POISONOUS MIXTURES:
GENDER, RACE, EMPIRE, AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY IN ANTEBELLUM
FEMALE POISONER LITERATURE

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by

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Abstract

by

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This dissertation examines the literature of the female poisoner in nineteenth-century America, primarily in New England between 1840 and 1864. These narratives centered on women who, among other crimes and transgressions, poisoned their victims, often men, typically their domestic partners. The writers of these narratives, however, characterized the female poisoners’ crimes in radically divergent ways—from horrors to misfortunes to heroic acts—depending upon how they envisioned the distribution and shape of cultural authority within the nation. Female poisoner texts engaged with a literary tradition of the poisonous woman, which deployed poison as a metaphor for mixture—a crossing and blurring of gender, class, racial, generic, and national boundaries. Narratives of these mixtures could figure structures of power and identity that ran the gamut from heterogeneous possibilities for establishing more egalitarian modes of authority and androgynous forms of identity to hegemonic possibilities for rigidifying social hierarchy and clarifying boundaries of identity. In short, this literature
enabled a debate about how power should be distributed in a “civilized” society, what boundaries and structures constituted that civilization, and which configurations of race, class, and gender should wield hegemonic authority over it.

This literature traversed multiple popular genres, and the dissertation tracks the female poisoner from the figure’s inception in published trial transcripts and newspaper coverage to the sensational ephemera I call “true” female poisoner pamphlets to fiction and drama by luminaries of the American Renaissance such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The dissertation analyzes how the media affected the conversation and how the conversation affected the media as the female poisoner was adapted to address changing political concerns. Each chapter thus examines another step in the evolving conversation as the argument shuttled back and forth through these various media and literary communities. This movement expanded outward from local conflicts over elite New England masculinity in the trials (chapter one) to questions about racial and regional power between North and South in the pamphlets and Stowe’s work (chapters two and three) to a debate over empire and forms of imperial hegemony between Holmes and Hawthorne (chapter four).
To Nathan
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the literature of the female poisoner in nineteenth-century America, primarily in New England between 1840 and 1864. Female poisoner literature traversed multiple popular genres, and the dissertation tracks the figure from its inception in published trial transcripts and newspaper coverage to the sensational ephemera I call “true” female poisoner pamphlets to fiction and drama by luminaries of the American Renaissance such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. These generically diverse texts centered on women who, among other crimes and transgressions, poisoned their victims, often men, typically their domestic partners. The writers of these narratives, however, characterized the female poisoners’ crimes in radically divergent ways—from horrors to misfortunes to heroic acts—depending upon how they envisioned the distribution and shape of cultural authority within the nation. Female poisoner texts engaged with a literary tradition of the poisonous woman, which deployed poison as a metaphor for mixture—a crossing and blurring of gender, class, racial, generic, and national boundaries. Narratives of these mixtures could figure structures of power and identity that ran the gamut from heterogeneous possibilities for establishing more egalitarian modes of authority and androgynous forms of identity to hegemonic possibilities for rigidifying social hierarchy and clarifying boundaries of identity. In short, this literature enabled a debate about how power should be distributed in a “civilized” society, what boundaries and structures
constituted that civilization, and which configurations of race, class, and gender should wield hegemonic authority over it.

As Margaret Hallissy argues, writers who create narratives about venomous women “are allusive [and] highly conscious of their antecedents in mythology and earlier literature,” and the long literary tradition surrounding the female poisoner readily lends itself to a conversation about power and the possibilities for its reformation on the most basic levels of the social order. Thus, when antebellum writers took up the female poisoner, their shared debate engaged with a textual tradition that already centered on conflicts over authority and identity and how they could be re-mixed and re-distributed to create new social formations. This literary tradition includes famous figures such as Eve, Medea, Medusa, Circe, and Milton’s Sin and lesser known but influential characters such as Melusine, the snake woman of medieval romance, and the Greek Lamia, the original for Keats’s poem of the same name. Lamia, in particular, became an influential figure in the literature of the female poisoner. While most often a venomous snake woman, Lamia, in the original Greek myth, is an “all-purpose evil being,” the embodiment of hybridity and feminine evil: a poisoner, an infanticide, and a vampire.¹ In the original myth, Hera punishes Lamia for her illicit sexual liaison with Zeus by slaughtering her children and transforming her from a beautiful woman into a serpent with a woman’s face. A maddened Lamia expresses her grief by afflicting other people’s children, slithering into nurseries to drain their blood. Later post-Christian incarnations of the lamia, such as

redactions by the philosopher Apollonius and the Renaissance psychological theorist Robert Burton, transfer the monster’s attentions from children to young men.\(^2\)

At the core of this literature, however, is a marked ambivalence, upon which antebellum female poisoner literature fastens. The narratives of the poisonous woman have typically diverged into two contending narratives that construct themselves by continuously revising each other—what we might call a patriarchal narrative and a counter-patriarchal narrative. The patriarchal strand of female poisoner literature constructs this figure as a justification for various forms of hierarchical authority. Antebellum authors who followed this line of argument drew upon an ancient “discourse of poison” that linked women to deception, sexual corruption, and the endangerment of male bodies.\(^3\) For instance, the lamias who seduce and devour handsome young men metaphorize women’s supposed powers of deceit and sexual control, as well as the more general temptations of disobedience and libertinism. They are shape-shifters, who appear as fascinating women to seduce, corrupt, and feed upon the flesh of youths—unless defeated by a stern patriarch capable of seeing through their alluring surfaces to the snaky natures beneath. While the lamia tried to draw the youth away from other men, the

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\(^3\) I borrow the phrase and concept of the “discourse of poison” from Annette Pharamond, who analyzes the tradition that links women to corruption, poison, deception, and the destruction of men and society. “[W]oman is thus a poison herself, not just a poison user, and this connects the discourse of poison with the tradition of depiction and theorization of women’s impurity . . . The impurity of women thus raises the question of the possibility of its propagation, which is said to occur in secrecy . . . [Poison] blur[s] the corporeal limits of the parties involved. Indeed, an important part of the depictions of woman as dirt and poison revolves around her capability to affect the integrity of the male individual, to weaken him mostly by the means of seduction and with her affinity with sin.” Annette Pharamond, “A Hermeneutic of Poison,” diss., University of Rochester, 1995, 6-7.
patriarch saves his erring pupil by breaking the lamia’s spell and reincorporating him into an exclusively male system of relationships and power.

This linkage of the poisonous woman to the destruction of innocent men was contested, however, by a counter-narrative that complicated the literature and held up the female poisoner as a heroic or tragic alternative to traditional hierarchical authority. The story of Melusine and Keats’s Lamia, as well as Milton’s depiction of Eve according to some readings, fall into this category. In this version of the story, the poisonous woman protects (or tries to protect) the young man from the patriarch’s oppressive control and instead opens up the possibility of a more egalitarian distribution of power between the genders, a more inclusive definition of the elite, and a less punitive social order. This narrative suggests that a regressive masculine desire to dominate others, not women’s sexuality and deception, is actually the true source of the poison that destroys young men and occasions humanity’s fall. In short, the poisonous woman literary tradition emerges as a hybrid of at least two conflicting narrative strands, patriarchal and counter-patriarchal, which interpret poison and its origin quite differently. Hawthorne’s Beatrice Rappaccini voices the issue succinctly when, after Giovanni poisons her with Dr. Baglioni’s “antidote,” she reproaches her lover and asks: “Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?”

In the antebellum era, Beatrice’s question about the comparative poison of women’s or men’s “nature” was an open and contested issue. Antebellum female poisoner literature in particular took up both strands of the poisonous woman tradition

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and approached the female poisoner as a moral and epistemological dilemma, centered on the question of who exactly was poisonous and why. The “answer” a text or its audience gave to this question reflected its attitude toward power and social discipline. For instance, if a woman became a female poisoner in response to male tyranny, then social authority needed to become more egalitarian. If, on the other hand, a woman became a female poisoner because patriarchal authorities had become too lax, then a return to strong, hierarchical discipline seemed in order. This attitude toward discipline ultimately determined a writer’s vision of how a social and cultural elite should be properly constructed.5 By drawing the female poisoner as a figure of indeterminacy, antebellum writers transformed her into a test of cultural authority. Whoever read the female poisoner correctly and responded in a way that could defuse her poison deserved the status and disciplinary authority of a cultural elite, while those who did not respond properly needed to be expelled from the social order or restrained. This literature thus emerged as an exploration of the questions: What should define a moral and epistemological elite invested with cultural authority—i.e. sympathy or detachment? And who should be able to claim this status and power?

5 I use the term “elite” here and throughout the dissertation in a specific sense that draws on the work of Ronald Story. By “elite” I do not mean “class,” which is typically distinguished by material factors, such as wealth and direct political power, and by a coherence of identity—a singularly high degree of control, consciousness, and resolution” (xii). Rather I define an “elite” as a rhetorical and cultural construct, which is in the process of being defined and claimed by multiple groups. These groups claim elite status by asserting superior moral and epistemological insight. Thus, the texts I examine focus on the construction of an elite identity that commands a cultural authority not necessarily linked to the material markers of an upper class. It is an identity category that denotes a claim to the education, cultural capital, insight, correct race and gender, and/or sensibility needed to guide the nation toward “civilization” and the race and gender constructions proper to it. See Ronald Story, The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard and the Boston Upper Class, 1800-1870 (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1980).
As writers of female poisoner literature responded to the country’s addition of new territories and the subsequent escalating sectional crisis, the nature of this cultural authority shifted, and the texts accrued additional rhetorical layers. The literature expanded from primarily gender- and class-focused texts about who should wield authority within New England society to racially inflected works concerning power on the national level to a literature concerned with regional (North-South) hegemony over the American empire. This thematic expansion coincided with a generic migration through multiple popular media, and the dissertation tracks the development of female poisoner literature as it moves simultaneously through these diverse media and outward in concentric thematic circles. In so doing, the dissertation analyzes how the media affected the debate and how the debate affected the media as the female poisoner was adapted to address changing political concerns. Each chapter thus examines another step in the evolving conversation as the female poisoner shuttled back and forth through these various media and literary communities. This movement expanded outward from local conflicts over elite New England masculinity in the trials (chapter one) to questions about racial and regional power between North and South in the pamphlets and Stowe’s work (chapters two and three) to a debate over empire and forms of imperial hegemony between Holmes and Hawthorne (chapter four). Because of the literature’s generic and thematic movement, the following chapters engage primarily with three bodies of scholarship, which focus respectively on gender and class, print culture, and race, nation, and empire.
Current literary scholarship on gender allows me to situate female poisoner literature as an antebellum descendant of the early American dramas of beset womanhood, which constructed a moral and epistemological elite through sympathy with transgressive women. Criticism about the novels and captivity narratives of the early republic by Cathy Davidson, Shirley Samuels, and Michelle Burnham points out that the new nation’s most popular literature featured embattled women and that these texts “conflated[d] national identities with women’s bodies.” In short, this popular literature created national identification by generating sympathy for transgressive female characters. As Kristin Boudreau argues, the novels of the early republic trained their readers in “an American tradition of egalitarianism through sympathy.” But this sympathetic egalitarianism worked paradoxically by casting the proper member of “civilized society” as part of “a moral elite to which anyone could aspire, provided he or she were responsive to the call of sensibility.” This training in sensibility, however, remained gendered. According to Nancy Roberts, the works that are “schools of sympathy” “teach us to feel” by teaching us to feel for their victimized and misrepresented heroines. However, because these heroines appear under suspicious circumstances that would make them seem corrupt and criminal, sympathy also becomes a matter of epistemology—of seeing the justified woman under the sinful exterior. Drawing on Ian Watt, Roberts argues that the reader must take on the role of juror, “another group of specialists in


epistemology,” who searches out the truth about the heroine and uncovers her genuine virtue buried under the oppressions of slander and circumstances.\(^8\) Thus, in order to enter the “moral elite” a reader must deploy both sympathy and a detective-like empirical epistemology. As Boudreau points out, sympathy and “the observing gaze” share the same structure, which attempts “to read the inner via the outer.”\(^9\) Readers of sentimental fiction were thus trained not only to sympathize with the victimized woman and recognize her intrinsic virtue. They were also encouraged to develop an epistemology that saw through surfaces to an interior truth. Crime fiction worked in a similar fashion. Antebellum narratives often combined sentiment and crime through a discourse of “legal romanticism,” which imbued the sentimental with the legal and the legal with the sentimental. This hybrid discourse, particularly when it was about women, engendered popular crime fiction that centered on a he said/ she said dynamic and acted as an important means of determining who could claim cultural authority as part of a national elite.\(^10\)

Linking cultural authority to sympathy for transgressive women through this he said/ she said logic, however, creates a tricky epistemological challenge for elite men—a challenge that becomes especially fraught around the female poisoner. First, on the basic...


\(^9\) Boudreau, 121-22.

level of physical fact, the secret nature of poison’s operation exacerbates epistemological uncertainty. Second, poison became associated with perverse constructions of gender that can deceive the observer and subvert and endanger the social order. The early female poisoner literature exhibits an anxiety about the possibility that surfaces—especially those of “fascinating” women—could be counterfeited, and sympathy, which depends upon a legible exterior in order to read the inner truth, could allow women to delude and effeminize men. At the same time, this literature expresses a parallel fear that men may actually pose the real poisonous threat to men—fooling and humiliating them while scapegoating an innocent woman. The central problem in the early literature thus zeros in on the questions: Who is failing to perform a proper civilized or elite gender identity, and, conversely, who is the innocent person that should gather sympathy and identification? Who is the real poisoner, and who the victim?

Underneath these questions about men’s sympathy with women or with men lies a broader conflict over the shifting formation of elite masculinity in the antebellum era. Scholarship by David Leverenz, E. Anthony Rotundo, and Michael Kimmel identifies the mid-nineteenth century as a period when masculinity underwent a major reorganization from patriarchal forms based in the household production of goods and the headship of the family to an “entrepreneurial,” “self-made,” or “marketplace manhood” derived from successful competition with other men in the marketplace. This new form of masculinity, they argue, required a “flight from the feminine,” while at the same time producing a deep fear of other men and the humiliations they could inflict. Gail Bederman analyzes the latter stages of this transition in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century shift
from a more domestic “manliness” to a “rough, working-class . . . masculinity.”

In essence, these critics describe the development of a more intensely homosocial, as opposed to a heterosocial, masculinity, that is, a masculinity defined by its alienation from women rather than a manhood defined by either its material partnership or sympathetic identification with women.

These terms “homosocial” and “heterosocial” derive from Eve Sedgwick’s work on erotic triangles. Sedgwick draws on Freud’s Oedipal triangle, René Girard’s mimetic desire, and Gayle Rubin’s theories of the exchange of women to describe how male homosocial desire is conditioned through triangulation, which creates a relationship between men through their desire for the same object (a woman). She suggests that “large-scale social structures” (such as the patriarchal nation-state for example), which largely exclude women as agents, “are congruent with male-male-female erotic triangles.” Michael Kimmel and Judith Butler also take up this male-male-female Oedipal triangulation. Butler critiques psychoanalytic theories that “construe identification and desire as . . . mutually exclusive” and relationships as necessarily “divid[ing] into either wanting to have someone or wanting to be that someone, but never both at once.” She argues that in fact “identification and desire can coexist, and that their formulation in terms of mutually exclusive oppositions serves a heterosexual matrix.” Michael Kimmel similarly attributes the homophobia and sexism inherent in modern masculinity to its

denial of the possible confluence of desire and identification. Masculinity is thus constructed by simultaneously disclaiming both desire for the father (and other men) and identification with the mother (and women). In the terms of my project, this dynamic of homosocial identification produces homosocial masculinity, while a masculinity constructed through the co-existence of desire and identification (a cross-gender identification) enables a heterosocial masculinity.\(^\text{12}\)

The dominance of this form of homosocial masculinity, however, was not a foregone conclusion, and the female poisoner literature of the antebellum era provided a space where desire and identification could coincide, where dominant forms of masculinity could be debated, and where alternatives to both older patriarchal and new entrepreneurial masculinity were explored. For instance, Stowe’s work and some of the later “true” female poisoner pamphlets explore a heterosocial identification that produces androgyny and an egalitarian distribution of power. The female poisoner in these texts takes on phallic qualities, while her male partners absorb feminine attributes. The female poisoner in this formulation becomes an ideal vehicle for the gender-crossing necessary to creating a confluence between desire and identification because the figure combines the unnerving sexual alterity of women with the comforting familiarity of a masculine or phallic agency, with which men might more easily identify.\(^\text{13}\) This hybrid figure thus


\(^{13}\) Carol Clover discusses this “phallicization” strategy in modern slasher flicks, but, unlike these films, which de-sexualize the heroine, many female poisoner texts insisted on their heroines’ feminine sexuality. See Carol Clover, *Men Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) 22-64.
opens up the possibility of a mutually-created androgynous identity for both men and women.

At the same time, the two narratives that make up the poisonous woman literary tradition (the patriarchal and counter-patriarchal) shape this literature as a forum for arguments about homosocial or heterosocial configurations of gender and society. And other texts work to revise and resist the female poisoner’s androgynous heterosociality. For instance, the early “true” female poisoner pamphlets portray the figure as the monstrous alien, against which men identify themselves and over which they exert punitive patriarchal authority. Holmes and Hawthorne, by contrast, reject Stowe’s promotion of androgynous heterosocial identification without (overtly) denying sympathy. Holmes embraces a genteel, professional homosociality as the basis of civilization, while Hawthorne recurs to his conception of an old domestic patriarchy, which preserves sharp gender distinctions by rejecting masculinities based on either a public homosociality or an androgynous confluence of desire and identification between men and women. In short, female poisoner literature produces a diversity of contending forms of homosociality and heterosociality. What forms are most appropriate to civilizing society, however, remains a central problem in these narratives. These texts ask: To what extent is civilized antebellum masculinity constructed heterosocially, and to what extent is it constructed homosocially? And what kind of heterosociality and homosociality is most conducive to civilization?

Chapter One, “Hannah Kinney, the Novel: ‘Popular Delusion,’ Elite Masculinity, and Transforming the Female Poisoner Trial into Literary Event,” examines how these questions molded the transcript and newspaper coverage of one influential trial. Hannah
Kinney’s 1840 trial in Boston for the arsenic poisoning of her husband revolved around the question of who poisoned George Kinney. Arguments made by the prosecution and the defense offered a stark alternative: If he fell a victim to his wife, he did so because his heterosocial sympathy and trust made him vulnerable to a corrupt “moral monster” beyond the pale of femininity and civilization. If, on the other hand, he died by his own agency or through the bungling of the quack who was treating him for syphilis, then a corrupt homosocial masculinity was to blame. In this second narrative, the loose living, financial pressure, and, especially, the influence of bad male friends in a homosocial antebellum culture drove Kinney from his wife’s care and protection and destroyed him. These conflicting arguments pitted advocates of a traditional patriarchal authority based on suspicion of women against supporters of a masculine moral elite based on sympathy with women. The trial ultimately humiliated the traditional camp and cast the Harvard doctors who testified for the prosecution as villains, whose lack of sympathy for the accused made them into fools and liars. At the same time, the “common men” of the jury proved themselves the genuinely insightful moral elites when their sympathy vindicated Hannah Kinney. The trial thus became a forum for arguments about what constituted proper sympathy and epistemology, what type of masculinity embodied them, and who could (and could not) claim the status of moral elite in New England society. This debate continued long after the trial was over as Kinney and her ex-husband penned dueling pamphlet accounts of her life, which I analyze in the next chapter.

Chapter Two, “The ‘True’ Female Poisoner Pamphlet and the Sensational Literary Transformations of the Female Poisoner,” examines the Kinney pamphlets and the subsequent evolution of the “true” female poisoner pamphlet. Although claiming
absolute truth, the “true” pamphlets were sensationally fictional and helped promote the female poisoner’s transition from trials and newspapers to fictional literature. This development marked the female poisoner as a liminal figure, one that titillated the public by destabilizing boundaries between genders, races, and regions, as well as genres. The questions about gender and elite status that emerged in the Kinney trial expanded to stand in for a host of other identity categories, and the pamphlets constructed the antebellum female poisoner as a richly versatile figure for opening up or closing down cross-category identifications. By turns androgynous, racially ambivalent, and of shifting class and regional associations, she opens up heterogeneous possibilities for cross-gender, cross-class, cross-race, or cross-region identifications—as well as cross-media conversations.

The “true” female poisoner pamphlets thus appear as genre-mixing anomalies that challenge many of the oppositional paradigms in current scholarship about antebellum print media. Isabelle Lehuu characterizes ephemeral literatures as “sites of contest” between “discrete publics,” but female poisoner literature mixes the supposedly “discrete publics” and crosses the increasingly “less permeable” gender boundaries that Lehuu identifies as developing in the broader field of popular print media. Female poisoner literature opens up a conduit between these disparate publics, not simply to foster the “cultural uniformity” Ronald Zboray attributes to print, but rather to engage dialogically with dominant cultural paradigms and interrogate what shape that uniformity will take. By the same token, the female poisoner pamphlets do not work as “Subversive fiction” that takes up the cause of the oppressed against the oppressors, as David Reynolds and David Ray Papke argue about other antebellum crime fiction. Like Papke and Reynolds, Lehuu considers sensational ephemera subversive, calling these works the new
“vernacular print culture,” which “defied orthodox uses of the printed word” and was “a parody of official book culture.” The “true” female poisoner pamphlets, however, often reproduce orthodox narratives within innovative media. For instance, many early pamphlets tell the same story multiple times—combining the style and arguments of Puritan execution sermons and last confessions with more sensational newspaper-like narratives. In short, the female poisoner trope created a bridge between orthodox and ephemeral literature, a locus where traditional and innovative genres, styles, and media met.

By tracking the female poisoner figure into more fully elaborated literary works, I show that, rather than creating a sensationalist “parody of official book culture,” this form of sensational literature became an integral part of that culture. David Reynolds has argued that sensational fiction and other “low” popular literatures greatly influenced and “nurture[d]” the “elite” writers of the American Renaissance. My research, however, reveals that this dynamic does not work in a unilateral fashion and that the “elite” writers also influenced the “low” producers of popular culture. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s version of the female poisoner significantly altered the “true” female poisoner pamphlet. Furthermore, my investigation of the Kinney trial and its after-effects shows that the trials that inspired much of the sensational literature depended on arguments of “elite” members of society. Thus, female poisoner literature helped create a shared popular culture that worked top-down as well as bottom-up.14

Scholars of Victorian Britain’s crime fiction generally identify the shared popular culture their sensational literature creates as a disciplinary mechanism that furthered bourgeois hegemony. Work by critics such as Ann Cvetkovich and D. A. Miller focuses almost exclusively on this disciplinary aspect of crime literature, while earlier criticism by Richard Altick concludes that crime literature leveled social classes and genders in a more egalitarian fashion. One can account for this critical discrepancy in part by attending to the difference in the materials analyzed. The more recent scholars make their arguments based primarily upon the analysis of novels, not the ephemera that Altick includes. The top-down discipline identified by later criticism simply appears to manifest more strongly in novelistic form than in ephemeral literature. Although female poisoner literature never quite made the grand leveling gestures that Altick associates with British ephemera, nevertheless, when female poisoner literature began to appear in novels and more permanent literary works, it underwent a shift from the titillating and indeterminate to the programmatic and disciplinary.

Unlike Victorian Great Britain, however, antebellum American society was increasingly bifurcated into two contending regional visions—North and South—in addition to class tensions. Thus, as the sectional crisis escalated and threatened New England’s power and influence, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Nathaniel Hawthorne created a female poisoner literature that extended beyond the


epistemological titillations of the pamphlets and constructed coherent, hegemonic, northern visions of American gender, race, nation, and empire. Donald Pease argues that “writers comprising . . . our American Renaissance . . . devised . . . visionary compacts,” which they hoped would help “to avoid a civil war by returning America to agreed-upon relations, thereby restoring to America a common life all Americans could share.”

Although this argument explains one current of the American Renaissance, many authors also worked to create a vision of American “civilization” in violent opposition to southern “barbarism.” When the authors of the American Renaissance drew upon female poisoner literature, they did so in order to create this oppositional, rather than conciliatory, version of the American nation.

The ultimate prize in this conflict, however, was not only national authority but imperial hegemony. Literary scholars such as Amy Kaplan and Shelley Streeby have argued that a literature of U. S. imperialism was being shaped long before the Spanish-American War and that the South (both the U. S. South and Latin America) played the central role in its creation. In Kaplan’s words, “representations of U. S. imperialism were mapped not through a West/East axis of frontier symbols and politics, but instead through a North/South axis around the issues of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation.” Antebellum female poisoner narratives, especially the texts of the 1850s and 60s, came to revolve around just such a “North/South” opposition between competing American imperialisms based on contrasting types of American masculinity and race figured as northern and southern. By the same token, female poisoner texts

increasingly replaced their earlier “multiple racial formations” with a more dichotomous racial paradigm akin to the solidified black and white “color line” identified by W. E. B. Du Bois after the Civil War. By tracking the female poisoner, we can see the generic and ideological process that produced these imperial oppositions out of other more cosmopolitan configurations of race and empire. Female poisoner literature thus provides a back-story for the evolution of representations of U. S. empire and the “imperial masculinity” or “imperial white manhood” that Kaplan and Streeby respectively identify as central to the post-bellum imperial project.17

The three authors I examine who participated in this national and imperial contest—Stowe, Holmes, and Hawthorne—shared a dialogue around the figure of the female poisoner. Holmes and Hawthorne both belonged to the exclusive Saturday Club, and, though their perspectives often clashed, they exchanged ideas, tropes and even plot elements about poison, gender, and race throughout their careers—producing, among other works, “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” “The Birthmark,” and Elsie Venner. As for Holmes and Stowe, they were friends and carried on a conversation about marriage and gender relations through their stories in The Atlantic Monthly. They also wrote each other admiring letters about their shared “colonizing” literary projects, particularly about Holmes’s lamia novel, Elsie Venner.18 Of the three, Stowe maintained the most liminal


and androgynous heterosocial configuration of the poisoner. Chapter Three “The Effect of a Slow Poison': Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Female Poisoner and the Salvation of New England Fratriarchy,” analyzes the entire sweep of Stowe’s career and shows how she drew on a homeopathic metaphors of poison to construct the female poisoner as a heroic “Tender Avenger.” As in homeopathic practice, poison counteracts poison, and the Tender Avenger attacks the more serious poisons engendered by a southern-style homosocial masculinity. For instance, Stowe’s portrayal of the mulatta female poisoner, Cassy, in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Christian Slave indicts homosocial masculinity as the source of poison and barbarism and elevates the androgynous female poisoner as the protector of sympathetic masculinity. By protecting the heterosocially constructed man, she enables him to defeat barbarism and extend a New England vision of America’s Christian civilization.

Stowe’s redaction of the female poisoner emphasizes not only the figure’s gender but her racial mixture. She attains a kind of “Spanish” indeterminacy that counteracts what Stowe sees as a harsh and potentially brutal Anglo-Saxon whiteness. Hawthorne and Holmes, however, associate this androgynous and cross-racial mixture with southern savagery. Chapter Four, “A Poisonous Mixture: The Savage Southern Hybrid and the Imperial New England Man in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s Elsie Venner and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Elixir of Life Manuscripts,” examines how these late antebellum and Civil War female poisoner texts create a vision of American empire by purging the “southern” poisoner from the body politic. These texts attack identification with the gender- and

race-crossing poisoner as productive of unnatural androgyny and racial mixture, which almost approaches a cross between the animal and the human. Holmes makes this argument most clear in *Elsie Venner*, which centers on the poisoner as lamia. He casts the lamia Elsie as both a danger to New England manhood and an unfortunate victim of a rattlesnake’s prenatal bite, an attack enabled by the unwise racial cross that produced Elsie—a marriage between a white New England man and a Spanish woman. Elsie’s mixtures ultimately require the fatal “cure” of a heroic medical student. Hawthorne’s poisoners, by contrast, derive their poison from an Indian-White mixture that he associates with the Confederates; but his poisoners ultimately bring about their own demise or displacement and are passively superceded by racially pure characters. Thus, these texts create whitened and re-masculinized heroes capable of purging the mixed poisoners and asserting a civilized northern vision of empire with clear racial and gender categories across the continent.

While Holmes and Hawthorne both cast this struggle as a conflict between masculinities, they produce very different pictures of ideal northern manhood. For Holmes, the ideal man vindicates the elite doctors ridiculed in the Kinney trial. This time, his professional man combines the muscularity of the common man with the piercing intellect and elite homosocial organization of the profession. Hawthorne consciously rejects Holmes’s scientific imperialism and equates the racially mixed poisoner with the intellectually complex man of science, while his own heroic ideal recalls the traditional masculinity of the Homeric warrior and domestic patriarch. Hawthorne’s determined simplification flies in the face of his earlier work, which distrusted paternal figures and endorsed a complicated view of human nature. The polarization of the Civil War may
have pressured him to produce a clearer propagandistic vision of the moral elite, a
distortion of his literary project which suggests why he failed to finish these last
manuscripts.

Ultimately, Holmes’s configuration of the female poisoner as diseased other and
the elite male as homosocial professional came to dominate the discourse of poison in the
Progressive Era. Before the female poisoner became a vehicle for disciplinary
normalization, however, this figure inspired a literature open to multiple configurations
of America’s moral elite and their cultural authority. This dissertation maps out the
heterogeneous possibilities that preceded the post-bellum medicalization of the female
poisoner.
CHAPTER ONE

HANNAH KINNEY, THE NOVEL: “POPULAR DELUSION,” ELITE MASCULINITY, AND TRANSFORMING THE FEMALE POISONER TRIAL INTO LITERARY EVENT

I. The Social and Rhetorical Background

This section explores the social and rhetorical environment informing the creation of antebellum female poisoner literature. It asks: Did this literature grow out of a fearful hysteria driven by an actual or perceived “crime wave,” as suggested by key texts in the study of female criminality? Or did it emerge in conjunction with a discourse organized around arguments over the cultural authority of the “common man” and the professional? My research indicates that female poisoner literature developed in association with the second issue and that current prevailing conceptions of a female poisoner crime wave in the antebellum era derive from a criminological discourse of poison that became powerful only after the Civil War. This criminological discourse has produced both a misogynist interpretation of antebellum female poisoners as a “deadlier species” coddled by a chivalrous or deluded populace and feminist rejoinders to that theory, which portray the antebellum public as
defenders of male privilege reacting violently to their terror of empowered women.\footnote{Otto Pollack’s foundational work, \textit{The Criminality of Women} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), is the most influential modern text that posits the “deadlier species” model based in part on false claims about antebellum female poisoners. The feminist rejoinders to this theory include studies by feminist criminologists (see note 10 below) and widely distributed popular histories of nineteenth-century female poisoners. See, for instance, Ann Jones, \textit{Women Who Kill} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) and Mary S. Hartman, \textit{Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes} (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).}

By contrast, my research debunks the deadlier species model’s application to the antebellum era and recovers an antebellum print culture that instead created multiple and ambiguous or often competing versions of the female poisoner, from villain to victim to hero. In short, because of their creation as part of a debate about authority rather than an established disciplinary discourse, antebellum female poisoner texts appeared as a flexible, multivalent literature and not as a blunt rhetorical weapon for either subversive or hegemonic interests.

The following section first uncovers the immediate source of current misperceptions about antebellum female poisoners: The post-bellum criminological apparatus for diagnosing and interpreting the female criminal as deadlier and more prone to poison than the male criminal is grounded upon a widely reproduced but entirely invented statistic. The section tracks the genealogy of this fiction and then briefly reconstructs an alternative quantitative picture of antebellum poisoning crimes and public response, which indicates significantly more prosecutions of male than female poisoners but also greater public interest in the latter. This interest, however, did not take the form of a simple misogynist fear of women as suggested by the feminist interpretations that look back at the antebellum female poisoner through the classic criminological lens. Rather, this section argues that, partly because of the
female poisoner’s use in debates over cultural authority, the antebellum public approached the figure with greater ambivalence, while writers portrayed the female poisoner in a more complex light, covering a wide range of characterizations from the sympathetic to the monstrous. This ambivalence stemmed in part from a rhetoric that constructed cultural authority and discipline through the transgressive woman. Sympathetic and accurate judgment of the transgressive woman (including the female poisoner) distinguished a civilized moral and epistemological elite from supposedly undemocratic and uncivilized elements such as privileged aristocrats and the untutored mob, who failed to judge or feel correctly and so participated in “popular delusion.” The rhetoric’s flexibility allowed it to escape any one identity group’s control, and so it was instead appropriated by diverse and often contending sectors of antebellum society. (For instance, both prosecution and defense in the Kinney trial used it against each other.) The contours of this rhetoric are teased out at the end of this section through a close reading of two key texts that deploy the trope of “popular delusion”—specifically, Dr. David Meredith Reese’s 1838 *Humbugs of New-York: Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion; whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion* and the doctor of law’s, Charles MacKay’s, 1841 and 1852 *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*.

Accounts of Victorian crime tend to link the nineteenth century with poison and specifically with poisonous women, claiming for example, that “alleged poisoning became the crime of the century . . . [and that] it was associated with women.”

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2 Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 102-03.
Mohr affirms a portion of this theory and identifies murder by poison as a prevalent antebellum fear: “Citizens feared death from poisoning and considered the incidence of murder by poison to be quite high in the United States through the first half of the nineteenth century.” He goes on to quote a leading nineteenth-century expert on medical jurisprudence, who claimed that even after the Civil War “poisoning was America’s ‘most common form of homicide.’”

Mohr’s work and the popular histories, however, both base their arguments on texts that emerged from a specific criminological discourse. The histories rest their suppositions about nineteenth-century America on claims and theories made by late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso and Otto Pollack, and Mohr draws his evaluations of antebellum attitudes to poison from Lombroso’s and Pollack’s precursors—antebellum doctors. His evidence derives primarily from his study of texts written by “regular” practitioners, professionals who had a distinct investment in cultural anxieties about secret poison. He chronicles how these doctors “pushed medical jurisprudence to the forefront of American professional life during the early decades of the nineteenth century” as a way to assert cultural authority. But these efforts were generally frustrated with one important exception: “[F]orensic toxicology appeared to be an arena in which the new interest in medical jurisprudence was paying genuine dividends for the medical profession.” Antebellum doctors were thus understandably preoccupied with murder by poison. As Mohr contends, “American medical journals probably published more articles on

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poisons and their detection . . . than on any other aspect of medical jurisprudence, and medical school courses in medical jurisprudence probably spent more time on toxicology than on any other subject. Nevertheless, my work indicates that the doctors’ attitudes toward poison and evaluations of poisoners did not necessarily dominate public opinion until the medical profession solidified its cultural authority late in the nineteenth century.

The “history” of antebellum female poisoners ultimately produced by this criminological discourse rests on an invented statistic, generated to confirm a “deadlier species” model of female criminality that depicts women offenders as more fiendish, primitive, and savage than male criminals. Twentieth-century studies of nineteenth-century female poisoners, such as Otto Pollack’s foundational work in female criminology, The Criminality of Women, assert that a “preponderance of women among apprehended poisoners, namely, 6.3 out of every 10, has been reported for the United States.” (This statistic even surpasses the results of Parliament’s 1851 study, which showed approximately 5.4 women out of every 10 British poisoners.) But this infamous “five-eighths” figure appears to derive from an undocumented claim in a 1931 history of poison published in London by a doctor of law, C. J. S.

4 Mohr, 94, 69-70.


6 Otto Pollak, The Criminality of Women, 16.
Thompson. In this text, he declares—without any footnote indicating his source—that “American statistics show that five-eighths of the murders by poison in that country were the work of women.”\(^7\) Both Pollack and Thompson assert their “five-eighths” figure in order to reaffirm misogynist tradition and prove that a witch-hunting theologian judged women correctly. In the words of Pollack, “the cumulative evidence of modern scientists does little but reaffirm Reginald Scot’s statement of 1584, that women were ‘the greatest practicers of poisoning and more . . . given thereunto than men.’”\(^8\) But, as one important late twentieth-century feminist criminologist argues, Pollack’s theories derive from “traditional beliefs about the character of women”—i.e. that they are incredibly cunning, manipulative, bloodthirsty, and deceitful.\(^9\) Nevertheless, this picture of women as the “deadlier species” has wielded great influence over the field of criminology and twentieth-century penal practice, and it remains a standard interpretation, which feminist theorists still work to refute.\(^10\)

Although Thompson claimed that he arrived at his estimate based on empirical “American statistics,” such statistics simply do not exist in America for most of the nineteenth century, where the formality of record-keeping varied widely.

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\(^8\) Pollak, 16-17.


The best compilation of poisoning cases from nineteenth-century America, in fact, radically contradicts Thompson. Although it only covers cases that rated immortalization in print, Thomas McDade’s *The Annals of Murder: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders from Colonial Times to 1900* enables a rough statistical analysis, which shows more male than female American poisoners. McDade records pamphlets and books on 52 American poisoners up to the year 1900. Of these, 35 are male and 17 (including 2 probable fictions) are female. (He also notes the fictional accounts of Ann Walters and Mary Jane Gordon but does not put the mass murderers under “poison” in the index. Their inclusion would put the total at 54 and 19.) Eliminating the fictions distributes the percentages for poisoning at 70% male and 30% female.12

The female poisoners that McDade records, however, generated more sustained and imaginative interest than their male counterparts. Just under 35% of the

11 When I asked the wonderful Notre Dame Law librarians for suggestions about how to find this fabled statistical information, their reactions varied from disbelieving laughter to sympathetic but firm negatives. If such records existed, they would reside in state not national archives; they would vary widely in reliability, since antebellum criminal record-keeping was notoriously spotty; and they would not be categorized according to crime. If some intrepid historian decides one day to undertake this daunting task, we may have some cautious form of the “American statistics” that Thompson and his successors so confidently asserted, but they could not have had anything close to reliable data.

12 This statistic approaches figures for modern poisoning homicides, which set the distribution at 60% male and 40% female. Jack Levin and James Alan Fox, “Female Serial Killers,” *Female Criminality: The State of the Art*, ed. Concetta C. Culliver (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) 254. See Thomas M. McDade, *The Annals of Murder: a Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders from Colonial Times to 1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). With regards to the threat that women posed for men, McDade records eight cases of women brought to trial for poisoning their husbands or male lovers. (This number excludes the fictional “true” female poisoner pamphlets.) In contrast, he catalogs twenty-eight men who went to the bar for poisoning their wives or female lovers. Thus, almost 80% of the partner-poisonings were men trying to get rid of inconveniently pregnant girlfriends or just plain inconvenient wives. And, perhaps even more striking, out of the total number of female poisoners, only a little more than 50% of them poisoned husbands, while the overwhelming number of men who used poison—80%—targeted their wives.
men inspired more than one pamphlet, while 56% of the women received the attention of multiple publications. In addition, the men who garnered additional publicity almost always had something extra to draw the attention: They were doctors or ministers or the first to use aconite. The male poisoner case that provoked the largest number of pamphlets actually focused on a female poisoner by proxy. (Henry Green’s cruel mother forced the young man to poison his wife.)\(^{13}\) The female poisoner stories also transferred more easily into the realm of cultural imagination and inspired a kind of intertextual exchange, which we will explore in the next chapter. Indeed, while the men’s pamphlets reflect genuine cases, almost 30% of the female poisoners McDade records are entirely fictional.

The available evidence from America consequently does not support a “crime wave” or even “wave of law enforcement” interpretation of female poisoners. American courts did not try suspected lamias by the wagonload, and legislatures passed over “the crime of the century” with singular indifference. This non-reaction becomes more pointed if we remember that in Britain during the same period, Parliament was passing actual legislation outlawing the sale of poison to women. If “everyone knew” that wives were poisoning innumerable husbands,\(^ {14}\) Americans seemed oddly calm about it, confining their reactions to discursive activities such as knowing and writing. And what they wrote often appeared surprisingly benign. Many of the fictional pamphlets depict sexy and heroic poisoners, while most of the now canonical antebellum authors who dealt with the female poisoner “portrayed [her]

\(^{13}\) McDade, 115-16.

\(^{14}\) Jones, 102, 98.
sympathetically”—at least compared to previous largely misogynist depictions of the lamia or snake-woman.\(^\text{15}\)

Attributing an overwhelming fear of homicide by poison and of female poisoners to antebellum Americans thus appears potentially anachronistic. Projected outward from a profession to the general populace and backward from later discourses into the antebellum era, this discourse of poison does not necessarily accurately reflect the cultural attitudes of most mid-nineteenth-century Americans and definitely does not reflect the recorded facts of criminal activity. In short, although antebellum female poisoner literature did start with trials and actual alleged crimes, the female poisoner was not an icon of immediate and real horror for antebellum Americans. Rather, she remained a flexible symbol—open for sympathy and even admiration.

This flexibility derived in part from the initial connection between antebellum female poisoner literature and a rhetoric of “popular delusion.” Although emerging criminological or professional discourse deployed this rhetoric to claim cultural authority, so too did other competing interest groups and discourses. Narratives of popular delusion revolved around attempts to determine who and what defined a moral and epistemological elite invested with cultural authority: Who exactly was deluded and thus an improper candidate for authority, and who, on the other hand, saw through appearances into the real truth of things? Popular delusion, in one hegemonic formulation of the rhetoric, stemmed from the common people’s inability

to weigh the truth or falsity of an issue correctly, unless directed by traditional authorities or aspiring professional experts. Furthermore, the crowd’s misperceptions drove irrational behavior that fomented social upheaval and violence imimical to modern civilization. The emerging professional discourse that eventually produced the discipline of criminology utilized this rhetoric to promote a professional hegemony, which in various manifestations either looked backwards to a social economy of privilege or forward to the Progressive era’s enshrinement of expertise. Proponents of the so-called “common man” structures of authority, however, also drew on this rhetoric to extend the Jacksonian era’s democratization of knowledge and authority and expand the ranks of the cultural elite to include working-class white men. This version of the popular delusion narrative depicted the common man as a moral and epistemological elite opposed to the equally deluded unwashed masses and privileged orders. These two groups—the mass and the privileged—were seen as working together to promote delusion or even barbaric atrocity—especially against helpless women. For instance, when that iconic self-made man, P. T. Barnum, apportioned blame for the Salem witch trials, he rested it equally between “popular and judicial delusion,” that is, between the masses and the privileged authorities. 16 At the same time, however, this wider distribution of cultural authority often underwrote a “white egalitarianism” among men, which subordinated women and racial others. 17

16 P. T. Barnum, The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages (New York: Carleton Publisher, 1866) 312.

Yet, in spite of their exclusion from power, women, particularly transgressive women, were central to the construction of this rhetoric of authority. Sympathy with transgressive women (such as Barnum’s witches) was a key point of contention in the discourse of popular delusion. The female poisoner especially posed both an epistemological and moral puzzle and so often appeared as an ideal test for competing claims to cultural authority. First, poison is a subtle, secret agent requiring greater powers of observation and investigation than more obvious methods of murder. The female poisoner further complicated the matter by covering the crime with an appealing womanly exterior—“usually the most amiable and innocent part of nature” according to the junior prosecutor in the Kinney case. Second, sympathy with the “innocent,” falsely-accused woman also provided a key litmus test for a “moral elite.”18 Within the terms of this paradigm, sympathy and observation—the moral and the epistemological—worked together to distinguish a civilized elite from the savage crowd. When, on the other hand, early professionals such as doctors or jurists argued for their own cultural status in the early Jacksonian era, they more typically recurred to a discourse that distinguished authorities by their lack of sympathy with the corrupt feminine. They thus often equated sympathy for and identification with a female criminal with an irrational emotionalism that provoked popular delusion. Within these terms, if the alleged female poisoner is a poisoner in fact, then sympathy is a snare and a delusion and a threat to civilized authority. This tension between sympathy as

sign of elite status and sympathy as sign of plebeian stupidity shaped the Kinney trial arguments and became a focal point for competing versions of elite masculinity. In the trial’s clash over proper class and gender construction, the proponents of the “sympathetic” common man narrative implied that the “traditional” mode is blind and cruel while the “traditional” men or professionals attacked the “sympathetic” men as gullible fools manipulated by their inferiors. Both sides accused the other of lowering themselves to participate in “popular delusion.”

The purveyors of “popular delusion” rhetoric examined in this section, however, were reacting against what Neil Harris describes as the Jacksonian era’s elevation of the common man into the role of cultural authority. According to Harris, many antebellum Americans adopted a new “operational aesthetic” that shifted the basis of “truth” from textual and traditional sources to empirical proof. This epistemological transition enabled the Jacksonian embrace of the common man, which “now placed all authority—social, moral, aesthetic, even religious—in the hearts and minds of the ordinary citizen, the much-celebrated common man.” But the advancement of the common man undermined traditional status and authority: “The rituals that had once comfortably protected social conventions disappeared or decayed. . . . [And] credentials, coats of arms, and university degrees no longer guaranteed what passed for truth.” This epistemological transformation led to a widespread use of what Harris calls an “operational aesthetic”:

an approach to experience that equated beauty with information and technique . . . [seeking] the opportunity to debate the issue of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced . . . [and] the thrill of reading about conspiracy, being fed clues in newspapers and pamphlets, and rendering a verdict as part of the ‘enlightened public.’
The operational aesthetic was part of a political philosophy that assumed that “the common sense of the average citizen was . . . a guarantee for the republic’s future,” and privilege, especially privileged access to truth, and those “experts” who wished to assert this privilege were “anathema”:

[M]any avid democrats assumed that any problem could be expressed clearly, concisely, and comprehensibly enough for the ordinary man to resolve it. Secret information and private learning were anathema. All knowledge was meant to be shared. Contemporary pamphleteers delighted in ridiculing experts and specialists; the expert turned out frequently to be a pedantic ignoramus, easily fooled himself; the learned doctor was often a victim of scientific nonsense and deserved to be overruled by intelligent laymen.19

The operational aesthetic thus displaced authority founded on traditional status and guild or rank privileges. But the operational aesthetic’s validation of the observational gaze also laid the groundwork for a different sort of intellectual elitism, which would fully flower in the late nineteenth century when the professions resettled their authority from traditional, textual sources to claims about a superior clinical or observational gaze. (The heroic detective who began his career with Poe’s Dupin is also a scion of the operational aesthetic mode.) Before they made this shift, supposed experts, medical doctors especially, suffered a great deal of mockery. But they often did so because they were not scientific experts, but rather dangerous “heroic” practitioners with autocratic bedside manners derived from eighteenth-century British models and spotty educations founded on outmoded theories and cures such as bloodletting, blistering, and large doses of poisonous purgatives. “Regular” antebellum doctors started reforming their practice in the face of public distrust and

intense competition from “irregular” practitioners. Encouraged by the clinical methods developed in France by Pierre Louis, they began to reject the weight of textual authority and “rationalize” medicine with careful observation and a greater reliance on the body’s own healing powers.  

Until they made this transition, however, many doctors, legal authorities, and academics fought a rear-guard action for traditional authority by attacking “popular delusion.” Although the “popular delusion” argument would eventually serve their claims to authority based on the observational gaze, it began as a strange mix of empiricism and Biblical authority. In essence, early forms of this argument worked to re-claim a version of patriarchal authority from the Jacksonian democratization of knowledge by holding up textual authorities and attacking the “popular delusion” that rejects them. For instance, in his 1838 *Humbugs of New-York: Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion; whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion*, David Meredith Reese, M.D., attempts to undermine the last vestiges of the female-led popular health movement and the hugely popular (because benign) homeopaths. The popular health movement insisted that “every man was his own doctor.” The body could heal itself if people observed proper hygiene and ate a balanced diet.


For a useful, if interested, exposition of the “homeopathic delusion” by a “regular” doctor, which gives direct insight into the sectarian conflicts between antebellum doctors, see Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Homoeopathy and its Kindred Delusions,” *Medical Essays, 1842-1882* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1896) 1-102.
Homeopathy, on the other hand, used “medicine” but in such diluted doses that it caused no harm. In place of these irregular practitioners, Reese promotes “regular” doctors such as himself. Unfortunately, Reese’s science rests on the traditional authority of “all the medical theories which have been accumulating for two thousand years” and the textual authority of the Bible. The first results in heroic medicine, which consists in bloodletting, blistering, and the liberal use of poisons such as mercury, arsenic, laudanum, and calomel. The second “common standard” crushes “ultras” or progressive reformers who hold themselves “wiser or better than the Bible.” He thus links the “popular prejudice” against medicinal mercury with the “reign of popular delusion” induced by abolitionists, female spiritualists (“factory girl[s] who would rather sleep than work”), and other progressive “ultras.”21 His tract pleads for a return to “common sense.” Yet his common sense manifests itself as deference to the judgment of properly institutional authorities, rather than an exposure of their usurping privilege.

While Reese focuses a great deal of his attention on generally deceitful female behavior, a more specific and lengthy attack on female poisoners appeared in a later examination of popular delusion: Charles MacKay’s Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds. Although we will look more closely at American manifestations of this discourse when we analyze the Kinney trial

21 David Meredith Reese, M. D., Humbugs of New-York: Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion: whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion (New York: John S. Taylor, Brick-Church Chapel and Boston: Weeks, Jordon, and Co., 1838)105, 123, 35, 130. The women’s suffrage movement relied heavily upon spiritualism to give women a divinely-sanctioned authority that circumvented the patriarchal Bible and clergy. Women who wanted equal rights had to think themselves “wiser and better than the Bible,” or they had to re-interpret it. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a committee of women did this in a radical way with The Woman’s Bible (1895).
arguments and the early female poisoner pamphlets, the British MacKay’s text was widely read in both his home country and in the U. S. and exerted significant transatlantic influence. MacKay, a doctor of law, first published his opus in 1841 to critique the “popular mind” and what he considered hysterical “popular delusions,” such as the witch trials. In 1852, however, he distributed a second edition, which affirmed the threat posed by female poisoners as a real and widely dangerous phenomenon and directly egged on Victorian Britain’s female poisoner mania.22

The British hysteria over female poisoners had been building throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in tandem with a deep economic downturn among the working classes. Then in March 1851, British justice hanged a fiend who roused official fears into action. Sarah Chesham allegedly ran a village poisoning service—mostly for poor women—which helped dispose of unwanted children and burdensome or abusive husbands; but she was only tried for murdering her husband. His death prompted a House of Commons investigation into poisoning cases that had occurred between the years 1840 and 1850. When the investigators found a “slightly higher” number of women brought to trial than men (97 women compared to 82 men or 54% and 46% respectively), “[t]hat confirmed for Parliament that poisoning was a woman’s crime,” and the House of Lords immediately passed the Earl of Carlisle’s bill, which stipulated that only adult males could purchase arsenic.23


23 Judith Knelman, Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 66. The House of Lords’ response to the slight gender differential suggests that a gendered “discourse of poison” was at work, and even the statistics and the British “crime wave” may have been driven in part by a “discourse of poison” derived from “the profusion of stories of female poisoners . . . [which] seem to establish that women have a particular propensity to
edition of his book, MacKay considers the bill a crucial piece of legislation and an accurate reflection of reality, and he suggests that these “women of the lowest classes” could infect other women and produce mass carnage as he supposes happened during the Italian Renaissance: “Ladies of gentle birth and manners caught the contagion of murder, until poisoning, under their auspices, became quite fashionable.” He openly supports the Earl of Carlisle’s bill, and, in reference to it, he argues that “[a] recent enactment, restricting the sale of arsenic and other poisons, will it is to be hoped, check, if it do not extirpate, this abominable crime.”

MacKay’s apparent shift in attitude following the House investigation and the Carlisle bill—from mocking hysterias as “popular delusions” to stoking one—seems to stem from his perception of the mania’s source and shows that this rhetoric may have less to do with exposing “delusion” than with undermining the “popular.” Delusion, in his rhetoric, only originates with the crowd, while wisdom trickles down from the upper classes. Thus, for MacKay, while the witch trials were supposedly promoted by ignorant peasants, the female poisoner action originates top-down with poison”—a kind of gender-profiling that makes women more likely to be suspected and tried for poisoning than men. Annette Pharamond, “A Hermeneutic of Poison,” diss., University of Rochester, 1995, 1. As Margaret Hallissy points out, men poison too, but when they do, “it is not seen as an action expressing malign qualities peculiar to masculinity.” Hallissy, xii. While a misogynist discourse of poison may have brought more Victorian women than men to trial, Randa Helfield argues that once women were at the bar “the cultural stereotypes of the men who applied the law” dictated that “the presumption of innocence was . . . stronger with respect to women than men” (101). Therefore, these alleged female poisoners were often acquitted or at least saved from execution. Randa Helfield, “Female Poisoners of the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Gender Bias in the Application of the Law,” Osgoode Hall Law Journal 28.1 (1990): 53-101.

24 In sharp contrast to MacKay, John Stuart Mill reacted to the bill by calling it a “gross insult to every woman in the country” and “a blind step in the reverse direction.” The legislation undermined the “elevation of women” occasioned by greater civilization or “the improved spirit of the time.” Furthermore, Mill questioned its basis in reality: “[The bill] assumes that women are more addicted than men to committing murder! Does the criminal calendar, or the proceedings of the police courts, shew a preponderance of women among the most atrocious criminals?” Quoted in Knelman, 67-8.
the perceptive authorities. He uses his chapter on the history of secret poison to extend this argument into the past by creating suggestive parallels with classic narratives of female poisoners. For example, Sarah Chesham’s crimes had been difficult to detect because her local community considered her a useful member and protected her. In a suggestive parallel with the Sarah Chesham episode, he lambastes “the superstitious and bigoted” medieval Italian populace who tried to protect the “hag” and poison vendor Tophania. He instead supports the “agents of the government” who manipulated the gullible “popular feeling” into condemning her: “To quiet their clamor and avert the impending insurrection, the agents of the government adroitly mingled with the people, and spread abroad a report that Tophania had poisoned all the wells and fountains of the city. This was enough. The popular feeling was turned against her immediately. Those who, but a moment before, had looked upon her as a saint, now reviled her as a devil, and were as eager for her punishment as they had before been for her escape.” His description of Tophania’s relationship to her appreciative public parallels the connection between Chesham and her village. He sees that relationship as a threat to order, creating “clamor” and “impending insurrection,” which must then be managed “adroitly” by the Renaissance version of professional spies or police detectives. Delusion, as long as it is instigated by proper authorities to maintain social order, is a public service.25

By the early twentieth century this rhetoric developed into a cult-like embrace of the scientist and a contempt for “crowd psychology.” For example, in 1930, the American Albert Edward Wiggam, D. Sc., could confidently assert that “[p]opular

notions are always wrong.” Unless it had the benefit of scientific training, “[t]he human mind is so constructed” that it will always choose the false over the true and believe outrageous things such as “women can drive automobiles as well as men” or “one man is as good as another.”

In the antebellum era, however, the rhetoric of hierarchical authority that MacKay and Reese deployed was embattled, and who exactly was deluded and why remained open questions. Sympathy for the female poisoner and even its development into “fascination” and identification formed the nucleus of the Kinney trial and especially of the press coverage. Before I work through the trial arguments, I want first to examine this coverage and particularly its creation of the female poisoner as a “sublime” figure concentrating public “fascination” and identification.

II. The Case of the Fascinating Mrs. Hannah Kinney

A. The Newspapers and the Milliner’s “Uncommon Power”

From the 21st to the 26th of December, 1840, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts convened a special holiday session to try local Boston milliner, Hannah Kinney, for the murder of her third husband, George T. Kinney, by arsenic poisoning. In his charge to the jury, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw declared, “It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance . . . to the community at large of this

prosecution.”

The trial involved Boston’s foremost scientific and legal intellectuals in leading roles and drew enormous crowds. The luminaries included not only Shaw, who was considered “the greatest legal figure” in antebellum Boston, but also no fewer than eight doctors and five lawyers. Most prominent among the doctors were three members of the Harvard faculty, scientists who laid much of the foundation for modern medical practice in America—founding *The New England Journal of Medicine* and the American Medical Association, discovering anesthesia, and promoting new fields such as obstetrics, pathological anatomy, and medical jurisprudence. The legal teams consisted of powerful jurists including the state’s attorney general (also a state senator), a future influential theorist of constitutional law, and a state representative. Lesser Bostonians, too, had been neglecting their

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27 This and all subsequent passages from Kinney’s trial will be excerpted from the copy of the trial transcript in *American State Trials*, which reproduces verbatim a contemporary pamphlet, “Trial of Mrs. Hannah Kinney for the Alleged Murder of Her Husband, By Poison, By a Member of the Bar,” (Boston: Times and Notion Office, 1840). This pamphlet, though an incomplete record, is the best source of information about the trial and was reproduced in papers such as *The Boston Courier*, as well as appearing separately as a bound volume. Other more official accounts appear to have escaped the record books held at the Massachusetts State Archives—perhaps because the trial occurred as part of a special session. Although experienced stenographers generally recorded trials at this time, the AST affirms the transcriber’s identification as “a Member of the Bar,” describing him (?) as a “Boston lawyer.” However, in the body of the transcript, he only calls himself “the reporter,” a more ambiguous attribution (649). The transcript’s publisher may have inflated his status to give the pamphlet more authority. See “The Trial of Hannah Kinney for the Murder of George T. Kinney, Boston, Massachusetts, 1840,” *American State Trials: A Collection of the Important and Interesting Criminal Trials Which Have Taken Place in the United States, from the Beginning of our Government to the Present Day*, ed. John D. Lawson, LL. D., vol. 17 (St. Louis: F. H. Thomas Law Book Co., 1916) 632.


30 The prosecution included James Trecothick Austin, the attorney-general of Massachusetts and a member of the Harvard Board of Overseers, and Samuel Parker. See Allen Johnson, ed.,
business concerns for months, buzzing with “considerable excitement,” gawking, and entangling traffic wherever the police transported the accused. And during the trial the mayhem only escalated as a courtroom designed to hold forty people was overwhelmed (as the *Boston Morning Post* had predicted months before) by “forty thousand” clamoring at the door.\(^{31}\)

Far more people read about Kinney, however, than ever attended the courthouse or fought for a glimpse of her on the street. Since the case came to light in August, newspapers and magazines across the nation had been reporting on it to the exclusion of other stories. Other sensational malefactors arrested that year—the bloodthirsty pirate, the murderous highwayman, or the father who raped his daughter—barely rated a line in the papers, while Kinney covered pages and pages.\(^{32}\) The Kinney proceedings became “the most talked-about trial of the day,” and the defendant’s “name and her whole history ha[d] become known from one end of the Union to the other”—and even beyond.\(^{33}\) During his closing remarks, the attorney


\(^{32}\) For instance, the final sentencing of Mr. Goodhue for “incest” received only a one-line mention in *The Boston Courier*, while the paper printed the entirety of Kinney’s trial transcript. *The Boston Courier* 14 Nov. 1840.

\(^{33}\) *Daily Advertiser* quoted in Keetley, 127. Keetley also notes the bizarre story from the *Boston Investigator*, a labor newspaper, about a poor man who “had become so obsessed [with the
general, James Trecothick Austin, reminded the jury of the trial’s international scope, claiming that it “is reported by a dozen stenographers to go all over the world” (625).

This national and international reach combined with the significance of the professional players set the stage for what became an antebellum literary event. The New England press and public sustained its attention, and for a full two years after the trial ended, the Kinney case continued to inspire its own media cottage industry—generating contentious letters and editorials, lengthy speculative “histories,” dueling pamphlets, and reproductions of the trial transcript. These materials inspired the creation of new forms of popular print culture—such as the sensational “true” female poisoner pamphlet—and ultimately fed the production of major literary works by New England’s most respected cadre of authors—particularly fiction and drama by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

This extensive influence, however, began with the press coverage, which reflected the rich cultural ambivalence of antebellum attitudes toward the female poisoner. These attitudes oscillated between figuring the poisoner as a horrific moral alien and as an almost heroic or sublime figure for sympathetic identification and even emulation. Even in the trial proceedings, the Kinney prosecutors acknowledge these competing attitudes depicted in the press coverage. For instance, in his closing remarks to the Kinney jury, the attorney general, James Trecothick Austin, begins by outlining his difficult position in relation to the public’s contradictory reaction to the female poisoner. Not only does the “arduous task” of prosecuting Hannah pit him
against the male jury’s gallant “humanity,” but he also stands alone against “the tide of public feeling [which] if its current had ever borne against the accused, would as rapidly roll back again” (611). Austin is being somewhat disingenuous when he temporizes about the initial public reaction—which in general condemned Hannah with a multitude of cruelly sensational articles about her past. But his overall contention holds true: When the American legal system prosecuted an alleged female poisoner during the nineteenth century, “public feeling,” or at least the newspaper stories, oscillated between repulsion and attraction.

