Working in the Diminutive: Women Professionals in Postbellum U.S. Literature (1861-1905)

by

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For Felix,

my second-newest achievement.
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Abstract

Around the time of the American Civil War, middle-class women began entering full-time employments outside the home at greater rates than ever before. In order to be perceived positively by men and non-working women, these women professionals had to frame their work as unthreatening to heteronormative patriarchal structures placing women exclusively in the home and men in employments outside it. Straddling ideals of “True Womanhood,” which emphasized meekness and domesticity, among other traits, and “Real Womanhood, which suggested women could be more robust without loss of femininity, women set the parameters for proper employments and created new niches of work middle-class women could perform without perceived losses to their femininity or domestic acumen, and by extension, class and social status. Further, uses of specifically feminine language such as female diminutive terms like “authoress” and “doctress” kept women professionals in separate categories from their male counterparts; this was often an intentional move women made to seem less threatening. This work done to sanction middle-class women’s non-domestic work can thus be seen as a sort of compromise between true financial and personal independence and continued social acceptability, a compromise that helped a large group of middle-class women find both success in professions and positive portrayals in novels and periodical literature of the later nineteenth century.
Introduction: Defining the Diminutive

In the 1980 film 9 to 5 starring Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, and Dolly Parton, three secretaries, in the absence of their male employer (whom they have kidnapped), implement several changes to their workplace that improve morale and productivity in the mostly woman-staffed office. Of these important changes, such as more flexible work hours, daycare availability, and an equal pay initiative, only the equal pay initiative is struck down by the company’s Chairman of the Board (Fonda). Thirty-seven years later, equal pay for equal work initiatives continue to be proposed in Congress, and a number of states have recently introduced or passed laws to the same effect. Attempts to win equal pay for equal work were being made long before 1980. Economist Virginia Penny, for example, advocated for women’s fair wages at least as early as 1870 (Think 43). What is perhaps most notable about these attempts is not that they have existed so long, but that they have not yet fully succeeded in the U.S. after over 150 years.

But why did women’s attempts at equitable working conditions and fair pay not succeed in the nineteenth century, considering the large number of women entering the workplace as well as the popularity of books about their possible employments and fair payment? My project

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1 Congress proposed a “Fair Pay Act” in April of 2017 “To amend the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 to prohibit discrimination in the payment of wages on account of sex, race, or national origin, and for other purposes” (H.R. 2095). This bill has not yet been voted on by either branch of Congress. In her campaign for President of the United States, Hillary Clinton promised to “work to close the pay gap” between men and women, especially focusing on “women of color” (“Women’s Rights and Opportunity”). Although the 1963 Equal Pay Act was enacted “to prohibit discrimination on account of sex in the payment of wages,” the need for updates to this law has been made clear by the number of more recent discussions of fair wages for both sexes (“Equal Pay Act of 1963”). California and Oregon, among other states, have recently passed their own equal pay acts to help close the so-called “wage gap” between men and women (“California Equal Pay Act,” “Oregon Equal Pay Law”).
consider the question of women wishing to be paid for work mostly outside their homes, and the ways they were depicted in both popular and now canonical literature at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. While it was becoming increasingly acceptable toward the turn of the twentieth century for men to seek wealth by virtually any means, a number of obstacles continued to hinder women from attaining professional success. Many of these obstacles were not physical or legal ones, but were rather built by social and cultural taboos that, in some forms, continue to exist today. In 1898, near the end of this study’s period of interest, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published Women and Economics, a book detailing the ways in which women had, until the late nineteenth century, been confined to their reproductive roles, to the extent that “so utterly has the status of woman been accepted as a sexual one that it has remained for the woman’s movement of the nineteenth century to devote much contention to the claim that women are persons” (49). Although she acknowledges that positive changes are beginning to take place, Gilman observes the phenomenon in which “in spite of her supposed segregation to maternal duties, the human female the world over, works at extra-maternal duties for hours enough to provide her with an independent living, and then is denied independence on the ground that

2 Several critics, some citing Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, note a change in views of men’s acquisition of wealth from “the deadliest of sins” to a “calling,” which also meant that financial success could be seen “as a sign of God’s favour” (Mukherjee 11). Cawelti points to three traditions of the “self-made man” including the Protestant ethic, adding a “second strand” that “indorsed such secular qualities as initiative, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and forcefulness” as well as a third “more complex” strand “tied to individual fulfilment and social progress rather than wealth or status” (Cawelti 5). None of these traditions include women, and in fact, as Angel Kwolek-Folland notes in Engendering Business, Most economic analyses argue that families achieve middle-class status when a man has sufficient education or training in white-collar work to support a wife and children without their additional paid labor. Class status thereby assumes a gendered material base derived from the value of a man’s wage. (Kwolek-Folland 11)

An argument can be made, then, that men’s economic and social statuses were lowered when their wives or female peers sought paid employments.
motherhood prevents her working” (20)! Gilman’s use of the word “independence” is primarily monetary, here and elsewhere in her *Women and Economics*, in that marriage or motherhood do not automatically preclude it. Indeed, one of Gilman’s primary claims is that marriage and motherhood need not hinder financial independence, even though they tend to stand as arguments against pursuing it.

Gilman’s writing may be considered progressive even for the turn of the century, but the issue of women’s financial independence was not a new one in 1898. Ann Douglas, in *The Feminization of American Culture*, argues that in the nineteenth century, “the ideal woman whom the counselors and educators wished to shape was to exert moral pressure on a society in whose operations she had little part, and to spend money—or have it spent on her—in an economy she could not comprehend” (Douglas 60). Douglas spends considerable effort asserting that women and clergy sabotaged their own social and economic progress by reverting to a separate-sphere “anti-intellectual sentimentalism” that ensured “the continuation of male hegemony in different guises” (Douglas 13). Douglas’s argument, that women essentially kept themselves subjected by refusing to enter so-called “masculine” creative realms, has been critiqued many times since the book’s publication in 1977.³

More recently, Lori Merish, in *Sentimental Materialism*, similarly paints nineteenth-century women’s roles as those of consumers rather than producers, but argues against Douglas’s view, asserting that

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³ While not directly attacking Douglas’s work, Joseph Fichtelberg, in his *Critical Fictions*, marks his work as “differing from a long-standing scholarly tendency to treat sentimental writing as a refuge, a protest, or an occult expression of the market and its consequences” and names Douglas as one scholar exhibiting such a tendency (Fichtelberg 2). Jane Tompkins has Douglas in mind when she says “centering on the home, for [the Stowes], is not a way of indulging in narcissistic fantasy, as critics have argued” (Tompkins 143) and she points to Douglas’s “anti-sentimentalist position” as her point of departure from Douglas and other similar critics (Tompkins 217, n. 3).
Douglas deterministically construes the emergence of female consuming as an inevitable response to female boredom, an insignificant activity women engaged in to fill the domestic vacuum created by industrialism. Reductively presenting women’s consumption (and sentimentalism itself) as a reflex of changes in economic production, Douglas fails to historicize the economic and gender relations she describes, and radically simplifies the ideological complexity of mass culture. (Merish 17)

Whether women’s consumption in the nineteenth century was “inevitable” or involved “ideological complexity,” it is clear that it was a major facet of their identities (Merish 17). For my purposes, the key to both Douglas’s and Merish’s arguments involves their assertions that femininity in the form of idealized domestic womanhood, or a “separate spheres” ideal, was being inextricably tied to consumerism in the nineteenth century; this consumption was painted as antithetical to purportedly masculine production, thus hindering women from entering most professions outside the home.

My project considers women working within such a hostile context, maneuvering and manipulating “separate spheres” to their own relative advantages. The “separate spheres” ideal is, in several ways, antithetical to women working. First, it depends on a heteronormative, nuclear, middle-class family with one (male) income earner. According to the well-entrenched “cult of true womanhood” that was just starting to weaken around the Civil War, a middle-class woman’s role was based on her “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152). Working outside of the home for money threatened all four tenets of this ideal; therefore, women wishing to do so could either renounce the cult (and often their social circles, families, and

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4 The women being discussed are mainly white and of the educated middle-class.
middle-class statuses in the process), or find ways to convince others that their employment did not, in fact, seriously conflict with the virtues of true womanhood. One successful method may have been to adopt the “Real Womanhood” ideal as an alternative to that of “true womanhood.” In her 1989 book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, Frances Cogan proposes an alternate to the “true womanhood” ideal, suggesting that a large swath of the female population between 1840 and 1880 was more interested in “intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage” than in Welter’s “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Cogan 4). Cogan’s view is not that women rejected the idea of “separate spheres” completely, but that their “unique sphere” was “vastly extended and magically swollen past the dimensions of anything meant by that term to devotees of competing True Womanhood” (Cogan 4). Cogan’s ideal serves largely as a happy medium between the more conservative “true womanhood” and the more radical, and less common, complete renunciation of “true womanhood” and “separate spheres” ideals; for this reason “Real Womanhood” fits well into this study, functioning as an ideological framework for understanding women who wished to pursue employments “as a woman,” as Cogan puts it (Cogan 5, original emphasis). This latter category of women, by continuing to conform to most of the prevailing ideals of middle-class white femininity, could in some cases find financial success, without loss of social or class status, working in non-domestic employments. Moreover, because of the number and range of women falling into this latter category, as much or more progress for women’s independence was arguably made in these subtle, gradual ways as was made by the radical renouncers of the “cult of true womanhood.”

However, the women depicted in this project were not necessarily interested in furthering women’s progress; for the most part they sought individual financial independence
similar to that of the so-called “self-made man.” This work began with my interest in the nineteenth century’s all-pervasive “self-made man” ideal, especially in terms of the ways it might transfer to women. It was already clear to me that the term “self-made man” referred mostly to an impossible fantasy; the idea that one could succeed financially purely based on “luck and pluck,” to borrow the title of one of Horatio Alger’s many notorious novels of self-making, masked the fact that Americans were decreasingly financially mobile as the nineteenth century came to a close. In his well-known book *The Incorporation of America*, Alan Trachtenberg emphasizes the increasing gap “between capital and labor,” and notes that by 1890, “in the population as a whole, the richest one percent earned more than the total income of the poorest 50 percent, and commanded more wealth than the remaining 99 percent” (Trachtenberg 99, original emphasis). This is not to say that it was impossible to achieve success from humble beginnings; there were simply fewer avenues by which to do so than Alger and others would have their readers believe.

The term “self-made man” also notably glossed over the dependence of such luck and pluck (and thereby, success) on both maleness and whiteness. In John G. Cawelti’s well-known book *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, although it contains important theorization on the origins and perpetuation of the self-made man ideal, no mention of women or people of color appears in the index. E.D.E.N. Southworth is one of only a few women mentioned in the text, and her novel *Self-Made* not only has a hero rather than a heroine but is described by Cawelti as “complete and unadulterated absurdity” (Cawelti 127). There have no doubt been other studies of self-making that consider women and people of color more thoroughly, but the fact remains that the term “self-made man” does not translate well to women for a variety of reasons, not least of which involves the question of to whom a woman belongs.
This question of ownership is in many ways the crux of this study: how could women move away from being primarily the possessions of their husbands or fathers, both personally and financially, toward actually possessing themselves, without significant upheaval of their individual social or class statuses, or of the white middle class more generally? If a woman is “self-made,” by definition she must have a self to make, which means that she is not solely property of a man. When studying female self-making in the nineteenth-century United States, we must first consider both what professional activities were available to women and to what extent girls and women considered themselves individuals. Although Linda Kerber argues in “Women and Individualism in American History” that “the language of individualism [has] helped [women] very little,” that language nonetheless occupies the female psyche to a significant extent in the nineteenth century (606). Discussions of independence and ambition, both financial and personal, can frequently be found in this era’s stories about and accounts of young women.5 However, such stories have tragic as often as they have triumphant ends; as Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains in her insightful Women and Economics written in 1898, “when the woman, left alone with no man to ‘support’ her, tries to meet her own economic necessities, the difficulties which confront her prove conclusively what the general economic status of the woman is” (Gilman 10). The idea of being “left alone,” however tongue-in-cheek on Gilman’s part, pervades stories and accounts of women making their own livings, from Louisa May Alcott’s heroine in Work to Pauline Hopkins’s Sappho in Contending Forces, and it was not often portrayed positively. Unlike many men, women frequently did not have family working

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5 Alcott’s young woman characters, especially in Little Women and Work, make “declaration[s] of Independence” and wish for personal financial successes (Work 5). Further, in “Making Hero Strong,” Daniel A. Cohen discusses the “tales of teenage ambition” written by women such as Mary Gibson in the 1850s, emphasizing that many women authors wished for “fame, fortune, and artistic expression” like the characters they wrote for popular magazines (Cohen 87).
traditions upon which to fall back, and so were forced to start from scratch when it came to a profession. Additionally, as a woman, being on one’s own could garner associations with prostitution or other illegal activity that were sometimes warranted, as the difficulty of making a living led many women down these paths. Thus, by many accounts, self-making in the era of “separate spheres” was both utterly impossible and completely necessary for women wishing to succeed financially in a non-domestic setting.

It was not completely unheard of for nineteenth-century women to become financially successful without encouragement; a handful of women attained considerable fame and fortune by their own talents. In addition to writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and others, some of whom will be discussed in this work, women such as Victoria Woodhull, Madam C.J. Walker, Hetty Green, and Nellie Bly earned financial success and notoriety in a variety of fields. For instance, Madam Walker created a cosmetics empire and became one of the first black millionaires, and reporter Nelly Bly traveled around the world and went undercover in a mental hospital for her profession. However, these financial successes very often came with a loss of social and moral standing. The millionaire Hetty Green, for example, was termed a “miser” and “the witch of Wall Street” in books and articles concerning her financial success, and only occasionally described with any positive attributes. Additionally, in the case of Victoria Woodhull, reactions against her outspokenness and her struggles against nineteenth-

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6 According to Alice Kessler-Harris, “to wage earning women, prostitution appeared as a rational choice in a world where few opportunities for a comfortable income offered themselves” (Kessler-Harris 104). Virginia Penny, too, points to low wages as a reason for women to look for more lucrative, but less moral, professions (Think 29).

7 Hetty Green was called “eccentric,” a “miser,” and “the witch of Wall Street,” among other epithets, during her life as well as after her death (“Crowd,” Sparkes and Moore). In contrast, an unusually flattering 1895 article compares popular negative portrayals of Green “in fiction” to the author’s own first-hand account of her as “tall and stately in carriage, and when she spoke her countenance brightened with intelligent animation” (Simonson 484)
century conventions could be said to make up an entire cultural movement. However, in my search for depictions of radical and groundbreaking women professionals in the late nineteenth century, I was continually drawn away from such women, who forcefully pushed against barriers with often significant financial success but mixed social success and societal progress, toward more common, less well-known, and decidedly more conservative women who garnered much more favorable depictions and, it may be argued, moved women’s professional rights forward less dramatically but ultimately more successfully due to the relative lack of backlash against them.

My use of the term “professional” to refer to women working in the various areas of employment discussed in this dissertation is not without problems. In his 1976 book *The Culture of Professionalism*, Burton Bledstein points to professionalism as arising from the American tendency to consider oneself middle class almost regardless of income. In the absence of distinct classes, divisions were made among those of the middle class based on education and skilled occupation. In many cases, both education and training for skilled occupations were either inaccessible to or deemed inappropriate for women by the very professionals who succeeded in acquiring such elusive education and training (Bledstein 109-110). For example, “in 1875, [a] 8 Barbara Goldsmith, in *Other Powers*, places Woodhull at the fulcrum of an entire era, focusing on her spiritualist influence which comprised one aspect of “the religious ferment that accompanied the so-called Great Awakening and the movements it spawned—temperance, abolition, and the struggle with women’s equality with man” (Goldsmith xiv). Amanda Frisken points out that “Woodhull has long borne the stigma of spoiler for the Reconstruction Era suffrage cause (among others)” and observes that “public activism, necessary to political struggle, jeopardized female activists’ class status” (Frisken 89). Goldsmith and Frisken would both argue that Woodhull, while important to women’s rights causes in the period, was not the reason for the failure of women’s suffrage just after the Civil War, even though she was blamed for this and a number of other societal problems in biographies such as the 1928 book *The Terrible Siren* and the 1967 *Mrs. Satan*, both of which come across as biased and chatty, but which also make valid claims to particular closeness to the source information (Sachs, Johnston).
gynecologist reported, on the basis of scientific evidence, that women were physiologically and mentally unfit for the professions and skilled labor” (Bledstein 110). Because working women were not always welcome into professional societies and universities that largely defined who a professional could be, it could be argued that most, if not all, working women were not professionals. However, there is no doubt that many employed women of the later nineteenth century considered themselves professionals; in her book on women’s employments, Virginia Penny includes a category entitled “Professional Women” including 38 different occupations (Employments xvii). “Physicians” and “Authors,” of special interest to my study, are included in this category that excludes many other occupations, such as “Architects” and “Merchants,” that could also easily be considered “professions” (Employments xvii-xviii). Whether or not they were acknowledged by professional societies and prestigious universities gaining influence as the century came to a close, women could, indeed, be professionals and in many cases considered themselves such.

Postbellum U.S. literature is a fruitful place to start looking for women’s successes in a professional capacity, especially considering the large number of women who were writing about and for other women at the time. Fictional depictions of women professionals, including many of the best-known ones, either push these women toward conforming to traditional gender roles or paint them as caricatures to be dismissed.⁹ Take, for instance, two of Henry James’s career women, Henrietta Stackpole, a journalist in The Portrait of a Lady, and Doctor Prance in The

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⁹ Henry James’s career women, Henrietta Stackpole in The Portrait of a Lady and Doctor Prance in The Bostonians, for example, both fall into the trap of caricature; as Carolyn Mathews notes, “with Henrietta Stackpole, he (James) betrayed a profound anxiety about the changing role of women and about tensions centered on issues of social class and propriety” (Mathews 190, my parentheses). In the case of Dr. Prance, who will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, James seems unable to reconcile her masculine profession with her gender, and resorts to portraying her as genderless and even, to some extent, featureless.
Bostonians. Both women are reduced to caricature at points in their portrayals as either made masculine by their professions or suited to their professions due to their inherent masculinity. Stories about women writers appearing in popular periodicals, for example, often upheld common stereotypes of messy, masculine women authors in order to insist that they or their characters conformed much better to norms of gender and domesticity.\textsuperscript{10} Other women, attempting to help women find more paid occupations, were able to suggest and describe employments but not always instruct them how to train for and actually obtain these jobs.\textsuperscript{11} Despite their shortcomings, such depictions can also be used by women professionals themselves to expand gently the boundaries of what careers were deemed acceptable for women in what contexts.\textsuperscript{12}

I have entitled this dissertation “Working in the Diminutive” for a few reasons. The term “diminutive” is inspired in large part by Sarah Hale’s suggestion, in two separate 1865 articles written for *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, that distinct terminology be used to refer to women and men in all titles, but specifically for roles and professions previously occupied only by men. Hale’s argument is that the differentiation “increase[es], also, the beauty and directness of speech, and the force and correctness of written language” (“Editors’ Table, Mar 1865” 279). Hale suggests the terms “Teacheress,” “Mrs. Dr.,” and “Paintress” be given to women in those roles, to name a few from her list. She is also careful to remind the reader that “every married woman should be addressed by her husband’s name as well as surname” (“Editors’ Table, Mar 1865” 280). Just

\textsuperscript{10} Chapter Two will provide an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon.
\textsuperscript{11} Chapter One focuses on several popular guidebooks detailing employments for women.
\textsuperscript{12} Pauline Hopkins, while arguably conservative in many of her depictions of middle-class black women at the turn of the century, especially in terms of women’s roles after marriage and acceptable professions before marriage, helped make new spaces for women’s art and interests and highlighted their achievements, if for a limited number of years, in the *Colored American Magazine*. Her work will be discussed in Chapter Four.
two months later, Hale again suggests diminutions of masculine terms, this time actually calling them “Diminutions of the English Language” in that they primarily add “-ess” to common professions with the apparent aim to differentiate men and women linguistically wherever possible and make the masculine term standard while the feminine one is Other (“Editors’ Table, May 1865” 464). In addition to being given diminutive names when they did the same work as men, women professionals were also often working less important jobs, earning smaller wages, and finding smaller openings for professional success than men were at the same time. As Gilman points out in *Women and Economics*, “economic progress, however, is almost exclusively masculine. Such economic processes as women have been allowed to exercise are of the earliest and most primitive kind” (Gilman 8). Despite such challenges, however, some women worked both in and with this diminutive space, using feminine stereotypes to their advantage and the ideals of both True Womanhood and Real Womanhood, in order to succeed both economically and socially.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters that discuss four important movements in women’s professions of the later nineteenth century. All four chapters point to women’s strategic maneuvering between breaking new professional ground for themselves and their sisters, and conforming to dominant views of middle-class propriety. In Chapter One, “Women’s Sanctioned Non-Domestic Work: An Imperfect Independence?” I discuss the reference works of (and reactions to) economist Virginia Penny, novelist and journalist M.L. Rayne, and others that helped more women toward skilled employment, while also critiquing the situation that keeps them underpaid, overworked, or underemployed. These books cataloguing women’s employments enjoyed significant popularity by walking a fine line between breaking new ground for women and maintaining a status quo that kept women as close as possible to traditional,
popularly sanctioned roles. Louisa May Alcott’s 1873 *Work* and Emma May Buckingham’s far less-studied but equally pertinent *A Self-Made Woman* published the same year provide fictional representations of the types of women found in Penny and Rayne’s encyclopedias, and dramatize the difficulties for a woman who wishes to make her own living, ultimately making compromises for their protagonists that kept them mostly in domestic settings despite initial struggles for independence from them. Buckingham’s work is one of very few to use the term “self-made” to describe a woman, and it exaggerates the differences between Horatio Alger’s “luck and pluck” model of self-made success for boys and the far more arduous and lonely paths to financial success for young women.

Chapter Two, “Authoring the ‘Authoress’: Women Writers’ Self-Made Success,” considers the woman author in detail, specifically focusing on the ways some women writers embraced and coopted both the term and identity of “authoress,” especially in the earlier part of the postbellum era. In the second half of the nineteenth century, authorship was one of the most accessible, and often most lucrative, professions for U.S. women. Because writing was usually done at home, it was less threatening to traditional gender roles than other potential professions, but nonetheless provoked depictions of women writers as slovenly, masculine, or poor housekeepers and mothers in many popular publications. Rather than overwhelmingly decrying

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13 Virginia Penny’s “Authors” entry of *The Employments of Women* notes specific dollar amounts that authors of both sexes made for a variety of book genres written; for example, “Mrs. Stowe has been very largely paid [and] Miss Leslie’s cookery and recipe books have paid her $12,000” (*Employments* 3). Penny also mentions men’s pay for writing, and shows that the rates of pay between men and women for this profession are perhaps the closest to the same of any profession available to women at this time.

14 Anne Boyd, in *Writing for Immortality*, discusses the fictions “by American women of the Civil War and Postbellum years” that were often “realistic narratives of how women writers and artists were forced to choose between their desire for expression and self-realization as artists and their desire for heterosexual love” (*Writing* 86-7). The stories I discuss in Chapter 2, by contrast, allow their protagonists both careers and heterosexual love, in part because the women
this caricature, some women writers at least partially upheld it in order to differentiate that undesirable type of writer from the feminine, capable, and financially solvent “authoresses” they considered themselves to be. While this move often separated women writers from their male counterparts (a separation that continues to exist today in the forms of romance novels and “chick lit”), it also made space for their success by insisting that women writers could simultaneously be successful wives, mothers, or daughters.

In Chapter Three, “Uneven Realism: The Woman Doctors of Later Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” we primarily investigate the male perspective on women professionals, specifically woman doctors, and consider the slightly backward, almost anti-realist depictions these otherwise realist authors put forth. Both Henry James and William Dean Howells, within realist novels, portray women doctors in decidedly un-realist ways, suggesting either that these characters were not meant to be taken seriously or that their authors were not quite able to comprehend women in new professional positions. In contrast, women such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, also writing about women doctors, use realism much more effectively than James and Howells, to suggest that women can be doctors without losing their womanliness, even if they generally must still choose between marriage and career. Phelps’s Doctor Zay is the only woman doctor depicted potentially combining a career with marriage (though she has not yet done so by the end of the novel), and she agrees to marriage only after a significant illness that weakens her, diminishing her initial position of power. As in the

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in question do not consider themselves “artists” to the extent that those discussed in Boyd’s work do.

15 James and Howells are widely considered the fathers of Realism who helped define and popularize the genre at the end of the nineteenth century.

16 In their article on fictional woman doctors, Nancy Elder and Andrew Schwarzer note that Dr. Zay’s “decision to marry Waldo Yorke and to continue to practice medicine is not portrayed as a victory for women physicians; the event is a capitulation by an overworked and ‘ground down’
previous two chapters, here we see women successfully co-opting an arguably masculine genre of writing, in this case realism, to depict women succeeding in traditionally masculine professions; moreover, the women depicted realistically are notably not made masculine by their choice of profession, and in all ways beside their professions, conform to prescribed middle-class female roles.

The women discussed in Chapter Three, however, are significantly more radical in their choice of profession and pursuit of it than most of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins’s women characters. Chapter Four, “Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins, and The Colored American Magazine: Middle-Class Black Women’s Work at the Turn of the Century,” considers the role of black women in the progress of women professionals, specifically in terms of their depictions in the Colored American Magazine and other works by Hopkins and Harper. Depictions and discussions of working women of color found in The Colored American Magazine and other works by Pauline Hopkins tended to resemble those of white women professionals written several decades earlier. This apparent conservatism, rather than providing evidence that black women writers were educationally or politically behind white women, helped entrench educated black Americans in the middle class, bolstering their claims to equal privileges to their white neighbors. Additionally, Hopkins’s editorial work in the CAM, though short-lived, normalized black women’s issues and artistic outputs as intrinsic to the black American experience, a feature of the magazine that completely disappeared with Hopkins’s departure in late 1904. Frances Harper’s novel Iola Leroy, despite similar charges of conservatism and privileging of whiter professional” (Elder and Schwarzer 168). Somewhat in contrast to this argument, Valerie Fulton claims that Dr. Zay’s illness and Waldo Yorke’s new professional zeal “do not signal each character’s reversion to a traditional gender role…Rather, they are for the first time able to meet on equal terms” (Fulton 249).
characters over darker-skinned ones, arguably gave stronger and more authentic voices to black women characters than any other author of her time of any race or gender. Both women, by modeling their works on those of their white, middle-class forebears, brought black women’s issues to a large number of readers and insisted on their legitimacy in the context of other examples of serious literature at the turn of the century.

There is no dearth of writing on the subject of women working outside the home, and analysis of a large swath of such writing helps form a picture of both the literature and the culture surrounding it. In each chapter, I have tended to focus less on well-known novels written by or about women, and more often on stories and articles, both fictional and non-fictional, written for a variety of popular nineteenth-century periodicals that seemed to provide clearer and timelier views of the women in question, whether they be real or fictional. Much like Frances Cogan in her book, I attempted to glean insights on working women from “a variety of genres: domestic novels, advice books, editorials, short stories in periodicals, and articles” (Cogan 21). Nationally popular magazines such as Harper’s, The Independent, and Godey’s Ladies’ Book feature heavily, alongside more regional or specialized periodicals such as Maine Farmer and The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health, in attempts at a comprehensive view of popular opinion concerning women working during the later nineteenth century. Alongside these articles, illustrations and advertisements have often helped paint a fuller picture of both expanded opportunities for and continued obstacles to women’s professional success.

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17 Hazel Carby notes that Harper’s “novel is generally considered to be her least successful project” and that “literary critics have dismissed it on the grounds of a lack of artistic merit” (Carby 63). In rebuttal to these claims, Carby argues that “far from being Harper’s least successful project, the incorporation of her essays and speeches into her novel makes Iola Leroy the culmination of her career” (Carby 63).
My aim is to consider working women in fresh ways, by using previously under- or unexamined texts on the subject. My study aims to consider the nuances that existed within women’s struggles to achieve financial and professional success for themselves, to show that employed women were not simply accepting or rejecting notions of “separate spheres” and “True Womanhood,” but working within and manipulating such notions to their best advantage. I have chosen to focus on the Post-bellum period of the nineteenth century for this study for several reasons. First, the loss of male workers during the Civil War, combined with increased opportunities available under expanding capitalism, made it necessary for larger numbers of women to become part of a growing workforce. As Lyde Cullen Sizer explains in *Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872*, “The rhetoric of unity, so necessary in wartime, allowed a larger room for play, even as it emphasized conformity: if women could successfully argue that their political and cultural work was intended to benefit the Union, paltry considerations of etiquette would ring false” (Sizer 70).

Much like in the post-WWII era, however, resentment over women occupying roles previously held by men led, at least partially, to increased professionalization of employments that made women’s acquisition of those employments more difficult just as they were becoming available. In his book *The Culture of Professionalism*, Burton Bledstein argues that an expansive middle class and more institutions of higher education helped form a culture of professionalism, in which a stratification of the middle class occurred based on profession and specific training done for it. Since many colleges and training programs did not accept women, it was often difficult for them to enter new professions. Further, men sometimes used their professional prowess to deter women from joining professions: Bledstein notes that “in 1875, [a] gynecologist reported, on the basis of scientific evidence, that women were physiologically and mentally unfit
for the professions and skilled labor” (Bledstein 110). Thus, postbellum women, namely middle-
class, northern women, were free to seek financial independence through non-domestic work, but
simultaneously forced to insist that these employments would threaten neither men’s statuses as
breadwinners nor their own perceived femininity and domestic prowess.
Chapter 1: Women’s Sanctioned Non-Domestic Work: An Imperfect Independence

In the preface to the 1883 edition of her popular book *What Can a Woman Do?*, fiction writer and journalist M.L. Rayne notes that “Fifty-three or fifty-four years ago Miss Harriet Martineau is reported to have said that, in Massachusetts, one of the most highly civilized and advanced communities in the world, there were but seven industries open to women who wanted to work” (iii). Rayne interestingly chooses the phrase “wanted to work” just lines after she suggests both that women who work in the 1880s should necessarily be “seeking positions of usefulness” and that “those fortunate ones…do not need to step beyond the horizon of home,” seemingly contradicting herself concerning the needs and desires for women to work (iii, my emphasis). Is it acceptable for any woman to wish to work outside the home, or should she only seek employments if she is not so “fortunate” that she can stay within “the horizon of home?” This type of contradiction runs through dozens of printed discussions of women’s employments outside the home in the second half of the nineteenth century; the question of what a woman could do encompassed not only capability but also ambition and permission. What was she physically able to do, but also what did she desire to do professionally, and also importantly, what did her peers, both male and female, allow her to do?

