparage Reformed theology; it also presents Calvinists themselves as trapped in the past—both in the chronological sense and in the sense of clinging to tradition. The text repeatedly describes the Calvinist characters as old. Mr. Conant, who shows no other signs of age and is the father of a young woman, is often called an "old man." This especially occurs when he is denying Mary access to Charles. For instance, when Mr. Conant finds Charles in his home, he verbally abuses him: "Out with you, and your damnable doctrines, you hypocritical son of a strange woman" (77). The text then contrasts loving, youthful Charles with angry old Mr. Conant: "Before *the old man* was aware of his purpose, [Charles] stept back and took the hand of the mother and daughter" and blessed them (77, emphasis added). By using the epithet "the old man" in a scene in which the Puritan father spews venom on Mary's beloved, Child draws further connections between Calvinism, intolerance, and age. These characteristics construct a picture of barbarity, distancing the protagonists from the religious Other.

Concomitantly, *Hobomok* characterizes Calvinists as being opposed to progress. The adjective "rigid" is used seven times in the novel, always applied to a Puritan. The depiction of Mr. Conant exemplifies this, as can be seen in the passage describing him and Hobomok hunting by torchlight: "The wild, fitful light shone full upon the unmoved countenance of the savage, and streamed back unbroken upon the rigid features of the Calvinist, rendered even more dark in their expression by the beaver cap which deeply

shaded his care-worn brow" (88-89). Here the men are spotlighted and frozen in characteristic facial expressions. Hobomok is "unmoved," but Mr. Conant even more so—he is "rigid." In Child's construction, orthodox doctrine and practice render a person rigid in all ways. In this passage, doctrine becomes physiognomy—the rigidity that characterizes "the Calvinist's" religion finds its way to his features.

In their oppositional stance, Mr. Conant and the other Calvinists serve a blocking function in the text. The most prominent example of this is Mr. Conant's hindering of Mary's relationship with Charles. In addition to banishing Charles from his house, he plays a role in getting him exiled. He also blocks human interaction in general. In the opening scene, an English visitor is eating with the Conants and pleasantly answering Mary's inquiries about her friends back in England. Mr. Conant bursts in with accusation, halting the conversation: "Wherefore, Mary, do you ask about those, who bow the knee to Baal?"—referring to the Episcopalians, whom he believes are idolaters (9). He continues in a monologue, during which Mary grows more hurt and embarrassed and Mr. Conant more obnoxious as he articulates his hatred of heresy. The home's hospitable atmosphere, which Mary and the visitor (and possibly the reader) have been enjoying, is destroyed by his prejudice.

Mr. Conant is only the worst example of the oppositional Puritans; the text represents nearly all of the men in similar ways. In *Hobomok*, Calvinism is coded male—none of the women is ever referred to as Calvinist. Moreover, maleness is associated with misogyny and hard-heartedness. Noting the text's gendering of religion, Robert Abzug observes that Child's "identification of women with spiritual concerns distinctly superior to the passionate sectarianism exhibited by most of *Hobomok*'s male characters argued

for woman's leadership in recasting religion" (195). Because Child conflates Calvinism with the male gender, what Abzug reads as Child's promotion of women is equally a demotion of Calvinists. The stereotype is exemplified when the villagers hear of Charles's supposed death. The men and women have opposite reactions when they consider Mary. Each group speaks with one voice:

> The matrons and maidens paid a passing tribute of grief, as they asked,
>
> "How will the poor damsel bear this? The Lord support her; for whatsoever be her errors in doctrine, she hath a sweet-tempered face, and a disposition like an angel."
>
> "Hold your blasphemous tongues," replied their rigid listeners. "Because the children of Belial have a comely form, a smooth skin, and noble blood, you forsooth straightway liken them to angels of light. . . . As for the untimely end of him who hath bred so much disturbance among us, 'tis but the visitation of the Lord." (117)

The women are sympathetic, more concerned with Mary's kindness than her heresy. The men, "rigid listeners," sound much like Conant. First they tell their wives to shut up. Then they compare Mary to a child of Satan ("Belial"), casting aspersions on her physical beauty, and finally they interpret Charles' death as decreed by God. The chorus-like fashion in which the men's and women's responses to Mary are presented underscores the novel's treatment of them as homogeneous groups. In scene after scene, men/Calvinists are rigid, judgmental, and stuck in their ways—which are emphatically the ways of the past.

The Calvinists' obstructing role in *Hobomok* extends even to the level of diegesis. As Mark Vázquez notes, only women move the plot along, whereas men merely have conversations—usually theological conversations (178). The uselessness of theological controversy is emphasized formally throughout the text, as the narrator refuses to give it space. *Hobomok* is a framed narrative, supposedly written by a male author/narrator who

works from historical manuscripts penned by his ancestor. As Molly Vaux posits, the framing can be understood as a cover-story device in order for Child to gain a voice in a patriarchal society (128). The frame drops away quite soon after it is introduced, however, and the narration becomes third-person omniscient once the ancestor returns to England. For these reasons, the narrator's voice can usually be assumed to represent Child.[8]

The narrator breaks off doctrinal discussions twice in the text, suggesting that theological debates impede the progress of the story. For instance: "I willingly omit the altercation which followed, which is given at length in the manuscript . . . and lastly the theological discussions of the evening" (12). The author skips over boring parts of the manuscript, thereby shunning theological dispute—and doing so markedly. The same gesture occurs again later: "The manuscript mentions numerous controversies between [the men], but their character is so similar to those I have already quoted, that I forbear to repeat them" (57). In other words: the Puritans wasted their time fighting over doctrine, but, dear reader, I will not waste your time in narrating them. The descriptions of the debates also belittle them; they are nothing but a "wild war of words" and "disputes on matters of opinion"—far from matters of life and death, as the disputers would have viewed them (57, 149). In Child's imaginative world, both Calvinist men and Calvinist doctrine belong outside the narration of America's progress.

In a brilliant sleight-of-hand, Child places *all* theological disputes in the past. The beginning of the novel asks reader not to be too hard on the Puritans since they had difficult lives: "in this enlightened and liberal age, it is perhaps too fashionable to look back upon those early sufferers . . . as a band of dark, discontented bigots" (6). However,

the compassionate tone here does not match the negative representation elsewhere—*Hobomok*'s Calvinists are nothing but dark, discontented bigots. The text resolves the tension between praise and critique by fashioning itself as a eulogy, like Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans.* Nineteenth-century readers are invited to conceive themselves as being in an "enlightened and liberal age," beyond and above the Calvinists, whose time has passed. Further along in the progress promised by the secularization narrative, they could look down and acknowledge the strengths of those benighted heroes. The passage increases in condescension: "To us indeed, most of the points for which they so strenuously contended, must appear exceedingly absurd and trifling; and we cannot forebear a smile that vigorous and cultivated minds should have looked upon the signing of the cross with so much horror and detestation" (6). The "points" are points of doctrine, which the men in *Hobomok* spend much of their time debating.

Though this passage ostensibly defends the Calvinist against the critical reader, it does so by assuming the superiority of the present. It is steeped in the traditional secularization narrative, depicting the past as charmingly befuddled and the present as commandingly objective—not to mention the way it conflates those positions with the religious disposition of each age. Taken as a whole, its rhetorical effect is to render theological disputes exactly what they "must" appear to the modern reader: "exceedingly absurd and trifling." Debates are not only belittled, but also effaced from the present. In a telling phrase, the passage describes Child's time as "this impartial period," sweeping away all current disputes (6). Here we see Child again altering the historical record, for the theological controversies of her time were many. As Noll puts it, the mid-1820s to 1850s "was marked by a much-expanded landscape of theological debate," not the least

of which was the split between orthodox and liberal Calvinists that led to the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825 (262). The rhetoric of this passage not only changes history but also comments on the antebellum scene, intimating that any theological disputes that still remain *belong* to the past.

Finally, it is not really Calvinists who are the ultimate problem; it is Calvinism itself. One of the tenets of the myth of the vanishing Calvinist is that his disappearance is natural, and the novel enacts this not only by depicting Calvinists as old, but also by representing Calvinism itself as unnatural—specifically, as an encumbrance that must be shed. In so doing, *Hobomok* aligns itself with the strand of the secularization narrative that sees religion as an impediment to true humanity. Charles Taylor calls this strand "subtraction stories," describing the cluster of beliefs as

> stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside. (22)

In subtraction stories, the past minus its limitations (especially religion) equals the present. This idea is appealing because it views the present not as a new regime, with both good and bad characteristics, but as the best of everything that has so far ever been. Though history has often been seen through the lens of subtraction stories, they are myths, not history. In *A Secular Age,* Taylor demonstrates that Western secularization is not the inevitable march of progress from illusion to enlightenment, but is instead a shift in structures of authority, governance, and thought that happened at a particular historical moment for particular reasons in Western Europe. It is a new thing, not simply a revision

of the old. The first part of Taylor's description of subtraction stories—modernization involving liberation from illusions—has already been seen in Mary's beliefs being classified as old-fashioned superstition. The second part—religion as an impediment to human nature—is evident in the representation of the Puritan fathers.

In the cases of Mr. Conant and Mr. Oldham, Sally's father, Calvinism muffles their better, more humane selves. Mr. Oldham, for example, has a difficult time hiding his true self. His countenance "reminded one of gleams of light through a grated window . . . in vain cast over the natural drollery of expression" (36). His darker emotions, like bars in a window, only half cover his natural happiness. At his daughter's wedding, he is "evidently disposed for a merry-making," but the talk turns to the ensuing ordination of ministers. Mr. Oldham tries to compose himself; he "passed his hand over his face, to cover it with the coat of sobriety. But the attempt was in vain, for in his most serious moods his mouth looked as if it contained an imprisoned laugh" (61). His hand, the coat of sobriety, and Calvinism all conspire to hide his innate capacity for laughter. In fact, the entire wedding chapter is a study in grim religion overshadowing what should be an unclouded occasion. Mr. Conant, for his part, has embraced Calvinism's emotional concealment as a discipline. When someone praises him, his pride is "concealed beneath a deep shade of rigidity" (106). When Mary grieves the supposed death of Charles, Mr. Conant wants to comfort her but is incapable of it because of his repressive habits: "He did as he had too often done—stifled the voice of nature, and hid all his better feelings beneath the cold mask of austerity" (119). Chosen or not, Calvinism masks what is alive in both Oldham and Conant.

The verbs and images in each of these passages echo those of Taylor; feelings and nature are “concealed,” “stifled,” “hidden” behind masks, “cast over” by window bars, “covered with the coat of sobriety,” “imprisoned,” and trying to escape. In each case, something good and natural is being suffocated by an add-on that must be stripped away—a mask, a window, a coat, and a prison cell. Humanity has always been there, but orthodox religion has covered it over. Progress therefore necessitates jettisoning that religion, the way Mary jettisons her belief in foreordination. By the end of the novel, even Mr. Conant sheds his cold mask and welcomes Charles as well as Mary’s half-Native son. He is both religiously and racially tolerant, redeemed as a human being by his transformation. His evolution from rigidity to acceptance, from orthodoxy to affection (for this is the binary the novel sets up) represents what Child imagines is necessary for the march of progress and the full flowering of American civilization. Calvinism, as much as time, is “the veil which hid the American empire from the sight” in the days of settlement (100). The empire has always been there; it has simply been obscured. Subtract Calvinism, and you get America.

The fact that Calvinism can be subtracted reveals the main difference between the vanishing-Indian and vanishing-Calvinist myths. Religion can be changed, but race cannot. Mr. Conant can shed his dark Calvinist superstition and embrace his intellect, but Hobomok cannot erase his dark skin or the cultural connotations that accompany it. This is why Hobomok must die, whereas Mr. Conant can live. The other difference between the myths, of course, is that the vanishing of the Indian is inevitable but tragic, whereas the vanishing of the Calvinist is also inevitable but to be celebrated. Both, however, are necessary for progress to take place.

The Light of American Progress

The final and most pervasive formal device Child employs to effect the vanishing of Calvinists is the imagery of light and dark. We have already seen how she draws on the supposed darkness of the Native American to construct the Calvinist as similarly ignorant and superstitious. The imagery is even more pervasive, though. Using multiple resonances of this trope—creation imagery, day and night, and enlightenment—the novel replaces orthodox Calvinism with a universal natural religion.

Not only Calvinists and Native Americans, but also the entire epoch is dark. Child creates this effect partly through alluding to the biblical story of creation but altering the expected timeline. Strikingly, the moment of America's creation is not arrival in the New World, but much later; the text depicts the settlement era as pre-creation and Child's day as Edenic. The Puritan era corresponds to the pre-creation chaos of Genesis 1:2, in which God's spirit hovers over the waters. For example, the text says that "the spirit of God moved on the dark, troubled waters" of Mr. Conant's mind, and "the spirit of devotion sat brooding over the soul" of Hobomok (8, 33). Furthermore, the text opens by comparing the author's present-day New England with "a perfect Eden" and contrasts it with the barrenness of the nation's origins (5). For Child, the true America did not begin with settlement, but later.

The delayed timing of America's creation is reinforced by figures of night and day. In addition to referring to Eden, the novel's opening page contrasts the noontime of the reader's present with the dawn of the colonial period: "The cold dew of our chilling dawn is still visible beneath the mid-day sun" (5). The Puritan dawn is not warm and hopeful; it is cold and chilling. The text applies this sensory symbolism to Calvinist

ethics too: "the moral as well as natural atmosphere, was chill and heavy" (91). The dark psychological world of *Hobomok* is mirrored by a dark natural world. The vast majority of nature descriptions occur at night, making the moon and stars much more prevalent than the sun. Many of the important scenes also take place outdoors at night: Mary's circle ritual, a nighttime hunt, and Mary's decision to marry Hobomok. Child was not the only author of her time to imagine the settlers in the dark; Henry David Thoreau writes in his journal, "I find on seeing a painting of our village as it appeared a hundred years ago that I had not thought the sun shone in those days" (qtd. in Buell *New England* 206). Whereas Thoreau laughs at himself for what was likely an imaginative commonplace, Child endorses it.

Glimmers of true America—reasonable, intelligent, and *enlightened*—stand out in the pre-Edenic, nighttime gloom of the setting. A scenic description near the beginning of the novel uses a simile to establish the connection between light and reason: "the distant water was here and there gleaming, like the fitful flashes of reason in a disordered mind" (12). On the level of character, Mary and Charles are the bearers of light. Lamenting the "chilling storms" that surround Mary in the settlement, the narrator explains that Mary survives because her mind serves as her own light: "The intellectual, like the natural sun, sheds its own bright and beautiful lustre on the surrounding gloom" (35). This passage uses a more specific version of the simile seen earlier; rather than light being like reason, the sun is like the intellect. Charles is also notable for his illuminating intelligence, which manifests itself in his physiognomy. Even his dark eyes must be described as light: his "bright dark eye" rests on Mary (49). The text draws stark contrasts between the learned Charles and the ignorant Puritans: "some of them were so far below his intellectual

standard, that nothing could have saved them from his contempt . . . and in no situation whatever, could Brown have been a Puritan" (69). This passage opens the chapter depicting Charles' trial, in which Mr. Conant raves about Charles making the settlers "drunk with the fornication" of Babylon and Charles calmly replies with Latin quotations (70). Though they live in the age of darkness, educated and reasonable Mary and Charles are forerunners of the American republic.

The novel's light imagery seamlessly associates reason with natural religion. As William Rossi explains, natural religion "seeks to establish a knowledge of God accessible to all rational human beings without recourse to supernatural revelation" (104). God is revealed through reason and experience. In contrast to Bible-based Calvinism, enlightened religion in *Hobomok* comes from nature—both human nature and the natural world. These are the sources of Hobomok's religious understanding:

> The star, which had arisen in Bethlehem, had never gleamed along his path; and the dark valley of the shadow of death had never been illuminated with the brightness of revealed truth. But . . . there are rays from God's own throne, which enter into the affections. . . . Nor had he ever read of that city 'whose streets were of gold, and her gates of pearl, in the light of which walked the nations of them which were saved,' but there was within him a voice loud and distinct, which spoke to him of another world. . . . He had never read of God, but he had heard his chariot wheels in the distant thunder, and seen his drapery in the clouds. (33-34)

This passage establishes a shift from traditional religious forms of authority to other forms. Alluding to the star that marked Jesus's birth and the dark valley of Psalm 23, it begins by explaining that biblical revelation ("the brightness of revealed truth") has been unavailable to Hobomok. Though these Old Testament and New Testament sources of light have been absent, he has encountered a more immediate source: "rays from God's own throne." Turning back to the Bible, the passage paraphrases the description of the

heavenly city in Revelation 21, again commenting that Hobomok's knowledge of heaven does not come from this written revelation but rather from an internal voice. Finally, it states that Hobomok knows of God not through the Bible but through weather: the thunder and the clouds.

In this passage of classic liberal natural theology, the text supplants the Bible's revelation with nature's three times. Though he has not read the Gospel of Luke, the Psalms, Revelation, or indeed any of the Bible, Hobomok receives all the knowledge he needs from his emotions, an internal voice, and the physical world. The form emphasizes the theme; the biblical allusions become fewer as the passage progresses. Furthermore, the effect of the allusions is to render the Bible not authoritative but superfluous. Mrs. Conant later articulates the thrust of this passage most straightforwardly, asserting that the Bible can be dangerous because it leads to contention, "but in creation, one may read their fill. It is God's library—the first Bible he ever wrote" (76). In the world of *Hobomok*, reading the Bible results in petty disagreements while reading nature results in wisdom and compassion. This contrast reflects the basic tenet of natural theology that "a theology based on nature could ground the existence of God through evidence of the lawlike regularity of the natural world (the argument from design), thus rendering belief both rational and universal and thus avoiding sectarian dispute" (Rossi 104).

Child's belief in natural religion corresponds with the renewed interested in the book of nature during this period. Antebellum Americans who lauded the book of nature conceived nature "as a vast symbolic text, the purer complement of the humanly composed Book of Revelation" (Buell *New England* 182). According to Rossi, natural theology so informed natural science that each organism's adaptation to its environment

was seen as evidence of a benevolent Creator (116). The Transcendentalist view of nature was also influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century Swedish mystic who held great interest for many nineteenth-century Americans, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe. One of Swedenborg's most popular ideas was the "doctrine of 'correspondences,' which postulated that every aspect of the physical universe symbolized a spiritual truth" (Karcher *First Woman* 14). Emerson puts it this way in *Nature* (1836): "Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual truths" (35). In other words, the natural world reflects the moral world, which is why the natural world can be a source of insight. A narratorial comment in *Hobomok* applies this belief to religion: "Spiritual light, like that of the natural sun, shines from one source, and shines alike upon all; but it is reflected and absorbed in almost infinite variety; and in the moral, as well as the natural world, the diversity of the rays is occasioned by the nature of the recipient" (69). Just as the sun shines on everyone, so does spiritual light; the physical mirrors the spiritual. These lines extend the rays that enlighten Hobomok to all people. Moreover, they develop the analogy of sunlight and spirituality: as the sun is reflected in a variety of colors, so religion will be expressed differently by everyone.

A moonlight soliloquy summarizes the universalist religious message of *Hobomok*. In the Calvinist nighttime, Mary addresses the moon:

> Thou hast kissed the cross-crowned turrets of the Catholic, and the proud spires of the Episcopalian. Thou hast smiled on the distant mosques and temples, and now thou art shedding the same light on the sacrifice heap of the Indian, and the rude dwellings of the Calvinist. And can it be, as my father says, that of all the multitude of people who view thy cheering rays, so small a remnant only are pleasing in the sight of God? Oh, no. It cannot be thus. Would that my vision, like thine, could extend through the universe, that I might look down unmoved on the birth and decay of human passions, hopes, and prejudices. (48)

The moon brightens the worship places of many religions, which are catalogued: Catholic, Episcopalian, Muslim, Jewish ("mosques and temples"), Indian, and Calvinist. Since heavenly light is spiritual light, all of these religions are animated by the same God. Moreover, the moon is not only illuminating these religions but approving them—kissing and smiling on them. The reasoning of this passage is simple: because the moonlight shines on everyone, God is pleased by everyone. God was even smiling on Mary's moonlight ritual. Her mistake was to believe that Hobomok's appearance in her circle set in motion an uncontrollable fate.

The logic of the moonlight passage only holds up if the doctrine of correspondences is assumed, and the passage works because this doctrine undergirds the novel. Mary can therefore wonder if her father's belief in exclusive religion is possibly true and can judge without hesitation that it is not. Two meanings of the word "natural" morph in Mary's reasoning: because everyone receives the natural light of the moon, it is natural (inevitable, automatic) that everyone would be accepted by God. Furthermore, all humanity has access to God through physical nature, human nature, and the "natural" light of reason rather than revelation. In the last line of the passage, differences between religions are erased in the moon's omniscient view and belittled as resulting from ephemeral, self-serving motivations: "passions, hopes, and prejudices." Geographical expansiveness (looking at the whole universe) stands for breadth of understanding; if we could see everyone, the argument goes, we would be less bigoted. Mary's moonlight soliloquy not only describes universal religion—everyone worshiping the same God—but also makes it seem like the only reasonable choice. Child does not even name her view, and thus it goes unmarked.

Though universal religion may seem familiar to twenty-first century readers, it was a relatively new idea in Child's day. As Michael Warner reports, the conception of religion as "a universal category of subjective belief" is the common view today, but actually, like secularization, this idea came about at a particular historical moment (*Keywords* 214). According to historian Peter Harrison, "religion" originated in the seventeenth century as a way of distinguishing true religion (Christianity) from false religion (all others). In its infancy, the study of comparative religions "was motivated not by any deep interest in the religious faith of other peoples, but by the desire to score points from theological adversaries" (146). In order to compare religions, historians had to reduce them from "integrated ways of life" to data that could be compared—propositional beliefs (64, 174). Thus, a reality that was once intermixed with culture, practice, and tradition became disembedded and understood as a bullet-point list of beliefs. In the nineteenth century, the concept of religion began to serve the opposite function that it did in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—as a way to combine religions. Susan Ritchie contends that the liberal study of religion during that period was a search for universalism: "the early-19th-century interest in comparative religious study was also in a large part a result of the hope of natural theologians for a Religion that might transcend the issues of religious difference" (451). In other words, religion became Religion, something all humanity held in common.

Child participated in this hope and this search for Religion not only in *Hobomok* but in later nonfiction work as well. In 1855, after a decade of research, she published the three-volume tome *The Progress of Religious Ideas, Through Successive Ages*. In it she examines the history, strengths, and weaknesses of every known religion and shows the

similarity of the Christian scripture to those of other religions. It was the first non-academic comparative religious text in English, bringing the study of Oriental scriptures, comparative mythology, and German Higher Criticism to a popular audience (Karcher *First Woman* 375). In it, Child defines true religion as "not consist[ing] in *doctrines* of any kind, but in *sentiments* of reverence toward God, and of justice and benevolence toward our fellow men" (451). In *Hobomok*, the sun and moon unite all religions; in *Progress*, certain postures toward God and humanity unite them. In both, all religions are one.

In an effort to unite humanity and religions, Child ends up erasing differences. This has historical precedent, of course. According to Rossi, American natural religion was partly made possible by settlers ignoring the Native Americans: "Discounting to the point of invisibility the presence of centuries-old native cultures granted free play to a pastoral ideology in which American nature appeared uncultivated in comparison with European, and thus was made more readily the scene of individual encounters with transhistorical truth" (102). A similar dynamic occurs with the treatment of indigenous religion. When we are first introduced to Hobomok after Mary's ritual, he is a mysterious "savage," grunting phrases like "What for squaw no love like white woman" and throwing branches on a sacrifice heap (14). As he becomes "civilized," however, all traces of his religion vanish. Addressed by the divine light of nature, he stands in as a blank-slate recipient of natural religion. Since Child's concern is the contest between Calvinism and natural religion, indigenous religions must disappear.

For Child, the natural, universal religion *Hobomok* promotes is particularly well suited as the foundation for the American nation. Though it was written twenty years

before the term was coined, *Hobomok* presents a version of Manifest Destiny. *American Progress*, a famous painting by John Gast (1872), visually represents many of the forces at play in Manifest Destiny (see fig. 1). Read from right to left, the painting moves from light to dark as a large angelic woman floats west, stringing telegraph wires and carrying a schoolbook. On her head is what George Crofutt, the commissioner of the painting, calls "the Star of Empire." In the bright east, lit by a rising sun, are symbols of civilization: ships, bridges, cities, and railroads. In the dark west are storm clouds and fleeing figures: bears, buffaloes, and Native Americans. Crofutt exclaims that "the Indians . . . turn their despairing faces towards, as they flee from, the presence of the wondrous vision. The 'Star' is too much for them." For Crofutt, the Native Americans are

Figure 1: John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. Chromolithograph published by George A. Crofutt. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

not driven westward by governmental policy but rather must fall back before the "presence" of the figure who represents whiteness, civilization, Christianity, technology, and education—in other words, American progress. Native Americans simply do not belong in this light-filled empire.

Hobomok opens with the same image of light progressing from east to west, chasing darkness and chaos away. The opening page articulates the trope most clearly, first referring to "the chilling dawn" of the nation's birth and then continuing: "The sun . . . was soon to shine its splendor upon the altars of the living God. That light, which had arisen amid the darkness of Europe, stretched its long, luminous track across the Atlantic, till the summits of the western world became tinged with its brightness" (5-6). This image recalls Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), which opens with this line: "I WRITE the *Wonders* of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations [*sic*] of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*: . . .wherewith His Divine Providence hath *Irradiated* an *Indian Wilderness*." Whereas Mather was singing the praises of the Puritans, however, Child revises the image. For her, irradiation comes to the New World not with the Calvinists but after they have fallen from power.

Though light equals civilization in Gast's painting and universal religion in Child's novel, in both it symbolizes progress. Shifting from religion to politics without distinguishing between them, *Hobomok* prefigures Crofutt's analysis when it labels the light's approach "the proud and rapid march of freedom" (6). The light imagery renders the "march" not militant but benevolent, as well as irresistible—who doesn't want the sun to rise? The major difference between *American Progress* and *Hobomok* is that Child would have included the Calvinists fleeing into the darkness with the Native Americans.

In her creation story of America, “Let there be light” means, “Let there be universal religion.” Her version of Manifest Destiny includes the shedding of orthodoxy.

Recognizing the Myth

Despite the power of the vanishing myths, both Native Americans and Calvinists continue to be a vital part of America. In 2009, *TIME* listed the New Calvinism as one of “the ten ideas changing the world right now” and wondered whether Americans would return to “the austerely demanding God of their country’s infancy” (Van Biema). To call this the resurgence of Calvinism would be to ignore the role it has always played in American history and culture. Whether it has been seen as the founding religion of America, as in the *TIME* article, or the religion that needed to be set aside for America to be founded, as Child viewed it, Calvinism is bound up with America.

However, to this day, American creation myths like *Hobomok*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Hope Leslie* have been successful in representing American history as emancipation from Puritanism. Most critics have not yet identified the vanishing-Calvinist myth as a myth (Buell and Walrath being exceptions). Instead, many conceive the supposed decline of Calvinism as natural and unavoidable. Ann Douglas, in the introduction to her important work *The Feminization of American Culture*, says straight out that Calvinism’s “demise was inevitable” (13). Likewise, Sederholm’s analysis of *Hobomok* assumes the Calvinist has vanished. He writes, “By 1820, Child already recognized that Calvinism had run its course” (555). This looks like a simple description but is actually a multi-part argument:

1) Calvinism only really existed before 1820.

2) Its demise was inescapable after it "ran its course."

3) Before it was completely extinguished, the prophetic Child saw, or "recognized," that it would die out.

Whether it ended in the 1630s (according to Child) or the 1820s (according to Sederholm), Calvinism has always already ended. Critics like Sederholm who celebrate Child as progressive often fail to see the effort that went into creating that definition of progress as well as Child's own role in that construction.

Elements of the subtraction story are also present in many pieces of criticism on *Hobomok*. Child promotes her *Progress of Religious Ideas* as an attempt to liberate readers from religious bigotry, and Karcher's language as she discusses the work is equally steeped in the subtraction story (Karcher *First Woman* 383). Her description echoes the concept of unshackling at least four times. For instance, she introduces *Progress* as "a formidable three-volume comparative history of religion in which Child would liberate herself once and for all from orthodox strictures" (356). Abzug's analysis of Child is even more dramatically framed by the secularization narrative: "Loosed by Unitarianism from Calvinism, she pushed past Unitarianism to an experiential sense of religion" (195-96). In other words, Child was in bondage to Calvinism but was freed by Unitarianism, and then freed once again into experiential, "untethered" spirituality (195). Orthodoxy equals stricture; liberality equals freedom; and progress entails "pushing past" one to the other. Abzug buys into Child's ideology, concluding, "the book as a whole lays out a perfect and unique American religious vision" (195). As a last example, Maddox's remark, quoted earlier, that "Mary has soaked up enough Calvinism to complement her

susceptibility to superstition," adopts Child's anti-Calvinist ideology without comment (100).

A primary reason the vanishing-Calvinist myth is invisible to literary scholars is that the field is itself steeped in the secularization narrative. As Michael Kaufmann has established, literary studies understands itself as a secular discipline. The conception of literary studies as secular has two sources. The first is the perception of literature itself as a replacement for religion, which Kaufmann calls the "Arnoldian replacement theory"—"the belief . . . that poetry/literature replaces a religion that had become too dogmatic" ("The Religious" 616). The second is the idea of secularism as an objective, scientific position suitable for academic inquiry. Scholars in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy have demonstrated the falsity of the latter idea, but it is up to scholars of literature to examine the first.[9] Literary studies has only recently begun to adopt the insights of secularization theory, partly because the religious/secular binary undergirds and justifies the discipline. "Secular" literary critics can imagine themselves as unbiased keepers of culture, able to be critical of the blind spots of the past while also preserving all that is valuable. Kaufmann maintains that literary studies' "continued reliance on the secularization narrative . . . has effectively rendered the secular/religious dynamic inert" and unavailable as a critical tool ("The Religious" 614). The implication of Kaufmann's argument is that scholars who desire to see the nuances of the religious and the secular in literature are at a double disadvantage, since both their profession and their subject matter have already been labeled "secular."