The first wave of public response coincided with the arrest. The authorities imprisoned Hannah based on two facts: an autopsy that discovered arsenic in George’s stomach and the fact that Hannah was his wife. Showing an equal disregard for more particular details, the press and (reported) public opinion also grabbed instinctively for a misogynist discourse of poison. They rushed into a breathless assumption of guilt and immediately fitted the accused into a poisonous woman stereotype that drew on the patriarchal version of this trope. The transcriber of the trial even admits in his pamphlet that he “began with a strong prepossession from public rumor” against Kinney (649). But while this initial outrage was peaking, a kind of attraction was percolating through it (as the attorney general’s “if” suggests). Disgust and alienation were transformed into admiration and identification. Guilt or innocence paled in the light of Hannah’s sublime power. According to later newspaper reports, the public began to display signs of sympathy: They would send Kinney money, tokens of affection, even proposals of marriage, and, when the jury
acquitted her (in less than three minutes), the crowd paraded through the streets cheering.

Although Kinney produced a nation wide press sensation, a longitudinal study of one paper will showcase the oscillation between repulsion and attraction as genuine stages, which cannot be argued away as the effect of differing perspectives from different papers. The conservative, highly respectable and high-toned Whig paper The Boston Courier seems an unlikely organ for such a “yellow” case, but the excitement drew even this serial into sensation and self-contradiction. On the day they recorded George Kinney’s death, the Courier ran an article attacking sensationalism and its glorification of criminals. The essay averred, “For our own part, we should prefer that the bald, simple details of crime should be circulated, rather than the highly-wrought and mawkish enormities of Mr. Ainsworth—the canonization of malefactors for the benefit of ladies in their drawing-rooms and children in their nurseries.”34 But, in spite of its avowed contempt for “highly-wrought” crime literature and sensational criminal biography, when Kinney was later suspected in her husband’s death, the paper mucked around for any detail about her life, however tenuous, and later displayed a “fascination” with her. Thus, when she was first arrested, the Boston Courier did not stick to “the bald, simple details of crimes” but rather dredged up old rumors about her past. The paper claimed to “draw no inferences from the facts,” but its “facts” included unsubstantiated gossip and scandal that the Courier itself deemed “libelous.” And the paper hinted—

34 “Mr. Ainsworth” refers to William Harrison Ainsworth, the British author of Jack Sheppard, a hugely popular novel about a romantic rogue who escapes from Newgate prison. The Boston Courier 13 Aug. 1840.
knowingly—at other, more damning reports it could have circulated.\textsuperscript{35} The respectable, urban \textit{Courier} liked to promote most of this sensationalism by quoting other less restrained or more provincial papers, such as \textit{The Democrat} or \textit{The Lowell Courier}, which accused Hannah of serial murder. The \textit{Lowell Courier} declared that “it has long been the opinion of many who knew her, that she was the cause of her [second] husband’s death . . . [yet] she has been accustomed to speak of him with much apparent feeling, and would sometimes weep, when conversing about him.”\textsuperscript{36} By quoting this claim, the \textit{Boston Courier} can join in the salacious rumor-mongering, full of tears and nasty intimations of multiple murder, while at the same time maintaining a pose of moral elevation and cool distance.

Another method of indirect commentary often used by the \textit{Courier} involved the reproduction of British reports. American newspapers still drew a large amount of their copy from the British press, and conservative Whig papers such as the \textit{ Courier} in particular derived the initial interpretive frame that they applied to poisoning crimes from European traditions and texts. When they wanted to contextualize American female poisoners, they typically turned to British histories of secret poison.

Thus, three days after reporting rumors about Kinney’s other alleged murders, the \textit{Courier} placed an interpretive frame around the case by reproducing a lengthy history of secret poisoning from a British journal. The “Progress of Secret Poisoning” is a standard “history” trotted out multiple times throughout the nineteenth and twentieth

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{The Boston Courier} 22 August 1840, morning ed. and 27 August 1840.
\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Lowell Courier} 30 Aug. 1840. Quoted in \textit{The Boston Courier} 1 Sept. 1840, morning ed.
\end{itemize}
centuries. Authors reproduced it, sometimes even word for word, in discussions of female poisoners from the trial of Jane M. Swett to C. J. S. Thompson’s account.\textsuperscript{37} The “Progress” relies heavily upon a blend of fact and fiction—using both poisonous female archetypes and actual offenders as evidence. The history connects threats to husbands in the domestic realm with danger to the social order. It elides distinctions between public and private crimes and characterizes poisoning as a political offense, the most dire threat to “every great man, king, prince, prime minister, or favorite.” It, like MacKay’s study, links the rise of poisoning and popular social disorders with the decline of virtuous republics. The history then equates the suppression of this crime with “an increased tenderness . . . for human life” in general—claiming that “[t]here is nothing in which the progress of civilization is more strongly marked, than the increased tenderness which is now felt for human life.”\textsuperscript{38} This argument works to revise the paradigm that equates “the progress of civilization” with a “tenderness” for criminal offenders, especially for the tender female criminals.

This language equating “tenderness” and “civilization” seems (at least to twenty-first-century eyes) more suited to an attack on capital punishment, rather than a “history” supporting it. But the \textit{Courier} had recently published an article opposing execution—before Kinney’s arrest—and it did not argue on the grounds of “civilization” or “tenderness for human life.” It opposed capital punishment because execution made the law appear “savage” and provoked “popular hatred.” Instead of

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Trial of Jane M. Swett of Kennebunk, for Homicide} (Biddeford, Maine: Butler and Plate, Book and Job Steam Printers, 1867) 3-5.

\textsuperscript{38} “[From the London New Monthly Magazine] Progress of Secret Poisoning,” \textit{The Boston Courier} 4 Sept. 1840.
“deterring the lower orders,” it “invest[s] crime with a certain false glory and horrible fascination.” (“Fascination” will reappear again and again in relation to Kinney.) In other words, the Courier posits a Foucauldian argument: that capital punishment makes popular folk heroes of criminals. It enables class identification. The people identify with the rebel rather than with the state and thus are encouraged to resist the social order themselves. The article compares the effect of executions to the effect of the wrong kind of literature, such as The Newgate Calendar.39

A month later, the Courier reproduced yet another excerpt from the British press—drawing on its cultural authority to help sell its argument. The editorial links women with this wrong kind of literature that threatens men and civilized society. The writer imagines men “injured” by feminine “maudlin sentimental tales” or “the last novel by the last female of fashion.” He reserves special venom for Samuel Richardson, the author most famous for portraying the misrepresented heroine, and he attacks women for reading about the folk hero “scoundrel,” Jack Sheppard. In place of Richardson and female novelists, the author holds up Henry Fielding as a model manly author for men to read. But, not content with creating a manly canon for men, he rages against women’s refusal to imbibe the same texts:

[m]any a squeamish lady of our times would fling down one of these romances [by Fielding] with horror, but could go through every page of Mr. Ainsworth’s Jack Sheppard with perfect comfort to herself. Ainsworth dared not paint his hero as the scoundrel he knew him to be; he must keep his brutalities in the background, else the public morals will be outraged, and so he produces a book quite absurd and unreal, and infinitely more immoral than

anything Fielding ever wrote.

Sheppard was a poor highwayman who escaped from Newgate Prison on more than one occasion, becoming a folk hero and a thorn in the side of authorities. The article’s anonymous writer thus makes a familiar reactionary attack on the female reader’s unauthorized identifications with Sheppard as “unreal” and “immoral” because the writer believes that this identification challenges a masculine aesthetic and ultimately established authority.40

However, these literary jeremiads about the immoral and disordering effects of crime fiction and popular identification may have already been outdated. Richard Altick argues that the shared taste for crime fiction in Victorian Britain actually helped build a common popular culture that “neutralized the political radicalism and class struggle that brought revolution to continental countries.”41 Even more specifically, Keith Hollingsworth contends that the “Sheppard mania” did not create a consciousness-raising type of “sympathetic identification” with a “plebeian hero” who resists current powers that be as an “enemy of society.” Rather the shared fascination with Sheppard was “an uncalculated paean to the end of bad old days” and “the old oppressions” embodied in savage spectacular punishments and executions. Furthermore, “humanitarian feeling had made the middle class quite as uneasy about [these punishments] as the class without property had ever been.”42 In short,

40 “From The London Evening Mail,” The Boston Courier 22 Sept. 1840.


sympathy and fascination with Sheppard unified both middle and working classes in their modern disgust for a barbaric but now spectral old regime and produced a sense of belonging to a civilized moral elite in contradistinction from a savage patriarchal social order now past.

The press coverage of Kinney incorporates her into this literary convention linking civilization to fascination with criminals. The papers’ “fascination” with Kinney ultimately constructs her as a Sheppard-like or sympathetic figure, who unifies the community by reaffirming the new civilized or “tender” dispensation. Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw joined in this project when he highlighted Kinney’s status as a test for civilized society. In his closing instructions to the Kinney jury, he argues that if

a female in the maturity of life, apparently talented, educated, and well connected, a widow and a mother, relations commanding the deepest sympathy . . . be convicted while under a false accusation . . . it would not only be an irreparable and most deplorable act of injustice and wrong to her, but would bring discredit upon the law and destroy public confidence, and be productive of disastrous consequences to the community (633).

If “the deepest sympathy,” particularly for women, civilizes and unifies, then a false conviction would destroy that unifying “public confidence” that binds together “the community.” As the date for Kinney’s trial approached, The Boston Courier began to lean toward this gentler approach to the accused, and it circulated articles that abandoned the dark insinuations against Kinney for more sympathetic reports. But these accounts also strayed beyond mere sympathy into fascination, which began by focusing on Kinney’s body but ended by investing her with sublime power.

Almost all reports first fastened upon Kinney’s appearance and poured over every detail of her dress and person. Evaluating her beauty seemed of paramount
importance even in the briefest of notices. All this concentration on her person, even when examining the details of her apparel, however, surprisingly, fails to draw a picture of a specific woman. The reports deploy vague and oddly contradictory adjectives: For example, she was “not strictly beautiful [but] to an extraordinary degree prepossessing,” “good looking,” or “having great personal attractions.”

Constant recourse to these kinds of abstractions suggests that Hannah was being fitted into a type, a rhetorical figure. Karen Halttunen’s study of the antebellum murderess would suggest that reporters were fashioning a figure of the eroticized beautiful. But the touch of oddness given Hannah, the “not strictly beautiful,” problematizes this interpretation. My own research into Kinney’s life and writings left me with the impression of a rather straightforwardly ordinary woman—a moderately intelligent, socially and religiously conservative artisan, who made some rather unfortunate choices of life partners before disappearing into obscurity. Contemporary descriptions, however, sharply dispute mine. As many times as they call her “attractive” reports also insist that she is “intelligent” or even “highly intelligent” (although none of the reporters actually spoke with her). They read her with a strange admiration for her “uncommon power” and on occasion display a profound indifference to belief in her innocence or beauty:

Her countenance, though not perhaps strictly beautiful, is highly intelligent and to an extraordinary degree prepossessing. It bears no marks of anxiety,

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43 The Boston Courier 26 December 1840; The Lowell Courier 30 Aug. 1840; The Mercantile 20 Aug. 1840.

nor any lines of guilt, and marks her as a person of uncommon power of mind and force of character. Be she guilty or innocent, no one, who has seen her, can ever forget her or fail to take an interest in her subsequent career.\textsuperscript{45}

The term “prepossessing” encapsulates the transition between the beautiful and the sublime: It means “attractive and pleasing” but also indicates that the speaker has been possessed or overpowered prior to the exercise of his reason. While contemporary literature and newspaper coverage often reserved sexual adoration for the beautiful victimized woman or even brutalized corpse and her perfect “snowy bosoms,”\textsuperscript{46} the mixed language of these descriptions, by contrast, shows that the reporters are doing something different with Hannah: They are merging an embodiment of the beautiful into an embodiment of the sublime. In Edmund Burke’s classic formulation, women are the ultimate image of beauty, but only men (or powerful and thus masculine entities) can claim sublimity. Like the female corpse, beauty, by definition, poses no threat. Beauty arises specifically in connection with the erotic passion inspired by women and the protective love generated by small and pleasing creatures. In contrast, the sublime stirs terror and is “some modification of power” that often appears odd or even ugly, an aesthetic that might support an explanation for the female poisoner as a product of masculine fears. The sublime, however, stretches past the dichotomies of threat and reaction. The sublime stimulates not only horror, but “admiration, reverence, and respect” because it indicates the kind of power we associate with the divine or its secular manifestation in political

\textsuperscript{45} The Mercantile 20 Aug. 1840; The Boston Courier 26 Dec. 1840 (a condensed version of the trial transcript with the added description appended).
authority. The sublime is not innocent. It precedes the mundane judgments between guilt and innocence. Instead, it universally possesses or fascinates the ones who look upon it. The primary effect of the most powerful sublime is “Astonishment,” a “state of the soul . . . [in which] the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.”

The newspapers encourage this understanding of Kinney as an object of overwhelming and almost unbalancing preoccupation, reporting stories such as the case of a man who became so obsessed with Kinney that he went mad and “absent[ed] himself from his home under the apprehension that his family intended to poison him.” In short, the press constructed Kinney as a sublime figure that provoked a universal attention that extended beyond the limits of the trial and its dismissive classification of her moral nature.

By investing Kinney with sublimity, the newspaper and trial accounts grant her masculine qualities, which most particularly include a capacity to engage in the operational aesthetic through her assumption of the common man’s powerful critical gaze. Kinney’s sublimity facilitates male identification—a kind of heterosocial or androgynous model, which Carol Clover discusses as a paradigm in modern popular culture. Clover theorizes horror as a genre that enables “cross-gender identification” by “phallicizing” the female hero, giving her masculine traits, especially through her

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46 This is one of George Lippard’s favorite phrases, which he typically uses in connection with a maiden about to be ravished. See also Cohen’s examination of the murdered prostitute and eroticized corpse in *The Murder of Helen Jewett*.


48 See note 33.
“assumption of the gaze.” The source of Kinney’s power is connected with this phallicized gaze: She is “exceedingly fascinating in her manners, or rather, as an acquaintance of hers said to us this morning, ‘in her eyes’” (italics in original). She wields a powerful ability to look, to which the transcriber devotes his sparse commentary, claiming she uses it to “scrutinize[]” every juror (536). By granting her this gaze, the reporter indicates that Kinney is engaging an operational aesthetic similar to that used by the men who are judging her—specifically, the reporter himself and the jurors. Although this heterosocial identification becomes muted (as is Kinney) during the trial, it appears as a key theme in the pamphlets that emerge from it. The trial transcript, by contrast, works more as a conflict between different representations and (masculine) representatives of Kinney.

B. The Trial Transcript

As part of its coverage of Kinney’s case, the Boston Courier printed the entire trial transcript. The transcript also appeared for sale independently, distributed as hundred-page pamphlet by a Boston bookseller and publisher, who identified the transcriber as “a Member of the Bar”—although, as I mentioned earlier, trained stenographers usually handled such productions. This focus on the transcript was typical for a popular case in the 1830s and 40s when “trial reports . . . had become the primary media of crime coverage” alongside “sensationalist newspaper accounts” and


50 The Lowell Courier 30 Aug. 1840.
“romantic biographies” of criminals—replacing early forms of crime fiction such as the execution sermon and the last confession. Daniel Cohen argues that this change occurred in part because of a shift in structures of authority and epistemology, which required that “[t]he truth was no longer baldly asserted and imposed by an authoritative spokesman, whether minister or lawyer, but was mediated and accredited through the autonomous judgment of the community itself, as represented by jurors and, by extension, readers.” The trial transcript thus acted as an ideal medium for the community to access this process of judgment.\textsuperscript{51}

Cohen also attributes the popularity of trial reports to the ability of the trial to incorporate the tropes of sentimental or “romantic fiction”—ultimately producing a “cultural compound” between journalism, literature, and law “that might best be described as ‘legal romanticism.’” Thus, “[f]ar from being the antithesis of sentimental expression, nineteenth-century legal advocacy could be its very essence,” and antebellum lawyers “not only adopted narrative strategies suggestive of fiction in their reconstructions of events but also invoked the epistemological authority of imaginative literature in their arguments.” In short, the trial’s “legal romanticism” constructed a rhetorical mode compounded of investigation and sensibility. This combination, not surprisingly, led to questions of sympathy with women and to one of the major epistemological problems organizing romantic “imaginative literature”—a question of gender interpretation that pitted a man against a woman in a kind of “he said/she said” quandary. In many of the antebellum era’s most sensational cases (and

in all the popular trials Cohen studies), the central epistemological issue that drew public attention revolved around a conflict between interpretations of a man’s and a woman’s behavior—specifically who exactly was “killer” and who “victim.”

The Kinney trial transcript repeats this pattern and focuses on competing interpretations of the accused and her husband. At the end of his directions to the jury, Chief Justice Shaw lays bare the key epistemological question they need to consider. The jury must perform “a comparison of motive” between Hannah and George Kinney (648). In other words, did she murder him, or did he commit suicide? Even the defense does not dispute that George’s entrails were suffused with arsenic (583), but they suggest that a number of other people could have been responsible for placing the poison there. It may have occurred post-mortem, while the stomach sat in an old paint jar unattended for five hours, saturated perhaps by arsenic from paint leavings. Or perhaps “a secret enemy of [Hannah’s] went to that office, while the bottle was exposed, and put arsenic into it to ruin the prisoner” (584). The defense suggests that Kinney does apparently have a “secret enemy” in the person of a mysterious religious busybody named Dr. Charles D. Hildreth, who may have planted other evidence and “of whom we know nothing except that he is inciting this prosecution here and there, and of whom the prisoner says, he is her most bitter enemy” (568). The defense also suggests that an “irregular practitioner” (618), Dr. Bachelder, may have poisoned George with the “quack medicine” he was using to treat his “secret disease” or syphilis (572). The prosecutors, on the other hand, argue that the discovery of her husband’s condition threw Hannah into a vengeful rage and
that “a secret disease and a woman’s jealousy is motive enough for a bad act” (625). However, the defense attorneys consider George’s syphilis as the “one drop that made his cup run over” (610). They argue that it was most likely that Kinney committed suicide driven to it by “his great failings . . . [g]ambling and drunkenness . . . [and] the shame and misery of that odious disease” (610).

These contrasting characterizations of Hannah and George Kinney shape the trial into a set of opposing narratives about gender, about who succeeds and who fails in their role. Failure to perform gender adequately supports an accusation that the one failing is a poisoner. In other words, who is the real poisoner? An “infuriated woman” or an “intemperate” man (626, 610)? The prosecutors scrutinize Hannah’s every word and expression for “inconsistency and contradictions” in her performance of the grieving widow and dutiful wife. They examine her countenance and behavior for “the absence of ordinary grief, the change in her conduct, conversations and representations of Mr. K.” (546). By the same token, defense lawyers sifft George’s business affairs and recreational activities, looking for signs of “ruin” or failure. In the words of the attorney general, they pry into “[t]he secret thoughts and private acts of the deceased, his days of labor and his nights of ease, the difficulties, despondings and the failings of a whole life” (619).

Prosecutors and defense lawyers hold up contrasting pictures of Hannah and her gender performance. They both posit that her capacity for embodying proper femininity depends upon how well she fulfilled her wifely duties toward the deceased. These duties consist primarily of sympathy for and protection of her

52 Cohen, 34, 244, 192-93, 248.
husband—caring for him patiently and affectionately in his failures and final illness and hiding these weaknesses from the public eye. At the same time, she herself must be transparent to public investigation. Yet these competing demands and the trial imperative that creates an opposition between the Kinneys’ motives require that she reveal these failings in order to be transparent and exculpate herself. The prosecution, nevertheless, swipes at her for revealing this information because all George Kinney’s secret shortcomings, “all that may be treasured in the memory of a wife, are disclosed to the counsel and laid open here” (619). The defense argues that she would only do so under great duress: “that she has ever locked those failings in her heart, until a cruel and bitter suspicion has driven her to reverse the very course of human affection” (573). The prosecution, however, argues that she makes her ugly revelations not because of the public’s “cruel . . . suspicion” but because she had no “human affection” for George. Furthermore, while the defense draws touching pictures of her tearful final hours with Kinney and her sorrow after his death, the prosecution suggests that her visits to his grave were meant to delude a watchful public. These actions “were the affectation of affection” (628). This charge associates Hannah with the stereotype of the painted woman, whose fair exterior hides a poisonous interior corruption. One writer in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* specifically figures this form of femininity as poisonous:

Affectation, like the poisonous *Upas* [lamia], defiles all it touches. From her approach, nature recoils, and simplicity shrinks affrighted! At first, affectation is content to wind her fanciful wreaths around the *exterior* of her victim; but the *poison* therein concealed soon penetrates the inner temple of the heart. The
most sacred affections are violated and made to attest her baneful influence.\(^53\) This association between the “affectation of affection” and the ability to delude men and poison them eventually migrated from the prosecution’s arguments to the early female poisoner pamphlets, becoming a central theme.

Both prosecution and defense, however, seem less invested in their varying representations of Mrs. Kinney than in their concern with a different source of poison, which they investigate in their extended battle over the picture of her husband. Their debate centers on conflicting visions of masculinity. The defense depicts George as a failed man, whose unmanly and intemperate lack of self control drove him to suicide. The lawyers describe George as melancholy, atheistic, and wild, almost a Byronic figure: “proud . . . a gambler, intemperate, ruined . . . a man of resolution, quick, and determined . . . he said nothing of religious hopes or fears; he died in sullen silence. . . . he suffered keenly from remorse. Gloomy thoughts gathered upon him. Such was his temperament” (610). The set of behaviors attributed to George (gambling, drinking, and frequenting syphilitic prostitutes) typified a developing homosocial culture, the dark side of men’s increasing isolation from (unfallen) women in the public. Karen Halttunen argues that this new urban male culture provoked anxiety about the corrupting influence “con men and painted women” exerted upon vulnerable young men. This “influence was compared to a poison, a disease, a source of contamination and corruption. The impressions made by wicked companions were ‘like poison, taken into the physical system and will be sure, sooner or later, to reveal its bitter

As we will see in chapter three, Stowe takes up this issue in her story of Cassy and makes the connection between this kind of masculinity and poison an explicit argument.

The prosecution, however, attacks this equation between the “convivial” pastimes of a homosocial public culture and suicide by poison. The attorney general, James Trecothick Austin, addresses members of the jury directly and scoffs, “the use of cards and games, at a convivial party, however it might be disapproved by the learned clergyman who sat on your right, Mr. Foreman, this morning, is extremely different from that habit which gnaws like a moral cancer on the desperate man, and makes him raise his arm against his life” (619). He then expands his argument from George Kinney to a larger crowd of “men” (perhaps including the jury) “who thus occasionally indulge in the pardonable hilarities of the time.” He asks the jury not to “visit so unjust a judgment” upon normal masculine behavior, which simply reflects the “time.” He includes himself in this current standard of just judgment in contrast with a threatening radical future: “. . . the disposition that would magnify amusements like these into . . . vice . . . belongs to the future Attorney General of the Commonwealth, and not the present” (619). This comment perhaps implies a nasty dig at the ambitious lead defense attorney, Franklin Dexter, who would become the federal district attorney. According to one observer, a “friction was manifest all

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54 Confidence Men, 4. See also G. J. Barker Benfield’s discussion of the antebellum anxieties swirling around young men’s vulnerability and the moral and medical advice literature that sprang up to teach them how to defend themselves from “wasting” influences. See especially his discussion of the advice manuals of John Todd, who worried that “[t]he whole body of the young men in our country are fearfully exposed.” G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Routledge, 2000) 155-56.
through the trial between Mr. Austin and Mr. Dexter which it was said at the time was the afterglow of the feeling” left over from a generation ago, when Dexter’s father defended the man who killed one of Austin’s cousins in a politically-motivated attack.\footnote{William T. Davis, \textit{History of the Judiciary of Massachusetts} (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1900) xx.}

But Austin’s argument also casts himself as the conservative bulwark against unmanly radical reform, as well as against the more reform-minded Dexter. His tone and address reflect the “convivial” argument he is making about male culture and tries to draw the jury into identifying with this form of masculinity. He furthers this creation of an “us” by opposing it to a “them,” who include the “learned clergyman” and Dexter. Ann Douglass observes that the antebellum clergy were increasingly associated with a sentimental femininity in contrast with the stern patriarchal masculinity of their Puritan forefathers. This feminization could be construed as a sign of civilization but was often criticized as unmanly degeneration.\footnote{Ann Douglas, \textit{The Feminization of American Culture} (New York: Noonday Press, 1998).} Austin draws on this latter interpretation, and by associating Dexter with the clergyman, he impugns the lawyer’s manhood and encourages the jury to identify as virile men against the effeminate sentimentalists.

At the same time, he does not want to abandon the province of sympathy (and its creation of a civilized social order) to his opponents. Rather, he attacks the reformers of male culture as less sympathetic than convivial conservatives such as himself: “I do not know, gentlemen, but what it is best to drink nothing but water, and
I have no doubt there are men among us who, if they had the making and executing of the laws, would hang and quarter every man who should drink a glass of alcohol; being, in their zeal for temperance, the most intemperate men in the world” (620). Temperance was often associated with women and a gentle and sentimental form of masculinity and civilization. Austin turns this paradigm on its head and describes these temperance men as “intemperate,” fanatical, and savage throwbacks to the era of brutal capital punishments. They lack sympathy and “convivial” fraternal feeling and are thus not men who should be in power or controlling “the making and executing of laws.” The jury, of course, executes the law, and Austin thus implies that they should not become “intemperate” and should rather endorse the “convivial” attitude and fraternal masculinity that he advocates.

By contrasting the jury’s manly and temperate ability to execute the laws with unmanly and uncivilized cruelty, Austin invokes the antebellum structure of feeling that pairs legitimate disciplinary authority with sentiment (the “increased tenderness” of civilized justice). But this sympathy typically includes empathy for women as well as the fellow feeling he elevates. In fact, the ideal object of sympathy within this structure of feeling is female, particularly a woman placed metaphorically on trial. Sympathy for her allows men to claim access to “a moral elite . . . responsive to the call of sensibility.” Or, to break this process into smaller component parts, sympathy for beset womanhood enables a claim to proper masculinity, which


58 Boudreau, 3.
subsequently enables a claim to the authority of an “elite.” Thus, throughout the trial, the defense challenges the witnesses, attorneys, and especially the jury to prove their proper gender construction through their sympathy for the “feeble woman” (570) at the bar. And the prosecution bemoans its difficult task, arguing uphill against such sympathy. In his opening statement, the junior prosecutor discusses his feelings and claims to be a genuine man of “sensibility” “oppressed” by the “difficulties” attendant upon prosecuting a woman:

It is not, on my part, any affectation of sensibility to declare, that I feel oppressed, not only by the awful consequences to which this trial may lead, but by the numerous difficulties in it which are to be surmounted . . . difficulties, which also become yet more formidable, when the horrible charge is made against a woman, usually the most amiable and innocent part of nature (537).

He cites “tender” justice as a primary characteristic of a particularly modern and American system—describing the “lively sympathies . . . [the] warm sympathies” that “modern tribunals . . . especially in this country” now feel for defendants (538).

This tenderness works through a process of sympathetic identification, which relies on the visual representation of feeling. The junior prosecutor, Samuel Parker, complains about the limitations of this sympathetic mechanism: “The invisible dead are soon forgotten; no warm sympathies arise out of the cold, neglected grave; the senseless, unseen, absent, defunct, mouldering body excites no commiseration: the living, breathing, palpitating flesh and blood, full of tremor and anxiety, which stand in danger before our eyes, engage and absorb all our sensibility” (538). He contrasts the living spectacle of Hannah with the dead and unseen George. Hannah’s obvious feeling and its visibility make her an object of sympathy, whereas the corpse’s lack of feeling and its absence from the juror’s visual field prevent George from evoking
their “warm sympathies.” Unlike the “invisible” corpse, the defendant fulfills an ideal of the sympathetic object, becoming a spectacle of sympathy “before our eyes.”

Adam Smith’s most famous theorization of sympathy centers upon this kind of visual representation, requiring that sympathy happen through witnessing the suffering of “our brother . . . upon the rack. . . . By imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body and become in some measure the same person with him.” Rousseau feminizes this sympathy by making his ideal object a mother whose child is torn from her arms by a wild beast, a spectacle observed by the sympathizing subject—a man locked in a tower.59

This sympathy for women, however, also poses a danger to the formation of elite masculinity by potentially compromising men’s epistemological superiority exercised through independent judgment. Sympathy threatens to cloud and delude the jurors, feminize them, and finally precipitate them back into the undifferentiated deluded public. Barker-Benfield cites one writer of advice manuals for young men, Isaac Ray, who “exhorted all men to adopt his program, emphasizing ‘independent, self-originating’ activity, distinct from the mass behavior controlled by what he called ‘the law of sympathy.’” Sympathy threatened to make men passive and effeminate, because “[t]he law of sympathy rested on ‘instinctive tendencies’: in the sympathetic

59 As Smith suggests, women’s bodies were thus not the only locus for communal identification. Fraternal or homosocial sympathy was often generated by the spectacle of a suffering man, a mechanism to which the prosecution recurs. See Sandra Gustafson’s discussion of John Hancock’s Boston Massacre Oration in Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Gustafson analyzes how the oration’s display of wounded male bodies works to “evoke the quasi-sacred emotion of patriotism” and encourage a masculine national identity (194). See also Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976) 9.
process the ‘intellect is entirely passive.’” The junior prosecutor casts this “danger” as an opposition between sympathy for a woman and the “love of truth”:

When too that flesh and blood are arrayed in the form of a full grown woman, distinguished for personal beauty, extraordinary talents, uncommon accomplishments, and of respectable rank in society, there is danger . . . that those sympathies for the living may prevail over the love of truth, may obliterate justice to the dead, and sway men to the side of mercy which may be unmerited, and to a decision, which, under the same proof, might have been the reverse of favorable, were a man on trial (538).

Hannah’s gender, particularly her successful performance of gender, thus exacerbates the problem of sympathy—at least according to the prosecution.

Part of their consternation seems to stem from the greater literary prominence of the victimized woman. According to Audrey Jaffe, eighteenth-century theorists of sympathy, such as Rousseau and Adam Smith, “link sympathy and spectacle in a way that . . . takes paradigmatic form in Victorian fiction.” Hannah thus becomes a spectacle that recalls antebellum narratives familiar to the jurors, and, as the prosecutor suggests in his odd characterization of Hannah as “uncommon,” “distinguished,” and “extraordinary,” she resembles a heroine from a novel more than a struggling milliner. Both prosecution and defense thus cast Kinney within a novelistic scenario, which relies on a discourse of “popular delusion.” The key interpretive framework in the novels of sympathy, which “teach us to feel,” revolves around an epistemological problem: a tension between the uneducated public rumor

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60 Barker-Benfield, 74.


62 Roberts, Schools of Sympathy, 4-6.
and suspicion that condemns or embraces the heroine based on appearances and the “moral elite’s” educated sympathy that opens up the truth of the situation. These novels thus position the reader as a potential moral elite who can sympathize with and uncover the truth about the heroine. Just as the novel, according to Ian Watt, constructs “the reader’s position . . . as being analogous to a juror’s,” so too does this trial shape Kinney into an “extraordinary” Clarissa.63

While the prosecution opposes truth to sympathy with the female “victim,” the defense makes them work in tandem. They argue that sympathy with Kinney shapes a more insightful gaze than that available to the “public.” This form of sympathy then becomes a means of distinguishing the jurors from “mass behavior.” In its opening sentence, the defense identifies Kinney as “the victim of popular prejudice and delusion” (557). The junior lawyer, George Curtis, contends that she suffers under a melodramatic convention—“one of those dark webs of circumstance in which the innocent are sometimes involved, for want of light” (559). He begs that the jurors “exclude from the mind” the “rumors . . . and insinuations . . . that shed[] a false and fatal light” over Kinney, which “the eye of credulity has gazed at, as if demonstration itself had been produced” (558). This “credulity” is associated with a public, from which the jury needs to separate itself: “It is difficult for you to resist the power of a preconceived suspicion; I do not mean in your own, but in the whole public mind. . . . Resist these influences, I beseech you gentlemen.—Remember you are not to try the truth of public suspicion, but the truth of the fact” (582). Curtis distances the jury’s “own” mind from “the whole public mind” and argues that they must resist

identifying themselves with the public mind. They must “[r]esist these influences” of a corrupting and false form of sympathy with the ignorant and suspicious mass, which compromises individual integrity. Rather, the jury’s sympathy with Kinney will enable them to assert their “own” minds in opposition to the “power” of the public.

The jury’s resistance to the “power” of the “public mind” is not just an assertion of integrity and independence, but also of superiority—a kind of elite status based on both moral and epistemological skill. Through a careful and disciplined use of sympathy the jury can demonstrate not only proper masculinity but a proper masculinity that invests them with authority and places them above the crowd as represented by the defense. The defense plays to this construction of masculinity as an epistemological elite by speaking to the jury as if they were quite capable of becoming legal experts. Although under common law a jury simply decides issues of fact while only judges are allowed to interpret law, the defense includes the jury within the privileged circle of legal interpretation. Curtis explains to them for many pages and in great detail the “theory of evidence” applicable to a circumstantial case such as Kinney’s (560). He initiates them into the interpretive wranglings internal to the legal profession—asserting that, though he and the prosecutor read the same classic cases, “I have always drawn from them far different conclusions from those of the learned counsel,” that is, “a rigid philosophy of circumstantial evidence,” (560) which he encourages the jury to adopt. He even asks them to engage with a strictly legal question and distinguish this case from “a class of cases . . . where the law requires the accused to account for the facts” (564). By asking the jury to operate on this theoretical and interpretive level, the defense lawyers draw upon the operational
aesthetic and “assume[s] that any problem could be expressed clearly, concisely, and comprehensibly enough for the ordinary man to resolve it,” but by doing so they transform the “ordinary” men on the jury into an elite both elevated above the crude “public mind” and on an equal footing with traditional authorities.64

The attorney general recognizes and complains about this strategy: “. . . I do not propose to say a word upon the law of the case. It would come with little weight from me if contradicted by the court, and I have no intention to advance any doctrine of evidence that they might not approve” (614). The words “unlike the defense” are implied in this avowal. Austin invests the sanctioned authority, the “court,” and not himself or the jury, with expertise about the “law” and “doctrine of evidence.” After criticizing the defense’s pretensions to such authority and their attempt to include the jury in this authority, he reminds the jury that they are simply “men of common sense” here to decide fact (not law): “I put the case to you, on the evidence, as men of common sense and not of extraordinary learning, for in the trial by jury, it is to men of good sense, drawn from the whole community, that all matters of fact in controversy must be submitted” (614). Austin’s insistence that the case needs the jury to act only with “common sense” rather than “extraordinary learning” comes hard on the heels of his argument about “convivial” masculinity versus sympathetic masculinity. He has just attempted to merge his vision of “convivial” masculinity with the jury’s self-construction of manhood, and, after criticizing the defense’s tactics, he associates that masculinity with a decidedly non-expert epistemological status and with deference to properly constituted higher powers.

64 Harris, 73-4.
He asks the jury to defer to the judges, however, not because of their higher status but because of their superior knowledge. In doing so, he gestures toward a discourse of professionalism that combined the operational aesthetic’s democratization of knowledge with the formalization of a new elite. Burton Bledstein argues that beginning about the time of the Kinney trial “Americans . . . committed themselves to a culture of professionalism,” which embodied a more radical idea of democracy than even the Jacksonian had dared to dream[,] . . . emancipated the ego of a sovereign person[,] . . . [and] incarnated the radical idea of the independent democrat, a liberated person seeking to free the power of nature within every worldly sphere, a self-governing individual exercising his trained judgment in an open society.

The professional facilitated “the need to reject traditional authority” by “penetrat[ing] beyond the confusion of ordinary experience, as he isolated and controlled . . . factors . . . hidden to the untrained eye.” Yet, ironically, at the same time that professionalism helped dispose of traditional authority, it also established a new version of elitism: “[T]he culture of professionalism bred public attitudes of submission and passivity” and “cultivated the inner aristocratic or elitist social instincts often found in the democrat.”

The “culture of professionalism,” however, suffered from uneven development, handicapped by jealous competition for cultural authority both within and between professions. In antebellum Massachusetts, the legal profession experienced a renaissance: “The emergence of large banking, manufacturing, commercial and transportation corporations in the state during the last decades of the

65 Bledstein, 80, 87, 90, 89, 104, 93.
18th century and the 19th century created a demand for lawyers that far exceeded the needs of the previously dominant farmer-merchant economy of the colonial period.” Lawyers’ direct access to courts and legislative bodies facilitated the profession’s rising influence, which helped them establish themselves as a powerful (though resented) “professional elite.”66 In part, the popularity of trials and trial transcripts and the disappearance of execution sermons reflected the antebellum era’s “gradual shift in the balance of cultural leadership from the ministry to the bar,” and “[t]rial reports thus tended to reclaim crime literature as an effective instrument of authority.”67 The legal profession’s claim to greater expertise in crime and the criminal facilitated this shift in and re-instantiation of cultural authority. Antebellum medical professionals tried to imitate this success and worked to establish their authority by making similar claims as expert witnesses. However, while the Kinney prosecutor attempted to extend deference to members of his own profession, the judges of “the court,” he did not afford the same professional courtesy to his own expert witnesses, the Harvard doctors.

Doctors, rather, found their fortunes at a low ebb in antebellum America. They had not yet been able to make the transition from British models, which based the physician’s authority on his status as a gentleman, to the American demand for proven technical expertise. Thus, the “regular” medical profession was beset by competing “irregular” practitioners, and physicians’ rather weak access to courts and

67 Cohen, 29, 28.
legislative bodies meant that they could not regulate away these competitors. Paul Starr argues:

Authority . . . involves a surrender of private judgment, and nineteenth-century Americans were not willing to make that surrender to physicians. Authority signifies the possession of a special status or claim that compels trust, and medicine lacked that compelling claim in nineteenth-century America. The esoteric learning, knowledge of Latin, and high culture and status of traditional English physicians were more compelling grounds for belief in a hierarchically ordered society than in a democratic one. The basis of modern professionalism had to be reconstructed around the claim to technical knowledge, gained through standardized training and evaluation. But this standardization of the profession was blocked by internal as well as external barriers—sectarianism among medical practitioners and a general resistance to privileged monopolies in the society at large.68

The Boston doctors associated with Harvard were working to produce this “authority” based on “technical knowledge” by turning to French clinical and statistical models: “Members of the antebellum medical profession relied upon statistics as the essential basis for challenging outmoded theories, for justifying new medical institutions in their communities, and generally for bringing about health reforms. They regarded statistics as the symbol of medical progress and the primary hope of attaining medical certainty in their time.” (One of the chief advocates for “‘[t]he numerical method’” was the defense witness Jacob Bigelow.) But these methods took a great deal of time and institutional support, which was lacking in antebellum America.69

Alternatively, doctors sought a shortcut to cultural authority through their role as expert witnesses, especially in poisoning trials. Dr. David Humphreys Storer, the

68 Starr, 17-18.

prosecution’s chief medical witness, was a leading advocate for the field of medical jurisprudence. He believed that “medical jurisprudence was the branch of medicine that permitted potentially the most important interactions between ‘the profession’ and ‘the community.’” Early proponents of medical jurisprudence expected that “the profession as a whole would be elevated to the level of neutral truth-seekers” in the courts. But, as lawyers ridiculed and juries ignored doctors, this forum in which the medical profession “had its greatest public visibility” became the “arena that made the medical profession look unprofessional.” By the 1840s, physicians began avoiding the stand, and the Kinney case contributed very publicly to their disillusionment. Storer himself had been involved in many cases but “perhaps the worst of them” was the Kinney trial. The case “rocked the Boston medical elite, for they ended up disagreeing with one another on the witness stand [and] feuding openly with the Boston legal establishment.”

The Kinney trial, in short, brought out the competition for cultural authority between the “common man” expert and between trained professionals from different fields in a way that humiliated the medical profession. Part of the reason for this humiliation was the very fluidity of professional boundaries, which made it unclear what kind of evidence the doctors should use to produce certainty and authority. Storer’s conduct in the trial was one of the primary reasons for this professional debacle—even gaining him a reprimand from the pages of a Boston medical journal. Instead of holding fast to assertions of medical “fact,” Storer played detective—badly. While doing so, he either made several key errors of memory and observation

70 Mohr, 103, 99, 98, 103.
or he testified falsely in an attempt to convict Kinney. Storer’s mistakes undermined the profession’s pretension to the observing gaze, while his inappropriate enthusiasm and rumor-mongering suggested a lack of sympathy with Kinney that compromised his membership in a moral elite. Instead of proving his claims to an epistemological and moral elite, he found himself associated with the gossiping “public mind.”

George Kinney died and was autopsied by Storer and his colleagues on a Sunday and was buried on Monday. Storer testified that on Tuesday Hannah Kinney asked him for a “certificate” averring that her husband had died of cholera so that she could refute nasty public rumors. The day is important because Kinney was only definitively told (by another witness) on Wednesday that people were talking about her and pointing her out as her husband’s poisoner. If she had asked for a certificate before she heard the rumors, according to Judge Shaw, “this is supposed to be an outbreak of conscious guilt before accusation” (645) and would go far toward hanging her. Instead, the physician suffered the humiliation of being corrected by an apprentice milliner about the time of the request (actually Wednesday) and the identity of the person who first brought it to him. He was further patronized and reminded of his place by defense attorneys, who granted that he “has unintentionally made a great mistake” and that, though he was “a correct medical observer,” he might not observe accurately in evidentiary matters: “But medical men, who in a professional examination would observe medical matters minutely as of great importance, would regard with comparative indifference minuteness of time in the application of evidence” (602). Storer also apparently mistook the time the supposed murder weapon—sage tea—was administered: “The tea Dr. Storer saw given, was at
some other time, even if Dr. Storer is not entirely mistaken as to any tea, for Goodwin says, and Dr. Storer assents to it, that the doctor was not present” (589). This time a house painter corrects “the eminent physician[]” and the prosecution’s star witness. Storer’s performance—mistaking times and teas—undermined the entire prosecution and may have prompted Isaac Ray to comment in *The American Jurist*: “It is a matter of common remark, that medical men, even when possessing considerable reputation, make but a sorry figure on the witness-stand, and the fact is regarded, on account of its frequency, as reflecting some discredit on the profession itself.”71 By contrast with Storer, Jacob Bigelow performed quite well, even prompting the prosecutor to remark that “if I required a physician for my family or myself, I should greatly prefer Dr. Bigelow” (614). Bigelow performed so impressively because, unlike Storer who tried to speculate about the murder weapon and motive, Bigelow confined his responses to the facts of toxicology and thus fulfilled the role we consider appropriate to the expert witness now.

More humiliating than Storer’s mistakes about the facts of the case, however, were his failures of sympathy. His obtuseness or “prejudice” failed to draw out Kinney’s confidence and made him a bad reader of her, and, worst of all, he gossiped about her and appears the source of all the “public suspicion” that eventually led to her legal troubles. We see this failure in the two puzzling interviews Kinney conducted with various doctors, in which she seemed to want to confide something. While the prosecution suggests that she suffered under a guilty conscience, the defense attributes the oddness of these conversations to “a reluctant suspicion that her

71 Quoted in Mohr, 100.
husband had committed suicide” combined with her continuing desire “from first to last [to] cover[] up his frailties from the world” (566)—especially if she did not trust in the sympathy of her interlocutor and feared that this secret would not be kept. According to Dexter, when she met with Storer, although “she began the conversation probably with that object,” she “felt reluctant” to divulge her suspicions to him (605). In the same way, Dr. Hildreth testifies that she backed away from telling him a “particular secret” because “[s]he said she saw an expression on my countenance . . . which led her to alter her mind about the conversation” (580). That “expression,” quite probably, lacked the signs of sympathy, which would have enabled Hannah’s confidence.

Sympathy, like the “observing gaze,” works “to read the inner via the outer,” and the defense casts Storer as an unsympathetic and thus bad observer, whose memory and interpretations of conversations with Kinney cannot be trusted. Dexter asserts, “I have not that confidence in the accuracy of Dr. Storer’s recollection of conversations, to suspend the life of the prisoner upon it” (604). In his interpretation, Storer reads murder where the signs indicate suicide. For instance, the defense argues that when the physician informed Kinney that her husband died of poison, she replied “Indeed?” because of her “secret suspicions of suicide,” not because she was a cold murderer. Yet, “Dr. Storer seems to distrust the answer; but so much depends upon the tone,” which, he implies, Storer simply cannot read accurately (608).

The doctor’s greatest failing, however, allies him with the “public mind.” Not only is he an abysmal observer, but he promulgates gossip and suspicion, seemingly

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72 Boudreau, 121-22.
talking about the poison with random witnesses—people who were not even professional colleagues. During the trial, Willard C. Lane, a saddler, testified that he saw Storer Tuesday night (before Hannah asked for the certificate), and Storer told him “that arsenic was found in [Kinney’s] stomach” (575). At the end of the trial, Shaw reproachfully implicates the doctor as the source of the rumors: “. . . it is said that rumors and reports were then in circulation. Were there such surmises at the time? It appears that Dr. Storer did not pronounce an opinion that the death was from poison until the chemical analysis was made, and yet on Sunday, the day of the death, he had said to Dr. Hildreth, ‘if you will keep our secret we will tell you there were indications of poison’” (645-46). During the trial, Hildreth had been caught out in a lie, which implied that he had planted evidence—a piece of paper marked “Poison” in Kinney’s house. Hildreth had also visited apothecary shops throughout Boston, trying unsuccessfully to find an apothecary who would testify that Kinney had purchased arsenic. It seems reasonable to believe that he would not balk at spreading rumors. His motivations remain unclear, and in the trial narrative he plays the role of the melodrama villain, whose persecution of the heroine is a mysterious manifestation of radical evil. 73 The transcript, however, casts Storer as the dupe—the gossipy fool and tool of Hildreth’s inexplicable malice or “the expert [who] turned out . . . to be a pedantic ignoramus, easily fooled himself.” 74 In short, in his eagerness to promote his expertise, Storer’s lack of sympathy for the accused female poisoner actually barred

73 For an explanation of the melodrama villain as an inexplicable agent whose motivation is “inadequate to the quantity of villainy unleashed,” see Peter Brooks’s The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) 33.

74 Harris, 74.
him from claims to elite masculinity and thus to cultural authority on both epistemological and moral levels.

Ultimately, Storer’s testimony failed to convince the jury, and, according to the trial transcriber, they returned a verdict of innocence in an insulting three minutes. At which point, the cheering audience poured out of the courtroom to form an ebullient multitude celebrating in the streets. After his poor performance, Storer went on to supplement his cooling enthusiasm for medical jurisprudence with another modality of investigation and control. He became the head of obstetrics at Harvard. Kinney, on the other hand, disappeared into obscurity—almost. She joined George’s relatives in Vermont but could not rest easy as public suspicion supposedly turned back against her. The year after her trial, she produced a pamphlet about her life, giving her version of the controversial events surrounding her husband’s death and her prosecution, which further emphasized Kinney’s pseudo-novelistic turn as a beset sentimental heroine.

The Kinney trial established the major paradigms for subsequent female poisoner literature. Later texts built their narratives around the determination of a moral and epistemological elite based on the proper use of sympathy with the female poisoner. Depending upon the type of masculinity and civilization a text advocates, that appropriate sympathy can be directed toward the poisoner (heterosocially) or toward her male victims (homosocially). Subsequent literature maintains the trial’s conflict between sympathetic (heterosocial) and patriarchal or professional (homosocial) masculinity. The gender paradigms generated in the trial extend from
specific conflicts over cultural authority in Boston to national struggles over the definition of the American “race,” nation, and ultimately empire.

The following chapter examines the pamphlets inspired by the Kinney trial. This “true” female poisoner genre begins with the direct responses, such as Hannah Kinney’s exculpating narrative and her ex-husband’s, Ward Witham’s, vitriolic reaction.\(^75\) Then it continues with what I call the “early” pamphlets, which appeared throughout the 1840s. These texts are generally “edited” by supposed ministers and cobble together multiple redactions of a single female poisoner’s story. They combine genres such as the last confession, familiar to readers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan crime literature, with pretended trial transcripts and literary or newspaper-like accounts. They also respond to the Kinney trial by elaborating on Witham’s reaction to the Kinney pamphlet. They return to the question of sympathy and delusion and argue that women delude and that proper masculinity is not sympathetic but rather recurs to the traditional authority of punitive patriarchs. By contrast, the pamphlets of the 1850s, including the large number of texts produced by the publisher/ writer, Arthur R. Orton, abandon the early pamphlets’ antiquated forms of crime fiction and masculinity and posit a sympathy with the female poisoner that leads to androgyny and a cosmopolitan national identity. This shift happens in part under the literary influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s narrative of Cassy.

\(^75\) Although it is difficult to confirm that these pamphlets were truly authored by Kinney and Witham, the pamphlets’ significant length, authorial copyright, dry detail, narrative coherence, and lack of sensational illustrations set them apart from later (fictional) “true” female poisoner pamphlets. Furthermore, if someone else wrote these two pamphlets to profit by the trial’s publicity, that only helps my argument for the female poisoner as part of a broad cultural (rather than merely personal) debate.
The Kinney trial and particularly its humiliation of the medical professional also influenced more “literary” works by important popular authors such as Stowe, Hawthorne, and Holmes. Stowe, for instance, engages with the Puritan models of female criminality and masculinity recalled by the early female poisoner pamphlets, but she also draws on conflicts between “regular” and “irregular” medical practitioners and the basic problems uncovered in the trial. She uses the female poisoner to argue for a sympathetic, almost androgynous, masculinity capable of civilizing the nation. The trial probably had its greatest effect, however, upon Oliver Wendell Holmes. Storer was a close colleague and business partner of Holmes. They had just founded the Tremont School, Harvard’s summer medical school, two years before the trial, and Holmes could just as easily have been called to the Kinney autopsy in place of Storer. In 1859-60, when he wrote *Elsie Venner*, his novel about a poisonous woman, Holmes would make sure that his physician hero exhibited sympathy for the female poisoner, which facilitated his use of the “observational gaze” and his authoritative role as detective and doctor. In short, Holmes’s novel produces a professional masculinity that solidifies the claims to both an epistemological and moral elite, which Storer failed to make.
CHAPTER TWO

THE “TRUE” FEMALE POISONER PAMPHLET: SENSATIONALIZING THE FEMALE POISONER AT THE BOUNDARIES OF U. S. CIVILIZATION

This chapter examines what I term the “true” female poisoner pamphlet, a sub-genre of sensational literature that flourished briefly between the mid-1840s and the economic depression of 1857.¹ These pamphlets follow the nefarious adventures of female fiends, who poison and otherwise inventively murder dozens of people. Yet, in spite of their outrageous fictiveness, the pamphlets claim absolute veracity and support this premise with a bricolage of authoritative narrative features, such as ministerial “editors,” references to corroborating (but nonexistent) newspaper reports or magazine articles, and an amalgamation of crime texts from last confessions to trial reports and autobiographies. The cost of these pamphlets made them available to a wide socio-economic spectrum—about twelve and a half cents or approximately 14% of a worker’s daily wage, just a bit more than the cost of a $4.95 paperback to a

¹ I discovered these pamphlets in the archives of the American Antiquarian Society, and I would like to thank the Society and especially the librarians at the AAS for their invaluable help and for allowing me access to the archives.
minimum-wage laborer working at $5/hour in the 1990s. They covered an average of roughly thirty pages, although their “editors” would frequently pad page counts by skipping numbers or starting the pamphlets with a number far in excess of “1.” Where the pamphlets were published remains similarly suspect, since the publishers would often print false location information corresponding to the locale of the narrative. This tactic produced texts that reportedly stretched from New Brunswick to New Orleans, but the only confirmed publishing locations so far are Boston and Philadelphia. Furthermore, the pamphlets purported to be “edited” by lawyers, ministers, and on occasion simply the disinterested publisher; but a pamphlet was more probably the product of a single publisher-author-editor-distributor. Although many of these so-called “editors” appear under pseudonyms or are otherwise elusive, the Philadelphia publisher Arthur R. Orton, who generated five of the sixteen pamphlets analyzed in this chapter, typifies this complex of creative and entrepreneurial functions.

This chapter examines the pamphlets in part because they provide a missing link between the non-fictional genres of newspaper coverage and trial transcripts and the literary works analyzed in the final two chapters. By straddling the divide between

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3 Although other pamphlets sometimes indulged in these humbugs, McDade points out that E. E. Barclay often played this trick with his sensational “true” pamphlets, sometimes even starting on page 19. Thomas M. McDade, “Lurid Literature of the Last Century: The Publications of E. E. Barclay” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 80.4 (October, 1956): 456.

4 McDade, 457.
the “real” female poisoner and her transformation into an antebellum literary figure, they allow a unique opportunity to examine how this transition is made—what is added, what falls out, and what broad arguments and questions shaped the development of female poisoner literature. The literary texts I examine later use the female poisoner to establish the extreme limit, the most pointed effect of barbarism and disorder, which defines the ideal or elite American and American civilization. Depending upon the particularities of that delineation, the female poisoner can appear as villain, victim, or hero—but always part of the defining limit. The pamphlets help lay the foundation for these arguments by constructing the female poisoner as a figure of liminality and epistemological instability, who appears at the fuzzy boundaries of antebellum constructions of class, gender, race, nation, and empire. For instance, the pamphlets’ “heroes” shift from lower-class parvenus to culturally and intellectually sophisticated elites, from “masculine” harridans to exotic beauties. (Sometimes this pseudo-transgendering happens to a single poisoner within one pamphlet.) The poisoners are also frequently of ethnic extractions that cross antebellum racial categories, such as Creole or Spanish. Similarly, their narratives traverse wide swathes of geography that evoke national or imperial boundaries: The female poisoners emigrate from Scotland to America, from Canada to Maryland, from New Orleans to Cuba, and from Jamaica to Mexico and Virginia. They travel up and down the Mississippi and from free to slave states. This testing of boundaries manifests in the pamphlets’ idiosyncratic generic structures as well. They combine popular crime genres that correspond to different time periods and divergent paradigms of authority—often in a way that explores tensions between these modes of power. For
instance, some pamphlets bring together the last confession and execution sermon
with contemporary genres, such as the sensational criminal biography and trial
reports. The former genres were hugely popular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-
century New England and undergirded traditional theocratic and patriarchal authority
but (according to Daniel Cohen) were abandoned by the Jacksonian era. The latter
genres, by contrast, ostensibly promote a “common man” authority against these
traditional power structures.  

The “true” female poisoner pamphlets thus fit awkwardly with critical
interpretations of other antebellum sensational literature, and attention to them may
help illuminate a more complicated rhetorical field of popular literature. Scholars of
antebellum crime literature have often interpreted the era’s sensational crime texts as
expressions of class critique—specifically an artisan or working-class criticism of the
traditional “aristocratic” upper orders. David Ray Papke argues that this literature
“actively linked crime and politics” in antebellum America. This linkage produced
what he calls a “critical perspective” that championed “emerging social groups” and
“the working and middle classes” against “the most dangerous malefactors”—i.e. “the
established and wealthy.” In a similar vein, David S. Reynolds argues that antebellum
crime fiction constructs democratizing class consciousness by creating “a sympathy
with the feisty rebel against the social establishment.” He positions these texts within
a larger reform culture whose “new egalitarian sympathy for oppressed groups”

5 “By the 1830s and 1840s, the transition was complete: execution sermons and last-speech
broadsides had vanished; sensationalistic newspaper accounts, legalistic trial reports, and romantic
biographies had become the primary media of crime coverage. An older literature of Protestant piety
had been overwhelmed by a new culture of legal romanticism.” Cohen, 192.
transformed “[p]opular adventure fiction” into a radical-democratic attack on social inequity. This fiction became increasingly subversive, both stylistically and thematically, as it became appropriated by a cluster of politically minded writers [that Reynolds] calls the radical democrats—authors whose hyperbolic reverence for America’s republican ideals impelled them to go to unprecedented sensational extremes to expose what they saw as the betrayal of these ideals in contemporary American society.

This “Subversive fiction” often centered on revenge plots, pushed forward by wronged working-class criminals avenging themselves upon “oxymoronic oppressors,” hypocrites such as lascivious ministers, pious slave-owners, and church-going capitalists. David Brion Davis similarly claims that in many sensational texts these criminal men could engage in a kind of political vengeance that operated as a “revolt against authority.”

The role of criminal women, however, remains more contentious. Although both Reynolds and Davis read many of the same texts (even the same characters such as Besse in George Lippard’s *The Quaker City*), they assert opposing interpretations of the female fiend’s role in this literature and of the amount of sympathy or identification an audience extends to her. Davis argues that antebellum texts constructed the female fiend as an unsympathetic “alien” and attributed any female atrocity to an original sexual fall. He maintains that, unlike men, who could only “choose” and “not actively generate evil,” a woman’s moral nature was inflexible and

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equated with sexuality. And, “since all evil was ultimately the result of sexual corruption,” the fallen woman “embodied positive evil and was thus condemned as one alienated by metaphysical necessity. . . . She had no other choice: the feminine alien was a breeder of contagious evil.” Furthermore, while men could abstract their wrongs into a larger political struggle, female criminals attacked only the particular author of their “sexual dishonor” and “were not supposed to generalize an accumulated series of wrongs, directing their vengeance, like a man, against some symbol of authority, restriction, or rivalry.” Reynolds, by contrast, reads the female criminal figure as both sympathetically heroic and political. He contends that “in the radical-democrat fiction of the American 1840s the woman criminal took on a special ferocity and gender-specific purpose she had not exhibited before.” She became the “feminist criminal” who “avenges wrongs against her sex by waging war against society” and takes “militant revenge against what was perceived as the deceptiveness and tyranny of men.” Stephanie Smith captures these qualities when she denominates such characters as “Tender Avengers.”

By contrast with Reynolds and Papke, Daniel Cohen (in an explicit critique of Papke) argues that antebellum crime coverage and the lurid texts based upon these cases were ideologically incoherent and more often served hegemonic (not feminist or class-conscious) interests. While Papke traces a trajectory in this crime literature from an antebellum “critical” voice for the oppressed to a post-bellum de-politicized expression of professional hegemony, Cohen observes elitist structures within the

very antebellum texts supposedly most “critical.” He argues that the newspaper coverage that Papke singles out as most politically pointed “did not so much adhere to a fixed ideological agenda as pick and choose at will from a varied menu of popular, if often contradictory, cultural motifs. Unresolved class tensions and conflicting gender stereotypes were at once expressed and subsumed within a flexible, pluralistic, and highly profitable discourse of legal romanticism.” Legal romanticism short-circuited the kinds of class- or gender-conscious sympathies that Reynolds sees in “subversive” crime fiction. Although this romantic discourse grew out of “[l]iterary sentimentalism” and its modes of sympathy with the victimized, Cohen argues that the sympathy it generates “was not merely a resource for the socially powerless but was becoming an effective tool of established elites.” It shored up confidence in the system of trial and punishment and in the professional elites who controlled it.  

This chapter asks how the “true” female poisoner pamphlets fit or problematize these paradigms and what cultural work these texts performed. Are they “subversive” and “critical” of class, race, and/ or gender inequity? Are they a “tool of established [or aspiring] elites”? Or, are they merely opportunistic and “contradictory”? These pamphlets resist easy explanation within these models because they are generically elusive and display extremely fluid class and gender categories. Cohen and Papke base their arguments on literature drawn from actual crimes, while Reynolds and Davis concentrate on overt fictions. The “true” female poisoner pamphlets, by contrast, are fictions that rest on a claim to absolute veracity and produce conflicting narratives and interpretations of their female fiends within a

8 Cohen, 244-45, 194.
single text. Thus, I read these texts not as radical or reactionary or simply contradictory but as perversely exploratory. By this, I mean that these pamphlets investigate the “gray” areas of class, race, gender, nation, and empire, and even the texts that claim to transform this liminality into black and white certainty only generate further instability. Michael Denning’s formulation of the dime novel as “contested terrain” between competing social groups is a useful paradigm for this fiction (which was the direct ancestor of the dime novel); but that image could be seen to imply that the “true” female poisoner pamphlets were a kind of ideological prize, with one contending group in ascendancy and then another—both producing consistent programs. Even Isabelle Lehuu’s “festive” version of this “contest” with its genre-specific “discrete publics” seems too strong and exclusive for these pamphlets. They seem more like indeterminate terrain than contested or fenced-off print cliques. The pamphlets enable a multiplicity of social groups to congregate for titillation at the boundaries—to dabble with multiple identifications and experiment with inconsistency. These texts obviously do not present themselves as complicated Jamesian art. Quite the contrary, they are a kind of epistemological pornography, working by cheap titillation; but explicitly sexual provocation is only one among many liminal excitements for an antebellum audience. Davis, Cohen, and Reynolds all point out that popular crime literature in the antebellum era gave a particular sexual charge to issues of crime and punishment. Conversely, Karen Halttunen has argued that antebellum pornography became strongly invested in issues of power. One could see this paradigm as sexualizing politics and politicizing pornography. The “true” female poisoner pamphlets simply reflect this cultural conjunction of the
sexual and the political in a very raw and unfiltered rather than programmatic way. They arouse, they titillate, they explore boundaries of power, they do not shape coherent ideologies.⁹

To date, no comprehensive study has been done on this literature. Ann Jones briefly discusses some of these pamphlets as a simple example of how “[f]ictional murderesses are naturally ‘fiendish.’” Reynolds mentions one of these pamphlets (i.e. the story of Mary Jane Gordon) and includes it haphazardly in a catalog of sexy “novels about woman criminals.” Papke expatiates briefly on the possible feminist identification enabled by one pamphlet female fiend and the escapist attractions of her illicit sexual adventures for an oppressed female audience:

Women in particular, when their resident patriarchs were at the office or busy in the fields, could slip a pamphlet out of their knitting or plates and vicariously experience the sexual adventures missing in their own lives. Reading of Isabella Narvaez, the ‘Female Fiend and Triple Murderess,’ who murdered one husband with prussic acid, a second with a hatchet, and still a third with a dagger, female readers might even have found a cultural vent for a man-hating urge literally engendered by grinding, draining private captivity. Papke’s imaginative reconstruction is great fun, but reader records for these ephemeral texts appear to be nonexistent. And, as Cohen points out, “a great variety of Americans of both sexes enjoyed antebellum crime literature.” So men as well as women were probably sneaking peaks at Isabella Narvaez.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Ann Jones, Women Who Kill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) 111; Reynolds, 218; Papke, 29; Cohen, 35.
This chapter is separated into three sections and analyzes sixteen pamphlets: Part one examines two pamphlets directly inspired by the Kinney trial and looks at how they make the transition from trial transcripts to the more literary pamphlet genre. Part two analyzes seven of the “true” female poisoner pamphlets produced in the 1840s by various “editors,” and part three examines the texts of the 1850s and performs a more intensive study of the works produced between 1852 and 1856 by one “editor,” Arthur R. Orton. Orton’s work appeared later than most of the other pamphlets and fell strongly under the influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s narrative of Cassy, which significantly altered the form and content of the genre.