Women’s roles in the nineteenth century have often been considered in terms of the “separate spheres” debate, which suggests that, for better or worse, women occupied separate space, both literally and figuratively, from men. Such separation meant, for instance, that women primarily occupied a private, domestic space while men dominated a public, business one. As Linda Kerber notes while discussing the work of Nancy F. Cott in her historiographic essay on separate spheres,
Cott added the thought that married women’s work became less like men’s work in the early nineteenth century, as men’s work was subjected to modern time discipline while women’s work remained task oriented. Work patterns reinforced women’s sense that their lives were defined differently from men’s. (Kerber 36)

Whether or not these differences between women’s and men’s lives were oppressive to women has been a topic of debate; additionally, the issue of whether such work for women was necessarily domestic changed as the century progressed. Although the “Cult of True Womanhood,” coined by Barbara Welter, was billed as a prevailing ideal in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, its privileging of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” in middle-class women did not make such virtues their only legitimate options (Welter 152). As Frances Cogan notes in her book *All-American Girl*, “more than one popular ideal existed and was embraced between 1840 and 1880” (Cogan 9). Her ideal, that she terms “the Ideal of Real Womanhood,” advocated “intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage,” and is framed in her book as successfully competing with that of “True Womanhood” (Cogan 4). Both “self-sufficiency” and “economic self-reliance” suggest that women were not always encouraged to do only domestic, unpaid labor, but that they could in many cases leave home to attain the abovementioned qualities. Despite a large number of critics weighing in on the separate spheres debate, few have discussed the ways in which women wishing to enter the workforce maneuvered separate spheres without rejecting them entirely.¹⁸ As Cogan observes, “the Ideal of Real Womanhood, however, demanded that one do

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¹⁸ Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, for example, in their introduction to the compilation *No More Separate Spheres!*, posit that “the separate spheres model ultimately resides in a concept of “woman” that is historically circumscribed and narrowly defined” and wish to “thin[k] past this pervasive way of reading the nineteenth century” (8). While I agree that the model is to some extent reductive, it nonetheless has a place in this project because of the ways
so as a woman, not as an androgyne or ‘freak’” (Cogan 5, original emphasis). Cogan’s emphasis, like those of critics discussing True Womanhood and separate spheres more generally, is not specifically pointed at women’s economic forays away from home; it is to these forays that this chapter turns its attention.

This chapter attempts to better understand the middle-class white woman who worked outside the home. Although women writing about women’s work made advances by the end of the century, their advocacy for women’s independence was tempered by a conservatism that still valued home-life first and, in doing so, emphasized class distinctions between women who could work and women who had to work. Further, even when women found financial success, the paths to that success continued to be markedly different for women than for men, according to fiction written about both. Despite noticeable changes to middle-class women’s employment opportunities, competing ideals concerning women’s proper “sphere” continued to make large-scale changes to women’s economic status difficult, if not entirely untenable.

I begin with a discussion of several books encouraging or celebrating women’s professional achievements, all written in the early second half of the nineteenth century and all of which went through several re-printings as the century progressed. In some cases, the women authors of these books themselves can be credited with helping the number of professions for women increase from “seven” to hundreds by the late 1870s, and of personally working with young women to help them obtain those professions (Rayne iii). Despite their arguably groundbreaking work, however, all four books discussed tend toward conservatism in that rather than organizing with other women to forcefully open new doors to employments, they mostly

nineteenth-century middle-class women apparently subscribed to a version of femininity that can best be described by such a model.
either approvingly comment on already open doors, or somewhat timidly suggest that more doors should be opened, without detailed plans for how to do so. M.L. Rayne’s popular 1865 guidebook, What Can a Woman Do?, for example, while attempting to explore and celebrate the strides made by women in the worlds of business and literature, also codifies and circumscribes women’s options for financial independence, primarily in terms of its overwhelming emphasis on literary occupations as the most reasonable employments for women. However, periodical writings by both men and women as well as fictional accounts of women seeking paid work during this time point to the insufficiency of such guidebooks to make significant change in mainstream perception of women attempting to do non-domestic work. The proliferation of literature concerning what women might do to make a living signals the need for such instruction to exist, while fictional characters like Christie Devon in Louisa May Alcott’s Work and Mary Idyl in Emma Buckinham’s A Self-Made Woman dramatize that necessity, ultimately pointing to women’s professional success as either rarely attained or undesirable and suggesting that middle-class feminine domesticity should take precedence over the search for permanent, meaningful employment outside the home.

An extended reading of Louisa May Alcott’s Work: A Story of Experience highlights the limited avenues to pecuniary success for women, exploring the changing reasons for women to leave home for employment, and further examining the close of the novel in terms of alternative female success in the 1870s. Alcott’s choice to make her protagonist, Christie, not an author seems to preclude the possibility of her earning any substantial income and virtually necessitates a marriage plot for the novel, but Alcott maneuvers around that marriage plot into a unique, gynocentric ending for the characters that Tara Fitzpatrick terms “’sentimental economy’ which refers to an economy that conflated the otherwise opposed images of work and love, self-
sacrifice and self-interest” (Fitzpatrick 31). She explains that Alcott posited “work (and not just women’s work), paradoxically, as an alternative to competition in the marketplace” (31, original emphasis). Alcott frames work done for money as socially alienating as opposed to socially and personally gratifying work done for love, and adjusts the definition of “independence” as the novel progresses until it takes a non-monetary, cooperative meaning very unlike other contemporary definitions of the word.

I also include Emma May Buckingham’s 1873 A Self-Made Woman in part for its similarity to Alcott’s much better-known Work, but also for its interesting interchange among intellectual, pecuniary, and physical self-making that departs from Alcott’s contemporaneous work in significant ways. One particularly interesting difference is the way in which Buckingham’s character retains her femininity more completely, in her quest for “independence,” than Alcott’s Christie does (Work 5). Buckingham’s novel is also very little studied, and though, as one reviewer explained, it “is evidently from the pen of an inexperienced writer,” there is still ample room for analysis of the novel for its own sake as well as in terms of a wider historic and literary context (“Literature”). The novel provides an opportunity to piece together a fuller picture of women’s writing about their own work than restricting oneself to the works of the more thoroughly-studied and exceptional Louisa May Alcott might give one.

Additionally, because of its overt themes of financial success and individualistic bildungsroman, Buckingham’s novel can be fairly easily compared to Horatio Alger’s novels of self-making and juvenile success to show the differences between men and women “Struggling Upward,” to borrow the title of one of Alger’s novels, even in fictional texts.

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19 For more on women’s authorship, see Chapter 2.
The texts in this chapter together begin to reveal the circumstances that limited options for women to become financially independent in the later nineteenth century U.S., while at the same time sanctioning more, and more varied, employments for women to take on. Despite the hundreds of “employments” possible for women to occupy by the early postbellum period, many obstacles continued to either keep women out of them or keep their wages for nearly all employments low, and while women economists and writers may have had numerous ideas for the jobs women could take (and even examples of women taking them), their practical advice for acquiring, keeping, and getting paid for those jobs was limited at best. Women’s struggles to succeed financially result directly from the paucity of social structures in place to ensure that success. Most women with employment outside the home, especially that not in a factory or retail establishment, struggled to succeed financially because they were entering new territory for women that often included little or no social support. Because such employment continued as the nineteenth century came to a close to be seen, even by those who advocated for more professional roles for women, as a contingency plan at best and desperate act at worst, middle-class women who wanted to work had difficulty finding help from others to do so.

Guides to Women’s Employments

The nineteenth-century U.S. is known for publishing swathes of etiquette books and articles for both men and women, guiding them in every possible matter of middle-class interest. One of the most popular purveyors of etiquette for women was *Godoy’s Lady’s Book*, edited by Sarah Hale and the most widely-read periodical in the United States, which enjoyed a circulation of 150,000 by the Civil War (Okker 1-2). The magazine published writing by women while also
encouraging women readers to follow, as Patricia Okker puts it in *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors*, “Victorian ideologies of gender” (51). When discussions of women’s non-domestic professions appear in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, they are usually limited to a few employments such as teaching and writing.\(^{20}\) At the same time that women are entering larger numbers of employments and publishing popular books that encourage each other to expand their opportunities to join more professions, “separate sphere” advocates like Sarah Hale and other contributors to the *Lady’s Book*, with their own writings, limit middle-class women’s professional opportunities and financial independence. In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas argues that Hale and her cohort were “intensely absorbed in trying to manufacture and defend a kind of pseudo-profession through the enunciation of a theory of female ‘influence’” amounting to “traditional, if strategically rephrased, notions of the feminine role” (Douglas 45). More recently, Kara Clevinger observes that “Hale has been and continues to be useful to scholars as a conservative straw woman who designed and upheld a single, sentimental view of the mother in the influential pages of *Godey’s*” (Clevinger 30). Although Clevinger emphasizes Hale’s views on childrearing here, she essentially argues that all of Hale’s views can be understood through those views; the editor of the book in which Clevinger’s essay appears explains that “As Kara Clevinger’s study of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in chapter 1 contends, Hale may have opposed women’s suffrage, but she strenuously insisted that the welfare of both family and state rested on the foundation of well-

\(^{20}\) For example, an 1869 “Editors’ Table” segment suggests that there are three options for young women: “mothers,” “display,” and “instructresses,” of which only mothers and instructresses are acceptable (“Editors’ Table” Jan 1869, 93). These segments of the magazine frequently support women’s higher education, but tend to focus only on educating women to become teachers.
educated mothers” (De Jong 10). The education that Hale proposes, then, should be specifically designed to aid motherhood or professions that either mimic or may coexist with motherhood.

We can see this trend in Sarah Hale’s *Woman’s Record*, originally published in 1852 but expanded and reprinted several times in much the same form through the end of the nineteenth century.21 It may be considered an outlier among the other texts discussed here, in that rather than serving as a guide for women wishing to enter careers, the book claims to include histories of “All Distinguished Women” who have ever lived (Hale title page). I include this text for several reasons: first, as a text written by the editor of arguably the nineteenth century’s most influential magazine for women, *Woman’s Record* ostensibly contains the stories of exemplary women to be emulated over several decades by all of *Godey’s Lady’s Book’s* enormous readership. Second, in its claim to catalog “All Distinguished Women,” *Woman’s Record* defines the term “distinguished” and circumscribes possible roles for women reading it. Based on her “Introductory Remarks,” Hale’s definition of “distinguished” comes from a “British critic” and describes those women “‘who have distinguished themselves in letters or in society, and have made it highly feminine to be intelligent, as well as good’” (Hale viii). It is not clear what “society” encompasses in this definition, but it is evident from the book’s contents that it does not generally include art, science, or business. Further, Hale states, in the “Introductory Remarks” addressed to male readers, that the intent of the book is “to understand what God intended woman should do; what she has done; and what farther advantages are needed to fit her to perform well her part” (Hale viii). Both “God” and “her part” are important to this sentence; rather than advocating for women’s self-dependence, Hale invokes the fatherly God as woman’s

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21 I include Hale, an arguably antebellum figure, because of her continued influence, through *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and other publications, on a large group of women through the Civil War and beyond.
guide and relegates women’s roles to a “part.” Women might, as Nina Baym argues in *Women’s Fiction*, be ideally for Hale “spiritual and moral leader[s] of the husband[s],” but they are nonetheless incomplete without men (Baym 258).

Further, in her “Remarks on the Fourth Era,” that of “Living Female Writers,” Hale writes that “the Fourth Era of this Record will be of more benefit, as affording examples for the young, and encouragement to those who are waiting some way to be opened to their endeavours, than all the histories in the preceding pages” (563). This statement asserts that the fourth section can serve as a guide for young women to become distinguished, but uses passive language to suggest that women must simply wait to be allowed to distinguish themselves rather than creating a path themselves. Additionally, the examples that follow are almost solely of literary women, nearly all of them of the middle or upper class. A few outliers among the literary include Angela Georgina Burdett Coutts, “distinguished as possessing more wealth than any other private woman in the world,” Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, and a handful of royal figures (634). Hale adds more women and their works to her book in subsequent editions of *Woman’s Record* in an apparent attempt to keep up with changing times, but is reluctant to call many women professionals “distinguished” other than “female writers” (Hale 1870, 565). In a majority of the *Record’s* entries, these women’s familial associations with prominent men are foregrounded and income is either not mentioned or de-emphasized. As Baym and Ann Douglas explain in their discussions of Hale’s work, women’s roles, according to Hale, should be more spiritual than economic; in Hale’s view, “male dollars must be ignored by female decorum; women should forget or at least appear to forget the sordid laws of acquisition and accumulation” (Douglas 57). Instead, women serve, for Hale, as “God’s appointed agent of *morality*, the teacher and inspirer of those feelings and sentiments which are termed the virtues of humanity” (Hale xxxv, original
emphasis). Baym argues that with this assertion, “Hale turns a potential deficit [lack of physical strength] to her advantage and presents it as a mark of superiority, as mind and spirit are superior to body” (Baym 256). Thus, with *Woman’s Record*, as Baym and Douglas observe, Hale rewrites history to include women, but does not intend for women to compete with men in terms of political or economic control.

Sarah Hale notes in her introductory remarks to the 1852 edition of *Woman’s Record* that “a dozen or more” books about women’s deeds “appeared” in the three years preceding her publication, but none before hers have contained “the true idea of woman's nature and mission” (Hale 1852 vii). However, Hale’s idea of woman’s “nature and mission” differs sharply from that discussed in Virginia Penny’s two books on employments for women, written in 1862 and 1869. Similar to Hale’s claim that she enters new territory with *Woman’s Record*, in the introduction to her second book on women’s work and compensation for it, Penny explains that “so far as I can learn, no work setting forth the occupations in which women may engage has appeared except mine, entitled ‘The Employments of Women.’ A vacuum on that subject had previously existed in literature” (*Think* 11). The first edition of Sarah Hale’s *Woman’s Record* appears earlier than *The Employments of Women*, but is not at all interested in the income women make in comparison to Penny’s book, which in its 1868 edition was renamed *Five Hundred Occupations Adapted to Women; with the Average Rate of Pay in Each* and in its third edition (reprinted as late as 1971!), *How Women Can Make Money, Married or Single*. In direct response to works like Hale’s, Penny acknowledges in the preface to her *The Employments of Women* that “it is very easy to obtain book after book on ‘The Sphere of Woman,’ ‘The Mission of Woman,’ and ‘The Influence of Woman.’ But to a practical mind it must be evident that good advice is not sufficient” (*Employments* v).
In her two books on women’s employments, Penny does her best to bridge the gap between “good advice” and formal training for women looking for work. As Frances Cogan notes, Penny’s first book, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman’s Work*, is virtually alone in the field [of advice books for women] in discussing such bread-and-butter issues as how to obtain a job and how to go about the application process; they alone delve into wages, hours, working conditions, safety, and advancement possibilities or requisite training to land a job and hold it. (Cogan 217)

While Hale simply lauds individual women who have somehow managed to distinguish themselves despite odds against them, Penny critiques those odds and looks for ways to improve them. In the *Cyclopaedia*’s more than five hundred entries, Penny includes:

- descriptions of the occupations in which women are, or may be engaged—the effect of each on the health—the rate of wages paid for those carried on in the United States—a comparison in the prices of male and female labor of the same kind—the length of time required to learn the business fully, […]—whether women are paid while learning—the qualifications needed—(*Employments* xxi)

Additionally, Penny compares men and women’s aptitude for each occupation, discusses the geographic regions where occupations are more or less often available, considers the hours per day worked for each occupation and whether this number could be shortened without loss of productivity, and includes other important considerations as well (xxi). In short, *Employments of Women* does its best to comprehensively account for every possible job a woman could occupy and to give her enough information to actually train for, obtain, and perform effectively her desired position. Of watchmaking, for example, Penny notes that “the qualifications needed are
delicacy of touch, patience, and great carefulness” and that “the principal objection to employing
women is that they are very apt to marry just as they become skilful enough to be reliable”
(Employments 243). Further, many other parts of the book contain occupations women are
mostly not, but should or could be, engaged in. For example, “[gold] assaying by acids and other
reagents could be done by women” (238, my emphasis) and “it would be more agreeable to most
ladies to have their teeth cleaned and plugged by a lady” (14, my emphasis). Penny’s repeated
use of the conditional and subjunctive in the book gives women license to perform a large
number of jobs, even while she acknowledges that their success in these pursuits is uncertain, if
only because it is mostly unprecedented.

Despite her optimism about the wealth of possible jobs for women, Penny is nonetheless
realistic about the current state of women’s employments. At the end of The Employments of
Women, Penny acknowledges that she has “received information from persons saying women are
never engaged in their branches of business,” and goes on to list those occupations, of which
there are approximately fifty, and the purported reasons women can or should not engage in them
(Employments 486). The reasons against women occupying certain jobs are listed within
quotation marks (for example, “Edge Tools (‘not adapted to the sex’),” suggesting that such
explanations come from outside sources and may not coincide with Penny’s views. More than
simply cataloging occupations, Penny seems to be making space for women to occupy nearly all
employments even if they have not previously held them, and her reluctance to acknowledge that
some jobs cannot be held by women emphasizes her creation of that space.

While The Employments of Women catalogs hundreds of jobs women can or do occupy,
Penny’s second book, the 1869 Think and Act, provides more in-depth analysis of women’s work
and compensation for it. As Penny explains in the “Object of the Book” section:
We have many books telling us exactly the condition of society, and the need of specific employment for unmarried women, whereby their pecuniary interest and happiness may be promoted, but how to select and engage in an employment, and what employments are open to women, is a subject hitherto neglected, or partially set forth, now and then, in the transient literature of the day.

I wish to see woman’s labor properly compensated, and she having free admittance to those employments for which she is fitted. I long to see the condition of the working woman improved, and to see her possessing such comforts and refinements as her station will admit. But to enjoy these privileges she must be trained to some particular field of usefulness. (Think 12)

The text that follows includes several dozen essays discussing women’s employment, compensation for it, and influence in business. Unlike her first book, which belies Penny’s cautious optimism for women who want jobs, a tone of defeat pervades the text; Penny worries that “the mass of women, in moderate circumstances, seems to be hedged in more and more from year to year” (Think 19). This observation is reiterated in Penny’s claim that “it is difficult to decide what occupations are most suitable for women without further trial, so little attention has been given to the subject” (Think 21). Her aim with Think and Act is to give more attention to the subject of women’s occupations, but she does not pretend to have a definite solution to all the problems facing women who need or want work. Even though “Every woman should be able to turn her labor, either mental or manual, into money,” the fact that “the majority of women have not been expected to earn a livelihood” means that most women have not been educated well enough to earn money for themselves (Think 118, my emphasis). Penny retains hope, however, that “if women pursue the higher branches of industry, it will elevate their position socially,
morally, mentally, and physically. They will have greater incentive to cultivate their minds. They will be more respected, and will acquire something like the independence and influence of men” (Think 75, my emphasis). Again we see Penny’s pragmatism mixed with optimism; the best she hopes for is that increased entrance by women into paying industries will bring them “something like” the power men have.

Throughout both of her books, Penny emphasizes properly preparing to do work outside the home. As Penny explains, “it is necessary for women to have some definite idea of what their resources may be—to what branches of business they may fly with hope of success” (Think 25). Penny’s books are attempts to put women on roads to financial success, but she must compete against those such as Sarah Hale who insist that women not engage in business, referring to money as a “contagion” to be avoided by women and children (qtd. Douglas 57). In response to arguments that earning money is associated with moral taint, Penny argues that “when I learn how many women have, from want and ignorance of any worthy occupation by which to earn an honest livelihood, fallen victims to the wily snares of wicked men, how many have sunk into woe and wretchedness, degradation and ruin, I would urge all girls who have it in their power, as they prize their own salvation in this world and another, to learn some business, trade, or profession” (Think 29). Her concern with “the wily snares of wicked men” is not unwarranted: according to Alice Kessler-Harris in Out to Work, a report on the lives of “2,000 female prostitutes who had been incarcerated” found that “nearly a quarter were married women whose husbands had either deserted or mistreated them[, a]bout the same percentage had worked at some branch of the sewing trades, and almost half said they had been servants before engaging in prostitution” (Kessler-Harris 58). In other words, a lack of sufficient options for women’s paid employment clearly correlates with poverty, prostitution, and imprisonment.
Penny’s texts break new ground for women, primarily in terms of their suggestion that women can occupy quite a number of paying employments such as “textile manufacturers” and “those in mercantile pursuits” (Employments xvi). But even with Penny’s expanded view of women’s work, her two books were not considered radical at the time of their publication. A number of positive reviews of both The Employments of Women (1863) and Think and Act (1869) emphasize how “practical” or “matter-of-fact” they are in helping women “find useful and profitable employment,” and that they have “done a real service to American women.”

Several of these reviews also exhibit relief that Penny does not tend to engage with hot-button women’s issues of the period; as one review notes, “the author leaves the subject of ‘Woman’s Rights’ for others to discuss, while she aims directly to find something for her to do, by which she can earn an honest living” (“Literary Notices”). Even Think and Act, a book more overtly interested in the employment rights of women in comparison to those of men, garners a positive review from Godey’s Lady’s Book, which notes that

At the present time, too, when so much is being said and written on the ‘woman question,’ we think the plain statements of facts, and the sensible deductions therefrom, with which the pages of this volume are teeming, will help many to a clearer view of the matter than they might otherwise have. (“Literary Notices: Reviews and Pamphlets” 463)

Reviewers prize Penny’s practicality as well as her apparent lack of interest in radical changes to women’s societal roles, suggesting that an unsentimental tone is not necessarily antithetical to a conservative stance on women’s rights, and that reviewers are happy to allow women to “earn an

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honest living” as long as they do not also show interest in voting rights or equality with men (“Literary Notices”). Penny’s success with popular reviewers can be at least partially attributed to her use of the ideals of Real Womanhood, entailing, as Frances Cogan puts it, “stretching the definition of ‘women’s sphere,’ a sphere [she] stubbornly refused to relinquish” (Cogan 11).

M.L. Rayne’s *What Can a Woman Do?*, originally published in 1865 and reprinted several times in the next three decades, falls somewhere between Sarah Hale and Virginia Penny’s works, in that it, like *Woman’s Record*, considers literature as an overwhelmingly important occupation for women in comparison to all other options, but as the title suggests, provides much more practical and financial advice, akin to Penny’s works, to women wishing to gain employment in a variety of fields.23 Rayne suggests that “the majority of the women in a community in great need of some money-making talent,” one that will help her emotionally as well as financially (Rayne 12). She stresses that

life is, indeed, a burden to one who, day after day, must plod for a mere existence at some work for which there is no special adaptation, but it is peculiarly trying and discouraging to a woman, who cannot choose for herself the profession or vocation in life which will give her the most pleasure to follow in the toilsome effort of winning her own bread” (Rayne 11).

Like Penny, Rayne suggests that an increase in ways for women to make money is needed, but she is more optimistic than Penny that women can find opportunities if properly trained: as she claims, “It is an established truth, that a woman who is competent in any one branch of business will always find a situation open to her, if she seeks it. In a contest, skilled labor will always succeed, against the assumptions and pretences of ignorance” (Rayne 14-15). Penny, on the other

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23 Rayne’s attention to literary professions is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2.
hand, knows that “we dare not say there is not a man or woman that wants remunerative employment but what can obtain it. No; we know it is not so” (*Think* 20).

Indeed, by the time of the aforementioned M.L. Rayne’s *What Can a Woman Do*’s writing, “there are more than three hundred occupations open to women, instead of seven, and that 300,000 women are earning their own living in these occupations, receiving from $150 to $3,000 every year” (iv). Despite the “three hundred occupations open” to women, the book still spends the greatest number of its pages on “the profession of literature”; the subtitle to Mrs. Rayne’s book is *Or, Her Position in the Business and Literary World*. Of the 500 pages of this text, nearly half are devoted to discussion or display of women’s literary endeavors, suggesting that even by 1883 it is much more common (and perhaps more acceptable) for an enterprising woman to be a writer than to have any other career. It is also notable that “Business” and “Literary” women are separated, as though one precludes the other. Perhaps this separation is in part due to the fact that “sentimentalism and emotional expression, according to [Victorians], were inappropriate in the business world but acceptable in literature, the church, and the home—all three areas seen primarily as the province of women” (Coultrap-McQuin 7). But even while Rayne seems compelled to discuss business and literature separately, “The Profession of Literature” chapter nonetheless finds itself in the “Women in the Business World” section of the book, and this chapter provides several practical tips for getting a manuscript published while providing few for writing in the first place. As Raye explains, “books written under difficulties are nearly always the most successful, as the friction of adverse circumstances brings out more freely the sparks of genius” (30). The word “successful” is here uncomplicatedly associated with “genius,” wherein a book will sell because it is “genius” in some way, and it is mainly “genius” because the author’s (assumedly financial) “difficulties” necessitate it. Rayne thus makes
women’s writing unequivocally about making money, both in terms of inspiration and publication success.

Even though Rayne has much to say on the subject of women in business, she is still careful to note that employment is not for all women:

the compiler trusts that it will be found helpful to those who are seeking positions of usefulness, and valuable to those who are already established, while to those fortunate ones who do not need to step beyond the horizon of home, it will give a deeper interest in “Woman’s Work,” and cause them to feel a personal pride in their labor and achievements. (Rayne 3)

According to this text, then, a late nineteenth-century woman’s work must be a “positio[n] of usefulness” and “those fortunate ones” are lucky enough to be allowed to stay home instead of leaving its “horizon,” (3, my emphasis). Although Mrs. Rayne acknowledges that women can take (because they have taken) positions as lawyers, dentists, and even government officials, she warns that they should not argue against their “twenty to thirty per centum less than men for the same or equivalent services” by “recourse to the ballot,” because lower pay “is one of the barriers which men themselves erected to defend women” from being enticed to work for themselves instead of relying on brothers, fathers, and husbands for sustenance (19). Mere employment for women, then, though becoming much more common by this time, is still seen as a last resort, even by those women such as the author herself who have clearly profited from it. Additionally, Mrs. Rayne stresses not disrupting the status quo, wherein women, if they take positions once open only to men, are paid considerably less than those men and have no option to change that situation because they have no voting rights.
Despite such apparent conservatism regarding women’s pay and voting rights, Rayne nonetheless acknowledges that “the day has gone by when a woman who enters any pursuit of industry loses caste,” suggesting that significant changes have come in the last few decades in terms of popular views of women working, and that Mrs. Rayne seems mostly happy to embrace those changes (Rayne 12). Allusion to a loss of “caste” points to the ways in which “industry” has until quite recently led to diminished social standing for women, and it is notable that Rayne does not claim that all female industry is free from the threat of losing “caste,” simply that the two are no longer inextricable (12). Rayne also assumes that her readers have “caste” to lose; she defines her readership as consisting of at least moderately educated, middle-class young ladies who can enter the workforce but may not actually need to.

We see from these texts and others like them that the need existed for women to learn trades that would help them obtain employment outside the home; it is not as clear, however, that this type of text actually helped women do so. According to the Michigan Women’s Historical Center, Rayne’s *What Can a Woman Do?* sold over 100,000 copies, while Hale’s *Woman’s Record* was reprinted at least three times by 1874. Penny’s *Employments of Women*, too, was “widely reviewed, generally positively” and “sold well” in its retitled second edition after Penny sold the rights for one hundred dollars (Gensemer). Were these books purchased for instructional or more casual reference purposes, though? Rayne’s book seems to be in the latter category; my 1893 copy features marbleized decorative pages and illustrations, and appears to have been a birthday gift for “Grace M. Bolton, From Mother” (Rayne viii). None of the abovementioned books, except perhaps for *Think and Act*, appears designed to be read from cover to cover, and although both Rayne and Penny meticulously include how much particular professions pay, how, specifically, a woman is to go about entering those professions is mostly absent. In *Think and
Act, Penny suggests that women should “have protective unions, and a standard of prices,” alluding to the fact that although male workers in the United States have guilds and unions, women for the most part do not (Think 39). It is thus both uncertain how a woman might acquire employment previously un-held by women, and how she might be adequately payed for that or any other employment.

The plight of Virginia Penny herself suggests that books like hers did not necessarily help women achieve more financial independence. Over twenty years after the publication of Think and Act, an article concerning Virginia Penny appeared in the New York Times. Its author lauds Penny and her work, explaining that “she worked for years with untiring zeal, regardless of home comforts and bodily health, devoting all her substance, time and brains to the one object, that of benefitting her sister women” (Beal 27). The article is not a pleasant retrospective, however, but “A Plea to Women” to help the now “old, poor, and homeless” Penny (Beal 27). She may have helped open “about four hundred channels in which respectable women can earn an independent livelihood,” but her poverty in old age suggests that little has changed in terms of women’s financial success in the last twenty or so years of the nineteenth century (Beal 27). Despite Penny’s at least partially successful pleas for more help and better wages for women, the accomplished, educated woman herself “has gradually sunk lower and lower into penury” (Beal 27). As we will see below, a greater number of jobs available to women does not necessarily translate to more women prepared or suited to enter new jobs, and while the above-discussed tomes are reactions to this proliferation of occupations, they do not always provide enough practical instruction for women to enter those occupations.
Alcott’s Work: Against Financial Independence

We can see the anxiety about accessibility to potential employments and one’s fitness for them evident in several of the works of Louisa May Alcott. Alcott’s autobiographical story “How I Went Out to Service,” initially published in The Independent in 1874 but concerning an event that took place in the 1850s, assumes a need for at least some girls to have occupations outside the home:

“What shall I do?” was still the question that perplexed me. I was ready to work, eager to be independent, and too proud to endure patronage. But the right task seemed hard to find, and my bottled energies were fermenting in a way that threatened an explosion before long. (“How” 806, original emphasis)

She describes both a desire to be “independent” and “bottled energies” that frame work as primarily elective rather than financially necessary for her; Alcott depicts her younger self as middle class and attempting to work within middle-class women’s rules of propriety. She acknowledges that

the highly respectable relatives held up their hands in holy horror at the idea of one of the clan degrading herself by going out to service. Teaching a private school was the proper thing for an indigent gentlewoman. Sewing even, if done in the seclusion of home and not mentioned in public, could be tolerated. Story-writing was a genteel accomplishment and reflected credit upon the name. But leaving the paternal roof to wash other people’s teacups, nurse other people’s ails, and obey other people’s orders for hire—this, this was degradation; and headstrong Louisa would disgrace her name forever if she did it. (“How” 808)
Alcott describes extremely limited employment options for a middle-class woman that seem expanded even by the time of this story’s publication, in that the above description of the “proper thing for an indigent gentlewoman” suggests ridicule of mores seen as unduly strict by 1874, even if they were fairly common in 1850. However, the independence Louisa hopes to gain by going “out” to work in the home of a stranger seems hardly independent at all to the modern reader, despite the sidelong glances her sisters give her when she announces her decision. Indeed, it is very little like young Luke Larkin’s venturing to the Midwest on business in Horatio Alger’s *Struggling Upward*, and it reaffirms the class and gender strictures within which Alcott was forced to work.