For scholars of the novel, the problem is even more entrenched. Given how closely modernization is connected with the rise of the novel, and given that the main

tenet of the secularization narrative is that modernization necessarily involves secularization, the secularity of the novel seems obvious. Two of the most important accounts of the rise of the novel rest on this belief. For Ian Watt, the secular novel displaces religion in the march of progress. For Georg Lukács, the secular novel arises to meet the need left when God abandoned the word. Watt and Lukács share the assumption that religion is no more. However, the novel as a genre does not record the historical disappearance of God any more than nineteenth-century American novels document the actual extinction of Native Americans. It is true that religion was being relocated in eighteenth-century British culture, but literature took an active part in this relocation rather than passively reflecting it. Of course, the interplay between religion and literature took different forms in America than it did in England and Eastern Europe, the contexts Watt and Lukács analyzed. However, their accounts of the novel share similarities to the way American novels are often interpreted, especially regarding their treatment of religion.

My argument that Child used plot to falsify belief in foreordination actually fits with the idea that the novel is a secular form, since the genre is often viewed as replacing the metanarrative of religion. Peter Brooks summarizes this conception:

> The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of the providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world. The emergence of narrative plot as a dominant mode of ordering and explanation may belong to the large process of secularization. (6)

In other words, "providence" (God or religion) used to supply a "masterplot" that gave a comforting coherence to life and the world. Due to secularization, that metanarrative was

lost, and anxious people started to write novels to explain life. Similarly, Ian Watt contends that novels must ascribe agency to human beings rather than to God (84). This formal expectation is exemplified in the way Mary actively chooses to marry Hobomok, whatever her excuses may be. Human agency is the only force at play here—and that is Child's point. However, this is not to say that the novel form cannot represent a belief in the divine; though it critiques predestination, *Hobomok* equally promotes universal religion. Though this novel may participate in the secularization narrative, this is different from saying the genre is inherently secular.

In two ways, then, *Hobomok* serves as a counterexample to the related ideas that the novel naturally replaces religion and that the novel form is therefore secular. First, the displacement of orthodox religion in the text is not natural and inevitable; it is intentional and active. Recognizing the myth of the vanishing Calvinist helps us see the rhetorical effort Child has to exert to banish Calvinism to the past. Second, *Hobomok* is not anti-religious. The narrative form is not the opposite of theology; rather, it can serve as an alternate theological rhetoric. My chapter on *The Minister's Wooing* takes up this idea at length.

Hobomok establishes some normativities that still play a role in America's self-understanding, which scholarship would do well to scrutinize. One is the conflation of America with liberal (Protestant) religion, which Tracy Fessenden has delineated in *Culture and Redemption.* One of Fessenden's purposes in the book is "to demonstrate . . . how particular forms of Protestantism emerged as an 'unmarked' category in American religious and literary history" (6). The closing line of *Hobomok* enacts precisely this conflation of liberal religion and the nation. Referring to Hobomok, it says, "the tender

slip which he protected, has since become a mighty tree, and the nations of the earth seek refuge beneath its branches" (150). Though the novel replaces the Bible with nature, this powerful natural image is undergirded with biblical allusions. The protected slip refers to Ezekiel 17:22-24, in which God says he will take a twig and plant it, and birds will live in it. Ironically, Child's revision of the text mirrors Puritan typology in that it compares America to the nation of Israel. The nations taking refuge under a tree is from Revelation 22:2, which describes a tree in the heavenly city whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. In the final sentence of *Hobomok*, then, America is not only Israel; it is heaven. This conception of America continues to hold power today. The relationship between America and Christianity is so complicated that it necessitates an absurd phrase like "crypto-Protestant secular providentialism." This is Michael Warner's description for the civil religion exemplified by the compulsory mention of God in presidential addresses and the presence of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance (*Keywords* 212-13). Closer attention to the co-construction of the religious and the national in texts like *Hobomok* may allow scholars to illuminate American self-understanding, past and present.

Taking another look at *Hobomok* may also help literary scholars recognize the assumptions underlying their work. Colin Jager articulates why this is crucial:

> Claims and assumptions about secularization must be subjected to the same sort of critical reflexivity that literary critics now habitually bring to discussions of race, class, and sexuality; we need to be alert, in other words, for the process by which norms get smuggled in as value-neutral descriptors. It turns out that those who believe in secularization's inevitability are a relatively small group of professional readers and interpreters. Because that belief contributes mightily to the cultural entitlement of this small group, it seems a worthwhile task to make it an object of analysis whenever we read the poetry and prose that gave birth both to it and to us. (*Book* 36)

Because the traditional secularization narrative is normative, Jager calls for scholars to attend to it as closely and self-consciously as we do to race, class, and gender/sexuality. Those who do not remain ignorant of both the power it gives them and the manner in which it limits them. For example, allowing the centrality of the secularization narrative in *Hobomok* to remain unidentified and unchallenged obscures important aspects of the work—both textual and ideological. *Hobomok* is an ideal starting point for this work, because it belongs to the group of texts Jager speaks of, which "gave birth" to a nation—and, if we are honest, an academy—as confounded about religion and secularization as we are.

Notes

[1] Even though it excludes Catholicism, Judaism, and other religions, I will use "orthodox religion" as a synonym for Calvinism because this was the context Child spoke into.

[2] By drawing a parallel between the Indian and Calvinist, I am by no means suggesting that the groups or the situations are parallel in every way, nor that the violence done by the vanishing-Calvinist myth is anywhere near that done by the vanishing-Indian myth. I am simply noting the striking similarity between the cultural work done by both myths.

[3] See Ezra Tawil, Harry Brown, and J. David Stevens for readings that focus on the racialist treatment of Native Americans in *Hobomok.*

[4] June 15, 1824 *United States Literary Gazette*; Sept. 18, 1824 *Ladies Garland*; and July 1825 *North American Review* all published substantial portions of the scene in which Hobomok relinquishes Mary and then vanishes.

[5] Some critics argue that though *Hobomok* participates in the vanishing-Indian myth, it also refers to the nation's indebtedness to indigenous peoples. Hildegard Hoeller, for instance, maintains that the novel reminds us of the sacrifices women and Native Americans made in the making of America, especially to white males: "Seemingly hopeless in terms of Indian survival in America, Child asks merely for recognition of debt, as acknowledgment of the sacrificial economy that built this nation" (66).

[6] Literature written by religious liberals is overrepresented in the nineteenth-century texts we read today, partly because of academic tastes and partly because the Unitarians and other liberals controlled the publications we recognize as purveyors of culture, such as the *North American Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. David Reynolds, in *Faith in Fiction*, gives a much broader picture of the period's literature by examining fiction by Calvinists and Catholics as well as liberals.

[7] The fact that Mary makes the choice to marry Hobomok while in a delusional state would seem to diminish the racially progressive nature of the miscegenation. A progressive reading of the novel is only possible in combination with a cover-story interpretation. It must account for the narrator's horror at Mary's decision, as exemplified here: "Powerful indeed must have been the superstition, which could induce so much beauty and refinement, even in a moment of desperation, to exchange the social band, stern and dark as it was, for the company of savages" (122). Obviously, a pro-miscegenation reading of this passage is only possible if the narrator does not represent Child. The narrator might represent the views of the male "author" of the preface, or Child might have cloaked her pro-miscegenation message in a culturally acceptable form. Gussman holds the latter position: "In her first attempt at writing about interracial marriage for a decidedly squeamish and frequently hostile nineteenth-century audience, Child is careful not to sound too enthusiastic," but the text ultimately legitimates the marriage through the child that is born (67). Tom Petitjean maintains that to soften the blow for readers, Child makes the marriage the result of supernaturalism and preordination: "By opening up her readers to the ideas of interracial marriages—even if she must use the supernatural to make these once radical notions palatable . . . Child envisions the potential for the multicultural future of America" (147). Critics who do not subscribe to the cover-story interpretation come up with radically different views. For example, Harry Brown notes that the text shifts to a gothic mode in the passages surrounding the marriage and concludes that Child punishes racial mixing by inflicting madness on Mary (138-39).

[8] Critics have varied in both the attention they give to the problem of the narrator and in their interpretations. Some, like Harry Brown, simply assume the narrator to be Child. Some, like Paula Kot, assume the narrator is male and Child's perspective is to be found elsewhere: "Child's male narrator absorbs her brother's perspective, but her portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship . . . challenges the narrator's repressive nationalism" (82). Others see more complexity. Ian Marshall, in his examination of the narratorial shifts, explains them in terms of Bakhtin's concepts of character zones (in which the narrator's language sounds like the character being described) and setting zones (in which the narrator's language takes on the tone of the setting). His conclusion is similar to Kot's. He believes that in a culture suspicious of women writers, Child has the male narrator use anti-feminist rhetoric in order to keep up the male disguise set up in the preface (2).

[9] A few seminal secularization theorists and works are sociologist Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994); anthropologist Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (2003); and philosopher Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007).

CHAPTER III

THE BIBLICAL NOVEL: SUBMISSION AS FORM AND THEME IN *THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD*

The Wide, Wide World by Susan Warner (1850) was the first American bestseller, translated into four languages and pirated by the thousands in England. In fact, its pirating worldwide "is said to have been the instigation of the International Copyright Agreement" (Denman 8). The only novel that surpassed it in popularity in its time was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but the two novels have had strikingly different fates (Foster 35). Whereas today *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is one of the best-known nineteenth-century novels, few people have even heard of *The Wide, Wide World* or Susan Warner. Apart from specialists in antebellum American literature, the general unfamiliarity applies in the scholarly realm as well.

A major reason *The Wide, Wide World* has sunk into critical oblivion is that its worldview is foreign to many scholars. Because literary criticism as practiced today has emerged from a rationalist rejection of religion, *The Wide, Wide World* can present a problem in its unrelenting focus on religion—specifically, Protestant Christianity.[1] If religion has been a blind spot in literary criticism, as Michael Kaufmann posits, this novel has fallen into that blind spot ("The Religious" 614).

Though criticism on *The Wide, Wide World* was sparse for most of the twentieth century, it was revived by Jane Tompkins in her groundbreaking *Sensational Designs* (1985). Her chapter on Warner, "The Other American Renaissance," remains the most significant piece on *The Wide, Wide World*. Other feminist scholars then took up

Tompkins' challenge to recover sentimental fiction—including *The Wide, Wide World*—focusing primarily on gender in their readings.[2]

Warner and feminist criticism make an unlikely pair, since second-wave feminism in particular has been critical of religion.[3] Joyce Carol Oates, in an essay on Warner's *Diana*, expresses the disjunction between feminist critics and Christian writers. She asserts,

> Contemporary feminist criticism of nineteenth-century women's literature is handicapped, to a degree, by its secular and humanist perspective. Confronted with religious convictions of a traditional sort . . . the feminist is inclined to see the author as misguided, or self-deluded, or (what seems to us more attractive) *ironic*: love of God and Christ and one's fellowman, the sacrifice of the self, an elevation of duty over all human activities—are these not clever authorial strategies for the indirect expression of hostility and anger? (191-92)

Oates is saying that though nineteenth-century female authors may have been authentic in their championing of self-sacrifice, critics today have difficulty reading them as such. As we will see, Oates' terms of misguided, self-deluded, or ironic serve as useful descriptions of how most scholars read *The Wide, Wide World*. What is most notable about Oates' assessment of Warner criticism is the reason she gives for its handicap: "We don't, can't, believe that suffering is finite but the bliss of Heaven infinite" (192). And again, more bluntly, "It is virtually impossible for us to *believe*" (192, emphasis original). To put it another way, modern criticism and Christian belief are mutually incompatible.

Tompkins also notes the challenges in interpreting Warner and describes the need for adopting a particular perspective. She insists, "It is only by attempting to see reality as [evangelical Christians] did that one can arrive at a notion of what gave sentimental fiction its tremendous original force" (150). That is, the cultural work of sentimental novels relied on the evangelical social context, and scholars must understand this context

to understand the literature. She asserts the same premise as Oates, that a chasm separates modern readers from authors like Warner: "The popular fiction of the American Renaissance has been dismissed primarily because it follows from assumptions about the shape and meaning of existence that we no longer hold" ("Other" 159-160). The assumptions she refers to are those of evangelical Christianity, and by her use of the pronoun "we" she places all evangelicals outside the fold of modern readership.

For Oates and Tompkins, then, reading *The Wide, Wide World* requires the reader to hold a set of beliefs no modern critic holds. Both of their essays are models of self-awareness and striking attempts to empathize with an unfamiliar worldview. However, their common claim that no critic in the modern world holds religious beliefs depends on the secularization narrative. Furthermore, their construction of readers as irreligious speaks of the unmarked secularism of the academy. Their assumptions raise the question: What would happen if a twenty-first century evangelical Christian read *The Wide, Wide World*? This chapter is that experiment.[4]

I propose that placing the novel back in its originally biblical context helps us interpret its view of submission. Out of this context, *The Wide, Wide World*'s message about submission can look like self-destruction under oppressive social forces. This interpretation is widespread in feminist criticism. To Joanne Dobson, for example, the novel's God is "a sadistic manipulator" ("Hidden" 231). Tompkins refers to Ellen's "masochistic ways" ("Afterword" 597). Marianne Noble extends both these ideas, arguing that the novel trains women in masochism by teaching them to associate punishment and love: "*The Wide, Wide World* suggests that an upbringing under the volatile intersection of two ideologies—Calvinism and true womanhood—conspired to

turn [nineteenth-century women] into masochists" (113). In her reading, God is the "ultimate heroic sadist, . . . the heavenly physician who requires his patient's total submission as a precondition for his healing" (103).

All these readings hinge on a particular interpretation of John, Ellen's teacher and eventual husband. In fact, most criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reads him as anti-hero. Accordingly, a common interpretation of the novel, going back to Helen Papashvily's *All the Happy Endings* (1956), is to read its depiction of Ellen's suffering as a revolutionary argument against patriarchy. Seeing the novel as subversive also depends on the work of Susan Harris in her *19th-century American Women's Novels* (1990), where she coins the term "coverplot" to describe how women writers wrote on two levels; they "created texts that could satisfy both public demands for women's submission to cultural norms and subcultural needs for alternative possibilities" (18). Catharine O'Connell states the centrality of John in the construal of *The Wide, Wide World* as rebellious: "The delegitimation of John Humphreys is crucial to the novel's validation of Ellen's perspective and experience. . . . If one reads the novel as unambiguously endorsing John's authority, it appears to be a manual for acceptance of or survival under patriarchy" (29). For O'Connell and many others, rather than endorsing John the novel renders him "grotesque," thereby undercutting the patriarchal authority he embodies and instead emphasizing the affliction Ellen undergoes in this unjust system (22).[5]

Rather than taking gender as the primary area of inquiry, I contend that returning *The Wide, Wide World* to its original framework reveals that Warner's view of submission is to take one's proper place in the larger story of God's work in the world. The novel itself, on a formal level, submits to the biblical metanarrative. This text

therefore sheds light on arguments about the Bible and fiction being necessarily in tension. Second, on a thematic level, Ellen's training in submission can be understood as the discipline a Christian undertakes in relating to God, rather than as an expression of misogyny or masochism, as it has often been viewed. The biblical allusions associated with John show him to be a stand-in for Christ. Therefore, Ellen's submission to John does not ultimately speak of a woman submitting to a man but rather a Christian submitting to her God. Obviously, this does not erase all implications of gender hierarchy. However, placing the novel in its original biblical framework illuminates the intentions of the text and the cultural work it did for contemporaneous readers, as well as demonstrating how certain definitions of religion delimit present-day interpretive possibilities.

Submission as Form: Writing into the Bible's Margins

The Wide, Wide World tells the story of Ellen Montgomery, a girl left with an aunt in the country while her parents travel to Europe for her mother's health. Aunt Fortune, a hard-hearted woman, works Ellen to the bone and keeps her mother's letters from her. Van Brunt, the man who takes care of Fortune's farm, befriends Ellen, but he is rough and unlearned. Given these circumstances, Ellen has difficulty keeping her mother's Christian practices and behavior. However, the Humphreys family—Alice, John, and their minister father—rescue her. Alice befriends Ellen, who is adopted into the loving family and receives the intellectual and spiritual training she lacked at her aunt's. John in particular oversees Ellen's education and formation—everything from natural philosophy to drawing to horse riding. When Ellen learns that her mother and father have

died, she finds solace in the biblical promises of reunion in heaven. When Alice herself dies, Ellen takes Alice's place in the Humphreys family and is at peace. But then, obeying her parents' recovered written wishes, she moves to Scotland to live with relatives. She spends three difficult years there with a family who attempts to nullify her Christianity, until John visits her and promises to bring her back to America when she is of age. The original novel ends with a hint at their eventual marriage, and an unpublished chapter describes their homecoming to America as a couple. In short, the schema of the novel is this: Ellen undergoes trials that strengthen her character, her faith in and love of God, and her longing for heaven.

Though religion was a common theme for antebellum women authors, *The Wide, Wide World* stood out even in its time for its portrayal of Christianity. In his 1870 biographical anthology *Female Prose Writers of America,* John Hart wrote of it: "We know of no work of fiction in which real religion, as it is understood by Evangelical Christians, is exhibited with so much truth and force" (422). The Newark *Daily Advertiser* said it was "capable of doing more good than any other work, other than the Bible" (qtd. in Papashvily 3). One reason the reviewer may have thought this is because the novel itself is highly reliant on the Bible. A French critic noticed this quality of Warner's work, expressing it with more ambivalence than the Newark reviewer: "We see that she measures everything, weighs everything, judges everything by the supreme authority of the Book *par excellence*. Whether that is her strength or her weakness, whether one should criticize or congratulate her for it, we won't take it upon ourselves to decide" (qtd. in Kim 788). The critical assumptions of today would treat Warner's

reliance on the Bible as an aesthetic liability. But that would be a mistake, for we actually have much to learn from Warner's work about how fiction and the Bible may relate.

If the story related in the Bible is the ultimate truth, how might one write a fictional story that does not contradict it? This dilemma confronted nineteenth-century American authors in particular, in an era when higher criticism was challenging biblical authority and fiction was becoming increasingly culturally acceptable. In his chapter "Literary Scripturism" in *New England Literary Culture*, Lawrence Buell surveys the history of the relationship between literature and the Bible from the Revolution to the Civil War. He identifies three approaches, which were loosely chronological: the conservative fictionalizing of biblical stories which "still defer[red] to the authority of the original narrative"; the relativizing literature which borrowed the Bible's structure but not its authority (such as Dickinson); and "literary scripturism," in which authors like Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville sought to compose a new Scripture that would replace the Bible (172, 175, 183). In Buell's estimation, it was difficult, if not impossible, for authors to write literature based on the Bible without undermining the sacred text. This is because literature's imaginative thrust forced it beyond the Bible in a way that ultimately destabilized the Bible's authority, as the three-part progression exemplifies. Buell concludes,

> Bible-based literature cannot go beyond quotation, paraphrase, and translation, and maybe not even that far, without putting the writer—voluntarily or not—in the position of rewriting Scripture and thus setting up the individual imagination in a sort of rivalship. . . . [The author's] faith in the authority of the original text, assuming that it existed to start with, is transferred to faith in the literary process. (185)

In other words, any imaginative literary effort will automatically eclipse the Bible, even if the author intends to validate it. Moreover, the very practice of imaginative writing undermines the author's faith in biblical authority.

Erich Auerbach also views fiction and the Bible as rivals, but he focuses on the authoritative claims the Bible makes rather than the creative tendencies of literature. In his famous contrast between the formal structure of *The Odyssey* and the Old Testament narratives, he contends:

> The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claims to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. (*Mimesis* 14-15)

In Auerbach's view, because the Bible alleges to be the sole truth, all other stories must be subjugated to it. It does not simply entertain us, as Homer does; it "seek[s] to subject us" (15). It seems that this could characterize any religious text, though one who holds that text as sacred would likely express its purposes another way.

For Warner, who joined the Presbyterian Church in her twenties, the Bible was the primary source of truth. She and her sister, Anna, called Bible verses "ladders" because one could climb up to heaven on them (*Susan Warner* 418).[6] Her later work highlights her extensive knowledge of the Bible. Like Lydia Maria Child, Warner also published a large nonfiction religious work. However, the two followed disparate paths: whereas Child wrote a work of comparative religion, Warner and her sister wrote *The Law and the Testimony*, an 840-page volume of proof-text Bible scriptures arranged thematically.[7] Just as Child's belief in universal religion can be seen in her first novel, so

Warner's Bible-based Christianity marks *The Wide, Wide World*. Orthodox Christian beliefs about the Bible's authority are described by contemporary Catholic theologian Paul Griffiths, who maintains that "the Bible has greater authority than any other work, that the reading of it should provide Christians with a set of tools and skills we can use to interpret the world, and that the world is to be interpreted in terms of the Bible, written into its margins, so to speak, rather than the other way around" (19). Though she lived a century earlier and was Protestant rather than Catholic, Warner subscribed to similar beliefs about the role of the Bible. The Bible is not so much a text to be interpreted, as it is the frame through which the Christian interprets the world.

Buell, by contrast, sees the majority of early American religious literature consciously or unconsciously reflecting what Hans Frei describes as the "great reversal" that took place in biblical interpretation in the second half of the eighteenth-century: "interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story" (Frei 130, referenced in Buell "Literary" 170). This history underlies his analysis of nineteenth-century literature. I would argue, however, that Warner's work has the opposite thrust. Though Buell's thesis of liberalizing progression accurately describes many antebellum texts, particularly those that have become canonical, *The Wide, Wide World* is an important exception.

The Wide, Wide World does not claim biblical authority, nor set itself up in opposition to it; rather, it gains narrative authority by submitting to biblical authority. In accordance with her beliefs, Warner formally fashioned her story to fit within the story of the Bible, writing *The Wide, Wide World* into its margins. In a sense, then, the real text of *The Wide, Wide World* is the Bible. The novel is shaped by the Bible in three ways: on

the level of words, the text is saturated by Scripture; on the level of plot, key verses structure the events; on the level of realism, daily life is represented as illuminating the Bible.

Words from the Bible make up a high portion of the novel's text. There are over 120 biblical references in the novel, a large number even for an antebellum text. The references range from direct quotations, indicated with quotation marks, to unmarked paraphrases. They usually occur in a character's speech, most often addressed to Ellen. For example, near the beginning, Ellen and her mother discuss how Ellen will cope when they are separated. Mrs. Montgomery says, "Let it make you seek that friend who is never far away, nor out of hearing. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. You know he has said of his children, 'Before they call, I will answer'" (22). This one speech is actually three scripture verses strung together, and the diversity of reference types illustrates the variety in the text. Mrs. Montgomery's first sentence, telling Ellen to seek a friend who is never far away, is an allusion to Acts 17:27, "they should seek the Lord . . . though He be not far from every one of us" (King James Version).[8] Her second sentence, the invitation to draw near to God, is an unmarked direct quotation of James 4:8. In the third sentence, the quotation of Isaiah 65:24 is indicated with quotation marks. This kind of speech is typical of the novel's mentoring characters; Mrs. Montgomery, Alice, and John all speak almost as much Scripture as they do their own words. By regularly leaving out quotation marks, Warner actually makes Scripture into their speech.

A second formal device Warner employs is to include long passages of the Bible in the script of her novel. At the close of the first chapter, Ellen reads Psalm 23 aloud to her mother, and the entire psalm is reproduced in the text. Two chapters later, Ellen reads

Revelation 7:13-17 to her mother, and the Scripture is again quoted in full. At these points the narrative pauses while attention shifts to the Bible reading.

In a few instances, rather than quoting a full Bible passage, the text will only cite the reference. One description of Ellen's daily Bible reading, for example, tells us only the chapter: "She began to read the 18th chapter of Matthew" (157). At this point, the biblically literate reader might try to remember what that chapter contains, but if she cannot, nothing is lost. As the scene continues, though, the narrative stakes of biblical knowledge become higher:

> She paused with pleasure at the 14th verse. "That means me," she thought. The 21st and 22nd verses struck her a good deal, and when she came to the last she was almost startled.
>
> "There is it again!" she said. "That is exactly what that gentleman said to me. I thought I was forgiven, but how can I be, for I have not forgiven aunt Fortune." (157)

Few readers would have the entirety of Matthew 18 memorized, much less know the verse numbers. If the reader wants to track Ellen's experience, she must find a Bible, open it to Matthew 18, and read. The narration leaves gaps that only a Bible can fill.

All three rhetorical techniques—putting Scripture into characters' mouths, reproducing entire passages, and citing only references—fashion the reader of *The Wide, Wide World* into a reader of the Bible. Each device places the reader in Ellen's situation, since she is also learning how to read the Bible and how to understand the relationship of biblical truth to her experience. Learning to read the Bible is therefore a thematic concern that is mirrored formally in an effort to have the reader undergo the same training Ellen does. In essence, the reader's experience of the novel is itself an education in how to be a Bible reader. Seeing Ellen draw parallels between the Bible and her own life, as she does

with Matthew 18 and Aunt Fortune above, the attentive reader is encouraged to do the same. [9]

Verses of the Bible not only saturate the text of *The Wide, Wide World* but also shape the story. The novel opens with Ellen learning she must be separated from her beloved mother. The orphan protagonist is common in sentimental novels, in what Nina Baym calls the "overplot" of woman's fiction. However, in other works (*A New-England Tale*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *The Lamplighter*, for example) the separation of mother and child is a tragedy that underscores the power of the maternal bond. By contrast, *The Wide, Wide World* portrays this disconnection as necessary for Ellen's spiritual development.[10] The controlling verse here is Matthew 10:37, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (38). When Ellen asks what this verse means, Mrs. Montgomery explains that Ellen will only be right with God once she loves Jesus more than she does her mother. In fact, God might be orchestrating this severance so that she can learn to love God: "perhaps he sees, Ellen, that you never would seek him while you had me to cling to" (41). A gentleman who befriends her on her boat journey away from home repeats this lesson: "He saw that his little child was in danger of forgetting him, and he loved you, Ellen; and so he has taken your dear mother, and sent you away where you will have no one to look to but him" (70). Indeed, many turning points of the novel involve Ellen being stripped of a beloved mentor—her mother, Alice, then even John when she leaves for Scotland.

The separation from John also evokes a Bible verse. After Alice dies, old letters from Ellen's parents, which Aunt Fortune has hidden, come to light. In these her parents enjoin Ellen to move to Scotland to live with her mother's extended family. Though her

parents are long dead by this point, Ellen and all her advisers believe she still needs to honor her father and mother, obeying the fifth commandment (Exod. 20:12). This commandment therefore creates a major turn in the plot. For the last third of the novel, Ellen is in exile in Scotland, being strengthened in adversity.[11]

Not only does Ellen adhere to biblical commandments; the implied author does as well. This is best seen in the treatment of Aunt Fortune, the novel's villain. Over and over Aunt Fortune treats Ellen unjustly and Ellen struggles to forgive, to carry out Jesus' commands to "love your enemies" and "forgive men their trespasses [sins against you]" (Matt. 5:44, 6:14). In most contemporaneous novels, the antagonist receives poetic justice. For example, Jennet, the loudmouth servant in *Hope Leslie*, ends her life gagged and blown up on a ship, which the narrator calls "fit retribution" (368). In *The House of Seven Gables*, Judge Pyncheon chokes to death on his own blood, fulfilling the family curse. Simon Legree of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is driven insane by his slave Cassy's ghostly trick, and his illness is labeled "the shadows of a coming retribution [thrown] back into the present life" (596). *The Wide, Wide, World*, by contrast, shows love and forgiveness to villainous Aunt Fortune. She is rewarded with marriage to Van Brunt, a kind and wealthy farmer. True, it is implied that Van Brunt will subdue her mean streaks, but even this is more than fair treatment for the heartless woman. Likewise, the trickster Nancy who antagonizes Ellen is repaid with a Bible and then with Ellen's friendship once she repents.[12]

The plot convention of the villain being punished in the end can be seen as a literary version of God meting out justice in the afterlife. In this novelistic custom, then, the author stands in for God. Many who see the novel as a secular form point to this

aspect of its construction.[13] However, not all novels use this technique; here we see Warner resisting it. Rather than carrying out its own retribution, the novel submits to God's command not to take vengeance on one's oppressors because God promises to do so (Rom. 12:19). In short, Warner refuses to play God. By declining to punish the villains in her novel, she practices the Christian response to enemies recommended by Paul in Romans and by Jesus in the Gospels. She also in effect asks the reader to depend on God's justice in the afterlife, thereby extending the bounds of her story beyond human retribution and even beyond earthly life.

Lastly, the novel's realism depicts daily experiences as helping one interpret the Bible. Even the most quotidian details have spiritual significance. In one scene, as Ellen watches Van Brunt butcher and preserve three hogs, she asks why he puts so much salt on them. He replies:

> "It wouldn't keep good without that; it would spoil very quick."
> "Will the salt make it keep?"
> "All the year round—as sweet as a nut."
> "I wonder what is the reason for that. Will salt make every thing keep good?"
> "Everything in the world—if it only has enough of it." (233)

This seems like an exchange about salt until we come to the next chapter. Alluding to Jesus' words, "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13), Alice tells Ellen, "Every Christian is a blessing to the world; another grain of salt toward sweetening and saving the mass" (241). Retrospectively, the conversation between Van Brunt and Ellen takes on greater meaning. The passage's purpose of teaching Ellen—and the reader—the role of Christians in the world explains its focus on the preserving, or saving, qualities of salt. The link between the experience and its moral is underscored by the similar language used by the speakers; Van Brunt's explanation that salt keeps "everything in the world"

"good" and "sweet" is echoed in Alice's statement that salt (or Christians) "sweeten" the world.