Before looking at these texts, however, the next section analyzes how the unanswered questions left over from a trial drove the search for certainty to literary solutions. The major texts in this section include two starkly contrasting literary responses to a single trial: the sentimental *A Review of the Principal Events of the Last Ten Years in the Life of Mrs. Hannah Kinney together with some Comments on the Late Trial. Written by Herself* and the lurid *A Brief Notice of the Life of Mrs. Hannah Kinney, for Twenty Years. By Ward Witham, her First Husband*. Kinney’s pamphlet tells the story of her trial and sufferings from her perspective and expands on the defense’s characterization of her as a sentimental heroine—a “victim of popular prejudice and delusion” and of a public misled and manipulated by falsely elite men. Kinney’s first husband wrote his pamphlet in response to some unflattering things Kinney said about him in her narrative. His story greatly extends the

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11 Of course, it is difficult to be certain about the pamphlets’ true authorship. See chapter one, note 75.
prosecution’s rhetoric about Kinney’s ability to manipulate and delude through sympathy and sexuality. He draws on literary conventions familiar in older crime literature, such as “the slippery slope” of sin, which begins with disobedience and libertinism and ends in complete corruption capable of infecting society at large. Both pamphlets elaborate on the fictional conventions and problems promulgated in the trial and further its transition into literary form. Their opposing narratives and characterizations of the female poisoner—as slandered heroine or corrupt monster—illustrate the contradictory approaches to the epistemologically unstable female poisoner that percolate through later pamphlet literature.

I. From Trial Report to Pamphlet Exposé: The Competing Narratives of Hannah Kinney’s Review and Ward Witham’s Brief Notice

The junior prosecutor in the Kinney case complained in his opening argument that “[r]ecent experience has shown how difficult, if not impossible, it has been to obtain a verdict of condemnation, in cases of alleged murders by secret poison, when females have been the parties accused, and men were the persons murdered” (538-39). It is difficult to gauge how widely the antebellum public endorsed this belief in the actual guilt (as opposed to legal guilt) of accused female poisoners. The audience at Kinney’s trial responded to her acquittal with “an applause that could not be repressed” and then poured “into the street and gave expression to their feelings in cheers” (649), but a legal judgment and an initial positive public reaction do not necessarily indicate a complete or enduring public confidence. As time passed, in the watches of the night, so to speak, did public opinion about alleged female poisoners
shift? Antebellum Americans may have enjoyed indulging in an “operational aesthetic” that thrilled to mystery and humbug and trusted in “the common sense of the average citizen,” and trial reports may have participated in this aesthetic by creating an opportunity “to present and fairly evaluate competing factual accounts and legal interpretations of disputed events.”¹² But this process—especially interpreting the record of a legal judgment based on reasonable doubt—does not produce the same level of certainty that a recurrence to other epistemological modes, such as reliance on literary types or providence or expert evaluation or traditional authority, might create. Furthermore, the particular gender questions raised in forums such as female poisoner trials added to the urgency and anxiety about finding the stable truth, which at least some members of the antebellum public displayed.

By contrast with the trial transcript, the popular pamphlet genre in America had long drawn on traditional authority—helping New England ministers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “consolidate their authority over their congregations.” Colonial New England crime pamphlets relied on execution sermons or final confessions, genres heavily standardized by religious teleology, with guilt as a foregone and certain conclusion. They worked primarily to reaffirm the authority of ministerial and judicial elites. Even the criminal’s final statements justified her punishment at their hands and ventriloquized their explanations of her innate corruption, which manifested first as disobedience and eventuated (by a slippery

slopes) in murder or worse.\textsuperscript{13} Antebellum crime pamphlets played with this older formulation and epistemology. The “true” female poisoner pamphlets especially supplemented the trial transcript by promising a thoroughly documented inside story capable of producing the certainty that a trial lacked. However, the sensational fictionality of the texts appealed to this desire while deferring its satisfaction to the realm of literature and pointedly removing it from reality.

We can see this dissatisfaction and urge to certainty in at least one audience reaction to a trial transcript. One of the husband-poisoners whom the Kinney prosecution cited as being acquitted because of her “SEX only” is Lucretia Chapman (539). A note, carefully penciled inside the front cover of the American Antiquarian Society’s copy of the Chapman trial transcript exemplifies this same frustration with the legal process and tries to frame the transcript with a gesture to providential authority:

At this moment (Nov 15 1834) I have before me a Statement in one of the newspapers which we shall send you. That this wretch (whose name is handed down to Posterity as the Paramour if not (though I certainly believe her to be so) the accomplice of the Murderer of Her Husband) is now reduced to the condition of a Strolling Player. How is She fallen! From Revelling in Luxury. Keeping a Carriage and enjoying all the Smiles of Fortune Surrounded by a humorous circle of Acquaintances—to be an Outcast from Society[;] for degraded as her present occupation is, even there the finger of scorn is pointed at her and she is greeted with hisses and general disapprobation. Thus we see How muchsoever we may deceive man and so elude the grasp of the Law the Hand of Retribution Justice will eventually grasp us and in the end we shall meet with our Reward!! How dangerous are the ways of the wicked!! J. Holden” (Isaac and James P. Holden gifted this little book to their brother W. George Holden.)

\textsuperscript{13} Daniel E. Williams, “Introduction,” \textit{Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives} (Madison: Madison House, 1993) 1-63. See also Boudreau, 2.
Lucretia Chapman was acquitted in May 1832. The transcript appeared soon thereafter, but a full two and a half years later, newspapers continued to monitor her behavior, while the public (at least in the form of the Holden brothers) weighed this new evidence for signs of guilt and divine retribution. Although Chapman may have been able to “deceive man” in the trial process, she met with a providential “Reward.” Holden equates this fated or divinely decreed “[r]eward” with public judgment, which makes her “an Outcast from Society,” points “the finger of scorn” at her, and greets her “with hisses and general disapprobation.” It seems counterintuitive to believe that the majority of Chapman’s audiences rejected her completely, a situation that if true would necessarily make for a very brief acting career. Be that as it may, Holden’s argument opposes the discourse that shaped the Kinney defense: that sympathy with the slandered woman defines an elite masculinity endowed with greater powers of perception than the vulgar crowd. In Holden’s appraisal, by contrast, “public suspicion” does not promote but rather resists “delusion” and passes a final and more accurate judgment than the jury and metes out a more appropriate punishment than the judge.

Holden also draws on a literary stereotype that differs radically from the sentimental heroine that dominated the Kinney trial. Holden and/or the newspaper writer he ventriloquizes paint Chapman as a libertine, a “Paramour,” and the dissipated and power-hungry coquette of eighteenth-century literature—“Revelling in Luxury” and enjoying the aristocratic-sounding accoutrements of a “Carriage” and a witty “circle of Acquaintances.” Holden follows the lead of the prosecutors, who cast Chapman as driven by the corrupt libertine’s “licentious appetites” (112) for sex and
material possessions. By contrast, the historical record reveals that far from
“Revelling in Luxury,” Chapman bore almost the entire labor of her and her elderly
husband’s school and household. Furthermore, Chapman’s defense depicted her as an
ideal republican wife: industrious, educated and an educator, and, at least to some
extent, quiescent towards men. At the same time, they portrayed her supposed lover
as a “Spanish” confidence man and vile seducer, suspect in both race and gender
performance, and suggested that, by contrast with this failed man, the jury should
display proper masculinity through sympathy with the wronged woman. 14

As in the Kinney trial, the Chapman case revolved around an opposition
between a woman and a man or men, which attributed guilt to the party who failed to
perform proper gender (either Chapman or her alleged “Paramour” or her husband).
Holden’s peculiar choice of “this little book” as a brotherly present seems to reflect
an anxiety about masculinity that eventuates in his desire to cement fraternal bonds
and push back a perceived critique of unsympathetic (homosocial) masculinity. James
Holden’s tone and word choice reveal a deep and continuing anger: Although the line
between indirect reporting and his own thoughts is somewhat unclear, it looks like he
calls Chapman “wretch” and parenthetically adds his belief in her guilt. At the very
least, his sending along the article indicates an agreement with its moral judgment—

14 For the most accessible copy of the Chapman trial transcript, see “The Trial of Lucretia
Chapman for the Murder of William Chapman, Andalusia, Pennsylvania. 1832,” American State
Trials: A Collection of the Important and Interesting Criminal Trials Which Have Taken Place in the
United States, from the Beginning of our Government to the Present Day, ed. John D. Lawson, LL. D.,
vol. 6 (St. Louis: F. H. Thomas Law Book Co., 1916) 99-396. For a modern historian’s evaluation of
Chapman’s less than luxurious existence, see Karen Halttunen, “Domestic Differences’: Competing
Narratives of Womanhood in the Murder Trial of Lucretia Chapman,” Race, Gender, and
its glee in the “Justice” of her severe social and economic fall. Holden furthermore feels compelled to frame the gift with a reassuring certainty about Chapman’s moral viciousness and her guilt and punishment. One brother’s implicit warning to another about the poisonous ways of bad women (“How dangerous are the ways of the wicked!!”) cements a homosocial bond through an unsympathetic form of masculinity and a clear categorization of deviant womanhood.

In 1841 Hannah Kinney appeared to suffer the “general disapprobation” that Holden directed at Chapman, and in response she appears to have written her own exposé and “true” frame of the trial. In this pamphlet, she claims that continuing public persecution drives her to lay out the real story. She states that “such feelings as I have heard expressed almost daily, since my acquittal” by “an excited public” aim to “kill[] [me] by piece-meals.” But she “attribute[s] all this to the want of information, respecting my real history,” and so she pens a pamphlet that promises the public “an undisguised statement of the facts . . . corroborate[d] . . . by the most indisputable evidence.” In this way she proposes to reveal the truths clouded by “horrid suspicions” left unresolved after the trial and grown out of “false surmises, and false opinions; in some instances, from discrepancies, jealousies, and envyings.”15 In short, she extends the work of the defense and aims to further defuse “popular prejudice and delusion.”

Although she proposes to accomplish this task by a complete exposure of the “facts,” she shapes these facts even more fully than the trial report within the

15 Hannah Kinney, A Review of the Principal Events of the Last Ten Years in the Life of Mrs. Hannah Kinney together with some Comments on the Late Trial. Written by Herself (Boston: J. N. Bradley and Co.: 1841) 3-4. All further quotations from this pamphlet will be cited parenthetically.
discourse of sentimental literature and its gendered paradigms of conflict. In her narrative, she becomes the beset heroine; “oxymoronic oppressors” such as lascivious deacons and cruel doctors appear as the villains; and perspicacious and sympathetic jurymen play the role of heroes and come to her rescue. In the sentimental novel, the heroine’s great virtue often led her into the appearance of impropriety, which a more worldly and shrewd actress would sidestep. Kinney reflects this narrative convention in her explanation of her pre-marital behavior with George Kinney and with Reverend Enoch Freeman, her second husband (who were vying for her hand at the same time). She argues that the apparent impropriety occurred because of their honest virtue—claiming that “‘they who know no wrong suspect none’” and so perhaps behave with an “imprudence” and “a carelessness in their general appearance and conduct,” which less pure women might avoid (22, 30, 27). This approach also follows tropes used in other exculpatory crime pamphlets such as Ann Carson’s 1822 narrative. Carson had been tried for helping her lover kill her long-lost husband, but in her pamphlet she rigorously denies the charge and, like Kinney, explains her apparent “coquetry” as a “careless[ness] of appearances.” She claims that she too was a victim of misguided popular opinion that judged on “appearances” only: “I for a frolic sacrificed that sanctity that ought to be a woman’s protection, and erred only in appearances, when the world had actually found me guilty.”

Kinney’s ultimate goal in her pamphlet, however, is not merely to assert her true inner innocence, but also to expose the corruption of hypocritical traditional

elites or Reynolds’ “oxymoronic oppressors.” She “wish[es] to show from whence the
suspicions against [herself] originated” (22). And she traces their genesis to a would-
be seducer in her second husband’s Lowell church, a respected deacon who reveals
his inner corruption so that she “could not consider him . . . suitable for the station he
then filled.” When Kinney rejects his illicit advances, he becomes her and Reverend
Freeman’s “decided enemy” (12) and tries to stop their marriage by whispering
suspicions about Hannah’s previous divorce from Ward Witham and her broken
engagement to George Kinney. The deacon spreads rumors about her supposed
iniquitous conduct, rumors which turn into church investigations. These inquiries
involve Baptist congregations from all over eastern Massachusetts and provoke
malicious tales that pursue her long after Freeman’s death and her move to Boston.

The deacon’s machinations of public suspicion are seconded by the irrational
and self-promoting behavior of the physicians attending Kinney’s trial and the
indifference of the Boston ministers. Chapter One discussed how the trial transcript
reveals that—because of their supposed lack of sympathy—Dr. Charles Hildreth
allegedly planted incriminating bits of paper and Dr. David Humphreys Storer spread
rumors and misinterpreted evidence. In Kinney’s pamphlet, she elaborates on their
perfidiousness and coldness. She claims that the original public suspicions about
George’s death “must come from some of the Doctors” (73). They stir up unfounded
public suspicion and delusion, rather than expelling it. They also fail to demonstrate
proper sympathy. When she tries to ask for their advice and “aid” concerning her
husband’s possible suicide, she expects their “consolation”: “But, alas! sometimes
when we expect a friend to guide us, they serve us as ‘a limb out of joint.’ I was
satisfied that Dr. Hildreth, had as much wickedness in his heart towards me as could be borne, and his very presence chilled my soul. They [Hildreth and Storer] soon retired without one consoling word” (73). Already convinced of her guilt, the doctors do not behave as sympathetic, “consoling” healers or as “friend[s]” and “guide[s].” Rather, they themselves wound the sufferer—becoming the deformed “limb out of joint.” Whereas at the trial, Storer interpreted her ambivalence about confiding in him as deeply suspicious, she attributes her hesitations to the doctor’s untrustworthiness and outright deceit:

[H]ow could I say more to a man, I then supposed, had deceived me from the time of his examination, up to that moment. I supposed he knew as well, at first, that [George] was poisoned, as he did then; and I believed that the suspicions abroad, originated with the physicians present at the first examination (74).

Their cold masculinity “chilled” Kinney, while their lack of transparency and rumor-mongering made them untrustworthy and the most malicious and damaging of the oxymoronic oppressors in her tale. Ministers also reveal an ungodly lack of sympathy—failing to visit her in prison and even, in their selfish indifference, forgetting to ask the church to pray for her deceased husband (81, 71).17

Kinney’s narrative, however, does have heroes—sympathetic and rational men who come to her aid. As the defense lawyers did, Kinney equates sympathy with epistemological clarity, proper masculinity, and genuine elite status. She argues that “much of this idle surmising [against her] arose from an improper state of heart in the suspecting ones”—both the hearts of the general public and the clergy and doctors.

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17 Oliver Wendell Holmes will take up this plot element in his indictment of the clergy in *Elsie Venner*. 
She fantasizes about what would happen if her oppressors could achieve this elite, almost godly, moral expertise:

Had we a power by which all could look into the human heart as the Eternal does; could some unseen hand withdraw the veil which shrouds the secret spring of all our actions; then you could see each motive which has prompted my course, and shame and confusion would cover your faces! Your hearts would melt with sympathy for the wrongs which have been done—wrongs which can never be repaired (54).

But, in her narrative, some men do have this power. From the very moment she saw them, “the faces of the jury presented the fair index of rational minds, and I was sure the judges were men of sound judgment. In their hands I felt safe” (83). She felt secure in the very “hands” that held her life in the balance, and she slept well because she recognized the “rational” perspicacity in the jury and judges that she saw lacking in other men. In fact, she argues that her release actually terrified her because “[t]he idea of meeting the world, subject as I should be to the criticisms of enemies, made sleep a stranger to me” (82). She fears being left to the mercy of the public and its manipulators, men such as Dr. Hildreth. When she realizes that he tried to frame her by dropping a paper marked “Poison” in her house, she knows further persecution awaits her, and she wants only to remain in prison:

When Dr. Hildreth came upon the stand, at the trial, and stated that the Attorney General said if a paper could be found with the word ‘poison’ written upon it, there would be sufficient ground for a prosecution; and when the Attorney General stated that Dr. Hildreth made that statement, and afterwards denied having said so—my blood curdled in my viens [sic]—and I looked upon that gazing assembly with no desire to be released from the evil chain that bound me. Why not rather than meet the world, go back with a light and cheerful step to the silent cell, where none but the eye of God was upon me? (76)

Ultimately, however, she suggests that these oxymoronic oppressors—the vile pious seducer, the cruel doctors, the indifferent clergy combined with the seductions
of corrupting male companions—afflict not only the sentimental heroine, but the sentimental man as well. She blames the deacon’s continuing “cruel persecution” for driving the sensitive George Kinney to drink and eventual suicide (65). The deacon’s malice along with the seductions of male public culture and the poisonous medications of bad doctors destroy him: He “had round him a host of beings who had done much to ruin him” (72). And this corrupting homosocial influence clouded his insight and played upon his “weaker judgment [and] . . . led him to ruin” (75). In other words, although George had the sympathetic potential to be the heroic elite man, surrounding bad masculinity confused his reason and dragged him down. The “friend” who drew George out of his home for a debauch on the Friday evening before his death was the immediate cause of his demise. Hannah tried to interfere. She “begged him not to go” and then “begged him to go home with me” on Saturday—trying to pull him back into the heterosocial domestic (67). She also “admonished that if he continued the use of [Dr. Bachelder’s] pills . . . they would certainly kill him” (67). Kinney believed that Bachelder, like the lustful deacon, was “not a suitable person” for his position (68). And those pills may have indeed poisoned George.

George Kinney’s “ruin” by corrupting male influence left Hannah unprotected and occasioned the persecution that almost killed her. Although she is careful not to blame George, her narrative of his failings gestures toward another oxymoronic oppressor, which Reynolds does not list but which becomes central to later female poisoner literature—the bad husband. While Kinney is gentle with George, she makes this bad husband motif explicit in her characterization of her first husband, Ward
Witham, a man whom she depicts as restless, financially irresponsible, and unfaithful. He “was not pleased with a Farmer’s life” and so moves the family and then picks up and fails at various jobs in Portland, and when he leaves to find work in Boston alone, he “sent me little or no means for the support of my family” and instead let everyone suppose he “was a single man” (5). When Kinney travels to Boston to confront him, he owns his abandonment and philandering as a masculine prerogative, claiming that “he thought any man had a right to live as he had” (5). In later pamphlets by Orton, this assertion of masculine privilege provokes the female poisoner to take “militant revenge against what was perceived as the deceptiveness and tyranny of men.”

Kinney, however, is the sentimental heroine and not the “feminist criminal,” so she simply refused to associate any further with a depraved man and was readily granted a divorce.

Ward Witham’s pamphlet responds to Kinney’s narrative by challenging her literary reconstruction of events and her linkage of delusion with an unenlightened public and traditional male authorities. He shows that she is the source of delusion, while the unsympathetic public correctly resists her wiles and sees her for the sexual predator she is. He argues that she is not “a wonderful heroine” from a sentimental novel but that that romance is only “the flimsy network she has thrown over” the real facts of her life. His narrative, by contrast, claims to demystify her romantic rhetoric

18 Reynolds, 363-64.

19 Ward Witham, *A Brief Notice of the Life of Mrs. Hannah Kinney, for Twenty Years. By Ward Witham, her First Husband* (Boston: the Author, 1842) 74. All further citations will be noted parenthetically.
and purports to teach young men to resist the passionate befuddlement inspired by
women:

There is a moral contained in the history of Mrs. Kinney which is well worth studying. The young man full of ardor and of ‘love,’ who sees nothing but the most adorable qualities in the fair object of his affection, is taught to control his passions sufficiently to allow his reason to ascertain whether his next step,—if it be that which will bind him indissolubly to her—will not be his ruin. . . . The man of mature years will see that, unless he exercise the utmost circumspection, he may be deceived by a woman; particularly if his regard for her, in the first place, and his pursuits, in the next, be such as to prevent his making an exertion to learn whether she possesses any of the short comings of her sex (7-8).

Witham’s “moral” follows the Kinney prosecution in suggesting that a man’s attraction to a woman can cloud “reason,” while his “regard for her” prevents a proper investigation of her. And while Kinney’s pamphlet argues that man’s “ruin” stems from corrupting homosocial associations, Witham claims that the heterosocial relation threatens men most: To “be deceived by a woman” into a marriage that “will bind [a young man] indissolubly to her” is the clear source of “ruin.” Conversely, homosocial advice from a “man of mature years” to a “young man” actually saves men.

Witham, in spite of his attack on Kinney’s fictionalizing, frames this “history” and “moral” within another gendered literary trope. He is invoking the narrative of the fascinating woman, the woman of “fair” and alluring exterior covering a poisonous interior. As David Brion Davis characterizes this figure, she is “the fallen woman” whose “sexual experience made her capable of any crime.”20 When Witham suggests that a young man must look to see whether “the fair object of his affection

20 Davis, 152.
... possesses any of the short comings of her sex,” he implies that he must make sure that she has not indulged in this sexual corruption to which women tend as a “sex.” He deploys a misogynist discourse of poison to turn Kinney’s allegations back onto her. The victim of privileged seducers and patriarchs becomes the seducer, victimizer, and poisonous corrupter of hapless men. She becomes the “painted woman” whose pleasing surface hides a poisonous interior. He states that he once believed that Kinney was “fair” and “gentle” and “bid fair to make me a happy husband. But alas! how often do we find the tempting fruit, with rich exterior, a mere mass of corruption!” He figures her and women in general as Eves who disrupt the “little paradise” of man’s happy home: “But alas! the devil is too jealous of the happiness of man, always to allow woman to escape his snares” (10, 18). As in the Eden myth, woman is innately more susceptible to the devil than man. She destroyed man’s original paradise and continues to disturb an American paradisiacal marriage. Kinney’s almost innate sexual immorality allows her to trick vulnerable men into sin. According to a conversation Ward had with an unnamed man who supposedly worked with Hannah’s father and “was intimately [carnally] acquainted with her,” even at the tender age of fifteen, she “would steal, lie, and be guilty of unmentionable improprieties with men . . . That she was one of that class of women who, by their beauty, arts, cunning, and deception, have the power to ensnare the other sex, and seduce them from the path of duty and get them in trouble.” If this witness is telling the truth, he has just admitted to betraying his employer and having intercourse with

his teenage daughter—thus his anonymity. Sentimental narratives might depict this man as a vile seducer. However, within the terms of this “fascinating woman” conceit, Kinney’s sexual immorality necessarily indicates deceit and makes her an untrustworthy witness, while, at the same time, Witham passes over the man’s deception and culpability and accepts his self-serving justification: that he was merely the sexual victim of an artful girl.

Kinney’s sexual corruption, he further argues, allows her to exert the sort of sublime or fascinating power that the press attributed to her intellectual talents, and that power is the real source of her seemingly innocent ability to garner sympathy. He describes her as “a cunning woman,” who used “those talents which nature has so bountifully bestowed upon her . . . to maintain her ascendancy over [Reverend Freeman]” (90). He alleges that the favorable judgment she received in their own divorce was “obtained in a way in which a person of Mrs. Kinney’s character would be likely to obtain it”—that is, through bribing officials with sex and by manipulating “sympathy in her favor; and prejudice against one she hated or feared” (74). In his version of events, he suffers from “prejudice” generated by a deceitful fallen woman.

Kinney had corroborated her story by reproducing letters and documents such as the divorce decree, and Witham counters and amplifies the trial testimony by producing his own witness and notarized affidavits. But the evidence he gathers (statements from Kinney’s native Portland community) and the way he deploys these figures is framed by a narrative taken from early crime literature: the slippery slope. He lays out the stereotypical progression that would become familiar to later readers

22 Witham, “Appendix,” 11-12.
of “true” female poisoner stories: libertine to infanticide to poisoner. Hannah’s craving for luxury leads her to thieving, even from Ward’s relatives. Her corrupting sexual urges produce a child too soon after the wedding to be Ward’s and give her license to chase after an ever increasing number of improper men: a “caravan Man,” a schoolmaster, even a mere “boy” who works for the Withams. Finally, according to several affidavits, while her husband is in Boston, Hannah becomes pregnant, steals “medicine” from a physician, and aborts the child, which she later flings into a nearby creek.

But oddly enough, the pamphlet does not dwell on the abortion, or even the later poisoning, as Kinney’s most aggravating offense. Rather what gathers most of Witham’s ire is what sentimental narratives and Kinney put forth as evidence of her sincerity and transparency: She “cared nothing for her reputation” (12). She sets herself against the community, insisting upon self-expression: “She is not of that class of women whose ears are always shut and whose tongues are always still” (39)—even when her speech exposes what Witham considers men’s private matters (her alleged sexual transgressions, which reflect on him, and the amours of her father and second husband). According to Witham, they move to Dover, not because he failed at farming, but to avoid the gossip about her. But even there, he says, she insisted on refuting old charges against her, and “[h]er first act was to reveal the reports which had existed concerning her in New Portland” (40). Witham seems to be suggesting that, to recur to the words of Judge Shaw, “this is supposed to be an outbreak of conscious guilt before accusation” (645)—the perverse criminal’s compulsive tantalizations, like the narrator of Poe’s “The Black Cat” bragging to police about the
workmanship of his basement wall. Witham claims that he leaves her specifically because they quarreled over his refusal to endorse this speech and “enlist in a warfare with her against” the whispering neighbors (42). Even her father “charged her for her own credit sake to keep [a letter that accuses her of sexual transgressions] where it was, yet she must leak it out” (56). Yet her father, too, seems driven to expose even more private charges with less occasion, telling Witham and at least one other man that Kinney dared to accuse him of “an unnatural crime,” incest. Witham, however, does not condemn the father. For him, Kinney’s charge, leveled “in the presence of her mother-in-law,” 23 combined with her memoir’s publication of Freeman’s romantic letters exposes her complete loss of “all sense of decency” and womanly “refinement of feeling” (59, 88).

The precipitating reason for the break up of their marriage—Witham’s refusal to side with her against the neighbors—appears odd unless we see that Witham locates morality and proper masculinity in an alliance with this informal community. Witham’s narrative, like Kinney’s, balances the villain with a hero. But in his pamphlet the hero is the very “vulgar prejudice” that Kinney attacked. Public rumor about a woman’s reputation is the best resource a young man has in his “exertion to learn whether [a woman] possesses any of the short comings of her sex.” Witham refutes Kinney’s sentimental argument of unearned persecution and conspiracy:

There probably never were very many instances where reputation was injured by reports, when there was no foundation for them. It is true that sometimes the foundation may be trivial, but almost invariably it is serious; and no person can go from one place to another where he has not before been known, and have the same character, without the existence of the same causes for it (95).

23 “Mother-in-law” means step-mother here.
If only he had listened to “reports” of Kinney’s “bad fame,” instead of the assurances of Kinney and her mother, he would have left her long ago (rather than waiting until she obtained a divorce on favorable grounds) (15-16). He connects this popular monitoring to the virtue of small towns:

... in many country towns, people are inclined to keep watch and take good care of their neighbors’ affairs. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult for the head of a family to correct his child, or perform some other necessary domestic duty, without being watched by some half a dozen of friends, and either advised by them as to the course he should pursue or censured for the course he has pursued (24).

This statement suggests that public report—far from furthering oppressive traditional authority as Kinney’s narrative maintains—actually corrects patriarchal power, sometimes even too much. In Witham’s formulation, public rumor crosses class and gender lines to both limit patriarchal authority and punish license. Without gossip’s corrective mechanism, painted women like Kinney deceive and ruin men at will, and the social order goes awry: “... the good people of New England have long enough been imposed upon by [Kinney] and other persons, whose whole aim is to destroy the moral tone of society, and to elevate themselves to a station the extreme opposite of that to which they belong” (105). While Kinney argued that oxymoronic oppressors such as the deacon or the quack doctor were not “suitable for the station[s]” they filled, Witham argues that deceitful parvenus such as herself “elevate themselves” into an inappropriate “station.” Enabled by sentimental paradigms, these poisonous women become a false elite, displacing traditional authority and corrupting society.

This argument connecting the self-made woman with a slippery slope of socially disruptive crime reappeared in the “true” female poisoner pamphlets, as did
Kinney’s oxymoronic oppressors and beset heroine. Kinney’s and Witham’s dueling narratives exemplify the two primary literary paradigms that would come to define the sub-genre. Like the Kinney texts, these pamphlets amalgamate sentimental and “fascinating woman” explanations. They pull together the romantic tropes of the Tender Avenger with patriarchal visions of woman’s innate depravity and place the delusions of woman in tension with the delusions of man and conventional society. They explore sympathy and alienation and the forms of gender and authority implied by different combinations. They do so by melding early forms of crime literature with modern romantic crime autobiographies and techniques borrowed from newspaper coverage. The next section examines how the early pamphlets negotiate these combinations.

II. Sympathy, Delusion, and the “True” Female Poisoner Pamphlets from 1844-50: The Narratives of Mary Jane Gordon, Sophia Hamilton, and Ann Walters

The earliest female poisoner pamphlets (from about 1844-50) favor Witham’s strand of narrative in both their biographical details and rhetorical modes. Some pamphlets reproduce the specific details of the crimes that he attributes to Kinney. For instance, Mary Jane Gordon flings the body of her infant into a stream just as Witham alleges Kinney did. Sophia Hamilton and Ann Walters seduce their husbands into marriage by caring for them during an illness just as he says Kinney did. Kinney’s mother argued him into remaining married to her daughter after he became aware of her reputation, and Sophia’s and Ann’s mothers also convince their
daughters’ suspicious husbands to remain in the marriages after they “found out the real character” of their wives.

Most pervasively, however, the pamphlets’ female victimizers follow the same slippery-slope progression Witham laid out in his ex-wife’s “history.” Like Kinney, the female poisoners in these pamphlets begin in libertinism, move to infanticide and then to husband-murder. However, after dispatching their husbands they plunge immediately into lurid and various mass murder, casually massacring every innocent in their path, achieving body counts that more than justify the Massachusetts attorney general’s assertion that “the protection of human life upon a large scale” necessitates the bloody suppression of the female poisoner. The pamphlets demonstrate that when women go bad, they become fiends, who start by destroying their own edenic domestic life and end by threatening the “large scale” social order itself. For instance, the Mary Jane Gordon pamphlet makes this emphasis quite clear. Using a purposive typographical error, the pamphlet’s first scene opens in “Edenboro, Scotland,” where one should find ideal marriages: “the holy ordinance from which . . . love and comfort should emanate” (9). However, Gordon and the other female poisoners violate this domestic union and become serious threats to the public because their sentimental husbands allow sympathy to delude them and make them vulnerable to attack. The husbands’ failures to maintain traditional authority and contain the corrupt feminine within the bounds of proper femininity and the domestic sphere not only ensure their own ruin but also enable her escalation from private to public malice.
For the rest of this section, I am going to examine a “canon” of female poisoner pamphlets produced between the years 1844 and 1850. These include at least eight different texts about eight ostensibly different poisoners. Because their publishers were shamelessly intertextual, however, they quite literally copied each other, just altering names, dates, places, and body counts. So the four different “Sophia Hamilton”s by William H. Jackson are really the same Sophia, sometimes appearing in Canada, sometimes in Hannah Kinney’s home state of Maine. Sophia is also the three different “Ann Walters” picked up by American publishers and moved to Maryland and Delaware—where she takes up with the slave trade in between murders. Perhaps fearing a similar theft, J. S. Calhoun, self-described “Attorney at Law” and the “editor” of the two different “Mary Jane Gordon”s, made

24 Because these pamphlets were “ephemeral” literature, many were not preserved. The ones that survived have not been collected into any one archive or index and so are difficult to find and easy to miss.

25 William H. Jackson, Life and Confession of Sophia Hamilton, who was Tried, Condemned and Sentenced to be Hung, at Montreal, L. C., on the 25th of November, 1844, for the Perpetration of the Most Shocking Murders and Daring Robberies Perhaps Recorded in the Annals of Crime (New York: Publisher, 1844); William H. Jackson, Life and Confession of Sophia Hamilton, who was Tried, Condemned and Sentenced to be Hung, at Montreal, L. C., on the 22d of January, 1845, for the Perpetration of the Most Shocking Murders and Daring Robberies Perhaps Recorded in the Annals of Crime (Montreal, L. C.: Publisher, 1845); William H. Jackson, Life and Confession of Sophia Hamilton, who was Tried, Condemned and Sentenced to be Hung, at Frederickton, on the 8th Day of April, 1845, for the Perpetration of the Most Shocking Murders and Daring Robberies Perhaps Recorded in the Annals of Crime (Frederickton, N. B.: Publisher, 1845). There also seem to be two variants of the 1845 Montreal text—one of which criticizes the American Revolution and the other of which avoids this critique but inserts further arguments about the need for Biblical authority. Further quotations will come from these Montreal versions.

26 Confession of Ann Walters, the Murderess! Also the Execution of Rev. Enos G. Dudley, at Haverhill, N. H., May 23d, 1849. To Which Is Added the Confession of Mrs. Mary Runkle, Who Was Executed for Murder at Whitesboro, N. Y. (Boston: Skinner’s Publication, n. d.); Confession of Ann Walters, the Murderess! Also the Execution of Rev. Enos G. Dudley, at Haverhill, N. H., May 23d, 1849. To Which Is Added the Confession of Mrs. Mary Runkle, Who Was Executed for Murder at Whitesboro, N. Y. (Proprietor, 1850); Confession of Ann Walters, The Murderess! Also the Life and Execution of Sam l. Green, A Notorious Robber (Boston: Dr. H. B. Skinner, 1856). Further quotations will come from the 1850 edition.
sure he claimed copyright privileges in the text of his pamphlets so that only he could plagiarize himself.\footnote{27} Quite literally, these early pamphlets were reproductions of the same fantasy: the same story about the same phantasmal female fiend.

The content of these pamphlets draws on the stereotype of the corrupting woman and ostensibly supports traditional authority, but the pamphlets also rely on a newspaper or exposé verisimilitude that is more consistent with sentimental and sensational literature and its unmasking of oxymoronic oppressors. In the crudest deployment of this method, publishers sometimes literally combined the female poisoner fictions with newspaper reports on real crimes—incorporating the fictions into pamphlets that recount men’s actual and, by comparison, less terrible crimes. The most amusing instance of this juxtaposition occurred in the case of Ann Walters who gleefully poisoned, shot, knifed, bludgeoned, and strangled a dozen people. This fiend’s story appears in pamphlets that include relatively sympathetic portrayals of male criminals. One included narrative, which follows the “Life and Adventures of Samuel Green,” calls this rebellious rogue “our hero,” and even though Samuel ends his career of thievery and vice by murdering a peddler, the crime appears almost

\footnote{27 “The right to this production is confined to one of his agents, therefore, none has authority to sell under the penalty of law. JOHN S. CALHOUN” (30). J. S. Calhoun, Attorney at Law, Augusta, Maine, Life and Confession of Mary Jane Gordon, who was Tried, Condemned, and Hung on the Twenty-fourth Day of June 1847, for the Murder of Jane Anderson, a Native of Vassalboro, Maine. Her Trial, Counsellors’ [sic] Debates, Judge’s Charge to the Jury, and Final Sentence, Condemnation and Execution, etc. Carefully Collected by the Author . . . (Augusta: J. S. Calhoun, 1847); J. S. Calhoun, Attorney at Law, Covington, Kentucky, Life and Confession of Mary Jane Gordon, who was Tried, Condemned, and Hung on the Twenty-fourth Day of February 1849, for the Murder of Jane Anderson, a Native of Covington, Kentucky. Her Trial, Counsellors’ [sic] Debates, Judge’s Charge to the Jury, and Final Sentence, Condemnation and Execution, etc. Carefully Collected by the Author . . . (Covington: J. S. Calhoun, 1849). Subsequent page numbers will come from the 1847 Augusta version.
accidental. And it “weighed heavier on his conscience than any other of his misdeeds.”

Another pamphlet matches Ann with the touching last words of Reverend Enos G. Dudley, a pious minister written as completely innocent of his wife’s murder and convicted upon the strength of circumstantial evidence, “false report,” and “prejudice.” Typically, a sensation or seduction novel would cast a character like Dudley in the role of hypocritical, seducing minister—privileged oppressor of beset womanhood; but the pamphlet turns that story around and re-casts him as the “victim of popular prejudice and delusion.” This reversal is purposive and rewrites the tale’s “real” precursor. Although the pamphlet remains vague on the details (unlike the gory renderings of Ann’s killings), Dudley’s case evoked the other famous murdering reverend of the nineteenth century, Reverend Ephraim K. Avery. In 1833, Avery allegedly murdered Sarah Cornell, a poor young woman from his congregation, who also happened to be five months pregnant, reportedly with his child. Although judges at first dismissed the case, which pitted the posthumous written testimony of a sluttish girl against the word of an upstanding citizen, an outraged crowd pursued Avery and

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28 Confession of Ann Walters, the Murderess! Also the Execution of Rev. Enos G. Dudley, at Haverhill, N. H., May 23d, 1849. To Which Is Added the Confession of Mrs. Mary Runkle, Who Was Executed for Murder at Whitesboro, N. Y. (Proprietor, 1850); Confession of Ann Walters, The Murderess! Also the Life and Execution of Sam’l. Green, A Notorious Robber (Boston: Dr. H. B. Skinner, 1856) 27-8.

29 Confession of Ann Walters, the Murderess! Also the Execution of Rev. Enos G. Dudley, at Haverhill, N. H., May 23d, 1849. To Which Is Added the Confession of Mrs. Mary Runkle, Who Was Executed for Murder at Whitesboro, N. Y. (Proprietor, 1850) 24-28. Although Dudley’s situation and last words seem too melodramatic to be completely accurate, McDade says the case at least “seems genuine.” But I tend to think it was invented or at least altered to echo the Avery-Cornell case. (See below.) Thomas M. McDade, The Annals of Murder: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders from Colonial Times to 1900, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961, 306.
forced a trial. When the jury acquitted, mobs of angry men threatened the minister until he fled to parts unknown. The class conflict that erupted between the upper-class ranks of ministers, judges, and jury men (who identified with the reverend) and the “mob” (who took the trangressive woman’s side) parallels the dichotomies that develop in later female poisoner pamphlets. Not surprisingly then, McDade records no less than twenty known publications devoted solely to the Avery case, a prodigious number at this time. The Walters-Dudley pamphlet thus could easily have echoed these works in order to revise the Avery case in a way that justified its privileged male villain.30

Including the female poisoner narratives with genuine stories of male criminals also served another function: it added a further degree of plausibility to a ludicrously implausible fantasy. The accounts of female poisoners were so outrageous that one finds it hard to imagine that the savvy nineteenth-century reader would credit them at all. In their various incarnations, Hamilton, Walters, and Gordon rack up an impressive body count, almost 150 total, and their authors suggest that the actual numbers could be much higher. Each of the Hamiltons kill at least sixteen people, while the Americanized Walters settle for an even dozen a piece. But with a minimum body count of twenty-two, the Gordons rank as the pamphlet genre’s most vicious female fiend. Her victims include her infant, her husband, a lover, her father,

her female lover’s male lover, her sister-in-law, and Calhoun even credits her with the infamous walk-by shooting of Charles G. Corlis (“J. Corles,” 22).31

When we place these pamphlets in context, however, we see that they did not differ radically from the crime journalism of the time. They only played at the edge of an emerging popular yellow journalism, crowned by the likes of The Sun and The Police Gazette, which feasted upon dubious tales of sex and blood—especially if women committed them. Even stodgier periodicals like Brother Jonathan dusted off the rare, breathless all caps for stories about women murdering men. For instance, in the walk-by shooting of Charles G. Corlis: “THE MURDER WAS COMMITTED BY A WOMAN.” In the same issue, a man slits the throat of an eight-year old child, Singleton Mercer pleads temporary insanity in the murder of his sister’s seducer, and a male woodchopper chops his male houseguest; but no other story receives this typographic honor.32

Like the newspaper headline, the pamphlets were conveyed in a format that insists upon verisimilitude (if a bit hyperbolically), and they would invoke the language of authenticity. For instance: “And we will now endeavor to state the facts as they have actually transpired; and our readers may rely upon the account here given of her parentage, as they have been selected from the most authentic sources” (Ann Walters, 3). Like Poe’s “Mystery of Marie Roget,” the pamphlets would often deploy a modern form of intertextuality to corroborate their stories:

31 Mary Jane is part of a long line of poisonous or vampiric lesbians used for reactionary purposes by their creators. See for instance, S. Weir Mitchell’s Octopia, the villainess of his 1886 novel Roland Blake.

As regards the truth of the foregoing, we presume the greater portion of our readers throughout Canada and the United States have already seen an outline, if not a detail of her trial, through the columns of their numerous journals . . . If they will find a Montreal or Quebec journal of the middle or latter part of February their doubts will be satisfied. (Sophia Hamilton, 31)

(Remember, this statement is being made about a woman who died four times under the name of Sophia and thrice more under the name Ann.) The more sophisticated productions would pile up this corroboration within the pamphlet itself. Some would cobble together several versions of the story done up in non-fictional genres, such as the trial transcript, the confession, and the witness narrative. But most importantly, they would deploy the epistemology of the exposé, of careful, scientific methodology:

. . . I have spared neither time nor trouble in collecting every incident of her life with exactness, together with her confession, from the hands of the Rev. Mr. A. Leman, pastoral minister of Augusta, Maine. . . . I have examined the hidden mysteries of her life with scrutiny, omitting nothing of interest to the readers, unraveled the cruel murders she committed, the shrewd and treacherous designs ever modelled [sic] by woman. And I assure you, reader, I feel it a duty incumbent upon me as a friend of society, to expose to the world the vice and wickedness which is existing amongst us in these very days in which we live . . . (Mary Jane Gordon, 4, 6)

Notice the “editor’s” language of detection and deliberate revelation: “collecting every incident . . . with exactness . . . examined the hidden mysteries . . . unraveled . . . the shrewd and treacherous designs.” Like Kinney’s rhetoric, this language aims to alter the reader’s perception of “things as they are” by showing us things as they really are under the mask of appearances. The editor, Calhoun, feels compelled to insert yet another layer of corroboration and adds the word of a traditional ministerial authority to his exposé. But this minister is also an everyman—Rev. Mr. A. Leman or “Rev. Mr. The man.” Calhoun threads references to the Genesis story throughout his narrative, so we could possibly read “A.” as “Adam” thus adding another patriarchal
level to the name. If so, Leman is not only the common man but he also sports a masculinity quadrupled, with two patriarchal titles (Rev. and Mr.) added to his two manly names (A[dam] Leman).

Calhoun’s Mary Jane Gordon pamphlet revolves around this kind of playful mixing of modes of authority and combining of modern techniques with older tropes. Its plot closely approaches the Witham pamphlet in its slippery-slope narrative structure, which in this pamphlet is figured as an ever-widening misanthropy. Gordon begins her slide as a “haughty” and materialistic coquette, who pursues pleasure and falls into sexual impropriety: “. . . previous to her marriage she revelled [sic] in almost all the enjoyments of a city life, resorted to balls, theatres, &c., and her husband’s pay being not sufficient to support such a life of enjoyment, she became careless about him, and resorted to other means of supporting her career [i.e. prostitution], which he very soon apprehended, jealousy becoming clear” (6). Like Lucretia Chapman, Gordon too “revelled” in luxury, and instead of Kinney’s tale of financially incapable husbands, Gordon’s narrative explains that her husband’s pay is simply “not sufficient” to support a profligate libertine. After her sexual fall, she escalates her “carelessness about” her husband into contempt and hatred for him. So she flings her newborn son into a river to gain “victory over the father.” When he returns home from his sea voyage and does not find the child he expected and instead Gordon denies ever being pregnant, he grows suspicious of her and finally “denied her as his wife” (9). Nevertheless, as “the power of darkness” tramples the “laws which regulate that mutual love and unanimity,” she is able to delude him with sympathy long enough to murder him (9).
The pamphlet’s anxieties about this power of delusion and its effect upon these “laws” resembles Witham’s similar concerns about the way that heterosocial sympathy threatens masculinity and social order. We see this from the first page as Calhoun relates a “twofold” purpose for writing or “editing” his pamphlet:

First, to lay before the world an entire confession of an inhuman murderer, whose cruel deeds no language can describe nor mind conceive, perpetrated in these very days in which we exist. Secondly, as a warning to all people, young and old, to not allow themselves to be drawn by the fair pretensions of woman so that they may avoid the unmerciful grasp of delusion, lying in wait for them . . .(3)

The second goal—to warn people about “the fair pretensions of woman” and the “delusion” she creates—falls in line with Witham’s argument about the dangers of the fascinating daughters of Eve. The pamphlet later elaborates and argues that people, specifically men, “allow themselves” to be deluded because they allow themselves to feel sympathy for women. For instance, Gordon begins her career as a mass murderer by selling corpses to the “well known body known as physicians,” and she starts this new business with her husband’s corpse (9). But he only falls prey to her malice because of his sentimentalism. After she sends him a letter characterizing herself as a suffering sentimental heroine—“forlorn, dejected, and despised by all my relations . . . friendless”—, against his better judgment he agrees to see her one last time (7). He responds to her literary efforts as a good sentimental reader—with tears:

He received the letter and gazed upon it attentively; he perused it over and over . . . His spirit became aroused into tenderness, and reflected on . . . the frailty of woman; he burst into tears and wept bitterly as he gazed over the letter on which her sentiments were written. (8)

He sympathizes and becomes “deeply affected for her misfortune” (8).
Calhoun blames this sentimental discourse and its ethic of sympathy with transgressive women’s woes for creating an epistemology that entertains moral ambiguity and thus encourages men to listen to and validate the morally ambiguous (and dangerous) woman’s testimony. Calhoun comments that this tragic missive casts the “mantle of misfortune . . . around Gordon’s husband, the veil of delusion suspended over his eyes which blinded his way, increasing with the delusion of woman, until it became so powerful that it predominated” (8). In other words, the tale of her suffering generates a sympathy that, instead of revealing truth, obfuscates it and creates a “veil of delusion.” This literary “veil of delusion” amplifies the effect of the already dangerous “delusion of woman” and stupefies the husband. When he returns home “to console” her and “listened to her with sincerity,” she announces to him that he is going to “fall this night a victim unconscious of approaching doom” and yet he “remained unmoved” as she fetches a sword and runs him through (8). The crude symbolism of this action displays Gordon’s phallic nature and points out that her husband’s sympathy allowed her to appropriate that power and penetrate him. Empathizing with and listening to women, though the key to Stowe’s later vision of ideal heterosocial masculinity, leads to an emasculating ruin here.

Calhoun’s first stated goal compares Gordon’s monstrousness (and the masculine failure that allows it) to an intrusion of barbarism into civilization. What makes the “inhuman murderer” so remarkable is that she does her work “in these very days in which we exist” or “in these days when religion is penetrating to the far distant climes of the earth”—the era of Christian civilization, the “enlightened age” (3-4). He argues that “we might not be so much surprised at those eventful
transactions, so inconsistent to feelings, had we lived in those days which have passed
when barbarism overshadowed the face of nature” (4). Yet those very “feelings” that
define a religious and enlightened civilization against barbarism, the “tenderness”
toward human life that the Kinney prosecution worried about, leave civilization along
with men’s bodies vulnerable to destruction by the monstrous woman: “. . . crime and
vice and murders the most sanguinary are increasing; still perpetrating under the roof
of seemingly apparent hospitality—perpetrated by woman, so inconsistent to
humanity and her sex” (4). Gordon displays that perversion of the domestic, that
“seemingly apparent hospitality,” when she sits her husband at the kitchen table to
murder him and, more especially, when she invites subsequent victims to dine on
poison soup or cabbage (12, 16). In similar fashion, Sophia Hamilton and Ann
Walters become “seemingly” hospitable proprietresses of inns, where they allow the
guests to stay free—until they murder them and take all their money (often at the
kitchen table as well). This “sanguinary” behavior, however, appears “inconsistent”
with “feelings” and with current Christian civilization, which contributes to
Calhoun’s stated difficulty in expressing Gordon’s crimes: the “cruel deeds no
language can describe nor mind conceive.” By contrast, the certainty of her guilt and
providential justice is easily understandable: “To such mortals the curse of
Providence will light upon one day or other as sure as the sun shines in the firmament
of heaven—a thing so certain as to be in the power of any ordinary mind to
comprehend” (32).

Calhoun’s pamphlet appears concerned to produce this clarity and certainty
from the unspeakable and ambiguous. He achieves moral certitude by creating two
fantasies that convert crises of moral upheaval, where the unsympathetic authority was wrong, and the transgressive woman was right, into moments of certainty and triumph for traditional authority: First, Calhoun’s “true” pamphlet reveals that Cotton Mather was right. Malicious witches exist. After Mary Jane murders her husband, she receives a visit from the “invisible world,” a phrase familiar to readers of Mather’s *Wonders of the Invisible World*, his justification of the Salem witch trials. In this text, Mather had tried to reduce the epistemological quandaries raised by the trials to theological verities grounded in the operations of invisible but also real and tangible entities such as Satan and his minions. Similarly, Gordon’s gentleman caller is undoubtedly the devil, who offers her his protection. In other words, at the very least she becomes a lost soul, and at worst she resonates with the Satanic witch, that quintessential alien and nightmare (10). Calhoun thus goes beyond body count to make Mary Jane a moral alien—a creature clearly and even metaphysically evil. If sympathy is the problem, Mary Jane must become an inhuman monster, beyond the pale of compassion.33

Second, Calhoun imagines a trial that is not simply a forum “to present and fairly evaluate competing factual accounts and legal interpretations of disputed events,” which leaves room for doubt.34 Rather, when a neighbor finally catches Gordon murdering her new sister-in-law, Calhoun’s version of the trial transforms it into a factory for absolutes—one that fashions a clear guilty result and destroys


34 Cohen, 28.
sympathy for the condemned. While the Kinney prosecution worried that jurors would shy away from pronouncing a guilty verdict in a capital case because of their sympathy for a “trembling” prisoner, Gordon’s judge closes the case by removing her from this shared “sympathy” for the condemned:

> When men are drawn in ordinary circumstance under the penalty of [death], there is generally some palliation, something to warm the sympathy of court and jury. Human nature may be led astray by the influence of the passions, laboring under some sympathy of smothered resentment suddenly awakened by the force of certain circumstances, depriving them of reason, and then they may take the life of an individual; depriving of life under that kind of excitement may avail of some sympathy; but this was not your case. You received no provocation; you have slept and meditated on the crime coolly; you have deliberately taken her life, so inhuman for woman . . . (24)

The judge’s statement makes clear that Gordon should not fit into the category of feisty rebel against authority. Unlike this revenge-driven criminal, her motives did not stem from an understandable or admirable impulse—“smothered resentment suddenly awakened,” which could “warm the sympathy of court and jury.” Her crime, rather, was a sign of her moral alienation, “inhuman for woman.”

Because Gordon does not deserve any sympathy, the legal romanticism of the trial breaks down, and instead Calhoun parodies legal romanticism and shows how a sympathy-free trial epistemology should have worked. The defense attorney spouts sentimental rhetoric in a way that exposes it as unfelt cliché—and he even gets that drivel wrong. He half-heartedly asks the jury to allow Gordon’s plea to “touch [their] hearts” and reminds them that “the life of a woman is in your hands” and that (incoherently) “it is better to take the life of two guilty than one innocent” (22-3). He then resigns because he “has the feelings of humanity”—real sympathy that does not feel for the female fiend—and so cannot defend the “unparalleled” Gordon (23). In
place of the Kinney prosecutors’ temporizing about motive or character, Gordon’s prosecutor simply refers the jury to the story of her life “written by herself. . . which you will find in the Glasgow Review.” (23) Rather conveniently, she gave all the particulars of her murders. This gesture substitutes textual authority for testimonial authority in the court. Instead of Judge Shaw’s cautions about circumstantial evidence, the judge instructs the jury that “[t]hose evidences produced are so undeviating, from which no other idea can I entertain but one of convincing guilt” (23). This apparent certainty, however, is only possible through a corruption of the trial and its conventions. It requires supplemental evidence, such as Gordon’s criminal autobiography, bizarrely published in a serial. And the rush to certainty elides key deliberative stages in the trial process. Perhaps because there is “not the slightest foundation for a doubt of [Mary Jane’s] guilt,” the judge rolls right into his sentence of death—not even allowing the jury to deliver a verdict—, but the omission is telling. In the Kinney trial, the jury’s judgment enabled these “common men” to display the sympathy and reason needed to claim the status of moral and epistemological elites. The text’s elision suggests that certainty can only be achieved by relying on established authorities such as the judge and traditional genres such as the last confession at the expense of the common man’s social elevation and sentimental discourse.

At the same time, the text undermines its own certainty. The “true” but really fictional genre, by its very nature, destabilizes the truth. A didactic allegory might compensate somewhat for the genre’s falsehood by pinning truth to a moral, but Calhoun exacerbates this instability at the very point where moral meaning should be
most obvious by creating nonsensical lessons. For instance, using providential language (such as the Holden brothers appended to the Chapman transcript), Calhoun has Gordon tell us what the reader should take from her story: “. . . a misspent life is the sure reward of a miserable end, I see it with sorrow, the phrase exemplified upon myself” (19). The moral is backwards. A “miserable end” should be the “sure reward” of a “misspent life.” The other way round makes no sense and implies that either the author mixed up his lesson or that Gordon does not understand what she “exemplified.” Last confessions in most colonial pamphlet literature reaffirmed traditional authority because the condemned embraced the judgment against her as justice and parroted the ministerial lesson that made her a graphic example of “sure reward” for misbehavior. Gordon’s last confession, like her trial, parodies and destabilizes the form. If Calhoun made a mistake, however, he repeats it in an emphatic manner. The Reverend Leman’s parting words to the audience exhort them to “remember, a misspent life is the sure reward of a miserable end” (30). And Calhoun immediately follows this moral with his own nihilistic interpretation of Gordon’s epilogue. Her lover/partner, Maria Mars, leaked Gordon’s story to the press, and, although this action could be seen as responsible to the community and enabling the conviction of a woman he called an “inhuman murderer,” Calhoun takes another lesson from it: “Let this be a warning to all never to place confidence in any, for the very one whom you will [sic] and whom you most adore, will perhaps be the very one who will deceive you when the day of trial, or some pecuniary advancement offers” (30). This “warning” not only fails to invest “confidence” back in traditional
authorities, it fails to invest it “in any” persons whatsoever and leaves the reader with only a vertiginous radical skepticism.

William H. Jackson’s earlier pamphlets about Sophia Hamilton, by contrast, do return more faithfully to older genres such as the last confession and even the execution sermon and their support for traditional authority. Hamilton follows the same slippery slope as Gordon: libertinism then infanticide then husband murder (by poison) then mass murder. Her narrative shows a similar concern with “delusion” or the feminine “art of subtle deception” (10) and with the intrusion of “barbarity . . . in the midst of a highly-civilized and Christian community” (5). But Jackson attributes this trouble to “disobedience in youth,” which creates a family history of dysfunction (Frederickton, 4). Hamilton’s father begins the process in England with his drunken libertinism, the grief of which kills his aristocratic father. He then crosses class barriers to consort with “a woman of low character” (Hamilton’s future mother), and they use up the patrimony left by the “wealthy nobleman” (6) so that they must emigrate to North America. There he furthers his downward spiral by participating in the ever-popular form of colonial disobedience—smuggling. Mary Jane Gordon’s father was also a smuggler and a traitor to his country but in the reverse direction. He “was a native of New York” whose marriage across colonial boundaries—to “a Scotch lady”—made him turn traitor and return to Britain: “[A]fter the breaking out of the Revolution, [he] had to abandon his country, and became a pirate on the eastern coast” (6)—presumably attacking American shipping on behalf of Britain. Hamilton’s father, however, betrays British not American authority and receives an appropriate providential punishment. In the course of his smuggling, he viciously murders a
witness to his crime and as he tries to stumble drunkenly away is “torn limb from limb by a large Scotch dog” (8) owned by the victim. It is possible to read these references to Scotland within the light of British imperial history. After the battle of Culloden, Scottish soldiers became the most feared arm of the British imperial army. They enforced British rule on rebellious colonials all across the empire. From the perspective of the Hamilton pamphlet, a “Scotch dog” appears as an appropriate enforcer of colonial rule, while in the Gordon pamphlet “a Scotch lady” seduces the American back into a treasonous colonial submission.

The disobedience of Hamilton’s father helps set the daughter on an evil path. Like her father, Hamilton meets a sticky end as a fitting punishment not so much for the multiple murders she commits but rather for her treason. Sophia makes away with an inoffensive Quaker guest, stabs her elderly African-American servant, strangles her new-born infant, and murders at least a dozen people for profit; but out of all the random carnage she perpetrates, Jackson returns to the poisoning of her husband as her most dire crime. The pamphlet’s final message concentrates exclusively on his murder as her greatest “barbarity.” In the text’s concluding pages, Jackson explains the moral of his story:

[I]t appears that then even the tenderness of the female sex, of which the foregoing pages furnish an example, is converted into the barbarity of the traitor, that she who should make her arm a pillow for the head of her husband, conspired to raise it against his life, that the bosom which should be filled with fidelity and affection planned his destruction (32).

During Kinney’s trial, Chief Justice Shaw used the phrase, “fidelity and affection” (632) to describe the treatment husbands should expect from their wives. In Jackson’s formulation and within the context of his argument about obedience, the phrase
indicates a further degree of subordination. The wife “should” display “fidelity,” a
term that evokes an almost feudal relation, and literally place herself beneath her
husband in a supporting position. Jackson’s anatomical metaphor says a great deal.
The “arm” is the instrument of a person’s agency and power, but the wife must
“make” or transform her agency into a support for the “head” or head-ship of her
husband. She “should” sacrifice her agency to his control, but when she freed her arm
and “conspired to raise it,” she unseated her husband and deranged the natural social
hierarchy. By contrast, Kinney described her sympathetic second husband as her
“pillow” or support. He is the “faithful heart which so often has pillowed this aching
head” (italics in original, 43). Her concentration on the “heart” rather than “arm” also
evokes a more sentimental rather than functional relationship in contrast with
Jackson.

When Jackson describes Hamilton’s domestic treason, he places it on a
continuum of treasonous “barbarity,” including the American Revolution and
atheism. He compares Hamilton to the revolutionary propagandist Thomas Paine, and
draws a clear lesson from their miserable deaths—the same moral that Calhoun later
perverts. He comments archly that while the “fruits of [Paine’s works in America]
require but little commentary . . . a miserable death is the fruits of a wicked life” (29).
He continues: “for how did Paine seem to feel . . . on the close of his earthly
campaign, he died like Voltair [sic] his predecessor and many other remarkable
infidels, yes reader, like Judas who betrayed his divine master afflicted by the bitter
gall of remorse and sorrow” (29).
Like Paine, who once “tramp[ed] on the holy ordinances of religion,”
Hamilton uses her final moments to contradict her “previously professed principles.”
She follows this declaration by bemoaning the offense she offered to male
authorities—husbands and fathers. Sophia’s guilt emerges from “those innocent
beings that I caused to leave the world by my cruel treachery; the tears of the
bereaved widows, and the cries of the helpless orphans” (29). The “innocent beings,”
who left behind widows and orphans, were husbands and fathers—betrayed
patriarchs. While a “feminist criminal” would characterize her crimes against men as
righteous attacks on illegitimate authority, she follows the older generic tradition and
affirms the justice of her fate and declares, “I deserve the cruelest death of any being
that ever existed” (27).