Alcott further explores and expands on the experiences of “How I Went Out to Service” in the 1873 novel *Work: A Story of Experience*. With its first lines announcing a “new Declaration of Independence,” Alcott’s *Work* portrays female work as a potentially enjoyable choice rather than an unfortunate necessity, depicting its heroine rejecting marriage, leaving her family, and voluntarily entering employment outside the home (*Work* 5). This first scene of the novel is rife with ambiguity about financial gain; the aforementioned heroine, Christie, wishes to “seek [her] fortune” (5), but is also intent on leaving a town “where the one idea is eat, drink, and get rich” (6). A page or so later, Christie again wants to “get rich,” though she acknowledges a flight of fancy in this desire (8). Christie here exhibits dueling ideas of financial and personal independence that her uncle quickly ridicules as irreconcilable; using the language of finance, he tells Christie that her ideas are “poor capital to start a fortin’ on” and warns that her “redic’lus notions about independence and self-cultur won’t come to nothin’ in the long run” (10). Interestingly, Uncle Enos focuses his attention not on Christie’s attention to fortune, but on her competing attention to life beyond mere money. We can see Emerson’s influence here; as Boyd
explains, in Emerson’s philosophy “male and female children alike were instilled with a sense of ‘self-control’ and a ‘capacity for self-government’ that linked autonomy and dependence” (Boyd 18). In other words, young women as well as young men, according to Boyd, were gaining new senses of independence from the ideas of the Transcendentalists, and it is not difficult to surmise that Uncle Enos makes reference to these ideas here. For Christie, independence means financial independence, but it also involves a certain disregard for monetary gain that looks toward “a better sort of life than this dull one made up of everlasting work, with no object but money” (10). The whole first chapter of Work is money-obsessed, and Alcott places Christie problematically between desiring and renouncing financial gain. This initial money preoccupation could perhaps be a way for Alcott to signal Christie’s immaturity and set her character up for later development, but her uncomfortable maneuvering between income and independence continues through the first part of the novel, after which talk of money disappears almost completely.

The opening chapter of Alcott’s Work was initially published in several periodicals simultaneously, all apparently advertising Henry Ward Beecher’s Christian Union, where the remainder of the novel was to appear serially. Notably, the original subtitle for Work was “Christie’s Experiment,” not “A Story of Experience;” that original subtitle simultaneously gives the novel a sense of Christie’s conscious, free choice to leave home and lends a feeling that this choice is potentially temporary and could be a mistake. Indeed, Christie even tells herself, “‘If I fail, I can come back’” home, a statement which, though she does not ultimately exercise that option, lends credence to the sense that her decision need not be permanent and might not even be serious (Work 13). The term “Experiment” also lends itself to a sense of Christie’s independence from others (and potentially even masculinity), in its suggestions of objectivity and rationality. One contemporary review described Christie as “less feminine, without being
more masculine, than the ordinary heroine,” perhaps in part because of Christie’s aura of rational
independence (“Miss Alcott’s New Novel” 189). An even earlier, incomplete version of the
novel was called *Success*, including only the initial chapters in which Christie passes from one
occupation to another with varying degrees of monetary and spiritual success. These factors all
contribute to a sense that *Work* marks an important change in the “liberty,” as Alcott might put it,
of unmarried young women.

All of Christie’s initial jobs are taken in the name of independence over money itself;
upon leaving her uncle’s house with the $100 he gave her, “For a week she enjoyed her liberty
heartily, then set about finding something to do. Her wish was to be a governess, that being the
usual refuge for respectable girls who have a living to get” (Alcott 16). This combination of
respectability and money-making is key to Christie’s success, but it is difficult, while imperative,
to accomplish both at once. Luckily, as Carolyn Maibor explains, “the money [Uncle Enos] gives
[Christie] as a going-away gift buys Christie a week’s respite in the city and the flexibility to
refuse undesirable employment” (74). Indeed, being “respectable” even while needing to “get” a
“living” seems possible in a way in *Work* that is impossible in an earlier novel like *Ruth Hall*,
where a woman merely venturing outside to look for employment of any kind is viewed
suspiciously.24 Part of this possibility is related to a class status that Christie retains and Ruth has
at least partially lost; Maibor argues that Alcott’s opinions of work were often “tinged with the
hauteur of privilege,” and this privilege certainly contributes to the differences between the two
characters (Maibor 73). However, Fanny Fern and her character Ruth Hall, though perhaps less
well-supported by her family, are similarly privileged as Alcott and Christie, so this difference
between their search for employment is indicative of a change between the 1850s and 1870s in

24 *Ruth Hall* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.
ideas about women working outside the home. Alice Kessler-Harris argues in *Out to Work* that “the Civil War provided a background against which wage-earning women began to reevaluate their condition” (Kessler-Harris 75). While this condition was not always improved after the war, there was nonetheless a large enough number of women entering the workforce that a change in views of working women was inevitable.

Indeed, Christie’s successes and failures are repeatedly contingent on a kind of independent spirit and work ethic that are not apparent in the earlier *Ruth Hall*. Tara Fitzpatrick explains this phenomenon in terms of *Work*’s relationship to a market economy:

> In *Work*, Alcott reconciled her heroine’s struggle for self-reliance with the promised rewards of self-sacrifice by positing the very universality of access to success—complete with the accompanying moral baggage about desert and punishment—that the middle-class work ethic assumed. The market economy succeeded, in part, by persuading aspiring men to use self-denial as a means of promoting self-interest: save now to spend later, work now to rest later, defer happiness now to enjoy the greater rewards the future will surely hold.

(Fitzpatrick 37)

Christie’s independence, then, takes shape as a paradoxical independence from the “self-denial” of “the market economy” that men’s independence in this era seemed contingent on, even though her actions in later parts of the novel seem to embody an alternative type of “self-denial” not related to “self-interest.” Alcott moves her heroine from dreams of riches to those of a peaceful, all-female community dedicated to making all of its members financially independent through social dependence on one another. Fitzpatrick sees this move as a triumphant one for Alcott’s novel, arguing that “women’s labor for love proved the ideal model for a challenge to the ethic of
the capitalist marketplace that finally could pose little challenge at all” (Fitzpatrick 39). This “capitalist marketplace” is also unequivocally male; Alcott positions true success in terms of independence from men and dependence on other women for communal support, making men consistently peripheral as well as more and more silent as the novel progresses.

Alcott’s *Work* repeatedly suggests both that individual success is not possible, at least for women, and that it is not usually even desirable. After working and leaving several different jobs, Christie is still certain that “If [she] need[s] money, [she] can always earn it,” even to the point that she gives much of her “fortune” away before beginning work as a seamstress (Alcott 101-2). Christie nearly attempts suicide after she is unable to sell her sewing work and cannot pay her rent, and after she looks in on a wedding and thinks “it isn’t fair, it isn’t right, that she should have so much and I so little” (*Work* 123)! By this time Christie seems to have exhausted all of the employments for which she has aptitude, and finds herself in exactly the danger Virginia Penny describes in *Think and Act*:

> I believe there are very few women that would go astray if honest employments were provided for them at *living prices*. Much of the degradation, madness, and suicide, that we hear of among women, in the humbler walks of life, arises from a want of properly remunerated labor—from destitution—from a want of sympathy and guidance from those of their sex in the higher walks of life with whom they have to do. (*Think* 23, original emphasis)

Just as Alcott does, Penny lists both remuneration and “want of sympathy and guidance” as reasons for women’s failures, suggesting that the presence of either of these might help save a woman from “degradation, madness, and suicide.” Money does not automatically come with happiness, despite Christie’s childhood fantasies of riches and fame; beginning new work, she...
finds that “her own heart [is] very solitary” and she is “tired of thinking only of [her]self” (Work 104–5). Christie’s downfall leading to her near-suicide begins with loneliness after she loses her sewing job along with the friend she has unsuccessfully vouched for (108). Soon afterward, “a wearisome low fever broke both strength and spirit, and brought the weight of debt upon her when least fitted to bear or cast it off” (117). Although Christie is impoverished due to the fact that she has been unable to work while ill and “if one steps out from the ranks of needle-women it is very hard to press in again, so crowded are they, and so desperate the need of money,” the real problem is a more spiritual one (122). As Alcott’s narrator explains, “it is not always want, insanity, or sin that drives women to desperate deaths; often it is a dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation” (118). This moment seems to mark a change in the novel from emphasis on income to focus on friendship as a root of success. On the brink of jumping to her death, Christie wonders: “Why should I work and suffer any longer for myself alone” (123)? For both Alcott and Penny, it seems that non-monetary help from others in the form of sympathy, friendship, or encouragement is as important for women’s success as sufficient wages and humane work conditions.

We see the question of emotional support repeated in the case of Rachel, the “fallen” girl to whom Christie becomes a lifelong friend. Rachel’s ignominious exit from the mantua-making shop is notable for the way she is universally shunned by her female coworkers, with the result that “her face grew hard, and a reckless mood seemed to take possession of her, as if finding herself deserted by womankind, she would desert her own womanhood” (Work 109). Trouble comes, for both Christie and Rachel, when they find themselves “deserted by womankind,” because “no one can live without a bit of love” (109). Similarly to Christie, Rachel is in this
predicament because she has insisted on being independent; as her brother David eventually explains,

She wanted to go away and support herself. *You* know the feeling; and I need not tell you how the proud, high-hearted creature hated dependence, even on a brother who would have worked his soul out for her. She *would* go, and we had faith in her. For a time she did bravely; but life was too hard for her; pleasure too alluring, and, when temptation came in the guise of love, she could not resist. (265, original emphasis)

Due to the girls’ own stubborn insistence on independence, refusing help keeps both Rachel and Christie from financial as well as emotional success. Not only is it difficult for both women to find adequate remuneration for their work, but they are also without networks of friends or patrons to vouch for them professionally or give them social support, ultimately leading to even more difficulty finding paid work.

This particular lack of access to success is not simply fictional; in her book *Think and Act*, Virginia Penny echoes many of Alcott’s sentiments about the causes of working women’s poverty and moral ruin. Penny explains that, as in the case of Alcott’s Christie, “it is the utter loneliness, and uncertainty of a home, from day to day, that drives many to desperation” (*Think* 23). Her book proposes “the opening of new employments” for women (25) as well as a “union or society among women to keep up the regular standard of prices” for their work (82). This “union or society,” in Penny’s view, would both improve wages and stave off loneliness. In fact, Penny’s experience even parallels Christie’s (and Alcott’s, to some extent) experience working outside the home:
A severe struggle, in poor health, for several years, to obtain a livelihood among strangers, alone and unaided, taught me the bitter experience of a woman thrown upon her own resources without practical training. A thorough English education enabled me to teach school, and so maintain myself. (Think 120-1)

It is difficult to find further biography of Penny, other than that she was born in Louisville, Kentucky, attended a seminary in Steubenville, Ohio, and “used her inheritance to fund the 1863 printing of her book” (Gensemer 331). Alcott’s Christie never teaches school or writes for a living, which makes her perhaps even more vulnerable to poverty and ruin than Penny or Alcott. To help others succeed better than she did, Penny suggests that more “Ladies’ Benevolent Organizations” be established to help young, friendless women looking for work in cities (Think 208). Penny herself ran an employment agency “for the purpose of aiding ladies and girls in securing employment in all the various branches of labor except domestic service” (“Ladies’ Employment Agency” 4, original emphasis). For Penny, as for Alcott’s characters, being alone and without friends is perhaps even more dangerous than being without “practical training,” and groups of other women who “have leisure” are best positioned to help such friendless women (Think 209). The poverty with which Penny ended her life (pleas to help her were published in newspapers in both 1895 and 1902) suggests that Penny was perhaps as devoid of friends as Christie is at her lowest point in Work, and dependent on strangers for her very survival (Beal 27, Gensemer 333).

Christie’s exit from paid work via near-suicide attempt marks a change in the novel from episodic to sentimental, and Alcott frames Christie’s sentimental development as preferable to her previous desires for financial independence. As Tara Fitzpatrick explains:
The lessons Alcott has Christie learn in the world of paid work seem at the outset to point to the necessity for enlarging women’s opportunities for meaningful work and independent livelihood. But from the moment that Christie realizes the merciless economy of the moral marketplace (it is, after all, Rachel’s chastity and not her productivity that is in question), she turns away from the public world and embraces instead the sentimental economy of family love and women’s friendships. (Fitzpatrick 34)

Importantly, the definition of “independence” itself changes with Christie’s move toward a “sentimental economy” (Fitzpatrick 34). Late in the novel, confronted with the choice to, as Mrs. Wilkins puts it, “marry for a livin’” (Work 252), Christie eventually decides, “I do love luxury and pleasure, but I love independence more” (270). This “independence” is much more clearly divided from financial considerations than it was in Christie’s “new Declaration of Independence” set forth in chapter one, even to the point of equating wealth with imprisonment. Indeed, “independence” becomes much less easily defined, and for Christie involves relying on others for emotional, if not financial, support much more than she did before. At the end of the novel, Christie muses, “Nearly twenty years since I set out to seek my fortune. It has been a long search, but I think I have found it at last. I only asked to be a useful, happy woman, and my wish is granted: for, I believe I am useful; I know I am happy” (329, original emphasis). The word “fortune,” like the word “independence,” has by this point in the novel become completely non-monetary, and fortune’s ability to make Christie “happy” seems contingent on its divorce from money. According to Fitzpatrick, Alcott “sought to address the problems of alienation, exploitation, and oppression—for women and for men, for all classes—by providing a reward for labor that was outside the normal economy of capitalist exchange” (Fitzpatrick 31). Christie
could, perhaps, have found financial success on her own, but the novel repeatedly makes it clear that individual pecuniary success, at least for women, is incomplete and perhaps even immoral, and therefore undesirable.

Questions of enlarging women’s opportunities to make money do not completely disappear from the novel, however; when Christie visits “one of the many meetings of working-women,” she finds a need for various classes of women to support one another better, and feels uniquely positioned, much like Virginia Penny, to bridge the gap in understanding between “workers” and “ladies” (Work 330). Here, as in other parts of the novel, we see that “the powerlessness and exploitation endured by working women of all classes threatened to reveal what Alcott’s fiction tried at once to conceal and mitigate: that suffering and self-denial were not always rewarded with true love, domestic bliss, and release from the yoke of economic necessity” (Fitzpatrick 34). Alcott’s ending, specifically, attempts a mitigation of the powerlessness of which Fitzpatrick speaks by making various women into “a loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, each ready to do her part to hasten the coming of the happy end” (Work 43).

It appears that “the happy end” involves voting rights for women more than wage fairness, but it is perhaps ultimately about neither. The final chapter of Alcott’s novel is “composed almost entirely of women,” and places Christie as a sort of exceptional heroine among them (330). Alcott teases high-minded “ladies” who advocate “Ideal Republic[s]” or “revolutionary” suffrage or anti-capitalist “labor reforms,” suggesting that they are unable to reach working women simply looking for “better wages…now” (330-1, original emphasis). As Fitzpatrick explains, “Alcott’s fiction explicitly replaced economic rewards with domestic love as the ideal motive for work, thereby positing a potential equality of compensation that disguised
the very inequalities of power and condition that Work is at such pains to detail” (Fitzpatrick 31). As it is for Sarah Hale, work for Alcott seems best when it is not really related to money at all, and the hundreds of jobs offered up by Virginia Penny as suitable for women would, at best, be temporary and incomplete solutions to the problem of women’s independence. Similarly, the working women are depicted “displaying the ignorance, incapacity, and prejudice, which make their need all the more pitiful, their relief all the more imperative” (Work 330). Christie becomes a kind of medium between these “ladies” and “women,” an “interpreter between the two classes,” herself occupying neither role, somehow (334). This placement of Christie in the final chapter as neither quite lady nor quite worker is the first explicit discussion of her role among other women, although she has occupied this role throughout the novel. Alcott acknowledges the difficulties for women like Christie in an ostensibly “democratic” society, explaining that

Such women were much needed and are not always easy to find; for even in democratic America the hand that earns its daily bread must wear some talent, name, or honor as an ornament, before it is very cordially shaken by those that wear white gloves. (334)

This late point in the novel is the first to reference success in terms of democracy, and positions Christie as the woman who essentially, as a medium between the spenders and the earners, helps democracy to function. This sentence also essentially negates the possibility for economic self-making, as those who earn their money cannot rise on that money alone, but need literal or figurative introductions to higher society. It seems for Alcott, here, that hindrances to success depend more on initial social position than on one’s sex, and that success, whether self-made or not, is almost completely divorced from the financial by the end of Work.
Buckingham’s *A Self-Made Woman*: Skimming the Surface of Success

However, Alcott’s non-monetary views on self-made success, whether male or female, were not necessarily shared by other authors of her time. The preface to Emma May Buckingham’s 1873 novel, *A Self-Made Woman* acknowledges that there are far too few applications of the phrase “self-made” to women and insists that her heroine, Mary Idyl, “was really self-taught” (Buckingham 9). Insistences like this one call to mind Horatio Alger’s stories of seemingly self-induced male success, such as that of Luke Larkin in *Struggling Upward*, in that financial success, especially, is a product of a bit of hard work and significant innate talent, combined with no small amount of luck, all of which are credited to the young man himself to make him “self-made.” As the end of *Struggling Upward* explains, “there has been some luck about it, I admit, but after all [Luke] is indebted for most of his good fortune to his own good qualities” (Alger 280). Although Buckingham emphasizes that “those of [her] sex” should work toward “a higher moral and intellectual life,” the intended outcomes of this struggle appear more material in nature, including “fame, wealth, love, and luxuriant ease” (9-10). Moreover, the listed goals are not only mostly material, but also highly individual, marking an important change from Alcott’s in other ways quite similar novels of female success. Although Buckingham’s novel has a somewhat similar plot and covers nearly the exact years that *Work* does (and was published in the same year), Buckingham’s protagonist has a much more individually, financially successful outcome than does Alcott’s. In the novel, Mary, like Christie in *Work*, declares a sort of independence from her family by asserting her “desire to enter Hope College” against the wishes of her father, eliciting a violent quarrel between them that Mary’s “frightened mother” cannot mediate (Buckingham 29-31). Whereas Christie makes partial amends with her uncle before departing his home, Mary’s father explodes at her suggestion that she enter college (for
somewhat unclear reasons, since it is hard to see what he prefers that she do), “angrily exclaiming—‘You are no child of mine! Leave this house immediately! I do not wish to see you again; yet do not come back begging to me when starvation comes, for I shall be deaf to your entreaties’” (31). Clearly in part to emphasize the heroine’s truly “self-made” character, Buckingham heightens the drama of the young girl’s departure and makes what was essentially an “experiment” in Work into a radical and potentially disastrous decision in her novel. Mary’s father “has forgiven” her less than halfway through the novel, however, and her mother explains his ire as a result of the fact that “he could not bear to have [her] go out into the world as a teacher,” for still unexplained reasons (78).

In the tradition of Frances Cogan’s Real Womanhood, Mary Idyl is met with several choices between career and heterosexual love, and feels free to reject at least one proposal of marriage. One of Mary’s early jobs is as a teacher, despite her father’s disapproval, but she finds romantic intrigue rather than professional opportunities there. In response to a declaration of love from the rakish brother of her young pupils, Mary replies that she “cannot love anything excepting [her] studies and profession. [Her] heart is wedded to [her] books, and shall remain thus until [her] education shall be completed” (54, original emphasis). As Cogan explains, “to the writers advocating Real Womanhood, marriage was the central act of most women’s lives, and it was one to be undertaken with the utmost seriousness,” but contrary to sentimental writers’ depictions of marriage, “the choice to marry and of a partner was the result, these writers hoped, of a surgical, hardheaded, and even cold-blooded investigation and assessment” (Cogan 103). While professing that it is her education preventing matrimony, Mary also marks the differences in their wealth as problematic for love and marriage. Indeed, education, love, money, and even physical attractiveness never seem too far from one another anywhere in the novel, and all are
positioned as individual rather than communal achievements. Mary consistently tells people about her determination to succeed by her “own exertions,” even refusing aid from others (mostly well-meaning men) in a way one would not see Christie Devon doing (Buckingham 71).

As Cogan would no doubt observe, we can see Penny’s and other advice writers’ influences in the novel’s claims to be written for “America’s young daughters” who “must strive to fit themselves for the position…for women in the new ‘Golden Age’ that is dawning,” but this “Golden Age” seems to be one of strenuous acquisitiveness more than anything else (Buckingham 341). While Penny repeatedly reminds her readers how difficult achieving success is for women, Mary’s story takes her fairly easily from one success to another, and wealth is virtually piling up by the end of the novel, from the “liberal” salary she receives from her Southern employer (whom she eventually marries) (Buckingham 108) to her namesake’s dying bequest of $20,000 (254), to her own discovery of “a rich vein of coal” on her father’s land (259), to the publication of a novel to great acclaim (273). Additional accomplishments in art and reading aloud add to Mary’s wealth and self-made attractiveness until she becomes an almost unbelievable success. Further, unlike Christie Devon, who finds her own version of success only after she begins work outside of the marketplace, Mary Idyl is still writing for money and acclaim at the end of *A Self-Made Woman* despite her “handsome income” from mining and the fact that her “‘Phoenix’…has already reached its twentieth edition” (Buckingham 337-8). Mary notes that “money is a wonderful passport into fashionable society” and seems to prefer the role of “heiress” to that of “poor governess” (272, original emphases).

Despite its abovementioned similarities to Alcott’s *Work*, Buckingham’s novel is not necessarily typical of woman-authored novels of the 1870s, in that it seems to rely on its protagonist’s superficial qualities more than its contemporaries. In fact, one contemporary
review of it calls it a “queer book, made up of odd compounds, which has somehow found a New York publisher” (“Literature”). The reviewer goes on to call it “the simplest form of a narrative, without a plot, and possessing no well-drawn characters. Even the aim of the book is missed, since it gives no evidence of ‘a high intellectual life.’” Most of the reviewers’ critiques are valid, as the novel professes Mary Idyl’s brilliance much more than it shows it, and the heroine encounters no major obstacles to success other than her brief Jane Eyre-esque rivalry with a Southern Belle for the attentions of a wealthy congressman. The aspects of the novel critiqued, however, are notable in that the novel’s feasibility is never in question; in fact, the reviewer says “she had the usual struggle” (“Literature”). It seems, then, that while the book may be “queer” in its construction and execution, its content is more “usual,” suggesting that Mary’s attempts to educate herself and become successful in the name of individual “fame” or “wealth” may not be out of the ordinary for a novel heroine, or even perhaps a middle-class girl, in the 1870s (Buckingham 10). Indeed, in her preface to the novel, Buckingham frames its purpose as much like those of Virginia Penny or M.L. Rayne in their books of employments:

I have also, another object in presenting this work to the public, namely, to benefit the large class of working-women who are bravely endeavoring to earn a livelihood for themselves and others.

There are hundreds among them whose personal appearance, and health and talents as well, are of a higher order than Mary Idyl’s; yet, because they lack her energy and indomitable perseverance, they are still held down by the iron hand of penury, of oppression.
Like my heroine, they are capable of winning fame, wealth, love, and luxuriant ease, if they will only arouse themselves and follow her example.

(Buckingham 10)

Penny might not agree that financial success was simply a matter of “indomitable perseverance,” but would perhaps agree that it was one indispensable factor of women’s professional success because such success was so difficult for women at this time.

However, Buckingham and her contemporaries such as Alcott and Penny would likely not agree with her opinions on the importance of “personal appearance, and health” to one’s success. Interestingly, the few positive reviews of Buckingham’s novel appear in places like Forest & Stream, which praises it specifically for “a strong argument in this work in favor of obeying the laws of hygiene and the hopes of the most salutary results,” as well as The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health, which advertised all of the editions of the novel and favorably reviewed both it and her next novel. Indeed, the publisher of A Self-Made Woman seems to have specialized in works of self- and home-improvement, as several pages of advertisements for “Works on Phrenology and Physiognomy,” “Works of Physiology and Hygiene,” and “Works for Home Improvement” follow the novel (Buckingham 344-7).

In fact, as Jaime Alves has explored further, A Self-Made Woman’s greatest strengths perhaps lie in its now problematic depiction of not intellectual or financial, but physical self-improvement. Concurrent with Mary Idyl’s intellectual improvement, aided by scholarships and a benevolent namesake aunt, come extreme body alterations, one of which is a limb straightening “by having the cords slightly cut, then held straight by instruments of steel for a season” (Buckingham 80). In fact, Mary endures several painful cosmetic procedures including an early form of dental braces, in a process of physical self-improvement that Alves says “suggests how
nineteenth-century America’s massive self-culture movement was by turns available and unavailable to women and how women with non-standard bodies might have grappled with that movement’s edicts and availed themselves of its methods” (Alves 103). Critical praise, as Alves observes, frequently discusses the “malformed” girl who develops into a “triumphant woman” and makes frequent use of the word “hygiene” (103-4). Although I agree with Alves’s assessment of the novel’s troubling celebration of deformity eradication, I am more interested in Mary’s superficial than her psychological purposes for these “improvements.” Despite her allegedly extremely high intellect for seemingly all subjects, as well as her claim to popular authorship, Mary’s success seems contingent on her physical alterations in a manner it likely would not be for her male counterpart. Mary must not simply educate herself through adversity; she must also make extreme alterations to her body if she is to be successful. Indeed, “although Buckingham lingers over the details of surgical procedure, discomfort and inconvenience, she also communicates the idea that these periods of suffering are ultimately tolerable, safe, and completely worthwhile—perhaps even recommended for other females similarly afflicted” (Alves 115).

It seems that for Buckingham, the popular mantra “beauty is pain” extends to another: beauty leads to wealth, which is the ultimate goal. Although Mary’s physical alteration may help her with marriage prospects, there is no evidence that it directly leads to the financial success she enjoys, as much of it comes from anonymous or pseudonymous work from home. This mantra also departs from Penny’s view, in Think and Act, that women should “cultivate the beauty of the heart, then of the mind, then of the person” (Think 256). Alcott’s Work, too, suggests that happiness and friendship are more important than beauty, and beauty is very little discussed in any but the “Actress” chapter, in which we learn “that to a cultivated eye the soul of beauty was
often visible in that face of [Christie’s], with its intelligent eyes, sensitive mouth, and fine lines about the forehead” and Christie’s friend tells her she has “a lovely figure, and as an actress’s best feature,--fine eyes and eyebrows” (Work 38). As it appears in one of the earlier chapters of Alcott’s novel, this discussion of Christie’s beauty should be seen as less important than later descriptions of the protagonist, seeing as though it is part of her more superficial, money-conscious period rather than the postbellum, more admirable period. Nonetheless, it is difficult to compare Mary with Christie; as Alves explains, “Buckingham’s novel suggests how nineteenth-century America’s massive self-culture movement was by turns available and unavailable to women and how women with non-standard bodies might have grappled with that movement’s edicts and availed themselves of its methods,” and perhaps Christie’s “self-culture” simply did not need to involve physical alteration in the way that Mary’s did (Alves 103). Both novels, however, seem to follow the idea, as expressed in Cogan’s All-American Girl, “that physical well-being, vigorous health, and physical fitness are the source not of ‘commonness’ but of true (as opposed to false) beauty” (Cogan 31, original emphasis). The wan, weakly damsel commonly seen in Victorian literature fit neither Alcott nor Buckingham’s ideals of female beauty or success, to the extent in Buckingham’s case that her heroine must change her physical body to become more fit and healthy.

Conclusion: An Imperfect Independence?

Whether or not major cosmetic surgery was necessary, there is a sense, based on the above-discussed texts, that women could, with difficulty but not necessarily at detriment to their social standings, find success through non-domestic work. As Alice Kessler-Harris explains in her important book Out to Work,
During the war large numbers of women—contemporaries estimated about 300,000—who might otherwise never have sought jobs entered the labor market. Lacking the financial support of men who had been drafted into the army, and without industrial work experience, they were particularly vulnerable. And although the Civil War expanded job opportunities for some women—opening clerical jobs in government to them, legitimizing nursing as a profession, and dramatically increasing the number of female teachers—it did not benefit all. (76)

In truth, many women needed or wanted to earn money, but “the influx of women into the labor force during the Civil War outpaced the additional work available” (Kessler-Harris 77). As Virginia Penny and others showed, expanded job opportunities existed, but many women lacked sufficient education or training for them, and continued to struggle against negative views of women working outside the home.