A second example of life illuminating Scripture is the novel's treatment of sheep. Opening as it does with Psalm 23, *The Wide, Wide World* is anchored in the image of God as shepherd. The metaphor is brought up again in another conversation between Ellen and Van Brunt. When he reads aloud a hymn lyric about being brought "to his chosen fold," she asks what a fold is, and he tells her it is where sheep are penned. Ellen correlates the hymn with verses: "I remember; that's like what he said, 'I am the good shepherd,' and 'the Lord is my shepherd'" (214, quoting John 10:11 and Ps. 23:1). Learning about farm life helps Ellen interpret both hymns and the Bible.

The connection between sheep and Christian spirituality is developed in a later scene in which Ellen reads the Bible to Van Brunt. She chooses John 10, Jesus' description of himself as the Good Shepherd, deeming it likely to win over the farmer. In the next chapter of the novel, the scenario of John 10 is brought to life when Ellen watches Van Brunt call the sheep (see fig. 2). The scene focuses on the sheep's fear of the newcomer Ellen and their trust in farmer Van Brunt, whose voice they hear and come running to. This same theme runs throughout John 10, in which Jesus says twice that the sheep will not hear or follow a stranger and five times that the sheep of his fold hear his voice and know him. Because the scene in which Ellen reads to Van Brunt gives the reference but not the content ("the tenth chapter of John"), this is another instance in which the association between Scripture and plot is left for the reader to discover (413). Readers who had taken up the implicit invitation to read John 10 along with Ellen in

Figure 2: Van Brunt calling the sheep. 1892 line drawing by Frederick Dielman from *The Wide, Wide World*, J. B. Lippincott edition, reproduced in the Feminist Press edition (8, 422).

chapter 39 would be rewarded when they recognized the verses echoed in the narrative of chapter 40. The implication of this hidden rhetorical technique is that readers unfamiliar with the Bible will miss many of the religious dynamics in *The Wide, Wide World* and potentially misinterpret scenes as straightforward realism.

In this way, *The Wide, Wide World* portrays this world as training for the next. This attitude toward life is played out textually in the examples above, and it is also spoken by John. He exclaims, "How eloquent of beautiful lessons all nature would be to us if we but had the eye and the ear to take them in" (479-80). Reading nature leads to wisdom in *The Wide, Wide World*, just as it did in *Hobomok*. However, here Child's hierarchy of the book of nature over the Bible is reversed. After extolling the lessons of nature, John emphasizes that one needs divine revelation in order to read nature correctly:

"no doubt without the Bible I could not read the flowers," he says (481). The "eye and the ear" that one needs in order to learn from nature, therefore, consists in knowledge of the Bible.

Seeing nature as religious commentary was not only a literary technique; it was also the way Warner interacted with it personally. In a letter, she writes of Niagara Falls: "Doubtless, to those who love the Bible, Niagara is a commentary on some text or other. . . . [it is] an unapt remembrance of the 'fulness of joy, and pleasures forevermore.' And that . . . rising cloud and gushing spray, what does that stand for . . . but the voice of harpers harping with their harps and singing their new song" (SW 453, quoting Ps. 16:11 and alluding to Ps. 144:9). Warner reads scenery as marginalia or "commentary" on a biblical text, with the sounds of the waterfall "stand[ing] for" the angels singing.

Understanding how Warner viewed the relationship between heaven and earth helps us interpret her use of realist techniques. Before Tompkins' recovery efforts, if Warner was praised for anything it was for realism and local color. As Charles Foster put it in 1978, "*The Wide, Wide World* continues to receive critical attention largely because it is one of the earliest and best examples of local-color writing" (41). Foster explains that Warner's realism was in service of didacticism:

> The Warners' novels, particularly Susan's, have a continuing literary value because their didacticism . . . is grounded in realistic images of life in rural New England and upper-class New York. It would be a mistake to argue that either of the Warners was interested in these images for their intrinsic interest. Such images were generally important only when they could be used to illustrate didactic points or in other ways contribute to the didactic purpose. (32)

Since William Dean Howells, most critics have conceptualized realism and didacticism as being at odds, if not mutually exclusive. Despite current contentions about whether

realism lived up to its own ideals, one defining element is its attempt to show rather than tell. As Everett Carter declares in his work on Howells, “The basic axiom of the realistic view of morality was that there could be no moralizing in the novel” (156). J. Paul Hunter describes the critical antipathy to didactic elements of novels: “When criticism has had to deal with didacticism . . . it has almost always become hesitant and apologetic, and the tendency has been to minimize or deny the presence of didactic elements as much as possible and to pronounce the residue an unfortunate flaw” (*Before* 55). However, scholarly qualms about didacticism hide its importance as a formal and thematic feature in early novels. Specifically, realist detail is often thought of as being in opposition to religious discourse, but this analysis does not hold for Warner. Foster points out that realism and didacticism were inextricable in Warner’s work, an insight that has been overlooked for many decades. What Foster calls “didacticism” can be also understood as realism in the service of Christian practice. Given Warner’s theological world, in which earth is the training ground for the afterlife, the “intrinsic interest” of any realistic image is precisely its didactic purpose. The two cannot be dissociated.

The form of *The Wide, Wide World* is so unique as to necessitate new terminology. Sharon Kim, in an essay my work is indebted to, labels the form of *The Wide, Wide World* “Puritan realism.” For her *The Wide, Wide World* is not a sentimental novel at all; instead, it is the offspring of *Robinson Crusoe*. By “Puritan realism” she means a text that unites the physical world with Puritan typology as Defoe’s novel does (784). Specifically, a novel of this sort depicts a material world and a spiritual world that are both literally true but are connected through typology, which Kim explains as “the Christian belief that people, places, objects, and events of the Old Testament (the types)

prefigure Jesus (the antitype) and his kingdom in the New Testament" (792). Gregory Jackson comments that in the Puritan tradition, in which Warner places herself, typological reading was extended to postbiblical history, which "meant that all kinds of events, even small and personal ones, could be understood as typological analogues of other events in Christian history" (*Word* 97). For Warner, then, sheep herding and salting meat are simultaneously part of everyday experience and also reminders of religious truth. Warner later published a series that dramatized Bible stories, and the goal she states for that series also applies to *The Wide, Wide World*: "The Bible narrative is a skeleton. We wish . . . to clothe the skeleton in its living flesh and blood" (preface to *Walks from Eden*, qtd. in Foster 90).

Though it includes the typological register, not every element of *The Wide, Wide World* functions as a type. For example, even though a white flower is "the emblem of a sinless pure spirit" for John, at other times flowers are just flowers (324). For example, when the narrator mentions that a bunch of lilacs in a vase has to lean against the wall "in very undignified style" in order to keep from tipping over, there is no second level of meaning (338). This detail simply makes the scene more lifelike and reminds the reader of any trouble he or she may have had with ungainly lilacs. But even these details, which could be read as mere "secular" description, serve a larger purpose. As Kim points out, the quotidian details of Ellen's life help readers identify with her and thereby encourage them to follow her spiritual example: "Even a girl who shells peas, loves kittens, and catches colds can draw closer to God" (803). The more detailed the description of experiences the reader might have in common with Ellen, the more closely the reader can

identify with her. In this way, even the non-typological details of this realist text serve as stimulants to Christian living.

Warner's desire to fashion her protagonist as a spiritual mentor to readers may also explain Ellen's conspicuously generic characterization. Ellen's physical characteristics—height, hair color, eye color, and even exact age—are never described. By depicting Ellen's inner life in claustrophobic detail but leaving her physical appearance nondescript, Warner creates a character that is easier for diverse readers to identify with. Whereas blue eyes and curly hair might belong to some readers but not to others, everyone experiences a range of emotions. In this aspect, the novel follows the tradition of Puritan life writing. As Jackson explains, in spiritual autobiography an individual's life could be a model for readers because, "in that all Christians possessed the image of Christ, they all looked alike" (*Word* 110). Spiritual autobiography thus serves as a sort of middle ground between allegory and realism, and this novel is a fictional hybrid of the same sort. As in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the character Christian stands in for all Christians, Ellen is meant to represent more than just herself. All readers can look like her. Paradoxically, then, both the novel's detailed quotidian experience and its generic protagonist encourage readerly identification.

Kim's label of "Puritan realism" is useful for highlighting the typological elements of the novel, but it may obscure the fact that not every narrative element is meant to figure something else. A better description for the novel's combination of typology and straightforward realism might be "evangelical realism," since Warner's purpose in using both literary registers is to evangelize readers by helping them see the connection between physical and spiritual realities.

A final distinctive formal element of *The Wide, Wide World* is the unobtrusive narrator. From Sedgwick to Stowe, from Eliot to Tolstoy, many nineteenth-century novelists created intrusive narrators who address readers directly, usually in a moralizing tone. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* famously ends with a sermon enjoining readers to "*feel right*" about slavery (624, emphasis original). The narrator of *The Wide, Wide World*, on the other hand, is strikingly absent from the story's frame. Instead, the narrative is focalized through Ellen. At one point Ellen draws the biggest piece of leather from a bag that children are passing around and drawing from with their eyes closed. In fact, she has cheated by peeking, but we only learn of her misbehavior because she blushes and eventually confesses: "She struggled; the blood rushed to the surface, . . .[she said], 'I saw a little bit when I put my hand in'" (294). The narrator only relays her actions and their consequences without remark, showing rather than telling.

Whereas in a modern or postmodern novel the narrator might refrain from moral commentary to reflect ethical ambiguity, *The Wide, Wide World* uses the same technique for the opposite reason. It presupposes a straightforward moral universe, relying on biblical laws as the source for judgment and assuming interpretive consensus among readers. In short, biblically literate readers do not need a preachy narrator to explain that Ellen was wrong to cheat or that Aunt Fortune is wrong to lie. This narrative style mimics the Old Testament narrative books, which record the actions of characters and assume readers will know how to judge them. The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 serves as an example. When Judah refuses to let his daughter-in-law marry his youngest son after her husband has died, he is breaking the law of levirate marriage that readers would know from Deuteronomy 25:5. Nowhere does the narrator mention this law or label

Judah a sinner, however; the story simply unfolds. In *The Wide, Wide World*, the effect of this rhetorical technique is similar to the one we noted with the novel's lack of retribution: by refusing to play judge, the narrator invokes God's moral authority. The indirect narration, which gives a mimetic quality to *The Wide, Wide World*, likely contributed to its immense popularity and its reputation as early realism. If a text that incorporates Christian typology was also a forerunner of an emerging literary period associated with secularism, perhaps the chronology that places typological literature in the "religious" past and realist literature in the "modern" should be questioned.

To conclude the discussion of formal submission, let us return to Buell's and Auerbach's claims about the opposition between the Bible and literature. It seems that Warner succeeded in writing a work of fiction based on the Bible that did not undermine its authority, despite Buell's emphasis on the difficulty of such a task. Nor did she lose her faith in the Bible's authority while writing, as he proposed would happen. Rather, she acknowledged its primacy by submitting her novel's text, plot, and representation to the Bible—writing it in the Bible's margins. In a way, Auerbach is right: the Bible does promise to give every person and experience its "due place within its frame," and this is where *The Wide, Wide World* positions itself. But this positioning does not need to be an act of subjugation to a despot, as Auerbach would have it.

Kevin Seidel, discussing the quoted passage from *Mimesis*, suggests that those who accept the Bible's claims experience them much differently than Auerbach describes them. Seidel insists, "Unquestionably, the Bible has been wielded as a book of absolute divine judgments, . . . but it is not the only way or even the most common way its authority is experienced by those who read it religiously, whether for study, guidance,

prayer, consolation, or meditation. In none of these practices is the Bible thought the voice of a tyrant, yet it remains authoritative" (645). Though the Bible may appear domineering to those who reject its authority, for those who accept it, it yields wisdom, insight, and comfort. For those who find their place within its frame, the place is not one of subjugation but of rest. In *The Wide, Wide World*, Mrs. Montgomery exemplifies this relation to the Bible in the opening chapter. Sick and agitated, she is finally able to sleep after Ellen reads Psalm 23 aloud. The narrator emphasizes the healing and comforting powers of the Scripture: "Those first sweet words had fallen like balm upon the sore heart; and mind and body had instantly found rest together" (15). As Griffiths puts it, in the traditional Christian view, "the possibility of our existence and all its boundaries are from God and of God. This means that we are fundamentally restless and disordered until we come to see and acknowledge these facts, and to harmonize our wills with them" (17-18). Just as *The Wide, Wide World* harmonizes its formal structure with the Bible, it also calls individuals to harmonize their wills with the truth about their relationship to God. Griffiths' comment thus describes both the formal submission of *The Wide, Wide World* and the complementary version of submission it thematically endorses.

Submission as Theme: Creaturely Compliance

In *The Wide, Wide World*, submission means taking one's place in God's story. Warner portrays Ellen learning this type of submission through the hardships she undergoes. In essence, Ellen undertakes the task of every Christian, as Griffiths states it above: acknowledging God's sovereignty and harmonizing her will with it. Warner depicts Ellen's training in detail so that readers can learn to acknowledge their own

creator. At one point Alice says, “Christians are the only Bible some people ever read” (239). This concept can be translated into the fictional realm: If *The Wide, Wide World* was as close as some readers might get to the Bible, the way its characters were depicted had weighty consequences for the readers’ salvation. Indeed, *The Wide, Wide World* can be viewed as a response to the nineteenth-century critics who believed that all novels led young readers away from the Bible. In addition to promoting submission by showing Ellen being blessed for it, the novel employs two tropes to underscore its message. It likens people to sheep and horses, creatures that must comply with their masters in order to survive.

The Wide, Wide World is infused with Psalm 23, which uses the conceit of sheep as people. In the psalm, David compares himself to a sheep taken care of by God. The good shepherd will lead him to grass and water and bring him safely through dangerous valleys, all the while guiding him with his staff. In other words, the shepherd will meet all the needs of the helpless sheep. Since David was a shepherd himself, he would have known that a comparison between humans and sheep is not complimentary. Sheep need constant supervision, feeding, and direction. They also must trust their shepherd and obey the prodding of his staff. In short, to say humans are like sheep is to take a low view of their intelligence and capacities. Compared with the knowledge and power of God, however, this view is accurate. To be human, in Psalm 23 and in *The Wide, Wide World*, is to constantly be confronted with one’s limited perspective and abilities. To be a wise human is to acknowledge that one is as reliant on God as a sheep is on its shepherd. When Ellen reads Psalm 23 to her mother in the first chapter, she thinks, “If only I could

feel these words as mamma does!"—by which she means being comforted by them (15). She spends the rest of the book learning how.

Though she uses the biblical image of sheep throughout the novel, Warner also transposes the image into a nineteenth-century equivalent: horse training. The image has slightly different connotations, since sheep simply need to follow, whereas horses need to be broken of their independent wills. But the idea of necessary submission that results in well-being is the same. Ellen is repeatedly described in the language of an untamed horse—her youthful passions are not yet broken by time; she has untamed, high spirits; and she has unbroken passion and pride (11, 63, 181). John, an excellent horseman, teaches Ellen to ride, thereby teaching Ellen to command both a horse and herself. At one point the narrator comments that while riding, Ellen was "thoroughly engaged in the management of herself and her horse" (415). John also compares Ellen to a horse, commenting that she is "more shy of taking a leap than [her] little horse is" and telling her to "no more lose command of [her] horse than . . . [herself]," echoing the narrator's earlier description (409).

If Ellen is a horse, John is a horse trainer. In one of the novel's most discussed passages, an unsympathetic character describes John's use of the whip to motivate an obstinate horse nobody else could ride. Ellen is unhappy that he would use a whip at all, but Alice explains that it was necessary, as "the horse was determined to have its own way and not do what his rider required of him" (377). This scene serves as a microcosm of what Ellen learns about God's correction—that discipline may be necessary in order to convince her to give up her own way. She learns to see her separation from her mother as God's loving but painful intervention and to turn to God for solace, as her mother has

enjoined her: "from the hand that wounds, seek the healing. He wounds that he *may* heal. He does not afflict willingly" (41). This early lesson in God's ways is repeated by the gentleman on the boat and later by John. After her mother dies and Ellen is inconsolable, John reminds her that even this terrible experience can be for her good if she trusts God: "If you are his child, all is done in love and shall work good for you; and if we cannot see how, it is because we are weak and foolish, and can see but a very little way" (349). In keeping with the sheep trope, John here expresses humility about humanity's power, intelligence, and perspective in contrast with God's omniscience.

The novel teaches that a loving God may occasionally use painful means for one's own good, just as a parent may with a child. Kim explains how Warner's beliefs influenced her narrative reasoning: "Because Warner believed in natural depravity, she also believed that God sent suffering in order to chastise sin and to encourage spiritual growth. Ultimately, Ellen does not suffer because men are unjust or because social forces oppress her; she suffers because there is something wrong with her" (786). Given this theology, Ellen's task is to accept suffering as coming from an authority whose goodness she trusts and to grow from it. By the time Ellen learns of Alice's fatal illness, she has developed the skill of endurance without rebellion: "she knew the hand that gave the blow, and did not raise her own against it" (428).

The novel's perspective on hardship stands in contrast with the typical modern view. As Bryce Traister explains, "In the Protestant-Calvinist framework, affliction becomes meaningful within a rendering of saintly perseverance, whereas modern secularity defines human suffering as the definitive challenge to modern civilization" (325). Traister draws on Talal Asad, who identifies an aversion to suffering as a

distinguishing characteristic of secular cultures. The distance between the Calvinist view and the secular view of pain is one reason it is important to return to the novel's context in interpreting it. If suffering is to be avoided at all costs, as many of today's readers would believe, Ellen's acceptance of it looks self-destructive. But for a Calvinist like Warner, suffering has meaning because every experience—those that cause anguish and those that evoke joy—is overseen by an all-loving and all-powerful God.

In Warner's account of her own experience, suffering brought her nearer to God. She wrote *The Wide, Wide World* in response to her family's financial crisis brought on by her father's mismanagement. Though she had begun life in New York high society, when she was seventeen the family went bankrupt and moved to a rundown house on Constitution Island. They never recovered their wealth or social status, and the sisters spent their lives writing in order to buy food. At the end of 1859 Warner reflected on the year in her journal: "The year gone!—which has done great work for us, for me. Separated us more from earthly hopes,—brought me nearer, I think, to the hold of unseen realities—or at least to God and his love, and to absolute trust and submission to him" (402). The physical discomfort and social isolation she had undergone that year had "done great work" for Warner because it had increased her trust and submission to God. This is the same narrative she has Ellen undergo.

The Wide, Wide World teaches that part of wisdom is knowing how to interact with suffering. Paul Ricoeur explains how the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, which the Christian Bible adopted, instructs the reader in suffering. It

> bind[s] together *ethos* and *cosmos*, the sphere of human action and the sphere of the world . . . in suffering and, more precisely, in unjust suffering. Wisdom does not teach us how to avoid suffering, or how

> magically to deny it, or how to dissimulate it under an illusion. It teaches us how to endure, how to suffer suffering. (12)

In other words, wisdom literature—especially the book of Job—sets a person's experience (*ethos*) in a larger context (*cosmos*). In doing so, it teaches us that our experience of suffering is not the end of the story, nor is our story the most important one. In its relentless portrayal of suffering, *The Wide, Wide World* does for its readers what Ricoeur sees the book of Job doing. The ancient writer of Scripture, the nineteenth-century novelist, and the twentieth-century phenomenologist share this value of enduring suffering with wisdom.

This theological context sets the stage for a new assessment of John. Jennifer Mason, discussing critics' "now ubiquitous denunciation" of John, asserts that it has a shaky foundation (505). Specifically, it relies on an anachronistic interpretation of his equestrian practices. From the scene referring to his judicious use of a whip, John has inexplicably earned the epithet "horse-beater" in Warner criticism (Tompkins "Afterword" 600). Yet nowhere else in the novel does he use his whip on a horse, much less beat one. Moreover, in the scene, Alice immediately explains his behavior as what any good horseman would do. Mason, drawing from nineteenth-century equestrian manuals, reaffirms Alice's defense. She concludes that at the time, John's practices would not have been considered brutal at all. It follows that criticism based on this characterization is suspect:

> John's sometimes highly physical riding does *not* mark him as villainous. We need seriously to reconsider locating subtextual or unconscious resistance to domestic ideology either in Warner or her nineteenth-century audience, since that position (so far) has been buttressed primarily by readings of horsemanship that are not consistent with contemporary equestrian discourses. (528, emphasis in original)

In other words, since neither Warner nor her original readers would make the leap from John's use of the whip to a view of him as sadistic tyrant, the reading of *The Wide, Wide World* as ironically subversive is untenable. By familiarizing herself with equestrian practices, Mason undermines one dominant trend of criticism on the novel. Her article highlights the importance of guarding against what Oates calls the "anthropologist's occupational hazard" of imposing unexamined cultural prejudices on a subject (192).

Recovering the novel's religious and biblical contexts much as Mason recovers the equestrian, I contend that Puritan typology sets the stage for how to comprehend John. Specifically, I believe Warner means John to be a type of Christ. Though a few critics have noted that John generally represents God because he is a clergyman, the direct parallels between John and Jesus and their implications have yet to be explored.

These parallels run throughout the novel. First, many minor characters in *The Wide, Wide World* are confused about how to understand John's mixture of composure and explosive righteous indignation, much as the crowds in the gospels struggle to comprehend Jesus. One man likens John to gunpowder: "quiet stuff so long as it keeps cool" (318). Also like Jesus, John speaks with moral authority and with cleverness that traps those who oppose him. For example, he sarcastically chides two young people in a manner that leaves them "enraged, the more because John had said nothing they could take hold of" (318). As with Jesus, to form an opinion about John is to reveal one's character. Unsympathetic characters dislike John extremely, while mature Christian characters honor him. As Ellen gazes at John one day, he asks, "What is your conclusion on the whole?"—meaning, What do you think of me? (321) She mentions the mixed reviews, and he tells her to judge for herself. This interaction echoes a conversation

between Jesus and his disciples. He asks, “Whom do men say that I am?” and then presses, “But whom say ye that I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29). John, like Jesus, is difficult to be around if one persists in doing wrong or fails to recognize his authority. Ellen shows her wisdom by loving John and striving to please him.

That John is meant as a Christ figure becomes even more apparent near the end of the novel, as the text becomes increasingly typological. The original closing chapter resonates with parallels between John and Jesus as he is figured in the Gospel of John. Through textual allusions, Jesus’ parting with his disciples before he is crucified is likened to John’s parting with Ellen in Scotland. John tells the heartbroken Ellen, “I am leaving you but for a time. I *must* go home now, but if I live you will see me again” (561). This speech echoes some of Jesus’ last words to his followers, a passage that has already been quoted multiple times in the novel: “In my Father’s house are many mansions. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again, and receive you unto myself. . . . Because I live, ye shall live also” (John 14:2-3, 19). Both speeches involve the speaker leaving a beloved one, going home temporarily, and promising to return and bring the beloved home if he lives. John then gives Ellen three guidelines, saying “perhaps I will try you in two or three things” (563). The first two injunctions are to “keep up a regular and full correspondence” with him and to “read no novels,” and the third one he smilingly refuses to tell her until the right time comes (563-64). It is safe to assume that the last item is to consent to marrying him. John’s parting commands evoke Jesus’ statement, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Finally, John prays for Ellen and for himself, particularly that they would see each other again, in a clear parallel to Jesus’ prayer in John 17 for himself and his disciples to be together in the

future. John's/Jesus' promise is fulfilled in the next (originally unpublished) chapter, when the typology becomes even more pronounced. John literally brings his new wife Ellen to his father's house and shows her the room that he has specially prepared for her. Ellen therefore ends the novel not so much in material opulence, as some critics contest, but typologically in heaven.[14]

The original readers of *The Wide, Wide World* would almost certainly have seen John as a type of Christ (see fig. 3). Jackson affirms that nineteenth-century reading practices were influenced by homiletics: "Trained in biblical exegesis, contemporary readers . . . came to texts armed with the capacity to understand the thematic and structural overlay of typology and allegory" ("Religion" 175). In fact, typology was so ingrained in people's understandings of literature that readers applied it even to dime novels. It is therefore not surprising that original receptions of John were markedly different from contemporary perceptions. As Mason states, "We may view John as an

Figure 3: John instructing Ellen. 1892 line drawing by Frederick Dielman reproduced in the Feminist Press edition (312).

overbearing and unlikable character, but I think we have yet to discover convincing evidence that Warner or her contemporaries thought the same" (531). Indeed, one reviewer called the young clergyman "one of the best and most carefully drawn characters in the book," and a young female fan wrote to Warner, "How I wished I had a [suitor like] John" (qtd. in Noble 116, 96). Another fan wrote, "My first convictions of sin were the result of reading the conversations between John and Ellen" (qtd. in Kim 809). Clearly, the original readers did not view John as a horse beater.

If John is a type of Jesus, the submission the text endorses is not female-to-male but human-to-God. In this novel, horses are not metaphors for women, as many critics allege; horses figure humans. Ellen's compliance is that of a creature (sheep, horse, or human) submitting appropriately to its master. The fact that Ellen models submission *to God* is most evident in the last portion of the novel, when she lives in Scotland with her irreligious relatives. Though she obeys most of their commands, she rebels when her grandmother and uncle forbid her to wake up early to read her Bible. She asserts, "There is One I must obey even before you" (542). The capitalization of "One" makes it clear that her words refer to the divine.

The fact that submission in this novel means humans yielding to God is buttressed not only by the fact that Ellen does not comply with all male authority figures, but also that John himself submits. His use of inclusive pronouns as he explains human limitations to Ellen is noteworthy: "if *we* cannot see how [things will work for good], it is because *we* are weak and foolish, and can see but a very little way" (emphasis added). In addition, the original last chapter depicts John's struggle to submit to God's will by leaving his darling Ellen in Scotland: "what God orders," he says, "let us quietly submit to" (565).

That John acquiesces at this point only strengthens the textual associations with Jesus' Passion, since Jesus says to God the Father, "Not my will, but thine be done" before facing crucifixion (Luke 22:42). If even John—if even Jesus—yields to a higher authority, evidently it is not only women who must comply with another's will. Isabelle White notes that Warner is ultimately calling for submission not to men but to God: "Warner's ideology did not . . . require all women to submit to all men; for her, authority was located not in men in general but in the father as representative of God" (34). In short, submission in *The Wide, Wide World* is not gendered feminine, though many critics have assumed it to be. Submission befits all human creatures, both female and male.

Defining Religion

Some may find my re-interpretation of submission in *The Wide, Wide World* unconvincing. After all, this is a novel, not a sermon. Even if their gender difference is not the primary aspect of John and Ellen's relationship, they are still male and female. Because Warner wrote a novel rather than a doctrinal treatise, and a novel that mixes typology and realism at that, its theological and social implications can be difficult to untangle. While I agree that gender difference is at play, noting the novel's typological form and its thematic focus on spiritual growth helps us see that its primary concern is not with hierarchical relationships among people but with the eternal implications of earthly actions.

Even if the novel's typology is recognized, a second concern about its gender themes arises. Since in the Christian tradition men have historically been seen as representing God's authority, even in a religious framework this novel could speak about

gender hierarchy. In other words, this novel could be considered patriarchal even within its biblical context, if that context itself is patriarchal. Christian feminist theology has been particularly concerned with this issue. Rosemary Radford Ruether, an important early figure in the field, explains its purpose thus:

> Feminist theology takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm. They question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination, such as exclusive male language for God, the view that males are more like God than females, that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society, or that women are created by God to be subordinate to males. (3)

While they share an objection to the oppression of women, Christian feminists take a wide range of stances on the Bible and the Christian tradition. Though it might be tempting to see Warner as a predecessor of feminist theology, her text cannot be pushed this far. She neither intentionally endorses male hierarchy nor seeks to subvert it. Indeed, by not subverting it, she may implicitly endorse it. I am simply suggesting that neither is her primary purpose.

A discussion about whether Christianity is inherently patriarchal is beyond the bounds of this chapter. It should suffice to say that it is one of debates influencing interpretations of *The Wide, Wide World.* Noble, for example, sees John as both a horse beater *and* a representative of God, though she does not trace the biblical allusions. For her, the opposition I have drawn between the two views of John does not hold, since God is "the ultimate heroic sadist." Her chapter best articulates the disturbing implications of the novel if it is interpreted with certain presuppositions.

One way of unearthing these presuppositions is to examine the various definitions of religion that lie behind perceptions of *The Wide, Wide World*. As secularization theorists such as Asad have noted, both "the secular" and "the religious" have constantly

shifting definitions. Colin Jager, in his chapter "Religion Three Ways" in *The Book of God*, discusses three common definitions: belief, discipline, and ideology. Though belief is a typical definition of religion, and ideology is the most common definition in Warner criticism, defining religion as discipline actually best fits the novel.

Defining religion as belief may seem natural today, but this classification does not match the religion depicted in *The Wide, Wide World.* Ellen believes in God throughout, but the novel is clear that she is not a Christian at the beginning. Because Ellen does not love Jesus more than she loves her mother, Mrs. Montgomery concludes that her "heart [is] hardened by sin" that keeps her from responding to Jesus' love (38). The novel as a whole bears out this diagnosis. It is not belief, then, that Ellen lacks. We saw in the chapter on *Hobomok* that viewing religion as belief arose during the Enlightenment as a way to describe and evaluate the religions of others. That Warner does not subscribe to this view of religion shows that understandings of religion do not follow a linear path; multiple definitions of it can coexist at any point in history.

Religion conceived as discipline aligns best with *The Wide, Wide World* as well as with Warner's own life. Discipline here means actions undertaken for the purpose of improvement, such as the training regimen an athlete submits to. It makes the most sense of the climax of the novel, when Ellen discovers she has become a Christian. Examining herself, she realizes she has changed:

> I didn't use to like to read the Bible, and now I do very much;—I never liked praying in old times, and now, oh, what should I do without it!—I didn't love Jesus at all, but I am sure I do now. I don't keep his commandments, but I do *try* to keep them. (352)

Almost like a checklist, this passage lists the Christian disciplines of reading the Bible, praying, loving Jesus, and obeying him. Whereas at the beginning of the novel Ellen was

unable to love Jesus, now her spiritual practices, or disciplines, prove that she does. The other version of discipline, in which punishment or hardship is imposed on someone in order to alter behavior, also applies to Ellen's experience. This is the discipline of being separated from her mother. Warner spoke of God disciplining her in much the same way she depicts Ellen being disciplined, even using the language of horse-breaking: "My will was never broken until the Lord took it into his own hands to do" (SW 34). When she greatly desired something she could not have, she wrote, "This is discipline for me, a new and doubtless useful one. My will was never so crossed before" (SW 250). Just like the suffering Warner wrote about at the end of 1859, not getting her own way was a "useful" discipline that strengthened her character.