Like Paine, who had “flung the sacred volume to the wind” and then
supposedly recanted his treasons, on her own deathbed Hamilton too regrets her
disobedience, reaches for the Bible, and reaffirms the traditional authority that wields
it. The woodcut of Sophia’s deathbed scene beautifully illustrates this scenario even
more clearly than the description in the text. It shows a mildly dandified gentleman
minister standing over a pallet, reading aloud from a large tome, presumably the
Bible. Laid out upon the rumpled bed, we see a hag—her face hideously wrinkled and
dehydrated and her stomach swollen with poison in a monstrous mockery of
pregnancy. (Jackson’s sense of poetic justice has Hamilton poison herself and so
endure the agonies to which she subjected her husband.) In her right hand, she clasps
long tufts of hair, woman’s glory, which she has torn from her own head in a spasm
of remorse. She stretches this sacrifice up to heaven and the serene man of God—
beseeching his pardon. And “[p]lacing her eyes fast on the object of consolation [the Bible], she exclaimed, that she now ‘felt the pains of hell searing her very soul!’” (30). Thus she died. Jackson immediately adds a paean to “the civil law, which I hope will still continue to be rightly and justly administered, because on its administration depends our safety and happiness, as well as civil and religious liberties” (30).

The fact that she dies with her eyes “fast” on the Bible carries heavy rhetorical significance. When Dr. David Meredith Reese attacked popular or democratic movements such as abolitionism, he accused its supporters of delusion because these “ultras” did things not strictly authorized by the Bible. And he further invoked the Bible as a “common standard” to overcome delusion and practically shut down those movements. A similar strategy was used against suffragettes. In Reese’s words, anyone who supports egalitarian principles by privileging a non-Biblical or non-textual epistemology thinks herself “wiser or better than the Bible.” They are deluded and must return to sanity and submission. Hamilton’s final moments are a return to this submission. She validates the text—of the civil law and the Bible—the rule of law, not men. Yet, her physical position and the Bible’s physical position in relation to the minister metonymically endorse the figure who holds the Word over her. Her death subject to this text resets the proper social order by placing that rebellious “arm” once again under and at the service of traditional religious and political authority.

In 1850, Sophia Hamilton became Ann Walters—with some small but important revisions, or anti-colonial American rejoinders. The pamphlet was plagiarized by a Boston publisher who removed the short interpolated sermon, the deathbed woodcut, the last confession, and all the rhetoric about obedience to parental authority and about Paine and the American Revolution and atheism. Walters’s father now turns to “intemperance” and an “artful[]” woman because his cruel, aristocratic English father refuses to allow him to marry “the object of his first love” (4). A “Paine” reappears in ironic response to Jackson’s narrative, now as the virtuous victim of Walters’s father. And Walters’s erring patriarch dies by legal execution, not at the teeth of a “Scotch dog.” However, the pamphlet maintains Jackson’s argument about “civilization and morality” and domestic hierarchy. The poisoning wife still exhibits “the barbarity of a traitor” when she relinquishes “fidelity and affection” and “conspire[s] to raise” the “arm” that should be “a pillow for the head of her husband” (22).

But the Ann Walters narrative does make one telling plot addition. It relocates the barbarism from the colonial margins to a national fault line on the border between slave and free states, and it refigures southern social order as a threat to civilization. The narrative removes Walters and her nefarious inn to Maryland where “taverns in the southern countries differ in regularity from those of the northern states” (11). This change in environment furthers her corruption and becomes part of her slide down the slippery slope:

Although born in a free country [Canada] where slavery is abhorred, she soon imbibed a taste for the traffic in slaves, as our readers may easily perceive [sic] that her location was in a slave State where morality is not very exalted, as such a course could not possibly have been carried on in a free State so
long, without meeting the eye of detection. However, she so managed matters as to make her house a kind of head-quarters for slave dealers, who generally had plenty of money[,] she soon got round her a gang of ruffians who were perfectly obedient to her will and ready to do the most bloody acts whenever she commanded” (11).

Abolitionist texts had long portrayed the immorality promoted by slavery, especially sexual immorality and a barbaric cruelty. The pamphlet links “morality” with a capacity for “detection” and argues that the greater morality of the free States also guarantees a greater ability to contain the female fiend. In the South, on the other hand, she can indulge her “taste” for murder and cruelty more freely and even gather together a fraternity of like-minded and obedient accomplices.

In the Sophia Hamilton pamphlets she crossed genders: “although rather masculine; she was very fascinating, and seemed to possess a soft, tender, agreeable disposition” (10). But in the Walters pamphlets, as she becomes southern, she almost seems to cross species, from human to animal. In the other major addition to the text, Walters attacks a crying baby:

She was so enraged upon hearing its cries, that she flew at the child tearing the clothes from off the victim of her wrath, biting it at the same time in the most dreadful manner, and as if this was not enough to satisfy her brutal disposition, the child still continuing to scream, she caught it up and held it with her hand to the fire, until its face was burned to a cinder (14-5).

She becomes “brutal,” an animal who bites and tears. And the narrative implies that she transforms into this brute because the slave system allows it. The baby is the child of a slave, and so Walters has complete power over his or her life with no one willing to inquire or stop her. The discourse of legal romanticism and sentiment drew connections between sympathy and insight into truth and sympathy and modern civilization’s “tenderness” toward human life. However, in a slave state, the pamphlet
suggests, Walters’s “tender looking countenance” covers an animalistic savagery. Yet Walters’s deception, like Hamilton’s, does eventually crumble in the face of roused public suspicion. A virtuous Quaker goes missing in both narratives and finally the neighbors “remarked the idle, sauntering fellows that were perpetually hovering” around her inn “until suspicion became so strong in the minds of the people, that they finally resolved to make a private search,” at which point they discover a cellar full of corpses (19). Though long overdue the suspicious public mind does come to the aid of civilization and authority.

As in Witham’s pamphlet, public rumor and investigation act as society’s and men’s best safeguard against malevolent women, but their belatedness make for a rather haphazard protection at best. This insufficiency pervades the early pamphlets. They attempt to clarify the ambiguity left by trial reports and sentimentalism by turning to traditional hierarchies. They appear to support these models of authority by purveying a narrative of the corrupting alien woman situated within obsolete crime genres. But the sensational and contradictory content of these forms ultimately destabilizes both this epistemology and authority.

In the next section, I analyze the second wave of “true” female poisoner pamphlets. The pamphlets of the 1850s abandoned Witham’s model, dropped traditional genres, and instead adopted the sentimental paradigms found in Kinney’s pamphlet and in sensational “radical-democrat” literature. But these pamphlets maintain the earlier pamphlets’ instability. They undermine their own romanticization of the female poisoner with conventional moralistic ends such as suicide or the convent. While the early pamphlets take up the stance of traditional patriarchal
literature but then trouble it with bizarre plot twists and rhetorical modes, the newer pamphlets seemingly embrace a feminist and radical-democratic mode but subvert the “Subversive fiction” with conservative or conventional moralism that throws into question the ultimate feasibility of subversion.

III. The “True” Female Poisoner Pamphlets of the 1850s: The “Tender Avenger” and the Work of Arthur R. Orton

Although Ann Walters’s pamphlet would appear at least once more in 1856, the other “true” female poisoner pamphlets of the 1850s would undergo a radical remodeling. Gone were the crude woodcuts of mannish fiends and the lascivious monsters driven by innate corruption. Beautiful, daring adventuresses took their place, heroic women who followed the model of the Tender Avenger or feminist criminal motivated by the desire to wreak vengeance upon vile seducers and tyrannical husbands. While the earlier pamphlets rested the blame for the female poisoner’s crimes on her inhuman moral corruption and the failure of traditional authorities to be sufficiently stern and patriarchal, the new pamphlets, like Reynolds’s “radical-democrat” sensation fiction, cast their poisoners as basically good women abused by deceitful and unsympathetic “oxymoronic oppressors.”

This literature, however, does not quite fit the “Subversive” model that Reynolds holds out for other popular sensational fiction. Rather the second wave of pamphlets often advocates the elite sympathetic masculinity elevated in the discourse of legal romanticism, and the female poisoners in these texts are driven just as much by the search for true love with sympathetic men as they are by the desire for
vengeance upon their abusers. Like the early pamphlets, these narratives typically initiate the fiend’s criminal career with a painful contrast between the paradisiacal domestic relationship and a fallen reality; but while the first pamphlets based that relation on the wife’s “fidelity and affection,” these later pamphlets form it around an emotional mutuality that excludes the corrupt inequalities of the world, a “magic circle [of] pure and unalloyed love, gushing up spontaneously from each heart.”\textsuperscript{36} The early pamphlets attributed the destruction of domestic paradise to woman’s innate corruption and deceit, but the works of the 1850s place the original blame on failures of masculinity that violate this heterosocial sympathy. Unlike the early pamphlets’ fixed male figures, the men in these texts often morph from sympathetic to oppressive. The temptations and pressures of an inegalitarian society invade the “magic circle” and cause the male leads either to crumble or to abandon their initial heterosocial and sympathetic masculinity for a patriarchal or homosocial masculinity, which seeks to control or exclude the feminine. In short, their behavior frustrates the heroine’s quest for heterosocial partnership, and this betrayal occasions her violence. She, in effect, becomes the enforcer not so much of feminist liberation but rather of sympathetic masculinity. By punishing bad masculinity, the female poisoner also becomes the defender of American civilization. In the earlier texts, civilization depended upon “tender feelings,” which were violated by the monstrous feminine, and so crushing her protected modern social order. But, in these texts, unsympathetic

\textsuperscript{36} Isabella Narvaez, the Female Fiend and Triple Murderess, or The Life, Confession and Execution of Isabella Narvaez, the Atrocious Murderess of Three Husbands: who was Hung at Shelbyville, Mo., Friday, Sept. 30, 1853. (Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Buffalo: A. R. Orton, 1855) 25-26.
masculinity poses the most serious threat. Civilization no longer relies upon the containment of the female alien and the assertion of patriarchal masculinity but rather upon the protection of heterosocial sympathy and sympathetic masculinity—specifically from oppressive patriarchal and homosocial masculinity.

Redistributing the blame for poison from corrupt women to tyrannical men corresponds to a displacement of setting from North to South and a recasting of characters from northern to southern men. The connection between American civilization and sympathetic masculinity was a longstanding trope of sentimental literature, but the equation becomes particularly important in the 1850s as a rhetoric for distinguishing civilized northern from supposedly uncivilized southern visions of American nation and empire. Thus the pamphlets shift from criminalizing the female alien to attacking harmful masculinity in part because the argument has moved from an internal debate about elite New England manhood to a concern with southern masculinity. While the earlier pamphlets concentrated their attention on the Atlantic coasts, the newer pamphlets move to southern and western settings. The new female poisoners exchange older immigration patterns between Britain and the east coast of North America for patterns of movement from free to slave states, from the South to the newly acquired western territories, and finally from the South to countries earmarked for future conquest by southern imperial ambition, such as Cuba or Mexico. At the same time, the men involved in these stories no longer derive from good northern stock. They are “southerners”—men from the American South or foreigners associated with racially and religiously suspect “southern” lands, such as
southern Italy, Greece, Mexico, Jamaica, or Cuba. These “southern” men become the source of corruption.

In short, the pamphlets of the 1850s displace poison from North to South, from disobedient northern women to weak and savage southern men. The narratives become meditations on the futility of seeking lasting heterosocial sympathy and civilization among southern men who manifest a regressive homosocial form of masculinity and champion the social order founded upon it. At the same time, however, these pamphlets toy with the possibility that southern masculinity may actually be more open to a more fully androgynous heterosocial union—one that would allow both partners to literally wear the pants and become joyfully liberated. (As we will see in Chapter Four, this potential deeply troubles Oliver Wendell Holmes and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and they shape their female poisoner texts as attacks on this extreme southern heterosociality.)

Part of the pamphlets’ geographic and ideological change may stem from the American public’s greater attention to questions of empire, race, and nation in the wake of the Mexican War. With the country’s violent movement toward imperial power, the nation suffered rising tensions over what form this empire should take, a conflict which further highlighted regional fault lines and occasioned arguments between North and South over what to do with non-Anglo-Saxons in the newly-acquired and potential territories and what proportion of this sudden empire should be slave and what proportion free. North and South began to appear less like organic
parts of the same body and more like competing civilizations, and the female poisoner pamphlets become part of a corpus of literature devoted to this puzzle.\(^{37}\)

As the pamphlets became incorporated into this new debate about northern and southern civilization, they significantly altered their form. These North-South tensions appeared in the 1850 Ann Walters adaptation of the Sophia Hamilton pamphlets, but later pamphlets went through a stylistic change much more thorough than the selective editorial comments of the Walters texts. The pamphlets of the 1850s eventually dropped the Witham interpretation of the female fiend and the bricolage style that cobbled together different crime genres and versions of the criminal’s story. Instead, as the texts shifted their focus further to the South, they adopted a unified sentimental and first-person autobiographical mode, influenced largely by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s story of the mulatta poisoner Cassy. This mode of presenting the female poisoner mimicked the style and plot details of Cassy’s sentimental autobiography, which Stowe related in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and at even greater length in her dramatization of the novel, *The Christian Slave* (1855).

The pamphlets of the 1850s, particularly those by Arthur Orton, appropriate much of Stowe’s basic narrative structures, character types, arguments, and literary methodology. For instance, Cassy’s story takes up the slippery-slope narrative that Witham and the early “true” female poisoner pamphlets used but reveals that unsympathetic men, not corrupt and deceitful women, occasioned each slip. Cassy is

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a beautiful, true woman devoted to domesticity and in loving sympathy with her “husband” (that is, her master). Her transition from fallen woman to infanticide to “husband”-poisoner all happens because of his fall from sympathetic to homosocial masculinity—a drop occasioned by his scheming friend. This friend leads him out of the house first to drink then to gamble then to pursue other women—until he finally sells Cassy to the friend. After this abandonment and abuse, Cassy turns poisoner to protect her son from this brutality. The deceitfulness of men and their progression from sympathetic to oppressive homosocial masculinity, sketched out in Kinney’s pamphlet as well, becomes a major organizing theme in this second wave of pamphlets. At the same time, the pamphlets adopt much of Stowe’s argument that traditional, homosocial masculinity creates poisoners and barbarity while sympathetic, heterosocial men promote healthy femininity and civilization. The female poisoner, in Stowe’s model, acts as a militant defender of sympathetic masculinity and civilization—poisoning in order to protect vulnerable young males from being brutalized or becoming brutal themselves.

Stowe’s literary methodology, however, shuts down the most radical implications of the female poisoner as enforcer. As Reynolds argues, “[i]nstead of allowing the Conventional to be absorbed into or undermined by the Subversive . . . Stowe gives full expression to the Subversive but uses every weapon in the Conventional arsenal to defeat it.”\(^{38}\) In other words, Stowe creates a heroic “feminist criminal” such as Cassy but in the end reduces her to a pious true woman—re-domesticated and espousing Christian civilization and male rule. The pamphlets of

\(^{38}\) Reynolds, 77.
the 1850s borrow this methodology and perform a similar rhetorical dance. While early pamphlets, such as Mary Jane Gordon’s, take up traditional genres and arguments and destabilize them with their outrageous fictional content and paradoxical morals, the later pamphlets invert this formula. They work with “Subversive” genres, such as the feminist criminal’s autobiography, but then delimit the heroines’ sometimes incendiary feminist rhetoric with conventional outcomes just as traditional as the earlier pamphlets—i.e. suicide, execution, or the nunnery. The very perfunctoriness and arbitrariness of these endings, however, undermine their conclusions in a way that Stowe’s lengthier and more rational explanations do not. The pamphlets may use the romantic female poisoner narrative popularized by Cassy, but the ephemeral texts nevertheless do not produce a coherent character or moral position.

The pamphlet that best exemplifies the tension between the methodology of the early and late pamphlets is the *Trial, Conviction, and Confession of Mary B. Thorn, Who Was Sentenced to Be Hanged at Portsmouth, Va., May 17th, 1854, for the Murder of Thos. Brady & Family, Written at her Request, and According to her Dictation, and Prepared by the Publisher, William C. Murdock*. The pamphlets written and published by Arthur R. Orton, which we will examine next, abandon the bricolage style of the early pamphlets (which combines trial report and last confession) and instead rely solely on a single straightforward narrative—biography or more frequently autobiography. As its title indicates, however, the Thorn pamphlet pulls together the trial report and the last confession and also adds in a biography by
Thorn’s guardian, Mr. Black. But these accounts do not come to a unified final moral. Rather, they portray Thorn and the events of her history in starkly conflicting ways.

The pamphlet begins with Black’s version of Mary’s early history: Her parents were Jamaican planters. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father was swept out to sea by a hurricane when Mary was an infant—leaving her a wealthy heiress but, according to Black, not very beautiful or intelligent. He narrates her history with the unsympathetic approach that characterized the judgmental editors of the early pamphlets. However, the details of his own narrative discover him to be a terrible fool and an abysmal guardian. His decision to send Mary off to London with the scheming Mr. Stone precipitates her fall. The aptly named Stone does not sympathize with Mary or her best interests and only cares about his lineage through his dissolute nephew, the aptly named Mr. Thorn. Stone pushes Mary into marriage with Thorn, who helps her spend her inheritance for “four short years in glorious city slavery in fashionable life” and then “gambles” the rest away on bad stocks (8). They remove to Charleston, South Carolina where Thorn takes up drinking and verbal abuse until Mary has him committed to prison. When he gets out, he finds his former business partner, his wife’s suspected paramour, sitting in his house and attacks him, but the partner fights back and kills Thorn. Black responds by blaming Mary—calling her “... the guilty wife, whose wicked and treacherous conduct caused the premature death of her husband” (10). His judgment against her coincides with that of the suspicious southern public, who threaten to lynch or starve her: “The widow withdrew from public view, as threats of open violence were made against any house that would afford shelter to her for love or money” (10). The narrative then moves to
the touching scene of Stone weeping over Thorn’s grave. Because of that “imprudent union” (11) with the “wicked and treacherous” woman he cannot settle his fortune on the nephew now. The narrative ends with Mary sailing to Norfolk, where she works as a maid and then poisons a family with laudanum to steal their money. She is caught, tried, and executed.

The trial narrative that follows the guardian’s biography paints a very different picture, one that fits into the sentimental mode of legal romanticism, rather than the alienating one of patriarchal narrative. This discourse transforms the “wicked,” “plain,” and not particularly bright poisoner of Black’s account into a fascinating romantic beauty whose “pale countenance” and “large blue eyes . . . anxious to catch some object of consolation” provoke “tears” and “pity” from the assembled crowd (19).

Mary’s final characterization, however, comes from her autobiography, taken down by the publisher. And here again we see a radically different interpretation of Mary and her history—one that portrays her not as treacherous monster or sentimental victim but rather as a sentimental hybrid with the Tender Avenger. In other words, Mary portrays herself as a woman wronged by a cruel public and deceitful or weak men, but she seeks both vengeance and heterosocial sympathy. Like Cassy and Kinney, she depicts her early self as the good wife and sentimental heroine. She explains that she was not a lascivious adulteress, although her drunken husband “charg[ed] me with inconstancy” (21), and she did not have him arrested to put him out of the way of an affair but “in hopes of adjusting his distracted mind” (21). A deluded southern community simply misinterprets these actions: “Then the
cry of dishonor was re-echoed by a regardless public because I would not stop to explain my motives to every bar-room loafer that thought fit to weigh my affections to my husband, my sense of dignity and honor, by the corruption of his own heart, or the heat of his own inflated brain” (21). Like Ann Carson, Mary was accused of “conniving at [her husband’s] murder” with her supposed lover; but just like Carson (and Kinney) she claims a virtue superior to appearances. To escape their unjust “public vengeance” (22), she travels to California and tries to find love again—with a man who deceives her with a fake marriage then scornfully tosses her aside when his real wife joins him. Their lack of “sympathy . . . [which] could exult over a fallen and abused female” provokes Mary to turn Tender Avenger and murder them (23). She then moves to Mexico where she tries to find true partnership once again with a Mexican aristocrat who is immediately cheated out of his property and murdered by priests as he tries to steal some of his fortune back from a church (30). These masculine failures leave her penniless and desperate enough to turn poisoner and outlaw—although she claims she only meant to put the Brady family to sleep. Finally she poisons herself with “Savannah [Georgia] flowers” (32)—literally poisoning herself with the South.

Like Kinney and Cassy and Isabella Narvaez (see below), Mary goes through three “husbands,” whose failures disappoint in various ways. The narrative suggests that her futile quest for partnership, more than vengeance, malice, or greed, leads to Mary’s troubles. A nun who takes care of her after her disastrous second “marriage” and while she considers her third, sums up the lesson: “You are not tired of gambling; what security can you have that he is better than the previous husbands; and if he is,
which is very doubtful, you are unworthy of him” (28). Sequestration in a convent seems the best solution to the impossibility of a happy marriage based on good heterosocial relations, but Mary insists on “gambling” and loses. As the nun suggests, the deck is stacked against her: As a fallen woman and Tender Avenger, she is “unworthy” of a good man. Yet, at the same time, her worldly experience and phallic violence bring her closer to men and male experience—making her more fitted to an androgynous partnership than the naïve true woman she once was. As she seeks this ideal union, her choice of partners becomes progressively more exotic—moving from the British metropole, to the westernmost territory of the United States, to the potential American territory of Mexico. Of the three, her Mexican husband appears the most noble and sympathetic. An avenging criminal himself, he includes her as an equal partner in his theft, and she proves herself “equal to the emergency” by firing a pistol into the face of his murderer (30). The narrative thus suggests that she does finally achieve a sympathetic heterosocial partnership, but this union can only form in crime at the margins of the empire and only for a brief span before falling prey to corrupt traditional (in this instance, priestly) authority. This paradox forms the nucleus around which Arthur Orton creates his “true” female poisoner pamphlets.

Arthur R. Orton, although the most prolific publisher of “true” female poisoner pamphlets, remains an elusive figure. A publisher named Orton first surfaced in 1830 on the masthead of Williams, Orton, and Company from Hamilton, New York. The name “Orton” then appeared more consistently as part of a concern called “Miller, Orton & Mulligan” with addresses in New York City and Auburn. They published a wide variety of texts, which included works by and about
extraordinary women such as Fanny Fern, Joan of Arc, and the veiled murderess Henrietta Robinson. They produced at least two works that could be associated obliquely with the Democratic Party and sensational “radical-democrat” sensibilities, such as John Campbell’s *Atrocious Judges* (a history of high-handed judicial injustice) and the life of Andrew Jackson by George Bancroft, the “anti-institutional” historian and “Jacksonian intellectual” with a complicated relationship to Boston’s elite philosophical circles.39 But the publishers seemed to pay special attention to reformist works including Richard Hildreth’s popular abolitionist novel, *Archy Moore: The White Slave* and important slave narratives by Solomon Northrup and Frederick Douglass. They also published the first *Republican Campaign Songster* for the first Republican presidential campaign in 1856, which, given the antebellum era’s tight party-patronage system, strongly indicates their affiliation with the Republican Party.40

The only confirmed address I found for “Arthur R. Orton, publisher,” places him in Philadelphia sometime in 1856.41 His name did not appear in the city directory previous to 1856, which might indicate a recent move to the city or simply that Orton boarded in another household. McDade claims that “A. R. Orton” partnered with sensational “true” pamphlet publisher, E. E. Barclay, to produce at least one pamphlet


40 I obtained the information about Orton’s possible early career and publications from searches of multiple library and archive catalogs.

41 His residence was at 580 South 5th Street and his business nearby at 113 Chestnut Street. I found Orton’s Philadelphia addresses in *McElroy’s Directory* held in the city’s National Archives.
in Philadelphia in 1851. McDade does not specify which pamphlet this was, but the date and “true” style would correspond to a pamphlet about the “true” murderess Pamela Lee. The records I have found for the text, however, do not identify a publisher. According to McDade, Orton learned well from Barclay and “became a formidable contender” in the Philadelphia market, producing numerous sensational “true” crime pamphlets until 1857 when the bottom dropped out of the antebellum publishing industry—or he died or disappeared from the scene in some way. While Philadelphia cemetery records do not mention an Arthur Orton, the city directory for 1857 no longer shows him living at his 1856 address. Rather, it lists the resident as “Elizabeth A. Orton.” Particularly if the “A.” stands for “Arthur,” she was probably Orton’s wife and, as the newly listed resident, also possibly his widow. Other possible indicators of Orton’s demise are the movements of his protégé, M. A. Milliette. In 1856, Milliette produced his first “true” female poisoner pamphlet, *The Life, Adventure, and Elopement of Emily La Croix, The Poisoner*. But he only appeared under his own independent business address for the first time in 1857—just a couple doors away from where Orton worked.

42 Private History and Confession of Pamela Lee, Who Was Convicted at Pittsburgh, Pa., December 19th, 1851, for the Wilful Murder of Her Husband and Sentenced to be Hanged on the 30th Day of January, A. D. 1852. Written at her Request and according to her Dictation, and Prepared by the Rev. Augustus Dimick (Philadelphia: n. p., 1852).

43 McDade, 457. Furthermore, Elizabeth maintained an association with Milliette. In 1858, she was listed as resident at 13th and Christian Street, and in 1859 Milliette finally received a residence line in the directory at 1311 Christian Street, while Elizabeth disappeared again from the listings. The next year Alexander Milliette was listed as a publisher at that address, while M. A. Milliette vanished from the Philadelphia directory and stopped publishing. M. A. Milliette’s absence from previous directories could be explained by his status as a boarder—perhaps with the Ortons. And his continuing association with the widow Orton, particularly his taking over her address, may suggest a marriage. (Is it possible that Orton suffered a death worthy of one of his sensational female poisoner plots? A wife, frustrated by her husband’s business failures and consequent ill temper, turns for consolation to his sympathetic but ambitious junior partner, who is striking out on his own for the first time. Like Isabella...
In spite of his brief tenure as sensational publisher, during the period between 1852 and 1857, Orton re-invented the “true” female poisoner pamphlet genre. He maintained some of the trappings of the earlier pamphlets (the reverend editors, for instance), but he left behind the bricolage style and streamlined the pamphlet along Stowe-inspired sentimental lines. Orton’s titles reveal a great deal about how he performed this adaptation: *The Life, Career, and Awful Death by the Garote, of Margaret C. Waldegrave; otherwise Margaret C. Florence—Alias Mrs. Belleville, Madame Rolande, Madame Le Hocq, the Poisoner and Murderess, at Havana, Cuba, June 9th, 1852. For the Murder of Charles D. Ellas, Lorenzo Cordoval, and Pierre Dupont (April 14th, 1852,) who were Three Desperate Members of a Powerful, and Sanguinary Band of Robber, Counterfeiter, and Assassins, known as, “The Alumni” (1852, which also appeared in a German-language version); Zilla Fitz James, the Female Bandit of the South-West, or the Horrible, Mysterious, and Awful Disclosures in the Life of the Creole Murderess, Zilla Fitz James, Paramour and Accomplice of Green H. Long, the Treble Murderer, for the Space of Six Years. An Autobiographical Narrative, Edited by Rev. A. Richards (1852); The Eventful Lives of Helen and Charlotte Lenoxa, The Twin Sisters of Philadelphia (1852); Isabella Narvaez, the Female Fiend and Triple Murderess, or The Life, Confession and Execution of Isabella Narvaez, the Atrocious Murderess of Three Husbands: who was Hung at Shelbyville, Mo., Friday, Sept. 30, 1853. (1855); and Ellen Irving, the Female Victimizer, who Cruelly Murdered Sixteen Persons in Cool Blood, for Revenge on her Narvaez, she poisons her husband, waits a suitable period, and marries his friend. The scenario seems unlikely but would certainly make a sensational “true” end to a sensational “true” career.)

These titles place Orton squarely within the genre birthed by Witham, Jackson, and Calhoun. He appropriates their stock characters, plots, language, and even their epistemological poses. He puts on—and even highlights—traditional elites. He invents two reverends to establish the texts’ claims to authority and authenticity. He throws out epithets that establish his protagonists as alienated, moral monsters: a “Female Fiend,” an “Atrocious Murderess,” a “Female Victimizer.” These fiends escalate from private to public crimes, which label them a dire menace to society—in the earliest of his pamphlets following Witham’s progression from infanticide to husband- or paramour-murder to “large scale” criminal activity. Margaret Waldegrave and Zilla Fitz James fling their infants into streams, as do Hannah Kinney and Mary Jane Gordon. Ellen Irving murders sixteen people—following in the footsteps of Sophia Hamilton. Also in the footsteps of Ann Walters, the pamphlets

The full citations are: The Life, Career, and Awful Death by the Garote, of Margaret C. Waldegrave; otherwise Margaret C. Florence—Alias Mrs. Belleville, Madame Rolande, Madame Le Hocq, the Poisoner and Murderess, at Havana, Cuba, June 9th, 1852. For the Murder of Charles D. Ellas, Lorenzo Cordoval, and Pierre Dupont (April 14th, 1852,) who were Three Desperate Members of a Powerful, and Sanguinary Band of Robber, Counterfeiters, and Assassins, known as, “The Alumni” (New Orleans, Charleston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia: A. R. Orton, 1852); Zilla Fitz James, the Female Bandit of the South-West, or the Horrible, Mysterious, and Awful Disclosures in the Life of the Creole Murderess, Zilla Fitz James, Paramour and Accomplice of Green H. Long, the Treble Murderer, for the Space of Six Years. An Autobiographical Narrative, Edited by Rev. A. Richards (Little Rock, Arkansas: A. R. Orton, 1852); The Eventful Lives of Helen and Charlotte Lenoxa, The Twin Sisters of Philadelphia (Memphis, Richmond, Baltimore, and Philadelphia: A. R. Orton, 1852); Isabella Narvaez, the Female Fiend and Triple Murderess, or The Life, Confession and Execution of Isabella Narvaez, the Atrocious Murderess of Three Husbands: who was Hung at Shelbyville, Mo., Friday, Sept. 30, 1853. (Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Buffalo: A. R. Orton, 1855); and Ellen Irving, the Female Victimizer, who Cruelly Murdered Sixteen Persons in Cool Blood, for Revenge on her First Love, William Shannon, who had Betrayed her. Also an Account of her
even combine headlines about women’s crimes with seemingly less interesting male criminals.

Orton’s titles, however, depart from the early pamphlets by including the male participants in the female fiend’s crimes, thus focusing attention on her relationships with men, relationships that often provide her with reasons for her actions. While the early pamphlets combined male and female criminals in a way that further demonized the female poisoner, these titles create juxtapositions that humanize the female lead by contrast with a more fiendish cast of men. Unlike Enos G. Dudley, Samuel Green, and his benign ilk from the earlier pamphlets, Ellas, Cordoval, Dupont, Long, Shannon, and many of Orton’s other male characters are villains of the deepest dye. They seduce, betray, rob, and murder with less motivation and more malice than their female companions. They attack innocents with no provocation, and often, their tyrannical behavior precipitates the women’s crimes. While inexplicable innate poison motivated the earlier female poisoners, these women act for understandable, human reasons. The men’s stories appear in conjunction with the women’s, not to demonize them, but to provide them with these motives. The female fiends only take up the dagger or the vial in response to their initial victimization at the hands of men and male privilege. For instance, Ellen Irving begins her career “for Revenge on her First Love . . . who had Betrayed Her”—that is, seduced, robbed, and abandoned her. Although Orton ascribes Ellen’s immediate vengeful motives to the depredations of one man, he links her actions to a broader oppression and suggests that his female

fiends suffer under a kind of global conspiracy of men: what later feminists might call the international patriarchy. For instance, the Cuban authorities execute Margaret Waldegrave because she asserts her right to self-possession against a group of criminal men, “The Alumni,” who want to possess her body and her property. She stabs a former lover, whose mechanical will “to possess himself of Margaret” led him to murder her true love and partner (29). And she blows up his cohorts as they conspire to rob her. Orton, like Charles Brockden Brown, enjoys a good conspiracy—especially international criminal cabals, the bigger the better. “The Alumni,” inflected with class and institutional connotations, stand in for a thuggish international aristocracy, ranged against Margaret and seducing and pillaging innocent women and populaces—until they run afoul of the female fiend.

Based on the titles, one could argue that the female poisoner’s male oppressors are simply criminals and seducers and that women should just choose a benign patriarch and take refuge in marriage. A closer look, however, reveals that whether the men are lawful or outlawed, whether their love is licit or illicit, matters less than whether they are sympathetic and egalitarian. In other words, do they create a truly heterosocial domestic relation, which allows both parties a degree of androgyny? Are they independent, accepting, and liberal mates who create an egalitarian and stable partnership with a woman? Or are they abusive, weak, and oppressive boys who ally themselves with masculine privilege against their partners? Orton establishes the androgynous heterosocial relationship (in or out of marriage, criminal or lawful) as an almost utopic ideal—although a fragile and dangerous ideal. For instance, Margaret Waldegrave drops into her troubled career because her lawful
husband cannot withstand his father’s condemnation of their union. Sight unseen, drawing upon ancient stereotypes, the old patriarch supposes some “cunning woman” has seduced his boy into marrying without his father’s consent (16). Margaret’s husband then shoots himself and starts a cascade reaction that ends in her execution. He leaves her with an infant that she drowns rather than try to raise alone; a vicious fellow sees her crime and blackmails her; she poisons him, is found out and pursued as an outlaw, which drives her to more crime, and so on. By contrast, her later partner in crime treats her “respectfully,” and “[t]hey prospered well” together. Their good fortune, however, is criminal and ultimately fragile—destroyed by the possessive jealousy of Margaret’s former lover who kills her partner (28-9).

Out of all of Orton’s texts, Margaret Waldegrave’s narrative most closely approximates the earlier pamphlets and becomes the narrative in which Orton most directly problematizes the older genres and the misogynist discourse of poison that connects women to corruption, poison, and delusion. Margaret comes from parents whom Orton describes as “a pattern of that moral grandeur, youthful enterprise, honesty and benevolence, which characterized the New Englanders who first turned the sod of the sylvan valley of the Genesee” (11). In other words, Margaret herself derives from the colonial New England tradition, and her narrative becomes a logical point from which he can most directly revise basic aspects of traditional crime fiction. Orton’s other female poisoner texts (with the exception of the early Lenoxa pamphlet) use the criminal’s own voice to tell her story, thus bringing the audience to see the world from her perspective. The Waldegrave pamphlet, by contrast, is told in third rather than first person, and it also adopts the basic narrative about women and
corruption, following the Witham slippery slope. But the Waldegrave pamphlet ultimately deconstructs the connection between woman and corruption, poison, and delusion. The narrative exposes the discourse itself and the men who wield it as the true source of this corruption, poison, and delusion. For instance, Waldegrave believes the ideology that labels her fallen and poisonous. When she takes in a poor sickly girl, the child dies, and “Margaret was convinced in her mind, that her presence had withered the flower,” just as Beatrice Rappaccini’s empoisoned breath caused her lover’s “bouquet . . . to wither in her grasp.”

But Orton dashes her Hawthorne-esque nightmare with a firm “This was not so” (32). Margaret, however, continues to consider herself a contaminating influence that should be sequestered from the world, but the narrator again affirms that such a belief is “a delusion” (34). Whereas the early pamphlets cast their female poisoners’ pleasant exteriors as the “delusion” and their poison as the reality, Orton’s text explicitly reverses this formulation and attributes “delusion” to that older discourse itself.

Although all of Orton’s pamphlets tend to place the blame for poison on male oppressors, his most explicit feminist indictment of the discourse of poison pours from the eloquent lips of Zilla Fitz James. While Witham described his ex-wife as “the tempting fruit, with rich exterior, a mere mass of corruption,” Zilla digs into “society . . . a sickly, bilious thing, rotten at the heart, and only held together by hypocrisy and deceit,” and she openly calls this corruption “the hypocrisy of men.” And she means men, not mankind. Zilla had fallen prey to a wealthy, respectable...

man, who seduced and impregnated her, alienated her from her family, and then abandoned her to retake his former lofty station in society. She poniards him as he is leaving the theatre one night with his gentlemen friends. The next day she reads a newspaper article eulogizing his virtues and describing his unknown assailant as “a crazy woman.” This hypocrisy and blindness provokes Zilla into a bit of textual appropriation that encapsulates Orton’s methods. Her extended cry to heaven re-interprets and reverses the misogynist discourse of *Hamlet, Othello*, and the Sophia Hamilton narrative. She starts by spitting out the mad prince’s famous “What a piece of work is man!” speech: “‘How noble he was in reason, how infinite in faculties . . . in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god! . . . the paragon of animals!’” But Zilla repeats this formulation only to uncover “the reverse side,” which reveals man as a deluding poiser:

> pouring the delicious poison of deceit . . . into virtue’s ear, till it acted as a stupefying opiate to reason, making that hallowed sphere, a woman’s heart,—that contains empires of feeling, and the rich domain where pure and unalloyed love disports in his sunniest hours—‘a cistern for toads to knot and gender in’ (21).

With this final quotation, the soliloquy from *Hamlet* merges with *Othello*. In that play Desdemona’s supposed adultery transforms her from Othello’s pure “fountain” into a rank “cistern for toads to knot and gender in.” Traditional wisdom considered toads poisonous, and so the Shakespearean passage equates women’s sexual anatomy with a rather disgusting fecundating poison. But Zilla’s version shows from whence this poison originates. Privileged men first pour the “poison of deceit” into women and transform their “pure and unalloyed love” (like Isabella’s) into the fiend’s poison. The poisoning is a speech act whispered in “virtue’s ear,” a rhetorical delusion that
“acted as a stupefying opiate to reason.” In other words, it obfuscates and paralyzes the exercise of sympathy and the clarity that comes with it. Society responds as if afflicted by the seducer’s deluding discourse so that they drive the fallen woman from society “as Adam and Eve were driven forth from the garden of Eden.” Eve, however, carries the burden of the fall alone although man’s exercise of male privilege acts as the original source of corruption, “contaminat[ion],” and “disease.” In a revision of Hawthorne, the oxymoronic oppressor switches places with Beatrice Rappaccini, who “breathed upon this fragrant flower with his pestiferous breath, which blights and destroys.” While some influential antebellum medical scholarship blamed women for the spread of most venereal disease,⁴⁶ Zilla claims that the seducer “perhaps diseased [the flower], so that the very air seems impregnated with a foul and contagious disease, that is taken by the unwary who touch it” (21).

Zilla sounds very much like a “feminist criminal” here, but her most apocalyptically vengeful moment occurs at the end of her speech when she deploys the prophetic Jeremiad and threatens a bloody “purge” of a rotten society. Her speech echoes and inverts Sophia Hamilton’s final confession, in which Hamilton asserts:

Were I on the summit of Mount Ararat, and could utter language as loud as thunder, and could speak every tongue and language, and had around me all the nations of the earth, I would declare that I deserve the cruelest death of any being that ever existed, if I thought it would be the means of preventing one single misguided and cruel wretch from a similar offense (27-8).

⁴⁶ According to Dr. Augustus Kinsley Gardner, in 1864, “Women sometimes, and not very infrequently, communicate disease to those men who have sexual intercourse with them, in close proximity to the period of their monthly courses. . . . I do not believe that a man often communicates diseases to a woman.” Quoted in G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Routledge, 2000) 277-78.
In Orton’s version, Zilla rages:

O, that I had the eloquence of a Clay, a Webster, and many other God-like statesmen, and the voice of thunder, and could stand upon the apex of the loftiest mountain in America, that I might be heard from Maine to California! then would I speak as the voice of God, against this monstrous injustice to my sex. But as it is, I live and die unheard, with a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword, and society ‘will still cling to its idols,’ unless a mighty one rises up and purges it, root and branch (22).

Sophia wants to appropriate God’s power—his lofty position on Mount Ararat, his voice of thunder, and his pre-fallen, pre-Tower of Babel universal language—but only in order to bring it all crashing down upon her. Zilla, however, transforms Hamilton’s Biblical and self-abasing vision into a national and liberatory narrative. She shifts the scene to “the loftiest mountain in America,” and she equates “the voice of God” with “God-like [American] statesmen”—specifically the two orators most famous for crafting compromises in an attempt to hold together the union. Similarly, Zilla wants to use their power to “be heard from Maine to California” to shape her own version of an American union—to speak for a feminist reformation of the nation, which will prevent a bloody cataclysm. But denied the elite “God-like” representative’s public discourse, she must “sheath[] it as a sword,” and without the discourse that is metaphorically “as a sword,” she has wielded a real blade. And herein lies the threat. If, instead of reforming, society insists upon “‘cling[ing] to its idols,’” that is, bowing before these deluding elite men, Zilla fantasizes the possibility that “a mighty one [will] rise[] up and purge[] it, root and branch.” She echoes Thomas Jefferson’s approving response to Shay’s Rebellion: “The tree of liberty must
be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” In other words, Zilla embodies the disenfranchised and oppressed, the “voiceless,” disappointed by the nation’s falling away from republican promises. She enacts in a local way the vengeance and violence they could potentially offer to their masters. But her reference to a “mighty one” indicates either an eschatological or fascist solution. The line between patriots and tyrants blurs.

Zilla’s vengeful feminist sensibility, however, is deeply intertwined with (and limited by) her search for a heterosocial partnership. About Green H. Long, the Arch-Fiend and her truest partner in crime, she says: “We fell in love with each other, at first sight, and I at once commenced to travel with him, and share an equal part with him in all his good and evil deeds, for years, up to the time he deserted me, and left me in the city of Mexico.” Only at that point, does Zilla abandon her defiant stance and re-class her rebellious behavior as criminal: “Since that time, there has been a great change wrought in me. I have seen the error of my ways [and] . . . have become converted to a better life.” She plans to become a nun “and forever seclude myself from the world, and do penance the rest of my days, for the many dark and black crimes I have committed” (31). For all her righteous feminist speeches or perhaps because of them, Zilla repents much like a villain from an early pamphlet and returns to a deeply traditional order—the Catholic convent. But her avowal sounds hollow, and the reader is left to think that perhaps her final failure at a heterosocial relationship prompted her renunciation of the world.

Unlike the pure feminist criminal motivated only by revenge, all of Orton’s fiends need sympathetic love and spend most of their energy looking for it and most of their venom attacking the forces that make it fail. Orton’s most thorough examination of why these failures occur is *Isabella Narvaez; the Atrocious Murderess of Three Husbands*. As the title indicates, his evaluation of the institution of marriage is more sanguinary than sanguine. Isabella begins life with wonderful prospects. Well-off, beautiful, and intelligent, she displays characteristics valued in the energetic heroine: “laudable enterprise” and “a high calling” for “ardent labors in the field of science” (23). She marries for love, a wealthy Italian named Ensalvi, who is worldly, cultured, kind, and “beautiful as the Apollo Belvedere” (24). For the first six months, they achieve the ideal, pre-lapsarian union. In Isabella’s description:

. . . for the hour that saw you wedded saw a magic circle described into which you both stepped, and left the world without, while the space within that magic circle was to you both a new heaven and a new earth, in which dwelt pure and unalloyed love, gushing up spontaneously from each heart like pure, sparkling water from the fountain (25-6).

Isabella’s enthusiastic imagery invokes an edenic recuperation of the ideal heterosocial relationship. She invests both man and woman with a “gushing” phallic power and plenitude, and the couple’s fountains spout “spontaneously” and without apparent limit. Moreover, their love is “pure and unalloyed.” In other words, it flows “unalloyed” with poison—a purposive irony because, within a year of their marriage, Isabella poisons her husband.

However, the pamphlet does not rush to label Isabella as the poisonous first cause. When she explains the reason for the marriage’s “fall,” Isabella focuses on Adam’s role (rather than the more typical or Witham-esque concentration on the
snaky Eve): “Alas! that bright things should so quickly end! Yet we must remember that we are mortal, and have been born under the curse pronounced upon Adam, the day he so foolishly ate of the forbidden fruit . . .” (26). She appropriates a Biblical explanation but in a way that highlights the role of men. Isabella shifts into a sentimental or exposé mode on the next page when she declares: “Now I must [lift] the vail [sic] . . .” (27). That “vail” was hiding her husband’s role in their fall, and like Kinney, she exposes his faults to public view. We soon discover that Adam has much less to do with the marriage’s dissolution, than Adam’s legacy: her husband’s self-indulgent dissipation and tyranny. Like Cassy’s husband, Ensalvi first breaks “the magic circle” by replacing his wife’s company with that of a drinking buddy and abandoning their domestic paradise for homosocial culture. And then he is the first to alloy their love with alcohol. Ensalvi loses all their money in drunken gambling. He deceives her and breaks his promises to reform, but Isabella tries to follow the program set out for the virtuous wife: She “bore it meekly, and doubled [her] kindness toward him, hoping by moral suasion to reclaim him from the pit into which he had fallen, and in which he was wallowing” (27-8). The narrative quickly exposes the complete uselessness and bankruptcy of this true womanly “moral suasion” model. Isabella cannot persuade her husband into reason and a return to their pre-fallen relationship, and when she tries another approach and criticizes him, he “called me all the vile things he could think of, and ended by calling me the paramour” of his friend (29). Isabella then tries another, final solution and slips prussic acid into his wine. Isabella is enough of the optimist to think that a loving marriage can work, and she tries again and again—but her husbands always change. The next apparently
wonderful man she marries metamorphoses into a “lazy fellow” (34) before the
honeymoon even ends. A freak accident sends most of the couple’s earthly
possessions to the bottom of the Mississippi, and he just sits and sits in their hotel—
whining petulantly about lost luggage as they slowly run out of their final funds—
until Isabella buries a hatchet in his head. Her third husband again seems respectful
and loving, but soon becomes a shameless adulterer. Isabella stabs him.

As Orton draws Isabella along her “path of destiny” (39), she dispatches
representatives from a reformer’s list of the nineteenth-century man’s major self-
indulgences and privileges: drink and gambling with the guys, infantile sloth and
financial incapacity, and romance with multiple partners. This quick catalogue of vice
exemplifies the reason the idyllic heterosocial relation fails. The fallen, public world
of male privilege always intrudes and allows men so much license that they cannot
help but fall into abusive self-indulgence and away from sympathy. Woman’s “moral
suasion” has no power to counteract it, and the only option available in the fallen
heterosocial relation is terrible violence. For instance, Isabella’s third husband
enables and justifies his adultery by throwing “himself back on his dignity as one of
the lords of creation, and beg[inning] to assert his authority as a husband and the head
of the house.” At that instant, “there was no more manoeuvering between us—no
skirmishes and sham-battles—but war, open war in real earnest” (42). His lack of
sympathy and recurrence to traditional patriarchal authority backs Isabella into a
corner. This failure of heterosocial sympathy transforms men into tyrants and women
into fiends and destroys the new Eden.
However, we should note that her husbands’ actions do not transform Isabella into the female fiend. Their words precipitate her violence. A nineteenth-century commonplace considered men’s words problematic when they were used to seduce women. Consider George Lippard’s formulation: “unlike man [woman’s] animal nature is a passive thing, that must be roused ere it will develope [sic] itself in action [but] . . . no devil crouching in the flames of hell is fouler than Woman, when her animal nature alone is roused into action.”\textsuperscript{48} Woman transformed into a fiend or “devil” only under a man’s sensual verbal provocations. While this argument places the original blame for women’s corruption on men, it also validates the discourse of poison as real. Even though it targets men as the active agents in her fall, woman’s innate sexual corruption and “animal nature” makes her fouler than man or even a devil. But Orton does not believe that sexuality creates female monsters. In fact, some of his greatest characters are fallen women, who set up “free love” relationships with partners outside of marriage. Orton’s female poisoners take multiple lovers and, at the same time, take on “the character of an assassin, but not a wanton” (Waldegrave, 10).

Isabella does not become a fiend because some innate sexual corruption comes bursting to the surface after being stirred by seductive words. On the contrary, “blarney and soft talk” (42) pass over her, but “epithets” that draw on the misogynist discourse of poison—these drive her mad. She endures her husbands’ abandonment and abuse; but when they destroy Eden and then turn the blame on her, when they deploy a misogynist discourse of poison against her, when they recur to traditional

authority, she snaps. Isabella determines on vengeance only after Ensalvi calls her “vile things”: “This was too much for me to take from him after he had caused me so much misery, and I determined to be revenged . . .” (29). She puts up with “misery,” but she kills him “for daring to call me vile when I was as chaste as the icicle” (29). And again, when her second husband attacks her “with base epithets,” “[t]hen there was war in earnest, and in the heat of the moment I seized a hatchet . . . [and] sprang upon him like a tigress” (35). And again, after her third husband “tried to blame” her and then assert his lordly right to “have a pleasant time with the beautiful young lady,” “[t]his language set me in such a rage that I had no control of myself, and without a moment’s thought I drew a dagger . . . [and] sprang upon him with the fury of a tigress” (42, 47). Men’s “language” does “rouse[]” Isabella’s “animal nature” and transforms her into a “tigress,” but not because it releases some innate savagery beyond the pale of understandable human motives. Isabella murders because of moral outrage generated by hypocrisy, delusion, and betrayal—and, most of all, by disappointment.

Isabella’s journey through her disappointing husbands corresponds to her travels up and down the Mississippi, but Orton confines her most brutal misfortunes to slave states. Orton identifies the South as a place where civilized justice and sympathy recede into traditional condign punishments and thus where his beautiful but criminal heroines meet barbaric fates. In fact, with the exception of his last female poisoner who dies by suicide in Albany, all of Orton’s main protagonists meet their miserable and often unjust ends in the South or its projected territories, such as Cuba and Mexico. Margaret Waldegrave dies horribly by the garrote, executed by the
Cuban authorities for homicides arguably committed in self-defense. Zilla condemns herself to a Mexican convent, and Isabella hangs in Missouri. But Orton’s most obvious southern subversion of civilized sentiments and judicial procedure occurs in his narrative of *Helen and Charlotte Lenoxa, The Twin Sisters of Philadelphia*. Very uncharacteristically, Orton has the twins spend almost the entire pamphlet within the environs of a single location, Philadelphia. While there, the innocent sister Helen trusts a gentleman from Tennessee, and in a “stupor of passionate love and blind devotion,” she falls, becomes pregnant, and is subsequently abandoned (28). At the end of the pamphlet, Helen and Charlotte travel to Tennessee where Helen murders her seducer. Although Charlotte “stood horror-stricken” at Helen’s deed and “had not expected her sister’s vengeance to take such a bloody course,” she too is put on trial (40). The southern jury apparently ignores evidentiary rules presuming innocence: “Helen protested her sister’s innocence of the crime; but the jury had no evidence in coming to any other conclusion but that she was guilty, and they were both sentenced to undergo the extreme penalty of the law” (41). The southern public also appears arbitrary and violent, and the informal network of rumor that made Kinney and Chapman suffer “disapprobation” in the free states excites this public to attempt a lynching. The murder caused the greatest excitement among the citizens, and no sooner was it known than around the country it flew, with the swiftness which always attends bad news. Never did occasion bring out more undisguised wrath. Had it not been for the stern inflexibility of the officers of the commonwealth, summary punishment would have been wreaked upon the young and beautiful, but alas, base women (41).
Although Orton rather atypically deploys the trappings of traditional morality in this pamphlet—calling the Lenoxa sisters “base” and claiming that he writes this narrative “to reform . . . youth” (15)—the events of the narrative undermine this evaluation of the sisters and the faith in the justice of their punishment. Charlotte’s only crimes consist of card sharking and poisoning herself. Throughout the pamphlet, she heroically assaults would-be seducers, schemes to support Helen and her child, and displays “force of character” (22) associated with a shrewd and assertive self-made woman. Thus the South’s punishment does not seem to fit her crime and lacks sympathy to the point of cruelty.

While Orton casts “southern” social order as atavistic, he creates “southern” characters that play at racial boundaries. For instance, Zilla and Isabella are both Creoles, an indeterminate racial category made up of the American descendents of “dark” Mediterranean nationalities such as French and Spanish. Like the population of beautiful mulattas that produced Cassy, the Creoles also live in New Orleans, in an exotic and imaginatively sexualized culture alien to the Anglo-Saxon American. Having already crossed racial and sexual categories, the Creole female fiends can perhaps more plausibly blur the boundaries of gender categories. By the same token, Orton also creates the male partners of his female poisoners as exotic and foreign. Their national difference and racial ambiguity often accompany a greater openness to an androgynous heterosocial partnership. An American cosmopolitanism or even imperialism might hold out the promise of a deeper sympathy between men and woman and more profound freedom.
Orton explores the implications of this heterosocial masculinity and its amplified ability to sympathize with the female fiend, for instance, in his last pamphlet, *Ellen Irving, The Female Victimizer*. The narrative indicts typical marital hierarchies, and Ellen Irving falls prey to the “delusive” promise of a traditional marriage offered by a Boston man. An experienced older male boarder appears at her father’s isolated farm and takes the virginal and ignorant Ellen under his tuition—teaching her botany and promising to show her the world, marry her, and use his wealth to care for her. After he takes her virginity and her money, he leaves her an insulting note—about how she is a burden to him. The letter transforms the formerly submissive and naïve girl into a powerful, sublime, tearlessly stoic and self-sufficient Tender Avenger who also desires an egalitarian relationship beyond the pale of corrupt society. The sympathetic man she seeks comes in the form of an “Italian murderer,” Charles Dorian. His capacity for accepting androgyny and a non-traditional relationship enables their heterosocial partnership. So when she meets Dorian, she surprises him because she is wearing men’s clothes, but when she tells him her story, he declares:

“I do not blame you for what you have done; nay, I admire you for it. Let us wander the world together. I will marry you if you wish.”

“Marry me!” I exclaimed. “I do not believe in marriage. Let us be partners in crime” (47).

Dorian “admire[s]” (rather than condemns) Ellen for her bravery in setting forth alone and for her clever gender transgressions. He does not “blame” her for her sexual fall or her subsequent criminal career. And they embark upon an equal partnership in love and crime—where both literally wear the pants.
Reading Orton, one begins to suspect that happy, egalitarian heterosocial relationships can only occur between criminals outside of marriage. These “free love” unions become a kind of feminist or democratic community clinging to the margins of society—vulnerable and ephemeral candidates for tragedy. And in the end, Dorian drowns in a boating accident—like Shelley—and Ellen becomes a Methodist and commits suicide. Orton’s female fiends, like Stowe’s, ultimately prove more effective as threats than as enduring feminist models or heroes. They react and revenge and seek out an egalitarian heterosocial relationship, but ultimately, the relationship or Orton’s imagination fails them. They end up in the same place as the early female poisoners: dead or sequestered. Margaret and Isabella are executed, Zilla moves into a convent, and Ellen commits suicide. Nevertheless, these tidy endings seem too neat and arbitrary, and although there is punishment it does not fit the crime. Orton does not formulate his endings as a triumph of American civilization, but rather as a failure or, at best, an ambivalent accommodation to disappointing social reality. The promise of truer unions between men and women held out by an opening imperial margin proves illusory.

While the “true” female poisoner pamphlets participate in the North-South argument about American civilization, race, empire, and masculinity, they only produce indeterminate narratives of ineffectual solutions. Their poisoners, though often heroic, fail to impose their vision of sympathetic masculinity and the social order resulting from it. The next chapter, however, examines the career of Harriet Beecher Stowe and her attempt to theorize an effective reformist female poisoner—
one who can enforce a sympathetic heterosocial masculinity and the vision of American civilization that that entails. Stowe’s poisoners work to protect sympathetic men from both outdated patriarchal masculinity and the new homosocial masculinity of antebellum public culture. In so doing, they resist an atavistic southern version of the American race and nation and enable a (supposedly) gentler New England-modeled imperial project.
CHAPTER THREE

“THE EFFECT OF A SLOW POISON”¹:
HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S FEMALE POISONER AND THE SALVATION OF
NEW ENGLAND MANHOOD AND U. S. CIVILIZATION

Why did Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin—a novel of moral reform
and instruction—feature a sympathetic female poisoner? A fallen woman, an infanticide,
and a would-be multiple murderess endowed with diabolical powers, Cassy makes an
unlikely sentimental heroine. She defies the Christic, self-sacrificing “true womanliness”
that critics identify with Stowe’s heroines or the other quadroon protagonists of
abolitionist literature. Most antislavery narratives cast the Cassy figure as the “tragic
mulatta” required to respond to sexual abuse with patient suffering and an early death.
Stowe’s Cassy does neither and instead more closely parallels sensational fiction’s
“Tender Avenger,” a literary type that often concentrated an audience’s class resentment
and called for retributive and revolutionary violence against her privileged rapist.²

1 Stowe uses this phrase to describe how exclusively male-devised “systems,” such as Calvinism,
afflict “a sensitive spirit.” See Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Minister’s Wooing, ed. Susan K. Harris (New

2 For the classic examination of Stowe’s heroines, see Elizabeth Ammons, “Heroines in Uncle
Tom’s Cabin,” American Literature 49 (1977): 175. Ammons’s catalogue of heroic women, however, fails
to mention Cassy.

Carolyn L. Karcher examines Lydia Maria Child’s creation of the “tragic mulatto” trope in “Rape,
Murder, and Revenge in ‘Slavery’s Pleasant Homes’: Lydia Maria Child’s Antislavery Fiction and the
Limits of Genre,” The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century
Yet Stowe claimed that she intended *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “a great pacificator . . . [to] unite both north and south” and even expected that her sympathetic portrayal of slaveholders and “their temptations, their perplexities, and their difficulties” would gain her book a more favorable reception in the South than in the North.³ Needless to say, audiences defied these expectations, and while *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a popular phenomenon in the North and abroad, many southern states all but banned it. Southern critics vilified the novel, but they especially resented its mixed race characters, whom Stowe “portrayed in the most complimentary terms.” One could expect the revolutionary defiance of a figure like George Harris to stir anxieties, since the novel suggests that such “sons of white fathers” could foment the violent rebellion slaveholders most dreaded.

But, while the southern press took occasional swipes at Harris, the mulatto that aroused the most widespread and virulent condemnation was Cassy. Mary H. Eastman, author of...

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³ Stowe makes these wistful comments in the preface to the 1879 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She is citing and agreeing with an overly sanguine friend “who had many relatives in the South.” Quoted in Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1985) 116.
the anti-*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* novel, *Aunt Phillis’s Cabin; or, Southern Life as It Is,* typified the southern response when she reviled Cassy as “a most infamous creature from her own accounts” and castigated Stowe for daring to make such a monster a heroic protagonist so that “we are to sympathize with her vileness, for she has no other traits of character described.”

Northern audiences, too, seem to have shared at least some of Eastman’s horror, a discomfort they expressed through slightly more subtle tactics of revision and diversion. For instance, the popular theatricals called “Tom-shows” often radically cut Cassy’s role, preferring to insert minstrel characters (such as “Cute”), who, according to Eric Gardner, reaffirmed racist prejudices and “suppressed . . . [the novel’s] subversive power.” Or, when they retained images of “female power,” they elaborated on the virtuous (and more typically tragic) quadroon Eliza and particularly on her flight across the half-frozen Ohio River—sometimes adding a pack of baying hounds live on stage. That image of a desperate true woman fleeing savage men and beasts, clutching her little son Harry to her breast, became the figuration of heroic motherhood most often reproduced from the novel.\(^4\)

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Eastman is quoted in Gossett, 204. For an examination of the “literary civil war” that occurred in the wake of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and specifically Eastman’s part in it, see Beverly Peterson, “*Aunt Phillis’s Cabin*: One Reply to Uncle Tom,” *The Southern Quarterly* 33.1 (1994): 97-112.