The texts discussed above do not always do well explaining how a young, middle-class woman who wanted a profession might train for and achieve one, but they do provide hope for such a woman that a professional life is possible, if only because they show that other women have already proven so. However, women’s successes in professions continued to compete against successes as wives and mothers at home, with a common claim that the two could not coincide in one person. Of the five women responsible for the texts discussed in this chapter, only two, Sarah Hale and M.L Rayne, ever married or had children.25 Penny’s observations about “marriages…becoming more rare,” thus increasing the number of unmarried women, both rich

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25 Hale spent most of her long adult life in widowhood, caring for five children without the financial or emotional support of a husband. A short biography of Rayne notes that “not only was she a successful working woman, but she was a working mother, too” (“Martha Louise Rayne”).
and poor, who need employment (Think 111), predate by thirty years Gilman’s acknowledgment in *Women and Economics* that

Now that she is a person as well as a female, filling economic relation to society, she is welcomed and accepted as a human creature, and need not marry the wrong man for her bread and butter. So sharp is the reaction from this unlovely yoke that there is a limited field of life to-day wherein women choose not to marry, preferring what they call “their independence,”—a new-born, hard-won, dear-bought independence. That any living woman should prefer it to home and husband, to love and motherhood, throws a fierce light on what women must have suffered for lack of freedom before. (Gilman 91)

This “independence” is not always, and perhaps not even usually, independence from marriage, but this complicated goal for postbellum women seems to be at least partially achieved through new or newly sanctioned forms of employment outside the home, within or without the bonds of marriage. Nonetheless, marriageability remained paramount to middle-class white women’s respectability, especially when they chose to engage in non-domestic work. As we will see in the next chapter, popular women authors used themselves and their characters as examples of women who could harmoniously combine domesticity with their careers without detriment to either.
Chapter Two: Authoring the “Authoress”: Women Writers’ Self-Made Success

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of authorship for women’s professions in the nineteenth century. As we have seen in the previous chapter, nineteenth-century guidebooks on women’s potential professions feature authorship prominently and suggest it is both the most accessible and often most lucrative work for women. According to Ann Boyd, by the 1860s and ‘70s “many women had already become famous as authors” and “the realm of literature was deemed by many male critics and writers to be dominated by women, who had extended their powerful roles as wives and mothers into the public sphere” (Writing for Immortality 2). Further, in her 1862 Employments of Women, Virginia Penny points out that “the number of women authors is much greater than one unacquainted with the statistics in regard to the subject would suppose” and that “the success of women in works of fiction is unquestioned” (Employments 4). This chapter enters into the by now lengthy and complex critical conversation surrounding nineteenth-century women authors and their literary successes, considering the ways in which women authors maneuvered and manipulated one of the only legitimate (and sometimes lucrative) professions for them, as well as the ways in which they depicted their fictional characters doing so. While at least a dozen critical monographs have been published on the subject of nineteenth-century women in the writing profession, they have tended to focus on individual writers finding artistic success within male-controlled culturally elite publications, and less emphasis has been placed on writing for popular publications as an avenue for middle-class women’s financial independence, albeit one that was more difficult than some popular literature of the time might make it seem.26

Though much has been said about a few important women writers of the nineteenth century, some of whom are discussed in this chapter, I am interested here in the ways in which these women’s works both paved the way for a culture of women becoming financially independent through writing and in many cases showed through their writing that this culture was already being or had been established. Additionally, I assert that one key to women writer’s success was their self-definition, not as artists or amateurs, but as “authoresses” who fell somewhere between the two categories, able to both achieve success and (at least some) respect as professional writers, but also capable of retaining their important home lives. At the same time, this chapter will also argue for the rarity of financially successful professional women writers; as critics have repeatedly shown, the large number of women writing during and after the Civil War did not necessarily equate to individual financial success for the majority of these women.

The nineteenth century was a difficult time for an American woman wanting to become a serious writer. However, as is clear from the huge bulk of literary production by women during this time, not all women writers were especially concerned with seriousness, and many were able to earn substantial livings writing for popular publication.27 From the middle of the century onward, magazines such as Godey’s and Harper’s published dozens of stories written by now unknown, unnamed, or pseudonymous female authors, many of whom addressed the subject of the “authoress,” a character who has been overlooked by recent criticism on female authors.28 These stories in large part depict women capitalizing upon, with various degrees of success, the

27 According to Shelley Streeby, women also wrote “about one-third of the Beadle’s dime novels that were published from 1860 to 1865” and during the Civil War, women were “clearly among the most prominent and successful authors” of these dime novels (Streeby 229).
28 Discussion of this criticism appears later in this chapter.
widening opportunities for publication along with the potential social repercussions of those opportunities.

This chapter explores female independence and economic success as depicted by women writers of the later nineteenth century, specifically in works about female authorship itself. I’d like to consider women writers not simply as wage earners, but as independent wealth makers whose identities are built around the work they do, specifically in terms of the money they make. Many literary critics have considered writing for, about, and by women during the mid-nineteenth century in the realm of “domestic fiction” or “sentimental fiction,” whether it be a refuge from, reconciliation with, or female translation of masculine speculative capitalism.\(^\text{29}\) However, few consider women’s writing of the 1850s and beyond in terms of either financial or personal self-making, perhaps because whether in the “domestic” or popular veins, women’s writing of the nineteenth century was rarely either lucrative enough to be considered a profession or esoteric enough to be considered high art.

Taking a cue from my coverage in Chapter One of women wage-earners, I first consider a specific popular woman author who writes about writing: Fanny Fern. Although her success came at least a decade before that of the other authors in this chapter, I begin with Fern for a few reasons. First, Fern’s *Ruth Hall* is one of the earliest examples of novels specifically about a woman’s financial success. Second, the novel introduces many of the problems associated with middle-class, white women becoming authors such as association with less savory types of “public” women, problems that continued in some measure through the end of the century. *Ruth Hall* serves as an important precursor to later stories about women writers, and reveals some of

the changes that occurred around the Civil War to make women’s writing for money more socially sanctioned.

Then, focusing on women writers as a group, I explore the use of the term “authoress” within periodicals of the 1860s and ‘70s as an already codified term bringing with it many gender and class associations, most of them pejorative. Susan S. Williams, in Reclaiming Authorship, thoughtfully parses the terms “writer” and “author” as they were used by women of the later-nineteenth century, suggesting that women writers to some extent controlled and manipulated these terms to their own ends. However, she does not address the very commonly used and often pejorative term “authoress,” which I consider in depth here as falling between the amateur, scribbling “writer” and professional, high-culture “author” described by Williams, a woman specifically motivated by the monetary benefits of writing who would often be dismissed by both “writer” and “author.” As we will see, women writers discussing “the authoress” or using her as a character self-consciously attempt to question and expand upon the term in mostly unoriginal but occasionally unique and humorous ways.

I primarily investigate the “authoress” as depicted by woman magazine authors themselves, who self-consciously and sometimes even ironically questioned and reconfigured the categories of women writers in order to socially and financially profit from those depictions. While significant work has been done discussing women writers’ self-distancing from often lucrative but intellectually suspect magazine writing in favor of the high art of publications like Atlantic Monthly, few critics have dealt with the pseudonymous and anonymous popular magazine authors who wrote specifically about themselves and others like them. Looking at magazine stories and articles of the nineteenth century that specifically discuss the “authoress,” this chapter attempts to fill that gap and discuss the ways in which she was considering herself in
terms of other types of woman authors. I reclaim the term “authoress” from its negative connotations, arguing that although considered by many to be a demeaning term, the “authoress” nonetheless also connoted a woman who was in many ways more successful than either the “scribbler” as she was popularly termed, or the serious, professional woman author. Further, “authoresses” themselves in many cases apparently took ownership of their categorization, dreaming not of “immortality,” as Anne Boyd says of Alcott and others, but of both the social respectability and pecuniary success brought by writing.

**Writing Independence: *Ruth Hall* and Women’s Necessary Success**

Although this study focuses on postbellum literature, a look at women’s literature in the preceding decades helps us understand the changes to ideas about women making money taking place in that period. In her recent book, *Panic Fiction*, on novels written by women during and about the financial panics of the 1830s and ‘50s, Mary Templin discusses women’s increased economic roles within their families in the wake of financial ruin. In a large number of cases, Templin asserts, woman characters in this fiction are overwhelmingly both victimized by and the primary solutions to their husbands’ or fathers’ financial collapses. She explains that one “aim of most Northern panic novels was to lessen middle-class women’s economic and social vulnerability by envisioning expanded economic power within domestic roles and by portraying women themselves as important agents of financial recovery” (Templin 20). At the same time, the “strengthened… economic power of the domestic realm” rarely extended beyond that domesticity, as Templin explains (107).
Templin further describes the ways that women in panic fiction who are forced to earn money for their families usually take domestic employments that rarely push the bounds of a proper occupation for a middle-class young woman. And those bounds were fairly tight; citing historian Jeanne Boydston, Templin points to the fact that “female producers and wage laborers were increasingly marginalized in representations of the marketplace” as the nineteenth century progressed, and that “‘femaleness’ was defined by ‘absence from the work place’ or domesticity” (Templin 111). We will see this dynamic played out in the articles and stories discussed below, wherein any level of assertiveness allies women undesirably with masculinity and authors must, even several decades after the period Templin covers, convince readers that it might be possible for women to have jobs outside the home, not to mention desirable. Further, these occupations were almost entirely engaged in for the specific good of the household, never for individual monetary gain. We will come back to this idea in our discussion of Ruth Hall, but as Templin explains, panic fictions, as well as most other fictions written in the 1850s and 60s and beyond, “keep women in the home, managing their households, caring for those in need, and supporting family members” (122). When unavoidably employed either within or outside a home, women of this period are nonetheless nearly always bringing the entire proceeds home to their impoverished families. Additionally, even “those who do portray women as producers […] tend to either cling to older models of female labor in the face of changing circumstances or feel compelled to characterize their female heroines’ labor as exceptional, not as a model for women’s economic participation” (Templin 120).

Despite her acknowledgement that the woman characters of panic fiction rarely leave the domestic sphere, Templin’s analysis makes a key departure from that of critics like Joseph Fichtelberg and Ann Douglas, who point to the female, domestic sphere as a kind of sentimental
refuge from the impersonal, male-run marketplace; she instead asserts that women in these financial fictions, with their often reasonable rather than sentimental reactions to male family members’ financial demises, elicited logical responses from readers rather than sentimental ones. As she explains,

> Contending that women’s economic agency is warranted by their rationality contradicts centuries-old characterizations of women as guided by emotion rather than reason and inferior to men in logical thinking. Panic authors reverse this hierarchy by pointing to the irrationality of man-made speculative economics and depicting the male speculator as the embodiment of irrational economic behavior. (Templin 119)

Even with their only minimal forays into economics, then, the women of panic fiction show, in Templin’s view, that they are both rational and economically savvy, qualities which would traditionally be attributed to men but which disappear among them during times of financial panic. Thus women are framed as the rational parties in these novels, but only temporarily and only by necessity. By association, the woman authors depicting these fictions also ally themselves with such rationality; Anna Bartlett Warner and Susan Bogert Warner, for example, “knew the hardships of financial failure firsthand” and “began writing in order to support themselves, their father, and their aunt,” thus taking on similar roles to the women they depict in their fictions (Templin 130).

Like the novels Mary Templin discusses in her book, Fanny Fern’s 1854 novel *Ruth Hall* follows a similar model of financial ruin caused by a male character followed by slow, arduous progress back to economic solvency thanks to the labors of a woman character. Like the women in several of those novels, the titular character Ruth enters the workforce only out of dire need
and only to provide for her family in the absence of financial help from relatives. This novel, although published much earlier than the other texts on which this study is based, is nonetheless an important starting point for a discussion of women made wealthy through their literary labors. In her introduction to the novel, Susan Belasco emphasizes the financial reasons for and results of women’s literary endeavors in the 1850s, explaining that while “women were taking advantage of the emerging vocational opportunities in publishing for women,” their most common purpose for such literary engagement was “economic survival” and even “dire economic necessity” (Belasco xxx). Belasco distinguishes Fern’s novel from others of its time by describing it as “the experience of the woman who is not a wife” and a “way in which the ‘domestic tale’ in its usual configuration could go significantly awry” (xxxvii). Fern’s positioning of the novel as “A Domestic Tale of the Present Time” may be in part ironic, but it is important to consider the extent to which Ruth’s literary endeavors are solely attempts to secure domestic harmony for herself and her daughters; Ruth Hall is not about literary ambition or even a woman’s success in a man’s world, but, rather, a tale of economic survival that happens to be possible for a particular woman only through literary output.

Indeed, Ruth stays mainly in the domestic sphere, venturing away from home only to search for employment. However, even this minor public action is suggestive of impropriety; Ruth notes that

It was very disagreeable applying to the small papers, many of the editors of which, accustomed to dealing with hoydenish contributors, were incapable of comprehending that their manner towards Ruth had been marked by any want of that respectful courtesy due to a dignified woman. (Fern 155, my emphasis)
The reader may understand that Ruth is “dignified,” but by venturing out to “ask of strangers a favor which a brother’s heart has so coldly refused,” she inadvertently (but inevitably) allies herself with the “hoydenish” and others who, indeed, could be anyone from anywhere (155). Fern specifically refers to the city where Ruth attempts to submit her manuscripts as “the business streets,” marked by signs which are “hieroglyphics” to her. Ruth’s status as a middle-class woman is contingent on her lack of understanding of the male-run “streets,” but her life and livelihood depend on the opposite. Further, while contemplating a business arrangement with the publisher Mr. Walter, Ruth wonders, “would he not think her too indiscreet to be intrusted with his confidence? Would he not be apt to believe that she had not even sufficient discretion on which to base a business arrangement” (Fern 186)? Indiscretion here applies both to trusting a stranger and to attempting to do business with him, activities that cast Ruth in the same light as the aforementioned “hoydenish” masses or as someone who may not have “earned [her money] honestly,” as her mother-in-law suggests (238, original emphasis). The landlady, too, looks askance at the “’pressing business that Mis. Hall must have’” that requires her “’running round to offices and the like of that’” and moving too rapidly between home and “the street” (223). It is clear that for a woman of the 1850s, any appearance of public life or engagement with business damages her middle-class status as well as her moral reputation.

As we repeatedly see, the novel is much more preoccupied with money than it is with publishing, and the publication of Ruth’s first article is described as “employment” rather than “authorship” or some other less pecuniary term (Fern 160). Ruth’s process of writing mirrors that of other domestic work such as sewing; indeed, it would hardly matter what skill she possessed when
there was rent-room to pay, little shoes and stockings to buy, oil, paper, pens, and ink to find; and now autumn had come, she could not write with stiffened fingers, and wood and coal were ruinously high, so that even with this new addition to her labor, Ruth seemed to retrograde pecuniarily, instead of advancing; and Katy still away! She must work harder—harder. (Fern 170)

Writing, then, is the particular kind of toil that brings Ruth enough money to support her family rather than a vocation bringing her intellectual satisfaction. She is able to succeed, ultimately, because John Walter recognizes and is willing to pay her “market-value—to speak in business phrase—as a writer” (184). The change of Ruth’s pay from a wage to a salary adds a desirable degree of separation between her toiling body and her income; the lighter workload offered by Mr. Walter helps, in Weinstein’s terms, at least partially erase the signs of this particular type of work on her body (Weinstein 37). The ultimate sign of her success comes when Mr. Walter shows Ruth “a paper” stating that “Mrs. Ruth Hall, of ------, is entitled to one hundred shares of the Capital Stock of the Seton Bank” purchased with the proceeds of her book (Fern 269). Sudden income seems to offer a reprieve from writing rather than an incentive to do more, and the bank stock note signals the novel’s, and Ruth’s, successful conclusion. Although no one says overtly that Ruth will necessarily stop writing after the novel ends, her answer to her daughter’s question “’when I get to be a woman shall I write books, mamma?’” is “’God forbid’” because “’no happy woman ever writes,’” suggesting that with increased happiness (through substantial income) will come decreased writing (225).

It is clear from both the novel and writings about it that Fern was ambivalent about her position as a writer. In spite of her distinction of being one of the first well-paid women writers,
Fern seems to consider writing to be paid labor rather than vocation. In her article on Fanny Fern and literary proprietorship, Melissa Homestead explains that

> In the language of 1850s feminist reform, then, Fern, representing her own situation through that of her heroine, Ruth, had “purchased” herself out of bondage through her authorial labors, and she was entitled to rebuke those who had tried to keep her and other women economically “enslaved.”

(Homestead 224)

Writing, then, is a matter of “labor” by which one earns money enough to buy independence, a task that is only necessary for women and slaves at this time. And even, as Homestead notes, “while ‘Ruth Hall’ gains full possession of her self, her identity, and her literary property, the periodical circulation of Fanny Fern’s works troubled her self-possession and proprietorship and caused her identity to remain publicly suspended in a state of crisis” (Homestead 226). There was seemingly no comfortable, suitable, middle-class employment possible for Fern because circulation of her works left her identity and intellectual property exposed to the public, threatening both her reputation as a respectable woman and her income. These threats, though perhaps lingering, are not nearly so pronounced by the early 1870s, when Alcott is writing her best-known novels and stories. However, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, changes in the later nineteenth century with regards to the respectability of women writing were not all progressive ones.

**Authoring the “Authoress”**

To discuss nineteenth-century women writers is not particularly to enter new territory; women, as Susan Coultrap-McQuin notes in *Doing Literary Business*, “wrote nearly three-
quarters of all of the novels published” by 1872 (2). Anne Boyd adds to this that “public authorship was increasingly perceived as a feminine realm, corresponding to the rise in female readership” (Writing for Immortality 25). Further, as Gillian Brown so aptly puts it in Domestic Individualism, “women in the nineteenth century are in the peculiar position of wanting to be in a sphere they already both do and do not inhabit” (4). Although she is discussing the domestic sphere generally here, her observation seems to apply equally well to the literary world at this time, perhaps in part because much women’s literature was considered “domestic.” Despite having supplied the bulk of the publications by late in the century, women were nonetheless considered less important contributors to literature than men (Coultrap-McQuin 5). More recently, Anne Boyd has made an important contribution to the field, chronicling four women’s (including Alcott’s) attempts to enter the “high literary culture” represented by The Atlantic, and explaining that they “were part of a new generation of women writers who committed themselves to lives as artists and exhibited the highest aims available to them, dreaming of immortality as members of America’s emerging high literary culture” (Boyd 2). Boyd’s claims concerning this “new generation” are in some ways hindered by her attention to only four female writers, but there was nonetheless a burgeoning culture of women considering themselves writers along with wives, sisters, or mothers.

In addition to Coultrap-McQuin and Anne Boyd, several authors have written on nineteenth-century women’s authorship and publication in various contexts, mostly in terms of their attempts to stand alongside men in the world of serious, increasingly professional authorship. In her book on nineteenth-century literary women in America, for example, Susan S. Williams is careful to distinguish between the terms “author” and “writer” as they were used by literary women of that time. According to Williams, “some nineteenth-century women” went to
“great lengths…to claim the title ‘author’” (11). In her view, this term suggested a professionalism in some measure of opposition to the term “writer,” which was considered natural, nonmonetary, and a result of a “writer’s itch” (Williams 21). She notes that nineteenth-century essays on female authorship “contain terms as various as ‘novel-writers,’ ‘female writers,’ ‘literary females,’ ‘literary women,’ lady-novelists,’ ‘female novelists,’ ‘writing women,’ and ‘authors’” (21). However, she fails to address the popular use of the term “authoress” here, despite its nearly ubiquitous use in the nineteenth century to refer to any and all female writers.30 Anne Boyd, too, in an otherwise fairly comprehensive anthology she has compiled of women writing about writing, includes only a handful of anonymous or now little-known authors and no works with titles including the word “authoress” (Wielding the Pen v-xi).

This distancing by current critics of women writers from the term “authoress” would seem to be more than an oversight, especially in Williams’s case; in a chapter entitled “Defining Female Authorship” that includes so many of the aforementioned terms in use during the nineteenth century, the omission of “authoress” is either a silent rejection of the use of the term or a suggestion that those within the category of “authoress” simply do not fit among the women included in Williams’s study. The former possibility is somewhat unlikely, considering that, according to at least one scholar, “‘authoress’…was the accepted title of a female writer in 1863” and that Williams seems to be attempting an otherwise comprehensive inclusion of the various titles of the female writer whether pejorative or not (Meredith 477). Instead, this omission seems

30 The term “authoress” is not new to the nineteenth century; the Oxford English Dictionary lists its first usage as 1478, less than a century after the first use of the term “author” (“authoress”). However, the huge increase in numbers of women writing in the United States in the nineteenth century made the term much more visible than it had been previously. The OED notes that “The gender-neutral author is now often preferred,” but the word is still in use and not termed “archaic” by the OED (“authoress”).
a conscious decision to leave the “authoress” out of a consideration of nineteenth-century female authorship, suggesting that those termed “authoresses” (or perhaps those only ever termed “authoresses”) were somehow different from the women Reclaiming Authorship includes.

But in what ways were they different, and why do these differences preclude them from inclusion among the woman authors whose names we remember? It is perhaps easier to define the “authoress” by what she was not, based on descriptions of other types of women writers within stories concerning authoresses. For example, in the story “The Authoress,” published in Flag of Our Union in 1865 (which also published Fanny Fern a decade before as well as Louisa May Alcott at around this time), the first-person narrator illustrates the stereotype of the literary woman in order to work against it:

> a woman who takes the pen, must, figuratively be clad in masculine apparel, must lay aside all the attributes of womanhood. No matter what the facts are—
> theoretically, I am a large, angular woman in spectacles, with short dress, carpet-bag and umbrella, calfskin boots, blue yarn stockings, a sharp nose, and a sharper pen. (Beale 20)

This description mocks a commonly held view of women who write, not by proving its lack of validity so much as by distancing the “authoress” narrator from that characterization. The masculine, unattractive literary woman described in this passage may be a caricature, but it is not far from an accurate description of several of the most notable professional literary and intellectual women of the U.S., who, according to Boyd, “believed that women had to set themselves apart from ordinary women in order to be good writers” and could often “be described as ‘tomboys’” (Writing for Immortality 40). In contrast, the literary narrator of “The Authoress” repeatedly insists that she does not fit the stereotype of a female author, but also does
not necessarily decry that stereotype altogether. This and other stories involve the “authoress” obscuring her identity as literary person in order to avoid rejection by potential suitors, and usually end with an unmasking of the authoress along with a mild comeuppance for the suitor and (often) a marriage proposal. Perhaps most importantly, though, the heteronormative romance plot is necessary to reaffirm the authoress’s femininity that is automatically endangered by her successful and semi-public employment as a writer.

Buckingham’s *A Self-Made Woman* exhibits several similar traits to these “authoress” stories, especially near its conclusion, when Mary Idyl has become happily married and financially successful. Mary initially hides her authorship from her husband, determined that she “will not tell him until [she has] shown him that [she] can preside over his house gracefully and well,” after he spouts the typical male criticism of an “authoress” (274-5). Indeed, before he is aware that the author of ‘Phoenix’ is his wife, Mary’s husband’s description of the imagined Lyra Glenwild is nearly identical to other published caricatures of messy, distracted authoresses:

> I presume, we should find her surrounded by a perfect chaos of books, furniture, papers, children—to say nothing of inky fingers, uncombed hair, soiled, slatternly dress, and faded, woe-begone face; her children ill taught and unpresentable; her husband in soiled linen (minus buttons)[…]were we at this moment to visit her unannounced— (Buckingham 273)

Notably, though, Lloyd’s caricature makes the authoress a bad housekeeper, but not an overly masculine woman. It seems that “women of genius should never marry” not because they are unwomanly, but because they are simply untidy due to the distractions of writing (274). This is a departure from other depictions of the authoress, including those of Alcott, in that Mary is never
depicted as masculine or tomboyish, and her femininity is not threatened by either her education or her writing.

However, critics are often quick to ascribe women’s success in literary business to some form of gender-bending or other subversive behavior, and at times these arguments have merit, in that some women did help extend their agency by various forms of subversion. For example, as Daniel A. Cohen has shown in his 2010 article, there were at least a few women writing about female economic independence as early as the 1850s. Cohen specifically analyzes the “half a dozen tales that [Winnie Woodfern] placed in the True Flag between 1853 and 1856 about teenage girls who display masculine traits, violate conventional gender norms, and struggle to fulfill high literary or artistic ambitions” (Cohen 86). While Cohen makes a strong case for Woodfern’s importance to later popular female “story paper” writers, the resolutions of even her initially unconventionally gendered stories often involve marriage and some sort of retirement from public life, and ultimately fit better into the “authoress” category than into that of the serious professional author. Further, while Woodfern’s stories were perhaps more popular than they were artistic, the “high literary or artistic ambitions” her characters aspired to are reminiscent more of the “authors” Williams discusses than the “authoress” examined here, who is at least as interested in romantic attention and monetary gain as she might be in “high literary…ambitions.” Woodfern and others likely knew that, as Mary Templin puts it in Panic Fiction, “female characters who […] understand and are savvy about financial matters are often depicted as literally and figuratively ‘calculating’—that is, greedy, self-centered, and motivated by the (masculine) head rather than by the (feminine) heart” (Templin 112). Indeed, Kathleen de Grave, in Swindler, Spy, Rebel, also points to the female writer as a type of confidence woman, who either acknowledged that it was “dangerous to tell the truth” if one wanted to sell books and
so stayed “within the bounds” of the literary conventions of woman’s writing (196) or used the novel as a “confidence game,” in which writers “built up readers’ confidence in a traditionally safe form, then revealed their true purpose after the readers had already been hooked” (de Grave 202). Whether or not Woodfern meant to ally herself with the masculinized, serious-minded authors she depicts in some of her stories, if she wanted to actually sell those stories, she was forced to mainly work within conventional gender roles.

Working in conventional gender roles, however, could also be seen to preclude an author being seen as a serious artist. In his essay on Alcott and “queer” authorial genius, Gustavus Stadler explores the complexity of nineteenth-century ideas of genius in terms of gender; while genius is “a subject position [a woman] herself cannot occupy, from which she cannot speak,” there is also a “necessary presence of femininity within the genius” as shown in contemplations of the term “genius” by Lowell and others (658). Stadler explains that associations between women’s writing and “domesticity and sentimentalism” usually precluded women from “genius…the high cultural term applicable to the alternative to this work” (659, original emphasis). However, high cultural genius and literary acclaim do not necessarily coincide, and Stadler does not equate literary genius with literary success here for either men or women, even if he might suggest that Alcott’s works attempt to achieve both simultaneously. In Alcott’s works, according to Stadler, we see a partial subscription to contemporary ideas of the genius being occupied exclusively by men in addition to a suggestion that, in Little Women at least, the “publicly celebrated figure [is] both seductive and productive, generative of both writing and the embrace of public authorship” (Stadler 671). In Alcott’s works that use the word “genius” heavily, then, there is a triple tension between literary work, literary genius, and literary success that is especially pronounced for women, in that women can achieve literary success in much of
the nineteenth century but are kept from both (outward displays of) work and access to genius because those attributes are considered exclusive to men.

In addition to avoiding being labeled as masculine, the authoress in such stories also fights against suggestions that she is slovenly or domestically disinclined. The anonymous 1857 story “Why I am Not an Authoress,” for example, involves a “young lady” who, in an attempt to become an “authoress,” becomes “careless” of her appearance and her “clothes suffe[r] in silence” until she is encouraged to take a break from “scribbling” to attend a party. The argument here, though, is less that writing makes a woman “careless” than that this particular scribbler is better suited to domestic pursuits than to writing and cannot, apparently, manage both at once. She ultimately acknowledges that she “may have made a very commonplace authoress” and is “quite willing to leave the field of literature to other more competent women” (“Not an Authoress”). One of these “more competent women” seems to be the author of the story herself, who unlike the protagonist is an authoress, likely because she can successfully manage both the home and a career. As Williams explains of the cacoëthes scribendi or “scribbling itch” stories of which this can be considered one, “the women behind these stories are exerting disciplinary quality control, critiquing indiscriminate writing through stories that they themselves have succeeded in getting into print” (24). However, this author and others like her, in addition to critiquing the writing, is also critiquing women’s abandonment of domestic duties and personal care in favor of such “indiscriminate writing” (Williams 24). Thus these stories serve to police both women’s writing and their domestic habits by suggesting that for women, writing is only a socially acceptable occupation insofar as it does not interfere with more important work: housekeeping.
This interest in coupling domestic bliss with professional literary success extends beyond fictional depictions of the “authoress,” to real-life authoress descriptions by those women themselves. A short letter to the editor published in an 1871 issue of the *New York Times* emphasizes this seemingly all-pervasive obsession with reconciling monetarily successful female authorship with domestic aptitude. The author of the letter titles herself “A poor authoress but a happy wife,” and she seems to use the word “poor” to mainly mean economically poor (although in a show of modesty could also refer to being poorly written), as her husband is “not what the world terms a successful man” and she both does “household labor” and “occasionally write[s] an article” to “earn” domestic comforts like clothing because her husband makes only “a trifle over $600 a year” (“Contented Reflections”). The author of the letter simultaneously insists that she is “contented” and attempts, because her husband makes such a small salary, to sell her books to the “Youngest Publisher in New York,” who has been mentioned in an earlier issue of the newspaper, for “ten per cent.” of the proceeds. Indeed, the author’s necessity for money everywhere makes itself known as her main purpose for writing both the letter to the editor and the books she has “had not the courage to present;” she consistently, and I argue necessarily, minimizes her literary ambition while emphasizing her domestic bliss, feminine timidity, and economic need.

This vision of a woman who, because she makes her own living, must necessarily be masculine, messy, a bad housekeeper, or even morally questionable, pervades both popular fiction and criticism of it during this period. An 1895 *New York Times* article entitled “Authoresses as Wives,” for example, re-introduces “a question that has vexed many debating societies and many thinkers,” that of “whether a woman is any the less eligible for the domestic circle by being intellectually developed to the extent of her capacity” (“Authoresses as Wives”).
In consideration of this question, the author takes up the example of a “‘lady novelist’” who has recently “secured a divorce from her husband for ‘incompatibility’” (“Authoresses as Wives”). The article ultimately suggests that the question of capacity for both domesticity and authorship cannot be answered, but not before it more or less dismisses women’s literature as trivial or silly and suggests that only “reformed literary women” can “make the best wives,” and only according to “the minority” of “male persons” (the rest of the male persons are certain no kind of literary women make good wives) (“Authoresses as Wives,” my emphasis). While this characterization partially suspends judgment on the quality of women’s literature and appears to use the term “authoress” as a matter of course in much the same way one would use the term “actress,” other articles treat the term in a much more pejorative way, pointing to the dilettante qualities of popular female authorship. At least as late as 1900, male authors are considering “not without a shudder…how the authoress has multiplied in the land” (Masson). This article suggests that writing women are detrimental to both home and literature, and sarcastically envisions a future in which there are no readers left because all of the women are too busy writing.

These types of critiques make it virtually impossible for women writers to write alongside men, when they, as authors, are both unfit mothers and household managers because they are either masculinized or distracted from domestic duties by their writing, and poor writers because they have entered authorship only for financial reasons and produce writing only other women would read. Women authors were well aware of the difficulties posed by such critiques and sometimes railed against them; the popular author Grace Greenwood reportedly said of women writers’ capacities for domestic success:

I believe that for one woman whom the pursuits of literature, the ambition of authorship, and the love of fame, have rendered unfit for home-life, a thousand
have been made thoroughly undomestic by poor social strivings, the follies of
fashion, and the intoxicating distinction which mere personal beauty confers. (qtd.
Rayne 513)

Greenwood does not suggest that women writers do not wish for fame or money, but that these
wishes do not hinder their domesticity any more than fashion or personal beauty. Further, in
terms of the financial reasons for writing, as Williams explains, “the move to disentangle
authorship from capitalism and the extensive celebrity system that accompanies it would seem,
on first glance, to make it a much more capacious category: amateurs participating in social
authorship coexist alongside professionals participating in a more market-driven one,” but
women who simply wanted to make a living writing often fit comfortably into neither category,
perhaps because they were less interested in separating “authorship from capitalism” (Williams
22). The women writers such as Louisa and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps discussed by Williams and
Boyd may have at times been called “authoresses,” but the stories and articles discussed here
describe decidedly different types of women writers, ones that could never slough off the
“authoress” label and in many cases did not attempt to do so.