Like Warner, Griffiths describes Christianity as a practice based on loving acknowledgment and gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice for us in the crucifixion. This is "a response required of us not by compulsion, but by love" (17). At first glance, this conception resembles Richard Brodhead's Foucauldian idea of disciplinary intimacy, which he sees exemplified in *The Wide, Wide World* (30). However, where Brodhead views love as a binding cord that compels behavior for social control, Griffiths sees love as self-sacrifice that awakens a response in the receiver. He explains that the content of Christian practice includes both beliefs and skills:

> [it] requires knowing that certain things are the case (what God has done, what God is like, what we are like, what we should do); it also requires knowing how to do certain things, the inculcation of skills that are difficult, learned slowly, learned hard, and never fully learned. Principle among those skills is the ordering of the will and appetites away from the self, away from self-centered gratification, and toward God first and other humans second. (17)

This passage could well describe all of the training Ellen undergoes, especially since her besetting sin is selfishness. If religion is discipline, it is something one practices but never masters. This focus on training may be why *The Wide, Wide World* is so long (almost 600 pages) and so full of trials.

Though religion as discipline fits best with the text, religion as ideology is by far the most widespread definition of it in Warner criticism. Oates points to this tendency when she says that feminist critics tend to read Warner's praise of self-sacrifice as "misguided, self-deluded, or ironic." We have seen that those critics who denounce John do so by interpreting the novel as ironic and subversive. To read Warner as misguided or self-deluded—also a common move, sometimes combined with the ironic view—is to likewise read her religion as ideology. Tompkins is the earliest advocate for this position, arguing that domestic ideology arose from willful self-delusion on the part of women: "The exigencies of a Puritanical and trading nation had put women in the home and barred the door; and so in order to survive, they had to imagine their prison as the site of bliss" ("Other" 170). They accomplished this imaginative act by embracing Christianity, which taught that the meek would inherit the earth. Submission to God and to men therefore "gave [women] a place from which to launch a counter-strategy against their worldly masters that would finally give them the upper hand" (162). In other words, their Christianity was a bid for power. Following Tompkins' lead, White defends Warner's religion by explaining its ideological usefulness:

> To today's reader who does not share Warner's faith, this religion sounds at best like a way of rationalizing suffering and at worse like masochism. But to Warner (and her readers) the belief served a valuable purpose. It organized for them both this world and the next, and it allowed them to live with conditions they could not change and to look forward to another world in which their values would prevail. (35)

For White, then, Warner's Christianity was a pragmatic response to unjust experiences. Noble, for her part, affirms the equivalence of religion and ideology explicitly in her thesis that "two ideologies—Calvinism and true womanhood" turned nineteenth-century American women into masochists.

Karl Marx's classic articulation of religion as ideology reveals the stakes involved in this definition. Marx famously called religion "the opium of the people," or masses (131). White's comment that religion allowed women to endure oppression by hoping for the afterlife is a positive version of Marx's view. Marx goes on to define religion as "the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again" (131). For Marx, a religious person either never had selfhood or has abandoned it. Echoing this view of religion, contemporary readers of *The Wide, Wide World* usually object most strongly to what they see as Ellen's lack of selfhood. Marx continues, "Man makes religion; religion does not make man" (131). This presupposition underlies Marx's view of religion. Either God exists and religion is the acknowledgement of that truth, or God does not exist and religion is a human construction. Therefore, calling religion ideology is only possible if one has already ruled out God's existence. This may be why religion is viewed, experienced, and even defined so differently from the inside than from the outside. Thus the same dynamic that divides Auerbach's and Seidel's opinions about the Bible also distinguishes among definitions of religion.

Those who view religion as ideology may understand the ordering of will away from the self, which Griffiths describes as part of Christian practice, as self-destructive.[15] This belief underlies Noble's account of the novel. She writes that the liberal commitment to freedom should end when a person wants "to relinquish all their rights or

actually to give themselves to another person, such as a sadist or a tyrant," which is exactly what this dangerous novel praises Ellen for doing (96). Though Noble calls God a heroic sadist, she actually means that a certain conception of God was planted in women's minds by controlling men. Since God is nothing but a human construction, giving oneself to God is actually giving oneself to the sadist or tyrant who created the concept of God (note once more the echoes of Auerbach's claim that the Bible is tyrannical).

Many critics have taken the opposite course from Noble and viewed nineteenth-century American women's embrace of religion not as oppression but as rebellion. In fact, Tompkins' reclamation of sentimental literature as a whole—not just *The Wide, Wide World*—is based on this premise. She argues that the ethic of submission and celebration of domesticity were "successful bids for status and sway" ("Other" 172). Though in this reading religion is not imposed from the top down, as in Noble, it still functions ideologically. Given that Tompkins performed the crucial work of introducing sentimental literature into the critical canon, it is not surprising that a definition of religion as ideology continues to hold sway in criticism on these texts.

If religion is ideology, critics have no choice but to interpret religious elements in literature in ideological terms. This limitation may hinder readings of texts that hold religion to be something other than ideology. A large-scale illustration from *The Wide, Wide World* is interpretations of John. We have already discussed John at length, but there are even more aspects of him that critics interpret on a literal rather than typological level. For example, John is both adoptive brother and husband to Ellen, a combination of relationships that makes perfect sense in a Christian framework that depicts Jesus as both

brother and bridegroom to Christians. But to Gary Goshgarian, who takes it outside the religious frame, John and Ellen's marriage reeks of incest (88). On a smaller scale, critics must read even Bible passages as speaking of something other than religion. For instance, Tompkins reads the climax of the novel, in which Ellen realizes she is a Christian, as primarily about the maternal bond. Ellen reads two verses that her mother inscribed in her Bible, both of which are promises of God to love and be faithful to those who seek God and to their children. She realizes they have come true. Tompkins prefers to read the inscription "I will be a God to thee" (Gen. 17:7) as Mrs. Montgomery speaking rather than God ("Other" 164). Likewise, when John teaches Ellen to say to God, "O, how I *love thy law*" (Ps. 119:97), Noble perceives her as addressing both God and John (110). The above interpretations, perfectly acceptable as readings against the grain of the text, should at least recognize and acknowledge they are doing so.

It may very well be true that the cultural work *The Wide, Wide World* does for average twenty-first century readers—unaccustomed to typological reading, apt to miss biblical allusions, and inclined to define religion as ideology—is to endorse female submission to males. In addition, the fact that this novel's evangelical realism moves between the typological and realist registers can understandably add to readerly confusion. However, for a scholarly audience, *The Wide, Wide World* may do the cultural work of highlighting the challenges involved in writing about religious literature in a secular age as part of the secular academy. Tompkins states a version of this idea: "The usefulness of *The Wide, Wide World* to a modern audience is that it forces us to recognize within our own systems of belief conflicts, such as that between the Christian and

Freudian versions of the self, that we have been unaccustomed to face" ("Afterword" 586).

Tompkins' work on *The Wide, Wide World* points to the critical path I am suggesting but is unable to follow it through. Her great strength is recognizing the ideological chasm between the world of Warner's novel and most modern scholarship. For example, she argues, "When critics dismiss sentimental fiction because it is out of touch with reality, they do so because the reality they perceive is organized according to a different set of conventions for constituting experience" ("Other" 39). Her chapter brilliantly spells out implications of the differing perspectives. However, though she recommends taking on the Christian view of the self—seeing reality as evangelical Christians do—as a good exercise for Warner scholars, she is unwilling to maintain that perspective for long. She switches quickly to a version of self posited by Marx and Freud, even comparing the novel's appeal to that of pornography ("Afterword" 600). Ultimately, Tompkins is unable to avoid the pitfall of seeing religious faith as confined to the nineteenth century. While attempted to rescue Warner's novel, her argument adheres to the secularization narrative by embedding the work in a subtraction story. What Tompkins labels the nineteenth-century worldview, I would simply call the traditional Christian worldview. This includes the belief that "God's love is the final fact of existence," for example ("Other" 154). The difference between the perspectives of Warner and many contemporary readers has not come about because of time passing but because of secularization, in particular the secularization of the academy.

Though this chapter seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of an evangelical reading of an evangelical novel, I am not asserting that only religious insiders can properly read

religious texts. This is as unnecessarily restricting as saying that only women can read texts written by women, or only Native Americans can read texts written by Native Americans. Instead, I am suggesting that unexamined definitions of religion, as well as unexamined secularism within the academy, can lead to misrepresentations of texts written from and to a religious perspective. While not all scholars hold religion to be ideology (indeed, I have criticized Tompkins and Oates for assuming this), many do, and acknowledging this standpoint may be an important starting point. Furthermore, the prevalent discourse through which literary scholars, religious or not, communicate is predominantly a secular one, and recognition of this will also enhance scholarship.[16] If Tompkins is correct that *The Wide, Wide World* is "the Ur-text of the nineteenth-century United States," criticism on it could be considered to exemplify our reception of the period's popular literature ("Afterword" 585). The assessment I have given suggests that the way we read nineteenth-century literature, especially texts infused with religion, should be modified in light of new insights from secularization theory.

Assuming religion to be ideology hides the unique contribution of an evangelical novel like *The Wide, Wide World*. Tompkins—one of the novel's best critics—ends up defending it on the grounds that it is about politics and power. In these concerns, it looks just like the works of Thoreau, Melville, and Twain. In fact, the back cover of the 1987 Feminist Press edition, edited by Tompkins, calls the novel "a feminist *Huckleberry Finn*." But perhaps a sub-tradition of the American novel has gone unrecognized because novels like Warner's have been forced into current interpretive frames.[17] Perhaps there is something worthwhile in this novel's form and themes other than the celebration of liberal individuality valued in academic culture and enshrined in many canonical

works—a vision of submission that is not about resisting, seeking, or acquiescing to power, but instead about resting in relationship with one's loving creator.

Notes

[1] Tracy Fessenden, in *Culture and Redemption*, has demonstrated that much nineteenth-century fiction promoted an unmarked Protestantism in an effort to make it normative. This is true of *The Wide, Wide World*; what the text calls "religion" or "Christianity" is specifically Protestantism. Having noted this, for ease of expression I will hereafter refer to it simply as Christianity.

[2] For feminist readings of *The Wide, Wide World*, see Helen Waite Papashvily; Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction*; Mary Kelley; Joanne Dobson, "Hidden Hand"; Susan Harris, *19th-Century American Women's Novels*; Erica Bauermeister; Grace Hovet and Theodore Hovet; Donna Campbell; Catharine O'Connell; Suzanne Ashworth; and Elizabeth Fekete Trubey.

[3] See Kathleen Sands for an extended discussion of the relationship between feminism, religion, and secularism. Second-wave feminism should not be seen as wholly antireligious. It also gave birth to feminist theology in its current form, which an early anthology, *Womanspirit Rising* (1979), describes as appreciate of religion while critical of the ways religions have been expressed: "Contributors to this volume agree that religion is deeply meaningful in human life *and* that the traditional religions of the West have betrayed women" (1).

[4] By the term "evangelical" I mean a certain strand of Protestant Christianity that British historian David Bebbington has defined as having four traits: "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross" (3). By calling myself an evangelical Christian and suggesting that my worldview may be closer to Warner's than Oates and Tompkins think possible for a modern person, I am not claiming that the way Christianity is lived does not differ over time or among individuals. Nor am I personally endorsing all aspects of *The Wide, Wide World.* To mention one example, I take major issue with its promotion of the middle class as superior, an ideology Brandy Parris and Jennifer Mason outline so well.

[5] In addition to Papashvily and O'Connell, Baym, Tompkins, Dobson, and Stewart ("Mothering") have published versions of this argument.

[6] Anna Warner edited Susan's letters and diaries to create the large and fascinating volume *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, which hereafter will be identified as SW.

[7] For a bibliography of the publications of both Susan and Anna Warner, see Sanderson.

[8] All biblical references will be to the King James Version.

[9] One strand of Warner criticism sees Ellen's constant Bible-reading as Warner's emphasis on literacy (see Suzanne Ashworth, Kevin Ball, and Elizabeth Fekete Trubey). These scholars point to the numerous other reading scenes as well—and indeed, there is no lack of literacy in this novel. However, viewing the Bible as equal to any other book fails to take into account its elevated status within Christianity and within this text.

[10] Claire Chantell reads the mother-daughter separation in *The Wide, Wide World* as evidence that Warner rejected domestic ideology, including the mother as sole instructor, in favor of a wider sphere of education for young women. Also see Sarah Brusky for a discussion of the "othermother" characters that take over the maternal role in sentimental novels, including *The Wide, Wide World.*

[11] For John Carlos Rowe, Warner sends Ellen to Scotland as a means of depicting America's religious and political prowess: to demonstrate "how the youthful United States will provide the geopolitical power to support the global expansion of Christianity" (52).

[12] For a Bakhtinian reading of Nancy that sees her as Ellen's repressed subconscious, see Veronica Stewart, "The Wild Side."

[13] For a discussion about the connection between poetic justice and divine justice, see Richard Rosengarten. In contrast to Michael McKeon's contention that aesthetic justice replaced Providence, emerging in the eighteenth century as a "special method . . . of compensating for the deficiencies of providential justice," Rosengarten instead maintains that "the Christian belief in providence directly informed the nascent formulations of poetic justice. . . . Disagreement focuses not on any displacement of providence by human artifice, but on whether providence is rightly depicted as a force in this world or the next" (24).

[14] The last chapter was not published until 1978, when Mabel Baker appended it to her biography *Light in the Morning*. Nobody knows why the chapter was not published; most scholars assume it was omitted for reasons of length, since the manuscript was already far longer than the average novel.

Drawing on the idea that Warner wrote in destitution, Tompkins reads the last chapter as Warner "giv[ing] her heroine everything that she herself wanted and couldn't get" ("Afterword" 601). Susan Williams builds on this idea, arguing that the sumptuousness of Ellen's room, which included original paintings, is actually the reason the chapter was not originally published: "The worldliness of the chapter is striking. Putnam [the publisher] and the Warners may have sensed that such worldliness might disrupt the moral message that their readers admired" (577).

[15] It is not necessary to view religion as ideology to see Warner's version of Christianity as dangerously self-effacing. The work of Linda Naranjo-Huebl on *The Wide, Wide World* is an instructive counterexample.

[16] Kaufmann also notes the potential disjunction between a scholar's religion and the conventions of the academy: "Even if a particular scholar practices a religion that itself does not recognize a distinction between the secular and the religious, his or her scholarly work nonetheless participates in an academic realm that has been historically defined by certain traditions of secularism" ("Puritans" 44).

[17] Jackson has traced the tradition of the homiletic novel, "which used fictional narrative to motivate real conversions" and taught readers how to live like Jesus (3). For him, *The Wide, Wide World* falls into the category of "Sunday-school fiction," a precursor to the postbellum homiletic novel (128).

CHAPTER IV

NOVELISTIC THEOLOGY: *THE MINISTER'S WOOING*

Six years after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe began her third novel, in which she turned her attention from American slavery to Calvinist theology. *The Minister's Wooing* was serialized in the new *Atlantic Monthly* from December 1858 to December 1859 and published in book form in 1859. A historical novel set in Rhode Island in the 1790s, *The Minister's Wooing* is constructed around a love triangle. A widow and her daughter, Mrs. Scudder and Mary, live with the Puritan minister Samuel Hopkins. Mary loves her cousin, the unregenerate but likable sailor James Marvyn, and Hopkins loves Mary. When James' ship wrecks and he is presumed dead, Mrs. Scudder persuades Mary to become engaged to the estimable Hopkins. James returns a week before the wedding, Hopkins breaks the engagement when he discovers that Mary loves James, and Hopkins himself performs the marriage ceremony between James and Mary.

Many scholars view the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, especially *The Minister's Wooing*, as a secularizing force—a linchpin in the change from Calvinist America to secular America. A sampling of criticism attests to the common association between Stowe and the secular: critics have contended that *The Minister's Wooing* has a "secular orientation," promotes the "secularization of Edwardseanism," takes part in "the secularization of religious novels," uses a "secular guise" and "semisecular aesthetics," and links the "sacred and secular" (Crozier 162, Buell "Calvinism" 260, Reynolds *Faith* 95, Wilson 558, Merish 1, Maura Shea n.p.). In addition, her novels in general are described as "secular and gynocentric" (Harris "Female" 197). The term "secular" seems

unavoidable in scholarship on Stowe. As we saw in the chapter on *The Wide, Wide World* about the term "religion," however, what each scholar means by "secular" can vary.

The purpose of this chapter is to read *The Minister's Wooing* in light of renewed scholarly attention to the secular that complicates the simple dichotomy between religion and secularism. I contend that Stowe critics often conflate two definitions of the secular, one being the etymological sense of "earthly," the other the modern sense of "anti-religious." Therefore, they are correct to note the mundane dimensions of Stowe's Christianity, but they are wrong to interpret her worldly focus as a movement away from religion. Rather, in *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe employs the rhetorical resources of the romance novel to argue for a theology grounded in the experience of human love. Finally, clarifying the differences among definitions of the secular illuminates that Stowe's novel is indeed secular, but only in the sense of being worldly—and even its sense of the world is infused with religion.

Defining the Secular

Because the secular has not received critical attention until recently, few scholars who use the term define it. This causes confusion. As Michael Warner establishes in his entry on "Secularism" for *Keywords in American Cultural Studies*, the word "secular" can have the following wide range of meanings:

1) earthly, worldly, mundane

2) unspiritual, non-religious (as in secular art)

3) embracing an alternative to religion, such as atheism or freethought

4) actively antireligious

5) a type of society in which church and government are differentiated

The first and oldest meaning dates from the thirteenth century; secular priests were those who lived uncloistered, in "the world" rather than in monasteries (*OED*). The first two definitions are not opposed to religion in any way; they are simply parallel to it. A secular painting, for example, might depict Napoleon rather than Christ, but it thereby makes no comment for or against Christ. This religiously neutral definition of "secular" is the sense in which Stowe uses the term in *The Minister's Wooing*. Listing the books in Mary's bedroom, she categorizes "The Spectator," *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare, and *Robinson Crusoe* as "the admitted secular literature," alongside which sit the Bible and the works of Jonathan Edwards (19). The third and fourth definitions of "secular," on the other hand, are opposed to religion. But even so, their degrees of opposition vary. Working with these definitions, the term "secular" could describe the position of a person who follows no religion or the position of someone who actively opposes religion. The fifth and newest definition, which focuses on the differentiation of social structures, is the one promulgated by those who created the field of secularization theory. In this definition, the religious and the secular are not structurally opposed but can peacefully coexist.[1]

Secularization theorists have had to carefully redefine terms because the fourth definition holds sway; in current use, "secular" and "religious" are opposites. This is the case in literary studies as well as in everyday speech. Recall Michael Kaufmann's argument that literary studies has built itself on the secular/religious binary, viewing itself as the secular replacement of what religion used to offer. This binary, along with the multiple possible definitions of "secular," has caused serious imprecision in Stowe scholarship.

As a binary, the term “secular” is almost always used in opposition to another term, which can help one determine what a critic means by it. The earliest association between Stowe and the secular is Alice Crozier’s *Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1969). She asserts,

> Her orientation was secular rather than ecclesiastical. Instead of doctrinal subtleties, instead even of salvation in the sense that Edwards used the word, Mrs. Stowe’s piety led her to concern herself with the redemption of drunkards, with Christian love rather than selfish hate between black and white, and with the lifting of the burdens of the oppressed everywhere. (162)

In the passage above, Crozier contrasts the secular with the ecclesiastical, or the churchly. She claims that Stowe’s religious practice was about loving and redeeming the marginalized rather than about preaching doctrine. Here Stowe is still motivated by Christianity—by “piety” and “Christian love”—but she lives them out in the world, on the streets, rather than inside the church.

In a later passage, Crozier uses the term “secular” differently. She describes Stowe as shifting the basis for morality: “The first step in the process which eventually led to the aesthetic or secular morality was the substitution of sentiment for dogma as the essence of Christian belief” (166). Here, “secular” is linked with aesthetics and sentiment and opposed to dogma. Crozier posits a progression: Christianity was once defined as dogma, then it became defined as sentiment, then morality became completely secular. In other words, Crozier might say that Stowe’s replacement of systematic theology with an affective experience of love is one step towards secularization—secularization here defined as the opposite of Christianity. Whereas Crozier first uses “secular” to denote something within the bounds of religion (simply outside the bounds of the church), in the second passage she uses it to mean something outside the bounds of religion. Given the

multiple possible meanings of the term, this confusion is not surprising; nor it is unique to Crozier.

The connection Crozier draws between the emotions and the secular also appears in Lawrence Buell's 1980 analysis of *The Minister's Wooing*. He argues that the novel demonstrates "the gradual secularization of Edwardseanism" ("Calvinism" 260). A later description clarifies what he means by secularization: "New England theology . . . modified in the direction of the religion of the heart" (271). By moving toward the heart, Stowe moves Calvinist theology toward romanticism and secularization. Whether Buell means that Stowe steps away from religion, or simply makes religion more earthly, is impossible to tell. In another piece, Buell specifies the way in which Stowe modifies theology: "*The Minister's Wooing* argues that Hopkinsian disinterested benevolence and the traditional conception of conversion experience need translation into more humanistic terms" (*New England* 269). "Humanistic" is the key term here, but again it is difficult to tell whether Buell means a Christian humanism or a comparatively more secular romantic humanism. Buell's work demonstrates the general critical association between the secular, the emotional, and the human, which could easily imply a separation between the religious and the emotional and human.

David Reynolds, the most influential proponent of Stowe's secularity, also uses the term in multiple ways. His thesis in *Faith in Fiction* (1981) is that from 1785 to 1850 American religious fiction of all genres moved from a doctrinal to a secular emphasis. Although Stowe wrote after Reynolds' time range, her work provides his prime example of secularized Calvinist fiction (95). Of her precursors, he writes, "the early fiction does reveal the Calvinist imagination escaping its doctrinal shackles and moving toward more

secular forms of religious expression," a process Stowe perfected (75). Note what Charles Taylor calls the subtraction story at play here: orthodox doctrine is the "shackles" that the imagination must "escape" from in order to move forward. Orthodoxy is static, liberalism progressive. Moreover, the imagination is opposed to doctrine and associated with the secular. However, the last phrase, "secular forms of religious expression," indicates that Reynolds is not using "secular" here to mean irreligious or antireligious. Another statement defines what he means by "secularization": "Calvinist fiction went through a long and rather tortured process of secularization, passing from modified doctrine to social reform to individual activism" (99). For Reynolds, to move toward the secular is to move away from doctrine to activism. There is no mention here of the boundaries of religion, and it is possible that all three steps—doctrine, reform, and activism—are modes of religious expression.

However, in the last sentence of his book, Reynolds places the secular and the religious in opposition. He explains that the title, *Faith in Fiction*, has three meanings:

> It points to the widespread treatment of religious faith in fiction, . . .[it] signifies popular authors' and clergymen's deepening faith in fiction as the most appropriate literary mode in an increasingly secular and antitheological age . . . [and] it suggests the painful suspicion, underlying much of these Americans' surface cheer, that the otherworldly religion in which they ostensibly had faith was a fiction. (215)

The title's second meaning, like his thesis, uses "secular" in contrast to doctrinal (a "secular and antitheological age"). However, the third meaning reveals that he sees orthodox religion as extraneous because it is nothing but a "fiction," in the sense of a made-up story. In other words, Reynolds' book traces what he sees as the movement from Americans putting their faith in Christianity to putting their faith in literary fiction. His analysis of literary history thereby relies on the secularization narrative—the idea that

progress entails a rejection of orthodox religion. Though the third meaning of his title is phrased as the opinion of nineteenth-century Americans, Reynolds' presuppositions come through in his portrayal of religion as an ideology that must be stripped away: as "surface cheer" that people "ostensibly" had faith in but at a deeper level were learning to view with "suspicion."

To explain the secularization of religious literature, Reynolds borrows an image from *The Minister's Wooing*: the ladder from earth to heaven, which Stowe takes from Plato.[2] In the *Symposium*, Plato writes of the ladder of love, or *scala amoris*, on which the lover ascends to heaven. Starting from the love of the beloved's body, the lover moves to appreciating all physical beauty, then the beauty of the soul, of laws, intellectual beauty, and eventually the Form of beauty itself. Stowe's version says God has placed the ladder on earth and invites people to ascend to him through their everyday experiences. One of her purposes in *The Minister's Wooing* is to critique the abstract theology of Puritan minister Samuel Hopkins, who barred people's natural access to God by "knock[ing] out every round of the ladder but the highest" (54). Reynolds uses this ladder to heaven to describe oriental tales, explaining that they reconstructed the rungs of the ladder that Calvinism had knocked out (21, 63, 68).[3] Looking ahead to the end of the progression he describes, he argues that "in more sophisticated religious fiction by later writers such as Catherine Sedgwick and Harriet Beecher Stowe, visionary imagery would be absorbed into the central action of the story, planting the celestial ladder more firmly in terrestrial experience" (42)—in effect, bringing heaven down to earth.

Though Reynolds is correct to pinpoint the ladder to heaven as an interpretive key to Stowe's religious writings, I would argue that what Stowe means by the ladder to

heaven is the opposite of what Reynolds says she means. Both see it as connecting earth to heaven, but for Stowe the emphasis is on the individual's ascent from daily events to knowledge of the divine. Through one's experience of love, in particular—"human affections, tender instincts, symbolic feelings, sacraments of love,"—the soul "rises higher and higher, refining as she goes, till she outgrows the human, and changes, as she rises, into the image of the divine" (53). The priority of the spiritual becomes even more evident in a later line: "the Eternal Father organized every relation of human existence and strung every cord of human love" to raise the soul to the highest step of the ladder (53). Rather than bringing heaven down to earth, Stowe perceives the ladder as bringing earthly creatures into heaven.

The ladder to heaven is the theological core of *The Minister's Wooing*, and it explains why Stowe would have chosen the romance novel to argue against aspects of Calvinist theology. Through the romance novel, a genre focused on earthly human love, she demonstrates that these experiences of love are the best way for people to learn about God. Not only does *The Minister's Wooing* depict human love, but it also engages the emotions of readers in an effort to teach them about God. Mark Noll, describing the theological battles among Calvinists of Stowe's day, describes her contribution as "novelistic theology," which involved "an almost complete rejection . . . of the overwhelming compulsion of America's Reformed theologians . . . to figure everything out" (326). Using Noll's idea of novelistic theology, this chapter examines the kind of theology Stowe was able to do through the novel form.

One of the major tenets of Reformed theology is the doctrine of election or predestination, the idea that God elected before time began to save certain people. Some

Calvinists extend this idea into double predestination, which includes the belief that God therefore also elected to damn some people. Samuel Hopkins, a student of Jonathan Edwards, pushed double predestination to its logical limits. His theological contribution was the doctrine of disinterested benevolence, which taught that the test of one's love for God was one's willingness to accept personal damnation. In other words, if I was chosen by God before creation to be damned, the way for me to demonstrate my selfless love (or disinterested benevolence) for God is to accept God's verdict. It is likely that Stowe chose the historical Samuel Hopkins as a main character for her novel and set it among the New England Puritans of the 1790s so that she could comment on disinterested benevolence, election, and even hell. Although Hopkins lived in the eighteenth century, his doctrine, as well as the larger framework of Edwardsean Calvinism, was a point of contention in Stowe's milieu.

As a popular novelist, Stowe had a unique voice in antebellum theological debates. Noll explains how well positioned she was to speak into them:

> As the daughter of Lyman Beecher, the era's most dynamic moderate Calvinist, . . . the wife of a Congregationalist professor of biblical literature, a constant participant in a ceaseless round of intense theological conversation, and a careful reader of learned and popular theology, Stowe was as well situated as any person in her age to take the measure of America's mainstream Reformed theology. (325)

Stowe was surrounded by ministers her entire life, including her husband. Following their minister father, six of her seven brothers became preachers, Henry Ward Beecher the most famous. Though Stowe and her sisters were denied pulpits, many of them preached with their pens.

According to Kimberly VanElsveld Adams, *The Minister's Wooing* was Stowe's response to an institutional controversy at her husband's workplace. Charles Stowe was a

professor at Andover Seminary, one of the conservative seminaries founded in response to Harvard's liberalization. Edwards A. Park, who was considered "the last of the consistent Calvinists" and taught Hopkinsian theology, was an influential professor at Andover during Charles Stowe's time there (31). Some of the professors, including Park, were worried by the increasing liberalism of their students. These professors mandated that students must accept their teachers' conservative theology by the end of their second year or leave the seminary.

The Stowes, however, sided with the students. Harriet Beecher Stowe tried to help the seminary students by introducing them to Henry Ward as a potential mentor and by publishing an article critiquing Andover for emphasizing the intellect over the emotions (Adams 32). She also used Park's biography of his hero, Hopkins, to fashion *The Minister's Wooing*—her novelistic critique of Hopkinsian theology. She even invited Park over for tea to listen to the latest installment of *The Minister's Wooing* in proof (Adams 52n17).[4] A letter she wrote to Henry Ward just after finishing the novel reveals its close connection with the seminary controversy. Railing against Park's teaching, she bemoans "the Hopkinsian method of disposing of the great majority of the human race up to our day . . . together with the dry heartless unfeeling cold manner in which the discussion . . . is conducted. All this has affected [Andover students] with the feeling that they cannot preach that" (qtd. in Adams 31). In this historical context, *The Minister's Wooing* can be read as an articulation of a Christianity that *can* be preached. According to Adams, Stowe's attack on Hopkinsian theology in *The Minister's Wooing* probably contributed to her husband losing his job. In 1863, Charles Stowe was forced to resign from Andover. He explained the situation in a letter: "for various reasons connected with

myself and especially my family, the trustees felt themselves seriously embarrassed by my continuance" (39). In his perspective, the hostility against him at Andover had begun with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but became especially strong after *The Minister's Wooing* was published.