When Stowe finally penned her own dramatic version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, however, it appeared a stark contrast to these popular interpretations. Apparently unfazed by the attacks of southern critics or the evasions of northern playwrights, she encouraged the audience to “sympathize” even more completely with Cassy. *The Christian Slave* (1855) radically inflates Cassy’s role, giving her almost the entire final act. It develops her interiority beyond the novel through added soliloquies and dialogue, even filling out the places in her narrative that the novel elided—for instance, what she whispered in French to Legree or how she reacted to Emmeline’s first appearance. Stowe makes her gaze the dominant perspective of the act—even going so far as to write the play expressly for one-woman recitation by Mary Webb, a commanding public speaker, who was herself a mulatto with a Spanish father and an African-American slave mother. And while Cassy gains multiple lengthy soliloquies, *The Christian Slave* treats the (supposedly) most iconic mother, Eliza, with perfunctory inattention. The play affords her less than half a page of dialogue and only a single brief scene shared with other major characters for both her introduction and final exit. Stowe also completely deletes the true-womanly white mothers, such as Mrs. Bird and Rachel Halliday, whom critics have believed so essential

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6 In the novel, Cassy (a house slave and Legree’s unwilling mistress) mysteriously appears in the fields, and when Legree asks her how she likes picking cotton, we cannot hear her response and only see that it enrages him. In the play, Stowe shows us how Emmeline’s arrival and Cassy’s maternal outrage over Legree’s intended sexual victimization of the poor “mother’s darling” precipitate her venture into the fields. Her actions demonstrate her disgust. We also hear her angry retort to Legree’s question: “Beaucoup mieux que de vivre avec un bête telle comme vous.” Or, “Much better than living with a beast like you.” Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Christian Slave. A Drama, Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Dramatized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson & Company, 1855), 49 and 52. Further quotations will come from this edition.
to her gender politics. In the space created by their erasure, Cassy “becomes the play’s representative mother,” and thus its central heroine.\(^7\)

Stowe had little control over the performance and consumer culture phenomenon inspired by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The minstrel shows, the music, the artwork, the toys and games, the figurines and the commemorative plates were generated without Stowe’s active participation.\(^8\) But when she chose to further package her novel for popular consumption and extract the characters and images that she considered most important, she accentuated Eastman’s “infamous creature,” the female poisoner, over the more conventional heroines. This chapter explains why Cassy was central to Stowe’s overall ideological program and what “cultural work” Stowe’s female poisoner was meant to accomplish.\(^9\)

I argue that Stowe privileges Cassy because the female poisoner allows her to expose and combat what she saw as the underlying cause of “barbarism” and the greatest impediment to America’s development toward what she terms “high civilization” and “Christian democracy.” She identifies that obstacle as a homosocially constructed version of masculinity trammeled by “aristocratic and Old World ideas” that equate male subjectivity with the selfish “appropriation” (rather than sympathetic protection) of the “weak and dependent” members of society (i.e. women, African Americans, or the

\(^7\) Gardner, 82. For a brief biography of Webb, see the 1856 printing of *The Christian Slave* (London: Sampson, Low, Son, and Co.) i-iv.

\(^8\) Ellen Goldner analyses the consumer culture phenomenon as a kind of “imagined community” experience and a “proto-nationalist formation” that had a life of its own, independent of authorial control. “Arguing with Pictures: Race, Class, and the Formation of Popular Abolitionism through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24 (2001): 71-84.

working industrial poor). Stowe sifts this “Old World and aristocratic” masculinity into two interdependent manifestations: First, the more blatant expression of this regressive masculinity appears in the “relics of barbarism” found in the “patriarchal institution” of southern slavery and in the residual “habits of thought [such as Calvinist theology] engendered by monarchical institutions.” Second, this masculinity also emerges in the new “outlaw” machismo that she saw embodied in various intemperances endemic to “mob madness” and antebellum male culture (i.e. lawless intimidation, fighting, drinking, gambling, financial speculation and acquisitiveness, and sexual infidelity). Although this second form of masculinity creates a space of resistance to some forms of elite hegemony, it does so, as Erin Mackie argues, by generating a “nostalgia,” which validates the “outlaw” as a figure of “fully licensed machismo . . . [who] asserts the

10 Stowe uses the terms “barbarism,” “high civilization,” “Christian democracy,” “aristocracy” or “aristocratic . . . [and] Old World,” and “appropriation” throughout her work, but see their most explicit formulation in “Woman’s Sphere,” 251; “What Will You Do With Her? or, The Woman Question,” 244; and also Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 199-200. See (respectively) Harriet Beecher Stowe, Household Papers and Stories (New York: AMS Press, 1967) and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994). All further quotations from the novel will come from this edition.

The conflict between “barbarism” and “civilization” became a widespread conceptual apparatus applied to the sectional conflict. For example, the Republican Party platform of 1856 “called for the prohibition of ‘those twin relics of barbarism, polygamy and slavery.’” Quoted in Melanie Susan Gustafson, Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 19.

For Stowe’s assertion that true men protect the “weak and dependent,” see Harriet Beecher Stowe, Pink and White Tyranny: A Society Novel (New York: Plume, 1988) 295.

In her letter to the editor of the National Era, the serial that first published Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Stowe positions the novel explicitly as a critique of the “‘patriarchal institution.’” Letter to Gamaliel Bailey, March 9, 1851. Reprinted in Joan D. Hedrick, ed., The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 66.

For Stowe’s critique of Calvinism as a limiting relic of the Old World, one of the “habits of thought engendered by monarchical institutions,” see Minister’s Wooing, 16.

Stowe uses the term “mob madness” in an 1836 letter to her husband, in which she describes the destruction of the abolitionist J. G. Birney’s printing press by a pro-slavery mob. Stowe was most troubled by the participation of “good men [who] in their panic and prejudice about abolitionism forgot that mobs were worse evils than” inflammatory abolitionist speech and who used the democratic process to subvert it: They “voted a mob.” Charles Edward Stowe, Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe Compiled from her Letters and Journals (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, and Co., 1889) 82-85. Charles Stowe’s biography provides an excellent account of Stowe’s developing attitude to the “slaveholding barbarians” (379) and its relation to her early experiences in the West (Ohio).
ultimate aristocratic privilege.”¹¹ Both forms develop as homosocial constructs that base masculine identity on the exclusion and appropriation of women. Stowe’s work argues that these two types of masculinity are only apparently at odds and that, in reality, the patriarch creates the outlaw in his own image and so extends, rather than reforms, a primitive system of domination. As a result of this unnatural birth unmediated by female influence, the nation suffers a regression, a destabilizing “barbarism,” which Stowe sees spreading through all levels of society and threatening a progressive, New England vision of the nation.

Stowe thus casts economic, social, and cultural conflict, including the sectional crisis and the struggle over imperial expansion, as a gender problem requiring a gender reformation. Her gender restructuring, however, works through a developmental model that privileges a public managed by men, but only men who have reached a higher heterosocial and more androgynous stage of development by passing through some form of matriarchal education. While many Stowe scholars focus on her reformist goals as gendered reforms, they generally isolate only one part of her program and so fall into two opposed camps. Depending upon the stage they privilege, they argue that she promotes either a matriarchy or a patriarchy.¹² Looking at the full sweep of Stowe’s work,


however, reveals that her “complex feminism” involves a domestic matriarchy that grows up into a public, heterosocially-identified rule of the brother. Overall, Stowe’s work argues that if the wrong kind of masculinity threatens civilization, the right kind of masculinity—woman-educated, woman-influenced, and thus sympathetic with the feminine other—preserves it.  

13 For the phrase “complex feminism,” see Zwarg, “Fathering and Blackface in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 569. The complexity of Stowe’s feminism is thrown in sharp relief by her reaction to the Beecher-Tilton sex scandal that smeared her beloved brother Henry. Although Henry’s seduction of his junior minister’s wife was an open secret, nevertheless, when Victoria Woodhull aired the matter in print, Stowe reacted by cutting off relations with her sister Isabella Hooker (a supporter of Woodhull’s). She had already viciously attacked Woodhull and liberal feminists in her novel, My Wife and I. See Donovan, “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Feminism” and Judith Fryer, “The Other Victoria: ‘The Woodhull’ and her Times,” The Old Northwest 4 (1978): 219-40.

Yet, in the wake of the scandal, Stowe did not (as some critics have suggested) give up her feminism for blind adoration of supine “true womanhood.” Frances B. Cogan argues that the ideal of passive and fragile “true womanhood” did not remain an uncontested construction in antebellum America. On the contrary, the ideal of “real womanhood,” based on intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage, provided a popular alternative and serious competition for the “true” model. Much of Stowe’s work, from “The Yankee Girl” to Pink and White Tyranny advocates the “real” construction of woman. Frances B. Cogan, All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 4.

One could also formulate Stowe’s arguments as an attempt to revise the masculine formation that creates heterosexuality and homosocial identification by excluding heterosocial identification. I draw these terms primarily from Eve Sedgwick. See especially, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York, 1985). Michael Kimmel’s theories of “Marketplace Manhood” also describe some aspects of the masculinity that Stowe tries to reform. See, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” The Masculinities Reader, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Cambridge: Polity, 2001) 266-87. In a more Stowe-specific context, Cynthia Griffin Wolff draws on the work of Anthony Rotundo, David Leverenz, and Julie Ellison and relates Stowe’s argument in Uncle Tom’s Cabin to the “fraternal love” movement created by male abolitionists and other reformers. Wolff sees Stowe relying in part on this movement’s “radically revisionist notions of ‘masculinity,’” which opposed masculinities that promoted imperialism and individual competition and domination. However, even gentle “fraternal love” often appeared as another
Stowe’s vision of ideal masculinity as disciplined, empathic, and self-sacrificing remained surprisingly consistent throughout her long career, but her arguments about how to achieve this type of manhood (i.e. through matriarchal education and influence) did not take shape immediately. In her earliest reform writings, the 1843 temperance tale “Let Every Man Mind His Own Business” for example, she argued that because men fomented bad masculinity in other men, the responsibility for reforming men should rest with men. As even the title of her story suggests, however, she worried that they rarely accepted this obligation. By the time Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she had theorized a reason for their reluctance: Men are interpellated by the homosocial system that creates the gender malformation in the first place, and therefore the heterosocial manhood and civilization require something external to the system to break the homosocial cycle and short-circuit the old patriarchy’s creation of new “outlaw” patriarchy. In other words, Stowe came to believe that men must save civilization and ultimately contain barbaric men themselves, but women must first save the men. Stowe’s matriarchy would serve the needs of heterosocial manhood and civilization by saving brothers and sons from the brutalizing influence of both their “Old World” fathers and their “aristocratic” outlaw brothers—thus allowing them to develop into civilized and civilizing men. The difficult form of male homosociality, so I argue that Stowe’s revisions of masculinity and femininity are more complicated and her version of heterosocial manhood more innovative than a simple acceptance of this reform masculinity. See ”“Masculinity” in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *American Quarterly* 47 (1995): 597. For a lengthier historical analysis of the shift from civilized, sympathetic “manliness” to a homosocial “rough, working-class . . . masculinity” in the late-nineteenth century, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). I would only add that a form of this “masculinity” could also be said to have permeated the southern aristocracy. Kenneth S. Greenberg places the culture of dueling or “honor” on a continuum with rough lower-class manhood. See *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996). And Stowe also portrays both lower- and upper-class southern manhood as manifestations of the same “aristocratic” savagery.
issue, and I believe the source of the critical confusion over Stowe’s gender politics, is the question of how she decides to accomplish this goal—in other words, what kind of woman is needed.

Stowe’s preferred vision of femininity depended upon what type of woman she imagined could best produce fully heterosocial men, and so her theory of the feminine changed as her ideas about how to create this manhood developed. Furthermore, because her constructions of femininity served a reformist purpose, femininity remained inherently situational and shifted with the social context and type of masculinity it encountered. Stowe’s earliest local color fiction embraced models of physically strong, rational, and active “real womanhood,” but most reform fictions offered passive, long-suffering “true womanhood” as the most effective means of recuperating intemperate men. Therefore, when Stowe first attempted to write reform literature, she settled uncomfortably with the “true womanhood” model. But even in “Let Every Man Mind His Own Business,” she portrays that feminine role as too static and largely ineffectual. And, when the sectional conflict intensified in the 1850s, it became clear that forming a civilization led by sympathetic men in the midst of escalating barbarism demanded a new version of femininity—a femininity less long-suffering and more active, capable of counteracting aristocratic masculinity and protecting young men from its brutalizing incorporation. This mission of protection and containment required a construction of femininity at odds with the delicate “true woman.” It necessitated a heroic womanhood that embraced a vigorous and sometimes deadly agency. In short, Stowe needed a female

hero who combined the moral authority of the tragic or true woman with the agency of the Tender Avenger. The female poisoner provided Stowe with a model for this hybridized reformist womanhood.

Stowe, however, could not theorize this reforming woman until she revised the reformist and romantic discourses of poison, which supported homosocial masculinity. Reformers had long used poison as a key theme in their rhetoric (i.e. “the serpent in the cup” or the prostitute’s “poisonous” interior).\(^\text{15}\) The Beecher family’s most successful reformers relied on a discourse of poison to shape their social critiques: Stowe’s father Lyman Beecher and her favorite brother Henry Ward Beecher both used poison as the primary organizing metaphor in the printed sermons that made them famous (on alcoholic and sexual intemperance respectively). And Stowe’s older sister, the educational reformer Catherine Beecher, also recurred to poison in her work, even introducing Stowe’s first collection of stories, *The Mayflower* (1843), by attacking the addictive and “pernicious poisons” spread by other fictions (but not Stowe’s).\(^\text{16}\) Yet the *Mayflower* stories, even the temperance tale, never mention poison. While Stowe inconveniently refused to explain her avoidance of the obvious reform metaphor, we can hypothesize that this omission originated with the nature of her argument. Her attack on homosocial masculinity was almost fully developed even in this first publication, but the Biblically informed discourse that fed into reform rhetoric identified poison with the corrupt and corrupting

\(^{15}\) Only much later did antislavery discourse (with Stowe’s help) identify the production of poison with masculine bodies. As the conflict over slavery escalated, reformist language of poison translated into and helped organize the discourse around the sectional crisis. See, for example, the political campaign ditty, “The Southern Serpent,” *The Republican Campaign Songster* (New York: Orton, et. al., 1856), 85-6.

feminine—not with men. This discourse gestured back to the story of Eve and the 
serpent, which genders female the human association with snakes and poison and places 
the blame for all of human misery and sin on that history. Furthermore, as we saw with 
the early “true” female poisoner pamphlets examined in Chapter Two, this identification 
between women and serpents was being used to argue for a return to an “Old World” 
patriarchal order. Because the connotations raised by the theological discourse of poison 
worked directly against Stowe’s central argument, it makes more sense that she would 
sidestep the metaphor entirely rather than take it up as she ultimately did.

Alternatively, Stowe could have drawn on Byronic Romanticism, which 
emerged the poisonous snake as a figure for the anti-patriarchal revolutionary hero. 
Stowe’s family (and antebellum America in general) was particularly enamored with 
Byron, who described his first outlaw hero as a “folded snake” prepared to strike at the 
tyrant’s heel. (See my discussion of Byron’s *The Corsair* in section II.) But Byron 
valorized the snake only after attempting to exclude women from association with it. This 
strategy redirects a rebellious power linked to women and places it at the service of 
outlaw masculinity. In essence, Byron’s use of the serpent as a metaphor for the 
marginalized male recuperated the snake at the expense of the women. While Stowe 
would later exploit this connection between men and poison, she also rejected this theft 
and simple inversion of the discourse and criticized the poet’s promotion of aristocratic 
masculinity in its new outlaw form.17

17 American revolutionary and national symbolism also used the poisonous snake. See Patrick 
Henry’s “Don’t Tread on Me” flag, with the coiled rattler embodying America in rebellion against the 
British, or Benjamin Franklin’s “Unite or Die” cartoon, with the diced body parts of a snake symbolizing 
the fractured colonies.
In between the *Mayflower* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, however, Stowe discovered a version of poison that allowed her to theorize a reformist femininity capable of revising theological and Byronic discourses of poison in a way that undermined both forms of homosocial masculinity and posited a civilizing gender alternative. Homeopathy made the human connection to poison androgynous and, furthermore, opened up the possibility that poison can counteract poison therapeutically—without the violent return to aristocratic masculinity promoted by Byronic narratives. Lora Romero rightly notes that “a nineteenth-century concept of physical health structures the entire logic of Stowe’s critique of patriarchal power.”\(^\text{18}\) More specifically, Stowe’s homeopathic re-interpretation of the discourses of poison structured her critique of aristocratic masculinity. Homeopathic thought allowed Stowe to draw on the association between women and serpents, women and poison, and recast that connection as heroic and medicinal. In so doing, she promoted a femininity that established a more forceful role for women in the formation of proper manhood.

Stowe could make these interventions because, at the same time that reformers were castigating social ills as poison and revolutionaries were celebrating serpents, an emergent medical discourse was beginning to offer a competing interpretation of poison. With the ancient caduceus or entwined serpents as its symbol, the largely male medical profession identified serpents with men as well as women. Antebellum medical discourse also highlighted the curative as well as the malign properties of supposed poisons, and the issue of poison became central to vituperative public debates between competing schools of medical practice, such that an antebellum school of medical thought was

largely defined by how it drew the line between poison and medicine. For example, “homeopathic” and “botanic” physicians accused “regular” or “allopathic” doctors, who dosed their patients with mercury, arsenic, and opium, of being poisoners. And in this pre-germ-theory era, epidemic diseases were often cast as poisonings. Even regular practitioners deployed metaphors of poison to attack their colleagues for carrying contagions from patient to patient.19

The most powerful alternative medical discourse of poison, however, did not originate with the do-it-yourself botanics or the regular profession’s own internal critics, but rather with homeopathy, whose practitioners established their own schools and lured away large numbers of the regular physicians’ cultured and well-to-do clientele. Homeopathy’s appeal derived primarily from its innocuous approach to medicating and its doctors’ heavy reliance on an early and idiosyncratic form of the “talking cure.” Homeopathy’s central doctrine was “treat like with like.” Or, put another way, diseases produce the same symptoms as poisons, so treat the patient with a substance that supposedly approximates the symptoms of the disease. Thus homeopathic physicians dosed patients with solutions of arsenic, calomel, and other poisons (but so radically diluted that they could not produce the pernicious effects that often accompanied


allopathic dosing). Furthermore, while many regular physicians relied on authoritarian bedside tactics drawn from status-conscious eighteenth-century models, the homeopathic practitioner would listen attentively to the patient’s catalogue of symptoms and the story of his or her miseries. The homeopath thus modeled a sympathetic form of medical practice and masculinity in conjunction with a positive reformulation of poison.20

In the late 1840s (after the publication of her earliest temperance fiction but before she began *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), Stowe became personally invested in these medical debates concerning the nature of poison. For years she had zealously followed the advice of regular physicians, who treated her with crippling amounts of mercury. But in 1846 she rejected the regular methods and left her family for almost a full year to take “the water cure,” a cleansing regimen which “had strong links with homeopathy.”21 By 1851, when she started publishing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe had adopted a homeopathic vocabulary of poison, which allowed her to diverge from the more scripturally based versions of poison appearing in the writings of the other Beechers. Stowe makes this shift apparent at the levels of vocabulary, plot, and characterization. For instance, instead of the generic “poison” and “corruption,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* uses the more specific metaphor of “laudanum” with careful attention to the particular symptoms produced by this substance. Stowe also applies a homeopathic understanding of poison and

20 Frederick Newberry discusses women writers’ tendency to create sympathetic models of masculinity based on the conversational doctor model, but (possibly because he focuses on the later nineteenth century when many regular doctors had adopted the sympathetic persona—at least rhetorically) he does not connect his argument to homeopathy. See “Male Doctors and Female Illness in American Women’s Fiction, 1850-1900,” *Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature, 1830-1900*, ed. Monika M. Elbert. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000.

sympathetic, conversational medical practice to her larger narrative. Cassy’s heroism and
the gender politics that accompany it are constructed around the homeopathic tenet that
there can be good and bad poisons, that poison can cure poison or serpent oppose serpent.
When Cassy’s resistance to slavery leads her to poison her son and later her master
Legree, she employs and embodies a medicinal poison, one that counteracts the wasting
inflicted by aristocratic masculinity. Subsequently, Uncle Tom approaches her like a
good homeopath, letting her tell her story and talk out that poison.

While reformist and Byronic discourses tend to conceptualize poison as a simple
or essential substance and the poisoner as a fixed identity, medical discourse
characterizes them as situational and in flux—dependent upon the state of the patient and
the disease. The aim of this medicinal poison is to use poisonous substances to move
beyond the diseased and medicated state into health. This model also metaphorizes a
more fluid understanding of femininity. Using this frame, Stowe’s other works (which I
will also examine below) suggest that the female poisoner is only an interim figure. As
both poison and poisoned, she can resist the progress of noxious aristocratic masculinity,
but she must also submit to a cure herself. Thus Cassy progresses from true woman to
Tender Avenger to healthy matriarch. Just as medicine is only given to a sick person,
Stowe sees the female poisoner as a transitional identity, formed to combat barbarism and
allowed to lapse once it has been overcome.

The homeopathic discourse of poison also enabled Stowe to make a specific
literary intervention, which allowed her to mediate between the reformist and romantic
discourses of poison and rewrite them. These discourses of poison were promulgated
through two popular literatures in antebellum America: the female poisoner pamphlet and
the Byronic hero narrative. Stowe constructs her arguments against aristocratic masculinity and for heterosocial manhood and civilization by rewriting these forms within a medical framework. By the time Stowe created Cassy, female poisoner trials, newspaper accounts, and pamphlets had already connected the female poisoner to a discourse with wide-ranging implications for masculinity, civilization, and the bodily integrity of both. As I discussed in Chapter One, antebellum histories of “secret poison” linked the ascension of female poisoners with the rise of unruly and degraded populaces and the decline of virtuous republics.\textsuperscript{22} The earliest female poisoner pamphlets picked up this strain and attributed the female poisoner’s rise to the fall of traditional patriarchal authority, weakened by “sympathetic” models of masculinity—a strategy that reflected a reversion to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century genres of New England crime literature. These texts drew on a scriptural discourse of poison to argue for a return to traditional masculine virtue and control, which contained and excluded the innately poisonous feminine.\textsuperscript{23}

With Cassy, however, Stowe could undermine the female poisoner pamphlets’ patriarchal or “Old World” moral theories by taking them up and then inverting them. First, by following the pamphlets’ “slippery slope” model of criminality, Cassy’s life


history covers all the seemingly disparate reform movements that concerned Stowe (women’s education, temperance, abolition, liberalizing religion, and women’s rights) and allows her to expose a common cause for all the social abuses they were meant to correct. The older crime literature blamed the (female) criminal’s inner corruption and attributed her fall to an incomprehensible refusal to obey patriarchal authorities such as husbands, parents, and ministers. Cassy’s story, however, lays the blame at the feet of those very patriarchal authorities. As a more complex character than either the “tragic mulatta” or female poisoner alone, Cassy forges a causal link between the opposed stereotypes of female victim and female fiend. This connection shows that—rather than the female fiend’s poison afflicting men—the abuse and intemperance perpetrated by “husbands” and masters pushes the female poisoner down sin’s slippery slope and threatens her bodily integrity. Cassy thus reverses the scriptural discourse that equates poison with women to reveal that homosocial masculinity “poisons” her. Even further, Stowe argues that the real (male) sinner falls precisely because his homosocial self-construction drives him to privilege male authority over the perspective of the feminine other—especially wives and mothers. (This rhetorical inversion ultimately transformed the female poisoner pamphlet itself. In Chapter Two, we saw that after the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin the genre made a radical rhetorical turn-around with Arthur Orton’s work. His pamphlets consciously copied Cassy’s narrative and cast the female poisoner’s actions as a response to men’s abuse.)

Stowe accomplishes this inversion of the female poisoner formula by granting Cassy a romantic interiority, which, while absent from previous pamphlet versions of the female poisoner, characterized many heroes of antebellum rape-revenge melodramas. At
the end of eighteenth century, production of crime literature started to undergo a shift
“from the pulpit to the market,” and so printers “maximized the sensational aspects of the
criminal’s life and minimalized the functions of repentance and justification.” Focusing
on the titillating details of criminals’ lives and crimes (rather than on their uniform
acknowledgment of disobedience and submission to ministerial authorities), printers
created “particularized” characters. Yet, the criminals’ motives (usually money) remained
“conventionalized.” By the antebellum era, however, audiences would read about
radically different sorts of villains driven by more unusual, psychologically complex, and
extreme motives. This shift has been interpreted as an exercise in the Foucauldian social
alienation of the criminal, making him or her into a fiend, an insane moral monster,
beyond the pale of normal humanity. During the time when crime literature began
creating these more extreme villains, however, literary and popular culture also surged
with a “Byronic fever” that provided an additional lineage for these new criminal types. I
argue that sensational writers created extreme moral monsters not by prefiguring modern
theories of abnormal psychology but by infusing their criminals with a romantic Byronic
“sublimity,” more like Milton’s Satan than Hitchcock’s Norman Bates. This Byronic
hero/ villain is defined by a psychic (and sometimes literalized) wound, typically inflicted
by some version of old patriarchal tyranny, which then drives him to seek vengeance
upon the world. (While the protagonists of popular rape-revenge melodramas populate
this category, the example most familiar to modern readers would probably be Melville’s
Ahab and his mad quest to destroy Moby Dick, the phallic sperm whale that maimed
him.) The hero thus strikes back at the patriarchy that brutalized him and creates a kind of
masculine gothic, where the repressed returns in a spectacle of revolutionary or outlaw violence.  

Stow, however, connected this admiration for male gothic violence and the accompanying vogue for Byron and Byron-inspired literature with the resurgence of aristocratic masculinity. In contrast with the female poisoner pamphlets, Byronic narratives such as *The Corsair* cast traditional masculine authorities as corrupt victimizers—while it lionized the criminal. But the admired criminal is admired because he is more manly and aristocratic than the degenerate patriarchal authority. And the Byronic hero defies the law and takes vengeance in order to restore his manhood and reassert that old code of masculinity. Thus, because he is in his own way just as reactionary as the conservative “editors” of the female poisoner pamphlet, the Byronic hero’s vengeful gothic return ultimately perpetuates the system that wounded him.

Although the Byronic hero is thus necessarily male, I argue that Stow was drawn to Byron’s inchoate attempt to create a female version of this figure—namely *The Corsair*’s vengeful slave heroine Gulnare—and that Cassy embodies a successful Byronic heroine, who feminizes and deconstructs the Byronic hero. The typical Byronic hero narrative falls into a strain of Romanticism identified as “masculine Romanticism,” in which the male poet/lover effaces the female beloved by incorporating her “into a narcissistic projection of his own self.” Thus, even when a heroine wanders into outlaw courses similar to the hero’s own rebellious seeking, he still cannot see her as a full

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subject. She remains subservient to him, responding to and reflecting his psyche. She remains just as “othered” as the pamphlets’ female poisoner submitting to the minister for forgiveness. With Cassy, Stowe makes the Byronic heroine’s subjectivity central to the narrative in a way that stops the “othering” imposed by the Byronic narrative and short-circuits the return to aristocratic masculinity. Cassy’s story does not end in the murderous gothic recurrence. Instead of re-establishing self and social order with an act of vengeful violence, her feminine and Christian solution ends with an escape and a re-instantiation of the civilizing dynamic between matriarchy and the rule of the brother.25

Cassy thus acts as a pivotal figure in Stowe’s career. Her reformist womanhood paves the way for the female heroes in Stowe’s later innovative religious romances, *Agnes of Sorrento, The Minister’s Wooing*, and *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*. While Cassy’s story promotes an alternative homeopathic discourse of poison and gender that could tear down the narratives supporting the two versions of homosocial masculinity, these novels go even further—advancing a scriptural re-writing of the discourse of poison, one that provides the theoretical foundation for a civilized American nation. The narratives directly connect aristocratic masculinity with poison, accusing both old-style patriarchs (priests, monks, monarchs) and new-style outlaws (rakish American politicians and entrepreneurs) of being poisoners. At the same time, Stowe revisits the story of Eve and transforms the serpent-associated woman into the hero capable of both replacing the old scriptural patriarchy and taming the new Byronic machismo. This type of woman

becomes the matriarch of a liberally unified American civilization, founded on the reconciliation between renewed “real” New England womanhood and re-trained heterosocial southern manhood.\(^26\)

The following pages place Cassy in context with Stowe’s other writings, particularly from the most productive thirty years of her career—from her early temperance fiction of the 1840s to her infamous exposé of Byron in 1869/70. This chapter is split into two primary sections corresponding to Stowe’s two major revisions. The first part examines Stowe’s engagement with the conventions of Puritan crime literature—particularly the “slippery slope” paradigm and the misogynist discourse of poison as they appear in the early female poisoner pamphlets. It analyzes the first part of Cassy’s story, her fall down the slippery slope, and then further contextualizes this part of her narrative by placing it in dialogue with Stowe’s other reform work, particularly the early temperance fiction. The second section looks at how Cassy’s story revises Byron’s *The Corsair*. It then expands that examination to Stowe’s complicated relationship to Byron, his literature, and the outlaw form of aristocratic masculinity he promoted. It tracks how Stowe develops her strongest revision of Byron in her antebellum romances by opposing the Byronic hero to the most effective form of reformist real womanhood, the serpent-woman.

\(^26\) Margaret Fuller makes a similar feminist revision of the serpent. In her poem, “Double Triangle, Serpent and Rays” she re-imagines the snake as an embodiment of transcendent androgyne, “Patient serpent, circle round . . . Double form of godly prime . . . Male and female . . .” She makes this circled serpent a “patient” creature rather than the symbol of evil or coiled vengeance that we find in scripture and in Byron’s work respectively. She also gave the circled serpent pride of place as the frontispiece for her classic work of feminist thought, *Woman in the Nineteenth-Century*. While I have been unable to find any direct link between the two writers (beyond their acquaintance with the same people and places), Stowe must have at the very least been aware of the infamous Fuller. Suggestively, their liberal feminist recuperations of the serpent parallel each other in many ways. See Eve Kornfield, *Margaret Fuller: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997) 155.
I. The Slippery Slope.

A. “The Quadroon’s Story.”

Act III of *The Christian Slave* opens with a soliloquy that establishes Cassy as an inversion of the female poisoner formula developed in the early pamphlets. In the pamphlets, the female poisoner appeared as a preternaturally strong and vigorous creature who attacked men’s vitality by degrees so that they became “tired . . . sick . . . dead.” Furthermore, her poison worked internally to kill “heart” and “root.” Yet, here, Cassy, the poisoner herself, is the victim of some internally wasting, envenomed affliction. The scene begins with her, alone in her master Legree’s decaying Louisiana mansion, contemplating her mental and physical state: “I’m tired! I’m sick! I’m dead! Dead? yes, dead at heart! dead at root, and yet I live; so they say at least. O, to think of it! to think of it! Why don’t I die?” (49) The scene encourages the audience to “think” with her beyond the superficial theological discourse of poison and its familiar gender categories and instead sympathize with her more complicated interiority and internal analysis.

If the poisonous woman is herself poisoned, it begs the question: What is the original source of the poison? Laudanum appears throughout the narrative as an organizing metaphor for the mechanisms of slavery and resistance. It is both the poison Cassy literally deploys in response to slavery and the poison metaphorically forced into her by the slave system. Augustine St. Clare, Stowe’s most eloquent Southerner of good will, articulates this motif most clearly when he characterizes slavery’s mechanism of control by declaring, “Whipping and abuse are like laudanum,” which produces “a
gradual hardening process” (*UTC*, 214). The abuse Cassy suffered has poisoned or hardened her, not only in the old Puritan sense of a hardened and sinful heart, but also in a medical sense—an atrophy of mind and body that makes her “tired . . . sick . . . dead.”

Stowe further links this atrophy to the economic relations of oppression, but in a way that insistently embodies and medicalizes the economic. St. Clare describes the essential mechanics of the slave and capitalist-industrial system as “appropriating one set of human beings to the use and improvement of another, without any regard to their own” (*UTC*, 200). But instead of an abstract economic analysis, Stowe’s medical frame allows her to diagnose this appropriation in terms of its deleterious or poisonous effects upon the mind and body, so that sexual and labor relations become bound up in a discourse of poison. Simon Legree and his economic philosophy of “Use up, and buy more” (*UTC*, 294) appears the ultimate manifestation of this poison. Stowe characterizes him as worse than a venomous serpent. Emmeline (his newest purchase and “little mistress”) tells Cassy: “I an’t afraid of snakes! I’d rather have one near me than him” (*UTC*, 325; *Slave*, 60). More deadly than poisonous creatures, Legree and the system he represents have developed into vampires “daily bleeding away . . . the [slave’s] inward life” (*UTC*, 336). In Cassy’s words, he is “wringing the life-blood out of” them (*UTC*, 344; *Slave*, 62).

Legree’s brutality would thus seem the source of Cassy’s uncanny undead life. But Stowe reiterates that a “whole system” of men promotes this abuse. The “considerate,

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27 This analysis echoes what Marxist critics would call “reification.” “Reification” is in part defined as “the transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world . . . a ‘special’ case of alienation, its most radical and widespread form characteristic of modern capitalist society.” (Seen in this context, the original subtitle of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Man that Was a Thing*, takes on added significance.) Gajo Petrovic, “Reification,” *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1991) 463.
humane men . . . are responsible for all the brutality and outrage wrought by these
wretches . . . [Their] respectability and humanity licenses and protects his [Legree’s]
brutality” (UTC, 295). Through Cassy’s autobiography, Stowe extends that “whole
system” of appropriation into the intimacy of the home to implicate the unsympathetic
husband. After she declares her “dead” condition, Cassy’s next words in Act III specify
the cause of her wasting and trace the real source of her sickness beyond the blatantly
savage and “low” Legree to the ostensibly civilized gentleman who was her “husband.”
She makes this point through a further inversion of the female poisoner pamphlets.

While the pamphlets identified the husband as the female poisoner’s chief and
most important victim, the rest of Cassy’s soliloquy reverses the attribution of guilt and
casts the female poisoner as the victim of her husband’s betrayal. After Cassy’s
introductory outburst, she breaks into a melancholy Spanish love-song, whose last verse
Stowe translates:

This was a bosom all my own,
That oft sustained my aching head;
A mouth which smiled on me alone,
An eye whose tears with mine were shed. (49)

Cassy stops: “Ah! that was his song!”—referring to Henry, her second master,
“husband,” and father to her living children. Although he had promised that she was his
true love and “wife,” Henry fell into dissipation and sold her and their children, initiating
the abuse that poisons Cassy. Seen in this context, the passage suggests that, although
originally “his” song was a typical courtly love lyric that Henry sang about a traitorous
woman or lost love, in Cassy’s mouth “his” song becomes about him and his betrayal.
The “bosom” meant to “sustain [an] aching head” and the “tears” were an inevitable
motif in the early female poisoner pamphlets, which they attributed to the poisonous wife
who deranged the patriarchal social order by deceiving and betraying her husband. Stowe inverts the formula so that the traitorous bosom and false tears now belong to the husband and master. He becomes the source of deception and social and epistemological instability. By putting the song in Cassy’s mouth, Stowe thus transforms a patriarchal trope about the traitorous or dead woman into a sketch of a civilized social order based on a masculinity that is heterosocial and sympathetic to women. The lyric suggests that this order rests on at least three fundamental heterosocial behaviors: First, the phrases “bosom all my own” and “mouth which smiled on me alone” indicate the husband’s monogamous fidelity to the wife. Second, changing the bosom that “sustained an aching head” from the wife’s to the husband’s shows that the husband supports the wife emotionally. Finally, the “eye whose tears with mine were shed” embodies the husband’s sympathy with the wife. By selling his wife and children, however, Henry betrays this civilized, sympathetic order for a barbaric one based on appropriation.

Stowe thus subsequently relates Cassy’s story as a narrative of Henry’s fall—a fall caused by his betrayal of heterosocial for homosocial relations that Stowe associates with aristocracy. As first portrayed, Cassy’s and Henry’s relationship appears idyllic—but Stowe lets slip small details that show deep and eventually damning inequities of power between them. Cassy describes Henry as an aristocrat, with traditional aristocratic values: “so beautiful, so high, so noble!” After her father-master’s unexpected death, he buys her, an innocent fourteen-year-old, and he promises that their relationship “was marriage before God,” if not before the law. By contrast with this suspicious set-up, Cassy appears the ideal wife. The early female poisoner pamphlets and trial transcripts often attacked the female poisoner for failing in her nursing duties and refusing to
medicate her husband in his final illness, or they accused her of using her nursing to “delude” a man into marriage. But when Henry becomes ill with yellow fever, Cassy nurses him through it and “gave him all his medicine,” proving her a “good angel” and a “faithful” wife. Cassy then gives birth to two gorgeous children, Henry and Eliza. They live in domestic bliss—until her husband’s favorite cousin and “particular friend,” Butler, comes to visit.²⁸ Henry had always been in awe of his dashing cousin and “thought all the world of him” and so follows him uncritically, while, as his dependent and his property, Cassy “did not dare say a word; for Henry was so high-spirited, I was afraid to.” Butler “got Henry going out with him,” and from that initial step outside of the domestic and away from his “wife,” Henry proceeds swiftly to drunkenness, immoderate gambling, and finally womanizing. Then to clear his gambling debts and free him to court another woman, Henry sells Cassy and their two children to his cousin—Butler’s plan all along (UTC, 315-16, Slave 55-6).

Through this Cassy-Henry-Butler triangle, Stowe explores the logic of aristocratic homosocial authority: It operates by playing on legal (if not “before God”) inequalities between white men on the one hand and women and racial minorities on the other. It replaces the mutual exchange between husband and wife with mindless submission to

²⁸ The name “Butler” was probably intended to evoke Pierce Butler, the St. Simon’s Island plantation owner who quite notoriously divorced the British actress and later antislavery author, Fanny Kemble, in 1849. The divorce created a public sensation, even involving Rufus Choate and Daniel Webster. In late 1848, the newspapers fed public excitement by publishing a copy of the Narrative Kemble had prepared for trial, which hinted at Butler’s numerous infidelities and detailed his tyrannical cruelty. Butler’s counter-narrative, Mr. Butler’s Statement, painted his wife as a sort of reformist ultra whose “fundamental” trespass was her “peculiar” belief “that marriage should be companionship on equal terms” and her rejection of “the customary and pledged acquiescence of a wife to marital control.” Quoted in J. C. Furnas, Fanny Kemble: Leading Lady of the Nineteenth-Century Stage (New York: The Dial Press, 1982) 347. Kemble makes explicit the connection between slavery and her husband’s aristocratic attitudes (the apparent source of the marriage’s failure and Kemble’s misery) in her later autobiographical works, such as A Year of Consolation and Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839.
male-male emulation—a substitution of “aristocracy” for “Christian democracy.” Stowe emphasizes the power that men have over other men and women’s relative helplessness in the face of that homosocial authority and how that exposes men (and women) to violation. Because of Cassy’s enforced helplessness, Butler can play the role of confidence man, who seduces and ruins Henry. Cassy’s story of downward spiral thus actually tracks the dissipation of her husband as he pulls away from his wife and becomes more deeply involved in homosocial relations and identifications. Party-going with strange men first draws him out of the domestic sphere. Then follows intemperance: drinking, gambling and financial excess, spousal alienation, abuse, adultery and abandonment. Cassy’s infanticide and (attempted) multiple murders of male lovers, husbands, and masters only follow from the destruction occasioned by Henry’s fall.

This revision of the slippery slope makes civilization rest upon the proper construction of masculinity. However, even though (or rather because) Stowe sees men as primarily responsible for the female poisoner’s crimes and the crumbling of civilization, her fiction singles out young men as in need of special protection. Because men’s incorporation into aristocratic homosociality causes such great harm, mothers must protect sons from this brutalizing system—even at the cost of murder. The typical tragic mulatta plotline fetishizes female purity and demands the heroine sacrifice her life to avoid sexual violation. Stowe’s fiction from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *Dred* and *The Pearl of Orr’s Isle*, by contrast, focuses on the body of the son. It becomes the vulnerable object, upon which civilization rests. So Stowe teases at the boundaries of sentimental propriety, which requires that “[i]n antislavery fiction, narrators avoid portraying the violation of even half-white men” because the “physical humiliation of a white man is obscene in the
Stowe endorses this high value placed upon the white male body, but because she considers its integrity so crucial, she sees the threat to it as the greatest argument against slavery or any other form of homosocial aristocracy that she can advance. That violation leads to barbarism.

Stowe’s anxiety about the son’s body appears most clearly in the “calaboose” section of Cassy’s narrative, in which the violation of her son’s body becomes the central horror of her experience, precipitating her transformation from true woman to Tender Avenger and poisoner. In this scene, Cassy comes upon a crowd gathered around a screaming child. Butler had recently sold her son, and his new master with two or three other men is dragging little Henry to the calaboose for a whipping meant to “break” him; but the boy pulls free and runs to his mother. She pleads with his captors, but they tear the child away, ripping off part of her skirt in the process. When her appeal to an apparently sympathetic male bystander fails, she runs home to Butler, but he laughs and refuses to interfere. She “snaps” and attacks Butler with a bowie knife.

This narrative maps out how the homosocial system operates through multiple class levels to appropriate the body of the son. Stowe’s depiction of it thus starts with “the crowd” and the unlikely grouping of “two or three men” somehow needed to restrain a child and the violently lower class ruffian-master who signifies his barbarity by “swearing dreadfully,” but then it rises up seamlessly to a seemingly sympathetic bystander, then to the superficially civilized Butler, whom Cassy finds in the quintessentially genteel space of “the parlor” (UTC, 317, Slave, 57). In the crowd surrounding the calaboose, Cassy significantly only mentions the presence of men and so

gestures to Stowe’s indictment of all-male public spaces as sources of barbarism. When Stowe argued that women should receive the right to vote and, furthermore, the right to attend polling places, she justified her argument by stating that “[a]ll places where women are excluded tend downward to barbarism.” Women should vote so that “voting may not be so disagreeable and intolerable to men of refinement . . . [that they are] constantly tempted to omit their political duties.” The crowd about the calaboose recalls the polls, those “horrible and disgusting” masculine enclaves.30 This is one of the dark places of the earth—a space that violates men.

Thus even the one man of “refinement” or civilization that Cassy finds there can only deny his tendency to heterosocial identification and support the brutality. After she “begged and pleaded” fruitlessly with the ruffians, she selects from the crowd what she hopes is an empathetic and civilized man who might help her: “one man stood there seemed to pity me. I offered him all the money I had, if he’d only interfere.” When he refuses, she races to Butler and “begged him to go and interfere.” But, just as Stowe suggests in “Let Every Man Mind His Own Business,” they will not resist the homosocial identification that shapes them and “interfere.” They will not protect the vulnerable son. Rather, they protect homosocial authority, shutting their ears to the woman’s pleas and uncritically quoting and slavishly echoing each other: “[The sympathetic bystander] shook his head, and said the man said the boy had been impudent and disobedient, ever since he bought him; that he was going to break him in, once and for all. . . . [Butler said] the boy had his deserts. He’d got to be broken in,—the sooner the better. ; ‘what did I

30 Stowe, “Woman’s Sphere,” 252-53.
expect?’ he asked. . . .” (UTC 317, Slave 57). Supported by masculine consensus, the men close ranks shutting out the mother and shutting in the “broken” body of the son.

Not only does the scene depict how the barbarizing system works, however, it also narrates how the forces of civilization might resist that system through transformations in femininity. The tableau at the calaboose literalizes the contest between civilization and barbarism as a struggle between maternal and homosocial authority for the son’s body. In Stowe’s formulation, the matriarchal relation between son and mother grounds normative civilized gender roles. Butler plays on this when he forces Cassy to remain the quiescent true woman by threatening to abuse or sell her children. And even after he sold them, he warned that “they should smart for it” if she were not “quiet . . . [and] peaceable” (UTC, 317, Slave, 57). By ultimately violating the mother-son relationship, however, Butler and his cohorts occasion a hysterical break that shatters the true womanly role and inaugurates a new kind of femininity. Henry’s “breaking in” breaks the true woman role. Stowe first makes this sundering visually apparent with the image of the torn dress: “[I]n tearing him off, they tore the skirt of my dress half away.” Her son’s humiliation divests Cassy of her true womanly accoutrements, and, when that and the true womanly tactics of “begg[ing] and plead[ing]” fail, she is forced into a radical gender transformation. When Butler dismisses her plea, she takes up phallic weaponry and becomes the Tender Avenger: “It seemed to me something in my head snapped, at that moment. . . . I remember seeing a great sharp bowie-knife on the table; something about catching it, and flying upon him; and then all grew dark, and I didn’t know any more—not for days and days” (UTC, 317, Slave, 57).
Cassy does not attack Butler with just any knife, however. The “bowie-knife,” a weapon popularized in Texas’s war with Mexico, connoted southern imperialism and the aggressive machismo that promoted it. Stowe refigures this “bowie-knife” masculinity as ultimately internecine. To make this connection more explicit, the one good, woman-influenced southern aristocrat in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Christian Slave*, Augustine St. Clare, also dies on the blade of a bowie-knife after he tries to break up a drunken barroom brawl. Cassy’s attack turns the line “‘what did you expect?’” from an offhand assertion of the brutal patriarchal status quo into a warning. Mistaken masculinity will provoke a correspondingly brutal shift in femininity—producing a femininity capable of winning the now violent contest for the son’s body.

Cassy thus proceeds to her greatest crimes—attempting to murder Butler and poisoning her second son (fathered by her next master)—explicitly to prevent her almost-white sons from suffering the bodily humiliation of being used up, beaten, and “broken in.” Little Henry’s “breaking in” pushes Cassy to poison her newborn son. She responds homeopathically to one kind of laudanum (the “whipping and abuse” inflicted on Henry and destined for this child) by dosing the baby with the literal poison in an attempt to save him:

> In the course of a year, I had a son born. O, that child!—how I loved it! How just like my Henry the little thing looked! But I had made up my mind—, yes, I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up! I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death. . . . he, at least, is out of pain. What better than death could I give him, poor child! (*UTC*, 318)

*The Christian Slave* further emphasizes that Cassy murders her son to keep him from suffering appropriation and abuse. It inserts the lines: “Yes, yes; he’s safe! They’ll never
sell him—they’ll never whip him! No, no; Nothing can hurt him! Ah! death is the best thing we can give our children” (58). Cassy emphasizes that this son looked “just like my poor Henry,” i.e. her older boy. But the name also recalls her “husband” Henry. The early female poisoner pamphlets had ascribed the poisoner’s infanticide to a malevolent desire to rob or injure the father through attacking his younger image. The infanticidal mother thus stole the child from the father, who has a legitimate right to property in the child.

Stowe suggests, however, that this conception of the child as the father’s property, rather than its mother’s or a subject in its own right, is part of a regressive homosocial system. She re-writes Cassy’s infanticide as a heroic attempt to maintain the child’s independent physical integrity against such an illegitimate appropriation. Cassy poisons her son to place him literally “out of pain,” “safe” beyond the reach of slavery and the abuse that accompanies it: In death, “[t]hey’ll never sell him—they’ll never whip him!” Cassy’s literal laudanum thus cures the figurative poison inflicted by slavery.31

Stowe repeats this infanticidal theme again and again. Her novels are full of women who commit child-endangering acts to protect their children, especially their sons, from the greater evil of patriarchy. In The Pearl of Orr’s Island (1862, started in 1852), Dolores takes Moses through storm and shipwreck to deliver him from a

brutalizing life as a slaveholder; in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Eliza leaps wildly across a half-frozen river to carry little Harry out of the slave-trader’s clutches; in *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856), Cora Gordon murders both her children to keep them from the same fate. Stowe further extends and normalizes infanticide beyond the slave system, even attributing it to New England mothers trapped in a Calvinist system. In *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859), Stowe describes the plight of a mother facing God’s wrath on behalf of her child: “The mother clasped her babe to her bosom and looked with shuddering to the awful coming trial of free agency . . . and as she thought of the infinite chances against her beloved, almost wished it might die in infancy” (197). To protect the child from the Calvinist patriarch’s punitive damnation, mother-love becomes a death-wish. These New England mothers fantasized about death taking their infants before they had a chance to grow up and incur the possible eternal pain and damnation inflicted by an implacable patriarchal God, but Cassy acts to protect her son from the certain pain and humiliation inflicted by the “patriarchal institution.” That patriarchal violation of the male mind and body is a greater horror than even the prospect of a mother murdering her own son.

Cassy’s homicidal urges thus become normalized, an understandable, even maternal, reaction to the horrors inflicted by extreme forms of aristocratic masculinity. And, if her response is normalized under these circumstances, so is her new forceful form of femininity. Stowe, however, draws the first part of Cassy’s narrative arc (before she moves beyond true womanhood) from the temperance narratives about white bourgeois women subjected to alcoholic husbands. Before she arrived at Cassy as a legitimate female hero, Stowe could criticize male intemperance but could not offer an effective
female-led solution. The next section examines Stowe’s temperance work and how she cast aristocratic masculinity and all the social abuses caused by it in terms of intemperance.

B. “Is not slavery as bad as intemperance?”

By referencing laudanum instead of another pharmaceutical in his characterization of “[w]hipping and abuse,” St. Clare creates an intensive metaphor that casts slavery within a temperance framework. Laudanum evokes simultaneously the ideas of medicine, poison, and addictive drug. It is a medicine warped into a disease-promoting poison that engineers an increasingly demanding addiction attended by an increasingly morbid rigidity—“a gradual hardening” that implies stasis and death rather than the vital “principle of growth” necessary to an expanding civilization. The choice of metaphor is not surprising considering Stowe’s background as part of a household that understood social abuses as poisonous intemperances. For example, Stowe’s father, the Congregationalist minister Lyman Beecher, first gained national recognition by publishing a lengthy diatribe against the “poison” of alcohol, *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasion, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance* (1826). Stowe’s even more famous favorite brother, Henry Ward Beecher, achieved national attention and an appointment to

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32 In 1836, the financier-abolitionist Lewis Tappan asked this rhetorical question as part of his argument encouraging children to form abolitionist societies in addition to the temperance societies they had already formed. Quoted in Shirley Samuels, “The Identity of Slavery,” *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford UP, 1992): 164.

33 Other elements of the antebellum pharmacopoeia would not have answered so well to the purpose. Although, in addition to laudanum, antebellum doctors often prescribed the poisons arsenic and mercury for multiple ailments, these “medicines” are not addictive. And alcohol, though addictive, is not aggressive enough in its action to be classified as poisonous within medical discourse.
one of the wealthiest churches in the nation after he published *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* (1844), the most important subject being the “Strange Woman” who lured men into her “poisonous” interior and then trapped them.\(^{34}\) At about the same time (1843), Stowe’s sister, the equally famous domestic and educational reformer, Catherine Beecher, introduced the author’s first published collection of fiction by claiming that (other) “[w]orks of imagination . . . are often the channel for conveying the most widespread and pernicious poisons . . . whose presence is never realized until pale cheeks and decaying forms tell of its fatal power.”\(^{35}\) In that collection, Stowe produced “works of imagination” that were not only not “poisonous” (charming regional character sketches, a form to which she would return in later life) but were intended as antidotes to social poisons that wasted the energy of “the Descendants of the Pilgrim.” These intemperances included inefficient domestic economy, adultery, reckless business practices, and, of course, alcoholic indulgence.

Stowe’s particular innovation, where she eventually departed from her relatives, stems from her idiosyncratic gendering of this intemperance and poison. She figures systems formed out of “aristocratic” or “monarchical” homosocial masculinity as a kind of contagion-producing agent or poison. She even applied this idea to her father’s religious background. For instance, she paraphrases Lady Byron as saying “that the Calvinistic theology, as heard in Scotland, had proved in [Byron’s] case, as it often does


in certain minds, a subtle poison.”

Stowe, herself, echoes that claim in almost the exact same language, stating that early New England Calvinism, for instance, “had, on minds of a certain class, the effect of a slow poison, producing life-habits of morbid action.”

In short, patriarchal systems provoke intemperance—poisonous, morbid, unhealthy, dissipated habits—and intemperance poisons the body and mind.

The impulse to reform such intemperance drove Stowe’s life work, and she engaged in multiple movements throughout her literary career: She started with alcoholic temperance and domestic and educational reform, shifted to abolition, anti-Calvinist theological liberation, and women’s rights. But throughout these multifarious concerns, we can pull out one binding common thread, one issue that Stowe’s work returns to again and again: “aristocratic and Old World” models of masculinity as the root cause of encroaching “barbarism,” the violation of true manhood, and thus the degradation of America’s “high civilization” and “Christian democracy.” Drinking, slavery, Calvinist damnation, gambling, illicit sex—all derive from aristocratic masculinity’s systemic intemperance—its insatiable need to consume and appropriate. Appropriation thus results from intemperate consumption. And intemperate consumption happens when homosocial influence precludes woman’s influence.

We can see this linkage most clearly in an article Stowe published in July 1843, in which she mentions Dickens’s visit to the United States and makes “one of her few public references to slavery before Uncle Tom’s Cabin”:


37 Minister’s Wooing, 197.
Mr. Dickens is immeasurably shocked at the system of slavery, and really set himself in an attitude of considerable moral sublimity in his remarks upon the subject—and why? Because of the amount of misery and suffering to man, his dearest interests[,] involved in the system. Why is Mr. Dickens so extremely alive to the interests of humanity in one point of view, and not in another, that he can burlesque temperance speeches, temperance hotels, and temperance societies, while he rejoices to add his mite to the efforts that are making against slavery? The most charitable conclusion to be made in the case, is, that Mr. Dickens, being . . . a person of no very profound habits or capacity for reflection on moral subjects . . . gives . . . full way to the floating, idle prejudice which pervades men of that class generally, making amends for it by very virtuous and cheap abhorrence of certain other men, who act precisely in the same way, on another point of equally vital interest to humanity.³⁸

This passage is surprising—at least at first. The woman who would become the leading voice of the American antislavery movement equates alcoholic intemperance and slavery and criticizes antislavery speech that does not acknowledge them both as points “of equally vital interest to humanity.” As the title of this section indicates, Stowe was not alone in drawing this comparison. Certainly, she and many other reformers saw both social problems as causing “misery and suffering,” but the comparison goes deeper than just that. This passage reveals that, for Stowe, intemperance and slavery manifest as symptoms of the same pathology of masculinity. Starting from this assumption, she can quite rationally equate “men of that class,” who excuse drinking, with “certain other men,” who “act precisely in the same way” by justifying the buying and selling of human beings. Both (only apparently disparate) categories of men lack “capacity for reflection on moral subjects.” They are stranded at what Stowe calls “the first unreflecting stage of development, in which are only . . . the aspirations that tend to the manly

³⁸ Quoted in Gossett, 57-8.
accomplishments.” In other words, these men exhibit a purely “manly” or atavistic form of humanity, which remains barbaric insofar as it remains homosocial and fails to heed women’s “spiritual” counsel (such as Stowe’s criticism of Dickens). This purely “physical,” “natural,” and even animalistic subjectivity is in its essence narrowly self-serving and “egoistic,” and so adults trapped at this atavistic stage create a relational system based on reification—on “appropriating one set of human beings to the use and improvement of another, without any regard to their own” (UTC, 200). If young men fail to submit to the gentle influence of their mothers and learn to sympathize with women, they instead identify only with fathers and other men. This homosocial identification stunts their maturation.

Gentle true womanly influence, however, is not enough to keep men from falling into such intemperance and barbarity. Stowe was afflicted by feelings of insecurity about the men around her—afraid that even her minister husband and brothers, these shining examples of civilized masculinity could “fall” and that she could do little about it. In one pained letter to her husband, Stowe records a “horrible presentiment”:

I thought of all my brothers & of you—and could it be that the Great Enemy had prevailed against any of you . . . [I] saw in a vision all the distress & despair that would follow a fall on your part till I felt weak & sick—I took a book & lay down on the bed . . . I looked in the glass & my face which since spring has been something of the palest was so haggard that it frightened me.40

In sympathy, Stowe anticipates the decay that would be endured by husband and brothers, if they were exposed to draining intemperances. She recalls the “pale cheeks” of


consumers of “poisonous” fiction, alcohol, or sex. But her letter also suggests that “all the distress & despair that would follow a fall on your part” would afflict her. Stowe’s “haggard” face and “weak and sick” state anticipates her descriptions of Cassy, another woman made “sick,” “sallow and unhealthy . . . and . . . emaciated” by a man’s “fall” (UTC, 304).

In her discussion of Catherine Beecher’s and Stowe’s American Woman’s Home, Amy Kaplan identifies the source of this “disease and invalidism that characterizes the American woman” and drives Stowe to “the bed” as the mother’s uncivilized “wilderness children and foreign servants, who ultimately infect both the home and the body of the mother.” By contrast, G. J. Barker-Benfield examines the antebellum discourse that identified women as the source of male invalidism. I believe that the majority of Stowe’s works, however, offer a diagnosis of the problem more in line with Lora Romero’s analysis, which finds that “the white hysterical housewife” is a victim of “a patriarchal power that violates the integrity of the self.” And furthermore, I suggest, that Stowe extends this diagnosis to men. They are also drained by “patriarchal power,” not “poisonous” women. Separated from home and the influence of wife and sister, men can fall prey to the corrupting influences of a homosocial public, which leads them to party, to drink, and to “fall” into sexual indiscretions. Even though the sexual transgression is heterosexual, Stowe gives it a homosocial cause. Stowe rewrites the misogynist “spermatic economy” examined by Barker-Benfield and the concomitant “discourse of poison” identified by Pharamond and played out in the early female poisoner pamphlets. She draws her revision of the latter from her early work in temperance reform and her larger theory of aristocratic masculinity. The woman is not as much of a snare to men as
other “aristocratic” men, who lead them into bad company. And women (at least in their true womanly role), though they may suffer with them, cannot save or control fallen men. However, other men—sympathetic men—do have that power.\(^{41}\)

One of Stowe’s earliest expressions of this theory appears in her temperance story, “Let Every Man Mind His Own Business.” On one level, the title is meant ironically—a dig at people who deny their responsibility for the weaker members of society. On another level, however, the title rejects the moral economy that places the burden of men’s salvation upon women. It specifies men and points out that men are men’s special concern, and that they should “mind” how their behavior affects other men. Stowe begins her story with a woman who takes on that impossible role of savior: Augusta’s fiancé Edward will not sign a temperance pledge, so she declares, “I will take the matter in hand myself, and sign a temperance pledge for Edward, and see that he gets into none of those naughty courses . . .”\(^{42}\) Nevertheless, “when the cares and duties of a mother began to confine her at home,” Edward leaves her temperate company for an increasingly homosocial and intemperate “convivial circle” (like the “convivial” masculinity embraced by James Austin):

It was at this period in the life of Edward that one judicious and manly friend, who would have had the courage to point out to him the danger that every one else perceived, might have saved him. But among the circle of his acquaintances there was none such. . . . True, heads were gravely shaken, and Mr. A. regretted to Mr. B that so promising a young man seemed about to ruin himself. . . . Yet it was at Mr. A.’s sideboard, always sparkling with the choicest wine, that he had felt the first excitement of extra stimulus; it was at Mr. B.’s house that the convivial club began to


\(^{42}\) “Let Every Man Mind His Own Business,” *The Mayflower*.
hold their meetings, which, after a time, found a more appropriate place in a public hotel (119-20).

Stowe points out that this decline, occasioned by men, could have best been stopped by men, by “one judicious and manly friend.” Edward’s fall down the slippery slope is also a progression that leads him further and further away from the domestic and the company of women and places him under the lone influence of men. He leaves home for “Mr. A.’s sideboard” presumably where women may still gather, and then moves into the more probably all-male “convivial club” at “Mr. B.’s house,” until he abandons the domestic completely for the homosocial space of “a public hotel.” (This kind of male “club,” which Stowe designates the generator of vice, typified the literary culture of antebellum Concord and Boston—with their “Town and Country Club” and then “Saturday Club” meetings at the Parker House hotel. Even when Stowe became America’s foremost woman of letters and helped launch the Saturday Club’s pet magazine, the Atlantic Monthly, she would not be allowed to join as a “full-fledged member.” By contrast, bi-gendered literary groups in the freer culture of Cincinnati, like the Semi-Colon club, encouraged Stowe’s earliest literary efforts and gave her a space to develop her fiction. I suspect that her return to more traditional New England in 1850 and her resulting intellectual isolation may have contributed to her impassioned identification with the disenfranchised slave and helped inspire Uncle Tom’s Cabin.)

Edward’s intemperance snowballs. Alcoholic intemperance places him in a “state” in which “the spirit of gambling or of wild speculation is induced . . . Unsatisfied with the healthy and regular routine of business, and the laws of gradual and solid

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43 Hedrick, Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life, 289. See Hedrick for her discussion of the rise of this kind of “parlor literature” versus the homosocial “professional” literature maintained in the East.
prosperity, the excited and unsteady imagination leads its subjects to daring risks . . .” that ultimately fail (124-25). Edward ruins himself and Augusta. He falls further into dissolution and even adultery and abuse. He becomes a “wild” and desperate Byronic character, who echoes Milton’s Satan: “Evil, be thou my good” (128). In many temperance narratives, the “logic of conversion” relies upon feminine “moral suasion” by a wife or a daughter, but Stowe departs from this formula. Augusta stands helpless before the temptations set by Edward’s “heartless friends,” and she can only suffer and wait “a little longer—a little longer” (133). Edward’s salvation only comes through the intervention of that “one judicious and manly friend.” The partnership between a woman and a sympathetic man finally cures Edward. Mr. Dallas’s masculine authority or “resolute steadiness” combined with Augusta’s “tender entreaties . . . prevailed” upon Edward to “give yourself to my [Dallas’s] care” (141-42), and he returns cured to a happy, domestic life with Augusta.