Indeed, as is evident from the stories already discussed, whether or not authorship was
often the easiest, most respectable, or most lucrative option for young women’s professions,
there was definitely a popular notion that riches and fame could come through the pen, and many
women seemed content with riches and fame alone. Several “authoress” stories involve the
young girl’s dream of writing

one book, and be famous, [then] why not more, and win wealth? wealth that was
to purchase happiness for us all, in the shape of a lovely country-seat on the
Hudson, and frequent trips across the ocean to see the wonders of the Old World,
and the other many entertaining pleasures riches and fame could bring. (“Not an Authoress,” original emphasis)

This dream of fame and wealth differs significantly from that of the four authors Anne Boyd discusses, who were “part of a new generation of women writers who committed themselves to lives as artists and exhibited the highest aims available to them, dreaming of immortality as members of America’s emerging high literary culture” (2). Here, the emphasis is not on high art and immortality, but primarily on “wealth” that would “purchase” comforts for the aspiring authoress and her family. I’m not saying here that authors such as Alcott did not write for money, but Boyd and Williams, among others, tend to deemphasize money’s role in these well-known women writers’ paths to authorship.

It is important to note that, in contrast, the women who may have described themselves as “authoresses” were not, apparently, on the path to literary immortality. Many of the stories concerning the authoress were written anonymously for weekly or monthly magazines published to be read and shared to disintegration rather than cherished for eternity. The anonymity of many of these authors, moreover, points to the pragmatic, businesslike purpose of writing stories; just like the woman described in “The Authoress’s Wife,” most of these writers seemed content to trade notoriety and esteem for capital. But while male authors like Melville and Hawthorne struggled to find publishers and sell their novels, this “damned mob of scribbling women,” as Hawthorne termed them (qtd. in Williams 10), even when anonymous or pseudonymous, “did work to theorize the terms on which female authorship should be viewed, thereby establishing the grounds by which to judge its success” (Williams 20). Williams astutely suggests that women writers were not merely tools of a male-run publishing world, but in many cases worked to take charge of their own artistic representations.
However, these representations, though they may have helped female writers get into print, were nonetheless circumscribed by the very stereotypes they often appeared to subvert. For example, the story “The Authoress’s Wife,” though not one of the anonymous ones, emasculates the man who claims he “should hate a woman who is forever dabbling with pen and ink” by not only making him into a “wife” but also by making his wife’s earnings from writing his economic salvation (Caldor 515). One might assume based on the previously explained logic of the “authoress” that the emasculation of the man would coincide with the masculinization of his wife, but the reader is spared such gender bending when the wife succumbs to childbirth (Caldor 519). Thus at the same time that the author tells us women can write without “the expense of home comfort or affection,” she also suggests that being both “authoress” and “wife” at the same time can be deadly (Caldor 519). “The Authoress’s Wife” makes some strides toward proving that women can be financially successful writers despite what their husbands say to the contrary, but it ultimately must contradict its own claims in order to preserve the authoress’s automatically tenuous femininity.

Just as these authors’ financial success was often contingent on their at least partial anonymity, it also depended on repeated affirmations of the negative stereotypes of female authors within the “authoress” stories. While the “authoress” in some ways proves that literary production and domestic aptitude can coexist within one woman, she generally does this by distancing herself from the types of writers defined by current critics as professional authors, leaving genius for the men and the mannish and insisting that her femininity and domesticity are not hindered by the lighthearted tales she writes. If, as Susan Williams claims, serious women authors were insisting that “although writing was a ‘universal’ middle-class act, authorship was an earned privilege,” the authoress was simultaneously insisting that her “middle-class act” both
helped her financially and kept her social life secure, placing her ever between amateur writer
and professional author (Williams 28). Considered this way, the self-conscious “authoress” may
not have made great strides in professional gender equality in the nineteenth century, but in many
cases she did manage to earn her own living in a way that her own writings helped make more
socially sanctioned.

Writing was not an act solely performed by middle-class women, but types of writing
done by working-class women often differed significantly from that described elsewhere in this
chapter. Popular women’s writing on authoresses tended to de-emphasize the physical labor
involved with doing writing in order to claim that it was fit for middle-class women to do, and it
also provided a model for topics about which middle-class women could write. Middle-class
women were not the only ones consuming this type of literature, however, and not all writing
written by and for women existed to provide a guideline for middle-class female comportment.
As Lori Merish discusses in her recent book on working-class women and literary culture,

> Countering the proliferation of literary texts that aimed to (re)produce domestic
womanhood and constituted a veritable discursive machinery of feminization,
working-class and popular texts exploited emerging urban discourses of the
subliterary, especially the gothic and sensational, to register often inchoate
longings, affinities, aspirations, and social tastes; they thus fashioned an
alternative, popular discourse of female working-class experience. (Archives 76)

Many stories appearing in some of the same periodicals as the “authoress” stories, such as Flag
of our Union where “The Authoress” appears, focused on the “mill girl” (who was a major
reader of such stories), and, as Merish notes, “centered on the working-class female body”
(Archives 76). Unlike the emulative stories featured in this chapter, in which ideal women writers
are often defined by their separation from both physical labor and their own bodies, the stories written by or for working-class women can often be classed as part of the “grotesque realm of antebellum popular culture,” in Merish’s view, that foregrounds the working-class body (Archives 83).

However, the fact that both arguably middle-class stories discussing the authoress and sensationalist “subliterary” stories could appear in a single issue of one magazine suggests that there was not as much class difference between the writers of these stories, or their readers, as they might claim (Archives 76). Although the stories discussed here tend to define and uphold a specific version of middle-class women professional writers, they do so by largely ignoring both the content of other stories published alongside them and the working-class women who were also reading and writing those stories. Although most were written a decade or two earlier than this study, as Mary Cronin notes in “Redefining Woman’s Sphere,” the publications of and concerning mill operatives promoted women’s rights to obtain academic educations, to choose careers, and thus have lives outside of their homes—relatively radical ideas that challenged the prescriptive middle-class literature pronouncing that a woman’s sphere was her home. The journals regularly stated that although factory women worked outside of their homes, they had not cast off their feminine attributes. (Cronin 17)

Similar to the authoress stories insisting that their protagonists could have careers and still be domestic, the mill publications insisted that their operatives were “pious, pure, submissive, and capable of domestic abilities” (Cronin 17). Like many of the women described in this study, the factory magazines “put forth an image of womanhood that closely mirrored the emerging ‘real womanhood’ ideal” on which Cogan elaborates in her book (Cronin 18). Thus, when Susan
Williams calls writing “a ‘universal’ middle-class act,” she neglects to note that it was also an act for those who “aspired to middle class status and resented upper class attempts to exclude them” (Cronin 18). Perhaps for this reason, many of the “authoress” stories discussed can be seen as aspirational, giving women guides for comportment as professional writers.

Although the “authoress” stories sometimes suggest that sufficient money can be made from publishing one’s writing, they rarely go so far as to provide actual numbers, perhaps in order to preserve ideals of middle-class propriety. In contrast, the entry for “authors” in Virginia Penny’s *The Employments of Women* is considerably longer than the average entry in her encyclopedia, and does list the specific salaries of a number of famous authors, both male and female. Penny notes that although “the labor of authors is not rewarded as well as other kinds of intellectual labor of the same extent: for instance, a physician or lawyer,” there are nonetheless many authors in the United States and Europe earning sufficient livings from their literary labors (*Employments* 3). This comparison is especially important, however, because of how few women have entered jurisprudence and medicine by the 1860s; as Mary Gabriel points out in her book on Victoria Woodhull, in the late 1860s, “5 of the 40,736 lawyers in the United States were women, 67 women were among the 43,874 clergymen, and 525 women had penetrated the medical profession, which boasted 62,383 members” (Gabriel 39). Though Penny’s entry on authors is long compared to others in her own encyclopedia, of the three authors of women’s employment guidebooks discussed in Chapter One, Penny appears least interested in authorship as a path to financial success; Rayne devotes at least half of her *What Can a Woman Do?* to women’s literary outputs (as is made clear from the book’s subtitle), while Hale’s *Woman’s Record* considers writers almost exclusively in her discussion of recent notable women.
All three writers tend to simultaneously highlight and downplay the amount of money a woman can earn by her literary endeavors. Rayne, for example, quotes the payment for Fanny Burney’s *Cecilia* as “remuneration of two thousand pounds” (26) but warns that novels meant for “light summer reading” might earn their authors “perhaps what it would have taken them three years to earn at school teaching” (30). Though she is quite specific about possible salaries for other types of jobs, Rayne does not appear to have any specific rates for publication of novels or stories available, despite the fact that she herself published fiction frequently in periodicals. Penny more freely lists the reported incomes of several well-known authors, both male and female, but warns that “it is necessary that the reader, in considering the figures given, remember that the reputation of an author has much to do with the price paid by a publisher for manuscripts” (*Employments* 4). Hale, though acknowledging some publishing history as well as the popularity and fame of the authors she includes in *Woman’s Record*, does not appear to make any mention of the income earned by them for their literary endeavors. Thus we see that while income is an important factor in choosing to write for a living, both its variability and middle-class stigmas associated with women making or thinking too much about money make income difficult for nineteenth-century writers to discuss meaningfully. As Frances Cogan notes, in nineteenth-century advice books, “most discussion of salaried employment is in the most high-toned, idealistic, and general terms,” and in fiction salaries become even more abstract or idealized than in the advice books (Cogan 217).

The language of these dreams of wealth and comfort are reminiscent of the masculine fantasies of success and riches seen in the novels of Horatio Alger and others published at around the same time, but tend to focus on providing luxury for one’s family over other kinds of desires. There are two common outcomes for girls with dreams of authorship in these stories; they either
become successful writers but must fight against male prejudice (“The Authoress,” “The Authoress’ Wife”), or they are disabused of their literary illusions by more conventional ends like marriage or having been spared “the mortification of unqualified rejection” (“Why I am Not an Authoress,” “‘Flora Farleigh’s’ Manuscript”). By the time of these stories’ publications, it is clear that the “authoress” was an established, and perhaps already stereotyped, role for women, if not always seen as a legitimate career. In fact, the term “authoress” itself seems to have already become pejorative, hinting at the dilettante qualities of popular female authorship.

Especially considering its importance to this chapter, I must emphasize that use of the term “authoress” was not universally accepted in the postbellum era. According to a 1930 article, “William Cullen Bryant while editor of the Evening Post issued to his reporters a blacklist including the terms ‘authoress’ and ‘poetess’” (Meredith 477). Bryant’s blacklist is discussed in an 1879 column of the New York Evangelist, and the columnist agrees that “the habit of affixing feminine terminations to neuter nouns is one which has done a great deal to vitiate the popular style…Author is a neuter noun as much as writer, or biographer or historian, and there is no more reason for speaking of a woman who writes books as an authoress than as a writeress or biographeress” (“Words Forbidden” 4). One of the probable reasons that Susan S. Williams does not acknowledge the term “authoress” in her Reclaiming Authorship is that women who considered themselves serious writers tended not to use it, at least later in the century. This is not to say that the term was not widely used, even fairly casually by contributors to the revered Atlantic Monthly,31 but rather that its potentially negative connotations were already evident early in the postbellum period.

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31 Based on a keyword search, the word “authoress” appears in just over 100 issues of the magazine over almost fifty years (1857-1900), which suggests that it was being sparingly used, or that some contributors to or editors of the magazine avoided it. The word appears much more
Sarah Hale, on the other hand, repeatedly advocates for use of the term and others like it in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and elsewhere, seeming to become more interested in its use as the century progressed. Comparing the 1853 and 1870 editions of *Woman’s Record*, it is interesting to track key changes not just in what made women distinguished or who was included, but how their accomplishments were described. Hale seems to double down on the conservatism of the 1853 edition in the 1870 version of *Woman’s Record*. From the 1853 to 1870 editions, part of the tome’s subtitle changes from “*with Selections from Female Writers of Every Age*” to “*with Selections from Authoresses of Each Era.*” But perhaps the most notable change is to the title-page description of Hale herself. Hale’s name changes from “Sarah Josepha Hale, Editor […]and Author” in 1853, to “Mrs. Hale, Authoress” in 1870. No major changes in Hale’s life or career can account for these changes, as she was editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* during both periods and also did not remarry between 1853 and 1870 (in fact, she was well-known to have dressed in mourning attire consistently after her husband’s death in 1822). According to Patricia Okker, “though late twentieth-century readers are likely to see editress and authoress as derogatory diminutives, Hale, like many women editors of her time, accepted and even championed such designations” (Okker 1). Indeed, a May 1865 “Editors’ Table” section of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* advocates for “Diminutions of the English Language,” providing a full list of “feminine names and titles or professions ending in –ess” and suggesting that not only should they be encouraged, but that even more, such as “paintress” and “professoress” should be adopted (“Editors’ Table” frequently, for example, in issues of *Littell’s Living Age* starting at least as early as the late-1840s. A search of the word “authoress” in Cornell’s *Making of America* archive gives a sense of the word’s prevalence among well-known and well-reputed popular periodicals such as *The Atlantic, Harper’s, The Century*, and *Littell’s Living Age*, and shows that it appeared about half as frequently as the word “author” in this archive. If we consider that women were contributing at least as often to these periodicals as men were, the relative lack of the word “authoress” is notable.
Hubel 89

464). This is the second “Editors’ Table” column in 1865 that suggests such diminutions; one in March of 1865 features a similar list and arguments. Whether or not Hale herself chose to make the alterations to the title page of *Woman’s Record*, they suggest that women should be allowed to distinguish themselves by writing and nothing else, and that their identities should always be based on the men with whom they are affiliated or against whom they are compared.

Although some women writers, such as Fern and Alcott, emphasized the physical struggle inherent in producing writing, others were more likely to make writing appear as a natural, effortless gift. Virginia Penny notes, in her entry on authors, that producing fiction “requires less time, less study, and less money, and rewards the authors pecuniarily better than any other kind of work, considering, of course, the comparatively small amount of application required” and reports that “the easy, natural manner of female authors is a marked feature” (*Employments* 4). In her book on nineteenth-century literature and labor, Cindy Weinstein argues that allegorical characters “rethin[k]…the representation of persons as mechanical and undeveloped in the discourse of labor and a burgeoning market economy” (Weinstein 5). Weinstein’s points about attempts to make the labor of literature seem invisible in the early- and mid-nineteenth century to differentiate it from the visible “hands” of industrial and slave labor can be applied in interesting ways to the marketplace of middle-class women’s writing of this period (Weinstein 37). If women’s writing was merely a product to be consumed, writers could be anonymous (or pseudonymous) producers of that product, nearly like workers in a factory. At the same time, writers who would rather not be anonymous were compelled, in Weinstein’s view, to make writing seem natural, as if it were not labor at all. In this way, writing could separate itself from the market in just the way that women’s writing was expected to in order to thereby separate women from the market as well. Women therefore had to struggle to make
names and income for themselves as authors while appearing to neither struggle to write nor care about making money.

Despite such daunting obstacles, U.S. women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century found more widespread financial success than women did in any other profession at that time. According to Coultrap-McQuin, “Gentlemen Publishers,” with “their emphasis on personal relationships, non-commercial aims, and moral guardianship, combined with the economic prospects of the industry, made it possible for women to work comfortably in a business that some claimed was far outside their sphere” (28). Alcott echoes this idea in “How I Went Out to Service,” explaining that “story-writing was a genteel accomplishment and reflected credit upon the name,” but maneuvering the publishing world was both more complicated and more dangerous to middle-class status than Alcott’s sentence might lead one to believe (“How” 808).

In his book on reading and writing in nineteenth-century America, Richard Brodhead discusses some of the difficulties inherent in becoming a successful woman writer. Discussing Alcott’s *Jo’s Boys*, Brodhead explores “the situation in which private, domestic women came to appear in public and to capitalize on a paying public in the entertainment sector but thereby also courted an invasion of their privacy, exposing themselves to—if not in fact inviting—the public’s vicarious consumption of their ‘personal lives’” (Brodhead 70). Thus, the very existence of this new possibility for women’s success and financial independence is circumscribed by the fact that this success is made possible by public consumption, and encroachment on the personal space of the author by the public results.

By late in the century, then, it initially appears that professional women, and particularly literary women, could through extreme financial circumstances, benevolent patronage from “gentleman publishers,” or (masculine?) assertion, gain a modicum of monetary independence.
However, the era of the Gentleman Publisher did not survive the century intact; As Coultrap-McQuin explains, in the last quarter of the century,

The new ideal of Businessman Publisher emphasized very different values and may have been less congenial to women writers than that of the Gentleman Publisher. In contrast to their more leisured predecessors, [these] editors and publishers […] were workaholics who emphasized activity, energy, and time orientation. […] These new publishers and editors were often more interested in audience appeal than moral guardianship. They encouraged hard work, rather than style, as the route to literary success, and frequently associated their views of writing with masculinity. (Coultrap-McQuin 48)

Coultrap-McQuin argues, then, that just at a time when women seemed to be gaining higher levels of literary and financial power, the “Businessman Publisher” model again re-made writing into a masculine endeavor unsuitable for most women. Most notably, she discusses the assumption that an employer who does not provide “moral guardianship” leaves women vulnerable to the immoralities of the public, one that returns us to the idea that independence, and therefore self-making, both personal and financial, was never quite possible for literary women of the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that women’s professional progress in literary or other employments was completely negated by this new model, but that women writers were forced to re-negotiate their roles in the literary world in order for their work to begin to be taken seriously in a new model of publishing that seemed not to value their specifically feminine contributions. Indeed, as we will see in the following chapter, male authors increasingly portrayed new types of women in their novels, which not only mischaracterized or stereotyped such women, but in some ways
seemed an attempt to deem women’s writing irrelevant; if Henry James could paint such a thorough and nuanced *Portrait of a Lady*, what need was there for women to write about their own experiences? Women, having struggled to make professions out of writing that often portrayed those and other struggles, would have to maneuver worlds of work that continually remade themselves as too serious and masculine for “scribbling women” or silly “authoresses” to manage.

**Epilogue: The Present-Day “Authoress”**

In many ways there has been little change in the state of women’s writing in the last 150 years or so. Women are still sometimes referred to as “authoresses,” especially those whose writing is seen as exclusively for women: the late Jackie Collins, for example, was called an “authoress” by the London *Daily Mail* as recently as 2014, shortly before her death (Hardcastle). Even if they are not called “authoresses,” women writing certain types of popular fiction are often considered apart from those who write “literary” fiction. In a 2014 *Harper’s Magazine* article, Jesse Barron discusses the supposedly new world of electronic novel publishing, exploring a group of romance writers who “consider the idea of literariness irrelevant to their project” (Barron). As Barron describes them, these writers are mostly women writing for other women, who have managed to publish without the help of publishing houses, earning far more money than they might in a traditional publication format. Barron spends considerable time in the article discussing the home lives of the authors in question, from their “Land Rover[s]” to, perhaps most notably, the change in their husbands’ roles:
I should mention that most romance writers have very traditional marriages — at least until the wife starts writing. The man plies a middle- or upper-middle-class trade, and the woman works part-time or takes care of the kids. But a big royalty check has a way of altering a marriage contract. (Barron)

Why “should” Barron mention the marriages of the authors he discusses, in particular? Perhaps for precisely the same reason women writers of the nineteenth century were eager (and perhaps overeager, at times) to insist that although authorship could change the economic makeup of their families, it was not threatening to their femininity or heterosexuality. Even more importantly, since romance “‘is written by women, edited by women, sold by women, read by women,’” writers’ husbands can apparently ignore or dismiss their wives’ work and simply enjoy the cash flow (Barron).

Two things at stake in Barron’s article are precisely those at stake in popular U.S. women’s writing of the nineteenth century: the relationship of this commercial writing by women and for women to “literary” writing, and the implications of such writing for the heteronormativity of its writers and readers. Barron insists that although there is “altering” of “a marriage contract,” husbands are not particularly threatened by such alteration. It seems important to Barron that they not be threatened; he mentions that the writers’ money buys mostly domestic comforts, and implies that “husbands” are unaffected other than enjoying new cars and home appliances. In terms of the literary merits of these e-book romance novels, Barron suggests that writing is essentially beside the point. Of primary interest to Barron, and to the writers, he argues, is how much money can be made from the sale of this product; except for the fact that the romance writers are skirting the traditional publishing system in order to earn more money than
they otherwise would, Barron shows very little interest in what product they are selling, and suggests that the writers themselves are not particularly interested in it either.

There is a sense here, as in the above discussed “authoress” stories, that the business of writing (and I would argue that it is business in both cases) does not and should not seriously impede the heteronormative lives of those engaged in it. And just as in the 1860s and ‘70s, this heteronormativity is somehow vital, and the best way to preserve it is for the writer’s husband to more or less ignore that she writes at all. Further, while online romance novel writing, like nineteenth-century women’s periodical writing, can be taken seriously as a source of income, it simply cannot be taken seriously as art, and, in Barron’s view at least, most of its producers have no interest in being seen as artists. Even in the twenty-first century, there remains a suggestion that the popular or money-making cannot be artistically valuable, especially if it has been created by a woman or for a primarily female audience. As we will see in the next chapter, William Dean Howells may have encouraged men of letters to become men of business so that they could make writing a profession rather than a pastime, but he did not suggest that men of business could easily become artists, or even that they should.
Chapter Three: Uneven Realism: The Women Doctors of James and Howells

While literary women comprised a large percentage of the women professionals in the nineteenth-century U.S., other legitimate and potentially lucrative career options were becoming open to women as the century progressed. The popular book *What Can a Woman Do?* claimed that by 1883 there were “more than three hundred occupations open to women” that paid up to “$3,000 every year” (Rayne iv). Fiction writers of the period, however, rarely portrayed women with such occupations, especially those writers associated with bastions of American culture like *Atlantic Monthly*. And although women professionals were generally sparsely represented in late-nineteenth-century American literature, their portrayal by male authors was especially rare.

One occupation for women that did receive occasional fictional attention was that of doctor, a profession newly available to U.S. women in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Stephanie Browner explains, “by 1868 more than 300 women had earned medical degrees, and the topic of women doctors was newsworthy enough for *The Galaxy* to run a long article reassuring the nation that most doctoresses were ‘gentle, modest, and womanly’” (Browner 135). Woman doctors, in particular, were fairly famously portrayed by several of the best-known male authors of late nineteenth-century American literature, namely Henry James and William Dean Howells. These authors were known for their relatively thoughtful and complex depictions of women, but these authors’ works on women professionals, rather than attempting to introduce or advocate for the entrance of new types of women into American literature, at best merely reflect women’s already widening sphere marked by their increasing entrance into traditionally male professions and spaces, and at worst distort or dismiss the reality of women professionals’ struggles. Despite their acknowledgments that women could potentially both obtain and succeed in professions outside the home, authors such as Howells and James frequently tempered such
acknowledgments with suggestions that success in such professions made women aberrant, eccentric, or unwomanly. Moreover, professions for middle-class women, if more than simply hobbies, were seen by these authors as radical alternatives, rather than supplements, to marriage and motherhood. Thus, in their considerations of women’s aptitudes for these new roles, James and Howells potentially do more to circumscribe such roles than to encourage their expansion.

This chapter considers the ways in which the two nineteenth-century authors closely associated with American realism, William Dean Howells and Henry James, unintentionally abandon their own definitions of Realist fiction when depicting woman professional characters, specifically the woman doctors in *Doctor Breen’s Practice* and *The Bostonians*, respectively. Howells appears unable to portray a professionally successful woman despite his mostly strict adherence to the “common” person and the real rather than the ideal, while James breaks from realist narrative detachment when writing on independent women, evidently compelled to insert narrative comment as an assertion of control over characters he has trouble allowing to speak for themselves. Such abandonment of the authors’ own tenets of realism in texts that otherwise appear to be realist reveals that both authors, while acknowledging the need to portray new woman figures, are nonetheless uncomfortable doing so. These portrayals of women professionals are neither intentionally reductive nor mean-spirited, but reveal the authors’ insecurity with both portraying women venturing outside prescribed roles and aligning women in any way with business, of which Howells and James are always suspicious. Additionally, popular fiction and nonfiction in contemporary periodicals, if still often misogynist in its hesitation to acknowledge women as proper doctors, tended to take more progressive views of woman doctors than the uncharacteristically conservative portrayals by Howells and James. Primarily because of this disjunction, both *Dr. Breen’s Practice* and *The Bostonians* were not
especially well-reviewed at their publication, receive widespread criticism from scholars today, and still tend to fall outside each author’s canon of work.

This chapter also considers the differences between the abovementioned male authors and female authors writing on the same subject. In contrast to those of James and Howells, depictions of such professionals by women realist authors writing around the same time, though not without problems, tend to serve as more accurate portrayals of the lives women doctors were actually leading. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Sarah Orne Jewett both realistically portray middle-class women successfully practicing medicine without detriment to their femininity. Their portrayals were also, for the most part, more positively received than those of Howells and James. However, the need to portray protagonists retaining their femininity while engaged in a profession reveals that even women authors were compelled by market forces to make their otherwise unusual heroines quite common in terms of their gender.

**James and Howells on Realism**

Much has been said about the forms of realism practiced by William Dean Howells and Henry James, and a thorough conceptualization of their realism is not my intention here. It may be helpful to refer to Lawrence Buell’s definition of realism found in his “Theories of the American Novel in the Age of Realism,” however:

Realism and its principal offshoots, regionalism and naturalism, operate via “surveillance” of a social scene “subjected to a disciplinary spectatorial gaze.” Typically they use undramatized narration to create an illusion of transparency
that seems to show rather than tell, even as character deployment is unobtrusively managed with care, e.g. by free indirect discourse. (Buell 327)³²

Buell’s definition points to an irresolvable tension that is fundamental to realism; in claiming to show an unadulterated reality, realist writers must “manage with care” their characters and situations. Howells in particular is accused by Buell of only “often sound[ing] certain that he knew what ‘realism’ was” in that Howells claimed it involved only the “truthful treatment of material” but also acknowledged that a novel is not expected to be “wholly true” (Buell 324, my emphasis). It is perhaps most useful here to compare these authors’ own words on realism to their actual realist practice, considering, in particular, their treatment of women doctors.

By the 1880s, women doctors were starting to gain mainstream respectability, having risen from mostly folk herbalists to college-trained physicians in the previous few decades. Articles in various newspapers and magazines from Medical and Surgical Reporter to the New York Times published in the 1870s, ‘80s, and ‘90s consider the fitness of women for the medical profession, mostly finding that (some) women can become successful physicians. An 1874 NYT article, for example, argues that “the fact has undoubtedly been proved that women have won for themselves an honorable place in the ranks of medicine” despite the fact that “women doctors are on trial, and inefficiency, quackery, pretension, and inadequate preparation can easily spoil the experiment” (“Women as Doctors” 6). Although many articles supporting women becoming physicians if they are properly trained appear during this period, they are mixed in with others that expose quacks, impostors, and even possible murderers among those women in one way or

³² Quotations in this passage are from Christophe Den Tandt’s “American Literary Naturalism” appearing in American Fiction, 1865-1914.
another illicitly claiming to be doctors. Further, just as they are posed to women in almost all professions at this time, questions of women doctors’ loss of fitness to marry or run households abound in the popular presses. An 1867 *Ohio Farmer* article, for example, documents anxieties that “if married, [women doctors] would cease to be a fountain of home influence, the gentle guide, friend, and instructor of their children, the counselor of their husbands” (Holbrook 278). Thus, while women doctors were on their way to acquiring respectability for their profession, there were still many ways in which they could fail to gain or easily lose that respectability.

However, works of fiction about women doctors with a claim to realism should, based on common definitions, make attempts to depict both socially sanctioned women doctors and less acceptable ones accurately. In his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James posits that “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life” (“Art of Fiction” 503, original emphasis). He likens fiction to history, in that both are “allowed to compete with life,” but history is not “expected to apologize” for this competition, whereas fiction unfortunately often finds itself doing so (504). This competition with life is found, for James, “in very truth,” when “the author has produced the illusion of life” (510). Thus, realist fiction for James is both representation and re-creation of real life’s truths that involves “catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life” and attempting to, although art is “essentially selection,” make its “main care” to “be typical, to be inclusive” (515). In theory, such writing, due to its avoidance of clichés and adherence to inclusivity and typicality, will “fly[y] in the face of

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33 In the 1880s and ‘90s, the *NYT* published articles such as “Taking a Fatal Dose. Killed by the Medicine Prescribed by a Self-Styled Woman Doctor” and “Woman Doctor Held for Swindling,” seemingly condemning unqualified women for suspect behavior or lack of proper professional credentials.
presumptions” about what art should be (513). The sense here is that by noticing every detail, even the “typical,” one might select the best possible subjects and create a superior work of art.

William Dean Howells’s vision of fiction is similar to James’s in that both rely on observing real life, and is perhaps most thoroughly described in his 1891 *Criticism and Fiction*. Howells hopes that “the time is coming…when each new author, each new artist, will be considered, not in his proportion to any other author or artist, but in his relation to the human nature, known to us all, which it is his privilege, his high duty, to interpret” (*Criticism* 8).

Quoting the sixteenth-century Spanish Humanist Juan de Valdes, he encourages authors not to “endeavor to add anything to reality, to turn it and twist it, to restrict it. Since nature has endowed them with this precious gift of discovering ideas in things, their work will be beautiful if they paint these as they appear” (*Criticism* 72). Just as James wishes fiction to “compete with life,” Howells encourages authors to look to what is real for a novel’s content and to “ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true” (*Criticism* 99)? The question of truth, for Howells, demands that authors “speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere” (104). This instinct is similar to James’s claims that “catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet” (“Art of Fiction” 515). James’s opinions of dialect, and even dialogue more generally, however, “diverged” from Howells’s, as Buell puts it: “dialogue interested James less and less as his style evolved. He advised Howells to use it more sparingly” (Buell 329). Nonetheless, both writers seem to agree that fiction should reveal or mimic real life based on as large an experience as possible.

It is evident that both Howells and James usually took their own advice when writing fiction, at times creating a sense of reality where one had previously been missing or lost in
earlier romance or sentimental fiction. In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan describes the particular realism practiced by Howells, explaining that

Howells calls for a mimetic fiction to represent faithfully ordinary life. Realism is not to reflect passively a solid reality; it is to face the paradoxical imperative to use fiction to combat the fictionality of everyday life; unable to anchor itself in a stable referent, it must restore or construct a new sense of the real. (Kaplan 20)

While Kaplan mostly discusses Howells’s later “city” novels here, the impetus to “represent faithfully ordinary life” is already quite evident in *Doctor Breen’s Practice*, as we will see in the following section. Kaplan further explains that “Howells claims that the realist must represent the average person, who cannot tell his or her own tale,” and many of his novels feature such average people (Kaplan 34).