Two personal tragedies that predated the Andover conflict also gave rise to *The Minister's Wooing*. In July 1857, a year before Stowe wrote the novel, her nineteen-year-old son Henry drowned. Like the character of James, Henry did not call himself a Christian, and in the Calvinist theology in which Stowe was raised, he was damned. This experience paralleled one that had occurred thirty-five years earlier, when her sister Catharine lost her unregenerate fiancé in a shipwreck. In anguish over the state of her beloved's soul, Catharine even travelled to his home to search for evidence that he had converted. She could find none (Charles Foster 95). This devastating experience and the tension it caused with her minister father were the main reasons for Catharine's eventual rejection of her father's Calvinism (Foster 96).

Given these circumstances, election and hell were likely on Stowe's mind when she began *The Minister's Wooing*. The parallels between Catharine's and Mary's experiences (losing an unregenerate lover at sea), and those of Stowe and James' mother (losing a son), confirm this. In addition, in the summer of 1858, immediately before beginning *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe wrote to her friend Lady Byron about eternal punishment:

> The spirit of Christianity has produced in the human spirit a tenderness of love which wholly revolts from the old doctrine on the subject . . . [yet] the most appalling language on this subject is that of Christ himself. . . .
>
> Is there any fair way of disposing of the current of assertion, and the still deeper undercurrent of implication, on this subject, without one

> which loosens all faith in revelation, and throws us on pure naturalism? (*Life* 340)[5]

Convinced that Christian love must lead one to reject the idea of "an endless affliction for past sins," Stowe searches for a way to reconcile her belief with Jesus' warnings about hell in the gospels (340). Because Jesus warned of hell, Stowe sees that to dispose of the doctrine comes perilously close to disposing of biblical revelation and replacing it with naturalism, or natural religion. This perspective, which was gaining ground in the mid-nineteenth century and embraced by Lydia Maria Child, for one, casts reason as the primary source of religious truth. In an effort to work out a solution to the dilemma she identified, Stowe wrote *The Minister's Wooing*.

Rhetorical Resources of the Romance Novel

In *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe uses every possible novelistic resource to argue against the existence of hell without rejecting biblical revelation. Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) is the best framework for understanding Stowe's novels. Booth's purpose is to lay out the rhetorical resources available to an author of non-didactic fiction, "the resources available to the writer . . . as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader" (xiii). Booth is particularly attentive to the implied author, or the core of norms and values that a work promulgates, and how this core is constructed through the interaction of characters, the narrator, and even description. We will look at how Stowe uses four resources—the marriage plot, telling and showing, the narrator and implied readers, and biblical allusions—to create a multilayered theological argument about God's eternal love in *The Minister's Wooing*.

As is evident from the title, the marriage plot plays a large role in *The Minister's Wooing*. James and Mary are childhood friends grown into lovers whose emotional relationship is "deep, equable, intense," full of "thrills and yearnings," and "living and sensitive" (27).[6] Their romance is enmeshed with religion. James' love is demonstrated in that he views the saintly Mary, who is clearly elect, as "a living gospel," while Mary's is shown in that she spends her days and nights in prayer for unregenerate James and would gladly exchange her salvation for his (24). When James goes off to sea and is presumed dead, the reader is left to struggle with Mary over his eternal destiny. The whole force of this romance novel is toward the consummation of their love, and the doctrines of election and hell block them from being together even in the afterlife. A twenty-two page review of the novel in the *American Theological Review* (November 1859) identifies exactly what is at stake in this conundrum: "the story places the interesting and beloved James in a position where either his soul or the standard New-England theology on this point must be sacrificed" (17). The reviewer assumes that if readers are forced to choose between saving a sympathetic character and saving a doctrine, they will choose the character. The marriage plot thus aids in the theological demise of hell, since it encourages readers to desire eternal life for James.

In addition to engaging readers' emotions against the reality of hell, *The Minister's Wooing* also argues against it logically through the musings of its heroine. In a crucial passage, Mary reasons that her love for James will actually keep James out of hell. This idea, which Stowe knew would be considered heretical, is presented as inconspicuously as possible—in the form of private questions. Yet, even though they are

private, Mary's thoughts have the persuasive effect of rhetorical questions. Sitting in her room, Mary wonders about James:

> If he were among the lost, in what age of eternity could she ever be blessed? . . . Could Christ's own loved ones be happy, when those with whom they have exchanged being, in whom they live and feel, are as wandering stars, for whom is reserved the mist of darkness forever? . . . Is there not some provision by which those roots of deathless love, which Christ's betrothed ones strike into other hearts shall have a divine, redeeming power? (205)

Mary begins with the premise that heaven is a place of blessed happiness. She then reasons that since she could never be happy in heaven if James were damned, he must not be damned.

Beyond simply being unhappy in heaven without James, Mary's reasoning suggests that she would not even be *complete* without him. This idea is alluded to earlier in the novel. When Mary hears of James' death, she begins to not even value her own salvation: "she felt how idle is the mere hope or promise of personal salvation made to one who has passed beyond the life of the self, and struck deep roots of [her] existence in others" (191). Even if Mary is saved, this passage notes, the boundaries of her self have increased to include James—she has "passed beyond" herself, and her roots are in James. Intertwining of persons is the novel's favorite trope for love, which it reflects in multiple images: connected fibers, cobwebs, cords, golden threads, hearts weaving into each other, life-nerves running into another life, living in another soul, thought-strings twisted together.[7]

As Mary later ponders hell, the implications of this shared subjectivity become clear. Mary's love for James makes them one; she has "exchanged being" with him and struck "roots of deathless love" into him. That Mary and James are intimately connected,

even sharing "selfness," is the guarantee to Mary and the reader that their love will not be thwarted (109). Using the image of intertwining in a discussion of hell has profound theological import, since it suggests that people who are connected on earth remain so after death and therefore must share the same eternal fate. As Mary climbs up the ladder of human affection to heaven, she can pull James up with her with the "divine, redeeming power" of her love. Indeed, by this point in the novel, Stowe has so emphasized the exchange of being that occurs in romantic love that she is confident holding it up against the gates of hell.

In contrast to Hopkins' definition of disinterested benevolence as being willing to accept one's own damnation, the novel instead depicts disinterested benevolence as the guarantee against the beloved's damnation. True disinterested benevolence, Stowe suggests, is the selfless love that overflows from Jesus into lovers. Mary wonders, "Would the last act of the great Bride-Groom of the Church be to strike from the heart of his purified Bride those yearnings of self-devoting love which His whole example had taught her?" (205). In other words, since Jesus' sacrificial love is the model for romantic love, he would not sever that love on Judgment Day by sending one partner to heaven and one to hell. Stowe further emphasizes the salvific efficacy of Mary's love by portraying James coming to faith in God while reading the Bible Mary has given him.

A second novelistic resource Stowe employs is telling and showing. In addition to affecting Mary's theology, James' supposed death also affects his mother's theology in ways that Stowe both describes and dramatizes. Chapter 23, "Views of Divine Government," serves as a microcosm of the novel's rhetorical strategy because it promotes the same message through two different means. As Booth points out, all

showing is actually telling, since the author chooses both what to depict and how to depict it (20). Likewise, Mikhail Bakhtin, writing about monological works (works with one main idea), explains that the author's thesis comes through a novel in three ways: as the deciding factor of what to represent, as the conclusion drawn from what is represented, and as the hero's opinion (*Problems* 67). We have already seen the first and third aspects—the marriage plot as an intentional choice for representation and the hero's opinion given in Mary's musings. Mrs. Maryvn's response to the loss of her son is a perfect example of the second aspect, the conclusion the novel draws from what it represents.

In the first half of chapter 23, the narrator explains the results of New England Calvinism. She asserts that Calvinist systems of theology "had, on minds of a certain class, the effect of a slow poison, producing life-habits of morbid action" (197). Even more dramatic: "while strong spirits walked, palm-crowned, with victorious hymns, along these sublime paths, feebler and more sensitive ones lay along the track, bleeding away in life-long despair" (197). In short, whether through poison or bleeding, Calvinism kills. The life circumstance the narrator focuses on is the death of a loved one: "when the stroke of death came, . . . who can say what silent anguish of loving hearts sounded the dread depths of eternity with the awful question, *Where?*" (197). Drawing from her own tormented questioning after her son drowned, Stowe writes powerfully about the emotional turmoil of such a state.

After telling, Stowe shows; the second half of the chapter dramatizes the effects of the doctrines in question through Mrs. Marvyn. The mother's mental breakdown over James' death establishes the impossibility of consenting to the doctrine of disinterested

benevolence. She is fully aware what the doctrine requires her to accept. Rehearsing Hopkins' idea that God damns the greater portion of humanity in order to reveal the evil of sin, she can only respond with what she believes is heresy:

> I never can think it right,—never! Yet they say our salvation depends on our loving God . . . better than our dearest friends.—It is impossible!—it is contrary to the laws of my nature! I can never love God! I can never praise him!—I am lost! lost! lost! (200)

This speech contrasts the laws of God with the laws of nature. Up against a doctrine that demands that she accept the damnation of her son, Mrs. Marvyn recoils and calls it "contrary to the laws of [her] nature," which compel her to love her son. Forced to choose between love of James and love of God, she chooses to reject God and face damnation herself. She considers herself "a lost spirit" (201). The scene bears traces of the New Testament's descriptions of the demon possessed. Mrs. Marvyn's speech is accompanied by physical frenzy, in which her eyes grow wild and "her words, mingled with shrieks and moans, became whirling and confused" (201). Looking on, Mary fears Mrs. Marvyn is losing her mind. The scene critiques Calvinist doctrine not as abstruse or unbiblical but as destroying those who believe it. Moreover, the scene places Calvinism at odds with motherhood, which many of Stowe's readers would have viewed as having a certain sacredness. Though this criticism is previewed in the narrator's comments at the beginning of the chapter, it is best communicated through dramatization.

In the scenes with Mrs. Marvyn, Stowe not only promotes a certain theology but also models how she believes theology should be communicated: rhetorically—that is, with the message adapted to the circumstance and the listener. The novel's first major criticism of Samuel Hopkins, who stands in for all Calvinist theologians, is that he "had been trained always to think more of *what* he should say than of *how* he should say it,"

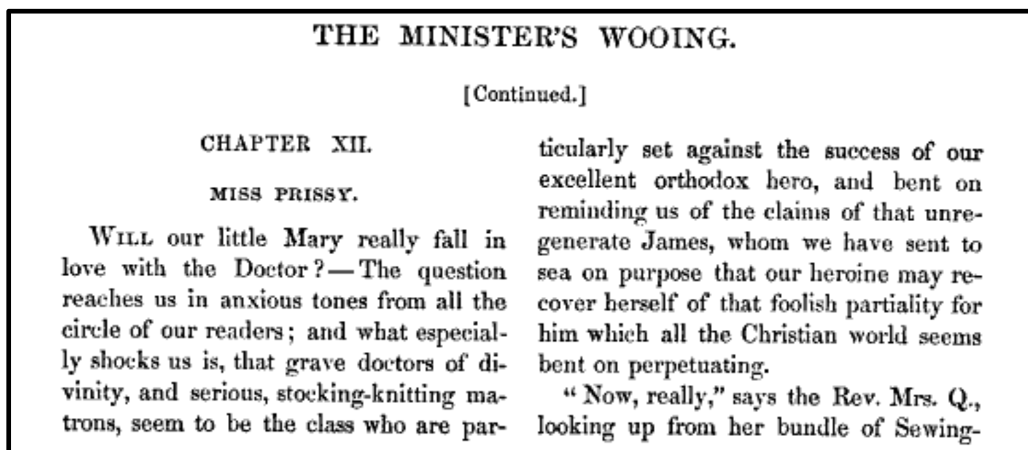
with the result that “few could follow him” (53, emphasis added). His shortcomings become evident in his failure to comfort Mrs. Marvyn. On a pastoral visit to the grieving mother, the only consolation Hopkins can offer is a restatement of his key doctrine: “There is no healing for such troubles except in unconditional submission to Infinite Wisdom and Goodness. The Lord reigneth, and will at last bring infinite good out of evil, whether *our* small portion of existence be included or not” (192). This utterance gives rise to her frenzy; hearing Hopkinsian doctrine expressed apparently has an effect akin to demon possession. The coldness of the dogma forces the warmth of her motherly emotions to be expressed in mania.

The servant Candace serves as a foil to Hopkins, underscoring the need for adapting messages to the audience. She is the only one who can calm Mrs. Marvyn down, which she does by telling her about Jesus’ suffering love. Later, she says that while in times of strength she has no objection to Mrs. Marvyn hearing Hopkins’ teaching, in this circumstance it is unhelpful. Alluding to 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, she argues that just as Paul told the Corinthians they were not ready for meat (complex doctrine) but needed milk (a simplified gospel) instead, so Mrs. Marvyn needs the milk of the gospel: “sick folks mus’n’t hab strong meat” (202).[8]

The Minister’s Wooing is rhetorically effective partly because it uses so many novelistic resources (plot, description, and dramatization), but also because Stowe hides her authorial purpose. She does this by creating the illusion of dialogue and experiment while controlling the outcome of each argument and event. In other words, to return to Bakhtin, Stowe takes advantage of the heteroglossia of the novel form to create not a polyphonic novel but a monologic one. Though today it is usually a compliment to call a

novel "polyphonic," the monologic nature of Stowe's works is actually what gives them their power. The technique of hiding her purpose is best seen in the interaction between the narrator and implied readers.

The Minister's Wooing is so engaging because the narrator is nimble, mixing earnestness and irony, jumping in and out of reliability. Knowing that readers familiar with novelistic conventions will expect Mary and James to wed, Stowe tries to create uncertainty by having the narrator temporarily defend Hopkins as a better choice. She toys not only with this convention but also with the serial form. The serial is particularly suited to suspense, because readers cannot skip to the last page of the book or even to the next chapter; instead, they have to wait a full month for the next installment. It is also suited to interaction between author and readers, since readers could ostensibly try to influence the outcome of the story by writing to the author. Chapter 8, part of the sixth installment of the serial, opens with the letters Stowe has supposedly received from involved readers (see fig. 4 for the text). The passage is dense:


THE MINISTER'S WOOING.

[Continued.]

CHAPTER XII.

MISS PRISSY.

WILL our little Mary really fall in love with the Doctor?—The question reaches us in anxious tones from all the circle of our readers; and what especially shocks us is, that grave doctors of divinity, and serious, stocking-knitting matrons, seem to be the class who are particularly set against the success of our excellent orthodox hero, and bent on reminding us of the claims of that unregenerate James, whom we have sent to sea on purpose that our heroine may recover herself of that foolish partiality for him which all the Christian world seems bent on perpetuating.

"Now, really," says the Rev. Mrs. Q., looking up from her bundle of Sewing-

Figure 4: Installment of *The Minister's Wooing* from *Atlantic Monthly* 3.19 (May 1858); Making of America Collection; Cornell University Library; Web; 14 July 2014.

At this point James has sailed, but the news of his shipwreck has not reached Rhode Island yet. Mrs. Scudder's machinations to get Mary to wed Hopkins are underway. Christopher Wilson articulates the brilliance of this chapter opening: "Stowe defends herself by feigning shock, as if she is more orthodox than her straight-laced readers. . . . Simultaneous however, she infers that even among the righteous, the heart knows intuitively what is best" (561). As Wilson explains, the narrator both presents herself as more orthodox than her readers and argues through them ("all the Christian world") for the priority of James. The ironic humor of this narrative voice also contrasts with the "anxious tones" of the "grave" doctors of divinity and "serious" matrons. She lightheartedly threatens readers with her supposed preference for Hopkins, calling him "our excellent orthodox hero." Indeed, even the novel's title indicates that the minister Hopkins is the main character, and the central plot his wooing of a woman. That his courtship of Mary actually imperils her happiness is an unexpected twist, indicating Stowe's awareness and manipulation of readers' expectations.[9]

The narrator of this passage differs from the narrator of the rest of the novel in both perspective and agency. Since the narrator has to this point exalted the romance between Mary and James, the flattening of Mary's affection to "foolish partiality" and the flattening of James to "unregenerate" is jarring (27). She also calls attention to her power over her characters, claiming she has sent James "to sea on purpose that our heroine may recover herself of that foolish partiality for him." This is surprising because the narrator has previously portrayed herself as a scattered storyteller who lacks control. For example, the second sentence of the novel confides, "When one has a story to tell, one is always puzzled which end of it to begin at" (3). And again, "Have patience with us, for we can

write only as we are driven, and never know exactly where we are going to land" (18). In the passage above, the narrator sheds all uncertainty and informs readers about her plan to make Mary forget about James. She responds to the indignation of four supposed readers, who make complaints against Hopkins such as, "But he's so old!" (107). For two pages, she praises Hopkins as a worthy mate, concluding, "One may see that it is ten to one our Mary may fall in love with him yet before she knows it" (109). In this line the narrator switches back to her earlier incarnation, shedding agency once more. Whereas the powerful narrator of the beginning of chapter 8 had "sent [James] to sea," by the end she recedes into the role of recorder who does not know what will happen (maybe Mary will fall in love with Hopkins, maybe not).

The narrator's playful threats to wed Mary to Hopkins had their intended effect of engaging readers. Stowe's biography notes that during the serial publication she received many letters from readers who were anxious for the future of her characters (332). For example, the month chapter 8 was published, Lady Byron wrote to Stowe,

> It would amuse you to hear my granddaughter and myself attempting to foresee the future of the "love story," being quite persuaded for the moment that James is at sea, and the minister about to ruin himself. We think that she will labor to be in love with the self-devoting man, under her mother's influence, and from that hyper-conscientiousness so common with good girls—but we don't wish her to succeed. Then what is to become of her older lover? (*Life* 344)

As this letter demonstrates, serial publications were often read in community and became sources of discussion. For instance, Susan Warner wrote in her journal, "Read aloud first two numbers of 'The Minister's Wooing'—much amused" (SW 385). The month between installments was ample time to debate the next turn of the story. Lady Byron and her granddaughter were convinced that Stowe would let James win but also perplexed by

the plot's movement toward Hopkins, guided within the story by Mrs. Scudder's meddling and without by the narrator's metacommentary.

In general, the narrator can usually be identified with Stowe herself, but in the passages cited above she becomes an unreliable narrator, stating ideas that are out of alignment with the implied author. Nancy Lusignan Schultz, noting the occasional strange moves of the narrator in passages like this, concludes that *The Minister's Wooing* is a double-layered text. In her reading, the narrator speaks not for Stowe but for Calvinism: "*The Minister's Wooing*'s 'cover story' is the narrative voice's claim that the covenant vow is inexpungible, that the minister must be married" (42). For her, the dressmaker Miss Prissy represents Stowe as a "madwoman-artist" (42). In a markedly different reading of the novel's narratorial voice, Christiane Farnan posits that Stowe creates a nonthreatening narrator who represents the story's female community. Invoking the parallel between an author and God, she attests that Stowe deliberately rejects this posture: "The narrator serves as a guide to the story, not as a forceful authoritative omniscient God-like figure who puts characters through paces and marches them toward a specific narrative end" (105). For Schultz, then, the narrator represents the Calvinist voice and is overridden by Miss Prissy. For Farnan, in contrast, the narrator's lack of agency is a purposeful distancing from the Calvinist God, a narrative stance that allows for a strikingly "nonoppressive narrative" (106). Schultz and Farnan both highlight important characteristics of the narrator. They come to different conclusions, however, because they each attend to only one narratorial persona. Schultz's reading fits best with the passage of teasing metacommentary about Mary and Hopkins, Farnan's with the narrator's comments about not knowing where to begin the story and not knowing the

ending. Attending to the novel as a whole requires an interpretation that accounts for all of the narrator's shape-changing, which is what I am attempting by describing Stowe's rhetorical skill. The effect of this mixed narrative voice is to mask the position of the implied author and create verisimilitude.

Stowe also creates the illusion of a lack of authorial control in self-deprecating narratorial comments about her purpose. Early in the novel, she claims that she will not be commenting on the theology the novel portrays: "It is not in our line to imply the truth or the falsehood of those systems of philosophical theology, . . . but as psychological developments they have an intense interest" (17). This statement encourages readers to see the novel as an experiment, asking what happens when Calvinist theology runs up against personal tragedy. In reality, though, Stowe both sets the terms and controls the outcome of this test.

A later passage emphasizes again that *The Minister's Wooing* is simply a romantic story, not a theological treatise:

> We foresee grave heads beginning to shake over our history, and doubts rising in reverend and discreet minds whether this history is going to prove anything but a love-story after all.
>
> We do assure you, right reverend Sir, and you, most discreet Madam, that it is not going to prove anything else. (73)

This passage, like the one at the beginning of chapter 8, imagines the implied readers as "grave," "reverend and discreet." However, rather than cheering for James, here they are set against romance. The narrator again has the upper hand, playfully promising to give them exactly what they do not want—a love story. The term "prove" has a double meaning; in the mouths of the readers it means "to result in"—is this history going to result in a love story? But the narrator turns it around to mean, "to logically

demonstrate"—this story is not going to prove anything but love. In other words, what on the surface seems like a simple love story is also a demonstration of the power and importance of romantic love. The narrator's playfulness in the passages addressed to imaginary readers has two effects. First, it obscures Stowe's rhetorical purpose by minimizing the theological conclusions her story drives toward. Second, it characterizes those who hold to abstract positions (whether they are set against Hopkins or against romantic love) as funereal and close-minded, in contrast to the narrator's nimble imaginative engagement with the messiness of life.

The final resource Stowe uses to reinterpret Calvinist theology is biblical allusion, in which she boldly meshes Christian salvation history with romance. One line expresses God's process of creation reinvented in romantic terms. Describing Hopkins falling in love with Mary, the text says, "It is the silent breathing of [Mary's] creative presence that is even now creating him anew" (56). The present tense and the phrase "even now" elevate Mary's creative work by taking it outside of time. More significantly, though, the words resound with biblical meaning. The most obvious parallel is the Genesis creation account; Mary's "creative presence" recalls God's spirit hovering over the waters before God creates the earth (Gen. 1:2). When God creates Adam, the first human, God breathes life into him the same way Mary's breath creates Hopkins: " And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (King James Version, Gen. 2:7). In the New Testament, the image of giving life is transformed into the Holy Spirit as God's breath, creating the church at Pentecost and giving eternal life to believers. With this background, Stowe uses loaded language by saying that Mary's breath is "creating [Hopkins] anew." She is drawing not

only on God the Father creating humanity at the beginning of the world, but also God the Holy Spirit re-creating Christians. Gathering all of these resonances, Stowe makes Mary a God figure and glorifies Hopkins' romantic attraction by comparing it with his being created and re-created by God.

With equally striking allusions, another passage in *The Minister's Wooing* redefines the Fall of the Genesis story as loss of faith in romantic love. A central idea of the novel is that a lover creates an idealized picture of the beloved, which the beloved strives to live up to. A chapter about romance opens with short vignettes depicting bitter, disillusioned people who have given up on romantic love after their ideal of their beloved is broken. The narrator addresses the reader, declaring that though this disenchantment is inevitable, it is dangerous to react to it:

> When thy ideal is shattered,—as shattered a thousand times it must be. . . turn not away in skepticism and bitterness, but rather cherish the revelations of those hours as prophecies and foreshadowings of something real and possible, yet to be attained in the manhood of immortality. The scoffing spirit that laughs at romance is an apple of the Devil's own handing from the bitter tree of knowledge;—it opens the eyes only to see eternal nakedness. (72)

To rephrase: the idealized version of the beloved, though it may not be true to the person in this life, is a glimpse of how the person will be in eternal life. According to the last sentence, to become bitter when one realizes the reality of the beloved is akin to Adam and Eve's Fall, which introduced sin into the world. To ridicule romance is to eat the apple that the devil tempted Adam and Eve with after God had told them not to eat from that tree. Just as Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and recognized their nakedness, this passage depicts the eye-opening disillusionment that strips the beloved of his or her idealized characteristics. Stowe's ability to reimagine the

entire Genesis account of the Fall in one sentence, and to center the creation of the world on romantic love, is only less remarkable than her audacity in doing so.

Lastly, the novel reinvents resurrection. As we have seen, it emphasizes the oneness of lovers to argue that love keeps a beloved one out of hell. In this scenario, Mary saves James by loving him. But the opposite also occurs—James, a sort of Christ figure, also saves Mary. The scene in which James returns from the sea draws parallels between James' homecoming and Jesus' rising from the dead. Capitalizing on the fact that Mary Scudder and Mary Magdalene have the same name, Stowe fashions the reunion between Mary and James as a reunion between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. In *The Minister's Wooing*, Mary is daydreaming about James when "suddenly she heard footsteps behind her, and some one said, 'Mary!'" (291). In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene visits Jesus' tomb and is the first one to see the resurrected Jesus. He is behind her, and she turns around but does not recognize him until he says, "Mary" (John 20:14-16). The text extends the parallels with Jesus' resurrection, saying that James "had hardly yet returned to the visible world" and describing his return as being "like life from the dead" (292, 295). Finally, as Jesus' resurrection bears the promise of resurrection for all Christians, James' reappearance gives Mary new life. When she heard James had drowned, Mary's soul died: "the thousand fibres that bind youth and womanhood to earthly love and life were all in her as still as the grave" (217). But when James returns to Newport, she comes back to life, displaying "no longer the beauty of the carved statue, the pale alabaster shrine, the sainted virgin, but a warm, bright, living light, that spoke of some summer breath breathing within her soul" (309). Mary transforms from lifeless icon to living woman when her lover is once more in her presence.[10]

John Gatta notes the pervasiveness of biblical allusions in these late scenes. He concludes, "Despite her resistance to a masculinized tradition of semiotics and epistemology, Stowe draws heavily on orthodox biblicism in framing the millennial-apocalyptic imagery that dominates the conclusion of *The Minister's Wooing*" (67). However, while Stowe does indeed draw on biblical tropes, as we have seen, she does so in a manner that resists orthodox interpretations. In fact, she reimagines the millennium and the apocalypse as a boy and a girl reuniting. Their reunion is expressed in terms of heaven and earth becoming one: "heaven and earth [fade] away together" as Mary sits in James' lap (292). Even more spectacularly, in this scene Mary is transported to heaven. She feels herself caught up in James' arms, "whether in the body or out of the body God knoweth"—a direct quotation of 2 Corinthians 12:3, in which Paul describes being transported to paradise (291). To demonstrate the salvific effects of romantic love, Stowe thus presents the romance plot through Christian imagery in a way that makes the two inextricable. Although this fits her understanding of how God draws people to himself—through the ladder of human affections—it was to be expected that the novel's presentation would create a storm of controversy.

Stowe was evidently worried about the reception of her novel, as two letters reveal. After only three installments had been printed, the *Atlantic* editor, James Russell Lowell, wrote to Stowe in response to a letter from her: "As for 'orthodoxy,' be at ease. Whatever is well done the world finds orthodox at last. . . . If, with your heart and brain, *you* are not orthodox, in Heaven's name who is?" (qtd. in *Life* 335). Apparently Stowe had voiced a concern that either she or *The Minister's Wooing* would not be considered orthodox, and in this letter Lowell brushes aside her fears by praising her compassion,

intelligence, and certain success. A similar exchange occurs in a letter from John Ruskin, who wrote to Stowe after the book was published in England: "I do not understand why you should apprehend (or rather anticipate without apprehension) any absurd criticism on it. It is sure to be a popular book" (qtd. in *Life* 338). Popular it was, but without criticism it was not.

Theology of the Bones

Stowe was correct to apprehend controversy. *The Minister's Wooing* added fuel to a fire already burning in antebellum Calvinism. Noll describes 1820 to 1860 as "the greatest, but also the most self-destructive, era of productive Christian theology in the nation's history" (263). Taking place in "oceans of print," these theological debates resulted in Calvinism fragmenting into nine factions, some of the most prominent being Unitarians and New and Old School Presbyterians (263, 266). A Unitarian paper lauded the novel, claiming it "will do more to break down Orthodoxy, than all the direct efforts of our Unitarian pulpits and press could possibly accomplish" (qtd. in *New York Observer* Oct. 20, 1859). Conservative papers, on the other hand, largely rejected it as heretical, if not diabolical.

In this climate, *The Minister's Wooing* was a shibboleth. Religious writers used reactions to the novel to determine who was inside and outside the fold of orthodoxy. For instance, one Presbyterian weekly, the *New York Evangelist*, initially praised the novel as a skillful love story but eventually renounced it under pressure from another New York Presbyterian weekly. It is possible that this struggle reflected or added to the newly formed rivalry between Old and New School Presbyterians. The two papers, the *New*

York Observer and *New York Evangelist*, waged a war over *The Minister's Wooing* that lasted from October 1859 to February 1860. In October, the *Evangelist* defended the novel against the religious press by arguing that Mrs. Marvyn's doubts of future punishment should not be read as Stowe's, nor should the novel be read as a theological work. The words of a character should not be read as "deliberate opinion, avowed and defended in a Theological Treatise. It is not at all in that light that we look upon this book, but as a simple tale of religious faith, and tender, trembling love." Three months later, the *Observer* harassed its rival by publishing this very defense alongside two devastating critiques of the novel that appeared in other Presbyterian papers. It deduces that "in its endorsement of Mrs. Stowe's attack upon New England theology and morals, the *N. Y. Evangelist* does not speak the sentiments of its own ecclesiastical connection" (Jan. 5, 1860). To put it another way, anyone who does not condemn *The Minister's Wooing* is not a true Presbyterian. The following week, the *Evangelist* editor responded that he had never endorsed the theology of the book, only praised the story. He added that he had since heard that Stowe was unsettled in her views on eternal punishment, and therefore there may have been a scheme in Mrs. Marvyn's dialogue. The editor saves his reputation by distancing himself from Stowe: "If there *were* such a design, certainly it was very reprehensible, and . . . had we been informed of any such reason for suspecting the intention of the author, we should of course have warned our readers about it" (Jan. 12, 1860). Other religious papers took sides on this debate, many agreeing with the *Observer* in its alarm over *The Minister's Wooing*, which it called "the most subtle and insidious and dangerous assault yet made" on Calvinist theology (Jan. 19, 1860).