Cassy endures the same narrative arc as Augusta, the same descent occasioned by the same homosocial pressures. Augusta, however, does not have to follow out the logic of her situation to its bloody end like Cassy does. She feels free to patiently endure poverty and abuse like a “true woman” because her loving brother, (yet another) Henry, stepped in to rescue her “beautiful son” (118) and other unspecified children and take them back to his home. But without any man willing to intervene, Cassy has to combine Dallas’s “resolute steadiness” and Augusta’s “tender entreaties” in herself. In the event that a woman lacks brotherly rescuers for her children or—eventually—her husband, she

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must claim a more androgynous form of femininity. Stowe models this androgyny in part on the Byronic hero. The next section looks at how she revises Byron to promote a real womanhood rather than a return to aristocratic masculinity.

II. The Corsair

A. Cassy Vindicated

Years into her adult life, Stowe recalled vividly her first childhood encounter with Byron’s poetry. *The Corsair* “astonished and electrified” her, and Byron became her “single greatest literary and imaginative influence.” Critics have argued that Stowe fell in love with Byron and the Byronic hero, that, caught up in the “Byronic fever” sweeping America’s youth, the adolescent “saw in the splendid Lord Byron a fabulous mirror . . . [and felt] a kinship with that troubled spirit.” But her investment in Byron may have also derived its peculiar intensity from her relationship to her father and his preoccupation with the poet. Stowe vividly remembers Lyman Beecher, “with a sorrowful countenance, as if announcing the death of some one very interesting to him, ‘My dear, Byron is dead—gone.’ After being awhile silent, he said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry that Byron is dead. I did hope he would live to do something for Christ. What a harp he might have swept!’ The whole impression made upon me by the conversation was solemn and painful.” Not only did Beecher mourn Byron with a striking intensity, he also fantasized repeatedly about meeting Byron and somehow being able to save him: “Father often said, in after years, that he wished he could have seen Byron, and presented to his mind his views of religious
truth. He thought if Byron ‘could only have talked with Taylor and me, it might have got him out of his troubles . . . ’”

However, although Byron’s death “dispirited” the young girl and led her to contemplate “the blue sky . . . [and] that great eternity into which Byron had entered,” Stowe does not reveal the conclusion of her reflections beyond the brief and noncommittal statement that she “wondered how it might be with his soul.” Stowe’s ambivalent account leaves far more critical distance between herself and the poet (literally the distance between girl and sky) than her father’s infatuated and somewhat condescending relation to him. While her father was devoted to saving him, Stowe just as often focuses on the plight of his victims. Furthermore, if Byron was indeed her “fabulous mirror,” she thoroughly smashed it—even at the expense of her own career. In 1869, Stowe pushed into print “The True Story of Lady Byron” and then in 1870 a book-length version called Lady Byron Vindicated. In them, she entered the corrosive debate surrounding the Byrons’ failed marriage. She took Lady Byron’s side, and in the process, in part because of her status as an internationally admired and respected author, she launched one of the most damaging attacks on Lord Byron ever published.

The Byrons’ infamous estrangement had provoked a long-standing literary-cultural battle about who was to blame for the separation and for Byron’s dissipation and untimely death. Did the wife’s cold virtue and unforgiving propriety drive a sensitive poet to ruin? Or did a debauched and abusive madman vilify, abandon, and torment a deeply virtuous wife and mother? After the publication of Dred in 1856 (which Lady

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45 Stowe’s recollection is quoted in Fields, 38-40. See Crozier, 210, 203.

46 Fields, 39.
Byron praised), the poet’s widow called Stowe into a private meeting. Concerned about how a new cheap edition of Byron’s works would affect “the popular mind,” Lady Byron entrusted Stowe with her side of the story, a side that included revelations about Byron’s alleged incest with his half-sister. She asked Stowe’s opinion about whether she should make the story public, but Stowe advised that publication would be too great a hardship for the ailing Lady to endure. In 1869, however, after Lady Byron’s death, Lord Byron’s former Italian mistress published a memoir, which again cast his wife as the villain. At which time, Stowe broke her silence and penned “The True Story of Lady Byron” for the *Atlantic Monthly*.47

The article defends Lady Byron as a long-suffering saint, one of Stowe’s ideal real women with “the soul, not only of an angelic woman, but of a strong, reasoning man.” By contrast, she characterizes Byron as the dissipated fallen man, fallen down the slippery slope of intemperance—alcohol, gambling, possible insanity, abuse, adultery, and—most horribly—incest. This last revelation “destroyed [Stowe’s] public reputation.” In the words of her critics in both Britain and America, it brought down upon her head “one unanimous chorus of condemnation” from “all who would guard the purity of the home from pollution, and the sanctity of the grave from outrage.” They called her a “vendor of poison,” “positively repellant,” whose manner was “sanctimonious imbecility.” They accused her of writing the story “to make money out of such abominations” and so that “the circulation of the magazine is thereby made enormous.”

47 Stowe also tells this story to Oliver Wendell Holmes in a private letter, in which she asks for his advice about the soon-to-be-published article. However, she makes her determination to publish quite clear: “I want, not your advice as to whether the main facts shall be told, for on this point I am so resolved that I frankly say advice would do me no good. But you might help me, with your delicacy and insight, to make the manner of telling more perfect.” Quoted in Beverly Peterson, “Hitherto Unpublished Letters from Oliver Wendell Holmes to Harriet Beecher Stowe,” *Resources for American Literary Study* 23 (1997): 61.
In actuality, Stowe’s article cost the *Atlantic Monthly* 15,000 subscriptions. Yet instead of giving up the story she proceeded to publish the book-length version of her argument the following year. She saw her defense of Lady Byron as a holy mission, on par with her antislavery and other reform work. As she wrote to a friend, in the midst of the public storm, “Depend upon it, the spirit of the Lord didn’t pitch me into this seething caldron for nothing, and the Son of Man walketh with me in the fire. Eternal right and justice are with me and I shall triumph . . .”

Perhaps, as has been suggested, we could see Stowe’s attack on Byron and her stubborn vindication of Lady Byron as a kind of anti-Byron conversion—as one critic phrased it, “the protests of a betrayed lover”—occasioned by the unseemly revelations of 1856. Or, it could be a case of projection. While she was vilifying Byron for his abusive hypocrisy and adultery, the Beecher-Tilton scandal was heating up and about to boil over into a public fracas. America’s most famous minister and Stowe’s favorite brother, Henry Ward Beecher, had allegedly conducted a sordid affair with the wife of one of his junior ministers. Despite all the evidence, Stowe stubbornly refused to believe her brother capable of this kind of vile behavior (even though she had worried about him years before). When Henry prosecuted Victoria Woodhull and Tennie Claflin for publicly printing the allegations, it caused a family split. Stowe sided with her brother and broke

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with her younger sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, who believed Woodhull and Claflin, her friends and suffragist allies.  

I believe, however, that while Stowe’s unacknowledged sense of betrayal (both by Byron and her brother) probably did factor into the passion of her exposé, evidence shows that the relationship between Stowe and the poet was strained long before her interview with Lady Byron or the scandal. Stowe’s own brand of feminism developed in opposition to the model of aristocratic masculinity embodied in the Byronic hero. The title of her book, *Lady Byron Vindicated*, echoes—I believe consciously—Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and Stowe seems to intend her book as a larger feminist statement about women’s condition suffering under the oppression of an aristocratic masculinity, even of the “outlaw” type. 

Throughout her career, Stowe demonstrated her aversion to the Byronic hero by attacking his central system of ideals—chivalry. Although *The Corsair*’s iconic hero, Conrad, lives by “his deep fidelity to a beloved and unironic code of chivalry,” Stowe’s relationship to that aristocratic code of male behavior is exceedingly critical. Far into her life, she believed that truly “manly” men protected women: “[M]en were born and organized by nature to be the protectors of women; and, generally speaking, the stronger and more thoroughly manly a man is, the more he has of . . . the disposition which makes him the charmed servant of what is weak and dependent.” Yet this kind protection is not

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50 Michael Schmidt, “A Note on the Text,” *The Corsair: A Tale* by George Gordon, Lord Byron (New York: Penguin Books, 1999) 75; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Pink and White Tyranny: A Society Novel*, 295. Originally published in 1871. Although Stowe states that all good or “true” men protected women, that is not the same thing as saying that all good or “true” women needed men’s protection. *Pink and White*
only not chivalric but it opposes chivalry, which Stowe saw as a cover for male domination and aristocratic class privilege. Stowe expresses this idea most clearly in *Dred*. She damns so-called southern chivalry as a farce, whose adherents “have none of the respect which a free man feels for woman as woman. They respect the sex when they see it enshrined by fashion, wealth, and power; but they tread it in the dust when in poverty and helplessness it stands in the path of their purposes.”

In other words, chivalry ravages precisely the most “helpless,” the truly “weak and dependent” women that true manhood protects. And by refusing women in “poverty” the rights of womanhood and crushing them to achieve their own “purposes,” masculine chivalry enables a pernicious and exploitive class system that reduces people to use-value. Thus, for Stowe, the chivalric Byronic hero is, at his ethical core, a Byronic villain.

The first incarnation of the nostalgic, aristocratic “outlaw” appeared in the form of the pirate,

and, not surprisingly, Byron’s first Byronic hero was also a pirate. But Stowe’s version of the sea-faring aristocrat transforms the seemingly noble Conrad into the explicitly depraved Legree, who, we discover, first gained his fortune as a buccaneer. He then invested his ill-gotten gains in slaves and cotton. Legree’s biography connects the supposedly romantic outlaw profession with the brutality of the slave master, the

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*Tyranny* looks at the plight of a “child-woman,” made so by a defective (patriarchal) education. I do not believe, as some critics have suggested, that Stowe’s late society novels “abandon[] the independent, strong woman” model to idealize the “the dependent woman who is destined for marriage.” Rather, she points out that men and male society have a responsibility to care for the weaker among them, especially if men have mis-trained them to be weak in the first place. See Dorothy Berkson, “Millennial Politics and the Feminine Fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe,” *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Elizabeth Ammons, ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980) 254. For Stowe’s admiration of muscular femininity and feminism, see Jean Lebedun, “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Interest in Sojourner Truth, Black Feminist,” 1974.


52 Mackie, 2.
worst of the tyranny that the rebel supposedly resisted. Through Legree, Stowe parodies and explodes the outlaw-chivalry romanticized by Byron and makes plain her judgment of the so-called hero.

Stowe’s primary interest, however, does not center on the Byronic hero cum villain, but on the Byronic heroine. Thus she draws very different lessons from Byron than many of his other admirers. Although The Corsair first “characterizes the brooding, handsome and enigmatic Byronic hero,” the passage that Stowe remembers most vividly was not spoken by Conrad. Stowe quotes the line, “One I never loved enough to hate,” as the exemplum of “the wonderful things” she found in the poem. Spoken by Gulnare, the Turkish Pacha’s chief harem slave/wife, the line describes her complex subordination to her husband/master, her contradictory feelings about her enslavement to a husband, and her ambivalence about seeking revenge. Gulnare’s wound comes from a much more personal source than Conrad’s abstracted, mysterious melancholy, and it problematizes the easy revenge solution. That complex relation to patriarchy seems to fascinate Stowe, and she reproduces it in her portrait of Cassy. Gulnare and Cassy share striking similarities. They are both dark, exoticized beauties, “black-eyed slave[s],” both subject to masters who double as husbands with a husband’s sexual access. (Many antislavery writers, Lydia Maria Child for instance, equated slavery with the harem. Their linkage became a consciousness-raising point of contact between the woman’s movement and abolition.) Cassy exhibits the same wounded interiority as Gulnare, the same questioning of “What am I?” and the same conflicted thirst for revenge and escape. But beyond the affinities of their characters and situations, Stowe literally re-enacts the central debate between Gulnare and Conrad—about whether she should murder the Pacha—in a way
that critiques Conrad’s failed rhetoric. She blames its failure on Conrad’s obsolescent attachment to aristocratic masculinity, which prevents him from entering into true sympathy with Gulnare or even granting her an independent subjectivity.  

The plot of *The Corsair* goes as follows: Conrad’s enemy, the Turkish Pacha, Seyd, intends to wipe out our hero and his band of pirates. In order to prevent this disaster, Conrad and his men conduct a pre-emptive sneak attack (in which Conrad gains access to the feasting Pacha by posing as an escaped captive and holy man). They attack, but before Conrad can kill his stunned nemesis, he hears women’s screams. By firing the city, his band has also trapped the harem women in a blazing inferno. Conrad rushes to the rescue and carries Gulnare to safety. Conrad’s chivalry gives the Pacha time to rally his forces, and they slaughter the pirates and capture Conrad. A grateful Gulnare falls in love with her rescuer, comes to an awareness of her enslaved and degraded position, steals out to visit the captive in the middle of the night, and decides to escape with the pirate before the Pacha executes him. She convinces a number of guards to join her, and, in order to ensure that they are not followed and to reap vengeance, she stabs the sleeping Pacha. They escape, but Conrad is repulsed by her crime and committed to another woman. He returns to his true love but finds her dead, her heart broken by news of his capture. He then disappears.

The central moral moment of the poem occurs in the scene between Gulnare and Conrad where he tries to dissuade her from turning “homicide” and killing her master (63). Although Conrad faces torture and death at the hands of the Pacha (in the morning,  

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the Pacha plans to make his “limbs writhe around the ready stake” (60), he nobly refuses her aid because it would involve killing the slumbering man with a “secret knife” (60). Even when she acknowledges his qualms and proposes to do it without his involvement (“But since the dagger suits thee less than brand,/ I’ll try the firmness of a female hand” 60), he is still horrified. Gulnare points out that the Pacha has abused her and insulted her honor and ultimately promises to drown her like a battered kitten when he grows tired of her. He “menaced fame and life,” and “When wearier of these fleeting charms and me,/ There yawns the sack—and yonder rolls the sea!” (59) She implores Conrad in language that resonates with debates surrounding Wollstonecraftian feminism and true womanhood, “What, am I then a toy for dotard’s play/ To wear but till the gilding frets away?” (59) Conrad’s answer indirectly affirms her objectification and role as a “toy” or tool for men’s pleasure and status. He rejects her plan because it would further lower his own “withered fame” (59), and he warns “Let me not deem that mercy shewn amiss” (60). In other words, if she murders the Pacha, her action would blacken his reputation because within the chivalric framework her agency can only be an extension of a man’s. If so, then he will, of course, regret saving her life and thus attaching her to him.

Conrad’s ethics do not shun murder or subterfuge (see his sneak attack and disguise), but he can only approve the “open hand” and “scimitar” of manly “battle”—exclusively and emphatically “shed by men!” (59-60, 62). When Gulnare kills the Pacha, a “spot of blood” on her face revolts Conrad: “That spot of blood, that light but guilty streak,/ Had banish’d all the beauty from her cheek!” (62) Gulnare has not become ugly. But the “beautiful” is associated with a passive and demure femininity, while the “sublime” attends awful masculine violence. Gulnare’s action has unsexed her, like the tearing of
Cassy’s skirt. Yet, Conrad cannot allow Gulnare clear passage into the fenced-off realm of the sublime, a privilege of male agency. Instead, Conrad blames himself for Gulnare’s violence: She is “the wretch he made” (63), like one fashions a tool.

By contrast, Tom wins his argument with Cassy and prevents her murder of Legree (in a chapter appropriately titled “The Victory”) because his sympathetic masculinity can acknowledge and address her specific needs and interiority. Thus, recasting Cassy in Gulnare’s role and Tom in Conrad’s, Stowe’s “victory,” revises the Byronic episode to allow Cassy to escape without staining her soul with “blood-guiltiness” (*UTC* , 345). When, like Gulnare, Cassy glides out in the middle of the night to visit Tom in his captivity and propose her bloody plan, she tells Tom that she poisoned Legree’s brandy (presumably with laudanum since it puts him to sleep), but that she did not have enough to kill him. However, she has readied an axe and asks Tom to butcher their sleeping master. When Tom refuses, she pleads with him, saying that if he were dead, they could “set [all the slaves] free.” Reiterating Gulnare’s plan, they “could find an island.” (Maroons and pirates are closely associated figures of the outlaw, and Cassy’s proposal would transform them into these Byronic outlaws.) When Tom again refuses, Cassy turns to do it herself. But, while the proud Conrad failed to stop Gulnare when she turned and left to kill Seyd, Tom “throw[s] himself before” Cassy and pleads with her in humility—not on behalf of his honor, but on behalf of her own soul and self. Although Tom converts and “saves” Cassy more thoroughly than Conrad does Gulnare, he does not conceive of her as a “toy” or a tool he “made.” Instead of Conrad asking Gulnare to desist for the sake of his own honor, Tom asks, “[F]or the dear Lord’s sake that died for ye, don’t sell your precious soul to the devil, that way!” Tom’s sympathetic masculinity
deters Cassy from her murderous mission: “The deep fervor of Tom’s feelings, the softness of his voice, his tears, fell like dew on the wild, unsettled spirit of the poor woman” (UTC, 345). Tom’s true “tears” and his genuine empathy with the “poor woman” makes him more “manly” in Stowe’s definition than the Byronic men—Conrad or the aristocratic Henry with his false tears or the brutal Legree.54

Conrad did not flinch at Gulnare’s revelation that the Pacha intended to kill her, and his flat denial of her plan would have delivered her up to that same death he faced. Tom’s truly selfless ministering to Cassy, however, allows him to address her specific needs, life, and health and propose an alternative to the martyrdom he chooses for himself. He says, “It’s different with you; it’s a snare to you,—it’s more ‘n you can stand,—and you’d better go, if you can” (345). He begs her to “Try it, and I’ll pray, with all my might for you” (345). At that instant, under the influence of Tom’s prayer, Cassy hits on the solution, a plan of escape that saves both herself and Emmeline.

This decision to allow Cassy to escape and live happily ever after angered pro-slavery critics who considered her “infamous” and deserving of punishment, but it also defied the conventions of the antislavery “tragic mulatta” narrative. The dramatic sacrifice of the heroine subtly suggests that that is the apotheosis of the system’s violence, the limit, the absolute worst it can do, and so it contains the humiliation

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54 Much has been made of Tom’s supposed effeminacy. Some critics even go so far as to call him a “heroine.” Ammons, “Heroines in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 178. But throughout the novel, Stowe shows him as stronger and more manly than many of the white men around him. For instance, when Eva falls into the river Tom heroically leaps in to save her and renders “more efficient aid” (128) than her father, and he “carries [Eva] so strong” when her father’s “slighter frame” grows “weary” (254). By the end of the novel, Uncle Tom has become “Father Tom” (344), an emblem of the virtuous patriarch.
inflicted by aristocratic masculinity within female bodies.\textsuperscript{55} That limitation of danger can allow the reader to feel a safe kind of sympathy, an alienating pity that puts distance between observer and object without any sense of possible threat to the observer (like the pity Conrad felt for Gulnare).\textsuperscript{56} But Stowe’s overall argument—that atavistic social abuses undermined civilization as a whole—opposed this strategy of isolating white, male bodies from suffering and humiliation. As Stowe’s career advanced, her fiction focused more and more on how aristocratic masculinity victimized, abused, and even killed this untouchable group—elite, respectable, powerful white men. By extending the danger to white, male bodies, Stowe also made a point of showing how aristocratic masculinity ultimately threatened elite men’s privileged position in society. The mechanism of aristocratic “appropriation,” as she theorizes it, relies upon violent forms of discipline and hierarchy, homosocially exclusive means of influence and education, and chaotic methods of dissemination and reproduction (mob rule or “lynch-law,” downward cultural and upward class mobility, miscegenation, father-daughter incest, and polygamy).\textsuperscript{57} Although these methods appear to draw boundaries between appropriators

\textsuperscript{55} See above for Nancy Bentley’s study of antislavery fiction, which contends that “physical humiliation of a white man is obscene in the domestic novel,” and “[i]n antislavery fiction, narrators avoid portraying the violation of even half-white men.” Bentley, 502, 506.

\textsuperscript{56} Stowe, herself, offends in this manner. Scholarship often accuses her of creating this kind of safe sympathy or pity by martyring Uncle Tom. But her later work resists this alienating melodrama and further generalizes the effect of social abuses. Ironically, her intellectualizing attempt to spread the danger beyond the usual vulnerable categories also makes her later fiction less effective as sentimental tear-jerkers. For the distinction between “compassion” and “mere pity,” see Glenn Hendler, \textit{Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 3-4.

\textsuperscript{57} According to Shirley Samuels, “[t]he family boundaries that both miscegenation and incest foreground were well recognized by nineteenth-century legislation. ‘State criminal codes . . . usually listed miscegenation next to incest as two crimes of ‘blood.’” This problematic association of interracial and intrafamilial crimes of blood was elaborated on by an antebellum Mississippi statesman who declared: ‘The same law which forbids consanguinous amalgamation forbids ethnical amalgamation. Both are incestuous.
and appropriatees, along lines of race, class, and gender, Stowe argues that, in fact, the appropriative mechanism knows no bounds. It forcibly mixes social categories: creating illegitimate and alienated mulattos, giving “ruffians” access to power with “gentlemen,” and finally even forcing true women to become poisonous phallic mothers like Cassy. Appropriation, she argues, begins with women and slaves and ends by consuming white men themselves. The brutalization of elite white men is the horror, the cause and effect, structuring almost all of Stowe’s fiction. It becomes one of her most pointed rhetorical innovations on the “tragic mulatta” narrative, intended to shock and to bring the horror of homosocial systems to the attention of those who seemingly benefit from them. She reveals that perceived benefit as ephemeral and brutality as the continuing reality.

When the sectional conflict between “barbarism” and “civilization” escalated, Stowe’s antislavery fiction also upped the ante by illustrating not only the physical humiliation of women and (almost) white men, but the repeated mutilation of white, upper-class men. In Dred, Stowe’s brutal southern plantation master, Tom Gordon, exerts his power first by beating his blue-eyed slave half-brother (another Harry), then gathers a mob to threaten a white minister, and then ends by savagely caning a fellow white aristocrat and plantation owner. This cowardly ambush (also with a “gutta percha cane”) is meant to parallel Preston Brooks’s attack on Charles Sumner in the Senate chamber.

Sumner was a friend and frequent correspondent of Stowe’s, and his crippling infuriated her and caused her to reverse her novel in mid-stride. She had initially intended *Dred* as an examination of southern aristocracy and a gentle conversion narrative, but, after Sumner’s beating and the burning of Lawrence, Kansas, Stowe declared that “[t]he book is written under the impulse of our stormy times . . . how the blood & insults of Sumner and the sack of Lawrence burn within us I hope to make a voice to say.”\(^{58}\) She then proceeded to kill off her southern abolitionist heroine, Nina Gordon, and switched her searing gaze to Nina’s debauched brother, Tom.

Through Tom Gordon, Stowe argues that even an initially bright and genteel white man thus brutalized and trained in brutality can reproduce a regressive homosocial system, becoming an intemperate, consuming aristocrat himself. Tom’s “perverse recovery from decline . . . redeem[s] his energies by marshaling them into an efficient instrument of his hunger for superiority.”\(^{59}\) This intemperate masculinity expresses itself in a devouring form of imperialism that also turns inward and colonizes civilization with barbarism. For instance, as slavery moves west, demagogues like Tom Gordon will mix classes and allow low and brutal masculinity into power: “If all the broad land between the Mississippi and the Pacific becomes one great market for bodies and souls . . . the trader and the catcher may yet be among our aristocracy” (*UTC*, 62). The greatest threat is that this form of imperialism will establish a brute “aristocracy” over “our” New England civilization. In *Dred*, Stowe charges the South even more bluntly with this foul

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\(^{58}\) Quoted in Hedrick, 258.

conspiracy. The aptly named Frank Russell, a southern aristocrat, declares that “our aristocracy . . . are going to annex Cuba and the Sandwich Islands, and the Lord knows what, and have a great and splendid slaveholding empire. And the North is going to be what Greece was to Rome. We shall govern it . . . and if we are careful, and don’t tell them too plain where we are taking them, they’ll never know it till they get there” (470).

The essential character of aristocratic masculinity is expansionist and imperialist. Russell’s statement exposes the danger that faces even the privileged. The “Roman” South will cap its imperial conquest of foreign lands by turning back and conquering American civilization itself, just as Rome conquered Greece. Already known as the American Athens, Boston (and New England in general) would provide the South with a veneer of culture and religion (just as Greece did for Rome), but ultimately the economic and political power would rest in southern not northern hands. “Civilization” would serve “barbarism.”

Franks’ interlocutor, the antislavery southerner Edward Clayton, challenges Frank’s scenario with an alternative and equally unpleasant and dangerous possibility: a bloody uprising. Their conversation recalls the argument between the twins in Uncle Tom’s Cabin—the “aristocratic” Daddy’s boy, Alfred, and the sympathetic Mamma’s boy, Augustine St. Clare. If, Stowe argues, the “aristocratic” homosocial system clings to life and continues to thwart national progress, the ultimate result will be either escalating barbarism that mixes classes and races indiscriminately and “uses up” people—or a violent, Oedipal implosion of society. Either option is an intemperate mess. Augustine St. Clare and Edward Clayton, both use the metaphor “to sit on” or “shut down the escape-valve” as a way to describe the inevitable effect of this imperialist “oppression” (UTC,
The “Old World” machinery is inadequate to the modern world, and eventually it will fail and explode into bloody revolution. Although Augustine prophesies a “dies irae” when “the masses will rise,” he expects that the “haughty” and almost-white sons will lead the revolution: At that “San Domingo hour . . .[s]ons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins . . . will rise, and raise with them their mother’s race!” (UTC, 234). Having endured oppression under the reign of the father, the sons will make common cause with the mother against him.

Thus aristocratic masculinity ultimately creates the conditions of its own bloody destruction. Stowe, however, remains highly ambivalent about this option. Although she lauds John Brown, she praises his sacrifice on behalf of the oppressed, not his violence. Violence is only legitimized by sacrifice—by enacting violence not on one’s own behalf but in order to paternalistically protect someone else, someone “weak and dependent” or lower on a hierarchical social scale. This definition of legitimate violence drastically curtails the revolutionary agency of the masses themselves and rather grants that power to privileged white male representatives who can act for them (much like the white New Englander John Brown led the attack on Harper’s Ferry to free southern black slaves).

This sacrificial violence will help contain explosive destruction. The oppressed could turn violently and self-interestedly against the homosocial system, returning blood for blood and poison for poison—but that method is still intemperate, still selfish and too close an imitation of “outlaw” aristocratic masculinity that oppressed them.

The key to maintaining civilization thus lies in the formation of privileged protectors. Mothers protecting children, especially sons, first model this role. Then when

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60 Gossett, 310-11.
the sons come of age, they can follow their mother’s example and protect weaker members of society (women, workers, and/or minorities) and thus civilization, like Augustine St. Clare and Edward Clayton do. Or, like Alfred St. Clare and Tom Gordon, they can choose the aristocratic father as a model and promote barbarism and eventually provoke revolutionary violence.

For Stowe, Byron embodies this kind of liminal figure, a privileged white man balanced on a knife’s edge, a damaged and conflicted manhood that can turn either to the mother or the father. Her strategy of extending the damage inflicted by homosocial forms to men themselves reveals this valuable potential in him. Although she portrays the Byronic hero as the villain in many of her pieces, she also shows him as a victim. Because he has experienced humiliation similar to that suffered by many women and minorities, the Byronic young man could experience genuine sympathy for them and is thus an ideal candidate for conversion to sympathetic manhood. Yet, because he is also privileged, he can exert the violence necessary to protect the “weak and dependent,” and so protect civilization from barbarism. He becomes the contested figure in a battle between barbarizing homosocial masculinity and the educating force of progressive matriarchy. Already poisoned by patriarchy and so marked by femininity, the Byronic figure is a mix of genders, a figure in flux. If he gives in to father-influence and paternal brutalization, he becomes fully bestial and poisonous, an agent of intemperance that manifests as further appropriation or self-interested, “outlaw” violence. If, on the other hand, he follows the gentling guidance of a maternal figure and learns to sympathize with and listen to women, he may be transformed into an ideal New England man: temperate, self-disciplined, nurturing rather than appropriating, yet with the ability to use violence
legitimately on behalf of the feminine other and to govern the country through a paternalistic hegemony that re-instantiates the neat social divisions disrupted by patriarchy.

In short, Stowe joins the argument about threatened New England masculinity, and suggests that instead of imitating the brutal homosocial “mob” and the demagogic and polygamous Southern “patriarchs,” they should regain their macho through a brotherly alliance with genteel women and the forces of civilization. The revitalized New England man thus marries a metaphorical “sister” and forms a racially and culturally homogenous mutual “coordinate marriage,” replacing the father’s “crimes of blood” (miscegenation and father-daughter incest) with a stable domesticity and clear categories of identity, capable of preserving “Christian democracy” and ensuring its millennial westward spread. A republic led by such sympathetic, woman-educated, and woman-influenced men will sweep away primitive masculinity and reproduce New England society across the nation.61


George M. Fredrickson discusses the struggle between southern aristocrats and New England Brahmins for control of the west. This conflict rapidly escalated after the Fugitive Slave law (1850), the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), and the Dred Scott decision (1857) threatened the old balance of power between North and South. Notice the key terms “barbarism” and “civilization,” which Stowe also deploys: “. . . the capture of fugitive slaves in the North and the introduction of slavery in the territories where New Yorkers were going represented the direct assaults of an alien Southern civilization on the New England way of life and its destiny to spread over the entire continent. It was on . . . a platform of New England ‘civilization’ with its capacity for community life, as opposed to Southern ‘barbarism’ and lawlessness, that more conservative New Englanders could support the antislavery side.” The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 46. For further discussion of the “entanglement of abolitionism and manifest destiny” and how Stowe’s “romantic racialism” excludes African Americans from the Brahmin’s manifest destiny, see Isabella Furth, “Manifest Destiny, Manifest Domesticity, and the Leaven of Whiteness in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” American Quarterly 55 (1999): 31-55. For Stowe’s framing of this western manifest destiny in terms of Christian perfectionism, see Theodore R.
B. Folded Snakes

Byron’s own characterization of the first Byronic hero establishes him as a mixed figure, embodying both victim and victimizer, male and female, with an uncertain snake-like potential. In *The Corsair*, Conrad appears as a romantic rebel resistant to all forms of tyranny, and the metaphor Byron uses to establish Conrad as both victim of oppression and agent of resistance is the venomous serpent:

Lone, wild and strange, he stood alike exempt
From all affection and from all contempt:
His name could sadden, and his acts surprise;
But they that feared him dared not to despise:
Man spurns the worm, but pauses ere he wake
The slumbering venom of the folded snake:
The first may turn—but not avenge the blow;
The last expires—but leaves no living foe;
Fast to the doomed offender’s form it clings,
And he may crush—not conquer—still it stings! (18)

The tyrant (or remnant of old patriarchy) may “crush” but not “conquer” the “folded snake,” which contains coiled revolutionary energy waiting to spring. But this metaphor does not conceptualize a “return of the repressed” masses.\(^6^2\) *The Corsair* ascribes to a classist, racist, and implicitly sexist vision of resistance akin to Augustine St. Clare’s

\(^6^2\) Scholars of the American gothic often analyze the genre as “an eruption of Otherness”—the uncanny re-emergence of the monstrous or of the historically oppressed (appropriated), which violates American mythology. Thus the gothic often centers on the vengeful return of excluded, effeminized groups (Native Americans, slaves, women); but, parallel to the tradition of “female gothic,” I would argue a genre of male or masculine gothic has also developed, which focuses on anxieties about masculinity (about being “othered”) and reasserts the brother’s/son’s manhood against the father’s. See the essays (particularly the introduction) in Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy, eds., *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998) viii; Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Louis S. Gross, *Redefining the American Gothic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Donald A. Ringe, *American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1982).
may turn” but it cannot “avenge” or fight back like the more developed or energized life form can. At the same time, the association between the republican hero and the snake does produce a blending of gender characteristics. The long-established connection between women and snakes and poison infuses the corsair with a taint of femininity.

Combining the phallic and the feminine, the serpentine Byronic hero becomes the perfect figure for Stowe’s sons, damaged or “crushed” by patriarchy, and he is well poised to embody the shift from homosocial aristocratic to woman-influenced and sympathetic masculinity. Stowe’s fiction thus demonstrates a long preoccupation with George Gordon (Lord Byron) and his Sturm und Drang clones. Stowe constantly repeats the Byronic character type and scatters Georges and Gordons profusely throughout her literature, often coupling those names with a form of “Henry,” the name of her favorite brother and her first son.

In modified fashion then, Stowe took up her father’s quest to save Byron, the fallen and wasted genius; for both father and daughter believed that talent—especially literary talent—put to immoral use (rather than “do[ing] something for Christ”) doomed the artist and his works to death. In response to Byron’s death, Stowe’s father preached a sermon that “made an impression on me [Stowe] that has never been effaced.” The sermon was essentially literary criticism—positing that the “impurities” of Byron’s works would “sink them in oblivion.” And Beecher lamented the “wasted life and misused powers of the great poet.” The main idea of the sermon, as Stowe recalled, “was that goodness only is immortal, and that no degree of brilliancy and genius can redeem vice
from perishing.”

Death and oblivion—rather than life and distinction—awaited misdirected energies, even brilliant ones. Stowe’s antebellum romances, in particular, attempt to channel his “power” in productive directions and away from self-destructive death-dealing.

However, her methods differed significantly from her father’s. She did not seem as sanguine as Beecher about Byron’s inevitable conversion if he “‘could only have talked with’” well-meaning ministers. Ministers, after all, received their training through the type of “Old World” homosocial system that Stowe identified with barbarism. As Stowe explained it, even good New England clergy subscribe to an atavistic Calvinism, which derives from “habits of thought engendered by monarchical institutions.” Ministers were often just as caught up in a deathly homosocial system as the misguided rebel against them. Calvinism, after all, had produced Byron. In *Lady Byron Vindicated*, Stowe “suggests that an image of the Calvinist God, imposed during [Byron’s] childhood in Scotland, had bedeviled Byron’s whole life, either driving him to believe in his own damnation or goading him to rebel against it.”

If salvation is to come, it must come through an alliance with women.

For instance, in *The Minister’s Wooing* Stowe creates two Byronic men: James Marvyn and Aaron Burr. Her darkly handsome fictional hero can dabble in atheism and overweening ambition and run off to sea and foreign temptations, but he also genuinely loves a virtuous woman—or rather he is learning to love her. At first, James’s encounter

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63 Fields, 39.

with the female other was under-evolved—aristocratic and appropriative—, and “he had wished to appropriate [Mary] wholly to himself” (24). But his love grows into something “sacred . . . which has led me upward . . . [until] I began now to live a new life—a life in which I felt myself coming into sympathy with [Mary] . . . [so that I can now] devote my whole life to [her],” instead of using her for his benefit (297, 299, 300). By contrast, Burr rejects Mary’s spiritual guidance, preferring instead to follow the dictates of his own rigid “ethical creed[]” (278). Stowe parallels Burr’s pursuit of “individual pleasure” with the complete “sacrifice” demanded by the Calvinist theology of Samuel Hopkins (Mary’s other unsuccessful suitor): “Both had a perfect logic of life, and guided themselves with an inflexible rigidity by it” (278). Although seemingly worlds apart, Burr and Hopkins are merely two sides of the same coin. They both rely on homosocial and thus narrow and egotistical “[t]heologic systems.” As Stowe further articulates in *Oldtown Folks*:

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> ‘The fact is, a man never sees a subject thoroughly until he sees what a woman will think of it, for there’s a woman’s view of every subject, which has a different shade from a man’s view. . . . Women’s nature has never been consulted in theology. Theologic systems . . . have, as yet, been the work of man alone. They have had their origin . . . with men who were utterly ignorant of moral and intellectual companionship with women, looking on her only in her animal nature as a temptation and a snare.’

Burr, the fallen grandson of the great Calvinist minister Jonathon Edwards, maintains a primitive, alienating relationship to woman, seeing her only in her “animal nature” and as an object to further his pleasure. Burr becomes as much an “appropriator” as the Calvinist forefathers he rebels against. His greater abilities, however, make his crime more infamous, and his greater power makes its misuse more deadly. Stowe describes this power as an almost snake-like ability to fascinate and control his prey. In Mary’s words:

65 Quoted in Donovan, 152.
Precisely because you are . . . strong keen, penetrating, and able to control and
govern all who come near you,—because you have the power to make yourself
agreeable, interesting, fascinating, and to win esteem and love,—just for that
reason you ought to hold yourself the guardian of every woman, and treat her as
you would wish any man to treat your own daughter (275).

Instead, Burr’s seduction of Mary’s friend, Virginie Frontignac, has “taken the very life
out of her” (275) by taking her heart and is more damning than theological impiety or
oppression:

Of old, it was thought that one who administered poison in the sacramental bread
and wine had touched the very height of impious sacrilege; but this crime is
white, by the side of his who poisons God’s eternal sacrament of love and
destroys a woman’s soul through her noblest and purest affections (137).

These passages illustrate how Stowe is intertwining the Byronic and scriptural discourses
of poison in order to deconstruct the gender politics of them both. While retaining the
negative evaluation of poison set out in scriptural discourse, Stowe reverses its typical
gender attribution by drawing on the conventions of a snake-like Byronic hero.

This moral reversal between man and woman leads into Stowe’s radical
replacement of the central sacrament of a theological system (communion administered
by a male priest or minister) with the more “eternal sacrament” of loving, sympathetic
communion between man and woman. This displacement privileges a bi-gendered,
egalitarian exchange over a ritual that re-inscribes masculine hierarchy. Within a Catholic
context (and within many Protestant ones), only high-ranking male clergy specially
trained within a homosocial system are able to draw blessings from God down upon the
bread and wine. Communion thus highlights their power and place in the hierarchy
between God and women. Stowe, a longtime advocate of women’s special spirituality
and right to minister, was drawn to the image of old patriarchal Catholic Italy and the
communion as an image of corruption and poison, of “irresponsible power.” Stowe refers
again to poisoning the communion wine and bread in her “Italian” novel, *Agnes of Sorrento*. In it, she attacked the Borgia popes and papacy in general as thieves, poisoners, and rapists. When Stowe traveled to Europe in 1859, she lingered in Italy—fascinated and repulsed by its exotic otherness. The two novels written immediately after her travel, *The Minister’s Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento*, are her most theological novels and reflect her attempt to theorize the connection between New England Calvinism and Italian Catholicism and a civilized antidote to the “poisonous” old forms of religion that “failed to humanize the savage forms of justice” or social control.66

Although Stowe went abroad for some of her subjects, she aimed her religious reforms much closer to home. She first published *The Minister’s Wooing* in *The Atlantic Monthly* in dialogue with the other fictions and articles in the magazine, but “Stowe’s novel posits a tradition of marriage choice . . . contrary to that expressed by contemporary courtship novels in the *Atlantic*.“67 The virtuous heroines of these other romances typically bowed to a parent’s choice of marriage partner and wed the fatherly minister-type, who would guide and educate the young lady. Although Stowe depicts the much older, paternal Hopkins as a gentle and good man and Burr as a “fascinating” one, Mary’s ideal choice is always James, even though her mother disapproves of him. James is in “sympathy” with Mary. She could have loved Hopkins perhaps “[i]f it were not for this mysterious selfness-and-sameness which makes this wild, wandering uncanonical sailor, James Marvyn, so intimate and internal,—if his thread were not knit up with the thread of


her life,—were it not for the old habit of thinking for him, praying for him, hoping for him, fearing for him” (109). James and Mary can achieve “a coordinate marriage . . . with a healthy mingling of gender characteristics”—something that Mary could not have within the confines of a hierarchical marriage with men socialized in alienating, homosocial systems. These conservative marriages would only reproduce father-daughter hierarchies and destabilizing power inequities.

While hierarchical systems depend upon hierarchized differences (racial, cultural, etc.) between partners, whether or not a couple can form a “coordinate” relationship depends upon a social propinquity between the man and woman. In much of Stowe’s fiction, this “selfness-and-sameness” seems to translate into racial homogeneity. James Marvyn and Mary Scudder are both New England Anglo-Saxons. In *Agnes of Sorrento*, the saintly Agnes and her successfully-converted Byronic lover Augustino are also both southern Italians. George and Eliza Harris in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* again are both mulattos. While hierarchical (father-daughter) models of relationships depend upon difference to maintain the hierarchy, Stowe’s version of a coordinate (brother-sister) marriage depends upon the elimination of that difference. So even if the Byronic brother is converted by his virtuous sister, if the differences between them are too great—especially racial differences—then the marriage cannot work.

Stowe spins out this part of her argument in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, through the relationship between the New Englander Mara Lincoln (her most saintly heroine to date) and “Moses,” the Cuban orphan boy who becomes Mara’s adopted brother and then, after they grow up, her fiancé. Mara is described as an ideal “nervous” Anglo-

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68 Gail Smith, 230.
Saxon: “the small pearl with the golden hair, with her frail and high-strung organization, her sensitive nerves, her half-spiritual fibres, her ponderings, and marvels, and dreams, her power of love, and yearning for self-devotion . . .” (148). Moses, however, is the son of a wealthy and tyrannical Spanish-Cuban slave owner and “is the type of the first unreflecting stage of development, in which are only the out-reaching active faculties, the aspirations that tend to the manly accomplishments” (163). One modern critic described Moses as “an early example of the machismo male—aggressive, morally insensitive and uncontrollable.”

Although handsome, daring, and ambitious, he is “one of that very common class who had more desire to be loved than power of loving,” and his “love was egotistic, exacting, tyrannical, and capricious” (230, 148). He “had quietly settled in his own mind that the whole love of Mara’s heart was to be his, to have and to hold, to use and to draw on, when and as he liked. . . . as a sort of inexhaustible, uncounted treasure that was his own peculiar right and property” (213). But Mara is not “inexhaustible,” and, like Little Eva, she dies of consumption, of being consumed. Miss Roxy, Mara’s neighbor and one of Stowe’s many useful maiden aunt characters, diagnoses Mara’s affliction as Moses and declares angrily against “‘a-usin’ up girls for the salvation of fellers” (325). Although Mara’s love of Moses “seemed almost to merge her personal identity with his” (195-6), unlike James Marvyn, Moses cannot merge his with hers. He cannot evolve far enough to sympathize with the saintly New England woman, to make a

69 Donovan, 151.

70 Stowe’s attack on this attitude as characteristic of barbaric and under-developed humanity directly challenges the reactionary discourse promoted by some prominent early gynecologists such as Augustus Kinsley Gardner (who hails from Roxbury, Massachusetts, the hometown of Stowe’s maternal relations). Barker-Benfield characterizes Gardner’s arguments as implying that “[m]en needed to ‘consume’ women (or else be consumed), to recruit their ‘exhausted energies’ . . . Woman should be inexhaustible and undemanding resources” (305).
return on her investment: “while her sympathies could follow him through all his plans
and interests, there was a whole world of thought and feeling in her heart where his could
not follow her” (332). Ultimately, Mara decides that her death right before their marriage
“is in mercy to both of us” because she “should be drawn by him earthward instead of
drawing him heavenward” (363). In other words, their union would not only fail to
redeem Moses but would cause Mara to de-volve.

Behind this romance looms the specter of U. S. imperialism and the heightened
sectional conflict that went with it. Stowe has taken her gender politics and her obsession
with Byron and transferred them into a racial-imperial context, and she frames the
problem of U. S. imperialism and what that would mean for New England through the
Byron problem. One of the major anxieties many Americans expressed about the
Mexican War concerned what to do with all the Mexicans in what would become U. S.
territory. As George Fredrickson points out, “democracy itself was beginning to be
defined as racial in origin and thus realizable perhaps only by people with certain
hereditary [i.e. Anglo-Saxon] traits.” What would the inclusion of Mexicans do to
American democracy? Would white men, as some pro-expansionists suggested, breed
with Mexican women to produce Anglo-Saxons, or would the children become degraded
mongrels incapable of citizenship, who would drag down American democracy and hold
back national progress? The Pearl of Orr’s Island suggests that Anglo-Saxons,
particularly the most advanced and spiritualized New England specimens, would “be
drawn by [them] earthward.”

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71 George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American
Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1971) 101; Reginald Horsman sets out these
Also bound up in this racial question was the burgeoning sectional conflict. Stowe started writing *Pearl* in 1852 in the wake of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the (to her) surprisingly negative and aggressive southern response to the novel. Many southerners wanted to push slavery further southward into the plantation-friendly land of Central and South America. Cuba, Moses’s point of origin, was especially desirable. But, in order to “protect American slavery where it already existed and to provide for its future expansion into Latin America,” the South had “to maintain a balance of power between slave and free states by gaining political hegemony in the [western] territories.”\(^{72}\) With Moses and Mara, Stowe seems to be asking what the union between the southern aristocratic master and northern Brahmin democrat will do to New England. Moses’s father was a slave-owner, a tyrant who (along with her father) forced Moses’s mother to marry him instead of the New England minister she loved. Perhaps if Dolores had escaped with her beloved, the man who becomes the Orr’s Island minister, their child could have made a viable union with Mara. But by the next generation, Stowe seems to suggest, it is too late. Something has changed, and Moses’s Cuban origins indicate that the South’s new expansionist mode (rather than a diplomatic returning to New England) has created too great a gulf between the cultures of New England and the southern slave power. One is evolving, the other de-volving, and the salvation of the Byronic South may cost the North too much. Mixing—racial or cultural—will destroy Anglo-Saxon New England.

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\(^{72}\) Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 140.
However, the aftermath of Mara’s death troubles this unilateral interpretation. Succeeding events could either confirm this interpretation, or they just might suggest a more sanguine solution to the Byron problem that does embrace some form of mixture and an alteration in woman’s role. Mara’s best friend, Sally, has “a rich Spanish complexion” (evocative of Mary Webb’s Cassy) and “the warmest gifts of vitality and joyous animal life” (181). Sally, a bit of a coquette, equals Moses in aggressive force. She talks back to him while Mara remains silent and thoughtful, and she stops his false, Burr-like attempt to seduce her and figuratively puts her “foot on the neck of the oppressor” (313). There is something of the revolutionary hero about Sally, a New England Amazon. And, eventually, she and Moses (both now gentled by Mara’s death) marry, and even Miss Roxy is “grimly approbative” (402). Does their union stem from their shared “Spanish-ness,” hereditary in Moses’s case and only superficial in Sally’s? Or is Stowe producing a more aggressive model of New England man- and womanhood, more suitable for a real contest between North and South? One critic argues, that “[f]amilies, according to Stowe, are constituted not by the fact that the children are related to the parents but by the fact that the parents are biologically related to one another.”73 In other words, a prerequisite for “sympathy” is racial sameness. But, nowhere in Stowe’s writings does she openly disapprove of interracial marriages. (She does, however, condemn the sexual abuse allowed by slavery, which produces illegitimate racially-mixed offspring.) On the contrary, Stowe warmly and publicly endorsed Anna Dickinson’s What Answer?, an activist novel that demanded to know why

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American society would not allow two spiritually-compatible people from different races to marry in peace. As Moses tells Sally, they have both been “educated by a great sorrow”—the loss of Mara—, and they also “have a world of thoughts and memories which no one can understand but the other” (401). From their newfound sympathy, Stowe is producing a new kind of hero and heroine, a new kind of New Englander. In place of the supremely sensitive and passive “true woman,” stands a new prototype, the matriarchal “real woman,” who is a more assertive and hardy version of womanhood, capable of resisting consumption. Dying in childbirth, Mara’s mother named her after the Hebrew word for “bitterness,” “for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (11); but the diminutive “Sally” covers over the name “Sara,” euphoniously parallel with “Mara” but also the name God gave Abraham’s wife once she conceived, for it means “princess” and “she who laughs.” Like, her Biblical namesake, Sally will presumably become the joyful matriarch of a new race. For Stowe “Spanishness [is] . . . a space of ideality . . . a latent dream text counterpoised to the waking life of slavery and racism.” Seen in this light, Moses’s and Sara’s shared “Spanishness” could reflect a utopian and progressive amalgamation between the South and New England, one that civilizes the Cavalier and fortifies the Yankee.

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74 Stowe reviewed the novel in the Hartford Courant and praised it as “one of those books which belong to the class of deeds and not words . . . If anybody can read that book unmoved, we have only pity for him.” In a private note to Dickinson, Stowe further revealed that she saw the young activist as continuing Stowe’s own work: “Your poor old grandma in the work rejoices to find it in your brave young hands.” Quoted in J. Matthew Gallman, introduction, What Answer?, by Anna Dickinson (New York: Humanity Books, 2003) 7.

75 Stowe describes Sally’s chastisement of Moses as coming from “a real woman’s heart” (313). See again, Cogan, 4.

Stowe’s real woman is thus a mixture on many levels, and Stowe often signifies that mixture by associating her with serpents. The real woman, herself, is not necessarily serpentine or phallic, but she wields power over the snake. For instance, let us return to the image of Sally putting her “foot on the neck of the oppressor [Moses]” (313). It places her in the same position as the tyrant crushing the Byronic villain/hero, but with a totally different moral valence. She takes up this posture in order to restrain, not oppress, Moses—and to protect herself from his tyranny. The picture further associates Sally with Mary holding down the Devil in the form of a serpent with her little foot and suggests an association between women, power, and snakes that can be heroic. Unlike the poisonous/poisoned serpent-woman (Cassy for example), this serpent-woman has successfully escaped or resisted being damaged or consumed by aristocratic oppression, but she acquires her strength only because the old serpent-woman suffered and rebelled. The real woman inherits the power of the serpent-woman—without the wasting Byronic damage that accompanied that power. The real woman can then replace the violent or infanticidal serpent-woman. For instance, the joyful, “Spanish” Sally replaces not only Mara but also brightly mirrors, Moses’s mother Dolores, “the sorrowful one.” Dolores suffered the dictatorship of a brutal, slave-owning husband because “the European fashion” under which she was born allowed her father to determine her life “according to his pleasure, as absolutely as if she had been one of his slaves” (250). But Dolores refused to allow her son to suffer the same regressive fate. Before Mara and Sally found baby Moses and Dolores’s corpse washed up on the beach, Mara dreamt that Dolores gave her Moses’s hand and said “Take him” (48). It is as if she brings Moses to New England (risking his life in the process), to the community of her only love, and gives
him to Mara—to protect him from being raised by slave-owners and being interpellated into a brutal and brutalizing system.

Yet, it is the real woman, Sally’s “experienced hand,” that finds and takes Dolores’s serpent-hair bracelet and inherits her strength. This object embodied and occasioned Dolores’s rebellion and refusal of appropriation (48, 51). The bracelet’s chain is made from the braided hair of Dolores’s mother. A serpent encircles the clasp and, over a plate attached to the braid, are Dolores’s initials “curiously embroidered in a cipher of seed pearl” (93). To court her, Dolores’s husband once sent her a diamond bracelet that “had for its clasp his miniature, surrounded by the largest brilliants.” But when Dolores’s wicked stepmother and stepsisters told her to “‘pull off that old hair bracelet, and try this on,’” she shocked them by throwing the diamond bracelet across the room and declaring “‘I shall not take off my mother’s bracelet for a gift from a man I never knew’” (257). Dolores’s suitor would have her wear his image, enshrined in diamonds. But she instead retains the hair bracelet, which links the mother’s power with the daughter’s inchoate identity, her initials outlined in “seed pearls.”

Persistently Stowe feminizes the Byronic “folded snake” and remakes the serpent into an embodiment of repressed female power, power that will return to “bite” the oppressor, who is the originating source of brutalizing venom. For instance, Legree dies in part because of the terrors inspired by a serpentine lock of Eva’s hair “which like a living thing, twined itself around Legree’s fingers” (322). It recalls the moment when a lock of his mother’s hair similarly twined about his fingers—a saintly New England mother he had beaten and abused. The serpent-woman becomes a sign of power, the return of the repressed, a new woman, who takes on phallic properties in order to protect
her son from brutalization. Thus, seemingly in opposition to her Calvinist background, Stowe embraces the association between women and snakes and poison. She meets the discourse of poison on its own ground and reverses the value judgments placed on this association—making what was pernicious and destructive, holy and wholesome. Administered by maternal hands, poison becomes medicinal and a corrective to patriarchy. By contrast, in the homosocial aristocrat’s hands, even sacred sustenance (the communion) becomes poison.

One of the striking peculiarities about Stowe’s serpent-women, however, is the lack of anger and malice in their vengeance. Although they can bring death, they do so with a sympathetic and almost divine sadness—for instance, Legree’s vision of his mother, “pale, loving,” while she strangles him (323, 327). In the same way, while some critics privilege a gothic version of Cassy, the dark vision of avenging maternity or militant feminism, Cassy’s story does not end with infanticide and revenge (though some of the sensational theatrical versions end with her shooting Legree or other villains). Rather, Stowe is positioning her version of the female poisoner against a gothic or revenge melodrama. She transforms the Tender Avenger or suffering serpent-woman into the real woman and the dangerous Byronic man into the sympathetic man. The last part of Cassy’s story serves as a blueprint for healing the Byronic wound and circumventing the gothic return.

77 See especially Gillian Brown, Stephanie Smith, and Karen Halttunen in note 12.
III. “Why don’t I die?”

If we read the endings of *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Christian Slave* together, we see two types of femininity being exorcised. In *Pearl*, Mara’s long-suffering, passive true womanhood passes away. And in the other texts, Cassy—the revolutionary, violent, Byronic Tender Avenger—too must die. In their place, Stowe leaves a strong and healthy real womanhood. *Pearl* proposes Sally as the icon of that real form of femininity, but *Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Christian Slave* casts Cassy—arguably Stowe’s most complex character—in all three roles (true, Byronic-female poisoner, and real). She is true until she “snaps” into the role of Tender Avenger and then combines and transcends both as a renewed matriarch. On her way to this new role, Cassy has to embrace and become the poisonous serpent, but on her way out, she learns to externalize the serpent and exert control over it (as Sally does). In the scene where this transformation occurs, where Stowe revises Gulnare’s fate, Tom talks to Cassy, as Lyman Beecher wanted to talk to Byron, and he helps her work out the beast. After listening to Tom argue that she must not allow her masters make her “grow[] wicked,” Cassy (snake-like) “fell on the floor, like one crushed and writhing under the extremity of mental anguish” (313). Like Byron’s Conrad, the “anguish” inflicted by the tyrant “may crush” the oppressed, but Tom insists that Cassy not turn to “sting” the oppressor. When Cassy finally agrees with him, she responds: “I know no way but through the grave . . . where shall we go?” (344) Tom’s prayers make Cassy realize the metaphorical truth of that statement. She and Emmeline will “die” and play ghosts in Legree’s attic until they
can escape. She exchanges the role of female poisoner, the gothic’s Tender Avenger, for the post-gothic, pacified female ghost.  

This figurative death prepares Cassy to take up her next role in life—the matriarch. By the end of the novel, Cassy has found her daughter Eliza, but, instead of the expected reunion, she makes a significant displacement. She passes over her adult daughter Eliza, who would be her social equal, to embrace her granddaughter Eliza: “saying, what at the moment she really believed, ‘Darling, I’m your mother!’” (372) These are Cassy’s final words, her apotheosis of fulfillment and conversion. Within the Christic “two or three days,” her Byronism and the marks of poisonous wounding disappear: “The despairing, haggard expression of her face had given way to one of gentle trust” (373). Little Eliza acts as an antidote. Stowe has Cassy literally compare the child to food, but a kind of miraculous plenitude that satiates without being consumed: Little Eliza tries to stuff cake into Cassy’s mouth, but Cassy refuses, hugging the child and claiming that “she has got something better than cake” (373). This kind of statement by an admitted infanticide could evoke menacing associations, but Stowe purposely

78 Gillian Brown describes this “haunted house” episode as a “gothicization” of the sentimental mode. Similarly, Karen Halttunen claims that “the haunted castle of the Gothic tradition symbolized the weight of patriarchal inheritance” that Stowe wanted to throw off. Kate Ellis defines the female gothic as a genre that asserts “the validity of female rebellion against an aristocratic father,” and Brown and Halttunen both see Cassy as an embodiment of the avenging gothic woman, bringing down the father’s house. But Stowe explicitly short-circuits the gothic revenge narrative, which smacks too much of Byron’s repetition of patriarchal violence. Instead, she leaves the violent self-assertion to the new sympathetic man (embodied by George Shelby), who exercises legitimate violence on behalf of the oppressed. In short, I believe this so-called gothic episode with its colonizationist denouement actually operates as a parodic circumvention of the gothic. See, Brown, 522; Ellis, The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 57; Halttunen, “Gothic Imagination,” 128.
brings up that association in order to highlight Cassy’s transformation from the infanticidal Tender Avenger into the fulfilled matriarch.79

The ultimate fulfillment, however, does not surround the body of the daughter or granddaughter, but that of the son. The final goal of Stowe’s work is a public rule by civilizing, heterosocial men supported by a domestic matriarchy. Thus her final word on Cassy and the other expatriates is a “P. S.” that will be “a satisfaction to some mother,” informing the reader that Cassy’s son Henry escaped and will soon join them in Africa (377). But both Stowe’s novel and play end with the most important object of conversion, George Shelby, the white southern aristocrat. The now adult George has taken up his mother’s anti-slavery mission and gone to retrieve Uncle Tom, the man that his father sold. When George buys Tom’s beaten corpse, Legree scoffs about the “fuss” he is kicking up for “a dead nigger,” and the young man “knocked Legree flat upon his face.” Unlike Cassy’s intended bloody resistance, this violence against the ruffian patriarch (on behalf of another) is a legitimate form of pedagogy. It “decidedly bettered” Legree, who

79 Many of Stowe’s “ultra” contemporaries, including her younger sister Isabella Beecher Hooker, advocated a kind of millennial matriarchy that idealized relations between women. Many feminist historians, critics, and theorists have also entertained ideas about women’s-rule and the supportive relations between women as an alternative and more egalitarian vision of power. Stowe, however, saw homosocial relations, even between women, as essentially hierarchical, with one person always taking on a dominant or educating role. Occasionally, the players switch roles, but the roles remain. We can see this dynamic operating without exception (at least so far as I have been able to find) in all of Stowe’s major fiction: between Nina and Livy in Dred, Virginia and Mary in The Minister’s Wooing, Agnes and Elsie in Agnes of Sorrento, or Miss Ruey and Miss Roxy in The Pearl of Orr’s Island. Of these, Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey are the most iconic representations of matriarchy—“cunning” or useful village sisters who never married and grew old together. They approach the affinity, the sameness, that Stowe sees as the ideal between man and woman: Each one’s opinions “were as like as those of the other as two sides of a peapod.” However, this similarity occurs through force, not sympathy, and so it exemplifies a tyrannical, not an egalitarian, system: “But as often happens in cases of the sort, this was not because the two were in all respects exactly alike, but because the stronger one had mesmerized the weaker into consent” (20). See Nancy Cott’s influential study of women’s communities in early America, The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977). Cott suggests that the formation of a domestic sphere (based on economic more than political exigencies) enabled a proto-feminist “consciousness-raising” (xi). For a brief discussion of the relation between Stowe’s and Hooker’s feminisms, see the end of Elizabeth Ammons, “Heroines in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 161-179.
temporarily exchanges unreflecting abuse for silent “consideration,” a decided move upward on Stowe’s developmental scale (364). In that moment, George becomes Stowe’s ideal sympathetic man, willing and able to protect the “weak and dependent” and take over the task of masculine reformation from the exhausted Tender Avenger. When George Shelby appears for the last time in “The Liberator,” the last narrative chapter before Stowe’s editorial “Concluding Remarks,” he seals this conversion to the civilizing responsibility of national reform. He swears over Tom’s grave that he would “never own another slave” (380) and instead establishes a free-labor plantation. This system, of course, solidifies the divisions of society into (full) black laborers and white male leaders, and, furthermore, it ensures that these divisions remain clear—now that the end of slavery has removed the threat of miscegenation and all the dangerous “sons of white fathers” have traveled into voluntary Liberian exile.

Cassy, however, ends her story in Liberia, Stowe’s fantasy of a new New England, a utopic space where both matriarchy and the rule of the brother work together to exclude aristocratic masculinity. In these ideal circumstances, heterosocial manhood

80 Stowe’s critics—both contemporary and current—have worried over Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s colonizationist and sacrificial denouement. Frederick Douglass pleaded with Stowe to rethink banishing African Americans from civilization: “The black man (unlike the Indian) loves civilization . . . and prefers to share its most galling evils, to encountering barbarism [in Liberia].” Other African American abolitionists, such as the editor of the Provincial Freeman, expressed their objections more pointedly: “Uncle Tom must be killed, George Harris exiled! Heaven for dead Negroes! Liberia for living mulattoes. Neither one can live on the American continent . . . Death or banishment is our doom say the Slaveocrats, the Colonizationists and Mrs. Stowe!” Stowe, or at least her “representative,” responded by publicly disclaiming the ending and acknowledging it as a product of mistaken understanding. Now better educated by these African American critics, the representative argued, she would revise her racial theories. To some extent, this may be true. Robert Levine has persuasively argued that “specific black responses [to Uncle Tom’s Cabin] . . . ultimately impelled Stowe to rethink and revise her view of black heroism,” producing the “revolutionary” African American warrior, Dred, in her next abolitionist novel. But nevertheless, the end of Dred duplicates the end of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and this later, more “educated” novel could still easily be summed up by the same lines the editor of the Provincial Freeman applied to the previous narrative—except that the exiles remain on the continent. In Dred, the mulattoes expatriate to a utopian feudal Canadian community run by “civilized” and paternalistic white Southerners in exile. And while Dred spouts
and real womanhood cooperate in the advancement of civilization. These gender corrections, however, happened only through the deadly ministrations of the female poisoner. While both the early female poisoner pamphlet and the Byronic narrative envisioned this female fiend as the greatest threat to the social order, Stowe’s revision of these discourses re-created the female poisoner as a means to save civilization. Stowe put her forward as a kind of secret weapon in the antebellum culture wars, able to attack primitive aristocratic masculinity and promote New England hegemony. An interim figure, she resisted “barbarism” and created a protective space for sympathetic, woman-influenced men to develop into their role as the protectors of women and the oppressed. Once they grew up into their role as heterosocial men, they could knock down the aristocratic masculinity of Calvinism, the slave power, and other “relics of barbarism,” and the progress of America’s “Christian democracy” and New England-guided “high civilization” could continue.