**Realism and Capitalism**

Howells’s interests in average people doing real work often placed him at odds with the tenets of capitalism. As Kaplan explains, “the realist serves as a producer among equals and takes his inspiration ‘from wherever men are at work, from wherever they are truly living,’” and “True life—reality—is here equated with work, which is viewed not simply as an occupation but more importantly as a system of value which privileges industriousness and self-discipline as the basis of communal life” (Kaplan 16-17). Many, including Howells, considered “industriousness and self-discipline” to be antithetical to a market capitalism that sometimes seemed to function on its own, while also acknowledging the inevitability of engaging with such capitalism. For example, Howells’s “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” published in an 1893 issue of

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34 See Dryfoos’s stock market gambling in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, for example.
Scribner’s, is an important, though somewhat limited, perspective on the necessity for a writer in the late nineteenth century to have business savvy in order to survive in a society that “does not propose to pay his bills for him” (“Man of Letters,” Kindle location 34). Howells struggles between arguing that “Business is the opprobrium of Literature” and that “Literature is Business as well as Art,” searching for the middle ground among literature, business, and art that is characteristic of many of his fiction and non-fiction writings, especially those written in the last decade of the century (Kindle location 42). In this essay, as well as in several of Howells’s best-known novels, business is the necessary evil that good men must practice in order to live in an increasingly capitalist United States.  

Although he expressed his ambivalence differently from Howells, Henry James had a similarly ambivalent relationship with U.S. commercialism. As early as 1876, James considered the figure of the capitalist in The American, at times suggesting the cultural inferiority of his character Christopher Newman to the European characters in the novel. As William Spengemann explains in his introduction to the novel, James “resented the steep condescensions of pretentiously superior Europeans and yet lamented the commercial vulgarization of his ‘sweet old Anglo-Saxon’ America” (Spengemann 9). Newman, the novel’s titular character, especially at the beginning of the novel, speaks most often in terms of purchases and their costs; indeed, his first word in Chapter 1 (and evidently one of the few French words he knows at this point in the novel) is “Combien?” to ask a young artist for how much she will sell her copy of a painting at the Louvre (American 36). This is only one of James’s early considerations of Americans’ preoccupation with affixing a price to everything; as Peggy McCormack has noted, “James’s fiction and criticism abound with literal and metaphorical instances of business and financial

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35 See A Hazard of New Fortunes and The Rise of Silas Lapham, for example.
terms” (McCormack 540). Although McCormack focuses primarily on metaphorical exchange in several of James’s late novels, her point that “protagonists recognize or discover an untraversable moral gulf between themselves and their communities when they become aware that they use the same terms but nonetheless do not speak the language of money which surrounds them” seems to apply both to *The American* and to *The Bostonians* (McCormack 544).

Both James and Howells apparently desire to separate literary endeavor from business, but both also acknowledge the impossibility of doing so. To return to Howells’s “Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” a typical literary man, as he explains, has scant knowledge of business matters: “He must still have a low rank among practical people; and he will be regarded by the great mass of Americans as perhaps a little off, a little funny, a little soft!” (“Man of Letters,” Kindle location 68). This sense of being “a little off, a little funny, a little soft” seems to be what, in this essay, Howells wants to help his literary brethren avoid by acquiring some business acumen; it also, in suggesting a natural aversion of literary men for business, allies the majority of such literary figures with “soft” women. It is not as clear what women of letters (or any other profession) should do in a world increasingly ruled by men of business. We see here that while good men are compelled to engage with business, it is not apparent that women should or even can be people of business similar to men of letters.

Indeed, Howells primarily relegates women to the role of consumers rather than producers of literature:

> The man of letters must make up his mind that in the United States the fate of a book is in the hands of the women. It is the women with us who have the most leisure, and they read the most books. They are far better educated, for the most
part, than our men, and their tastes, if not their minds, are more cultivated. (“Man of Letters” Kindle location 277)

In this passage we see a key distinction being made between women’s “tastes” and their “minds;” although he acknowledges that women have literary taste, Howells assumes that women have the “leisure” to consume literature, but neither the artistic talent nor business acumen to create and sell it. Here and in the remainder of the essay no mention is made of literary women, let alone businesswomen, contributing to a sense that women can be neither in any serious way. The passage not only assumes that women, since they rarely have full-time employment, “have the most leisure, and they read the most books,” but also appears to accept this fact without critique. Because women are so dominant in their consumption of literature, per Howells, they are potentially also a part of what keeps male authors “a little soft” even when they consider their art to be a moneymaking livelihood.

Henry James’s relationship to women, especially independent ones, is similarly complex and problematic. Despite writing some of the most memorable women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, according to Elsa Nettels, “In his fiction, James portrayed women who surpass men in the power to initiate and control action; in his criticism, he maintains the masculine-feminine polarity to guarantee the supremacy of the male artist” (Nettels 48). Nettels further argues in her book on gender and language in American fiction that James saw women becoming “masculinized” by “a gross mercenary society” that wants their “cheap work” (73). Most of the discussion here involves male and female novelists, but similarly to Howells, James is concerned with the uncomfortably close relationship between art and commerce, and is likely to portray any type of financially successful professional—male or female—mostly negatively.
Therefore, when Howells and James tackle women professionals as protagonists in their novels, they must maneuver their uneasy relationships to people of business as well as to women more generally. Howells’s and James’s forays into depicting woman professional characters seem to arise from their realist impetus to depict normal people in everyday life: both Doctor Breen’s Practice and The Bostonians address women figures to whom entire novels had not yet been devoted. Their choices to confront the woman doctor are based on that same impetus, but also place such women safely apart from crass business. Howells chooses a “lady” doctor as his protagonist rather than a (more common, apparently) woman doctor of lower social status or some type of businesswoman, primarily in order to avoid associating her with the problems he sees with professions whose sole aim is to acquire money. While James’s woman doctor in The Bostonians is neither the protagonist nor a “lady” and in some ways seems more faithfully to depict the “common” doctor of her sex, her juxtaposition with other women in the novel suggests her superiority to them while also making such a superiority contingent on loss of femininity. Thus both authors valiantly attempt but at least partially fail to depict a realistic woman professional, less because they dislike or misunderstand women professionals (though there is some evidence of that) than because they wish to disentangle them from commercial motivations.

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36 Howells’s novel was published in 1881, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s in 1882, and Sarah Orne Jewett’s in 1884.

37 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Sarah Orne Jewett similarly avoid questions of income in their contemporaneous depictions of woman doctors, and discussions of income in both novels suggest that they do so for similar reasons as Howells.
**William Dean Howells’s *Doctor Breen’s Practice***

*Dr. Breen’s Practice*, originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* between 1881 and 1882, is one of several novels written by Howells in which a woman is the central character. In it, a young female doctor attempts to begin a homeopathic medical practice before ceding her only patient to a local male doctor and subsequently marrying a man described by one contemporary reviewer of the novel as “a stick of a man who can drive a horse and sail a boat” (Review). Although this could easily be the plot of a romance rather than that of a realist novel, Howells depicts both setting and characters using his own definitions of realism. The novel opens with a lengthy present-tense description of Jocelyn’s Resort and the surrounding area, giving a sense that the narrator describes a real place populated with real people living now. This sense of the realness of the people is augmented by Howells’s pointed use of dialect and colloquialism in conversations among ancillary characters. As Buell notes, “One of realism’s hallmarks, as in regional or ‘local color’ fiction—place-based writing whose basic premise was to render symptomatic scenes of off-the-beaten-track districts and subcultures—was attempted scripting of the actual speech” (Buell 329). These characters “talking vapidities” are intrinsic to neither plot nor character development, but add to the feeling that real life is taking place separately from the main characters in the novel, and that everyone, if not equally important, is at least important enough to warrant a few pages in his or her own words (*Dr. Breen’s* 50). This acknowledgement of the locals’ presence in the fictional world of the novel does not go without judgment, however; by calling the characters’ discussions “vapidities,” Howells signals that their speech is recreated for local color more than it is to acknowledge the humanity of the speakers (*Dr. Breen’s* 50).
With these points in mind, the reader can assume that all of the characters follow the tenets of realism, and in many ways they do. Dr. Grace Breen, in the first scene in which she appears, is described as having “lady-like sweetness and a sort of business-like alertness” (*Dr. Breen's* 10). This pointed juxtaposition of the term “lady-like” with “business-like” to describe Dr. Breen reaffirms that Howells considers ladies to be ideologically separate from business, a distinction also made in “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” but it also suggests that Grace can be described in more than one way. However, the novel quickly begins almost awkwardly to insist on Grace Breen’s femininity; perhaps to make her a more sympathetic character after having initially described Dr. Breen as “business-like,” Howells spends significant energy in the rest of the novel distancing her from both business and masculine tendencies. Indeed, the novel is preoccupied with the potential threat to Grace’s femininity brought on by her chosen profession, and Howells seems continually compelled to insist that her traditionally masculine employment has not made her mannish. When Grace’s mother criticizes her for her timidity with an assertion that “a man wouldn’t” be timid, Grace retorts,

"No. I am not a man. I have accepted that; with all the rest. I don't rebel against being a woman. If I had been a man, I should n't have studied medicine. You know that. I wished to be a physician because I was a woman, and because—because—I had failed where—other women's hopes are." (*Dr. Breen's* 43)

Grace mentions “other women’s hopes” in reference to her thwarted romance alluded to early in the novel, and her consideration of this as a failure casts her medical ambitions in the light of a consolation prize rather than a viable option for a young lady. In several cases throughout the novel we see Grace Breen failing in firmness and even wishing “that she could do or say something aggressively mannish, for she felt herself dwindling away to the merest femininity”
(96). It appears that while Grace would be a successful doctor if she were “aggressively mannish,” her narrator prefers that she fail at medicine instead of “where—other women’s hopes are.” The novel problematically abounds with references to Dr. Breen’s femininity and even juvenile girlishness that inevitably tie themselves to her failure to properly treat her only patient.

It is difficult to reconcile Howells’s apparently progressive ideas about woman’s roles in society with his continual emphasis on Grace’s femininity and fragility which seem to deny her success in her profession. Dr. Breen is relegated to the role of nurse for much of the novel after she cedes her patient to the coarse Dr. Mullbridge, and while there is a suggestion that she may continue work as a doctor after her marriage to Mr. Libby, the novel ends before the reader sees her succeed in such a venture. The novel’s title itself, in the double sense of the word “practice,” suggests that Grace is somehow in preparation for her real life that has yet to begin; rather than practicing medicine, it seems that Grace is practicing at medicine, with little success, throughout the novel.

Although most modern scholars are critical of the novel for its failure to redeem Grace Breen professionally, in his essay “Marriage and the American Medical Woman in Dr. Breen’s Practice,” Frederick Wegener argues against the general consensus that Howells’s depiction of Doctor Grace Breen is unsympathetic or lacking in subtlety, claiming instead that the treatment of the marriage versus career question in the novel “turns out to be a good deal more ambiguous and nuanced, considerably complicating the novel’s engagement with the question of marriage in

38 According to Robert Hough, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries Howells advocated for women’s suffrage and thought that women “would bring a rational element to the democratic process that would strengthen popular government” (101). Although this does not necessarily translate to support for women occupying traditionally-male professions (and Hough takes a few Howells quotes somewhat out of context in this section of his book), it is nonetheless evidence of a partially-enlightened stance on women’s rights.
the life of a medical woman in Gilded-Age America” (5). Wegener fairly convincingly makes the case that Howells had done his homework on women doctors before beginning the novel, and was therefore sufficiently aware of the real difficulties women doctors faced to portray Doctor Breen in a complex and realistic way. But while Howells clearly knew a variety of specific details about women doctors’ training, his depiction of Dr. Breen’s crisis of confidence is not necessarily progressive or even especially accurate. Even before the reader is aware who she is, Howells describes Grace Breen in the opening chapter as an attractive young person having difficulty convincing her friend to obey her wishes and questioning her decisions. These attributes continue to define Grace as she is faced with both medical and personal decisions in the novel. Additionally, Grace’s resigned observation early in the novel that “A woman is reminded of her insufficiency to herself every hour of the day. And it’s always a man that comes to her help” is repeated in both minor and major ways throughout the text, from the example Grace uses of Mr. Libby cutting her out of her sewing to Dr. Mullbridge’s successful treatment of Mrs. Maynard in Dr. Breen’s place (Dr. Breen’s 43).

It is difficult to reconcile Wegener’s claims with Nettels’s observation that “in his novels and plays, Howells pictures no alternatives for women bred to the restrictions of polite society,” and that “no upper-class woman portrayed by Howells achieves success in a profession” (Nettels 34). A claim may be made that Howells was attempting to depict a real situation and “reject the ideal,” but his lack of any successful alternatives to Dr. Breen suggest something else (Criticism 12). In his perspective on women, says Nettels, he seemed to continually “shift his ground,” but often “stressed the sense of deprivation and inferiority suffered by women isolated from men’s business and professional lives” (Nettels 29).
Grace’s lack of fitness for managing her own professional affairs is emphasized in her discussion of business with Walter Libby, the dilettantish family friend who becomes Grace’s paramour. When Mr. Libby asks Grace if she “despise[s] business,” she answers, “I don’t know anything about it” (Dr. Breen’s 145). She repeats this ignorance a few lines later, again insisting “I don’t know about those things” when Libby asks for her opinion on the cotton trade, and finally even asks, “I? How should I know?” about Libby’s fitness for that profession (145). As Nettels explains, “women’s often noted ignorance of the language of politics, business, sport and war is amply illustrated in Howells’s novels, in which men must explain to women the meaning of the words they use, including the jargon of their professions” (Nettels 36). The narrator says this directly in Dr. Breen’s Practice, explaining that “a woman respects the word a man uses, not because she would have chosen it, but because she thinks that he has an exact intention in it, which could not be reconveyed in a more feminine phrase” (Dr. Breen’s 126) This ignorance of stereotypically masculine language is not a failing of women in Howells; in fact, Grace’s professed ignorance of business makes her both more sympathetic and more feminine. Indeed, according to several of Howells’s later works, associating too many things with money is a failing men and women can share; Dr. Mullbridge’s reference to his marriage proposal to Grace as “business” is a clear sign of his lack of fitness to be her husband (223).

However, while Nettels and others touch upon Howells’s portrayal of women in traditionally masculine professions, their mention of such women’s professional roles is largely beside the point. Howells’s novels, as well as critical discussion of them, tend to focus on advocating social changes that largely keep women in their prescribed roles as feminine, leisured consumers rather than occupying ones that radically alter a gender status quo. Also, Howells frequently falls back on the cliché that women, because they are less engaged with nasty
capitalism, are more morally upright than men, who cannot possibly avoid it if they want to provide for themselves and their families. As Robert Hough argues, “like many other men of the Victorian era, Howells seems to have accepted the idea of an innate morality in women, a quality that men did not have” (101).

Howells’s views on gender relations, based on Dr. Breen’s Practice and other works, were not necessarily shared by his more mainstream contemporaries. One contemporary review of the novel in the New York Times, for example, notes that Grace Breen’s “character for firmness must be sacrificed in various humiliating ways” and that “few” readers “will not wish events had had another turning” (NYT review 10). It further laments that “Miss Breen is thrown away upon a stick of a man who can drive a horse and sail a boat” and that “she is utterly obliterated the moment she resolves to marry him.” The problem the reviewer has with Dr. Breen’s Practice is not that Grace Breen decides to marry, but that Howells “appears to have erred by landing his heroine in mediocrity.” It is the mediocrity of the partner, not the mere subsuming of Grace’s medical career to marriage, that apparently offends. A man who was less of a “stick” perhaps would prevent Grace from being “utterly obliterated,” according to the reviewer. At the same time, however, the reviewer appears to have trouble acknowledging Dr. Breen’s career at all; considering how much time is spent in Howells’s novel describing various characters’ difficulties with calling Grace Breen “Doctor,” it is interesting that the New York Times reviewer appears to have the same difficulty, preferring the use of “Miss” in place of “Doctor,” placing the word “Doctor” within quotation marks at least once, and eventually resorting to calling Grace Breen “Miss Doctor Breen” near the end of the review. Although Howells’s novel shows little “novelty of subject,” as the NYT reviewer puts it, in terms of its
woman doctor plot, this same reviewer is nonetheless uncomfortable enough with the idea of a woman doctor to be uncertain what to call her.

*The Atlantic Monthly*, however, where *Dr. Breen’s Practice* was serialized, reviews the novel with considerably less critique than the NYT reviewer does. According to the anonymous reviewer, Howells “sees people, and he sets himself the task of discovering what their real lives are, with the purpose of giving his readers just those particulars which seem to be most indicative” (*Atlantic review* 129). The reviewer emphasizes Howells’s “kindliness” in portraying characters, and suggests that the relationships the narrator helps the readers form with the characters are like those people have with one another in real life. Further, the review de-emphasizes the fact that the novel’s subject is a woman doctor, and focuses instead on Howells’s style. Beyond a simple difference of opinion between the NYT and Atlantic reviewers, the differences between these two reviews point to a difference in audience between the two periodicals in which the reviews appear. It is apparent from the NYT review’s dependence on plot summary that its reader likely has not yet read *Dr. Breen’s Practice* and may never do so; as he gives away most of the novel’s plot, the reviewer praises much of Howells’s style and attention to detail while strongly critiquing his novel’s main characters. In contrast, the Atlantic reviewer, writing mostly to subscribers of the magazine who had likely read several of Howells’s works by this time, could almost be describing any of Howells’s novels, and uses an abundance of positive adjectives to give a vague impression of the novel rather than specific description or pointed critique. Thus, an audience looking for something new finds the novel tritely rehashing old ideas, while one interested in the subtle realism frequently found in *The Atlantic* might find it charming and thorough. At any rate, we can see from these differences between reviews that even the
supposed leaders in fictional realism do not always exhibit as much progressive thought as the modern reader might expect.

Because of the *NYT*’s large readership, the *NYT* reviewer’s disappointment in Grace Breen’s character can be said to stand in for a progression in the popular view of women doctors that has apparently surpassed Howells’s own by the 1880s. Howells may successfully depict minor characters who have had little place in fiction before, but his rendering of a woman doctor in this novel falls back on outdated ideas of what women are capable of and desire to do. Henry James, as we will see below, succumbs to different but equally damning treatment of a woman doctor who cannot be considered a model for women’s professional aspirations any more than Grace Breen can.

**Henry James’s *The Bostonians***

Henry James’s 1886 novel *The Bostonians* is an attempt to address “the situation of women” through a depiction of a young woman orator’s near-rise to public prominence. With its detailed descriptions of even the most minor characters and innovative subject matter, the novel falls well within the category of realism. However, as we will see, James’s narrator (and thereby James himself, it could be argued) passes judgment on his characters much more often than in his other novels, betraying an insecurity with regard to depictions of women who fail to fit gender or social norms. In his introduction to the novel, Richard Lansdown calls it “caught” “between the blind necessity of progress and the urge to retain the old” (xxviii).

James discusses, and at times ridicules, various types of women in *The Bostonians*, but his portrayal of the woman doctor, Dr. Mary Prance, is perhaps most useful here. Several critics have considered Dr. Prance to various ends, but most have noted that she stands in some way
apart from the novel’s other women, reluctant to become part of any movements, even those in proclamation of women’s rights. Our first introduction to Dr. Prance separates her from the other women in the room; she is “a plain, spare young woman, with short hair and an eye-glass; she looked about her with a kind of near-sighted deprecation, and seemed to hope that she should not be expected to generalise in any way” (Bostonians 20). Ian F.A. Bell’s widely cited article “The Curious Case of Doctor Prance” includes a thoughtful close reading of Dr. Prance in terms of the liminal space she occupies between public and private, and male and female. In Dr. Prance, Bell sees “a literal re-forming of assumptions about the schisms of gender itself” (Bell 32). Indeed, Dr. Prance does stand out among the other women in the novel for a variety of reasons including her speech; as Bell explains, “Doctor Prance is not only a straight talker but one who, by comparison with the varieties of loquaciousness that surround her, talks very little at all” (34).

James’s male protagonist character, Basil Ransom, is more sympathetic to Doctor Prance than he is to any other female character in the novel, in part because, as we will see below, he ascribes his own thoughts to Dr. Prance whenever it is convenient. Jennifer Fleissner completely ignores Dr. Prance in her discussion of feminism as fad in The Bostonians, but this oversight again helps reaffirm Bell’s claim about Prance’s liminal status. If there are only, as Fleissner claims of the novel, “two trajectories for womanhood, one knowable (marriage) and one seemingly at odds with futurity itself,” to which trajectory does Doctor Prance belong (Fleissner 160)? She is clearly not the type for marriage, but neither does she seem “at odds with futurity,” in that both her words and profession suggest action and ambition.

In a novel with apparently so many different types of women, however, what does it mean that the only professionally employed one is notably different from all of the other characters, both male and female? As Basil observes on his first encounter with Dr. Prance,
She looked like a boy, and not even like a good boy. It was evident that if she had been a boy, she would have ‘cut’ school, to try private experiments in mechanics or to make researches in natural history. It was true that if she had been a boy she would have borne some relation to a girl, whereas Doctor Prance appeared to bear none whatever. Except her intelligent eye, she had no features to speak of.

*(Bostonians 33)*

Prance’s lack of any “features to speak of,” rather than suggesting she is manly, encourages the reader to disregard Prance’s bodily appearance in favor of her “intelligent eye” (33). Somewhat in contrast to this idea, Anne-Claire Le Reste argues in her essay on the realism of Henry James and William Dean Howells based on James’s *The Bostonians* and its Howellsian precursors that “Grace Breen, Howells’s ‘womanly’ doctor, is a ‘nice’ version of Olive, the New England girl obsessed with duty, as well as the reversed image of Dr. Prance, James’s own ‘manly’ female doctor” (Le Reste 91). Her suggestion that James rewrote Howells in *The Bostonians* just five years after the publication of *Dr. Breen’s Practice*, based on the above quote from James’s novel as well as a fuller analysis of Grace Breen’s character, seems incomplete; Doctor Prance in many ways defies gender categorization, and while Grace Breen is more “womanly” than she is “manly,” her preoccupation with ‘womanly’ versus ‘manly’ attributes throughout the novel attunes the reader to thinking about how (and whether) ‘manliness’ and ‘womanliness’ determine professional success. However, Le Reste does make a valid contrast between Dr. Breen and Dr. Prance, in that Grace Breen fails to be a successful doctor, while Mary Prance appears to be quite successful in her practice, if she is resigned to treating only other women. It seems, then, that for both James and Howells, femininity in some ways precludes professional success, but the two authors deal with this belief in different ways; Howells does not allow Grace Breen to fully
succeed as a doctor, while James portrays a completely unfeminine, albeit fairly successful, woman doctor. As Valerie Fulton explains in her article on women and professionalism in realist fiction, “Dr. Prance stands in the fortunate position of being able both to represent women and to issue a corrective on them…she demonstrates what women might be like while at the same time showing what successful professional women are bound to be like” (Fulton 246, original emphasis). Neither James nor Howells very heavily critique the social situation that bounds women to “be like” a particular thing, even when they spend considerable time portraying a variety of women. Although women characters figure in these novels, at times quite prominently, they do not tend to subvert traditional feminine roles very much. In Fulton’s words, “with few exceptions, James’s novels feature marriage as the most viable option for women, even when other opportunities present themselves” (242).

The liminal space that Dr. Prance occupies surprisingly produces some of the clearest and most certain narrative in the novel. Le Reste makes particular note of the ways in which James’s novels are narrated, explaining that in The Bostonians, “the narrative voice asserts and undermines its authority at the same time,” in that “he emphasizes the arbitrariness with which he chooses to give us access to the characters’ consciousness” (Le Reste 93). Le Reste’s primary example of such “arbitrariness” is the narrator’s claim that “he is unable to describe or explain this or that, and then going on to perform that very task,” and that particular task in her example is to “give some account of Basil Ransom’s interior” that turns out to be quite detailed (93). Le Reste echoes Alfred Habegger’s earlier claims about authorial intrusion in The Bostonians:

Inevitably, authorial intrusions or comments have great specific gravity. They stand out, make special claims to veracity and importance, play a leading role in guiding our understanding and interpretation. Less obviously, the manner in
which a novel’s creator breaks into his or her creation discloses some powerful secrets about its hidden constitutive principles. James speaks out in *The Bostonians* far more often than in his other narratives, and yet, contrary to the impression his more sweeping authorial pronouncements convey, he does not display a steady, unruffled, all-surveying mastery. (Habegger 182, original emphasis)

With this lack of steadiness in the narration, James “inadvertently discloses a strange nervousness about his sovereignty over these characters” (Habegger 186), ultimately causing the “authorial identity” to be “gravely at risk” (189). It seems that even when they are more or less caricatured, the various female characters in *The Bostonians* exceed the boundaries of the narrator’s, and by extension James’s, understanding.

James’s authorial intrusion also contradicts a significant aspect of realism; according to Priscilla Walton, “the concept of form in a Realist aesthetic insisted upon accuracy of representation, which was to be effected through the ostensible removal of the author or the downplaying of the authorial voice” (Walton 14). Such a departure from realism, rather than suggesting that *The Bostonians* is not a realist text, signals that James simultaneously wishes to portray the 1870s women’s movement and its players accurately and feels compelled to judge the movement and so, he cannot resist intruding. As Jennifer Fleissner explains in her book on women and American naturalism, “James’s own decision to write about feminism as a sign of the times makes clear his own vexed participation in fad culture,” and his vexed participation in women’s culture as well (129, original emphasis).

Although she makes a valid point that *The Bostonians*’ narrator seems alternately omniscient and ignorant, Le Reste does not note that he seems at least slightly more likely to
know the inner workings of his male characters than his female ones. This discrepancy is at least in part due to the fact that the narrator seems to believe that his women characters’ inner workings are either undeterminable or nonexistent; for example, as Fleissner explains, “Verena never ceases to explain herself as the result of forces outside her,” and in addition to seeing feminism and independent women in *The Bostonians* as a type of fad as Fleissner does, we can also see this observation as evidence that, for James, Verena has no inner life or simply cannot understand herself in terms of anything other than an outside force (Fleissner 125). It is not simply that James’s very hands-on narrator does not understand Verena and other female characters’ inner workings; it is also that he believes they have none.

This lack of inner workings reveals itself in a vagueness of female ambition that can be seen in various places throughout the novel, with claims made by characters such as “the most effective way of protesting against the state of bondage of women was for an individual member of the sex to become illustrious” (*Bostonians* 122). How one does so or what it means to “become illustrious” never seems quite clear to any of the novel’s characters, and this vagueness is reaffirmed in the midst of Olive and Verena’s cohabitation, when “the two young women concluded, as they had concluded before, by finding themselves completely, inspiringly in agreement, full of the purpose to live indeed, and with high success; to become great, in order not to be obscure, and powerful, in order not to be useless” (122). Such tautology does two things: it makes James’s female protagonists seem uncertain about their specific desires, and emphasizes the lack of tangible options for women during this time. How and why Verena or Olive might become “great” or “powerful” is vague to the reader because it is vague to the characters themselves. In another portion of the novel, Olive muses that Verena “had grown up among lady-doctors, lady-mediums, lady-editors, lady-preachers, lady-healers, women who,
having rescued themselves from a passive existence, could illustrate only partially the misery of the sex at large” (67). Olive seems suspicious of such active women and is unable to align herself, in her vague notion of what women’s success might look like, with women successful in such specific ways.

Indeed, of at least the dozen female characters in *The Bostonians*, most of whom are part of an early suffragist or feminist movement, only Doctor Mary Prance seems entirely certain of both what her ambitions consist of and how to achieve them. Dr. Prance has been discussed above, but it is notable in a book with mostly free indirect discourse that we almost never read her thoughts directly, but nearly always through Basil Ransom’s conversations with and observations of her. For example, we must take Ransom’s highly subjective word when he muses:

> Ransom could see that she was impatient of the general question and bored with being reminded, even for the sake of her rights, that she was a woman – a detail that she was in the habit of forgetting, having as many rights as she had time for. It was certain that whatever might become of the movement at large, Doctor Prance’s own little revolution was a success. (39)

This passage is doubly offensive to Doctor Prance: it both demeans her professional work by calling it a “little revolution” and takes all agency away from her by describing her only through the eyes of a conservative Southern misogynist. Habegger suggests that James makes, in parts of *The Bostonians*, “the powerful claim that he understands the feminine breast better than these female characters do,” and while one would have to argue that the narrator and Ransom were of the same mind to agree with Habegger that James makes such a claim here, we are nonetheless dealing in this passage with a male narrator-type character who makes sweeping proclamations
about female characters’ minds (Habegger 186, original emphasis). Ransom sees Mary Prance as a perfect sidekick; having apparently foregone romantic attachments to pursue medicine, Dr. Prance is neither rival nor paramour, free to become Ransom’s platonic, mostly silent, nearly genderless companion with whom he can fish or share a cigar. Dr. Prance’s feelings about Ransom are never elucidated, and do not seem to especially matter to either Ransom or the narrator. Thus, even when the reader is given a somewhat positive depiction of a woman professional, James refuses to allow her to speak for herself or even any other woman to speak for her; it seems, therefore, as though Dr. Prance’s “own little revolution,” if successful, is so small as to be unnoticeable by any other characters.

**Woman Doctors in Comparison**

Under the veil of realist critique of prevailing social trends, the above-discussed novels succumb to, and even reinforce, many of the existing stereotypes of women professionals: that they are weak and undecided, therefore not really fit to be professionals, or that they are forceful and unfeminine, and therefore not really fit to be heterosexual women. It is also sometimes easy to forget, when considering such titans of nineteenth-century literature, that many others wrote at the same time, about similar subjects, and were even published in the same periodicals as Howells and James. Howells’s *Dr. Breen’s Practice* is often discussed in criticism along with Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *Dr. Zay* and Sarah Orne Jewett’s *A Country Doctor*, due to their similar characters, plots, and publication dates. However, while it seems that in Howells’s novel the
decision between a profession and marriage is somehow already made for women like Grace Breen, Phelps’s and Jewett’s novels do some work to break that mold. According to Fulton,

By foregrounding James’s characterization of the “lady doctor” and combining the successful professional status of this figure with the marriageability of the conventional nineteenth-century sentimental heroine, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Sarah Orne Jewett revise the root assumptions that inform James’s examination of this “most salient…point in [nineteenth-century social life”—“the situation of women” and “the agitation on their behalf.” (Fulton 243)

In other words, if in Doctor Breen’s Practice Grace’s femininity precludes her from professional success but secures her marriageability and in The Bostonians Doctor Prance’s lack of femininity secures professional success but prevents marriageability, Phelps and Jewett insist that both professional success and marriageability are possible in the same woman, if not always at the same time.