The battle of reviewers is informative for what it says about the theological possibilities of a romance novel. The *Evangelist* defended *The Minister's Wooing* on two fronts: (1) that it was a love story, a tale, and not a theological treatise, and (2) that Mrs. Marvyn's doubts about hell did not reflect Stowe's opinion. These claims rest on the assumptions that narration is different from exposition (showing is different from telling) and that the opinions of characters do not always match those of the implied author. When the reviewer found out that Stowe might be less than orthodox, however, he jettisons both these arguments and insists, "*We have not endorsed the theology of The Minister's Wooing at all*" (Jan, 18, 1860, original emphasis). Whereas at first he reads the novel as a love story rather than theology, under pressure he recognizes the potentially problematic theology embedded in that love story. Furthermore, he notes that the speech of characters often does reflect the author's intention. Though he does not use these terms, in effect the reviewer changes from defending the novel as polyphonic to admitting its monologic nature. That Stowe was promoting her theological position in a *novel*, which might seem polyphonic and therefore innocent of didacticism, is likely what made worried reviewers label the work "subtle . . . and dangerous."

The main concern of reviewers was the novel's threat to the doctrines of election and hell. The most insightful review is the long *American Theological Review* piece previously mentioned. Most worrisome to this reviewer is that the novel performs theological analysis starting from the emotions rather than a rational interpretation of Scripture. It interprets life "from the heart without a Bible, rather than from the understanding with the Bible open before it" (13). Though the idea of hell might not make sense in human terms, the reviewer argues, God is a better judge than humans are.

Therefore, to draw conclusions about hell by pointing to the suffering love of a woman, like Mrs. Marvyn or Mary, is inappropriate. The reviewer picks up on Stowe's denigration of tightly-held abstractions in favor of truths fitted to particular people in particular circumstances, like the "milk" Candace offers Mrs. Marvyn. Quoting Candace's assertion that she feels "in her bones" that James is not really dead, the reviewer labels the novel's perspective "theology of the bones"—theology that reasons about eternal matters from one's own visceral experience rather than from revelation (18). He worries that this relativism will spread because of the book's popularity and laments that Stowe "had some part in helping [the *Atlantic*] fulfill its mission of evil," which is to undermine "Puritan Theology" (22).[11]

As this review underscores, characters in *The Minister's Wooing* do indeed reason about God from human experience. When Mrs. Marvyn is frenzied, Candace uses an analogy with her own love to persuade the desperate mother that God loves her: he "*loves* ye, honey! Why, jes' feel how *I* loves ye—poor ole black Candace,—an' I a'n't better'n Him as made me!" (201). If Candace loves Mrs. Marvyn, the reasoning goes, the God who made Candace and is better than her also must love Mrs. Marvyn. James' mother herself also reasons from human experience, but with negative results. Mrs. Marvyn decides she cannot love God because the doctrine of election is akin to child abuse: "What if a father should take means to make it certain that his poor little child should be an abandoned wretch? . . . It is *not* right!" (200). After she has recovered from partial insanity, she elaborates: "Any father, who should make such use of power over his children as they say the Deity does with regard to us, would be looked upon as a monster by our very imperfect moral sense" (206). This second passage, while still comparing

God to a monster, adds the caveat that human moral sense is incomplete. This qualification is what has allowed Mrs. Marvyn to recover. She has recognized that though God's actions might appear unjustifiable, humans cannot properly evaluate them. By refusing to judge God, Mrs. Marvyn can maintain both her sense of justice and her belief in God's love.

Through Mrs. Marvyn pre- and post-frenzy, Stowe can both voice and denounce the Unitarian idea that God is to be judged on human terms. Describing the differences between the Calvinist and the Unitarian view of the Atonement, Ann Douglas explains the work of Unitarian theologian Hosea Ballou: "Ballou's translation of a divine dilemma . . . into its human analogue—which he then uses as an unimpeachable test of truth—is typical. God's privileged, absolutely non-human status is gone; he is to be judged very much in mortal and moral terms" (125). Mrs. Marvyn's last statement both uses a human analogue and cautions against it. Elsewhere in the novel, however, God seems to be judged very much on human terms. For example, what is Mary's conclusion about hell other than an analogy between romantic love and Christ's love?

The novel form, because it does not need to be systematic, can contain such apparent inconsistencies. Recall Noll's definition of novelistic theology as rejecting the "compulsion . . . to figure everything out" (326). Through Mrs. Marvyn, in particular, the novel demonstrates the shortcomings of systematic theology as it depicts her thought process about hell. Referring to the idea that God wills some to suffer, she tells Mary that she cannot disbelieve the doctrine because the Bible and nature support it. But she can refuse to infer from this that God is unloving and instead choose to focus on his love demonstrated in the crucifixion. Basically, Mrs. Marvyn exchanges systematic theology

for a mystical, affective experience of God's love. She says, "I have thought, in desperate moments, of giving up the Bible itself. But . . . do I not see the same difficulty in Nature? . . . If there is a fathomless mystery of sin and sorrow, there is a deeper mystery of God's love. So, Mary, I try Candace's way,—I look at Christ,—I pray to him. . . . I rest there,—I wait" (206-207). Though Mrs. Marvyn is given to logic, she learns to use another part of herself in response to God. Like a Catholic mystic, she looks at Christ on the cross, she prays, she waits. The narrative form of the novel allows her to do this as well as giving readers permission to do the same.

A letter from Stowe to her sister highlights how much she drew from personal experience in depicting Mrs. Marvyn's anguished questions and hard-earned peace. A month after her son Henry died, she wrote to Catharine about it. Her language prefigures Mrs. Marvyn's agony about her son's destiny and how God's actions measure up to human standards:

> Distressing doubts as to Henry's spiritual state were rudely thrust upon my soul. It was as if a voice had said to me: "You trusted in God, did you? You believed that He loved you! You had perfect confidence that he would never take your child till the work of grace was mature! Now He has hurried him into eternity without a moment's warning, without preparation, and where is he?" . . . What should we think of the crime of that human being who should take a young mind from circumstances where it was progressing in virtue, and throw it recklessly into corrupting and depraving society? (qtd. in *Life* 321-22)

The same letter also shows Stowe arriving at the conclusion she provides for Mrs. Marvyn, of trusting God's love as the model and source of her own love and being content to rest in mystery:

> No such slander as this shall the Devil ever fix in my mind against my Lord and my God! . . . He invented mothers' hearts, and He certainly has the pattern in his own. . . . The mysteries of God's ways must be

> swallowed up by the greater mystery of the love of Christ. (qtd. in *Life* 322)

Reading this letter, it becomes evident that Mrs. Marvyn speaks for Stowe both in her doubts about hell and her faith in God's love.

In place of systematic theology as the means of knowing God, *The Minister's Wooing* commends daily experience—particularly the experience of human love. In a speech to the church women, Mary summarizes her new understanding of God borne through suffering: "A love passing knowledge,—passing all love of lovers or mothers,—a love forever spending, yet never spent" (212). This passage is particularly poignant because the deep and agonized love of lovers and mothers for James has just been dramatized and felt. Douglas Walrath notes that the novel's alternative theology is at play even in the character of Hopkins. The Calvinist minister turns out to be generous and loving—to the point of giving up his beloved Mary—even though his doctrine is so demanding. In this way, Hopkins mirrors God. Walrath affirms, "The theological resolution in *The Minister's Wooing* hinges on character, not logic. God and godly humans surpass logic. . . . A demanding God and humans inspired by God turn out to be more benevolent than we expect them to be" (55).[12] The novel form not only allows Stowe to argue how she thinks theology should be done—drawing from human experience—but also allows her to invite the reader into that type of theological reasoning. In effect, she draws the reader up the ladder toward heaven.

The Secular Novel

In its shuttling between earth and heaven, *The Minister's Wooing* should cause us to revise accepted notions of the relationship between religion and the novel form. A

common supposition in literary criticism, from the nineteenth century to this day, is that the novel form can only work against religion. In 1847 the *North American Review*, which was associated with Boston Unitarianism, noted the "general distrust of the works commonly called religious novels" ("Amy Herbert"). It claimed that such novels are largely incapable of representing both doctrine and daily life well; they are either too doctrinal and uninteresting as a story, or too earthly and not pious enough. Either way, story and doctrine are opposed. Buell participates in a similar assumption when he argues that Unitarian ideology lends itself better than orthodoxy to writing fiction, and that even novels written by orthodox writers end up being more liberal than the writers themselves. He gives two potential reasons for this dynamic:

> Either the conventions of romance prevented conservative authors from speaking their convictions . . . or else the creative process triggered in the sensibility of these writers a partial liberation from creedal restraints. In any case, when orthodox writers ventured into the charmed world of romance, they did so at peril to their orthodoxy. (*New England* 236)

Buell claims that either generic conventions overshadowed the authors' beliefs, or the authors were able to temporarily suspend their beliefs as they wrote. As we noted with Reynolds, the subtraction story underlies Buell's formulation "liberation from creedal restraints." Both Buell and the *North American Review* assume that the novel form pulls one way while orthodox religion pulls another, and the two cannot coexist.

Because of this presumed tension, many critics join Buell in assuming that if religious themes are incorporated into a novel, those themes are automatically affected. To put it another way, the novel form exerts liberalizing theological pressure. For some, the tension is even greater between religion and the romance novel. Catholic intellectual

Orestes Brownson best articulates this view in the January, 1848 *Boston Quarterly Review*:

> The distance between the interest of [a love] story and that of a theological discussion is much greater than the distance between it and that of any secular or profane discussion. . . . The only religion lovers can understand or relish is the religion of the natural sentiments and affections, that is to say, no religion at all. Nothing is more absurd than for a novelist to mingle in his work a story of profane love and a story of religious conversion, two things which will no more mix than oil and water. (226)

Brownson's hypothesis that religion and romance are incompatible can be found in current readings of *The Minister's Wooing*. For instance, Alison O'Harae notes that *The Minister's Wooing* substitutes marriage for salvation as the end goal. She concludes, "It is difficult to determine whether this is Stowe's deliberate revisionism of Calvinist theology, or simply an implicit consequence of seeking to deal with such complex theological issues through the medium of the historical romance novel" (77). This either/or has the same contours as Buell's. For O'Harae, there are two possible explanations of the novel's theology: (1) Stowe deliberately placed marriage above salvation in order to rework Calvin's system, or (2) the conventions of the romance novel—because marriage is *its* end goal—inevitably created this outcome.

The Minister's Wooing makes for a provocative study of the novel because both options O'Harae suggests are partially correct: Stowe does employ the conventions of the romance novel, but she does so self-consciously, in order to modify Calvinist theology. I concede that *The Minister's Wooing* and her other novels may have had a liberalizing force on American theology. In fact, in Noll's table of Calvinist factions from 1790 to 1860, Stowe and her brother Henry Ward, along with Horace Bushnell, are their own category: American Romantics (264). My point, however, is that the novel form did not

create her theology. The novel form did not pressure her into rejecting hell. Rather, her theology—her belief that God brings people to himself through human love—is what made the novel an ideal medium for her. Brownson's scornful remark that "the only religion lovers can understand or relish is the religion of the natural sentiments and affections" identifies exactly the kind of religion she promotes. Stowe did not believe in a ladder to heaven because she wrote novels; she wrote novels that creatively instantiated her belief in a ladder to heaven.

Stowe knew that she was walking a fine theological line in *The Minister's Wooing*. The responses of Lowell and Ruskin to her anxiety about the novel's reception indicate this. Her letter to Lady Byron about hell also highlights her cautiousness. She probes the problem of hell in exactly the same way she later has Mrs. Marvyn probe it, wanting to reject it but unable to ignore its confirmation in the Bible and nature. Here is the letter again:

> The doctrine as now taught . . . I fear, is inferable from the analogies of nature, and confirmed by the whole implication of the Bible.
>
> Is there any fair way of disposing of the current of assertion, and the still deeper undercurrent of implication, on this subject, without one which loosens all faith in revelation, and throws us on pure naturalism? (qtd. in *Life* 340)

Well might Stowe be concerned about jettisoning revelation and being thrown on "pure naturalism," since that philosophy was becoming increasingly popular in the mid-nineteenth century. In England, the term "secularism" had just been coined for it. George Holyoake first used "secular" in 1851 to describe "a general test of principles of conduct apart from spiritual considerations" (46-47). Writing in 1896 in *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*, he reflects on the secular movement he led in Britain:

> I could see that material laws counted for something in the world. This led me to the conclusion that the duty of watching the ways of nature was incumbent on all who would find true conditions of human betterment, or new reasons for morality. . . . To this end the name of Secularism was given to certain principles which had for their object human improvement by material means, . . . justifying morality by considerations which pertain to this life alone. (45-46)

Holyoake's main tenet was that morality should be determined by humans attending to everyday life, rather than by a religious text or with reference to eternity. Studying life—"watching the ways of nature"—was the proper way to make moral decisions. By making human emotion the basis of knowledge of God, and by reasoning from human experience to what God must be like, Stowe approaches Holyoake's position. She has not rejected religion, as Holyoake has, but she has put religion on a different—some would say secular—foundation.

However, we must read Stowe in her historical context. When she maintained the importance of the earthly, the emotional, the human, she did so in opposition to those who thought God was indifferent, if not opposed, to those things. One of the characteristics the novel gently chides Hopkins for is his ignorance of the work that sustains his life. After describing in detail the sewing, cleaning, and cooking that Mrs. Scudder and Mary do for Hopkins, the narrator comments wryly, "The Doctor little thought, while he . . . gently traduced the Scriptural Martha and insisted on the duty of heavenly abstractedness, how much of his own leisure for spiritual contemplation was due to the Martha-like talents of his hostess" (99-100). Critics have typically read passages like this as a feminist argument for the importance of the work women do; it is equally an argument for the value of the material over against abstract spirituality.

Because of the confusion caused by multiple definitions of "secular," many critics unwittingly misread Stowe. They note Stowe's glorification of the humanistic and worldly and call it a secular move, but they slip from meaning secular as "earthly" to meaning "irreligious" or even "antireligious." However, Stowe's point is that the earthly and the emotional are the way God teaches us about himself, so they are deeply religious. Through the character of Hopkins, she argues against the divide she sees in Calvinism between doctrine and experience, God and life. Secular and sacred are one: "So long as we have a body and a soul[,] two worlds must mingle,—the great and the little, the solemn and the trivial, . . .—only, did we know it rightly, nothing is trivial; since the human soul, with its awful shadow, makes all things sacred" (120). Whereas Calvinists upheld the sacred over the secular, modern critics uphold the secular over the sacred. Both assume a split that Stowe is intent on dismantling. Ironically, then, by reading her as secular, many contemporary critics reinscribe a binary Stowe finds false. She writes novels, writes about families and marriages, because she believes "the Eternal Father organized every relation of human existence and strung every cord of human love" to raise the soul to himself (53). Her novels are secular, but in a religious way; they depict earthly experiences as the rungs of the ladder leading to heaven.

It is a quirk of literary history that Reynolds, in describing the progression he sees from doctrinal to secular literature, appropriates many of his images from Stowe. We have seen how he uses her ladder to heaven to characterize oriental tales. In the same manner, he borrows the image of frozen Puritanism from *The Minister's Wooing*. Stowe depicts Calvinist theology as "glacial reasonings" and refers to the "snow-banks of cold Puritan preciseness" (198, 73). Reynolds comments that Stowe tries "to dissolve rigorous

logic with the humanizing warmth of fiction"—indeed, that fiction in general "melted" Puritanism (94). In *Beneath the American Renaissance*, Reynolds extends the trope of frozen Puritanism to Melville's work. Referring to *Moby-Dick*, he writes, "Melville's creative exploitation of secularized religious images throughout the novel would almost certainly have been impossible if the 'prow' of the American pulpit had not broken up the ice fields of doctrinal Calvinism" (28). Literature was stuck in frozen doctrine, the story goes, but as sermons became more secular they broke the ice, and the ship of literature could move forward into enhanced creativity and realism.

Only if the secularization narrative is assumed must the progress of literature toward the "secular" virtues of imagination and artistry be equated with its movement away from religion. Indeed, Reynolds' work suggests that literary history's version of the secularization narrative is that literature became more imaginative and sophisticated as it broke away from "doctrinal shackles." The same narrative of progress underlies comments by Buell such as, "the creative process triggered in the sensibility of these writers a partial liberation from creedal restraints." Scholars of antebellum religious literature are enormously indebted to Reynolds and Buell, both for the breadth of their recovery efforts and the depth of their analysis. I propose that the best way to build on their work is to acknowledge their presuppositions and reassess this literature, especially heeding the multiple definitions of "the secular." Doing so will bring to light the nuances of Stowe's novelistic theology and potentially reveal the same religious impulse in other "earthly" novels. Moreover, attending to the secular will help us disentangle nineteenth-century American literary history from the secularization narrative.

Notes

[1] For examples of scholars who work with the fifth definition of "secular," see Charles Taylor, Michael Warner, Talal Asad, and Jose Casanova. For Taylor, "secularity" does not mean secularized public space, nor does it mean the decline of religious belief and practice; instead, it means the changing conditions of belief, in which the default has gone from belief in God to unbelief, and faith is always seen as one possibility among many (20). Warner emphasizes social-structural differentiation: "The more robust understanding of secularization is that a variety of social changes—bureaucratization, the rationalization and professionalization of authority, the rise of the state, the separation of the economy, urbanization and empirical science—change the position of religious institutions in the social landscape" (212). For Asad, "the secular" is an epistemic category that gives rise to "secularism," a political doctrine that leads to "secularization," the redefinition of the person as a citizen of a nation: "Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment whereby a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion" (5). For Casanova, secularization must be defined as "differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms" and not as "the decline of religious belief and practice" or "marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere" (211).

[2] The ladder to heaven is also the title image for Charles Foster's important work *The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism* (1954).

[3] Reynolds assumes that Jonathan Edwards is the one who has knocked the rungs out of the ladder. However, Hopkins is the subject of the chapter in which the ladder passage appears and is therefore the more likely referent of the epithet "our sage" (54).

[4] By placing Harriet Beecher Stowe and Park in opposition, Adams revises the former understanding of them as friends, best articulated by Buell in "Hawthorne and Stowe as Rival Interpreters of New England Puritanism," chapter 11 of *New England Literary Culture.*

[5] Charles Edward Stowe's biography of his mother, *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1889), will be referred to as *Life* in parenthetical citations.

[6] Dorothy Baker compares *The Minister's Wooing* to other courtship novels published at the same time in the *Atlantic*, pointing out that Stowe challenges the traditional marriage plot by depicting a young woman choosing her mate independently, even against parental wishes, responsible only to her own heart. She thereby increases the focus on romantic love.

[7] In a brilliant commentary on Stowe's use of the web, Joan Hedrick connects it to Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which depicts the sinner as

a spider hanging by a thread over hell. She suggests that Stowe reverses the image: "Stowe's reworking of Calvinism makes the spider the heroine of the salvation drama. For the terrifying individualistic vision of Edwards she substitutes a communal vision in which women are spinners and weavers—knitters-up of the social fabric. They create webs of relationships that securely hold the lonely sinners whom Edwards trifled with" (280).

[8] In 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, Paul writes, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (King James Version).

[9] Christopher Felker sees such moments of metacommentary in *The Minister's Wooing* as training readers to recognize ideology: "Stowe inserts moments of realism into the conventions of the formulaic romance for the express purpose of disrupting and modifying her narrative's presumed meanings," thereby training readers in seeing through "the seductive and controlling nature of political activity" (168-69).

[10] Paul Eakin reads what he calls Mary's orientation toward death as part of Stowe's "suggest[ion] not only that the Doctor's theology defines the significance of death but that it even partakes of the principle of death itself" (38, 41). In his interpretation, Stowe wanted to wed Hopkins and Mary in a symbolic reconciliation of Calvinism and sentimentalism but realized as the novel progressed that this was impossible (43).

[11] Despite the reviewer's insights into the implications of Stowe's novelistic theology, it must be said that this *American Theological Review* piece is a product of its times, marred by its racist treatment of the character of Candace and its patriarchal attitude toward Stowe.

[12] In focusing on the way Stowe critiqued Calvinist theology through the novel form, this chapter may give an unbalanced view of the novel's treatment of Calvinism as a whole. Stowe's portrayal of Calvinists is actually relatively positive for its time. Until the 1980s, most criticism on *The Minister's Wooing* was primarily concerned with whether the novel was pro- or anti-Calvinist, and there is plenty of evidence on both sides. Charles Foster, Paul Eakin, and Vernon Parrington stressed Stowe's continuity with her Calvinist upbringing; Alice Crozier, Ann Douglas, and Dorothy Berkson view Stowe as rejecting Calvinism. The fact that these interpretations divide along the gender line can be explained partially by the novel's conflation of Calvinism and patriarchy and by the reality that feminist readings before 1980 were primarily done by women. Walrath, in a recent treatment of the question, shows that *The Minister's Wooing* was remarkably pro-Calvinist for its time, especially in its relatively sympathetic portrayal of Hopkins: "From midcentury on, nearly all Calvinist ministers who appear in American novels, regardless of the time in which the novel is set, are characterized as bigots or fanatics, or both"—Hopkins is neither (29). Accordingly, Walrath reads Stowe as longing to retain Calvinism but unable to fully embrace it or completely reject it (55).

CHAPTER V

THE PROVIDENTIAL PLOT: SLAVERY VERSUS CHRISTIANITY IN *THE BONDWOMAN'S NARRATIVE*

> Miserable as I was, helpless, ~~hopeless~~ almost hopeless and a slave I felt that my condition for eternity if not for time, was perferable [*sic*] to [my owner's], and that I would not even for the blessed boon of freedom change places with him; since even freedom without God and religion would be a barren possession.
> (*The Bondwoman's Narrative* 112)

In 2001, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. bought an old handwritten manuscript at auction whose title page read, "The Bondwoman's Narrative By Hannah Crafts A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped From North Carolina." Having never been published, the manuscript was soon authenticated as written somewhere between 1853 and 1861. However, nobody could identify the author. In 2002, Time Warner published the novel, which became a New York Times bestseller thanks to ingenious marketing and the work's historical and literary importance.[1] *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was hailed as likely "the first novel written by a black woman and . . . the first novel written by a woman who had been a slave" (*Bondwoman* xlv).[2] The *Narrative* is a first-person account of Hannah, a literate multiracial woman living in the antebellum South. She is enslaved to two families in succession before she escapes, disguised as a white male, and settles in an African-American community in New Jersey.

For eleven years after the work was published, a number of experts searched for Hannah Crafts while others debated how autobiographical the novel was. Though its subtitle and preface mark it as a slave narrative and the story is constructed around an escape, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is unmistakably a novel. The text is full of stories

within stories, and it features a Dickensian villain named Trappe as well as gothic elements such as generational hauntings and bloody deaths that recall Hawthorne. Even stranger, it is a pastiche of other nineteenth-century novels; numerous scenes are borrowed nearly word-for-word from other works, including *Rob Roy*, *Jane Eyre*, and especially *Bleak House*.[3] In September 2013, Julie Bosman announced in *The New York Times* that Professor Gregg Hecimovich had located the novel's author, an African American named Hannah Bond. In May 2014, the novel was reissued with a new preface co-written by Hecimovich listing many of the details he had discovered about her life. Bond was indeed enslaved and escaped from North Carolina in 1857. Hecimovich surmises that she began the novel before escaping and finished it in 1858, which means that all the firsts Gates claimed for it are true.[4]

Given its unique form and the circumstances of its publication, previous criticism on *The Bondwoman's Narrative* has naturally been preoccupied with the interrelated questions of authorship and genre: Was the author black or white? How much, if any, of the work is nonfiction?[5] It turns out that the truth is complicated. Bond created a narrator-protagonist who shares many characteristics with herself: the name Hannah; light skin; literacy; status as a house servant; enslavement to John and Ellen Wheeler in Washington, DC and North Carolina; escape from the Wheelers passing as a white male; and a happy ending in New Jersey, married and teaching schoolchildren.[6] Despite its highly fictionalized nature, it is a slave narrative in the sense that it is a narrative about slavery written by a fugitive slave, loosely based on her own experience.

The Bondwoman's Narrative stands out from other slave narratives of the time in that it is both more novelistic and more pietistic than most others. Noting the novelistic

qualities such as description, serial plotting, and dialogue—as well as its unabashed borrowing from other novels—critics have read *The Bondwoman's Narrative* in the context of a number of fictional genres: the gothic, the romance, and the sentimental novel or woman's fiction. Highlighting the novel's other defining characteristic of religiosity, I would like to add another genre to the ones already identified: the spiritual autobiography. Yolanda Pierce explains the genre as "a behavioral guide and an instrument of moral leadership" ("Redeeming" 93). In *Hell Without Fires* (2005), the first study of early African-American spiritual narratives as a genre, Pierce articulates the insights to be gained from these texts: "What questions do their narratives answer (and ask) about slave life and religious faith? For what reasons was the conversion experience . . . such a fundamental and life-altering experience for the first generations of African descendants in America?" (3). There are at least three reasons the autobiographical religious aspects of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* may have been overlooked until now: the work was not yet confirmed as an autobiography, current scholarship tends to subordinate religion to other concerns, and (despite progress in this area) race continues to be the main critical lens through which works by writers of color are interpreted.

Gates has celebrated *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as the "unadulterated 'voice' of the fugitive slave herself, exactly as she wrote and edited it" (*Bondwoman* xlvi). A number of scholars have posited that the novel was never published because it was objectionable in its time. For example, Augusta Rohrbach maintains that the fictional nature of the novel made it unpublishable in a period when slave narratives were scrutinized for authenticity (13). John Stauffer, on the other hand, argues that abolitionists would have found the novel problematic because of Hannah's ambivalent

relationship with freedom: "At times, she resigns herself to slavery and even blurs the distinctions between freedom and bondage. An abolitionist editor would have required [Bond] to affirm absolute distinctions between slavery and freedom" (55). Stauffer attributes Hannah's ambivalence to Bond's experimental style, in which she combines the gothic, the sentimental, and the slave narrative. I would instead ascribe Hannah's unusual views on freedom to the complicated road she navigates between Christianity and slavery. In addition to flouting the expectations of nineteenth-century publishers, Bond also exposes twenty-first-century assumptions about history and genre by not meeting today's expectations.

In this chapter I contend that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* complicates two common critical assumptions, one social and the other formal. The first is that the primary effect of Southern Christianity in the antebellum period was justifying slavery and controlling slaves. The second is the longstanding idea that realism in a novel excludes divine intervention. Both assumptions interpret religion as something else; the Christianity of slaves is an embrace of oppressive ideology, and an intervention of Providence in a novel is a literary device that, at best, mars its mimetic nature. The role of Christianity in the novel is markedly different from these perceptions, however. On a sociopolitical level, Hannah's faith in and obedience to God provide her with both spiritual and political freedom. On a formal level, Bond's realist use of Providence and biblical intertext functions as theodicy—an insistence that despite the horrors of slavery, God is in control and will mediate justice. In *The Bondwoman's Narrative* Bond overlays the story of God's work in the world onto the slave experience to indicate that the lives of everyone, of all races, are plotted by Providence. The chapter concludes by suggesting

that because the realist novel is defined by the exclusion of the supernatural, perhaps the secularization narrative motivates even boundaries between genres.

Slaveholding Religion Versus Slave Religion

It is well known that slaveholders used Christianity to buttress the system they benefited from. The antebellum period was rife with biblical justifications for slavery, expressed from pulpits and in pamphlets that maintained that slavery was part of America's providential plot. Joseph Stiles' attempt to reconcile North and South in 1853 appeals to this supposed divine plan: "Is [slavery] not a plan inaugurated . . . by Providence himself, and therefore free from the peril of a proposal by a North man or a South man?" (196). Stiles also labels slavery "God's great providential mandate" and "God's great Africo-American missionary enterprise" (235, 231). In what was at the time considered the best antebellum religious defense of slavery, Thornton Stringfellow expounds on the missional aspect of the transatlantic slave trade. He writes that slavery

> has brought within the range of Gospel influence, millions of Ham's descendants among ourselves, who, but for this institution, would have sunk down to eternal ruin. . . . In their bondage here on earth, they have been much better provided for, and great multitudes of them have been made the freemen of the Lord Jesus Christ, and left this world rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God. (166)

In Stringfellow's construal, God first brought a curse on Africans through their ancestor Ham (Gen. 9:25), then God saved them both physically and spiritually by bringing them to America where they could be taken care of and hear about Jesus.[7] Such arguments put the force of religion behind an economic system of oppression based on racism. Moreover, many slaveholders attempted to control their slaves by claiming divine

backing for their ownership, teaching their slaves passages of the Bible that enjoined slaves to obey their masters, such as Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22, and I Peter 2:18.[8]

The best-known antebellum slave narratives, such as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, emphasize the hypocrisy of white Christians. In a brilliant parody of the Eucharist, Jacobs writes that her owner Mrs. Flint was not "put in a Christian frame of mind" by taking the Lord's Supper. On the contrary, if dinner was served late when Mrs. Flint returned from church, she would spit in the leftovers so the cook and her family would be unable to eat them (14). Douglass is even more explicit in his condemnation of southern Christianity. The most religious characters in his narrative are generally the most abusive ("n*gger-breaker" Mr. Covey being the best example), and Douglass associates the two characteristics (71). He asserts, "the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—. . . and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection" (82). In his appendix, Douglass clarifies the difference between "slaveholding religion" and "Christianity proper," the first being that which he has railed against and the second being the complete opposite, such that to embrace one is to reject the other (105).