The next chapter examines how Nathaniel Hawthorne and Oliver Wendell Holmes also entered the debate about New England manhood through the medium of the poisonous mulatta. The two of them were in close conversation about what type of revolutionary rhetoric and menaces a few white ruffians, he ultimately converts to Uncle Tom’s (played by “Milly” in this novel) pacifist philosophy and then immediately sacrifices himself under the slave-catcher’s guns. Attending to Stowe’s female poisoner allows us to uncover a deeper logic behind her stubborn insistence on this end (besides her racism and ignorance). Colonization/sacrifice (actual or in a false gothic) subverts the Byronic revenge narrative—the bloody dies irae followed by a re-instantiation of aristocratic masculinity—which Stowe feared. She did not portray colonization as an exile into “barbarism,” but rather an escape into “civilization.” As the passage above shows, Douglass took note of this as the fundamental purpose behind her argument and tried to sway her from colonization by arguing that Liberia was more barbaric than even America. (Apparently, the tactic worked—partially—since she did switch to Canada.) Douglass, et. al. quoted in Gossett, 172-73; Robert S. Levine, “The African-American Presence in Stowe’s Dred,” Criticism and the Color Line: Desegregating American Literary Studies, ed. Henry B. Wonham (New Bruswick: Rutgers UP, 1996) 186.
masculinity elite New Englanders needed in order to overcome the southern threat. Like Stowe, they figured this threat as barbarism, a savagery stemming from a primitive element mixing into American civilization. But while Stowe blamed this atavism on the re-introduction of an old, patriarchal masculinity into modern manhood, Hawthorne and Holmes equated it with racial hybridism and the introduction of “dark” races into the Anglo-Saxon bloodline. They also considered the heterosociality that Stowe constructed either too weak to combat southern savagery or too open to savagery itself. Furthermore, while Stowe proposed the racially-hybrid woman as a potential facilitator of true manhood and civilization’s next stage, they portray the woman of mixed race as particularly dangerous to elite men and thus to civilization—herself the source of barbarism. Just as Stowe did, they associate the mulatta with poison, but a poison that remains deadly rather than acting medicinally. For Holmes, the solution to the problem of savagery and the purveyor of proper masculinity is embodied in the modern professional, the doctor who combines the observational gaze with a distant sympathy to catalogue and diagnose and then “cure” or exile the poisonous racial matter from the body politic. Hawthorne, however, always portrayed that combination of piercing analysis and cold sympathy as “the unpardonable sin.” As Beatrice Rappaccini said to Giovanni, the medical student, who pried into her secrets, “Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?” That form of masculinity is deadly and more poisonous than the poison woman. And by the end of his career, under the stress of the Civil War, Hawthorne had turned completely from modern American masculinity and embraced a return to Europe and the now gentled patriarchs of a bygone era.
CHAPTER FOUR

A POISONOUS MIXTURE: THE SAVAGE SOUTHERN HYBRID AND THE
IMPERIAL NEW ENGLAND MAN IN OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES’S ELsie
VENNER AND NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S ELIXIR OF LIFE MANUSCRIPTS

Starting in the early 1840s and then again between 1859 and 1864, Oliver
Wendell Holmes and Nathaniel Hawthorne participated in a dialogue using a
metaphorics of poison to figure structures of gender, class, race, nation, and imperial
power. In the works of the 1840s—in Holmes’s Homeopathy and its Kindred
Delusions and Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” for instance—the writers
deployed a discourse of poison to interrogate the proper construction of elite New
England masculinity and femininity.1 Between 1859 and 1864, their concerns about
gender became national in scope and extended to include questions about the
American “race,” civilization, and empire. Provoked by what they perceived as

1 For a detailed argument about this writerly exchange, see Taylor Stoehr, Hawthorne’s Mad
Scientists: Pseudoscience and Social Life in Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters, (Hamden: Archon
Books, 1978) 119-120. Seymour Gross also points out how “Rappaccini’s Daughter” created “a
remarkably precise reflection of the image of the physician in nineteenth-century America” (141),
including the profession’s disputes, incompetence, and incipient eugenicist delusions of grandeur.
Holmes wrote about and was deeply involved in these struggles and plans for the profession. See,
“‘Rappaccini’s Daughter’ and the Nineteenth-Century Physician,” Ruined Eden of the Present:
Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, eds. G. R. Thompson and Virgil Lokke (West Lafayette: Purdue UP,
1981): 129-42. For an alternative reading of the medical profession and Hawthorne’s tale, which
argues that he is portraying the Renaissance rivalry between Galen and Paracelsus rather than the
conflict between nineteenth-century heroic and homeopathic practitioners, see Carol Marie Bensick,
La Nouvelle Beatrice: Renaissance and Romance in ‘Rappaccini’s Daughter,” (New Brunswick:
Rutgers UP, 1985).
barbaric southern threats to the proper hegemonic construction of American
civilization, they became preoccupied with savagery and retooled their previous
discourse of poison to explain and combat it. The resulting texts were Holmes’s *Elsie
Venner*, a novel centering on a poisonous lamia, and Hawthorne’s *Elixir of Life*
manuscripts, his three attempts to produce a novel about the search for a draught of
immortality that ultimately acts as a deadly poison. These texts equate poison with a
regressive savagery, which is in turn associated with the South and its imperial
aspirations. This southern savagery produces improperly mixed versions of gender,
race, and class—monstrous hybrids that then threaten to shape a violent and primitive
rather than a civilized form of American nation and empire. Their hybridity promotes
a dangerous heterosociality and race-mixing that both erases gender difference in a
disquieting androgyny and darkens the American race.

In an attempt to theorize an antidote to this savage heterosocial masculinity,
Holmes’s and Hawthorne’s narratives imagine a renewed New England masculinity
capable of combating and containing the poisonous southern hybrids and thus
reasserting a New England vision of American civilization. In doing so, they both
recur to patriarchal constructions of masculinity (based on the authority of the
“father”). These patriarchies, however, differ significantly. Holmes promotes a
modern masculinity, what I am calling “professional masculinity.” This masculinity
asserts its superiority through a professional discipline and a clinical gaze combined
with manly physical health and hardihood. As a “professional” masculinity, it also
relied upon what Paul Starr calls “collective authority.” This type of authority depends upon cohesion between elite men of the intellectual professions and hierarchical discipline and protection, which are transmitted from the master professional to the student. The structure is homosocial, though theoretically open to women if they can take on these masculine roles. (Holmes himself once sponsored a woman to medical school until his colleagues objected and the issue threatened professional unity.) Hawthorne, by contrast, eschews that forward-looking professional masculinity as already too complicated and savage—both lacking true sympathy and improperly mixing gendered spheres. It is a vision of modernity that he finds a disguised recurrence to the primitive. In the midst of the Civil War, he steps away from the moral mixture and complexity he interrogated throughout his career and promotes a simplified ideal of manhood and womanhood. He romanticizes a historical masculinity that embraces a phantasmal return of the fathers—the simple, “John Bull,” domestic patriarchs of England and early New England, who, in his conception, provide the most reliable counterweight to southern hybridity.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I examine how Holmes’s Elsie Venner rewrites Keats’s Lamia to validate the professional’s clinical gaze and his homosocial authority, both of which were condemned by the poem as destructive to the utopic heterosocial relation. In Holmes’s redaction, however, a heterosociality supported by the female gaze threatens to poison American civilization with violent and improperly mixed genders and races, and the

professional is the best man to counter the lamia’s penetrating stare and purge these elements.\(^3\) Section two focuses first on Holmes’s equation between American imperial civilization and elite homosocial masculinity and second on how he comes to code this masculinity as racial and regional. The battle for control over the nation and empire thus pits a manly, homosocial northern race against a degenerate, heterosocial southern one. In *Elsie Venner*, Holmes acts out this contest between the characters of Bernard Langdon and Richard Venner, which in turn replays the encounter between Preston Brooks and Charles Sumner. For Holmes, Brooks’s attack on Sumner and its aftermath signaled the South’s tyrannical designs against northern manhood, while the burning of Lawrence, Kansas, or the “Kansas iniquities” as he called them, revealed that the humiliation of northern manhood merely prefigured the South’s ultimate imperial aims for the continent. Holmes believed that southern men could only perpetrate this violence because the men of New England’s traditional elite had allowed the development of their intellect and sympathies to overmatch their manly hardihood. In *Elsie Venner*, he names and so in effect creates this class, calling them “the *Brahmin caste of New England.*”\(^4\) He suggests that if the Brahmins renewed their physical manhood, becoming more professional, muscular, and militaristic and less feminine and sympathetic, then the North would be able to crush savage southern masculinity and retake control of the nation. Holmes’s texts from this period,

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especially *Elsie Venner*, work to define a homosocial organization and northern masculinity capable of successfully revising the Sumner-Brooks encounter.

Throughout these sections, I also draw on Holmes’s *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* and *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*, both of which appeared after Sumner’s beating and attempt to think through the problem that savagery posed for American masculinity and civilization. I also read the novel in conjunction with Holmes’s 1863 July 4th oration, “The Inevitable Trial,” and with various pieces from Holmes’s correspondence and poetry. The oration states more explicitly the theories of homosocial civilization and “hereditary southern character” that Holmes was puzzling through in the novel.

In the third section, I examine how Hawthorne engaged with *Elsie Venner* in his *Elixir of Life* manuscripts—which are, specifically, the two *Septimius* novels and *The Dolliver Romance* fragment. While I synthesize material from Hawthorne’s other works and correspondence, I also read his manuscripts primarily in conjunction with his direct commentary on the Civil War, “Chiefly about War-Matters. By a Peaceable Man” and “Northern Volunteers. From a Journal.” He interrupted his work on the manuscripts to travel around the battlefields and pen these accounts, and the language, imagery, and even “plot” elements from the manuscripts transfer into the

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5 Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will cite these major sources parenthetically with initials where needed for clarity followed by page numbers. So, “The Inevitable Trial” is (IT); *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* is (AB); *The Professor of the Breakfast Table* is (PB); and *Elsie Venner* is (EV). See Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Inevitable Trial,” *Pages from an Old Volume of Life: A Collection of Essays, 1857-1881* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892) 78-120; *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table: Every Man His Own Boswell* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892); *The Professor at the Breakfast Table* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892); and *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892).
non-fiction and vice versa. Hawthorne had tried to incorporate Holmes’s materialist or biological-racial “solution” from *Elsie Venner* into his *Septimius* manuscripts, but that approach proved incompatible with his more traditional historical-moral framework. He too finds southern savagery inappropriately heterosocial, but he equates Holmes’s professional homosocial civilization with this barbarism. Instead, he advocates a traditional heterosocial form of civilization based in the domestic with distinct gender roles presided over by a domestic patriarch. The old men that Hawthorne pictures in “War-Matters”—the “venerable fathers of the country” seemingly drawn from their graves to chastise the traitors—suggest this direction to him. After sending the poisonous half-breed Septimius to an ancestral estate in England, Hawthorne abandons him for *The Dolliver Romance*, which tries to solve the poisonous elixir of life problem with, for Hawthorne, an uncharacteristically gentle and willfully simple patriarch as hero.\(^6\)

I. The Brahmin’s Professional Gaze and the Tragic Lamia’s Un-Fascinating Stare

Critics have read *Elsie Venner* as a *Bildungsroman* for the medical profession and an assertion of Anglo-Protestant hegemony and as a re-articulation of the lamia

myth. I argue that these interpretations—the hegemonic and the mythic—are deeply intertwined and that Holmes promotes professional masculinity and white New England hegemony through his revision of Keats’s *Lamia*. Keats crafted a version of the lamia myth that idealized heterosocial sympathy and the feminine gaze while attacking professional homosocial masculinity as tyrannical and its clinical gaze as brutal. Although Keats was Holmes’s favorite poet, “the most truly poetic poet of the century,” Holmes took issue with this romantic version of the lamia story. Instead, he placed the lamia narrative within a “scientific” imperial and racial context that allowed him to reverse Keats’s argument and reclaim the tale for the heroic man of science.

Holmes’s redaction of *Lamia* situates the tale in American imperial politics and the racial and gender theory current in the 1850s. Within this framework, the mixtures that produce both the lamia Elsie and her half-Hispanic/half-Brahmin cousin Richard Venner figure as improper forms of imperial hegemony. This mixing

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draws the cousins downward into identification with reptiles or “dark” races and not upward into the disciplined civilization of their white fathers. Furthermore, their regression threatens to contaminate or colonize the New England community and arrest its civilized development. Within this framework, Elsie and Richard appear as biological deformities, whose savage gender transgressions are occasioned by the introduction of poison into the New England bloodline—both literal and racial. Elsie is the only child of a venerable New England man of the old Tory stamp and a gentle Spanish mother. This initial mixture perhaps leaves her in an ambiguous and vulnerable position that contributes to her contamination. While pregnant with Elsie, her mother was bitten by a rattlesnake as she stood in her doorway—a suggestively liminal position. As a result, Elsie becomes a lamia, born with a serpentine birthmark, a poisonous bite, a hypnotizing glare, and an ungovernable, un-domestic, reptilian temperament. Her father, Dudley Venner, her doctor Kittredge, and the African American nanny, Ol’ Sophy, place her under constant surveillance, but Elsie still rambles the woods and cliffs where “[n]o woman would have clung” (189). She defies authority and once poisoned a domineering governess (with a mysterious powder—presumably arsenic) and her cousin Richard (with a bite). And when Richard returns from South America to woo Elsie in order to acquire her father’s property, their racial disorder threatens to spread as even the venerable Dudley estate is in danger of falling into the hands of a wild “half-breed.”

However Holmes’s hero, Bernard Langdon the New England Brahmin and man of science “cures” this disease by asserting his superior clinical gaze, physical prowess, and homosocial alliances to cast Richard and Elsie from the communal
body. Although the story is titled *Elsie Venner*, it spends most of its time and energy on Bernard, whose hazards and professional self-assertion occupy most of the narrative—taking up seventy-five pages before we even see Elsie and bringing the novel to a close long after her death with his successful professional placement and marriage. Bernard is a young Brahmin and a talented and self-reliant medical student, who has taken a temporary post as schoolmaster at the local girl’s school to fund his degree. Richard’s plan to win Elsie and the estate crumbles when she falls in love with this superior New England man. Richard then indulges his savage southern nature and tries to murder Bernard but is foiled by the better marksman and exiled from the country in shame. Elsie then reveals her love to Bernard, but he approaches her as an object of scientific curiosity and compassion and rejects her with cold brotherly pity. She takes to her bed. Bernard (unknowingly?) sends her leaves from a plant that is poisonous to rattlesnakes and to Elsie. The poison cleanses the snake and birthmark from her body and allows her to cry and love like a normal woman while she is dying. After her death, her father is able to marry again—this time to a blond New England schoolteacher of true womanly character and Brahmin breeding. Bernard also marries appropriately—a wealthy, submissive, white, city girl—and becomes a socially well-placed doctor to the rich and eventually a professor at Harvard, just like Holmes.

Holmes creates this story of masculine, professional, and racial triumph for the Brahmin male by “un-revising” Keats’s *Lamia* and returning the figure to its classical sources. *Lamia* redacts and rewrites Robert Burton’s 1651 account of the
lamia, which in turn is a redaction of Philostratus. These earlier versions act essentially as warnings against the “strange woman” (Philostratus, 24), the powerful “other.” They are object lessons for the young, undisciplined man tempted to reject homosocial company and patriarchal authority for the enticing possibilities of heterosocial union. In Philostratus, for instance, the lamia takes the shape of a beautiful noblewoman to entrap Menippus, a youth “so well built that he looked like a handsome amateur athlete.” Because he “could not resist his passions,” he agrees to go home with her when she promises him wine, sex, and music with “no rival to annoy you”—in effect, a heterosocial immunity from male competition as well as fellowship (24). But Menippus is the philosopher Apollonius’s student, and the wise man “used to look at him with a sculptor’s eye” and so could see the baneful relationship. He scolds, “[Y]ou [Menippus] cherish a serpent and a serpent cherishes you” (25). At their wedding, the philosopher exposes the feast as a “pretense of reality,” and after making a short zoological disquisition on the lamia and her various names and habits, he “force[s] it to confess its true nature.” She admits that she is a lamia who “glutted Menippus with pleasures in order to devour his flesh; for her wont was to feed upon young and beautiful bodies.” The lamia then vanishes and a chastised Menippus is safe and presumably returns gratefully to Apollonius’s tutelage (25-6). Burton’s condensed version of the tale maintains most of these major plot points but omits Lamia’s planned cannibalism. Instead, he emphasizes her deception and Apollonius’s role in revealing the illusion—that all her wealth is actually “no

substance, but mere illusion” and when “she saw herself descried . . . all . . . vanished in an instant” (648). This version makes it seem almost unfortunate that the beautiful heterosocial dream could not remain reality.

Keats expands on the original tale’s tension between the heterosocial and the homosocial and casts the contest as one between competing gazes, a construct that Holmes will incorporate strongly into *Elsie Venner* but to very different effect. In the poem, as in Arthur Orton’s pamphlets, Keats’s androgynous heterosocial relationship is a fragile utopia, vulnerable to traditional patriarchal authorities and their intrusive gaze and oppression. While Burton only condenses the ancient narrative and retains most of its essential elements unchanged, Keats rejects the moral of the parable and instead makes Lamia into an innocent victim and Apollonius into the villain, whose “eye severe” (ii. 157) kills both Lamia and Lycius (Menippus).10 In Keats’s poem, Lamia has been cursed and forced to take on the form of a serpent, but Hermes cures her with a “Caducean charm.” The prototypical doctor facilitates her union with Lycius by making her “a real woman” without stripping her of her supernatural and masculine powers—thus allowing her a degree of sublimity and androgyny to facilitate a more equal union (i. 133, 332). One of these powers is a penetrating gaze—a kind of astral projection that allows her to see “all she list” (i. 204), and so “[t]he lady, ever watchful, penetrant” (ii. 34) can see into Lycius just as Apollonius can. Unfortunately, she sees that his pride will destroy their fragile “empery/ Of joys” (ii. 36-7). Specifically, their heterosocial union, tellingly described as a joyful empire,

will be crushed by his desire to join in homosocial competition and display her to the public at a wedding feast as a “prize . . . that other men/ May be confounded and abash’d withal” (ii. 57-8). And, as she feared, at the feast Apollonius stares her to death: “the sophist’s eye,/ Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,/ Keen, cruel, perceant, stinging” (ii. 300-01). That phallic gaze overmatches her own, and his “hungry spell” makes her “icy” so that when Lycius touches her “the cold ran through his veins” until she becomes “deadly white” (ii. 259, 251, 276) and fades away.

Elsie Venner reproduces these narrative elements as major stages in the plot but inverts their meaning—making the mixture of race and gender created by heterosocial sympathy a horror to be avoided and the clean hierarchies of patriarchal discipline the saving alternative. The most important element in this conflict between heterosocial and homosocial orders for both Holmes and Keats centers in the competition of gazes. The staring contest between the lamia and the philosopher forms the central power struggle in the novel, but in Holmes’s version the murderous man of science takes the role of hero. Bernard’s professional self-making and the protection of the community depends upon his development of this correct clinical gaze—one that is deployed against women and racial others but averted when in fellowship with equals or other elite men.

This hierarchical scopophilia—particularly regarding women and the “deformed”—runs like a dark connecting thread throughout Holmes’s work. Elite men look, and the other is looked upon. This dynamic holds together the proper sexual relationship and thus civilization, while a reversal of subject-object relation threatens social order. Thus, Holmes does not express the same reservations as
Hawthorne about women in public (which Hawthorne delineates most sharply in his sketch of Anne Hutchinson but which continues to appear throughout his later works). Rather, he finds a healthy sexual pleasure and social discipline in the very display of feminine objectification and male privilege or “right” that Hawthorne abhors. The Autocrat avers that “Nature and custom would, no doubt, agree in conceding to all males the right of at least two distinct looks at every comely female countenance,” and only “ill-bred women” object. “When a lady walks the streets, she leaves her virtuous-indignation countenance at home; she knows well enough that the street is a picture-gallery, where pretty faces framed in pretty bonnets are meant to be seen, and everybody has a right to see them” (AB, 194-95). Women’s faces enter the public literally as aesthetic objects, pictures, for male consumption. In Elsie Venner, Holmes characterizes this gaze as sadistic but just and analytic, forcing its objects “to bear the part of victim! . . . No mercy for you, my love! Justice, strict justice, you shall certainly have.” He compares the woman so exhibited to Hiram Power’s “The White Captive,” a sculpture of a naked and chained girl being displayed for sale in a Turkish slave market: “The dance answers the purpose of the revolving pedestal upon which the ‘White Captive’ turns to show us the soft, kneaded marble.” Nevertheless, in spite of its cruelty, Holmes argues that feminine display and the male gaze form the essential mechanism driving human progress or the “struggle for life” Mr. Darwin talks about” (EV, 93-4).

Civilization thus depends upon a hierarchy of the gaze where men look and women are looked upon. A woman, such as Elsie, who reverses this relationship threatens the Darwinian prosecution of the sexual relation and thus of civilization.
Holmes reserves special abhorrence for such women. For example, one of the residents in the boarding house that forms the setting for The Professor at the Breakfast Table is a woman who looks—a “brain woman,” sneeringly labeled “The Model of All Virtues” by the Professor. One of the other boarders is a fatally malformed dwarf, whom the Professor condescendingly calls “Little Boston” because of his noble devotion to the city. Although the Professor admits that human beings naturally “watch persons who are subjects of special infirmity” and although he himself has been staring and prying obsessively into the invalid’s privacy, Little Boston reviles the Model for her looking. He responds with hysterical venom to her gaze:

I hate her,—I hate her,—her eyes kill me,—it is like being stabbed with icicles to be looked at so,—the sooner she goes home, the better. I don’t want a woman to weigh me in a balance; there are men enough for that sort of work. The judicial character isn’t captivating in females, Sir. A woman fascinates a man quite as often by what she overlooks as by what she sees. Love prefers twilight to daylight; and a man doesn’t think much of, nor care much for, a woman outside of his household, unless he can couple the idea of love, past, present, or future, with her (PB, 101).

The young women in the dinner party’s “‘struggle for life’” “must be weighed in the balance” while the lights from the chandelier “search[] [them] like the noonday sun” (EV, 94). Yet, a woman who would “weigh [a man] in the balance” provokes his “hate” by usurping the “sort of work” reserved for men. Even further, she disrupts that “struggle for life” because her failure to “overlook[]” cannot “fascinate[]” and thus draw a man into the sexual relation, encouraging him to “care . . . for . . . a woman outside of his household.” In fact, the woman’s gaze threatens the man’s life and life itself. Her eyes “kill” Little Boston, penetrating him like “icicles.” The gazing woman, not the prying Professor or Apollonius, freezes and kills. Holmes shifts that
villainous role to the powerful woman. Thus, life and the community microcosm of the boarding house requires that the Model “goes home,” exiled from the group, because she is a kind of vampire or anti-evolutionary killjoy. Her “cold, damp hand” has a “depressing effect on the vital powers” so that when she touches people, “virtue passes out of us, and we feel as if our electricity had been drained by a powerful negative battery, carried about by an overgrown human torpedo” (PB, 71-2). This consumption of life defines the Model as a defective creature, “an overgrown” or malformed human, not a woman; for, in the Professor’s paradigm, femininity is identified with a cheerful self-sacrifice that facilitates men and society. While the Model argues that a “woman of sense ought to be above flattering any man,” the Professor responds that that is precisely what defines “real women” or “heart-women” (PB, 136, 146, 148). He asserts: “[A] woman who does not carry about with her wherever she goes a halo of good feeling and desire to make everybody contented . . . which wraps every human being upon whom she voluntarily bestows her presence . . . isn’t worth the trouble of talking to, as a woman,” that is, as a potential mate (PB, 137). Ultimately, the men in the house gather forces to expel this non-woman from society. They humiliate the Model and send her packing.

Like the Model, Elsie Venner’s gaze consumes men’s life force and her touch freezes; but her mixed blood amplifies this menace, extending the danger from male bodies to the Brahmin race and New England community. Richard Venner worries that her eyes “sucked your life out of you” (194), and when Bernard takes Elsie’s hand, “a cold aura shot from it along his arm and chilled the blood running through his heart” (423). Contact with Elsie chills his Brahmin blood. In Elsie, Holmes
combines the Model’s gender role inversion with the more potent threat of interracial contamination: a “poisoning by substances associated with an array of other bodies ‘different’ in race and religion.” 11 Indeed, the entire narrative exhibits a strong preoccupation with race and is framed in terms of a racial question. For instance, we discover that the Professor who narrates the novel is a racial scientist, having recently penned an “Anglo-American Anthropology (unpublished)” (8), and the tale is officially “The Professor’s Story” and a continuation of his work. The narrative focuses specifically on the dangers posed by racial others, which Elsie concentrates in her person (just as the lamia combines multiple gender threats):

By the end of the novel Elsie Venner is associated with practically every racial and religious ‘other’ threatening Anglo-Protestant America. The rattlesnake poison that seeped into her system through her mother’s body results in an absolutely fanciful array of associations with African-Americans, Native Americans, Spanish Catholics, and, of course, irrepressible wild reptiles.

In short, Elsie almost appears a super-concentrated tragic mulatta. As a racial threat, Elsie menaces the entire community, potentially thwarting its Darwinian progress. Natural male aversion to masculine women ensures that the Model never marries. Her gender deformity ends with her, but Elsie is a beautiful nubile woman, whose racial otherness lends her a peculiar fascination that counteracts the repulsion engendered by her gender transgressions. Thus “physically able to pass on these characteristics to her children, she represents a total threat to the community of Rockland. Tempted to love her, Bernard Langdon must find the will to resist—and instead marry a suitable

woman to carry on the Brahmin caste.”

If, on the other hand, he dares to marry Elsie, her poisonous blood will literally kill Holmes’s Brahmin protagonist. When Reverend Dr. Honeywood asks Ol’ Sophy, Elsie’s African American nurse, “what do you think would happen, if [Bernard] should chance to fall in love with Elsie, and she with him, and he should marry her,” Sophy replies with a whisper the readers are not allowed to hear followed by “He die,— that’s all” (350). The reader can infer the content of the whisper based on previous evidence cited by the Professor to explain Elsie’s strangeness—namely the story of the poisonous Indian woman sent to Alexander the Great to kill him with a kiss (222)—a story also cited in “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” Elsie’s body, presumably, is imbued with poison fatal to the Alexander of this story.

Elsie’s ability to poison male bodies and hinder the normal sexual relation is inextricably bound up with her ability to wield a phallic gaze, which also extends her threat from the young man to a community dependent upon the Darwinian struggle. While the male gaze initiates the life cycle, her stare halts romance and short-circuits the development of normal reproductive unions. At a party, “the glitter of [her] diamond eyes . . . seemed to disenchant the air so full a moment before of strange attractions” (105). She dampens the “strange fascinations” produced by a nubile young woman and “the luminous vapor of life that she exhales” (104). Elsie’s gaze acts as “a counter-charm” and thus prevents Bernard Langdon from being captivated and led into “Nature’s supreme quod erat demonstrandum” or marriage (104-05). Under Elsie’s eyes, “[t]he round-limbed beauty at his side crushed her gauzy

12 Burbick, 247.
draperies against him . . . but it was no more to him than if an old nurse had laid her hand on his sleeve” (105).

Bernard’s professional “struggle for life” and that of the Brahmin race is tied to his ability to win the correct mate—a woman who will facilitate his professional ambition without challenging his homosocial masculinity. But in order to acquire this woman, he must assert his control of the gaze and defeat that of the racial other. Holmes thus crafts a parallel second party scene, in which Bernard reclaims both his phallic gaze and the proper girl by defeating Elsie’s stare. At the party, Elsie grows jealous of Bernard’s attentions to Letty, the young woman whom he will marry at the end of the narrative, and she begins to wield the same “counter-charm” that she did at the previous social gathering. But Letty is a much more appropriate mate for Bernard than either Elsie or his earlier attendant. She is not only a cultured, wealthy, and socially well-placed Brahmin, she is also what Holmes calls a “real woman,” who will subsume her interests into her husband’s, boost his confidence and social capital, and rest content within the domestic realm. Unlike Elsie’s or the Model’s dampening effect, the real woman’s “halo” brings life and aid to men. The Professor imagines this “halo” as protecting men from the critical public gaze and facilitating their ascension to social and political power. For instance, he imagines “with a pang” that one day the “choice of the people” for President might fall upon someone who was not “by any stretch of charity . . . a gentleman,” and, in that case “angels of good breeding” must “shield the victim of free institutions” from the “concentrated gaze of good society” by mimicking and so normalizing his boorish dialect and table manners.
(PB, 141-42). Letty fits this helpmeet paradigm, not only in wealth and social standing but in her compliant and giving personality:

She was so full of life, so graceful, so generous, so vivacious, so ready always to do all she could for [her grandfather] and for everybody, so perfectly frank in her avowed delight in the pleasures which this miserable world offered her in the shape of natural beauty, of poetry, of music, of companionship, of books, of cheerful cooperation in the tasks of those about her (EV, 235).

Her “pleasures” remain distinctly retired and domestic or other-directed, unlike Elsie’s love of wild rambles and self-willed temperament. In short, Letty is a facilitator of men, the perfect “heart-wom[a]n.” For a union with her, Bernard “was determined to look [Elsie] down” and his “stead[y] and calm[]” stare defeated her, made her “pained or wearied . . . baffled and shamed . . . and shorn of her singular and formidable or at least evil-natured power” (309-10). Unlike Hermes, who left Lamia’s “power” of the gaze intact, this new doctor’s “Caducean charm” stripped Elsie, “pained” her, and effectively put her in her place. This reduction to passive womanhood requires that Elsie relinquish her sublimity, her masculine power and androgynous identity.

In spite of the suffering this discipline inflicts upon Elsie, Holmes insists on Bernard’s benevolence and sympathy. For Holmes, the doctor becomes the new hero of a racial drama—the agent who controls barbaric violence and creates civilized order by erasing disruptive hybridity. He compares the disciplinary mechanisms of the medical profession with those of the ministry and the law and argues for the doctor’s greater effectiveness and humanity. Thus, the Professor advises Bernard about Elsie, “I suppose we must punish evil-doers as we extirpate vermin . . . restrain them from violence . . . and when you have got rid of them, or got them tied hand and
foot so that they can do no mischief, sit down and contemplate them charitably” (226, 228). Bernard and Dr. Kittredge “got rid of” the half-breed Richard Venner, and Bernard’s devastating rejection and gift of the poisonous ash leaves Elsie paralyzed, figuratively “tied [her] hand and foot so [she] could do no mischief.” On her deathbed, Bernard “sit[s] down and contemplate[s] [her]”: “He looked with almost scientific closeness of observation into the diamond eyes; but the peculiar light which he knew so well was not there” (446-7). Now that he alone wields the clinical gaze, he can then “charitably” assert that the “Dudley race might well be proud of the last of its daughters, as she lay dying” (447). The “brute nature” in Elsie has been “subdued” (446), and, even though she dies when the snake part of her withers, the pure Elsie becomes a source of pride for her aristocratic “race.” Thus, when Bernard kills her and makes her deathly white like Lamia, it is a triumph that frees him and the other Brahmin men from the threat of racial mixture and the heterosociality that Keats idealizes. At Elsie’s funeral, her father “was pleased that those who remembered her living should see her in the still beauty of death” (457)—especially because she is now so pure and white. By contrast, when she was living, “through all [Elsie’s] rich nature, there was some alien current of influence, sinuous and dark, as when a clouded streak seams the white marble of a perfect statue” (291-2), but now in death “the shade or blemish” is removed (457). Bernard has cleansed her of her racial hybridism, and Elsie can appear on display like the perfectly white Greek Slave. After her death, both Bernard and Dudley Venner can marry suitably domestic Brahmin women, who do not threaten a white and patriarchal order.
Bernard, however, can only make this professional and racial self-assertion and defeat the gaze of the other with the help of homosocial organization. The older doctors advise and protect Bernard throughout his contest with Elsie and Richard, and his deference to their authority enables him to succeed. Thus, Holmes’s homosociality may discipline the other, but it proves itself in the same way that Stowe’s heterosociality does: by protecting the vulnerable young New England man.

In *Lamia*, when Lycius tries to stop Apollonius, he continues to stare at the trembling woman and claims that: “‘from every ill/ Of life have I preserv’d thee to this day./ And shall I see thee made a serpent’s prey?’” (ii.296-98). Keats immediately ironizes this claim to benevolent protection when the philosopher’s stare kills Lamia and then Lycius falls down dead, his “arms . . . empty of delight,/ As were his limbs of life” (ii. 307-08). Holmes’s version of the story, however, recasts Elsie as dangerous to the young man, and the doctors gather together to protect Bernard from her so that he can become a professional himself. This mission trumps even the physician’s duty to his patient. While the Professor who narrates the novel mentors Bernard and so can understandably fret over and warn him about lamias, Dr. Kittredge is Elsie’s doctor, and he claims that “love [of a young man] would be more like to bring her right than anything else” (195). Nevertheless, he chooses to protect Bernard and warns him, “Her love is not to be desired . . . Keep your eyes open and your heart shut. If, through pitying that girl, you ever come to love her, you are lost” (212, 214). He encourages Bernard to observe clinically rather than love Elsie, and he immediately arms him with a pistol and a mysterious white powder, presumably an antidote to
Elsie’s poison (216-17). This advice and the pistol save him from the dangerous racially-mixed Venners.

Holmes ultimately figures this racial conflict as a deadly war between barbarism and civilization, thus linking the professional’s humanizing mission to western imperialism. In number III of The Autocrat, Holmes makes the clearest statement of this position. He takes up the Sepoy rebellion, a bloody uprising that provoked transatlantic outrage, to vindicate himself: “Who was that person that was so abused some time since for saying that in the conflict of two races our sympathies naturally go with the higher?” (AB, 66) That abused person, of course, was Holmes himself, who in a much-criticized letter to the abolitionist Theodore Parker admitted, “that in a pinch, his sympathies were with white men” and asserted that “‘the white race at the south must always have the upper hand.’”

He continues:

No matter who he was. Now look at what is going on in India,—a white, superior ‘Caucasian’ race, against a dark-skinned, inferior, but still ‘Caucasian’ race,—and where are English and American sympathies? We can’t stop to settle all the doubtful questions; all we know is, that the brute nature is sure to come out most strongly in the lower race, and it is the general law that the human side of humanity should treat the brutal side as it does the same nature in inferior animals,—tame it or crush it. . . . England takes down the Map of the world . . . and makes a correction thus: Delhi. Dele[ted]. The civilized world says, Amen (AB, 66).

Holmes sees this dynamic between racial “sympathies” and civilized discipline as tied to a humanizing imperialism he believes he shares with New England reformers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1860, Stowe wrote to Holmes praising Elsie Venner (or the parts of it that had so far been published in The Atlantic Monthly). Holmes

13 Quoted in Tilton, 226-27.
responded by flattering the author “to whom it has been granted more than to any other to reach the heart of the race, colonizing her thought in all civilized and even half-barbaric tongues.” He saw her as a partner in his humanizing mission: “I have in common with yourself, a desire to leave the world a little more human than if I had not lived.”

But “the human side of humanity” works through a discipline that will “tame” or “crush” the barbaric racial other and, in Elsie’s case, did both.

As part of his own “colonizing” mission, Holmes tries to produce a homosociality that is civilized and civilizing or “humanizing” like Stowe’s heterosociality. Holmes’s novel asserts the superior sympathy and epistemological insight of the distancing clinical gaze, re-validates the cold philosopher, and humanizes his “eye severe.” By doing so, he transforms the philosopher and the now professional homosocial patriarchy he represents back into the elite heroes of civilization. This civilizing homosociality emerges out of a professional masculinity that restores the hierarchical relation between wise patriarch and youth—all the while maintaining an ersatz sympathy with the excluded “other.” In practice, however, this sympathy cleanses the racial other and women from the body politic and behaves more like disciplinary surveillance, which though intended to “tame” benevolently, can “crush” as well. (The cure was successful, but the patient died.)

Holmes bases the nation and American civilization and empire on a specifically male public culture. Holmes’s version of this culture, however, is quite particular and derives from the exclusive semi-public of elite male clubs. He models civilization on the sort of professional collegiality constructed in this homosocial setting and thus defines barbarism as whatever disrupts elite male collegiality. While most critics consider Elsie the most serious danger in Holmes’s novel, I argue that the narrative actually poses Richard Venner as the greatest threat. As a privileged male with access to these homosocial circles and yet without the proper collegiality, Richard Venner’s savage masculinity wages the most direct assault upon Holmes’s civilized social order and conducts the most violent attack upon Bernard. The fight between Bernard and Richard follows the Brahmin’s less hazardous defeat of Elsie, and their encounter forms the text’s climactic moment—Bernard’s most suspenseful and dangerous contest. While Elsie actually tries to protect Bernard from her cousin, the “half-breed” nearly succeeds in killing him. Furthermore, Richard’s profound similarity to Elsie (their perverse heterosociality) threatens to win her love and allow him to usurp the Dudley estate, thus wresting it from Brahmin hands. With the Dudley rank and wealth behind him, Richard would be well-situated to pursue larger ambitions. And, with Richard, Elsie’s local threat would thus extend onto the public stage and threaten Bernard’s self-making and Holmes’s “humanizing” mission.

The next section examines the conflict between Richard and Bernard and places it in context with Holmes’s opposition between savage southern masculinity and civilized northern manhood. Through their struggle, Holmes asserts the
Brahmin’s ability to define civilization and exposes how savage southern masculinity violates this civilized vision of the American nation and empire.

II. Southern Savagery and the Civilizing Club

Although good women may facilitate civilization, its highest expression, according to Holmes, remains homosocial and elite—that is, it excludes not only women, but disruptive male others. For instance, immediately preceding his tirade about the Sepoy Rebellion, Holmes defines what he means by civilization: a racially and sexually homogenous association that creates a homosociality without the brutality that Stowe or Hawthorne identified with antebellum male culture. He claims that a “Club . . . strung like a harp, with about a dozen ringing intelligences . . . is the last triumph of civilization over barbarism” (AB, 63-4). But this “harp” depends upon a harmony that is both homosocial and racially exclusive. As his example of this ideal, he cites the Saturday Club, the latest version of the Town and Country Club, which had excluded Frederick Douglass in 1849 and never accepted women in any of its incarnations.15 It is not that Douglass or women did not possess “ringing intelligences,” but the “whole force of conversation depends on how much you can take for granted” (64). For Holmes this ability to assume defuses conflict. He compares such a conversation to master chess players who, unlike the “[v]ulgar players,” do not need to pursue the game into “the brutality of an actual checkmate.”

In contrast with the friction of real racial and class politics, these masters manipulate the “White” and “Red” pieces with a superior calm (64).

Yet the insight that these elite club gentlemen have into each other differs radically from the penetrating observation wielded against women and racial others and the professional pity afforded them, and it also contrasts with a female homosociality that remains primitive and ancillary to male structures of power. The Club members’ sympathy is “a blessed clairvoyance that sees into things without opening them” (64). In Elsie Venner, Holmes describes this homosocial relation as “a mutually interpenetrative consciousness”—a shared penetration that does not work through violence: The “Doctor read through words and thoughts and all into the father’s [Dudley Venner’s] consciousness. There are states of mind which may be shared by two persons in presence of each other, which remain not only unworded, but *unthoughted* . . .” (194). That shared consciousness between physician and father is enabled by their shared knowledge of Elsie’s secret crime—her attempt to poison her governess—and their mutual responsibility to control her. It leads to a strategy session about the most effective and humane way to contain her, which “was the key to the more than indulgent treatment, which . . . the girl received from her father and all about her” (195). By contrast, the silent communication between Elsie and Ol’ Sophy is described as primitive and particular—“a kind of dumb intercourse of feeling, such as one sees in the eyes of brute mothers looking on their young,” an exchange that while “subtile [sic] . . . was narrow and individual” (419). Furthermore, Ol’ Sophy’s insight forms a crucial part of Elsie’s surveillance: “It was through [Ol’ Sophy] that the father had always known most of the actions and tendencies of his
The “clairvoyance” between male club members, however, exempts them from surveillance and grants them a special social privilege, “that glorious license, which, having shut the door and driven the reporter from its keyhole, calls upon Truth, majestic virgin! to get down from her pedestal and drop her academic poses, and take a festive garland and the vacant place on the medius lectus” (AB, 64). Unlike the “brute” communication between Elsie and Ol’ Sophy, their civilized discourse removes the “reporter” who disciplines through surveillance.

For a very long time, Holmes considered southern gentlemen part of this clairvoyant elite homosocial civilization. He only made a remarkable reversal when he decided that they were violating the genteel homosociality that held the nation together and defined America’s imperial mission as civilizing. They were thus barbarizing the nation and became racially suspect. Previous to this conversion, Holmes’s “attitude toward the South during the antebellum period had been in pronounced contrast” to that of his more reformist fellow Brahmins. His conservative views stemmed from his “Brahminism” being “less provincial” and “more racial” than the rest of his elite circle’s. 16 Before he changed his mind about southern men, this divergence brought him into some uncharacteristic conflicts. One of these disagreements arose in the aftermath of a poetry reading he gave on October 14, 1846, to the Boston Mercantile Library Association. Holmes read his poem “A Rhymed Lesson (Urania),” which addresses many of his favorite topics including freedom of religion and thought, the commonness of poetry and the poet, and the

need to maintain the Union. In it, he worries that the “poor reformer,” whose desire for “praise” drives him to choose “an ultra side,” rides unsteadily on two Manichean wheels: “One black with epithets the anti throws,/ One white with flattery painted by the pros.” Holmes decries this black-and-white oppositional thought, the “discordant cries” he fears threaten the Union. Like Hawthorne, he recurs to a patriarchal heritage as a defense against “disunion”:

Chief of New England! by your sires’ renown,
Dash the red torches of the rebel down!
Flood his black hearthstone till its flames expire,
Though your old Sachem fanned his council-fire!17

He identifies the “rebel” with a few southern hot-bloods, but he also implicates the Calvinist religious tradition, which he associates with the reformers and an Indian primitivism or New England’s “old Sachem.”

When his anti-slavery friend, James Russell Lowell, confronted him about this attack on reformers, Holmes denied being a “thorough-going conservatist” but justified his poem by claiming that

I believe that at present you and I cannot prevent the existence of slavery. But the catastrophe of disunion I believe we can prevent, and thus avert a future of war and bloodshed which is equally frightful to both of us in contemplation. . . . I thought disunion the most vital matter at present.”18

Yet he blames the abolitionists and their uncivil language for creating the threat of disunion. He condemns them even more explicitly in an 1855 letter to Emerson:

If the law of conscience carried out fully only by the ultra-abolitionists, had been proclaimed in strict accordance with the law of love, I believe the


18 Quoted in Morse, i. 299, 300-01.
question [of slavery] would be far more nearly solved than it is at present. But
they have used every form of language calculated to inflame the evil
passions[,] and the consequence is that growing sectional hostility, the nature
of which is the disruption of the government . . .19

The “consequence” of their violent, “calculated” language is the “catastrophe of
disunion” that Holmes most feared. Maintaining his vision of the genteel homosocial
bond between elite men—both northern and southern—required the expulsion of such
discourse.

By 1863, however, Holmes had radically changed his mind. His July 4th
Oration, “The Inevitable Trial,” completely exculpates reformers and recasts the “war
and bloodshed” as an “inevitable” clash of incommensurate civilizations: “The
antagonism of the two sections of the Union was not the work of this or that
enthusiast or fanatic. It was the consequence of a movement in mass of two different
forms of civilization in different directions” (IT, 85). Instead of willfully provoking
“evil passions,” reformers are “intrusted with the sacred duty of eliminating the
substances that infect the air . . . whose instincts lead them to attack the moral
nuisances which poison the atmosphere of society” (IT, 90). Acting on these
“instincts,” they become almost Darwinian agents of “destiny” and the “law of moral
progress” as played out in the Northern character.

Holmes attributes the antagonistic movement between North and South
wholly to the presence of slavery and “the change of character it was bringing about
in the people of the two sections,” which undermined the Southerners’ proper descent
from a noble patriarchal heritage and perverted their imperial mission (85). In the

19 Quoted in Tilton, 227.
North, “the law of moral progress” stirred “a great uprising of the human conscience,” the voice of which “awakened conscience” only grew “louder and stronger” (92-3). In the South, by contrast, slavery was producing a tyrannical “hereditary character” (92), which finally undermined the South’s own heroic patriarchal lineage:

The descendants of the men ‘daily exercised in tyranny,’ the ‘petty tyrants,’ . . . came at length to love the institution which their fathers had condemned while they tolerated. It is the fearful realization of that vision of the poet where the lost angels snuff up with eager nostrils the sulphurous emanations of the bottomless abyss—so have their natures become changed by long breathing the atmosphere of the realm of darkness” (86).

This explanation for the conflict between northern and southern character draws on a discourse of poison, which it pours into a hereditarian or neo-Lamarckian racial theory. Nineteenth-century hereditarian theory preceded Darwinism and continued to exert a strong influence even after Darwin debunked its central premise. This theory proposed that “the behavioral patterns of the parents could be inherited by the offspring . . . [and that] culture and environment played [a major role] in the formation of individuals and civilizations.”20 In other words, a parent’s chosen behaviors could alter family characteristics and be transmitted to offspring. If, as Holmes suggests, a too-long embrace of slavery had altered Southerners’ “hereditary character” and “their natures become changed by long breathing the atmosphere of the realm of darkness,” then perhaps they have made the equivalent of a “dark” racial change. The reformers had tried to purify the South’s satanic atmosphere, but this poison had finally altered the racial make-up of white Southerners and threatened to

spread and darken the American race. Thus, Emerson feared that the South would “Africanize” America, and similarly Louis Agassiz (Holmes’s much admired friend and member of the Saturday Club) worried that the country could be “Mexicanized.”

Given this racial schema, the war became an inevitable clash of two civilizations over American empire: “The moral uprising of the North came with the logical precision of destiny; the rage of the ‘petty tyrants’ was inevitable; the plot to erect a slave empire followed with fated certainty . . .” (93).

Thus between 1855 when Holmes accused abolitionists of fostering “evil passions” and 1863 when he invested them with “a sacred duty,” between his claim that “the white man must always have the upper hand in the south” and his characterization of the South as “the deadly reptile of the cotton field” (IT, 96), the southern gentleman proved he was a dangerous racial other threatening both American civilization and the elite homosociality that embodied it. In a March 8, 1864, letter to John A. McAllister, Holmes claims that “the Kansas iniquities . . . first opened my eyes to the base designs of the mighty slave dynasty”—i.e. “the plot to erect a slave empire.” These “Kansas iniquities” refer to the burning of the abolitionist town of Lawrence, Kansas, on May 21, 1856; but “Bleeding Kansas” was also paired with “Bleeding Sumner”—the brutal attack on Charles Sumner, the abolitionist senator from Massachussetts. On May 22, 1856, Preston Brooks, a congressman from South Carolina who had objected to what he considered insults


22 Tilton, 228.
directed against his cousin and his state in Sumner’s recent speech, entered the senate chamber, where he brutally caned Sumner—permanently disabling him. Whatever his flaws may have been in Holmes’s eyes, Sumner was his neighbor and later a fellow member of the Saturday Club—a Brahmin gentleman. The attack violated the genteel homosociality that Holmes most valued and identified with the American community. Thus, in his oration, Holmes uncharacteristically recurs to the language of Biblical teleology and identifies this attack on Sumner as the initial southern “crime” in the “harvest” that brought on the war and disunion:

At last, in the fulness [sic] of time, the fruits of sin ripened in a sudden harvest of crime. Violence stalked into the senate-chamber, theft and perjury wound their way into the cabinet, and, finally, openly organized conspiracy, with force and arms, made burglarious [sic] entrance into a chief stronghold of the Union”—i.e. the attack on Fort Sumter (86).

Holmes’s opinion of the importance of the attack mirrored that of many of his fellow moderate Northerners. The news about Lawrence and Sumner (and especially the latter) caused an uproar in the North and further linked the ideas of an expanding “slave empire” with the destruction of northern civilization and the humiliation of northern manhood. Large meetings were called in almost every major northern city to protest the attack. According to the typically understated Edward Everett, when the news of the caning reached Boston, “it produced an excitement in the public mind deeper and more dangerous than I have ever witnessed.” When South Carolina voted to return Brooks to the House with accolades and the majority of the southern

23 See, Edward Waldo Emerson, The Early Years of the Saturday Club, 1855-1870 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).
press praised his actions, it “outraged northern moderates even more than the caning.”25 Antislavery reformers had long criticized the South as an alien and barbaric society, and now much larger segments of the northern population began to adopt this framework. A Boston conservative who had previously defended the South now “must in sorrow concede a lower civilization than I would ever before believe, tho’ [Theodore] Parker, & those called extreme, have often & calmly insisted upon this very fact, while I have warmly denied it.”26 Furthermore, the South’s “lower civilization” began to be seen as imminently threatening to Northern freedom and civilization. In a June 6, 1856, essay in The Liberator, Emerson lamented: “I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one state. I think we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom.”27

“The Inevitable Trial” refuses to classify southern society as barbarous or Southerners as “barbarians because they cherish an institution hostile to civilization” (106). But Holmes saw slavery as transforming southern whites into a hostile imperial power that would ultimately try to devour the North. He describes the Southerners as “fanatics for a system [slavery] essentially aggressive, conquering, wasting, which cannot remain stationary, but must grow by alternate appropriations of labor and of land.” This system had regressed the southern gentlemen that Holmes once

24 Quoted in David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1960) 300.


26 Quoted in McPherson, 151-2.

27 Quoted in Donald, 311.
admired—causing them ultimately to “come to resemble their earlier prototypes,” the
Saracens, “a nation of predatory and migrating warriors” (106). If the North did not
defeat them utterly, it would “betray your civilization” by leaving “a power on your
borders that will be to you what the Saracens were to Europe” (106-7). Holmes makes
quite clear that the war is a “Holy War” against the “enemies of civilization” and a
battle for empire, for ultimate control of “the broad continent” and the power to be
“Arbitress in the councils of earth’s emancipated peoples” (116-17,120).

Holmes supports his thesis about the regression of southern manhood by
directing his audience to consider their contemptuous language, an arrogance which
suggests that they have rejected the egalitarian homosocial fellowship Holmes deems
appropriate to the civilized elite:

Already, even, the insolence of their language to the people of the North is a
close imitation of the style which those proud and arrogant Asiatics affected
toward all the nations of Europe. What the ‘Christian dogs’ were to the
followers of Mahomet, the ‘accursed Yankees,’ the ‘Northern mudsills’ are to
the followers of the Southern Moloch (106-7).

This “insolence” echoes the insults thrown at elite northern men in the aftermath of
the Sumner beating, which so outraged the northern public. For example, the
Richmond Enquirer equates Sumner and his fellows with animals or slaves that
needed to be collared and beaten: “The vulgar Abolitionists in the Senate are getting
above themselves. . . . They have grown saucy, and dare to be impudent to
gentlemen! . . . The truth is, they have been suffered to run too long without collars.
They must be lashed into submission.”28 In response, northern writers accused
Southerners of having an animalistic nature. Emerson fumed that “One must look to

28 McPherson, 151.
the planters of the South with the same feelings that he would regard the spider and
the fly, the tiger and the deer. . . . The people are barbarous. They are still in the
animal state.” He further suggests that the North needs to “civilize” them, “take out
the brute, and infuse a drop of civility . . . [so that] [i]nstead of racers, jockies,
duelists, and peacocks, you shall have a race of decent and lawful men.”

Like Emerson, Holmes, in private correspondence, described the dichotomy
between the two civilizations and two forms of empire as an effect of two types of
manhood—one decent and lawful, the other savage and animalistic. Thus, northern
success depended on the proper assertion of that “human” masculinity over the
“beastial and diabolical”:

If we have grown unmanly and degenerate in the north wind, I am willing that
the sirocco should sweep us off from the soil. If the course of nature must be
reversed for us, and the Southern Goths must march to the ‘beggarly land of
ice’ to overrun and recolonize us, I have nothing to object. But I have a most
solid and robust faith in the sterling manhood of the North, in its endurance,
its capacity for a military training, its plasticity for every need, in education, in
political equality, in respect for man as man in peaceful development, which is
our law, in distinction from aggressive colonization; in human qualities as
against beastial and diabolical ones; in the Lord as against the Devil.

Although Holmes had once denounced the black and white moralism of the “ultras,”
here he too portrays the conflict between North and South as an opposition between
God and the Devil, the human and the animalistic. This Manichaeism extends to his
depiction of northern and southern versions of imperialism—one as “peaceful
development” and the other as “aggressive colonization.” Yet in spite of the benign

29 Quoted in Broaddus, 90.
30 Quoted in Morse, ii. 166-67.
nature of the North’s civilizing project, it requires violent masculine assertion. Whether the North can defeat these Saracen warriors or Southern Goths and so control American civilization ultimately depends on northern masculinity, “whether the North has virtue and manhood enough” (100)—whether it is “unmanly and degenerate” or “sterling.”

Holmes wrote *Elsie Venner* partly to decide this question—to prove that New England manhood is “sterling” and can defeat southern masculinity. He does this by taking a group of unlikely warriors, what he calls our “poor Brahmins,” and transforming them into professional men who combine the social status and deference to homosocial hierarchy displayed by traditional New England elites with the muscularity and boldness of self-made men. The new Brahmin can thus be individually formidable and can also call upon the power and protection of his profession. As long as he resists inappropriate heterosociality, this combination allows him to defeat the conniving violence of southern masculinity. And by doing that, he can reassert control over the social order and the racial others of the empire, thus promoting “civilization” and “peaceful development.”

The successful re-assertion of elite northern manhood thus requires a careful balancing act between the softer signs of civilization (sympathy, fraternity, compassion, intellect) and the violence necessary to put down a Saracen. Many New England writers (including Stowe) had worried that too great a whiteness, too much civilization, was withering northern manhood and causing their own “hereditary” difficulty. Holmes addresses this problem when he introduces and defines the “Brahmin caste of New England”—a “race of the hereditary scholar [which] has
exchanged a portion of its animal vigor for its new instincts.” Like the reformer’s “instincts,” these “new instincts” are civilizing or de-animalizing: “One string of the animal nature has been taken away [which] gives only a greater predominance to the intellectual chords” (4, 8). Nevertheless, “it is hard to lead men without a great deal of animal vigor.” As an example, Holmes posits a hypothetical Senator who “broke down” on the floor in the middle of a speech and thus not so subtly alludes to the Sumner caning, arguing: “A man’s breathing and digestive apparatus (one is tempted to add muscular) are just as important to him on the floor of the Senate as his thinking organs” (5-6). Holmes then introduces Bernard Langdon as a member of this Brahmin caste. Unlike the unfortunate Senator, however, Bernard works out, and Holmes lovingly details his regimen, looking at the young man with a sculptor’s “critical eye,” just as Apollonius examined Menippus. According to the Professor, “there was a pretty show of muscles, beneath the white satiny skin of Mr. Bernard Langdon” (32). Bernard successfully combines whiteness and elite status (signified by the “satiny” skin unroughened by hard labor or exposure) with “muscular” vitality, reintegrating this physical manliness into the Brahmin’s “new instincts.”

Bernard can bring together these masculine elements because he is the professional man, made up of both the old New England elite’s intellectuality and deference to homosocial hierarchy and the new self-made man’s muscularity and boldness. In *The Autocrat*, Holmes argued that he prefers a “man of family” (i.e. a Brahmin with a long cultivated family history) to a “self-made man,” which he considers “imperfectly made” (20, 23). But in Bernard he merges the culture of the former with the energy of the latter. The genteel Langdons have fallen into difficult
financial straits, and Bernard must save up money before he can continue his medical education. He tells the Professor: “So I must look out for myself for a while. It’s what I’ve done before, and am ready to do again” (9). In addition to his self-motivation, the Professor further depicts him as confident and courageous and capable of shaping the world to his own design—“a resolute young fellow” who “steps up to the great bully, the World, and takes him boldly by the beard” (9-10).

The Professor spells out the ultimate goal for Bernard without much sentimental idealism: power. He lays out how this new self-made and family youth will rise in the world, from poor to rich clients, to a professorship at Harvard Medical (similar to the position he has), to a rich and socially-suitable wife. In the end, he may put himself on a level with the highest in the land. . . . And to stand at the very top of your calling in a great city is something in itself—that is, if you like money, and influence, and a seat on the platform at public lectures, and gratuitous tickets to all sorts of places where you don’t want to go, and, what is a good deal better than any of these things, a sense of power, limited, it may be, but absolute in its range, so that all the Caesars and Napoleons would have to stand aside, if they came between you and the exercise of your special vocation (20).

Professional prowess, gaining “the top of your calling,” creates a “sense of power” that can make even (southern) tyrants “stand aside.” This professional masculinity thus combines the family man’s culture and intellect with the self-made man’s energy to reassert Brahmin dominance.

One major threat to this process of professional male empowerment, so the Professor fears, is a heterosociality that merges the man’s identity into the woman’s (rather than vice versa). Specifically he worries that an unguarded sympathy could leave Bernard open to “being fascinated” so that the “rays of a passionate nature . . . would be absorbed into the very depths of his nature, and then his blood would turn to
flame and burn his life out of him, until his cheeks grew as white as the ashes that cover a burning coal” (17). A powerful, “passionate” woman could steal his precious vitality, interfere with his rise, and corrupt the new Brahmin race.\(^{31}\) The Professor loses sleep fretting that Bernard, loosed from his professional oversight, could make “one of those miserable matrimonial misalliances” (18). If he marries a woman “above his level,” he will “become the appendage of a powerful family connection” (20). But worse, if he marries “some fresh-faced, half-bred country-girl, no more fit to be mated with him than her father’s horse to go in double harness with Flora Temple,”\(^{32}\) then he will find himself a country doctor, whose constant driving makes him “feel like the mummy of an Indian who had been buried in the sitting posture and was dug up a hundred years afterwards” (18, 21). Throughout his work, Holmes portrays Indians as symbols of inevitably dying barbarism. Little Boston describes the Indians as “provisional races . . . the red-crayon sketch of humanity laid on the canvas before the colors for the real manhood were ready,” who “are passed away or are passing away, according to the programme” (82-83). When the Professor lays out Bernard’s options as rocketing to “the top of your calling” as a new professional or becoming “the mummy of an Indian,” he racializes the stakes. In other words, a heterosocial “misalliance” could transform the conqueror of tyrants and his race with him into a revenant, a dying rather than thriving breed. When Bernard marries, he

\(^{31}\) See Barker-Benfield’s discussion of the antebellum medical belief that women were dangerous because they could suck the energy from men. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

\(^{32}\) A record-setting trotter.
must already have reached “his level,” already be formed, and not allow a woman to shape him to her level. This mechanism contrasts markedly with Stowe’s heterosociality derived from the matriarchal formation of men. In Holmes’s formulation, by contrast, women in no way drive men’s self-fashioning. They only facilitate or hinder this outcome, just as they facilitate or hinder the formation of polite society.

The novel thus concentrates its energy on the confrontation between Richard and Bernard and establishes this conflict not as a romantic contest but as a struggle for power between two forms of masculinity with historically two different territories for assertion, which now—inevitably—clash and overlap in Elsie. Richard desires Elsie primarily for the land she will inherit (empire) and secondarily because he considers her a challenge: He had “tired of worshipping or tyrannizing over the bistred umbered beauties of mingled blood.” He wanted “a creature of a different race from these degenerate mongrels.” He considered Elsie “wild” and high-born and proud and thus “‘a filly worth noosing’” (154). Bernard, by contrast, sees her as a medical mystery and thus his province of authority:

Mr. Bernard had made up his mind, that, come what might, enemy or no enemy, live or die, he would solve the mystery of Elsie Venner . . . He was not a man to be frightened by a scowl, or a stiletto, or any unknown means of mischief, of which a whole armory was hinted at in that passing look Dick Venner had given him (204).