Sarah Orne Jewett’s A Country Doctor makes explicit the decision women must make between marriage and professions. Long before Jewett’s protagonist, Nan Prince, actually rejects a suitor in favor of medicine, her relatives suggest that she must choose between marriage and becoming a doctor. Her doctor guardian, John Leslie, says midway through the novel:

I see plainly that Nan is not the sort of girl who will be likely to marry. When a man or woman has that sort of self-dependence and unnatural self-reliance, it shows itself very early. I believe that it is a mistake for such a woman to marry. Nan’s feeling toward her boy-playmates is exactly the same as toward the girls she knows […] I shall help her […] by providing something else than the business
of housekeeping and what is called a woman’s natural work, for her activity and capacity to spend itself upon. (Jewett 92-3)

In fact, the issue of Nan’s fitness for a career instead of marriage is the main conflict of the novel; there seems no possibility that Nan could be both wife and doctor, and Jewett positions her choice to forego marriage for medicine as the most natural one. As Nan herself says of her decision, “People ought to work with the great laws of nature and not against them” (189). In the case of The Country Doctor, these “laws of nature” have much to do with talent and professional calling; as Frederick Wegener observes, “Identity and calling become inseparably entwined at more than one point in Nan’s understanding of her own experience,” and the novel consistently and repeatedly uses the words “nature” and “natural” to insist that it is correct for Nan to not only enter medicine as a profession, but also to choose it over marriage and family (Wegener xvii).

Why can male professionals be husbands but female professionals cannot be wives? Jewett considers this question several times through several characters in A Country Doctor. Discussing marriage and career with her aunt, Nan says “of course I know being married isn’t a trade: it is a natural condition of life, which permits a man to follow certain public careers, and forbids them to a woman” (Jewett 190). Later in the novel, Nan Prince’s guardian Dr. Leslie tried to assure himself that while a man’s life is strengthened by his domestic happiness, a woman’s must either surrender itself wholly, or relinquish entirely the claims of such duties, if she would achieve distinction or satisfaction elsewhere. The two cannot be taken together in a woman’s life as in a man’s. (Jewett 223)
Leslie never explains or tries to determine why this might be the case, and the phrase “tried to assure himself” suggests that he is not fully convinced of the truth of his beliefs (Jewett 223, my emphasis). The text does not make clear which part of this rumination is uncertain, so the reader is left to guess whether Leslie doubts a specific part, or the entirety of his assertion. Jewett’s narrator, however, is much more certain of a changing civilization:

The preservation of the race is no longer the only important question; the welfare of the individual will be considered more and more. The simple fact that there is a majority of women in any centre of civilization means that some are set apart by nature for other uses and conditions than marriage. (Jewett 224)

In the narrator’s view, then, the fitness of women for professions is simply a question of population; if there are too many women to mate with men, some will have to do something other than marry, and Nan Prince is one of those women.

Of the best known nineteenth-century American novels about women doctors, only one suggests that it might be possible for a woman to be a doctor and a wife at the same time: Doctor Zay by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Unlike Howells’s and Jewett’s protagonists, who have recently or not quite become doctors in the span of their novels, Phelps’s female protagonist is a well-established and well-respected medical practitioner by the start of the novel. She also saves the other protagonist, a young man who is injured early in the novel and quickly falls in love with her. As Fulton explains, “Phelps’s deliberate reversal of gender role stereotypes helps to illustrate the idea that women are not inherently inferior to men, but instead must as a matter of course be weak and indecisive unless given the opportunity to prove their capabilities through demanding work” (Fulton 248).
This “demanding work” is also depicted more specifically and realistically in *Doctor Zay* than in any other novel discussed in this chapter. Shortly after Yorke is saved from death and comes to realize that he has a woman doctor, she explains his injuries to him and the remedies for them:

> A dislocation of the ankle; a severed artery in the arm; and concussion of the brain,—besides the minor cuts attendant on such an accident as yours. Each of these is doing finely. You have now no cause for alarm. It was a beautiful dislocation!” added the physician, with enthusiasm. (Phelps, Kindle Locations 1004-07)

The doctor seems to lose her gender in this passage, acquiring the “enthusiasm” of “the physician” who is little more than a walking profession. Phelps continues throughout the novel to describe Dr. Zay’s care of Yorke in specific, technical terms, even when Yorke himself continually tries to humanize and feminize the doctor, wondering if she is tired, calling her a “poor girl” (Kindle Location 1186), and noting that she is a “beautiful woman” (Kindle Location 1031). There is a sense, especially early in the novel, that Yorke is struggling to reconcile his preconceptions of doctors with his idealized view of women and can only understand one when he separates it from the other.

As Fulton has pointed out, the novels *Dr. Breen’s Practice, Dr. Zay, and A Country Doctor* all can be seen to fit within the genre of “lady doctor” novels, in that income is not the primary aim, or even much of a concern, for the women practicing medicine, who all have some other means of subsistence than a career. However, considering the titular characters’ apparent lack of need for money, income is discussed surprisingly often in these novels, as though these women are exceptions to the growing group of women practicing medicine in the nineteenth
century. For example, in first observing the doctor in Phelps’s *Doctor Zay*, Waldo Yorke expresses his surprise that she might make enough money to own multiple horses, considering that “he knew nothing of the natural history of doctresses. He had thought of them chiefly as a species of higher nurse,--poor women, who wore unbecoming clothes, took the horse-cars, and probably dropped their ‘g's,’ or said, ‘Is that so?’” (Phelps, Kindle Locations 1199-1200).

Yorke’s vision portrays woman doctors as those working as doctors out of financial necessity, who, like common portrayals of women writers discussed in Chapter Two, are also disheveled, unfashionable, or masculine. Indeed, many of the early descriptions of Doctor Zay include traditionally masculine adjectives, suggesting that although she is “unmistakably, a lady” (Kindle Location 257), she is also “strong,” with a “business-like way” (Kindle Locations 939, 960).

Yorke “experience[s] a certain embarrassment” that a woman, especially an attractive, ladylike one, would ask him personal medical questions and perform medical tests on him (Kindle Location 960-61). Doctor Zay surprises Yorke not so much because she is a woman who is also a doctor but because she seems to inhabit both roles so completely and successfully.

In many ways Phelps’s and Jewett’s novels provide a more trenchant critique of late nineteenth-century social norms than their male compatriots do, in that their woman characters are much more fully developed and therefore better able to engage with the current world from which Howells’s and James’s heroines seem detached. Based on James’s and Howells’s own definitions of realism claiming that fiction should “compete with life” or that it be “true,” *Doctor Zay* and *A Country Doctor* meet those criteria better than their women doctors do. In his essay on medical knowledge and geography in Phelps and Jewett, Mark Storey explains that both women were particularly aware of developments in medical practice when writing their novels; he notes that “the medical context that both Phelps and Jewett were engaging with determined,
constrained, and embedded itself into the generic strategies of the texts themselves” (Storey 694). Dr. Zay, according to Storey, is constructed “as a modern, professional doctor—signposted by the instruments and medical books—who also displays attributes apparently at odds with that status: traditional agricultural knowhow and the emotional vulnerabilities of womanhood” (698). Phelps’s doctor appears to live in a real world and to be a complex, realistic character, much like James and Howells wish their own characters and worlds to be. Jewett, too, “seems to attempt, aesthetically and thematically, a realistic portrayal of a child growing up in New England who becomes a respected female doctor” (Storey 700). Not only are the portrayals of the medical practices realistic, but the personal dilemmas that the two doctors must maneuver to continue to successfully practice medicine also appear to be realistic. Phelps and Jewett both defy the stereotypes of women doctors that Howells and James tend to hold up, while still acknowledging the personal and professional difficulties women who wanted to become doctors faced at this time.

Like Phelps and Jewett, short periodical works about woman doctors suggest that having a profession for a woman does not preclude being desired by the opposite sex, even if it is nonetheless almost impossible to be both a doctor and a wife at the same time. For example, in the story “Doctor Mary,” published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1882, a young female doctor who is engaged to be married discovers that her husband-to-be is neglecting his mother, so resolves to break her engagement and decides that “her profession must be husband and home to her henceforward” (Wright 6). Another, “Doctor Edith,” originally published in England but reprinted by Littell’s Living Age in 1886, recalls other stories in which a woman hides her profession from a disapproving but attractive young man, but ultimately marries the man and (at least partially) subsumes her profession to marriage. In this story, “Edith confines her practice
principally to her own and Clarissa’s nurseries” and lets her husband deal with the medical practice after marriage though she had earlier insisted on continuing medicine even after the sisters fell into considerable money (“Doctor Edith” 101). These stories, like Phelps’s and Jewett’s novels, answer the question of women’s simultaneous fitness for a career and marriage in the affirmative, even if their protagonists never manage to have both at the same time.

Contemporary reviewers of Phelps’s and Jewett’s novels mostly echo the progressive tendencies of the authors whose novels they review, with minor exceptions. Reviewing Doctor Zay in the context of other novels about woman doctors, an anonymous Overland Monthly reviewer muses that “the new class rarely slips in gradually and unperceived, individual by individual, but comes in a party, drawing all eyes to the simultaneous entrance of half a dozen” (Review of Dr. Zay 102). The reviewer calls the novel “a more serious attempt than either [Charles Reade or William Dean Howells’s novels] to handle the same problem in fiction [that of the woman doctor]—and this time by a woman.” The Overland reviewer does seem to strike at one of Phelps’s motives for the novel when considering:

It is an inquiry whether it is essentially in man’s and woman’s nature that the man should have outside occupation and interest that, in many cases, stand first in his heart, while he himself and the ministering to his interests stand first in his wife’s; whether, in the society of the future, this predominance may not fall to either husband or wife indifferently, according to individual character. (103)

More than a simple review of Phelps’s novel, these remarks consider the possibility of a sea change in not only women’s career opportunities, but also their social relations.
However, even when praising Phelps’s writing, some reviewers simultaneously insult her characters such as the eponymous doctor, by calling her “a large-minded, ambitious woman with a ‘career’” (“Miss Phelps’s ‘Doctor Zay’” 624). The scare quotes around the word “career” are quickly followed by the claim that the doctor is “so intensely in earnest that she undertakes a tilt against the laws of nature and the archery of love, in favor of Hahnemann and a career,” which uses martial imagery to suggest that for a woman, pursuing a career is “against the laws of nature” (“Miss Phelps’s ‘Doctor Zay’” 624). The reviewer further displays his skepticism “at the happy combination of so much beauty and vigorous strength with ten years of hard work in college, medical school, and hospital,” as though a woman’s attractiveness cannot coincide with professional labor and talent (624). Like reviewers of Doctor Breen’s Practice, the reviewer attempts to praise the novel but ultimately reveals a deeply-rooted prejudice against women with “careers” in the process.

Although nineteenth-century novels concerning woman doctors tend to avoid discussing the income brought in by them, contemporary magazine articles on the topic of woman doctors show clearly that income is a significant concern for women doctors and those interested in reading about them. The 1889 Maine Farmer article “Women as Doctors,” written “38 years” after Elizabeth Blackwell “established herself in New York as the first qualified woman physician,” devotes about half of its words to the question of woman doctors’ salaries (“Women as Doctors 4). While no final judgment is made on the fact that “comparatively few properly qualified women doctors fail to find themselves able to support a modest menage by the time they have been three or four years out of school,” one might argue that the article encourages women to become doctors specifically for the income (4). This preoccupation with income marks a change from articles published earlier in the century, such as the 1873 “The Woman Doctor
Question—An Alliance,” which encourages “our county medical organization [to] be more liberal” in its acceptance of women into the medical profession (105). This article, written for Medical and Surgical Reporter, may in part be less interested in income due to its niche audience, but the difference in subject also shows the huge strides women made in the medical field in only a decade or two. Howells (and James, to a lesser extent), in his concern for the fitness of a woman to practice medicine, is a decade or more behind the news on this subject.

Realist authors felt compelled to address the fact that women in the last few decades of the nineteenth century were joining ranks with men in professions, but were less compelled than contemporary journalists to acknowledge that such professions could help women become more financially independent. Moreover, and as was increasingly clear to women authors at least, a woman could pursue a career without inevitable loss of femininity or moral uprightness. However, there continued to be a sense that while men could easily juggle family and career, it verged on the impossible for women to do the same. Both Howells and James realized that in writing about woman doctors, “The characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix” (“Art of Fiction” 509). Such difficulty reveals itself in the fact that in portraying not “common,” but exceptional women professional characters, these authors work against their realist intentions and ultimately write off women’s important struggles to fill roles traditionally occupied by men.
Chapter Four: Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins, and *The Colored American Magazine*: 
Middle-Class Black Women’s Work at the Turn of the Century

It is clear from previous chapters in this dissertation that women’s professional success in the nineteenth century was usually contingent on their professions being (or at least appearing to be) either similar to their traditional roles as middle-class wives and mothers or temporary positions/stepping stones to middle-class wifehood and motherhood. As previously discussed, middle-class white women in (or attempting to acquire) professional roles were viewed most positively when their work kept them at least partially in a woman’s “sphere.” At the same time that many middle-class white women were defining the term “New Woman,” women of color, in many instances, seemed to be falling back on earlier views of what an honorable middle-class woman should look like. Most specifically, the *Colored American Magazine*, while under the editorial direction of Pauline E. Hopkins, could arguably be seen as conservative in its apparent interest in domesticity and Victorian morals that were beginning to be sloughed off by white women of the middle- and upper classes.

If educated white women struggled to be taken seriously in lucrative professions outside the home, it was even more difficult for women of color to enter and succeed in those professions. Many educated African American women faced a multi-layered task in pursuit of professional success; first, these women had to prove amid significant racism that they both could be and were sufficiently educated to succeed in professions previously reserved for better-educated white men or women. Second, they had to defend themselves against claims of moral looseness or hypersexuality carried over from slavery but also at times (usually to a lesser extent) attached to white women professionals, especially those choosing careers in lieu of marriage and children. As popular economic contributor to the *Colored American Magazine* Albreta Moore-
Smith put it at the time, “The sins and weaknesses of other races are generally hidden from public gaze when the question is one of honestly (sic), sobriety and morality, but those of the Negro are forever laid bare before the illuminable rays of the searchlight of public opinion” (Moore-Smith 326). Third, they had to negotiate, as Hanna Wallinger puts it, “a social and political climate that gave more power to men and demanded more achievements from women” (Wallinger 107). In efforts to combat these difficulties, many African American women writers, such as Pauline Hopkins and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, not only repeatedly insisted upon their kinswomen’s moral rectitude, but also tended to fall back upon often conservative forms of writing previously popular but beginning to fall out of favor with their white, middle-class counterparts.

However, the generic conservatism evident in these women’s writings as well as much of the content of *The Colored American Magazine* is not necessarily a sign of actual conservatism among the writers themselves. Instead, it is a conscious attempt to attract readers of all races by asserting similarities between black and white middle-class cultures. As can be seen both from the fiction of these authors and the surrounding content of the magazines in which their fiction (and other fiction like theirs) appears, “uplift” of the black race in many ways looked like assimilation with the white middle class, especially where women were involved. The closer to white their interests and pastimes appeared, the better chance black women had to be heard and supported by the white middle class.

This apparent conservatism is especially evident in the novels discussed in this chapter. Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* portrays employment outside the home for women as often necessary, but marriage as ideal. Similarly, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, despite spending considerable effort portraying Iola insisting upon work over marriage,
ultimately finds both a romantic partner and relief from employment for the titular character, who is happy to “teach in the Sunday-school, help in the church, hold mothers’ meetings to help these boys and girls to grow up to be good men and women” rather than occupying any full-time paid employment (Harper, Kindle Locations 2757-2758). Real-life examples of successful black women, such as the notable women profiled in *The Colored American Magazine*, similarly emphasize qualities admired in women by the (conservative) white middle class, often including established lineage from notable black citizens. While it would be possible to discuss Pauline Hopkins’s contributions alone to the canon of both black and women’s literature, it is her work in the context of *Colored American Magazine* that I am most interested in here, especially as both it and the magazine pertain to women of color’s professional developments and successes.

**Women’s Inclusion in the *Colored American Magazine***

Particularly during the period in which *The Colored American Magazine* was edited by Hopkins, the “uplift” of black women, specifically, was a focus. This uplift came in several forms: fiction by and about middle-class black women, biographies of prominent black women, and advertising by and directed toward black women. Several critics have discussed Hopkins’s refusal to be conciliatory to white readers and mark the refusal as the reason for her removal from editorship of *The Colored American Magazine*, but these critiques tend to focus somewhat too heavily on the short term or even “failure” of Hopkins’s publishing tenure in lieu of interest in what Hopkins helped the magazine do while she was publisher. Under Hopkins’s editorship, however short-lived, of *The Colored American Magazine*, women’s concerns, interests, and

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39 Sigrid Cordell, Alisha Knight, and Jill Bergman all discuss Hopkins’s role at and departure from the CAM.
successes were treated not separately from or as inferior to those of men, but as intrinsic to the experience of Americans of color. Jill Bergman, in her several essays on issues of gender in the magazine, pays considerable attention to issues other than Booker T. Washington’s hostile (in Hopkins’s opinion) takeover of the magazine in 1904. This attention to women is evident throughout the issues of CAM with which Hopkins is involved; as Jill Bergman explains in a 2004 essay,

From the covers featuring portraits of successful African American women surrounded by floral borders to the advertisements promoting goods traditionally associated with women, The Colored American under Hopkins’s leadership seems to have been designed for readers much like Hopkins herself: middle-class, at least modestly educated, ambitious—either professionally or socially—and interested in and informed about racial uplift and the race community.

(“Everything” 189)

Hopkins, it seems, had specific interest in racial uplift for women: according to Bergman, “Hopkins crafted The Colored American specifically to address a female readership” (“Everything” 195). Hopkins’s presence in The Colored American Magazine helped include women and even portray them as critical to questions of racial uplift and the increased role of black Americans in middle class society.

Notably, the magazine’s interest in women’s uplift often comes in the form of discussion and even advocacy of women of color entering professions. One of The Colored American Magazine’s regular contributors was Albreta Moore-Smith, a woman described in the “Story of Our Magazine” section as having “a type of industry which would be well for many of our girls to emulate; energetic and businesslike, she is the embodiment of many other thrifty qualities so
characteristic of true Westerners” (“Story” 47). Perhaps in keeping with the resistance to self-making, in a long article entitled “Woman’s Development in Business” in a 1902 issue of The Colored American, Moore-Smith argues that there is no such thing as a “‘new’ woman,” but that, instead, changes have come to U.S. culture that allow women to pursue new endeavors (“Woman’s Development” 323). As Moore-Smith explains, “the only satisfactory evidence or conclusion agreed upon is that she is simply progressing, her natural tendencies not having changed one iota” (“Woman’s Development” 323).

There is a sense here that, as we have seen in the periodical writings discussed in other chapters, Moore-Smith is passively taking advantage of gradual changes in women’s opportunities rather than actively attempting to make change herself. In many ways there is little difference between articles on women in business written for white-run publications and this one written for The Colored American Magazine; Moore-Smith spends the majority of the essay discussing women in general rather than a specific race, framing business success for women of color as only slightly different from and more difficult than it is for white women. Instead of focusing initially on race, Moore-Smith points to difficulties for business women brought about by men, arguing that “It is hardly fair for man to declare that woman is not his equal, and is incapable of attaining the business heights he has reached and enjoys, while systematically withholding from her the very means by which he reached his giddy station in the commercial world” (“Woman’s Development” 324). Similarly, in her book Think and Act discussed in the previous chapters, Virginia Penny complains that “women’s labor is not paid for in proportion to the time consumed, the trouble or danger attending it, nor the benefits to accrue from it” (Think 43). Both writers suggest that women are kept inferior to men in business by men themselves and then blamed for this inferiority. In one of the first articles by Moore-Smith appearing in CAM,
she judges that “seventy-five per cent of the working women of this country are discontented,” naming “low wages and a great ambition” as the two most prominent reasons for this discontent (“Why?” 468).

Further, Moore-Smith emphasizes many of the same problems discussed by writers covered in previous chapters, such as Virginia Penny and M.L. Rayne, including questions of women’s strength and aptitude for certain jobs; as she explains, “the strength of many young women is being wasted by laborious work in sweat-shops, factories and stores. Women bread-earners should be given work in keeping with their strength” (“Woman’s Development” 325). Contesting views of black women as physically strong like their slave forebears, Moore-Smith makes the professional desires, and abilities, of black women essentially the same as those of white women. As she explains, “The necessity of becoming proficient in trades, as well as professions is fast taking possessions of Negro girls and women. This is one of the most gratifying results of higher education. All over the country our girls are seeking diplomas in these studies of their own volition” (“Woman’s Development” 326). Further, Moore-Smith must still note that such pursuit of education and employment is not detrimental to femininity: “she is as womanly and gentle as was her grandmother; contact with the business world does not wear off the fineness which men so much admire in women if this quality be inherent” (“Woman’s Development” 324).

Additionally, while she eventually notes differences between black and white woman workers, most of Moore-Smith’s observations could apply to women of any race. After speaking in general terms about women in business and thus attracting a wide swath of readers, Moore-Smith can then focus on the unique challenges black businesswomen face. As she sardonically explains,
‘Color’ now protects many a Negro working woman from petty annoyances. She is not favored (?) with bon-bons, theatre tickets and suppers after working hours, escorted by her employer. These pastimes are generally the beginning of the end. The sister in black, if no weaker, is wiser in the end. There are those who do and will continue to mix pleasure with business. (“Why?” 469)

Contradicting claims that black women are sexually loose or particularly susceptible to untoward advances in the workplace, Moore-Smith instead claims that it is easier for them to separate “pleasure” from “business” because employers usually do not treat them as potential paramours. This is not to say that black women are free from sexual harassment in the workplace, but that they are not tricked into relationships with men in power because those men do not often pretend to desire romantic relationships with them (although they might attempt sexual relationships). Moore-Smith cites essentially the same problems for white and black women in the workplace: that they are either invisible or treated as sexual objects by the men in charge.

The articles written by Albreta Moore-Smith on the subject of women working are well-suited to an *Colored American Magazine* edited by Pauline Hopkins. In the same issue of the magazine in which Moore-Smith is first introduced to the reader, several advertisements addressed to “Ladies” appear, enticing them to do sewing work with “nothing to buy” and “experience unnecessary” (“Advertisements” March 1901). Advertisements such as these are both evidence that some of the magazine’s intended readership is female and suggestions that the women reading could be better educated than they are employed. It is difficult to tell if such “Ladies” are meant to be the same ones buying hair straightener and pianos, but it is clear that women without experience or capital in need of employment make up at least some of the magazine’s readership. Notably, these advertisements specify that money can be made “at
home,” and although there are other advertisements for sales “agents” in the magazine, none directly address “ladies” as the sewing advertisements do. While initially apparently at odds with advertisements for, arguably, luxury goods to buy, these calls for seamstresses are completely in keeping with a middle-class, domestic, female readership. Like the women described in Chapter One forced to find work to at least supplement their families’ incomes, the women these advertisements address are assumed to need or want to work “at home” and perhaps have no professional “experience.” Further, as Moore-Smith discusses and as we will see later in this chapter, it was especially difficult for black women to find, keep, or endure work outside the home due to a mixture of racism and sexism, so in-home work may have been preferable for black women wishing to establish or retain reputations for middle-class morality and propriety.

In addition to including advertisements for work, the CAM also provided employment for both men and women to sell the magazine. These sales agents were apparently quite diverse; as Hanna Wallinger explains, “the nearly sixty agents who sent in their biographical sketches present a spectrum of African American society from schoolteachers, businesspeople, farmers, to people involved in numerous business, social, church, and political organizations” (Wallinger 55). The May 1901 issue (the first anniversary issue) of Colored American includes, in a segment entitled “The Story of Our Magazine,” portraits of many of the magazine’s sales agents, nearly half of whom are women. The biographical sketches accompanying these portraits portray the women in terms of their contributions to their race more than to the financial success of the magazine, and the women are very often described as wives and mothers before “agents,” suggesting that their femininity takes precedence over their business acumen. Of “Mrs. Joseph Burton,” for example, we read that
Although much sought after in society, she prefers spending most of her time in her home, where she is ever ready to make things cheerful for her many acquaintances, by her pleasant smile and exquisite taste in entertaining.

As an agent of the magazine we consider her services invaluable, as she loves the work for its real worth. (“Story of Our Magazine” 71)

This “real worth” evidently refers to racial uplift; other agents of the magazine, male and female, are described as lending their moral influence to the steady upbuilding of a publishing business which will leave no room for discussion as to “which is the largest Afro-American Publishing House.” Doctors, lawyers, preachers, and teachers all work for the benefit of the race through the magazine. There is a RACE PRIDE, and we have felt it. (“Story of Our Magazine” 69)

In the words of the magazine, agents are selling for educational and humanitarian reasons, not because they need or want money. Thus, we see that the key to success as a sales agent is wholehearted support for the thing being sold without regard to the money brought in by selling it. By convincing the reader that the transaction is social or moral rather than monetary, the seller locates both herself and the reader/buyer in a middle class that can be mostly unconcerned with money and costs.

More often than encouraging black women to venture forth from home and acquire careers, however, the CAM falls back on Victorian ideals of domesticity and discouraged radical change to women’s roles. In the same issue of CAM, for example, Pauline Hopkins argues for women’s work outside the home and against women’s suffrage (“Women’s Department” 121-23). Although she tentatively encourages women to work, noting that “for all the women of color
who are seeking new avenues of work and an outlet for thoughts that breathe, there is a blessing if they persevere in the name of God and humanity,” Hopkins is decidedly against them venturing into politics (“Women’s Department” 122). She warns that

Physically, women are not fitted for the politician’s life; morally, we should deplore seeing woman fall from her honorable position as a wife and mother to that of the common ward heeler hustling for the crumbs meted out to the “faithful” of any party in the way of appointments to office” (“Women’s Department” 122).

These physical and moral impediments to public office are also key to women’s middle-class status; Hopkins refutes common critiques of black women as physically strong and morally weak, but also circumscribes their opportunities for greater equality with men in doing so. In this way, Hopkins, and the CAM more broadly, trade radicalism for a version of middle-class propriety common to a white middle-class of several decades earlier. It seems as though, for Hopkins, aligning black women with conservative white women is radical enough without suggesting they also become “New Women.”

Indeed, The Colored American Magazine is in some aspects virtually indistinguishable from predominantly white-authored periodicals of the same period. As Wallinger explains, “The Colored American Magazine set out to be a quality journal similar to the Atlantic Monthly and saw itself as a magazine dedicated to the needs of a particular reading group: African Americans and as large a number of white sympathizers as possible” (Wallinger 50). It is notable, but not necessarily misguided, that Wallinger makes “African Americans” and “white sympathizers” one reading group. There is an argument to be made that the CAM wished its African American and white readers to be indistinguishable, and that this lack of distinction was encouraged by the
content of the magazine. The January 1901 issue, for example, features a short story entitled “Miss Wilkins, M.D.” in which a single young woman moves into a town and is speculated about by its gossipy residents. Not only are there no clear markers to suggest the race of the story’s characters, but the reader, regardless of race, in effect becomes one of the nosy townspeople wondering about the newcomer in their midst. Thinking that because she has put a sign up outside that says “Miss Wilkins, M.D.” that Miss Wilkins is a doctor, the town’s minister notes that he is “glad to see the independent spirit manifesting itself in the gentler sex to invade more and more the professions; it’s a healthy tone of the times” (Brock 182). Despite his generally positive take on women in more professions, the minister’s use of the word “invade” points to his discomfort with women professionals. Just as the townspeople are beginning to become accustomed to the idea of a woman doctor living in their town, they are relieved to learn that she is “merely a mender of dolls” (Brock 183, my emphasis). I emphasize the word “merely” to point out that to the residents of Millville who were concerned about Miss Wilkins’s “uppish lookin’” demeanor, a doll mender is much more socially accessible than a lady doctor would be (Brock 179). “Miss Wilkins, M.D.” shares many of the same comedic misunderstandings as stories written about women doctors or “authoresses” discussed in other chapters of this dissertation, and if its pastor character seems particularly advanced in thinking compared to characters in *Dr. Breen’s Practice*, for example, one might explain this difference by the twenty year gap in their respective publication dates rather than by any real differences in their characters’ (and by extension, their authors’) views.

More important, however, is the story’s interest in the origins of Miss Wilkins. Several neighbors, specifically Adrian Marsh, the “head deacon” of the Baptist church and Miss Wilkins’s nearest neighbor, criticizes the landlord who rented Gray Cottage to Miss Wilkins
without knowing “who or what this woman is” (Brock 179). The question of her “past life” is of at least as much interest to the town as is her current occupation and purpose there (Brock 179). This interest in a woman’s history and lineage appears in other parts of the same issue of Colored American Magazine; the biography of Pauline Hopkins, for example, begins with an extended discussion of her family tree, including her father, “a G.A.R. veteran of the Civil War,” her mother, who is “a direct descendant of the famous Paul brothers,” and various other uncles, aunts, and cousins (“Pauline E. Hopkins” 218). As Jill Bergman explains, “the biography carefully accentuates Hopkins’s impressive family history and her connections to the anti-slavery movement as a means of placing her firmly within the black middle class” (Bergman 91). In comparison, a short biography of a male magazine contributor lists his accomplishments and place of birth, but does not seem compelled to discuss his entire lineage (“Here and There” 208). In fact, in her series on “Famous Men of the Negro Race,” Hopkins has the following to say about ancestry:

Ordinarily a biography is expected to begin with some genealogical narrative, intended to show that the person presented to the reader was descended from ancestors of renown… But these men of the Negro race whom we delight to honor, had no ancestors. “Self-made,” they traced their lineage from the common ancestor, Adam. (“Charles Lenox Remond” 34-5)

This marked difference between descriptions of notable black men and notable black women points to an anxiety about women’s backgrounds that we see in fiction like “Miss Wilkins, M.D.” and other texts found in CAM, such as the biography of Albreta Moore-Smith, previously discussed in this chapter. Although it is not the first proof of her quality discussed in the biographical entry on her, mention of Moore-Smith’s parentage, as it is with many other woman
contributors to the magazine, is noted as key to her ability; we read that “Mrs. Smith’s display of ability along these lines is not surprising to her many friends, for her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Richard E. Moore, are two of the oldest and most prominent citizens in Chicago” (“Story” 47). Although it is not always possible, it is evidently ideal for a contributor to CAM to have a respectable African American lineage. As Wallinger explains, “where there is a family history that could be told and shown…Hopkins presents this as a remarkable fact” (Wallinger 103). Of course, preoccupation with notable women’s lineages is not confined to descriptions of women of color; nearly every entry in Sarah Hale’s Woman’s Record, for example, begins with a family history of the woman discussed, as though women are foremost important in terms of their associations with important men. Lydia Maria Child, for example, is described as “wife of David Lee Child” before any mention of her literary prowess, which is the ostensible reason she is included in the collection (Hale 619).