Though they criticized slaveholding Christianity, most slave narrators—including Douglass and Jacobs—portrayed themselves as Christians. It is possible to interpret this religious dimension of their texts as an attempt to appease white readers' expectations, which is how Ted Bailey conceives of it. Discussing slave narrators' authenticating devices such as prefatory testimonials and specificity of names, Bailey adds to the list the devoutness of the narrator: "The piety the slave narrators often display . . . is part of a

sentimental strategy aimed largely at how a white audience perceives blacks" (48-49). In the ideology of romantic racialism, black people had a natural affinity for religion, and so white readers were more at ease with a Christian black author than they would have been with an atheistic or agnostic one. For Bailey, then, a slave narrator's religion is a strategy—much like Susan Warner's religion is perceived as a strategy by Jane Tompkins.

While Bailey's hypothesis may be true for many slave narratives, it does not hold for *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Christopher Mulvey, for one, notes the difference between Bond's religion and that of other contemporaneous authors: "Douglass, Brown, Webb, Wilson, and Delany display a formal Christianity with little warmth or religious feeling. *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is an exception. Christianity pervades the work" (27-28). Though Hannah and Bond should not be confused, the text leads most readers to assume that Bond herself was a Christian. Ann Fabian comments that the narrator's "evangelical Protestantism gives the reader a glimpse of [Bond's] own spiritual narrative" (qtd. in *Bondwoman* lx). Moreover, regarding the novel's positive portrayal of Mr. Henry, a slaveholding minister, Mulvey writes, "Ironic readings do not seem to be invited because signifying on [Bond's] minister involves signifying on [Bond's] Christianity" (27-28). Mulvey contends, in other words, that Bond is not signifying in her portrayal of Christianity. Hannah's devoutness is not a strategy or an irony; it should be taken at face value. As we saw in the chapter on *The Wide, Wide, World*, the current academic climate tends to take a Marxist view of religion, perceiving it as an ideology that subdues the oppressed. The insights of Marxism are particularly relevant for the study of antebellum America, given slavery's co-opting of Christianity. However, like

Warner's novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* necessitates a different kind of reading. If one subscribes to Bailey's view, one might expect a slave narrative untouched by abolitionist editors to depict a hostile or indifferent attitude to Christianity. What Bond's "unadulterated voice" articulates, however, is the opposite.

The Bondwoman's Narrative affords a literary glimpse into a lesser-known side of history, a side Albert Raboteau describes in his definitive history of African-American religion titled *Slave Religion.* Raboteau chronicles slavery's appropriation of Christianity while also delineating how uneasy the relationship between Christianity and slavery actually was. Slavery was antithetical to the basic Christian message of equality, the realization of which kept many slave owners from converting their slaves: "The most serious obstacle to the missionary's access to the slaves was the slaveholder's vague awareness that a Christian slave would have some claim to fellowship" (102). One slaveholder, for instance, did not want her slaves converted because she feared seeing them in heaven (103). The spiritual and earthly conditions of slaves were viewed as connected; for example, in colonial times both owners and slaves viewed baptism as a means of manumission. Worried that owners would prevent their slaves from gaining eternal life because of this perception, Christian missionaries pressured legislatures to clarify that baptism did *not* alter a slave's condition. By 1706, at least six colonies had passed acts to this effect (99). The misconception continued, however, to the point that one missionary required all slaves to assent to the following statement before he would baptize them: "You declare . . . that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience that you owe to your Master while you live" (123).

Missionaries recognized that slaveholders' economic concerns limited their access to slaves, so they tried economic tactics. For instance, in 1724, there was a proposal in Virginia to make it advantageous for owners to baptize slaves, giving them a tax break for each one baptized (107). Winthrop Jordan summarizes the missionaries' most effective solution to their quandary:

> The chief obstacle . . . was the slaveholder's fear that conversion might weaken his dominion over his slaves. Accordingly [the missionaries] went out of their way to stress that Christianizing Negroes would make them much better slaves. . . . These clergymen had been forced by the circumstance of racial slavery in America into propagating the Gospel by presenting it as an attractive device for slave control. (190-91)

This solution of Christianity-as-slave-control led to the slaveholding religion we are familiar with. But even that was not as monolithic as one might think. Raboteau stresses that, despite the efforts of missionaries to portray Christian instruction as a means of domination, their message was still mixed:

> Labor as they might, the missionaries could not yoke together the goals of slave instruction and slave control into a stable and permanent union. Inherent in the recognition of the slave's claims to humanity and even more in the assertion of his *right* to Christian instruction was . . . an implicit threat, even though muted, to the practice of slave control and management. The threat came closer to being explicit when some masters admitted that they had been converted to a more spiritual view of their slaves. (171)

Masters who taught their slaves to obey them based on Ephesians 6:5 had only to continue reading for a few more verses to find themselves addressed in verse 9 as being accountable to God: "And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him" (King James Version).[9] Depending on how they interpreted such

passages, honest slave-owners could discern that Christianity undermined the foundations of the slave system as much as it seemed to uphold it.

Just as Christianity had a varied effect on owners, it also had a mixed effect on slaves. Pierce remarks on the complexity of African-American responses to Christianity:

> Christianity represents a contradictory faith for African Americans; its signs, symbols, words, and messages were used to physically and mentally enslave. . . . And yet, much of African-American writing, from the early spiritual narratives . . . to the works of contemporary novelists like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, is still self-consciously about a process of faith and belief—a faith that leads to wholeness for an individual and for a community. (*Hell* 3)

In the past decade or so, a number of scholars have examined the beginnings of African-American Christianity, specifically how African-American authors used the Bible to reinterpret their circumstances. Among these works are Pierce's *Hell Without Fires* (2005); Joanna Brooks' *American Lazarus* (2003), which describes how eighteenth-century African-American and Native American authors used religion to transform the meaning of race; and Katherine Clay Bassard's *Transforming Scriptures* (2010), which examines how nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American women writers used the Bible as a source of liberation. Brooks' introduction is particularly relevant for the study of Bond. In it, she clears the ground by voicing and rejecting a widespread view of the authors she studies. She asserts that they were:

> visionary innovators of new strands of religious belief and practice. They were not merely dupes, apologists, or victims of missionary colonialism, as they are sometimes made out to be. Such views typically hinge on a rigid and outmoded Marxist rejection of religion as ideological delusion; they do not reflect a more contemporary cultural studies understanding of religion as a venue for creative and political agency. (17-18)

Brooks wants readers to view the religion of her authors as a source of power and medium of creativity rather than as a symptom of dehumanizing colonization. The

Marxist ideology Brooks refers to is best articulated by Vladimir Lenin, who expands on Marx's concept of religion as an opiate:

> Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. . . . Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man. (83-84)

Many slaveholders assuredly did encourage submissiveness and patience in their slaves and comfort themselves by thinking of slavery as a providential mission. At the same time, however, many slaves embraced Christianity while rejecting the idea that God ordained slavery. Raboteau argues that slave religion, far from drowning the human image of slaves, actually solidified it: "That some slaves maintained their identity as persons, despite a system bent on reducing them to a subhuman level, was certainly due in part to their religious life. In the midst of slavery, religion was for slaves a space of meaning, freedom, and transcendence" (318).

A lot of ground needs to be cleared if we are to hear Bond's voice accurately. *The Bondwoman's Narrative* can be a disturbing text, especially in Hannah's decisions about freedom. When she chooses to remain enslaved out of a sense of duty, it is tempting to assume she is parroting slaveholding rhetoric. In fact, before Bond was identified as the author, some scholars assumed that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* could not have been written by a slave because of its depiction of Christianity. R. J. Ellis, for instance, concludes that the author must have been a white woman, partly because of the "disconcerting" way "the text embraces the doctrine that poverty brings its own rewards to a good Christian" (155). In Ellis' opinion, to portray good slaves being rewarded is something an African American would never do. In his article, Christianity and whiteness

go hand in hand. Given the horrendous reality of slaveholding religion, Ellis' hypothesis is understandable. However, now that Bond has been identified, an interpretation like Ellis' would view the African-American and Christian Hannah (and, by extension, Bond) as a dupe rather than as an individual who has embraced a certain religion. Especially now that we know more about Bond, we must be careful to let her voice speak for itself rather than allowing our disgust of slaveholding religion to drown it out—as merited as that disgust is.

The Bondwoman's Narrative is remarkable in that it displays Bond's awareness of the fact that Christianity was co-opted by the slave system while also offering Christianity as the ultimate source of hope and aid. The text raises internal questions about the relationship between Christianity and slavery and explores its complications. The next two sections survey the answers Bond gives to two such questions, respectively: (1) Is it a Christian slave's duty to obey her master? and (2) Given the horrors of slavery, can God be in control?

Servant of Christ

> Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. (Eph. 6:5-6)

The Bondwoman's Narrative dramatizes the negative effects slaveholding religion had on many slaves' opinions of Christianity. For instance, when Hannah comes across a dying slave, in concern for her eternal destiny she asks if she has ever prayed. The unnamed slave answers, "Ministers used to come among us and pray, but I never minded them. They mostly prayed that we the slaves might be good and obedient, and feel

grateful for all our blessings, which I know was fudge. It hardened my heart, I could not bear it" (226). This speech shows the natural result of hypocritical slaveholding religion—it could easily harden the hearts of slaves against anything associated with Christianity. Hannah understands the woman's position while also mourning it: "How I pitied the poor benighted soul to whom the sweetest influences of religion had become gall and wormwood" (226). She likewise pities the woman's brother, Jacob, who is similarly blocked from God: "I could only regard him with compassion that in his trials, and difficulties he was unaware of the greatest source of abiding comfort" (223). In this scene, Bond makes an argument similar to the one Stowe makes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through the character of George: that one of the worst outcomes of slavery is to make Christianity unpalatable, thereby endangering the souls of the enslaved.[10]

Bond also takes up the debate whether Christian slaves are more obedient to their masters than non-Christian slaves are. In some scenarios, the novel suggests that Christian slaves are indeed more valuable because they are more pliant. For instance, when a slave owner hears how Hannah has taught the slave children Christian practices, he tries to buy her. Hannah narrates that the children told the owner "how I taught them to pray, and love one another; . . . [and he] inquired of Mr. Trappe for me, and said that he thought I must be worth having" (176). In addition, Hannah often submits in ways that are advantageous for her owners—such as refusing to run away. The novel's overall treatment of this question, however, exposes the debate as driven by economics. Unsympathetic characters express both sides of the controversy in order to get more money for Hannah, even when they clearly do not believe what they are saying. For example, when Mrs. Wheeler wants to buy Hannah, she calls Hannah "a bigot in

religion" in order to persuade her owner to sell her (157). However, Mrs. Wheeler has just told a friend that religion in a slave "makes little difference" (156). On the other hand, in negotiating with a slave trader, Trappe lists "religious" as one of Hannah's good traits (108). Once she is sold, however, he reveals his true belief when he tells her to make "submission and obedience . . . the Alpha and Omega of all your actions" (111). Because Revelation 22:13 calls Jesus the Alpha and Omega, Trappe's words are a deliberate order for Hannah to reject her religion in order to be a better slave.

Through Hannah as a model, the novel suggests that Christianity does make a slave obedient, but only up to a certain point. When an owner commands an action that would involve disobeying God, the Christian slave's submission ends. A Christian slave might be an ideal worker or housekeeper, then, but she would not submit to some of the other things slaves were expected to endure, such as being raped or flogging another slave. This perspective—that obedience is ultimately due to God—is the key to understanding Hannah's decision to finally escape, as we will see. Bond also expresses this concept through other characters. In response to Trappe's sales pitch, the slave trader Saddler unwittingly speaks the truth about slave religion:

> I hardly think that religion will do [Hannah] much good, or make her more subservient to the wishes of my employers. . . . Religion is so apt to make people stubborn; it gives them such notions of duty, and that one thing is right and another wrong; it sets them up so, you'll even hear them telling that all mankind are made of one blood, and equal in the sight of God. (108-9)

In this passage of dramatic irony, in which Saddler laments the emboldening effect of religion on slaves, he articulates the principle behind that effect: equality before God.

Understanding Bond's position on obedience necessitates studying the characters that brought Hannah to Christianity, Hetty and Siah. These two have received little

scholarly attention, but the early scenes in which they teach young Hannah establish the novel's ethical framework. White northerners who are against slavery, they serve as Hannah's models for the Christian life. The text says they feel strongly about "the degradation and ignorance [slavery] imposes on one portion of the human race. Yet . . . though they could not be reconciled to the system they were disposed to stand still and wait in faith and hope for the salvation of the Lord" (10). The last line, especially the phrase, "stand still and wait," sounds like the epitome of political quietism. And in one sense, it is; Hetty and Siah do not take arms against slavery or try to change legislature. Yet they do act in other ways. Citing Jesus' command to Peter to "feed his lambs," Hetty teaches Hannah to read (7, quoting John 21:15). This instruction, being illegal, results in the couple being evicted and imprisoned. Hetty and Siah are just one of the novel's reminders that not all white Christians subscribe to slaveholding religion.

The crucial aspect of the passage describing Hetty and Siah's response to slavery is its allusion to the Exodus story. This story, in which God brings the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, was a common referent for American slaves. They identified with Israelite history and mapped biblical geography onto the U.S.; crossing the Jordan meant crossing the Ohio River, while reaching the Promised Land, or Canaan, meant landing in a Northern state. The allusion refers to a passage after the escape from Egypt, when the Israelites panic because the Egyptian army is following them. Moses tells the people: "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Exod. 14:13). Then the salvation of the Lord appears; God parts the Red Sea, the Israelites walk across, and

the Egyptians are drowned as the waters rush back in. Hetty and Siah's action, or inaction, must be viewed in this context. When they "stand still and wait in faith and hope for the salvation of the Lord," it is not because they do not care about ending slavery but because they want to let God fight. To that end, they pray for slaves every morning and evening and sing praise songs with the same spirit (10). From a materialist standpoint, instructing Hannah to read would count as anti-slavery action whereas praying and singing would not. However, in Bond's worldview both are important acts of rebellion—and praying is actually most effective because it calls on the unlimited power of God.

Given the importance of the Exodus story for American slaves and the multiplicity of biblical allusions in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, it is noteworthy that this is the sole Exodus reference. That Bond chooses to associate Hetty and Siah, rather than Hannah, with the Exodus story reveals an important aspect of Bond's understanding of race. Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is clearly addressed to white readers, or *Our Nig*, which is clearly addressed to African-American readers, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is neither. There is one internal address to the (presumably white) President, senators, and ministers and another to "Doctors of Divinity," but both of these are rhetorical oddities—the first is even borrowed from *Bleak House* (183, 206). Nina Baym's early assessment of the novel was that a free black woman wrote it for black schoolgirls. She posits, "the novel's most crucial stylistic feature [is that] it was intended for a specific and all-black audience" (324). Other critics assume that the intended audience was white, pointing to the ubiquitous literary references and the novel's preface that ingratiates Bond to "a generous public" (3). I propose that the race of her readers did not matter to Bond so much as their status under God. She most commonly divides readers along religious

rather than racial lines; she writes that readers "of pious and discerning minds" will find traces of Providence in the novel, while "the skeptic may smile" at how Hannah finds guidance through Scripture (3, 213). By depicting Hetty and Siah modeling their behavior on the Israelite slaves, Bond crosses racial lines to argue that the anti-slavery response should be the same for whites and blacks: to obey God and wait for his salvation. At this period in history, for Bond to downplay racial boundaries was itself a radical move.

Reading through the lens of religion opens this text in new ways and solves some interpretive problems. Bassard, for instance, maintains that "the narrative demonstrates a spiritual authenticity that may account for our difficulties in affixing racial certainty to its narrative voice" (68). Understanding that race is not Bond's primary category of classification explains some aspects of Hannah's relationships with other slaves that have mystified readers. Bassard continues: "The key to interpreting this text—and the most consistent element of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*—is the certainty of a moral universe grounded in [Bond's] belief in the supernatural as an active agent in the lives of her characters" (68). To put it another way, accepting the implied author's faith in Providence is what makes sense of the novel. In addition, Bond crafted a novel that would encourage her readers to believe in and obey Providence the way her exemplary characters of both races do. This rhetorical purpose makes the work part spiritual autobiography, an "instrument of moral leadership."

Hannah's response to slavery, like Hetty and Siah's, looks contradictory at first. Early in the novel she runs away with her multiracial mistress, Mrs. Vincent, who has been passing as white. But she escapes only because she wants to help her beloved mistress (51). The next three times she has the opportunity to gain freedom, she rejects it.

For instance, when she and her mistress are found in the woods but not yet identified, she admits to being a slave (71). A few months later, when Saddler's cart falls over an embankment and only Hannah escapes alive, she again volunteers the information that she is a slave. Being light-skinned, she is tempted to "perpetuate the delusion" that she is a white relative of the dead Saddler, "but only for a moment. My better nature prevailed" (120). While waiting for a new master to arrive, she stays with the white Henry family, which nurses her to health. When her enslaved friends Charlotte and William invite her to escape with them, she refuses because "duty, gratitude, and honor forbid it" (147). But once Mrs. Wheeler owns Hannah and orders her to marry Bill, a field slave who repulses Hannah, she escapes for good, again out of "duty" (212). Thus, she attributes opposite actions—staying put and escaping—both to duty.

Critics have offered various reasons Hannah does not escape from the Henrys but does from the Wheelers. Christopher Castiglia posits that she stays with the Henrys because of her longing for a mother, which is fulfilled in Mrs. Henry. In his view, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* "explores a slave woman's desire for her absent mother and the consequent unpredictable identifications, especially with white women" (234). Stephanie Li, on the other hand, maintains that Hannah's decisions are based on her desire for true womanhood (defined by the white middle-class woman) and domestic space: "Hannah could embrace bondage in Mrs. Henry's household because it represents domestic utopia. However, the Wheeler plantation offers no such ideal, and thus Hannah must run away. Both her earlier desire to remain a slave and her later determination to flee reflect her singular desire for a home" (61).

To these interpretations rooted in psychoanalysis and social constructions of class and gender, John Stauffer adds an explanation based in genre. He believes the novel shifts from gothic to sentimental to slave narrative. As a consequence, Hannah evolves from a passive, gothic narrator who does not believe in freedom to an active slave narrator who condemns slavery (56). He describes the progression in religious language, as Hannah's or Bond's "conversion to freedom" (66).[11] This conversion to freedom is "both as a condition for herself and as a universal belief. In one sense, [Hannah] evolves over the course of her narrative: from a Gothic to a sentimental self; from being born again through Christ . . . to being reborn as free and married" (66). For Stauffer, the primary change between the early and late Hannah, so monumental it can be called "conversion" and "being reborn," is her embrace of freedom. In order to accept true religion—abolitionism—Hannah must jettison her false religion of Christianity. Stauffer describes Hannah's early beliefs and their effect: "[Hannah] distinguishes heaven from earth and places her faith in the next life. . . . sentiments which do nothing to inspire revolutionary deeds to achieve a new world on earth" (58). Stauffer here echoes Lenin; religion is a "spiritual booze" in which the oppressed look to the future and thereby drown their desire for a good life. In this conception, religion and rebellion are incompatible.

Christianity did not always have an anesthetizing effect on slaves, however. In response to assertions like Lenin's and Stauffer's, Raboteau points out that a belief in the afterlife does not automatically lead to political quietism:

> It does not follow necessarily that a hope in a future when all wrongs will be righted leads to acquiescence to injustice in the present. Religion had different effects on the motivation and identity of different slaves and even

> dissimilar effects on the same slave at different times and in different circumstances. (318)

I contend that Hannah's various decisions in regard to freedom are not a result of changing her mind but rather examples of the diverse effects Christianity had on her in different circumstances. It is the changes of situation, not the transformation of author or character, that result in Hannah's varying responses to freedom.

I take Hannah's motive for escaping from the Wheelers at face value. She explains her reasoning in the opening of chapter 17: "When [Mrs. Wheeler] sought to force me into a compulsory union with a man whom I could only hate and despise it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it" (212). Hannah's unchanging values are virtue and duty. Whereas her duty of gratitude to Mrs. Henry had kept her from running away, in this case duty to "myself and my God" entailed escape. In the upside-down world of slavery, "rebellion would be a virtue." Though her actions seem opposed, the underlying motivation is the same. Hannah has been following Ephesians 6:5 ("Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh"), but once her fleshly master requires her to disobey her divine Master, her allegiance shifts. Recognizing that all are "servants of Christ," she follows God's commands instead (Eph. 6:6). Brian Sinche puts this succinctly, observing that "God and Christian morality are [Hannah's] master and mistress" (189). Determined not to act out of her own will, Hannah seeks guidance from Scripture and reads the story of Jacob fleeing from Esau. She clearly desires freedom; at one point she refers to freedom as "dear . . . to every human being," while "servitude" by comparison is "bitter" (213). However, her expressed motivation is not to escape slavery but to follow God. As the epigraph I chose for this chapter conveys, Hannah would prefer eternal rewards over

temporary freedom: "my condition for eternity if not for time, was perferable [*sic*] to [my master's], . . . since even freedom without God and religion would be a barren possession" (112). God, in his providential guidance and protection, gives her both earthly freedom and eternal life. Although in this passage Bond initially describes Hannah as "helpless, hopeless," before she finishes the sentence she crosses out "hopeless" and changes it to "almost hopeless" (112). She thereby shifts the focus from Hannah's position under the mastery of Trappe to her position under the mastery of God. This double condition is crucial for understanding Hannah's relationship to freedom, and it also illuminates Bond's use of Providence throughout the novel.

Bond's Providential Plot

For many novel theorists, the novel form and divine intervention are antithetical. In the traditional history of the form articulated by Ian Watt, the realist novel came about as a result of empiricism, which rejects supernaturalism:

> The novel's usual means—formal realism—tends to exclude whatever is not vouched for by the senses: the jury does not usually allow divine intervention as an explanation of human action. It is therefore likely that a measure of secularisation was an indispensible condition for the rise of the new genre. The novel could only concentrate on personal relations once most writers and readers believed that individual human beings, and not collectivities such as the Church, or transcendent actors, such as the Persons of the Trinity, were allotted the supreme role on the earthly stage. (84)

Watt does not argue against the existence of the supernatural; he only gestures toward what "the jury" would allow as courtroom evidence. The story he tells about the novel form participates in the subtraction story of the secularization narrative; his underlying assumption is that religion needed to be cleared away for modernity to emerge and for the

novel to emerge as the modern genre. The conditional verbs of his final sentence convey this supposition. In essence, he says that the novel "could only" focus on earthly relationships "once most writers and readers" had recognized the centrality of human agency.

Though Watt has been heavily debated on nearly every point, his assertion about plausibility continues to influence discussions of the novel genre. George Levine gives a slightly different version of the argument:

> If providence is to make itself known in [the world of the realist novel], it can only come at the point of leaving it: to imagine a narrative of development and action in which merit is appropriately—even if only roughly—rewarded. . . entails a fundamental violation of the rules of the novel, of the canons of plausibility. (213-14)

In other words, the only place for providence in the realist novel is in the afterlife, since divine intervention into this world would break the rules of the novel form. The canons of plausibility (Levine), what the jury allows (Watt)—these are assertions about reality that masquerade as common-sense statements about "what everyone knows to be true." Though he is more nuanced than Watt, Levine comes to the same conclusion about the novel form. He begins his essay, "It would be silly and demonstratively untrue to argue that the novel is an inevitably secular form" (210). But two pages later, he states that "the novel as a form, having developed for a century with the development of the new bourgeoisie and capitalism, was intrinsically secular" (212). The difference between the novel being *inevitably* secular and *intrinsically* secular is negligible. Levine's definition of "secularism" also mirrors Watt in its exclusion of the supernatural; secularism is the "belief that all of experience must be recognized as non-transcendental, as operating

entirely in terms of the natural world, without miracles or supernatural interventions" (210n1).

Supernatural interventions play a central role in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, as one might expect from the preface. In the preface, Bond insists that she simply presents a "record of plain unvarnished facts" (3). It closes with a crucial sentence:

> Being the truth it makes no pretensions to romance, and relating events as they occurred it has no especial reference to a moral, but to those who regard truth as stranger than fiction it can be no less interesting on the former account, while others of pious and discerning minds can scarcely fail to recognize the hand of Providence in giving to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruit of their doings. (3)

There are two arguments embedded here, in an ABAB structure. First, (A), Bond distinguishes her text from romance—a traditional way to emphasize its factuality—but says it will still interest readers who recognize that truth can be stranger than fiction. Second, (B), she argues that since her text simply records the truth, there is no particular moral added on. However, certain readers "of pious and discerning minds" will be able to glimpse in her tale the moral structure of the world, in which God rewards the faithful and punishes the wicked. By the end of the novel, the (A) and (B) arguments turn out to be one. In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, truth is stranger than fiction precisely *because* Providence determines the outcome.

Although *The Bondwoman's Narrative* includes genres that incorporate the supernatural, such as the gothic and the sentimental, the providential interventions that occur fall not in these passages but in the realist portions. Because Watt and Levine have set the terms of debate about realism, however, critics tend to apologize for what they see as flaws in the novel's attempts to be mimetic. The novel includes a significant number of what Fabian calls "clumsy plot structures" and "impossible coincidences," many of

which the text attributes to God's intervention (qtd. in *Bondwoman* lix). Given the convenience of providential involvement, it is natural to read the hand of God in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as nothing but a *deus ex machina*, a device thrown in to explain an improbable event. Fabian summarizes this perspective: "In the novel, the hand of Providence is, of course, the author's own hand" (48). Hollis Robbins, in a related fashion, believes both Bond and Hannah invoke Providence to eschew responsibility for their actions. Referring to a scene in which Hannah makes Mrs. Wheeler's face turn black (inadvertently, or so it seems), Robbins writes, "However much Hannah seeks to put the blame on others (including Providence), Mrs. Wheeler's abracadabra metamorphosis is clearly the work of a knowledgeable authorial hand" (73). Finally, William Gleason remarks that Bond calls on Providence to explain Hannah's miraculous reunion with her mother: "In terms of narrative design, the 'strange and devious ways' by which Hannah and her mother are brought together seem as much [Bond's] as any higher power's" (65). Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townshend interpret the preface and invocations of Providence as ironic, maintaining that the preface "suggests that her final distribution of punishments and rewards is intended to be implausible and arbitrary, a sop to 'pious' readers" (230). Whether they view Providence as a plot device, an excuse, or a concession to religious readers, these critics all assume that Bond does not mean to make any statements about the real God by including Providential interventions.

In contrast, I maintain that Bond intends the divine interventions in the plot of her novel to be part of its realism; indeed, she includes the supernatural for a theological reason. Providence pervades *The Bondwoman's Narrative* because Bond wants to convey that God is in control regardless of what one viewing the antebellum South might think.

Just as she raises the problems of slaveholding religion, Bond also raises the question of whether the horrific world of slavery proves God's absence. The novel answers this question with both its plot and its form: God intervenes in the plot to punish the bad and reward the good, and the biblical intertext overlays the story of God's faithfulness throughout history onto the slave experience.

The first third of the novel depicts slavery overturning the providential order, particularly in the way the system places white people in the position of God. At one point while living with the Henrys as a sort of guest, Hannah learns that a new owner is coming to claim her. She kneels at the feet of Mrs. Henry, imploring the woman to buy her. Pious Mrs. Henry protests that Hannah should not "kneel to mortal woman" (129). By telling Hannah not to kneel, Mrs. Henry tries to reject the god-like power of purchase she has. But Hannah remains there to emphasize how greatly Mrs. Henry can affect her life: "No; Mrs. Henry here let me kneel at your feet until you promise to pity and save me. . . . Save me; for you can" (129). Though Mrs. Henry refuses the role of God, other owners gladly assume it, believing they control even the souls of their slaves. Hannah mentions that Mrs. Wheeler's manner "told me that I was hers body and soul" (159). Likewise, Trappe seeks to make Hannah "realize that in both soul and body I was indeed a slave" (112). But in the final analysis, Hannah asserts that her soul is owned not by a person but by God: "though my perishable body was at their disposal, my soul was beyond their reach. They could never quench my immortality, shake my abiding faith and confidence in God, or destroy my living assurance in the efficacy of the dying Saviour's blood" (106). These homiletic lines assert that the things that matter most—the immortal

soul, faith in God, assurance of salvation through Jesus—are kept safe even through physical danger or torture.

Divine intervention is one of Bond's novelistic responses to the way slavery threatens the providential order. Thomas Vargish, describing the presence of Providence in Victorian novels, distinguishes between two versions of the providential worldview that were common in nineteenth-century England. The first, exemplified in works like Paley's *Natural Theology*, "emphasized the order of the world and the evidence to be found there for a divine planner" (20). This version emphasized transcendence, a view of God as being outside and above the workings of the material world. The second view, which gained popularity later in the century, emphasized immanence: "the concept of providence itself becomes progressively less an image of order, regulation, grand planning and more an intimate solicitude for individual lives" (21). While those Americans who held to slaveholding religion, like Stiles and Stringfellow, viewed slavery as part of the divine plan, the slaves who suffered under the system were naturally more likely to embrace an immanent Providence. And indeed, this is the type we see in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Against the upside-down backdrop of slavery, Bond introduces a God who breaks in to right the wrong through retribution and rewards.

To emphasize the benevolence of Providence, Bond fashions Mr. Trappe as a sort of anti-Providence. Like God, he is omniscient and omnipresent. He is the one who discovers that Mrs. Vincent is multiracial and blackmails her, which leads to her running away with Hannah. Once the women have escaped, he keeps finding them in unlikely places: "He was then watching us, dogging our footsteps, and would be haunting us everywhere" (65). He also provides for the physical needs of Hannah and Mrs. Vincent

while they are imprisoned, sending them a doctor and delicate food—but only so that Mrs. Vincent will be fit to sell. Trappe himself sets his power against God's, describing his purpose to Mrs. Vincent thus: "I wished you [to] feel yourself standing on the brink of a precipice, and know that *my hand* could thrust you down to certain destruction, or pluck you back to safety" (102, emphasis added). Here and elsewhere, the hand harkens back to Providence. When Trappe regains control over the women after they escape, Hannah narrates that he "felt an increased sense of his own power, importance, and strength of purpose now that our destinies for time I had well nigh said for eternity were in his hands" (99). Trappe thinks he holds the women's eternal destinies, but the narrator knows better. In the phrase, "I had well nigh said for eternity" Hannah acknowledges that an owner can seem to control a slave's soul, but at the same time she also records her resistance to Trappe's self-professed omnipotence. In other words, she *almost* said he controlled their eternity, but in the end she does not say it. Like the "~~hopeless~~ almost hopeless" passage, this phrase registers two realities and designates the spiritual reality as superior.