He does not desire or sympathize with Elsie in any emotional understanding of the term: “He had passed through the sympathetic and emotional stages in his new experience, and had arrived at the philosophical and practical state, which takes things coolly, and goes to work to set them right” (167). In other words, in order “to
set [Elsie] right,” he could not feel with her. He is distant from her—seeing sympathy that works through identification (rather than pity) as dangerous and weakening. As the Professor declares, “All of us love companionship and sympathy; some of us may love them too much” because sympathy becomes regressive when it interferes with the “right of self-determination” (253). And, as the Professor explained above, that self-determination is essentially masculine self-making, a process that inappropriate sympathy with women can corrupt.

Although Stowe and Holmes were in friendly conversation, Elsie Venner inverts her formulation of the ideal heterosocial relation formed through sympathetic identification. Holmes rests his argument, his goal in Bernard’s success, upon a maintenance of separate spheres and disparate identities for men and women. In reference to Richard and Elsie, he argues that though they “had much in common,” that made them “as if both were boys”—inappropriately masculinizing Elsie but not tempering Richard. That shared androgyny, he suggests, will create deep problems: “wherever two natures have a great deal in common, the conditions of a first-rate quarrel are furnished ready-made”—not the ideal basis for a marriage. Nature operates through “the antipathy of like to like” so that people “mix in with the world and again struggle back to average humanity” (151-2).33

By contrast, the sympathy between like natures grounds the positive sexual and romantic relationships in Stowe’s novels. It enables a civilizing androgyny. We

33 Charles Boewe (310) and Everett Carter both argue that Holmes advocates the normal and the conventional as healthy and that his works “embodied, rather than rejected, the conventional acceptations of its times” (Carter, 38). “The Typicality of Oliver Wendell Holmes,” Themes and Directions in American Literature: Essays in Honor of Leon Howard, ed. Ray Browne and Donald Pizer (Lafayette: Purdue University Studies, 1969): 38-57.
could read Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Isle* as a partial response to *Elsie Venner* and the relationship between Elsie and Richard. In *Pearl*, Sally, Pearl, and Moses have the same early connections that draw Elsie and Richard together, but that androgynous same-ness between Sally and Moses (both of “Spanish” complexion or origin) makes their relationship civilizing and beautiful. In Stowe’s story, the blond dies and the “Spanish” girl lives and gets her man and the serpent bracelet. In Holmes’s novel, by contrast, the “Spanish” Elsie dies and the blonde and blandly appropriate Letty walks away with Bernard and Elsie’s bracelet of golden scales. While Stowe’s novel suggests that New England culture can be reinvigorated through a “dark” racial infusion, Holmes’s “struggle back to the average of humanity” significantly whitens that average. The relationship between Sally and Moses, however, succeeds in part because Moses (standing in for the southern aristocratic) can be transformed culturally into a New England Anglo-Saxon. Holmes is much less sanguine about Richard’s prospects, and he returns to the encounter between Sumner and Brooks as an object lesson demonstrating that southern character has become too degraded for anything less than a violent response.

Just as Elsie stands in for a host of racial others, her cousin, Richard Venner also embodies a veritable stew of southern masculinities. The novel describes him many times as “Southern” (337, 365, 378), melding together the southern-ness of his South American origins with the southern-ness of the slave states. He emerges from the union of a New England sea captain and South American woman, “a daughter of an alien race” who yet had “real azure blood in her veins, as proud as if she had Castile and Aragon for her dower and the Cid for her grandpapa” (200). Yet in spite
of this aristocratic and knightly heritage, Richard is described as “haälf Injun” or a
“half-breed body . . . turned loose to run among Indians” (384, 405). He is “dark,” a
coloring which comes “partly from descent, partly from long habits of exposure”—
i.e. a picture of hereditarian nature/nurture racialism (157). He is both “feline” and
“like Mephistopheles” (175, 300)—the combination of “beastial” and “diabolical”
Holmes noted in southern men. He exudes criminality and even poison. A venerable
judge pronounces, “His face is indictable at common law. . . . I don’t like these mixed
bloods and half-told stories” (177). When Richard goes to Boston, a detective follows
him, mistaking him for a “wife-poisoner” until he decides he is “one o’ them
Southern sportsmen” (162).

Like a good “Southern sportsman,” Richard devotes himself to fast horses. The Autocrat declares that, “Horse-racing is not a republican institution” (unlike New
England’s horse-trotting), and he attributes the practice to “the semi-barbarism of a
civilization resolved into its primitive elements. . . . Its supporters are the Southern
gentry . . .” (AB, 34-5). The narrator characterizes Richard as a horseman, a “Spanish
bandit on that wild horse of his” (178) or a “young Gaucho” (150), who thunders
about the country on his wild racing horse. The moral implications of this habit are
clear:
It makes men imperious to sit a horse; no man governs his fellows so well as from this living throne. And so, from Marcus Aurelius in Roman bronze . . . the saddle has always been the true seat of empire. The absolute tyranny of the human will over a noble and powerful beast develops the instinct of personal prevalence and dominion; so that horse-subduer and hero were almost synonymous in simpler times, and are closely related still. An ancestry of wild riders naturally enough bequeaths also those other tendencies which we see in the Tartars, the Cossacks, and our own Indian Centaurs . . . Sharp alternations of violent action and self-indulgent repose; a hard run, and a long revel after it; this is what over-much horse tends to animalize a man into. Such antecedents may have helped to make little Dick Venner a self-willed, capricious boy, and a rough playmate for Elsie (151).

This passage encapsulates Holmes’s explanation for his change in attitude toward aristocratic Southerners. In more primitive, “simpler times,” this form of masculinity defined the “hero.” But now, this “tyranny” and the “violent” and “self-indulgent” habits (typically associated with slaveholders) only “animalize.” This type of man, like the “Indian Centaur,” is fated to pass away in the face of new, civilized forms of manhood. The passage links Richard with Marcus Aurelius, one of the Caesars that will have to “stand aside” for Bernard when he exercises his “special vocation”—in this case, solving the medicated mystery of Elsie.

Holmes scripts the final confrontation between Bernard and Richard as an imaginative justification of Sumner and a condemnation of Brooks. For Holmes, as for many Northerners, the Sumner beating crystallized and emblematized the regional conflict as a contest between masculinities. So how exactly the beating progressed became a crucial issue: Did Sumner, after the first blow, “bellow[] like a bull calf and quickly f[a]ll cringing to the floor, an inanimate lump of cowardice”? Or did Brooks, taking “advantage of his defenseless position and of the surprise, beat Sumner
senseless, and continue[] to strike him after he collapsed on the floor”?

Although a great deal of ink was expended on competing interpretations of Sumner’s beating and specifically what it said about northern and southern masculinity, Holmes arguably made the most systematic literary effort to think through the incident and vindicate Sumner and northern masculinity. *Elsie Venner* responds to “the Kansas iniquities” and the attack on Sumner (and the southern press’ behavior) and tries to resolve the threat to New England civilization and manhood those incidents implied by replaying the conflict through Richard Venner and Bernard Langdon. Holmes reproduces the “insolence of [southern] language to the people of the North,” which emerged in the aftermath of Sumner’s beating, with Richard’s insults to Bernard and his class status. He calls Bernard a “dog” (370), reminiscent of the “vulgar Abolitionists in the Senate” whom the *Richmond Enquirer* claimed needed to be collared. And his break with Elsie happens when she calls Bernard “a gentleman,” who “would not vex me as you do.” Richard lashes out: “‘A gentleman!’ Dick answered with the most insulting accent—‘a gentleman! Come, Elsie, you’ve got the Dudley blood in your veins, and it doesn’t do for you to call this poor, sneaking schoolmaster a gentleman!’” (359).

Richard’s refusal to consider Bernard “a gentleman” reflects Brooks’s explanation for his attack on Sumner. He would have called him out for a duel, but Sumner was not a gentleman and so rated instead a punishment reserved for inferiors.

Holmes’s narrative also clears up the questions about whether Brooks plotted a sneak attack or acted out of honor and whether Sumner was unmanned by surprise and made defenseless by shock or merely cringed in a “sneaking,” cowardly manner.

34 Donald, 309-10.
Richard acts out of cool, malicious self-interest against a perceived rival for property (362). He plans his assault on Bernard for weeks. He stalks Bernard with an almost sexually sadistic enthusiasm. Watching Bernard through the schoolmaster’s apartment window, Richard “experiences a peculiar kind of pleasure” as he “holds a loaded rifle in his hand, which he naturally hates to bring to its climax” (356).

Bernard (like Sumner and his refusal of bodyguards proffered right before the attack) remains innocent and unsuspecting. But unlike Sumner, Bernard has fellow professionals looking out for his interests. Doctor Kittredge

  felt an interest in the young man—a student of his own profession, an intelligent and ingenuously unsuspecting young fellow, who had been thrown by accident into the companionship or neighborhood of two persons, one of whom he knew to be dangerous [Elsie], and the other he believed instinctively might be capable of crime [Richard] (344).

Kittredge arms Bernard with a pistol and a powder. Though unwilling to take either, Bernard bows to the superior authority of his professional senior. This homosocial deference saves his life: On the night Richard tries to run him down and lasso (“collar?”) him, Bernard takes his pistol with him only because “he remembered the old Doctor’s counsel, which he had sometimes neglected” (369). With the pistol, Bernard shoots the wild black horse out from under Richard, who is then pinned under the animal’s corpse. Again, like Sumner, the initial surprise and violence of the assault “threw Mr. Bernard violently to the earth, where he lay motionless, as if stunned” (370). Holmes indulges in a lengthy description of the effects of such a blow—the disorientation and helplessness. It is as if he is exculpating his friend Sumner from a charge of a cowardly refusal to defend himself. A stunned man can do nothing for his own protection, and Holmes follows this scene with a further
disquisition about the effects of unconsciousness. In spite of Bernard’s helplessness, Richard struggles to get free from his fallen horse and finish off his victim, but Dr. Kittredge again interferes. He has sent his servant, Abel, to follow Richard, and Abel stops him from attacking the stunned Bernard. Kittredge then takes charge of the situation and exiles the horseman from the nation, driving him to a seaport town where he takes passage back to South America.

Elsie and the wild horse, however, do not meet with such gentle treatment. In the “recent combat of cavalry and infantry” (375), the tyrannical horse-subduer loses in the face of a united front of professional men, but with the southern man out of the way, the professional men are free to “cure” the savage woman. The savage woman like the savage horse sustains the tyrant. The savage woman is also the embodiment of her race. Elsie, in particular, represents a host of racial others who are whitened away in the course of her purification. By defeating Richard and then purifying Elsie of the beast (even if it means killing her), the professional New England men prove their superior ability to civilize the nation. Bernard has become the true horse-subduer and American hero.

By contrast, Nathaniel Hawthorne returns to the historical ideal of the horseman to renew northern manhood and make the “hardy virtues flourish,” while the scientist’s over-intellectual “nonsense dies like a wilted weed” (CWM, 421). The next section examines his response to the problem of southern savagery and northern weakness—an argument that counters Holmes’s vision of professional masculinity. Hawthorne equates heterosocial and race-mixing savagery with the professional’s elite homosociality. Instead, he opposes southern masculinity with a purposely
uncomplicated American masculinity that recurs to the domestic patriarch’s clear
gender role and the “Homeric hero’s” unreflective violence.

III. Poisonous Elixirs, Indian Mixtures, and Venerable Fathers

Nathaniel Hawthorne had long been preoccupied with poison—producing short fictions such as “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” “Egotism; or, the Bosom-Serpent,” and “The Birthmark,” for example. These earlier narratives dwelt overtly upon issues of gender and criticized a misogynist reading of poison, distributing some of the blame for corruption onto men’s selfish will to power. In 1861, Hawthorne returned to the poison theme and began writing his only lengthy treatment of it as a response to the sectional conflict and to Elsie Venner. These unfinished narratives were later called The Elixir of Life manuscripts. Within two years, Hawthorne had produced over 150,000 words that made up two novel-length drafts. The first draft, called Septimius Felton by the editors of the Centenary edition of his works, creates a complete narrative and follows the story to its conclusion, while the second draft, Septimius Norton, is richer in detail but halts mid-way through the story.

Although superficially very different from Elsie Venner, the Septimius narrative incorporates and revises several elements from Holmes’s novel and explores its central issues (savagery and the American “race” and empire) in dialogue with the earlier work. Holmes and Hawthorne had a long history of exchanging tropes and arguments, especially about poison and the medical profession. For instance, Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” drew on Holmes’s medical tract Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions, and Holmes returned the compliment by pulling ideas from this
story and “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” “Egotism; or, The Bosom Serpent,” and “The Ambitious Guest” for *Elsie Venner*. These similarities became so strong as the writers approached 1860 that Holmes, in his second preface to the novel, rebuffs the accusation of plagiarism, swearing that “[m]y story was well advanced before Hawthorne’s wonderful ‘Marble Faun,’ which might be thought to have furnished me with the hint of a mixed nature,—human, with an alien element,—was published or known to me” (EV, x).

Although *The Marble Faun* touches on issues of atavism and race-mixing in the figure of Donatello (the “Faun”) and Miriam (a possible mulatta or Jewess), it quickly “spiritualizes” and universalizes them into a moral allegory for the human condition. In the wake of *Elsie Venner*, however, Hawthorne switches to a more biological and hereditarian racial epistemology. The *Septimius* manuscripts thus appear as Hawthorne’s most openly and scientifically racist texts, a strong departure from his other fictions. Like *Elsie Venner*, *Septimius* revolves around the actions of a student of science and his investigations, but Septimius, like Richard but unlike Bernard, is also a “half-breed,” part British-extraction, part Indian. And, like Elsie, this lingering barbarism in the blood makes him a poisoner and a threat to the community.

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35 Stoehr, 119-20, 126-29.

Hawthorne is often seen as a writer of complication and mixture, embracing humanity’s community in sin and its sympathy in crime. The *Elixir of Life* manuscripts, however, experiment with simplification and community formed through the alienation of racial mixture and intellectual investigation, both of which Hawthorne associates with a southern savagery that violates communal bonds. Hawthorne thus takes on Holmes’s racial discourse but contests Holmes’s professional solution. Both authors identify a Stowe-like race-mixing heterosociality as savagery that must be overcome and cast out. Hawthorne’s novel, however, indicts the professional or intellectual man as contributing to this heterosocial savagery, and ultimately rejects the new Brahmin for a decidedly anti-intellectual masculinity that is militaristic in public and patriarchal within the domestic. In *The Dolliver Romance*, he pulls this ideal even further back from the modern—lionizing a gentle, markedly uninquisitive, and simple seventeenth-century patriarch.

Many critics who discuss the *Elixir of Life* manuscripts focus on Hawthorne’s failing powers, which they attribute to guilt over his family’s near-death illnesses in Italy, his own approaching sickness, or an inability to deal with his recent canonical status. The autobiographical elements of the story seem to reflect the author’s consternation about his art and isolation or his family history. Other critics, including Hawthorne himself, attribute his inability to complete another romance to the intrusions of reality in the form of the Civil War, while still others focus on how the *Septimus* narratives revolve around an attempt to define heroism or to revile
hybridism. These last three less autobiographical interpretations interest me most.\textsuperscript{37} I argue, however, that Hawthorne links his concerns about the War, heroism, and hybridism through a meditation upon southern savagery—one that responds specifically to Holmes’s argument about the same subject in \textit{Elsie Venner}.

The \textit{Septimius} narratives deal openly with the Civil War and with the transformation in masculinity that accompanies it. Although Hawthorne sets Septimius’s story in a New England village during the British march on Lexington and Concord that started the Revolutionary War, the narrative also references the current conflict. Hawthorne makes this most clear in a striking meditation on military heroism and unity that appears with some alterations in both versions of the manuscript:

We know something of that time, now; we that have seen the muster of the village company, on the green before the meeting-houses, and heard the drum and fife, drawing the sobs of mother, sister, and sweetheart, watched the farewells, beheld the familiar faces, that we hardly knew, because a moment had transformed them into the faces of heroes; breathed higher breaths for their sakes, and hoped that we, had the summons come earlier, might have been heroes too; thanked them, in our deepest hearts, for showing us that our daily meanness is still capable of being so readily kindled into heroic endeavor and accomplishment; felt how a great impulse lifts up a whole people, and every cold, indifferent spectator, making him religious whether he will or no, and compelling him, however reluctantly, to join in that great act of devotion which we recognize when so many myriads of hearts conspire together for something beyond their own selfish ends (SN, 216-17).

The Civil War, like the Revolutionary War, unifies and “lifts up a whole people” in a “great act of devotion,” transforming simple men into “heroes” so that even the “cold, indifferent spectator” must join in. Septimius, however, appears an anomaly and refuses to enter into this general elevation. He scorns the “great act of devotion” and becomes morbidly obsessed with the shortness of human life.

The narrative demonstrates the folly and racially determined inevitability of Septimius’s alienation. After a handsome British soldier steals a kiss from Rose, Septimius’s love-interest, transformed later in the manuscript into his half-sister, he indulges his murderous Indian blood and enters the running guerilla warfare; but because of that Indian blood, his killing is secretive and thus murderous rather than patriotic and heroic. He shoots the young officer in a duel, and, with his savage Aunt Keziah’s/ Nashoba’s help, he buries the youth on the hill near their cottage. Violating the officer’s last request, Nashoba takes a bizarre document from the body, which she gives to Septimius. It is a conduct manual and a recipe for a draught of immortality, written partly in a secret script. Septimius becomes obsessed with deciphering it and spends hours walking the path on the hill by the grave. One day he encounters Sybil.
Dacy/ Dark, a strange, half-mad young woman sitting on the grave and looking like she sprouted from it. When strange flowers grow from the mound as well, they seem the key ingredient in the potion. The English lord and alchemist who wrote the recipe also appears to be the same man as the old Indian sachem who taught Nashoba’s ancestors how to make a foul drink she loves. When Septimius discovers the coincidence, he decides to conduct an experiment: He puts some petals in Nashoba’s drink. She dies terribly, but he keeps working on the potion with some advice from a mysterious Dr. Portsoaken until he believes he has found the correct mixture. But he does not want to face immortality alone, so on the night of Rose’s wedding to the dashing war hero, Robert Garfield/ Hagburn, Septimius invites Sybil to drink with him. She drinks and dashes the rest to the floor. She explains that she and Dr. Portsoaken, who had been supposedly helping Septimius, had actually plotted his death. The doctor had been using Sybil to entangle the young British officer and then to lead Septimius into making an elixir that was actually a poison—all so Portsoaken could claim an English estate (to which the officer and Septimius were heirs). Sybil wanted revenge upon Septimius for murdering her lover, the young officer, and so she agreed to help poison him. But she fell in love with him and so decided to save his life by drinking the false elixir of immortality. Sybil dies; Dr. Portsoaken is run out of town; and Septimius returns to England to live morose and alone on his estate while Robert and Rose live happily ever after.

The key theme throughout this narrative is the savagery occasioned by gender and race mixture, which places the hybrid beyond the pale of the human community. Whether critics believe that Hawthorne understood gender categories as “securely
founded in nature” or “arbitrary,” they agree that he was deeply invested in them, and “gender confusion . . . occasions for Hawthorne the deepest anxiety.”\(^{38}\) Stowe’s androgyrous heterosociality was not Hawthorne’s heterosocial union. By the same token, Hawthorne was marked by a similar “anxiety over the threat of racial mixture.”\(^{39}\) Hawthorne himself puts this aversion more forcefully in a note in *Septimius Norton*: “The mixture of race a crime against nature, therefore pernicious” (256). Septimius’s existence then is an abomination: “he had derived from the peculiar and mixed nature of his ancestry—being of an anomalous and mixed blood, which Nature might not seem to have reckoned upon or purposed” (SN, 254). Hawthorne sees this mixture as the reason Septimius cannot join with the common “great impulse.” Therefore, constitutionally, he cannot participate in the war and the improved masculinity it portends.

Hawthorne interrupted his work on *Septimius* to write his two non-fiction essays on the war: “Chiefly about War-Matters. By a Peaceable Man” and “Northern Volunteers.” In them his plot elements and language link the Southerners he describes with Septimius. Hawthorne observes in “Chiefly about War-Matters” that for the northern soldiers the war has a masculinizing, “morally invigorating” effect: “The enervating effects of centuries of civilization vanish at once, and leave these young

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\(^{39}\) Anna C. Brickhouse, “‘I Do Abhor an Indian Story’: Hawthorne and the Allegorization of Racial ‘Commixture,’” *ESQ* 42.4 (1996): 233.
men to enjoy a life of hardship, and the exhilarating sense of danger—to kill men blamelessly, or to be killed gloriously” (CM, 421). Septimius’s Indian blood and savagery, by contrast, percolate too near the surface for him to take part in the war’s “great impulse” and its “ennobling of brute force” (SF, 17). In his only attempt to enter combat, his “Indian fierceness . . . thrust[] up its malign head like a snake,” and he thrills when he thinks of killing “so deeply was Septimius’s Indian nature of revenge and blood incorporated with that of more peaceful forefathers . . . that it made him not a patriot, but a murderer” (SF, 20, 38). This inability to be a single-minded “patriot” suggests a connection between Septimius and southern Confederates. Hawthorne describes him as “a traitor-enemy . . . because he was seeking to withdraw himself from the common bond and destiny” (149), just as the Confederates had tried to withdraw from the Union. Hawthorne argues that “utter selfishness . . . grows out of a peculiar privilege [that refuses to] share our good with all” (DR, 545). He identifies this “peculiar privilege” (which echoes the peculiar institution) with the elixir. And, by locating the source in an English lord turned Indian sachem, Hawthorne links the feudal with the savage and primitive.

This connection between the feudal and the savage allows Hawthorne to critique southern racial medievalism. Before the war, southern writers had tried to differentiate the southern and northern “races” by inventing a medieval history that claimed to trace Northerners to Anglo-Saxons, while Southerners derived from their conquerors, the noble Normans.40 Hawthorne’s visit to a prison for Confederate soldiers, which forms the centerpiece of “War-Matters,” ironizes this southern racial

40 McPherson, 197.
paradigm. In the prison, he does find a feudal people, but “peasants, and of a very low order; a class of people with whom our northern rural population has not a single trait in common.” As in *Septimius*, Hawthorne equates the feudal with the atavistic savage:

> There was one poor wretch, a wild beast of a man, at whom I gazed with greater interest than at his fellows; although I know not that each one of them, in their semi-barbarous moral state, might not have been capable of the same savage impulse that had made this particular individual a horror to all beholders. [He stomped to death a wounded Union soldier, who had begged his aid after a battle.]

The “savage impulse” possibly shared by all the Confederate soldiers recalls Septimius’s own violence and contrasts with the “great impulse” of patriots in battle. Hawthorne hoped that if the war did nothing else it

> will free this class of southern whites from a thraldom, in which they scarcely begin to be responsible beings. . . . [A northern victory would remove] the foul scurf that has overgrown their life, and keeps them in a state of disease and decrepitude, one of the chief symptoms of which is, that the more they suffer and are debased, the more they imagine themselves strong and beautiful (CWM, 429-31).

In other words, they are miserable peasants and savages fantasizing about their nobility.

> Although he believes that education and enlightenment might civilize many of these benighted Confederates (including even the “wild beast”), Hawthorne becomes disturbed by the Southerners’ savage “unpardonable sin,” which mixes masculine public violence with women and the domestic: “It seems possible . . . to forgive our chivalrous antagonists almost anything save such atrocities as these, which show something so grotesquely hideous in the Southern character that our benevolent impulses are entirely non-plussed” (NV, 443). By “atrocities,” he refers to the Southerners’ reported taking of human trophies: “ornaments neatly carved out of a
brave man’s bones, to hang at a lady’s watch-chain, or a skull to hold their whiskey and water, and to be passed from lip to lip of man and maiden at their social and family gatherings” (NV, 443). He returns repeatedly to these “atrocities” in both “Chiefly about War-Matters” and “Northern Volunteers,” making the issue the central theme of the latter. While the trophies are grisly enough, Hawthorne seems most horrified, not by the act of taking them, but rather by where they are sent—to the home. By importing this savagery into “their social and family gatherings,” they incorporate the “lady[5]” and the “maiden” in the violence and transform the domestic into a space that promulgates barbarism rather than civilization.

In “Northern Volunteers,” Hawthorne, like Holmes, attempts an explanation for this phenomenon, this “something so grotesquely hideous in the Southern character” in contrast with northern character. He blames a heterosociality that merges women with men’s violent contest, and these savage women then make the heterosocial relation and thus men savage. By contrast, the northern soldiers maintain a strong separation of spheres and a belief in true womanhood, which keeps them “better and braver.” While “chivalrous” Southerners send bones to their women, bringing them into the public conflict, northern men distinguish themselves by a “homely courtesy” that looks to the domestic and “make[s] room” for women on their way home and struggling through a crowd of soldiers:

“God bless you ladies,” cried one manly voice. “My mother was a woman.” And that word aptly expressed what we felt to be true of those fifteen thousand volunteers. They carried their home in their hearts, and remembered that they had women for their mothers and sisters; and on the march, in the camp, and on the battle-field, they are the better and braver for the recollection (NV, 444-45).
The northern volunteers are “better and braver” or more civilized because they “carried their home in their hearts”—bringing the “civility and kindness” (NV, 444) of the domestic sphere with them into the war, into the most violent of homosocial competitions. And, true women are inseparable from this domesticity. Yet Hawthorne continues:

But when we hear of a Southern soldier sending a trinket of human bone to his mother, or his sister, or his intended bride, the question naturally occurs, “Can she be a woman?” If not, it accounts for many peculiarities of the Southern female, and likewise of the Southern male (NV, 445).

The “peculiarities” or the “something so grotesquely hideous in the Southern character” stem from the “Southern female” not being “a woman.” If she is savage enough to bring the war into the home, rather than enabling the men to bring the home into the war, then that “accounts” for the barbarism.

Hawthorne, as we will see below, found the homosocial competition between men violent and humiliating. Throughout his career, Hawthorne, like Stowe, criticized a homosocial, patriarchal masculinity, its failure to sympathize with women, and its brutal humiliation of sensitive young men. He privileges the domestic and the relation between husband and wife as the height of sympathetic relation, but this relation is not androgynous and heterosocial in the way that Stowe’s ideal relations were. Unlike Stowe, Hawthorne “yearns for an older world of gentlemen” and his heterosociality remains deeply patriarchal. His heterosocial ideal remained “European,” that is, although he prioritized the community created in

41 David Leverenz argues that the oppression and humiliation of young men is the key horror in Hawthorne’s texts. Manhood and the American Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).

42 Robert Martin, 125.
the domestic relation over the public, he “had not relinquished traditional ideas of
femininity and a woman’s place.” His heterosociality thus exists within a traditional
patriarchy, which confines women to the domestic and requires a self-sacrificing true
womanhood, a helpmeet to a man.

While Stowe’s formulation of heterosociality posited a “real woman,” who
guided men both morally and intellectually, Hawthorne argues, “Woman’s intellect
should never give the tone to that of man, and even her morality is not exactly the
material for masculine virtue.” And again, while Stowe believed women’s presence
and participation would purify the public, Hawthorne recurred to old-fashioned
associations between women’s public-ness and sexual impurity. In his sketch of Anne
Hutchinson, he attacks what he calls “public women” in overtly sexual terms,
claiming that there is “a sort of impropriety in the display of woman’s naked mind to
the gaze of the world, with indications by which its inmost secrets may be searched
out.” He also figures public women as a threat to rather than protector of manhood
and American civilization. He worries that when “the domestic race . . . shall have
turned their hearts from the fireside” and become public and published authors, “the
ink-stained Amazons will expel their rivals”—i.e. male authors such as himself—and
“add a girlish feebleness to the tottering infancy of our literature.” Marking a
slippage between paradigms of ethnicity and gender, this female “race” almost
become infanticides—enfeebling (or poisoning) the infant American letters.

American Fiction (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1984) 203.
Hawthorne modified his views in later texts, particularly concerning the true woman’s moral authority, but he maintained his stance against transferring that authority into the public, even when the woman was at her most fulfilled and powerful. For instance, at the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator prophesies that the “angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman.” However, he immediately qualifies this statement and excludes any woman “stained with sin, bowed down with shame”—a woman such as Hester Prynne, who had been unchaste and publicly humiliated. Rather, this messianic woman must be “lofty, pure, and beautiful . . . showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!” As Scott Derrick has argued, Hawthorne interprets the “successful” woman’s life as one devoted to soothing suffering and holding together the community from her fireside. Even the “showing” or display remains retired from the public gaze: the “test” is her exhibition of a domestic “sacred love” between husband and wife.45 By contrast, by incorporating masculine, “public” elements into their characters, the savage “Southern female” inhabits the same gray area of race and gender confusion as the women writers.

The *Septimius* narratives instantiate this contrast between the clearly feminine, white, domestic northern woman and the mixed southern woman in the characters of the domestic Rose and the wild, half-Indian Aunt Nashoba. When Nashoba finds

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Septimius, now repenting his ferocity, standing over the body of his fallen enemy, she screeches at him to scalp the officer and creeps over the hill toward the body “with her Indian eyes glittering; stretching out her claws towards the poor victim; as if she would herself do what she bade Septimius to do.” Like the “Southern female” with her bone trinkets, Nashoba seeks a trophy from their enemy’s body, “appearing to be drawn by it, as such things have a singular attraction for wild beasts.” When she urges Septimius again to scalp him, he replies with the same question Hawthorne posed about the “Southern female”: “Hush, witch! are you woman at all!” He then mirrors the northern volunteer’s invocation of motherhood: “Look at the boy, and think that he had a mother!” This last has the desired civilizing effect: Nashoba’s “milder womanhood—the English womanhood . . . awoke in her, awoke the fireside influences and overcame the savage strain.” Under the renewed sway of the “fireside” or domestic, she pities the officer and rebukes Septimius for falling away from his white, English side: “it was a cruel thing to kill him, when the Indian has been tamed out of you so long” (SN, 242).

Rose, by contrast, is securely a true English woman, but her very purity and simplicity draw down contempt from the aristocratic savage, similar to the arrogance shown by the “Norman” South towards the “Anglo-Saxon” North. Nashoba, “drawing herself up with an odd assumption of superiority,” looks at Rose “out of her glittering Indian eyes like a sort of wild beast, making itself as humanlike as it could, and sitting down to tea—like the wolf in grandmother’s cap.” In a conjunction of the aristocratic and savage that Hawthorne explores further later in the narrative, she tells Rose, “You are not of our [hers and Septimius’s] blood, and are a tame thing. No
wonder you don’t like my tea [i.e. the basis for the elixir]” (SN, 206). She further
gripes that “Rose . . . is a pretty flower—yes a pretty little garden flower, for any
common man to wear in his breast. None of the witch blood in her veins—none of the
wild blood. She’d never ride on a broom stick, or brandish a tomahawk; but she has
her uses” (214).

One of these “uses” is as the narrative’s moral compass, pointing toward
civilization and away from savagery. In Septimius Felton, Rose remarks on the
frightening female savagery Hawthorne associates with the “Southern female”: “even
women grow almost fierce in these [war] times.” But they do so, Rose argues,
through a misperception that draws them backwards into a more primitive era with a
savage enemy—remembering

  the old times of the Indian wars, when the women were as much in danger of
death as the men, and so were almost as fierce as they, and killed men
sometimes with their own hands. But, women, now a days, ought to be
gentler; let the men be fierce, if they must—except you, and such as you,
Septimius (SF, 39).

Although we do not know why she states this last caveat, based on the rest of the
narrative, we can assume that she senses the savage potential in his wild blood.

Rose has an instinctive aversion to the poisonous and hybrid. She draws back
from the racially-suggestive “caudeleucia nigrissimus,” (SF, 78) the poison flower on
the grave: “for she was a person so natural that she hated poisonous things or
anything speckled especially, and did not indeed love strangeness” (SF, 91). Rose’s
aversion links racial mixture (the “speckled”) with poison, and the text reveals that
Septimius’s and Rose’s attempt to form a domestic heterosocial relationship is thus
doomed because they have incompatible blood and thus characters. Even as Rose
agrees to marry Septimius, “her secretest heart, her deepest womanhood, perhaps, did not consent; there was something in Septimius, in his wild, mixed nature, the monstrousness that had grown out of his hybrid race, the black infusions, too, that melancholic men had left there . . .” (SF, 40). She draws back from Septimius’s monstrous hybridity, his “blackness,” a reaction that mimics her revulsion at the beautiful, but poisonous flower. Although she admires Septimius for his Elsie-like “dark beauty,” his racial otherness is too alien and unsympathetic. Just as Elsie froze Bernard when she touched him, when Septimius “gave her the kiss of contract, her lips grew white” (SF, 40).

Ultimately, however, Septimius cannot accept her civilizing influence, not only because he is of mixed race, but because he is a professional—an intellectual—and too complicated for her simple sympathy. For a time, her “womanhood” calmed Septimius’s wild and asocial investigative impulses:

She reconciled him, in some secret way, to life as it was, to imperfection, to decay; without any help from her intellect, but through the influence of her character, she seemed, not to solve, but to smooth away problems that troubled him; merely by being, by womanhood, by simplicity, she interpreted God’s ways to him; she softened the stoniness that was gathering about his heart (56-7).

“Womanhood” here is associated with a “simplicity” distinct from “intellect.” Her “intellect” does not, as Hawthorne had worried, “give the tone to that of man.” But Septimius actually desires intellectual companionship, a heterosociality where a woman’s intellect could color his:

He felt as if he had taken to himself some thing, good and beautiful doubtless, in itself, but which might be the exchange for some more suited to himself that he must give up. The intellect, which was the more prominent part in Septimius, stirred and heaved, crying out vaguely that its own claims perhaps were ignored in this contract; Septimius had perhaps no right to love at all;
that if he did, it should have been a woman of another make, that could be his intellectual companion and helper (SF, 40-1).

He finds this intellectual “dark sympathy” in Sybil, who helps him concoct his elixir (SF, 151). Like him, she too is tainted. Though her race appears pure English, she has transgressed a gender boundary—becoming both a fallen and an avenging woman. That sexual experience and violent malevolence stains her, like Septimius’s Indian blood, with a “snakelike malignancy” (SN, 308). She has become that “speckled” poisonous flower “grown up out of the grave,” unnatural and “anomalous” like Septimius: “so simply unlike anything that had come before” (SF, 59). And, we find that the supposed flower is only the “semblance of a flower, but really a sensual growth out of a grave [which] converted the drink into a poison” (SF, 190). The “sensual” fallen woman cannot save or civilize and had only been sent “to eat into [Septimius’s] life and distil poison into it” (SF, 188). Although “Northern Volunteers” evades an explicit catalog of the southern woman’s “peculiarities,” Sybil’s sexual indiscretion and lust for revenge suggest what those might be.

With Sybil, Septimus explores the “peculiarities” of the Southerner’s “intended bride,” but Septimius forges his strongest sympathy and deepest heterosocial identification with his mother-figure and teacher, Aunt Nashoba. Their relationship approaches the educating, matriarchal mother-son bond found in Stowe, but the text bases their heterosocial sympathy upon a shared racial “evil,” making a dark mockery of Stowe’s ideal. Septimius is linked to Nashoba “by the ties of hereditary peculiarities, such as existed between himself and no other human being, since the herb-woman was the last of that wild and evil blood from which they sprang” (SN, 435-36). Her maternal “reminiscence of [Septimius’s] childhood” when
“you used to run to me . . . and put your little hand in mine” makes him realize that “there had been a peculiar tie between him and this old woman—something in the depths of character and idiosyncrasy that made them continually understand many of one another’s peculiarities” (SN, 424). Note the repetition of “peculiar” and “peculiarities” echoing those of the southern man and woman. (Their unspoken kinship and shared “idiosyncrasy” also mirrors the “idiosyncratic” communication between Elsie and Ol’ Sophy.) Their relationship, however, violates the gender hierarchy that Hawthorne endorses. Nashoba, though untutored, gives the tone to Septimius’s intellect—educating him in her ancient herbal science. She teaches him “the secret of my drink . . . all [its] herbs and mysteries . . . where they grow, and how to gather them” (SN, 292). But this maternal education is a perverse tutelage in poison. Furthermore, Hawthorne establishes the sympathy between Nashoba and Septimius as an aspect of their shared race, a race that is “monstrous” and passing away. Septimius makes this clear when he begs the dying Nashoba not to leave him because, “I shall be so lonely! We are the last of our race” (SN, 424-25). She replies, “it is a dismal world enough for those that are out of place in it, and who can never find their like, such as we of Indian blood, or of a strange new blood made out of two races, and so that we are a kind of monster in the world” (SN, 425). In a world in which “a great impulse [was] lifting up a whole people,” their savagery, their “strange” racial and gender confusion, like that of Richard and Elsie Venner, is “out of place.”

Unlike Holmes, however, Hawthorne links Nashoba’s and Septimius’s monstrous heterosociality to professional masculinity—showing that Holmes’s elite
homosociality is just as poisonous and race-mixing. Hawthorne depicts androgynous heterosociality and professional homosociality as equally poisonous. This argument plays out in the equation drawn between Aunt Nashoba and Doctor Portsoaken, who are shown as two sides of the same coin, “professional rival[s]” (SN, 423), both saturated or “soaked” with their own concoctions and both considered poisoners and poisonous. Nashoba appears “so yellow and unwholesome . . . she seemed as if she had been gathering poison and mischief all the days of her life, and that now she was as full of it as a toad” (401). The narrator equates the “slow poison” produced by years of drinking her wild elixir with her wild race: She had “a skin as yellow as gold, being either the hue of her Indian intermixed blood or else the effect of her herb-drink” (SN, 409). While Nashoba’s poisonous mixed blood makes her monstrous, the doctor too is associated with a poisonous “monster” of suspicious southern origin. In a web over his desk crouches his giant pet spider, “of some South American breed” (SF, 133), and Septimius wonders if the arachnid “were not the type of Doctor Portsoaken himself, who fat and bloated as the spider, seemed to be at the centre of some dark contrivance” (SF, 133-34). The spider also produces “a certain potent and piercing poison,” analogous to the doctor’s penetrating and violating gaze (SF, 139).

In most antebellum fiction, doctors and scientists appear as idealized men, but Hawthorne portrays them as selfish sadists, a kind of modern throwback to the savage. Typically, fictional doctors in antebellum America appear as men who can truly empathize with embattled heroines, men who can claim to be sympathetic, civilized, and progressive and who ally themselves with women against tyrannical
men. Even fiction critical of the new professionals associates them with a heterosocial alliance pushing forward the civilized and modern. For instance, the figure of Hiram Scribe in Melville’s “I and My Chimney” is a thinly-veiled Dr. Holmes, deployed by the narrator’s wife and daughters to convince him to update their home by knocking down the antiquated phallus (chimney) with which he identifies his patriarchal authority. Yet Hawthorne, by contrast, often conflates doctors and scientists with the sadistic old-style patriarchs. Critics argue that Hawthorne vilifies doctors because he sees them as prying coldly into secrets and thus violating human sympathy. The doctor’s “inscrutable inevitable eye” tortures and oppresses its object, committing “the unpardonable sin . . . a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into its dark depths, not with a hope of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity.”

Holmes clears Bernard of blame in Elsie’s death. He poisons her by accident, and, besides, it purifies or “cures” her. And he insists on Bernard’s capacity for great


48 Joyce Warren argues, “If the worst fate according to Hawthorne is to lose one’s place in the chain of human sympathies, the worst crime is to violate those human ties by using another human being for the furtherance of one’s own selfish purpose.” And that is the unpardonable sin. (220).


sympathy. Hawthorne, however, revels in the irony of what he recasts as seeming sympathy covering the “cold philosophical curiosity” that kills. When Septimius tries to cure Nashoba’s sudden illness by secretly stewing the grave flower in her drink,

he was subconscious that he was trying a bold experiment, and that he had taken this poor old woman to be the medium of it, in the hope, of course, that it would turn out well; yet with other views than her interest in the matter. What was the harm of that? Medical men, no doubt, are always doing so,—and he was a medical man for the time. Then why was he so pale? (116-17).

Hawthorne reveals the “subconscious” sadism of the “medical man” and his acts of purification, the greedy self-interest (not “her interest”) and seeking for dominion, which Holmes’s novel had blithely elided.51

By contrast with Holmes’s cold clinical sympathy, Hawthorne invites his readers to develop an “‘apprehensive sympathy,’ [which] yields the instinctive, spiritual, even visceral response that confirms what Hawthorne cannot, will not, or dares not articulate, the secrets buried in his texts.” But this form of investigation into secrets is “sympathetic penetration,” akin to the “mutually interpenetrative consciousness” and “clairvoyance” that Holmes reserved for the homosocial company of elite men. Hawthorne, however, “finally forbears to join” this “idealized . . . union” and “refuses to submit to the same leveling.”52

The reason for this coyness may lie in his attitude toward masculinity, which equates the phallic gaze with brutality and sees “male rivalry as a . . . basic source of ___________________________

51 Hawthorne makes similar assertions about the selfishness of doctors and their human experimentation in earlier short fiction such as “The Haunted Quack” and “The Birthmark.”

52 Gordon Hutner, Secrets and Sympathy: Forms of Disclosure in Hawthorne’s Novels (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 6, 8-9; Holmes; See also Roy Male for Hawthorne’s abstracted version of sympathy stemming from “a fundamental belief in the universe as a coherent, living unit” (141). “Hawthorne and the Concept of Sympathy,” PMLA 68 (1953): 138-49.
anxiety” and “unceasing competition . . . ‘the agony of the universal struggle to wrest
the means of existence from a host of greedy competitors.’” David Leverenz argues
that Hawthorne “builds his tales around spectacles of public humiliation, as strong
men collectively try to shame weaker, yet nobler individuals.” The analytical gaze
acts as the essential mechanism of this spectacular humiliation: “Analysis comes to
feel like an act of dominance, very male, heartlessly violating the fragile quasi-female
sympathy we should be nurturing in ourselves.” Hawthorne’s texts do not typically
depict that “quasi-female” or “penetrative sympathy” within a homosocial context,
while they portray the purveyors of the clinical gaze and thus of male-male
humiliation as the chief villains.

Thus, while Bernard’s professional mentors protect him, when Septimius
reaches out to make a homosocial and professional connection with a wise doctor and
rejects the traditional heterosocial domestic, it opens him up to manipulation and
ultimately assassination. Septimius indulges in “cold egotism” and declares:

My thoughts . . . are of a kind that can have no help from any one; if from any,
it could only be from some wise, long-studied and experienced scientific man,
who could enlighten me as to the bases and foundations of things . . .
Methinks these are not to be taught to me by a girl touched in the wits.

Rose extrapolates from this statement about Sybil to herself—the real target of the
statement: “[D]rawing imperceptibly away,” she responds, “I fear . . . that no woman
can help you much. You despise woman’s thought, and have no need of her

53 Leverenz 4; Martin 63 and quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne, The American Notebooks, ed.

54 Leverenz, 4, 231.
“affection” (65). Septimius’s desire for a homosocial intellectual apprenticeship, as well as for a heterosocial “intellectual companionship,” leads him to “despise” Rose’s womanly limitations and the domestic “affection” she could bring him. By rejecting a grounding in proper domestic sympathy, Septimius makes himself vulnerable to homosocial domination. Soon after his alienation from Rose, he meets Dr. Portsoaken and falls almost unwillingly into conversation with him: “there was a sort of charm, or rather fascination . . . a great deal of magnetism in this queer man” (74-5). The doctor’s “fascination” and “magnetism” recall Elsie’s similar traits and associate the “queer man” with the other “fascinating” elements in the novel—poisonous women (Sybil and the flower). In addition, his “magnetism” evokes “animal magnetism” or mesmerism, and Hawthorne loathed the mesmerist because he believed he “violated the individual soul” in an apotheosis of the “unpardonable sin.” He links this mesmeric influence to Septimius’s homosocial (and perhaps veiled homosexual) desire—explaining that another reason for his fascination with Portsoaken might be that “Septimius had for a long while held little intercourse with men; none whatever with men who could comprehend him” (75). That desire to be comprehended by another man, again reminiscent of Holmes’s “mutually interpenetrative consciousness,” only allows Portsoaken to con Septimius. While Dr. Kittredge supplied Bernard with an antidote to Elsie’s poison, Dr. Portsoaken teaches him how to brew poison for his own mistaken suicide.

The *Septimius* manuscripts also indict the professional advice given by Holmes’s doctors as cold, selfish, and savage under its veneer of civilization. When Bernard wants to solve the mystery of Elsie, he consults the Professor, who sends him a letter full of good advice. But the scientist’s epistle that Septimius studies in his investigation produces the same horrific effects attributed to Elsie. Just as Richard wondered, “What was the matter with her eyes, that they sucked your life out of you in that strange way?” (199), Hawthorne’s narrator asks, “What was the matter with this document, that the young man’s youth perished out of him, as he read?” And just as the touch of Elsie’s hand “chilled the blood running through [Bernard’s] heart” (423), the document cast a “cold spell” and reproduced the “icy hand” of the writer “so that the heart was chilled out of the reader” (SF, 102-03). And yet this icy alchemist gives out the same advice that the warm Dr. Kittredge gives Bernard about Elsie: “. . . shun woman . . . If thou love her, all is over” (SF, 105). But when Bernard does refuse to love her, “[i]t was all over with poor Elsie” (423). In Hawthorne’s text, the refusal to love woman is attacked as a monstrous selfishness. The narrator ultimately dismisses the document as counseling “a selfish withdrawal from all sympathy with poor suffering mankind” (SN, 323). By using language similar to Holmes’s, he associates this selfishness with Holmes’s heroes.

Furthermore, Hawthorne equates the scientist’s supposed high intellect with a gross and low materialism. Holmes had been accused of a certain earthiness in his writing. One review (written too late to influence Hawthorne’s manuscript) complains that *Elsie Venner* exudes “an atmosphere of carnality . . . [and] in Dr. Holmes’s treatment of women, the influence, the physical influence of sex is very perceptible
In similar fashion, Hawthorne seems to be taking issue with the Professor’s pragmatism and carnality, identifying it with the “lower . . . nature” that supposedly imbued Elsie. The document was created by a “shrewd” man

originally greatly gifted, capable of high things, but gone utterly astray, partly by its own subtility [sic], partly by yielding to the temptations of the lower part of its nature, by yielding the spiritual to a keen sagacity of lower things, until it was quite fallen; and yet fallen in such a way that it seemed, not only to itself, but to mankind, not fallen at all, but wise and good, and fulfilling all the ends of intellect in such a life as ours, and proving moreover that earthly life was good, and all that the development [sic] of our nature demanded (SF, 103-04).

Hawthorne targets Holmes’s very physical, optimistic, “earthly” philosophy. But instead of seeing this approach as “humanizing” and civilizing as Holmes intended, Hawthorne sees it as deluded, deceptive, and ultimately “fallen.” And most damning of all, Hawthorne weds the intellect with the brute, the philosopher’s “subtility” melds with the “lower part of its nature.”

In the final insult to Holmes’s professional man, Hawthorne thus transforms the doctor, the civilizer and racial purifier of Elsie Venner, into a hybrid of the intellectual and the brute. No longer simply an ally of women and a mixer of gender, the man of science becomes a racial atavism. Hawthorne melds the primitive and the scientific—making a “natural Indian doctor” of Septimius (SN, 292). Furthermore, he insistently connects the primitive and the aristocratic/ scientific through the metaphor of the elixir:

Here was, in one case, a drink suggested, as might be supposed, to a primitive people by something similar to that instinct by which the brute creation recognizes the medicaments suited to its needs . . . and here, again, was a

56 Quoted in Tilton, 258.
drink contrived by the utmost skill of a great civilized philosopher, searching
the whole field of science for his purposes; and these two drinks proved to be
in all essential particulars, identically the same (SF, 87).

A “primitive people,” the “brute creation,” and the “great civilized philosopher”
produce the “same” drink: a poison. And again, ironizing the southern claims to
feudal nobility by conflating the Indian sachem and English lord/alchemist and
making him the source of the potion, Hawthorne fuses savagery with aristocracy.

The professional man thus partakes too much of the primitive to differentiate
himself from the savage Southerner or solve the problem of southern character.

“[S]ubtility” and savagery join in an intellectual, race-mixing stew. It is too
complicated. The ideal man for these times of conflict is a simpler man—not
primitive—but Homeric. While Holmes argued that “the horse-subduer and hero
[who] were almost synonymous in simpler times” are now tyrants and savages,
Hawthorne describes a young cavalryman as an ideal of the white race and the male
gender. The young man’s “face had a healthy hue” and his “daily business to ride a
horse and handle a sword” made the “hardy virtues flourish,” while “the nonsense
dies like a wilted weed” (CWM, 421). The “wilted weed” resonates with Septimius’s
“sensual growth,” while the “nonsense” recalls his scientific investigations.

Hawthorne’s description echoes the advice of Septimius’s minister: “Let [the war]
absorb you while it lasts; and come out of it, at its close, your mind cleared of all
rubbish, made simpler, by simple and high emotions, religious; by trust in God” (SN,
302). In other words, he should simplify his mind, rid himself of the intellectual
“rubbish,” and replace his complicated questions with “trust.” But once again, like the
Southerners, he cannot achieve simple virtue because of “the peculiarity of the thing that absorbed him, apart from other men” (SN, 302).

This heroic simplification requires giving up the Brahmin intellect and sensibility that Holmes considers ideal for the professional man. When Robert Garfield’s grandfather worries that Americans “never shall be able to stand against old England” because “the race is dwindling away . . . and giving up its strength and sinew for a little sprightliness,” Septimius responds by valuing that “dwindling” (SN, 214). He argues that Americans “may gain . . . more delicate nerves, and finer sensibilities . . . a capacity for deeper insight into things not of sense; so that, ceasing to be so apt for war, we shall become apt for higher things, and be able to conquer warriors too” (215). Septimius’s description of the new American “race” mimics Holmes’s portrait of the intellectual Brahmin and his way to power. While Holmes argued that Brahmins needed to supplement their refined intellects with physical hardihood, he never suggested that they abandon their intellectual progress. And, at least in *Elsie Venner*, Bernard’s superior “insight” helped him “conquer warriors”—or the rural bully and the wild horseman Richard Venner. But Septimius’s speech is interrupted by British soldiers, one of whom steals a kiss from Rose while he stands helpless and fuming, and thus eviscerates his argument. The way to power for Hawthorne does not lie with the intellectual.

Robert’s argument for the simpler manly ideal, however, is born out. He reclaims an English heritage—not the feudal and aristocratic Englishness associated

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with Septimius, but a John Bull, broad-chested purity: “the courage, and strength of
grip . . . [the] manly quality that our English forefathers had” (SN, 215). When Robert
returns from the war on a brief furlough to marry Rose, Septimius is astonished at his
transformation. Robert has lost

his loutish, rustic air and deportment, developing his figure, seeming to make
him taller, setting free the manly graces that lurked within his loutish frame—
not less was the effect on his mind and moral nature, giving freedom of ideas,
a simple perception of great thoughts, a free natural chivalry; so that the
knight, the Homeric warrior, the hero, seemed to be here . . . in this young
New England rustic; and all that history has given, and hearts throbbed, and
sighed, and gloried over . . . might be repeated, perhaps, in the life and death
of this familiar friend and playmate of his, whom he had valued not over
highly” (SN, 158).

Although it has been claimed that “there are no . . . heroes in Hawthorne’s fiction,”

the Union soldier and his allegorical incarnation, Robert Garfield, come close.

Hawthorne’s ideal man, like Holmes’s, engages in an ironic triumph over those who
underestimated him. But in this instance the scientist failed to value the simple Robert
“highly.” The intellectual manly ideal that embraces complication and progress is
surprised by the success of a masculinity that works as a repetition—not a rejection—
of history. But the greatest irony is that this repetition does not fall back into and
merge with savagery, but the professional ideal embodied in Septimius does. The
New England man thus throws off the “enervating effects of centuries of civilization”
by “following out their native instincts of destruction, precisely in the spirit of
Homer’s heroes” (CWM, 421). Yet Septimius must return to a feudal English estate
and hide himself away.

58 Warren, 190.
Toward the end of “Chiefly about War-Matters,” however, the ideal young men drop away, and a different patriarchal vision of historical manhood walks on stage. At a hotel in Virginia, Hawthorne remarks on a number of “elderly men with frilled shirt-fronts . . . the fashion of which adornment passed away from among people of this world, half-a-century ago.” Even further, he begins to suspect that they may be icons from the Revolutionary generation: “It is as if one of Stuart’s portraits were walking abroad.” He continues:

I see no way of accounting for this, except that the trouble of the times, the impiety of the traitors, and the peril of our sacred Union and Constitution, have disturbed, in their honored graves, some of the venerable fathers of the country, and summoned them forth to protest against the meditated and half-accomplished sacrilege (CWM, 439).

Although this passage is brief, it seems to have sparked the idea for a different “patriarchal” solution. Sometime after his trip to the battlefields, Hawthorne left Septimius (now abruptly named Hilliard Veren) sitting on a rock unsure of what to do, and instead the author switched to a totally new work, The Dolliver Romance. This new narrative discards the darkly doubting Septimius and the Homeric Robert for “Doctor Dolliver, a worthy person of extreme antiquity” (449). The “patriarch” is determined to “bring his forlorn shadow into the summer day that was meant for younger folks” not for selfish reasons, but rather because his orphaned great-granddaughter needs his care and protection. Like “the venerable fathers of the country,” he too is summoned from the grave to care for vulnerable offspring and wears clothing “half-a-century” old (454). But while Septimius and Dolliver’s deceased grandson were “distinguished by an experimental and inventive tendency,” Dolliver “claimed to be nothing more than an apothecary” only reproducing the same
ancient and harmless curatives he had been trained to make in his youth (458). And even then, the young Dolliver “had shrunk from acquaintance” with the “secrets of [his master’s most dangerous] prescriptions” and “declined to enter the medical profession” because of his “scrupulosity” about playing fast and loose with life and death (461). His more scientific grandson had produced an elixir of immortality, probably the one that poisoned him when he swallowed a “heroic” dose. But when the cautious Dolliver finds what he supposes is a cordial, he sips it judiciously, so that he can grow young enough to take care of the child, orphaned by her father’s rash and selfish act. This conservatism about preserving the body’s constitutions parallels the conservative function of the fathers protecting “sacred Union and Constitution.”

Unfinished at the time of Hawthorne’s death in 1864, the manuscript of The Dolliver Romance rested on his coffin during his funeral service. Nevertheless, the fragment makes an odd epitaph for the author, one that, on the surface, seems markedly inconsistent with his other work. Its portrait of the lovable chemist contrasts with Hawthorne’s previous creations—sadistic Faustian scientists and malicious patriarchs. But I suggest that Hawthorne created Dolliver as another possible solution to the problem of savagery, a more direct refutation of poisonous scientific and primitive selfishness, and an even more humane alternative than Holmes’s professional or his own Homeric hero. In Hawthorne’s conception, the Southerner was not simply a throwback to the primitive but rather a most modern conjunction of

the savage and the modern professional man. Similarly, in his view, the androgynous heterosociality advocated by authors such as Stowe ultimately blended with the elite homosociality embraced by Holmes. Both options—the heterosocial savage and the homosocial professional—produce the same disorder. To better counteract them both, Hawthorne finally posits a historical manhood capable of returning America to a domestic heterosociality and re-establishing the nation’s racial and gender order more effectively than any modern solution.

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60 For his horror of the fathers, see Erlich. For his Faustian preoccupation, see William Bysshe Stein, *Hawthorne’s Faust: A Study of the Devil Archetype* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1953).
Antebellum female poisoner narratives offer more than salacious whodunits. Rather, these texts illuminate a large and important terrain of antebellum U. S. literature and culture—specifically, how this society conducted a transformative conversation about U. S. “civilization” across diverse media. The female poisoner covered extensive ideological and textual ground. The figure appeared in multiple forms—often taking on complex racial and gender configurations and equally cosmopolitan geographic associations, generally with imperial overtones. At the same time, the female poisoner appeared in a wide array of print media that reached multiple publics with divergent levels of literacy, some not in English. Yet through all its mutations, the female poisoner drew with it a thread of argument and became a medium through which the antebellum public conducted a conversation about key ideological issues. Through the poisonous woman, Americans discussed how to construct proper versions of gender, race, nation, and empire—in short, which configurations did they believe should be invested with the cultural authority to shape U. S. “civilization.”

The female poisoner has a long literary history of traversing different media and social strata, from the theological Eve to the folkloric snake wives to the medicalized poisonous woman to the mythic Lamia to the Keatsian *Lamia*. When antebellum authors turned to the poisonous woman, they found a discourse rich in inter-textual possibilities. The female poisoner thus gave them a means to repackage cultural materials to engage
with different audiences and rhetorical goals. In similar fashion, I too have used the female poisoner to follow antebellum cross-media textual adaptation. By gathering a body of material around a single figure, I have been able to trace continuities in rhetoric between authors and between diverse media such as non-fictional ephemera, ephemera that claimed a space between fact and sensation, and openly fictional or self-consciously literary works. Charting this rhetorical movement has revealed how antebellum fiction digested other cultural materials and how these non-fiction texts relied in turn on fictional conventions.

My dissertation has thus tracked the course of the female poisoner and the conversation it carried as the figure migrated back and forth from ephemeral works such as newspapers, published trial transcripts, and sensational “true” pamphlets to popular but more permanent literary works by influential authors of the American Renaissance such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. I have examined how each genre, each writer, and also (when reader response evidence was available) each public reacted to earlier female poisoner narratives and how they altered the character and story to produce contending arguments about identity and authority. Furthermore, I have tracked how these arguments shifted over time and how the female poisoner was manipulated to meet the rhetorical demands of changing circumstances—most especially the escalating sectional crisis between the North and the South in the 1850s. I have followed these developments between writers in a literary community as they continued their conversation around the poisoner and also within the careers of single authors as they responded to shifting political concerns and developed new uses for the poisoner.
Tracking the development of antebellum female poisoner has also revealed an overall path of transmission, which organizes the dissertation. In chapter one, the dissertation analyzed newspapers and trial transcripts, and then in chapter two it traced the female poisoner from these non-fiction publications into a sensational sub-genre, which I have called the “true” female poisoner pamphlet. These bizarre texts cobbled together trial transcripts and criminal biographies with older crime genres such as the last confession and even the execution sermon. Like the accounts of real poisoners, the “true” female poisoner pamphlets claimed to be absolutely accurate. Nevertheless, in spite of or perhaps because of their generic strangeness, these texts formed an important bridge between newspapers and legal media and later literary depictions of the female poisoner. They also further transformed the female poisoner into a figure of liminality and amplified the possibilities for interrogating or playing at the boundaries of genders, races, and nations. While the trials focused on the poisoner’s gender-crossing potential, the pamphlets also cast her as a picara, who traversed national, regional, and ethnic boundaries between forms of civilization. When Stowe (chapter three) and Holmes and Hawthorne (chapter four) later drew on this mixed version of the female poisoner, they transformed the pamphlets’ eclectic forms and epistemological titillations into more fully-theorized and programmatic arguments about how the boundaries should be shaped. Their configurations of the female poisoner, especially Stowe’s, in turn radically influenced the narratives the pamphlets told. The pamphlets thus brought the female poisoner debate—and what more sophisticated writers such as Stowe did with it—to audiences who may have avoided the more permanent literary works because of literacy levels, economic means, or personal tastes.
In order to analyze such a diverse body of texts, this study has drawn upon and contributed to scholarship in a range of fields, including popular culture, sentimental and sensational literature, print media or history of the book, masculinity studies, women’s history, and studies of empire, race, and nation. First, by recovering the mechanics of a cross-media conversation, this project reveals how particular antebellum technologies of print shaped multiple versions of race, gender, nation, and empire. Conversely, the dissertation explores how the conversation about these issues of identity and authority helped drive the development of various media and interactions between reading publics. Second, recovering this larger print context exposes the broader debates that engaged particular writers. Focusing on how writers were working to solve these society-wide theoretical problems clarifies certain nagging literary puzzles, such as Stowe’s gender politics or Hawthorne’s vision of empire. Third, while scholarship in many of these fields has argued for continuities between ideologies of gender, race, nation, and empire, tracking the female poisoner arguments through diverse media exposes a specific narrative for how the connections developed between these constructions and how and why rhetorics and arguments about one were applied to another. Finally, while this dissertation conceptualized female poisoner literature within a public sphere frame focused on debate, its analysis of antebellum print culture indicates how a history of the book approach can illuminate a public sphere frame. Further research along these lines into the material practices and readership of antebellum print ephemera promises to open up rich new opportunities for mapping the material and ideological connections between ephemeral and more permanent literary productions. This approach could offer a powerful tool for reading nineteenth-century U. S. literature—enabling scholars to sketch
a more detailed picture of how literary communities and conversations formed and how these networks shaped the texts they produced.


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---. 27 Aug. 1840.

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