To reassert divine order, the penultimate chapter of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* metes out justice on Trappe in every possible way. His demise is poetic, fitting his sins; two men whom he has enslaved escape, and they haunt him the way he has haunted others. Eventually, he is found facedown on the floor—as low as physically possible—with a bullet through his brain. The framing of this episode is heavy-handed in its moralism; the chapter title ("Retribution"), epigraph, and framing narratorial comments all emphasize that Trappe got what he deserved. The epigraph reads, "Say to the wicked it shall be ill with him, for he shall eat the fruit of his doings" (238, paraphrasing Isa.

3:10-11). It thus repeats the last line of the preface, which promises that pious readers will "recognize the hand of Providence in giving to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruit of their doings" (3). After narrating the event, Hannah records her mixed feelings: "'Twas a dreadful thing, I shuddered and could have wept, though what better could one so heartless and unfeeling expect? 'Since he that sows the wind, must reap the whirlwind'" (243, quoting Hos. 8:7). Though horrified by Trappe's violent death, she cannot mourn it, since he brought it on himself. Isaiah and Hosea have explained the order of the universe, and Trappe should have heeded them.

Providence also intervenes to provide for and protect those who obey and trust him. After God guides Hannah to flee from the Wheelers, a number of miracles ensue. For instance, a cow appears to feed her: "While debating with myself how to obtain a breakfast, a cow approached. Her udder was distended with the precious fluid. I thought of Elijah and the ravens . . . when she came still nearer, and stopped before me with a gentle low as if inviting me to partake" (218). Hannah recollects 1 Kings 17:6, in which God feeds the prophet Elijah while he is in hiding by having ravens bring him bread and meat. Since Hannah is later fed by women who pity her in her white-orphan-boy disguise, this providential cow is not necessary to explain any twists in plot. Rather, it serves as an example of God's protective care. More dramatically, Hannah's life is twice saved after she prays for help. While falling from Saddler's cart, Hannah prays and suffers only broken bones. Mrs. Henry attributes Hannah's salvation to God: "Your escape seems almost a miracle. . . . A merciful Providence watches over the humblest" (120). On a second occasion, when the boat Hannah is in overturns, she says she "recommended myself to God" and is caught by a tree (232). She narrates that the tree "had saved me

under Providence from a violent death" (232). These interventions are framed as God's responses to Hannah's faith and therefore have theological significance in addition to providing narrative drama.

Finally, Providence dispenses rewards to deserving characters—in particular, Hannah and her mother. After Hannah washes up on shore from the overturned boat, an old woman walks by. Against all odds it turns out to be Hetty, even though both characters are now in a different state. Hannah ascribes this reunion to divine intervention; she feels "that I could never be sufficiently grateful to that over ruling Providence, who by such eventful and devious ways had led me to the bosom of my old friend" (234). But beyond even these two strokes of luck is the biggest one: Hannah's reunion with her mother in New Jersey. In the final chapter, Hannah addresses the reader: "Can you guess who lives with me? You never could—my own dear mother. . . . There was a hand of Providence in our meeting as we did. I am sure of it" (244). The reunion is incredible given that Hannah was separated from her mother early in life and cannot remember anything about her. Bond gives minimal natural explanation for how the meeting occurred, instead emphasizing the mother's faith that she would one day see her child: "She had no means of bringing about this great desire of her heart, but trusted all to the power and mercy of heaven. So strong was her faith" that she always expected to find her daughter (245). The actual meeting is unnarrated: "We met accidentally, where or how it matters not" (245). The point of this turn of events is not to give the reader the pleasure of narrative closure but to preach God's power and love: "We had been brought together by such strange and devious ways. . . . [We] returned thanks to Him, who had watched over us for good, and whose merciful power we recognised in this the greatest

blessing of our lives" (245). In these passages, Hannah and her mother are moral exemplars in two ways—in demonstrating the kind of faith that deserves compensation and in knowing whom to thank for their good fortune.

In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, coincidence is much more than an authorial convenience. Bond wrote, and likely lived, in what Vargish calls the "providential tradition," which sought to imitate the ways of Providence within a realistic work of fiction. Vargish notes, "Coincidences in the providential tradition are always more than the arbitrary manipulation of events modern readers often take them to be. They signal a purposiveness beyond the natural accident" (10). This signaling of supernatural causes is part of the "providential aesthetic," in which

> coincidence is not necessarily a failure in realism or (as is sometimes implied) a cheap way out of difficulties in plot and structure—though of course it can be both in a bad novel. Instead, coincidence is a sign or pointer. As Barbara Hardy observes, 'Coincidence is a symbol of providence.' Coincidence characteristically refers the reader to causes and patterns beyond the immediate or empirical range of what we perceive as probable in physical nature, the naturalistic range. (Vargish 9)

In other words, an author writing in the providential tradition does not use coincidence to get her characters out of a jam but to gesture toward God.

Scholars who believe that Bond invokes Providence to cover up "clumsy plot structures" miss that the narrator herself is fully aware of the implausibility of certain events. She even highlights it. The text calls Providence's actions in reuniting Hannah with Hetty and her mother "eventful and devious" and "strange and devious" (234, 245). Twice, she acknowledges that readers could be skeptical of her blessings. Of her mother she asks, "Can you guess who lives with me? You never could" (246). Her tone is similar when she introduces the news that the escaped Charlotte is now her neighbor: "You could

scarcely believe it, it seems so singular, yet it is none the less true" (244). The descriptions of these events do not seek to hide their implausibility; instead, they underscore it in order to highlight that God must have acted in order to bring about such unusual ends. In the context in which Bond wrote, to maintain that God would intervene to bless a slave, even to the point of directing and aiding her escape, is to make both a religious and a political statement. Though the slave system set itself up as the arbiter of justice and set up slave owners as gods, Bond's invocations of Providence speak both of God's ultimate control and of the value of each human.

The blissful final chapter of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* presents a puzzle for scholars of the slave narrative. William Andrews remarks, "there is simply nothing like it in the entire pre-Civil War African American slave narrative" (35). Accustomed to mixed endings like Harriet Jacobs'—"The dream of my life is not yet realized"—readers are likely to be surprised by Hannah's satisfied statement, "I found a life of freedom all my fancy had pictured it to be" (225, 244). This difference between endings is a major reason Andrews believed that the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was not a slave. He did think she was African American, however, and he sees the end as mimicking "woman's fiction" for the purpose of social commentary. Andrews concludes that the ending's wish-fulfillment aura, its "unreservedly happy ending," is a statement about social possibilities (33). He contends that

> insisting on Hannah's thorough fulfillment in freedom may have seemed the best way [for Bond] to announce to her readers, white as well as black, that an African American woman had every right to aspire to such fulfillment as Hannah achieves and to expect that "Providence" would reward an African American woman in this fashion if she lived up to the moral and religious standards that Hannah consistently summarizes as her "duty." (40)

My argument has much in common with Andrews', except that I would take Providence and duty out of quotation marks. Whereas Andrews sees the novel emphasizing racial equality, I see it as emphasizing racial equality based in spiritual equality. Bond establishes God as the great leveler of races. For example, Hannah repeatedly refers to her immortal soul and Jesus' blood as her sources of confidence. God's agency in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a form of theodicy, an answer to the problem of evil so apparent in antebellum America.

The second way Bond answers the question of whether God is in control is formal; by drawing parallels between her characters and biblical characters, she overlaps the story of Christian history with the slave narrative. The breadth of biblical support Bond draws on can be missed by scholars who focus on slaveholding religion. For instance, referring to Hannah's decision to escape so as not to bear slave children, Stauffer comments: "Like other evangelicals, she cannot base her belief in freedom on scripture. . . . There were too many instances in the Bible that sanctioned slavery" (64). On the contrary, a careful reading of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* reveals that Hannah's belief in freedom is based almost entirely on Scripture. She sees the Constitution and the Bible as complementary documents in their insistence on equality; the Constitution "asserts the right of freedom and equality to all mankind," while the Bible "tells how Christ died for all; the bond as well as the free" (207). Though modern readers are inclined to distinguish between sociopolitical and spiritual equality, and though slaveholders went to great lengths to distinguish between the two, Bond's point is that the two should be one.

Scholars have not ignored Bond's use of the Bible. The textual annotations identify a large number of the biblical references (though not the allusion to Exodus discussed above or the reference to the Hebrew Children discussed below). In addition, Lawrence Buell has examined the parallels between the protagonist and the Hannah of 1 Samuel, Hagar, and Jacob; Rohrbach also comments on the Jacob and Esau story; and Dickson Bruce looks at Mrs. Henry as the ideal woman described in Proverbs 31. Bassard has conducted the most extensive study of the Bible in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. She recognizes a number of biblical models Bond draws on to elevate Hannah and Mrs. Vincent: the Shulamite woman in Song of Songs, Esther, the Queen of Sheba, and Christ. My focus will be on how these, and other, Bible stories help the characters reinterpret their circumstances and how the biblical epigraphs encourage readers to understand this slave narrative in a particular way.

Bassard notes the numerous parallels between Christ's passion and the narration of Hannah's escape with Mrs. Vincent, in which the mistress is figured as Christ and Hannah as a disciple. She reads these allusions as a "subversive subtext" that "transform[s] domesticized images of women into increasingly empowered figures" (77). At her most empowered, Mrs. Vincent is compared to Jesus, "King of Kings" (77). Although Jesus does indeed represent power, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* he represents a particular kind of power: victory through suffering. The Christological allusions, rather than ending once Mrs. Vincent dies, continue unabated. Bond's purpose is not solely to privilege Mrs. Vincent but to suggest that she, like Jesus, conquers *through death*. After Trappe takes the women out of jail, he gives Mrs. Vincent a lecture on how she must please her new master. While he speaks, she has an aneurism and dies.

Remarkably, the text insists on describing her death as triumph. The chapter ends with her last breath: “A gleam of satisfaction shone over her face. There was a gasp . . . and she was free” (103). It is striking that Mrs. Vincent was satisfied, even freed, by dying. Later, Hannah celebrates that Mrs. Vincent “has escaped the tormentor” (115). Lastly, she describes the outcome in phrases resonant with the apostle Paul’s description of Jesus’ salvific death: “Through death she had conquered her enemy, and rose triumphant above his machinations” (104).[12] George Faithful, examining the role of Jesus in African-American spirituals, explains that slaves identified with him in their affliction: “Jesus provided the spirituals’ singers central paradigm for strength in weakness and hope in the midst of suffering” (5). Christianity teaches that since Jesus was resurrected and is still alive, his power is available to all people—especially to those who suffer as he did.

While Mrs. Vincent’s narrative resembles Christ’s, Hannah’s narrative draws on the Old Testament. Identifying with the Israelites the same way the Puritans did, she relies on numerous Old Testament stories for guidance and courage while discerning whether to escape. Seeking God’s will, she opens the Bible randomly to the story of Jacob fleeing, and says, “to me it had a deep and peculiar meaning. ‘Yes,’ I mentally exclaimed. ‘Trusting in the God that guided and protected him I will abandon this house’” (213). She continues, “I remembered the Hebrew Children and Daniel in the Lion’s den, and felt that God could protect and preserve me through all” (214). Hannah lists models for herself: Jacob, Daniel, and “the Hebrew Children.” The Hebrew Children is the traditional way of referring to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, colleagues of Daniel’s when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. The three refused to worship an idol, were thrown into a furnace, and were miraculously saved by a fourth man whom

Christians typically interpret as Jesus. Daniel, for his part, was thrown into a lions' den for praying to the Hebrew God, but angels came and shut the lions' mouths.

Hannah's musing about God's preservation, and even her choice of phrase, "the Hebrew Children," resembles that of a spiritual:

> Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
> Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
> Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
> An' why not-a every man.
>
> He delivered Daniel f'om de lion's den
> Jonah f'om de belly of de whale
> An' de Hebrew chillun f'om de fiery furnace,
> An' why not every man. (Johnson and Johnson 148-49)

Whether or not Bond was explicitly referring to the spiritual (which is entirely possible), the song's theology is the same as Hannah's.[13] Since God protected Daniel, Jonah, and the Hebrew Children, the lyrics say, why won't he protect me? Surely he will. Hannah's strong identification with these characters exemplifies the slaves' worldview as Raboteau explains it:

> the slaves, following African and biblical tradition, believed that the supernatural continually impinged on the natural, that divine action constantly took place within the lives of men, in the past, present, and future. . . . A sense of sacred time operated, in which the present was extended backward so that characters, scenes, and events from the Old and New Testaments became dramatically alive and present. (250)

The boundaries between divine and natural, between past and present, which most twenty-first century Americans are accustomed to simply did not operate for antebellum Christian slaves. Readers of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* should be alert to the interpretive challenges these differences cause.

Daniel and the three men are particularly interesting examples for Hannah to choose here, because all of them were enslaved to an authority figure of a different race

whom they obeyed up to a certain point. (Though the spiritual includes Jonah, Hannah does not refer to him—possibly because he was in a whale's belly as a result of disobeying God.) Just as Hannah gained favor with masters who found her obedience valuable, Daniel and his friends gained so much favor with the Babylonian king that he made them provincial rulers. Once the king required them to do something against God's commands, however—to worship an idol or to stop praying—they refused. They received death sentences, but God rewarded their obedience to him by saving their lives. The fact that Hannah at this point thinks of these stories rather than the Israelites' escape from Egyptian slavery underscores the text's emphasis on obeying God rather than on seeking freedom.

Connections between Hannah and Old Testament characters also occur paratextually, outside the narrative. Except for two chapters with no epigraph, each of the twenty-one chapters has a biblical epigraph. In the dark middle section of the novel there is a series of epigraphs from the psalms and Jeremiah. Each one cries to God for help in distress, and a few point out the speaker's innocence and remind God of previous promises to make things right: "I have done judgement, and justice; leave me not to my oppressors"; "Arise, Oh Lord; Oh God, lift up thy hand forget not the humble"; "Remember, Oh Lord, what is come upon us; consider, and behold our reproach"; and "Deliver me, Oh Lord."[14] The last epigraph, the call for God's deliverance, is especially provocative because it heads the chapter in which Hannah refuses to escape with Charlotte and William. It serves as another instance in which Hannah decides to stand still and wait for the Lord's salvation—while actively imploring God to deliver her.

The final three epigraphs respond to the despairing central ones; they are statements about how God will turn, or has turned, things to rights. The epigraph to chapter 19 is, “I have never seen the righteous forsaken” (Ps. 37:25). In this chapter, Hannah miraculously meets Hetty again and hears her life story since being evicted. Hetty emphasizes victory in affliction, telling Hannah that she and Siah “found like Paul and Silas of old that bonds and imprisonment when unjustly suffered might be even the means of spiritual consolation and improvement” (235, referring to Acts 16:25). “The righteous” of the epigraph could thus refer to Hetty or Hannah, who have both suffered but now begin to receive their rewards. The next chapter is the retributive chapter, which opens with, “Say to the wicked it shall be ill with him, for he shall eat the fruit of his doings” and narrates the poetic justice dealt to Trappe. Finally, the novel turns to rewards again in the shiningly joyful last chapter, headed by Psalm 23:2: “He leadeth me through the green pastures, and by the still waters.” Comparing the epigraphs from the middle of the novel to those at the close, a clear movement is evident—from desperate pleas for God’s help to instances of divine intervention. The overall effect is a call-and-answer arrangement. The epigraphs therefore set the stage for the providential care narrated in the text as well as accentuate it.

In his explication of paratexts, Gérard Genette highlights how epigraphs engage readers. Paratextual elements are particularly important in terms of interpretation since they are “a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, . . . an influence that . . . is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (2). Specifically, an epigraph raises the questions, Who is speaking? and What does it mean? In terms of the speaker, Genette observes that the one who chooses the epigraph could be

either the implied author or the narrator. In a text like *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, in which the narrator and protagonist are one, the option of the narrator should be considered: "In the case of a homodiegetic narrative it is advisable to hold out at least the possibility of an epigraph put forward by the narrator-hero" (154). That the sources and sentiments of the epigraphs so closely resemble Hannah's supports this option. In the end, the reader has to decide who is speaking in each epigraph as well as what the epigraph means: "The attribution of relevance . . . depends on the reader, whose hermeneutic capacity is often put to the test" (Genette 158). Whether the speaker is Hannah or Bond, the epigraphs operate on another level from the narration and thereby give weight to the conclusions Hannah draws in the narrative. They compel readers to recognize, or at least wrestle with, the implications of these Bible passages for Hannah's life. The epigraphs, then, are another strategy the novel uses to convince readers of two related truths: that each person is important in God's sight, and that God will bring justice.[15]

Recognizing the breadth and depth of Bond's biblical references can help us appreciate the Christian impulse of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, despite a critical tendency to interpret religion as something else. It can also help us attend to how Bond uses Providence for theological purposes. On the last page of his book, Raboteau summarizes the common view of slave religion and explains his differing perspective:

> Slave religion has been stereotyped as otherworldly and compensatory. It was otherworldly in the sense that it held that this world and this life were not the end, nor the final measure of existence. It was compensatory to the extent that it consoled and supported slaves worn out by the unremitting toil and capricious cruelty of the "peculiar institution." To conclude, however, that religion distracted slaves from concern with this life and dissuaded them from action in the present is to distort the full story and to

> simplify the complex role of religious motivation in human behavior. (318)

Raboteau points out that the religion slaves embraced did indeed give them another world to look forward to and allowed them to find meaning in their pain. However, this does not mean that it routinely made them apathetic about their lives or eager to suffer. The relationship between this life and the next, which is at the heart of the debate I have staged between Raboteau and Lenin, also plays a role in theories of the novel form.

Defining the Novel

One major assumption many Marxists and many novel critics hold in common is that religion is otherworldly. This supposition undergirds Jean Fagan Yellin's analysis of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, in which she compares the novel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* She decides that religion is more central to Stowe's text than Bond's because the former emphasizes the afterlife while the latter stresses this life. She writes:

> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a profoundly religious novel, fueled by the conviction that what matters most is the Hereafter. Again and again, it dramatizes the moral choices white Americans must make in response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. But in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, religion, while present, is not fundamental. Its central concern is not with the immortal souls of the characters, but with the here and now, and it focuses on the dilemmas slavery presents to its slave protagonist. (112)

While I would disagree that Bond is unconcerned with immortal souls, my point in quoting Yellin is simply to point out her logic: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is religious because what matters in it is the afterlife, whereas *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is less religious because what matters in it is this life. In other words, what constitutes a religious novel is a focus on the afterlife, because this is what constitutes religion itself.

It is true that novels do not usually venture into the afterlife. The challenge for religious novelists, who believe in ultimate justice, is to depict this reality in the context of this world. This has been a dilemma for Christian novelists since the beginning of the genre. For example, the readers of *Clarissa* (1748) criticized Richardson for betraying poetic justice by allowing his heroine to die. In a later postscript, he argues that he did indeed carry out justice by giving Clarissa the rich reward of heaven. He writes that those "who are earnest in their profession of Christianity . . . will rather envy than regret the triumphant death of Clarissa . . . [whom] HEAVEN *only* could reward" (289). Like Richardson, Bond incorporates the afterlife into her novel with the death of Mrs. Vincent. Because the text persists in depicting and referring to her demise as a triumph, it also presumes that she continued to live elsewhere.

A second possible solution to the afterlife dilemma is for the novelist to mingle this world with the next. Susan Warner and Bond both do this; the final chapter of both *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* could be renamed "Heaven on earth." Both Ellen and Hannah experience complete fulfillment in the form of marriage, a home, family, and bliss. Since these chapters follow hundreds of pages of struggle, they stand out and seem to be in a different register. They resemble sun bleached color photographs, while the other chapters seem to be stark black and white. In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, then, a Christian's life in heaven, though it is not narrated, is part of the novel's plot—and, to put it crudely, its reward system. The afterlife is part of the *fabula*, though not the *sjuzhet*. Thus, as I mention in the chapter on *The Wide, Wide, World*, it is not entirely correct to say that novels cannot include the afterlife.

In that novels do not often *depict* the afterlife, critics are right to say that the novel genre represents only this world. The problem comes when scholars such as Watt pair this observation with the conviction that religion is otherworldly, concluding that religion therefore has no place in a novel. In short: if religion is about the next life, and the novel is about this life, then the novel must be secular (in the sense of irreligious). I contend that the first premise of this syllogism is faulty. In the chapter on *The Minister's Wooing*, we saw that Stowe scholars also tend to divide religion from the world, thinking that by being earthly Stowe's novels must also be irreligious.

In addition to the afterlife, the second element realist novels are said not to include is the supernatural. Recall Watt: "The novel's usual means—formal realism—tends to exclude whatever is not vouched for by the senses: the jury does not usually allow divine intervention as an explanation of human action" (84). And Levine: providential intrusion would be a "fundamental violation of the rules of the novel, of the canons of plausibility" (213-14). These claims slip easily from describing the literary form of realism to commenting on reality itself. Their bottom line is that novels must be plausible, must represent reality *as it really is*, and since God does not intervene in real life, he has no place in the novel.

But as the reception of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* has taught us, even the most expert opinions about plausibility can be fallible. Sometimes truth can be stranger than fiction. After all, William Andrews, based on his extensive knowledge of slave narratives, concluded that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* could not be one. He was not alone. Many other intelligent critics assumed that a former slave would not have had the time, training, or materials to write such a literary tome. This argument is best articulated

by Baym, an authority on nineteenth-century American novels (321). Even Hecimovich, who eventually discovered that Bond was the author, set out to find a white author because he considered Gates' claim that a runaway slave had written it "too good to be true" (xxii). As it turns out, the Wheeler family had a large library and apparently actually taught their slaves to read so that they could serve as secretaries (see fig. 5).[16] My purpose is not to criticize these early educated guesses about *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, which continue to shed light on the novel. I simply want to point out that plausibility is in the eye of the beholder.

Furthermore, is not one's view of reality affected by one's view of God? Vargish explains the providential worldview thus: "In the idea of providence itself there lies an

Figure 5: Paper cut by Sybille Schenker portraying the Wheeler family and Bond in their library. Illustration in Paul Berman.

implicit suggestion that the universe contains a right *way*. . . . If we discipline ourselves to stay on the way, everything will seem ordered, significant, suited to our being. If we depart from the way, . . . then the world becomes hostile, delusive, alien" (24-25). This chapter has sought to demonstrate how different *The Bondwoman's Narrative* appears when placed in the providential context. It is not necessary for a scholar to be a Christian in order to read the novel this way, but those who do not believe in the afterlife or the supernatural may have to make epistemological leaps in order to do so. Even for me, a practicing Christian living in a secular world, writing this chapter was an exercise in continually re-training my mind to the Christian worldview. So while Ellis sees in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* a white author touting slaveholding religion and Stauffer sees an author converting from Christianity to freedom, I see an African-American author delineating her views—and even some of her experiences—as a Christian and a slave.

Of all genres, novels are the closest to life and reality. This is a typical working definition of the novel. My hypothesis is that one's definitions of "life" and "reality" will influence not only what one finds in any given novel, but even one's definition of the Novel. It is striking how, for many novel theorists, the genre exemplifies the forces he or she sees in the world. For the early Hegelian Georg Lukács, "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). For Marxist Frederic Jameson, the novel is "a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes" (85). For Foucauldian D. A. Miller, "The story of the Novel is essentially the story of an active regulation" (10). For feminist Juliet Mitchell, "The novel is the creation by the woman of the woman, or by the subject who is in process of becoming woman, of

woman under capitalism" (289). For Freudian Peter Brooks, the novel is "a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" (xiv). For Eastern Orthodox Mikhail Bakhtin, who believes truth is found in dialogue, "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" ("Discourse" 262). Each of these theorists has embraced a master narrative—dialectics, Marxism, Foucauldianism, feminism, psychoanalysis, Eastern Orthodoxy—that explains the world for them. They each view the novel genre through their chosen lens. Consequentially, the novels that best represent the genre match the contours of the metanarratives they believe. To a religious person, then, an "implausible" providential novel that takes eternity and the divine into account may be more realistic, even more novelistic, than a "realist" novel. I argued in the chapter about *The Wide, Wide World* that our beliefs about God determine our definition of religion and our definition of the self; perhaps these beliefs also define the boundaries we draw around genres.

Notes

[1] For a thorough, critical summary of the marketing of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, see Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman.

[2] All textual references will be to the 2014 edition of *The Bondwoman's Narrative.*

[3] The textual annotations to the 2014 edition list at least fifty-nine passages that resemble portions of *Bleak House*. Most critics, following Gates' lead in his 2002 *New York Times* article "Borrowing Privileges," view what could be considered Bond's plagiarism as instead an act of artistic appropriation for the purpose of social commentary—in other words, as "signifyin(g)." Indeed, one characteristic of criticism on *The Bondwoman's Narrative* before September 2013 (when Bond's real name became known) is the ubiquity of puns about her pen name "Crafts"—the author was crafty in the way she crafted her narrative from other texts, etc. Hecimovich has since suggested that Bond took the name Crafts to honor both Ellen Crafts (who also used a suit of men's clothes to escape) and the Craft family at whose farm Bond hid while Wheeler searched for her (xix). Those who suspected the author of punning were correct, but the pun is in the

title—*The **Bond**woman's Narrative*—rather than in the pen name. For investigations of Bond's use of other novels, see Catherine Keyser (*Jane Eyre*); Robert Levine (*The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables*); Erin Smith (*The Castle of Otranto*); and Hollis Robbins, Daniel Hack, and Ballinger, Lustig, and Townshend (*Bleak House*).

[4] All biographical details I cite about Hannah Bond are taken from the preface to the 2014 edition of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Because Bond probably began writing in 1857, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is considered the first known novel *written* by a black woman, whereas Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, published in 1859, remains the first novel *published* by a black woman (*Bondwoman* xlv). Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is now typically categorized as an autobiography.

[5] Based on the contents of the text, a number of critics believed it was mostly likely written by a free black woman—William Andrews, Nina Baym, Joe Nickell, and Eric Gardner being the most prominent proponents of this view. A few went so far as to argue (to varying degrees) that the author might be white: Thomas Parramore, Bernier and Newman, and R. J. Ellis, for example. Hecimovich himself undertook his search for the author hypothesizing that she would be white (xxii).

[6] A note on nomenclature: To distinguish between author and character, I will refer to them as "Bond" and "Hannah," respectively. To avoid confusion about authorship, when I quote critics who use Bond's pen name because they wrote before Hecimovich's research was published, I will replace "Crafts" with "[Bond]."

Between the *New York Times* announcement in September 2013 and the writing of this dissertation, the only literary criticism on *The Bondwoman's Narrative* that has been published is Martha Cutter's April 2014 article on "skinship." Though Cutter uses the pen name, referring to the novel's author as "Crafts," I have used "Bond" based on the assumption that criticism will shift this way, as criticism on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* did when Harriet Jacobs was identified as its author.

[7] It is worth noting that the proslavery defenses appealing to providentialism were formed in response to antislavery arguments also based in providentialism, which insisted that "slavery could not endure forever under the weight of an advancing (and divinely directed) morality" (Guyatt 230).

[8] For a concise summary of the biblical justifications for slavery, see Pierce, *Hell,* 129-33.

[9] All biblical references will be to the King James Version.

[10] Readers familiar with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will note many similarities between the novels. Though the Christianity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is undoubtedly mixed with problematic romantic racialism, recognizing the surprising parallels between Stowe's account and Bond's may lead to a more nuanced understanding of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[11] Unfortunately, Stauffer does not distinguish between the author and the narrator, referring to both as "Crafts." I use "Bond" when I think he is referring to the author and "Hannah" when I think he is referring to the narrator/protagonist.

[12] I Corinthians 15: 54-55 and 57 declares that Christians will be resurrected because of Jesus' death and resurrection: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

[13] Bond could also be echoing another spiritual, "O Daniel," which ends with the line, "My Lord delivered Daniel, O, Why not deliver me, too?" (Allen 154).

[14] These epigraphs, from chapters 7, 8, 9, and 11, are quotations of Psalm 119:121, Psalm 10:12, Lamentations 5:1, and Psalm 140:1. The textual annotations to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* mistakenly claim that Bond misattributes the epigraph to chapter 9: "Although [Bond] identifies her citation as from the Book of Jeremiah, this verse is actually Lamentations 5:1" (274). However, Bond does not identify the text as coming from the Book of Jeremiah; she simply writes "Jeremiah" under the verse. Following the tradition of Scott and the gothic novelists, Bond typically cites the author of her epigraphs rather than the name of the text she draws from. For example, she attributes a quotation from Proverbs to Solomon (125), quotations from the Psalms to David (31, 88, 104, 135, 151, and 244), and a quotation from the Pentateuch to Moses (44). When she attributes the quotation from Lamentations to Jeremiah, she is simply invoking the tradition that the prophet Jeremiah wrote the Book of Lamentations.

[15] Though *The Wide, Wide World* also has an epigraph for each chapter, they serve a different purpose. Warner's choice of literary epigraphs elevates her status as an author and her text as a work of literary culture. Both authors, however, use epigraphs to gain admittance into a certain group that some may deny them; Warner seeks to be one of the literary elite, and Bond seeks to be one of God's chosen people.

[16] Appendix C of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* lists the books in John Hill Wheeler's library in 1850. For a discussion of Wheeler's library catalogue in 1882, including some antebellum works that were not on the 1850 list, see Paul Berman.

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