Such similarities between biographies of women written nearly fifty years apart could easily point to conservatism on the part of Colored American Magazine (as, indeed, Hale and her works were also markedly conservative for the 1850s), but there are several important layers to the Colored American Magazine’s decision to foreground the family backgrounds of its female contributors. First, ties to several generations of free (Northern) black citizens at least partially separate these women from the violence and violation of slavery. Although Hopkins and others consider the plight of the female slave in their fiction, their non-fiction and many of their most sympathetic fictional characters’ families have been free citizens for several generations. Second, if it is true that much of the CAM’s intended audience was middle-class white people, a contributor’s apparently all-black lineage both exculpates white readers from blame for the ubiquitous rape of slaves leading to mixed-race children, and denies them credit for a black
woman’s intelligence and accomplishments. Further, these accomplishments can better hold up against those of white authors and society members when the magazine insists that they have been cultivated over several generations of free black families who have worked their way into the middle class. Finally, in their similarity to descriptions of white women intellectuals in Hale’s work and elsewhere that insist on the inclusion of male spouses and relatives, these biographies suggest that middle-class black women are conventional in the same ways that middle-class white women, even the notable ones included in magazines, fulfill their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters before they venture into business or intellectual pursuits.

Hopkins does further work to minimize black women’s exceptionalism, both to call attention away from individual women and to suggest that women’s achievements are not necessarily unusual. Of Hopkins’s series, “Famous Women of the Negro Race,” Matter-Seibel argues that, in contrast to the series on famous men, “the women in the women’s series are rather seen as an embodiment of the community endeavor and not as individual heroines” (Matter-Seibel 82). The series is in fact misnamed in the sense that, though specific women are discussed and celebrated, their importance is framed in the context of larger movements of women rather than as unique forebears for them. Whereas her “Famous Men of the Negro Race” devotes an entire article to one notable man, the “Famous Women of the Negro Race” are discussed in “twelve groups,” with several women, save for a few exceptions, in each group (“Announcement for 1902”). However, although Matter-Seibel claims that “women like Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells and Fannie Barrier Williams, who were regarded as aggressive and improperly behaved in the white press, are significantly missing from her ‘Famous Women of the Negro Race’” because “These African-American New Women were still too new to deserve a place among cultural icons,” Ida B. Wells is actually included in the series (as Ida Wells Barnett), as is Mary
Church Terrell (Matter-Seibel 83). The fact that Matter-Seibel misses the inclusion of these important women is perhaps as much a product of their relative (un)importance to the series as it is of oversight; the entry on Ida B. Wells appears among several other “Literary Workers” discussed, and one of the first things the reader learns about her is that “Her story is romantic” (“Some Literary Workers” 279). Hopkins does not apologize in the biography for Wells’s behavior, as Matter-Seibel suggests she might, but instead treats Wells as a well-known personage with a story “we all know” who is “without a doubt the first authority among Afro-Americans on lynching and mob violence” (“Some Literary Workers” 279). Meanwhile, though the advertisement promises “the story” of women of color’s “Club Life” all the way “from inception to the present time” and names almost a dozen notable women including Terrell (“Announcement for 1902”), most of these women are relegated to a cursory list in the actual October 1902 segment (“Club Life Among Colored Women” 277). Although Terrell is listed in the advertisement as one of the club women, her biography appears in the second installment of “Literary Workers,” just after Frances E. W. Harper (“Literary Workers (Concluded)” 370).

When Hopkins writes about woman authors in the CAM’s “Famous Women of the Negro Race,” she refers to them as “literary workers” rather than using “authors,” “writers,” or some other more common nomenclature (“Some Literary Workers” 275). By terming them “workers,” Hopkins puts women writers in the same category as those who work in offices or factories, and legitimizes writing as a form of labor rather than simply a middle-class hobby. However, while writing might be labor according to Hopkins, it is mostly done in the home. Although the initial advertisement for Hopkins’s “Famous Women of the Negro Race” promises sections on the “Medical Profession” and “Women in Business,” it seems that these installments were never published in the magazine; between the September and October, 1902 issues, the “Famous
Women” segments jump from section “X. Artists” to section “XII. Higher Education of Colored Women,” and section XI, whether or not it was meant to discuss businesswomen or woman doctors, is nowhere to be found (1902 Vol. 5 492-4). These are not the only changes made to the series after its initial announcement in Colored American, but the absence of discussion of “famous” women who worked outside the home is nonetheless notable. According to Matter-Seibel, with the “Famous Women” series, “the political agenda of learned and independent womanhood is brought together with the Victorian ethos of serving humanity,” and the service to humanity often seems more important than the identities of those who serve (Matter-Seibel 82).

In contrast to Hopkins’s own reference to women writers as “literary workers,” in various parts of CAM, Pauline Hopkins is referred to as “The Popular Colored Writer,” “Talented Negro Authoress,” and “famous Negro authoress,” among other descriptors. The term “authoress” strikes a conservative note considering that it is not being used pejoratively by CAM at a time when, as we have seen in Chapter Two, most serious publications either use it negatively or shun its use altogether. Hopkins of course was also more than simply a “popular” or “talented” or even “famous” writer: she edited much of the CAM for several years in addition to writing under both her own name and several pseudonyms, often in a single issue of the magazine. According to Wallinger, “Hopkins found the use of a pseudonym very convenient. It allowed her to disguise her identity, publish more frequently, and avoid public criticism directed at herself” (Wallinger 62). Wallinger further explains that “The use of pen names was a survival strategy for the woman editor, who did not have a large support group to shield her against opposition nor role models to teach her survival schemes in a male-dominated corporate enterprise” (Wallinger 59). There are also surprisingly few women contributors besides Hopkins, so a pseudonym was a way
for the magazine to appear as though it had multiple female contributors and that Hopkins was
not nearly single-handedly writing the bulk of the articles and stories.

These articles and stories helped comprise the CAM’s identity as, according to The
Digital Colored American Magazine project, “among the first general magazines addressed to a
middle-class African American readership,” one that pointedly included women for the four
years that Hopkins wrote for and helped edit the magazine. Although it may be argued that much
of the work done for and by women in CAM had a tendency toward conservatism, the magazine
was nonetheless vigorously including women in conversations about black “uplift.” Pauline
Hopkins, by all accounts, was the primary, and sometimes sole, reason for such inclusion. There
are several theories about why Hopkins left The Colored American Magazine, but the changes
made to the magazine upon her departure were drastic. In her essay on Pauline Hopkins and race
in CAM, Sigrid Cordell somewhat casually mentions that “the Colored American Magazine’s
attention to women’s issues disappeared after Hopkins left the journal in 1904” (Cordell 55). To
say “attention to women’s issues disappeared” might be considered an understatement when we
look at a November 1905 issue of the magazine, in which no article is written by a woman or
even exclusively concerns women, and where no photographs of women appear (save for the
frontispiece, a photograph of a “South African wedding”). 40 Further, in the article concerning
recent stage performances, the female performers are identified by their relationships to men
rather than being discussed on their own merits (“Stage Comment” 652). As Matter-Seibel notes,
“Between 1905 to (sic) 1908, most articles published by the magazine were on business,
agriculture and industrial education. There was rarely literature by black women or articles about

40 As a handful of articles are written by authors listing only their first initials, it is possible that
women wrote them, but the articles’ subjects are not overwhelmingly female, and there are no
markers to suggest female authorship.
them” (Matter-Seibel 85). It is clear from the advertisements that, though apparently left out of virtually all other portions of the issue, women have not been prevented from paying to advertise in the magazine, as several businesswomen’s ads appear in the final pages of the issue (“Advertisements” Nov. 1905).

However, by the April 1909 issue, women seem to have stopped advertising their professional services entirely; while one or two advertisements address “ladies” in addition to gentlemen, none directly suggests that any women are advertising in, contributing to, or reading *The Colored American Magazine* by this time (“Young the Hat Renovator”). Jill Bergman notes, too, that the “change in content [to virtually exclude women’s issues] influenced the readership, as indicated by the magazine’s advertisements. No longer promoting beauty products such as hair straightener or skin lightener, the magazine ran ads for cigars, tailors, and real estate brokers” (“New Race” 100). Whereas ads for real estate brokers or investment might address women when placed alongside ads for dressmakers or beauty products, once these “women’s” ads disappeared, the other ads effectively lost their potential to speak to women and thus as much as half of their audience. While no data on the gender of *CAM’s* readers is readily available, the switch from literature to articles about fraternal societies after Hopkins’s departure doubtless caused a shift in readership toward men.

In *CAM*, Pauline Hopkins’s influence shows its audience both that women’s work and interests are as important as men’s, and that literature and leisure culture uplift people of color alongside history and politics. The simultaneous disappearance of literary sections and women’s contributions is partially due to Pauline Hopkins leaving the magazine, but it also signals the magazine’s loss of attention to women of color and their interests. Similarly, articles, stories, and poems within the magazine can be seen as of potential interest to either men or women as long as
it features both male and female contributors and subjects. As Wallinger explains, “Confronted with racism in addition to sexism, challenged by the influence of the Tuskegee spirit, confronted with white women as antagonists rather than as sisters, and concerned with the public image of black women, Hopkins and her contemporaries would never see the woman’s side only; they had to negotiate race as well” (Wallinger 99). Hopkins’s departure from CAM was not simply the loss of a prolific female contributor and editor, but a signal of the complete disappearance of women from CAM’s definition of “the Interests of the Colored Race” (Oct. 1908 Cover). A charge of conservatism may be leveled at Pauline Hopkins, but her work in The Colored American Magazine at very least guaranteed that women were considered part of the group the magazine sought to both represent and reach.

Middle-Class Black Uplift in Fiction

At roughly the same time that The Colored American Magazine was working toward “uplift” of black men and women through “Literature, Science, Music, Art, Religion, Facts, Fiction and Traditions of the Negro Race,” prominent black women were also writing full-length novels concerning racial “uplift.” According to Anna Storm, “Because of its association with uplift ideology, domestic fiction offered black women a political platform while still in some ways conforming to patriarchal gender roles and the tenets of bourgeois individualism” (Storm 364). In both the cases of Frances E.W. Harper’s Iola Leroy and Pauline E. Hopkins’s Contending Forces, the race’s cultural and social improvement is brought about by educated, mixed-race women who strongly resemble their middle-class white counterparts. For many of the women of color depicted in the fiction of Pauline Hopkins and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper,
establishing oneself in the respectable middle class often means renouncing a career in favor of marriage and motherhood. Though such a resemblance has garnered criticism of both authors by people who claim that white-appearing heroines support myths of the white savior or of the tragic heroine, Harper and Hopkins manipulate those myths to their advantages, successfully toeing the line between assimilation with the white middle class and dedication to black “uplift.”41 In this way, the two authors can portray new types of black women in fiction while simultaneously staying within the confines of middle-class Christian morality, and thus enjoyed both black and white readership at the turn of the century.

Harper and Iola Leroy:

By the 1890s, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was nearing her 80s and had enjoyed a successful career as a poet, author, and lecturer. Pauline Hopkins gives her due coverage in the second “Literary Workers” section of CAM’s “Famous Women of the Negro Race” series, treating her like an aging grande dame of black progress. With her biography of Harper, Hopkins is much more interested in her public persona and works, including her financial successes, than she is in her actual writing. Although one poem by Harper is reprinted at the end of the segment, Hopkins emphasizes Harper’s generosity, learning, and finances significantly more than her literary prowess, perhaps in order to liken her to other “literary workers” or even to her readers. As Hopkins explains,

41 Anna Storm, for example, argues that “While on the one hand Harper’s and Hopkins’s fiction exposes the flaws in racist logic and denounces white supremacy, their responsibility to represent the race in way (sic.) that would actually give African American women political power and citizenship sometimes resulted in their conceding to representations that were complicit with racism and sexism” (Storm 365).
Her private lectures to freedwomen are particularly worthy of notice. Desiring to speak to women, along the objects of wrong and abuse under slavery, and whom emancipation found in deepest ignorance, Mrs. Harper made it her business to talk to them of their morals and general improvement, giving them the wisest counsel in her possession. For all this work she made no charge, working and preaching as did the Master—for the love of humanity. (“Literary Workers (Concluded)” 368)

There are interesting juxtapositions here between public and private, and also an emphasis on the generosity of Harper in giving “the wisest counsel” to freedwomen for “no charge.” Hopkins seems particularly interested in Harper’s financial situation and giving, suggesting that these attributes placed her in the middle class. According to Hopkins,

Mrs. Harper was not contented to make speeches and receive plaudits, but was ready to do the rough work, and gave freely of all the moneys that her literary labors brought her. Indeed, it was often found necessary to restrain her open hand and to counsel her to be more careful of her hard-earned income. (“Literary Workers (Concluded)” 368)

Hopkins also finds it important to repeatedly mention Harper’s popularity, explaining that “fifty thousand copies of her four books have been sold” and that “She has never once been other than successful in delivering thousands of speeches” (“Literary Workers (Concluded)” 369).

According to this biographical sketch, Harper appears to break the mold of both the domestic woman and the collectively successful one; Hopkins notes that between 1860 and 1864 Harper “retired to a small farm bought from the accumulated sales of her books, etc., and for a time was absorbed by the cares of married life,” but this is the only mention we read of domestic
inclination, which appears to have ended shortly after the death of her husband in 1864 ("Literary Workers (Concluded)" 368).

Despite not warranting a mention in Hopkins’s biographical sketch of Harper, the 1893 novel *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* follows an important trend in black fiction by women, one that Hopkins herself later follows. The novel harkens back to the sentimental romance trend popular earlier in the century, following a beautiful, mixed-race, (initially) tragic heroine as she overcomes slavery and racism to find lost loved ones, achieve financial and personal success, and help to improve the lives of her fellow freed men and women. According to Hazel Carby, Harper wrote for black Sunday school readers, and her use of aspects of the sentimental, or domestic, novel is clearly an attempt to include an appeal to a female readership. Harper adapted and used these formulas from women’s fiction in an attempt to reach a wide audience and entertain as well as teach. (Carby 72)

The title of the novel, with its woman’s name plus descriptive alternative, is reminiscent of earlier fiction written by or for women, such as *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly*.

However, as Carby and others observe, in *Iola Leroy* Harper updates sentimental conventions, especially in her treatment of women’s desires and successes. After nursing the wounded in the Civil War and successfully reuniting her family, Iola decides that she will find work. As Carby explains, “Harper returned her characters to the North, where Iola decided to work, not out of necessity but from a conviction that women should work” (Carby 79). In the same vein, Marilyn Elkins notes that “in Iola’s continued refusal to marry the white Dr. Gresham and live a life that will be free from work, Harper creates a female character who questions the assumption that a woman should marry and not seek independence through employment” (Elkins
50). Indeed, Iola makes several statements in favor of financial independence over marriage for women; beginning to look for employment, Iola tells her uncle that “every woman ought to know how to earn her own living” and that “a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women” (Harper, Kindle Location 2037). She spends the next portion of the novel seeking and acquiring respectable work, even after her uncle attempts to convince her it is unnecessary, with some hiccups due to her complicated racial identity. For example, Iola’s Uncle Robert warns her that the man advertising for saleswomen “doesn't expect any colored girl to apply” and would not hire a black woman (Harper, Kindle Location 2041). Iola must subsequently resign one position and is forced out of another because of her race, which no one even is able to determine without significant detective work. Iola’s experience, perhaps because of her education and evident class, appears to be, if anything, less difficult than average for women of color at this time. Discussing women in the workplace at the turn of the century, Kessler-Harris notes that women “sacrificed higher wages for the relative satisfactions of working with compatriots or of doing respected work” (Kessler-Harris 141). She explains that, in many cases, “respected work” depended as much on who was doing the work as on what type of work was being done, and that “for [native-born white women], one measure of genteel employment was the absence of immigrant or black workmates” (Kessler-Harris 137). There were few options for a black or immigrant woman who herself wanted, as Kessler-Harris puts it, “genteel employment.”

Undeterred by her earlier experiences, Iola decides to continue to look for work after the family moves to another city, arguing again, and echoing Virginia Penny and others, that “every woman should have some skill or art which would insure her at least a comfortable support” (Harper, Kindle Location 2096). Despite Robert’s pleas that she not “subject [her]self to the
same experience again” and instead stay home, she finds a personal nursing position and from there is hired on at the store of her employer, who uses his position of power to force acceptance of her employment by the other employees (Harper, Kindle Location 2095). Like many other events in the novel, the benevolence of Iola’s employer is serendipitous, but it also showcases the difficulty for most women of color to find “respected work” (Kessler-Harris 141). *Iola Leroy* is clear, however, that acquiring such work is worthwhile, even if it is difficult.

Work takes place in lieu of conventional marriage for much of *Iola Leroy*. Early in the novel, Iola is courted by Dr. Gresham, who proposes marriage, asking, “what is to hinder you from sharing my Northern home, from having my mother to be your mother” (Harper, Kindle Locations 1170-1171)? By sharing Gresham’s “home” and “mother,” Iola effectively would erase her identity as both a black woman and an independent one; she refuses him with the excuse that she must search for her mother, but her reasons are more complex. According to Carby, “As a black woman, Iola’s sexual autonomy was immediately threatened. Her refusal to accept the protection of white male patriarchy, in the form of Dr. Gresham’s proposals that they marry and pretend Iola was white, was a prelude to a series of incidents in which Iola had to struggle as a woman as well as a black person to establish her independence” (Carby 91). This is also the first of several instances in which Iola refuses the opportunity to “pass” as white, despite both the ease with which she could do so and the considerable social and monetary benefits appearing white afforded. Iola determines to be independent, especially from white men like the ones who enslaved her in the South, even if those white men appear to be benevolent.

In this way and others, we see glimpses of progressive thinking and the New Woman in *Iola Leroy*, but not quite so many as to alarm readers unused to seeing black women portrayed as anything but caricatures, let alone seeing black women writing such complex characters
themselves. The end of the novel leaves Iola married, perhaps, as Elkins explains, “fully prepared to be an equal partner” with her mixed-race husband, but nonetheless mostly stepping away from employment outside the home or for income (Elkins 50). According to Hazel Carby, “Harper had a vision that women were potentially capable of transforming society, but although this vision was not limited to what women could achieve from the hearthstone Harper did regard the home as a crucial sphere of women’s influence” (Carby 69). Nonetheless, Iola’s statements about the need for women breadwinners as well as her mostly single-handed success in reuniting her family, working independently, and helping others of her race find measures of success defy easy dismissals of her character as overly conservative or domestic. As Carby observes, “Iola was shown to continue working after her marriage, and there was no patriarchal transfer of Iola, as property, from father to husband” (Carby 80). The death of Iola’s father is at least part of the reason for this lack of transfer, but the fact that Iola has been transferred as actual property early in the novel perhaps also lends itself to an aversion to symbolic property transfer later in the novel.

To a greater extent than the other texts discussed in this chapter, Iola Leroy refuses to fall back on caricatures in its portrayal of either white or black characters. Especially in the case of the women in the novel, there is an unusual amount of confidence, capability, and independence found, from Iola herself to Aunt Linda, who shows a surprising amount of enterprise despite her illiteracy and dialect speech. However, Anna Storm warns that

While Harper’s novel appears to advocate classlessness, it often fails to recognize how culture and respectability were in fact closely tied with class status. It is for this reason that the novel’s conclusion implies that the future belongs more to
African American professionals like Iola and her husband than to the illiterate yet business-savvy Aunt Linda or even a soldier like Robert Johnson. (Storm 365)

Indeed, Iola is seen, especially later in the novel, as a model of culture and behavior to be emulated by the poorer black characters; when she “quietly took her place in the Sunday-school as a teacher, and in the church as a helper,” she takes it upon herself to be an “especial benefit of mothers and children” to save them from “dens of vice” (Harper, Kindle Location 2784). Iola spends the novel on a moral high ground from which she is never seriously tempted, and Harper crafts Iola as an ideal of black womanhood, even while she is careful to portray all types of black women as potentially worthy of respect.

Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*

Several comparisons can be made between Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* and Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, and many similar arguments have been made about them, concerning their reliance on the Romance, their mixed-race characters, and their financially independent women, among others. Both novels begin before the Civil War, focusing on rich, white, southern characters who have married mixed-race (or possibly mixed-race) women. As might be expected, tragedy befalls their offspring, in the form of enslavement or threatened enslavement leading to flight north. Both novels were considered “race-work” in that they were written to improve black lives using models of the race who persevere despite hardship (“Prospectus…”). *Contending Forces*, though written after *Iola Leroy*, can easily be seen as the more conservative, if not more conventional, of the two novels, primarily in terms of its more stereotypical treatment of lower-class black characters, who appear in the novel mainly as a point of contrast with the serious, middle-class
characters and to provide comic relief through dialect and social faux-pas. More than *Iola Leroy*, *Contending Forces* seems intent on convincing the reader that a black middle class exists, and that women are the major reason for its existence.

Although *Contending Forces* was not serialized in *The Colored American*, it was published by the Colored Cooperative Publishing Company, which also published the magazine, and was initially sold for $1.50 but later given as a free gift to *CAM* subscribers. This incentive ensured that magazine subscribers and *Contending Forces* readers would make up essentially the same group, and suggests that *CAM*’s editors considered the message of the novel to be in line with that of the magazine. The advertisement for *Contending Forces* that appears in an early issue of the magazine calls the novel “pre-eminently a race-work dedicated to the best interest of the Negro everywhere” and an “important and valuable romance of Negro life” (“Prospectus…”). The same advertisement also appealed to “club women” to become sales agents of the Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, alerting them in one version that they could earn “a liberal commission” (“Prospectus…”). In a later advertisement, the book is offered “Free” because *CAM*’s editors “feel sure that where it is once introduced, we will sell hundreds of copies” (“CONTENDING FORCES—FREE”). Unlike the previous advertisement, this one does not solicit sales agents of either gender, perhaps because it is giving away, and not selling, the novel.

The first lines of Hopkins’s preface to *Contending Forces* echo both the aforementioned words of sales agents for the publishing company and the sentiments of many other women writers forced to profess lack of interest in fame or fortune; she claims she is “not actuated by a desire for notoriety or for profit” but writes “to raise the stigma of degradation from [her] race” (*Contending* 13). To claim one does something professionally not “for profit,” however, is to
suggest one does not need to write for a living, placing her firmly in the middle class. This claim to lack of interest in money is reminiscent of the women described in previous chapters, such as the “lady” doctors from Chapter Three and the authoresses of Chapter Two. Especially in the case of the stories about authoresses, although money often was not specifically discussed, it was the primary reason to take up a profession; women wished to attain economic independence, but needing to earn her own money to achieve it could threaten a woman’s class status. Therefore, various other reasons were often given for such pursuits. Hopkins’s biography in The Colored American supports the idea that writing is best when it is divorced from income, noting that although the young Hopkins “did much literary work for which she was well paid,” she later was “obliged…to cease her literary labors for a time and try for something that would immediately help her financially” (“Pauline E. Hopkins” 218-19). Hopkins’s return to writing reflects well on the magazine, in that she has either forsworn significant financial gain for love of writing or that The Colored American is the first publication that can sufficiently “help her financially.” The ideal work for Hopkins is that which will pay, but is also paradoxically more important than money.

As Richard Yarborough explains in his introduction to Contending Forces, Hopkins’s goal of “facilitat[ing] the uplift of her race” involved creating “Afro-American characters who would be acknowledged by the white reader not only as human beings but also as embodiments of white bourgeois values, manners, and tastes” (Yarborough xxx-xxxi). This interest in the white middle class as a model of Afro-American behavior serves to attract white readership but also to critique the social and governmental systems in the U.S. that arbitrarily separate white and black Americans. Hopkins must first assert that there is no moral difference between black and white middle classes before arguing for racial uplift. Bergman argues that “like other turn-
of-the-century African-American women, Hopkins is not ready to abandon the domestic ideals of the bourgeois matron, in part because she has just got a chance to join the bourgeoisie” (“New Race” 88). However, the choice to value the domestic seems as much strategic as it is emulative; Hopkins and her black contemporaries must prove that they belong in the bourgeoisie before beginning to push against its confinements. As Bergman puts it, “far from abandoning the bourgeois matrons’ ideals, then, Hopkins merges them with the ideals of New Womanhood to create a new race of black women who take a distinctly maternal approach to racial uplift” (Bergman 89). And while many see Hopkins’s use of the sentimental novel form as either ironic or subversive, the serialization of her novels in magazines points also to the financial practicality of such a form.

In *Contending Forces* Hopkins seems to prize the cultural accomplishments of the white middle class and set her characters on paths to emulate or achieve these same accomplishments. Early in the novel, the narrator muses on the cultural repertoire of its middle-class people of color:

> With about every avenue for business closed against them, it is surprising that so many families of color manage to live as well as they do and to educate their children and give them a few of the refinements of living,—such as cultivating a musical talent, gratifying a penchant for languages, or for carving, or for any of the arts of a higher civilization, so common among the whites, but supposed to be beyond the reach of a race just released from a degrading bondage. (*Contending* 86)

No one in the novel appears to be impoverished, and everyone seems to have both extra-employment interests and accomplishments, and money to spare for community improvements.
Even the lower class characters are seen to be improved in culture and standing by proximity to their black middle class landlords and neighbors; Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White start a laundry business in Mrs. Smith’s boarding house, in part “because of her known respectability, and because they could there come in contact with brighter intellects than their own” (Contending 104). Notably, these intellects are both black and, for the most part, female; Hopkins depicts a community of educated and resourceful women who help one another improve in terms of both income and education.

Though charges of romantic idealism have been leveled at the female community Hopkins depicts in Contending Forces, this community is not simply fictional. As Hopkins herself notes in the “Women’s Department” section of the Colored American Magazine’s second issue (a section that disappeared after this issue due to redundancy with other parts of the magazine), “one of the most remarkable movements of the twentieth century has been the ramification of women in all directions where she has seen the slightest chance for business or intellectual progression” (“Women’s Department” 121). Having provided the readers with a list of women’s clubs and their officers, Hopkins notes that despite criticisms of the “women’s club movement,” she finds that “for all the women of color who are seeking new avenues of work and an outlet for thoughts that breathe, there is a blessing if they persevere in the name of God and humanity” (“Women’s Department” 122). In the “Here and There” section of the August issue, moreover, we see news of “the Lucy Stone Club, an organization of colored women lately formed to raise money to establish a home for old folks and orphans of our race” (“Here and There” 188). In addition to (or perhaps due to) the fact that “many prominent people of Worcester” have “subscribed,” “the amount of money pledged is a large one” (“Here and There” 188). Here and elsewhere in the magazine articles place strong emphasis on the wealth and
cultural prowess of both women and men of color, and in many cases women are the main subjects of such articles, especially while Pauline Hopkins is involved.

The “club woman” that Hopkins portrays in *Contending Forces*, Mrs. Willis, is a complex character whom several critics have discussed, reaching varying conclusions. The initial description of Mrs. Willis is ambiguous; we see that “Shrewd in business matters, many a subtle business man had been worsted by her apparent womanly weakness and charming simplicity” (*Contending* 144). She is also portrayed as interested in money as a means of social standing: “Money, the sinews of living and social standing, she did not possess upon her husband’s death. Therefore she was forced to begin a weary pilgrimage – a hunt for the means to help her breast the social tide” (*Contending* 146). Interest in money is always problematic for Hopkins’s characters, but Alisha Knight argues, with varying success, that “albeit a secondary character, Mrs. Willis plays a positive and pivotal role in *Contending Forces*, serving as a black woman’s success archetype that, prior to 1900, had been absent from American literature” (Knight 74). In order to prove that Hopkins wrote Mrs. Willis as a positive model of success rather than a suspicious character to be avoided by the angelic Sappho, Knight must argue that “it is a mistake to identify the narrator of *Contending Forces* with Pauline Hopkins” (Knight 75). In contrast, Anna Storm argues for a more complex assessment of Mrs. Willis, noting that “Hopkins’s portrayal is appreciative of Mrs. Willis’s skill and drive yet distrustful of her manipulation of masks for personal ambition, extending her critique to the category of race women who manipulate the image of the New Negro Woman for personal gain” (Storm 366). Mrs. Willis can be both admired and distrusted for her success, and Sappho’s unease with her speaks both to this distrust and Sappho’s own vulnerability.

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42 Alisha Knight, whose work is discussed below, writes extensively on Mrs. Willis.
While her depiction of middle-class black woman characters can be seen as complex, Hopkins has a tendency to do disservice to her lower class, darker skinned characters. Several critics argue that Hopkins displays elitism in her treatment of uneducated black characters, and one can see evidence of this in *Contending Forces*. In his introduction to the novel, Richard Yarborough argues that “Hopkins’s own elitist views mar her treatment of lower-class black characters” (Yarborough xli). For example, Mrs. Ophelia Davis’s frequent discussion of money combined with her dialect speech (sprinkled with malapropisms) make her a fringe, comic character not to be classed with the novel’s more important women. Our first encounter with Mrs. Davis, for example, separates her morally from the novel’s higher-class characters. Discussing her clothing, Ophelia explains that “I’ve got a silk dress, two of ‘em, an’ a lace shawl an’ a gold watch and chain. People wants ter know how’d I git ‘em. I come by ‘em hones’, I did” (*Contending* 105). For Ophelia, “hones’” means that she took money and clothes from the house of her previous “mistis” when it was abandoned during the Civil War; there is a moral grey area here that provides comedy in its juxtaposition with that of the novel’s middle-class black characters. Jill Bergman even goes so far as to claim that Ophelia Davis’s bicycle riding is both comic relief and a critique of the popular image of the New Woman:

By linking Ophelia, a well-meaning but silly character, with the bicycle fad, Hopkins draws attention to frivolous aspects of New Womanhood and provides a sharp contrast to the important race work to be done, thus registering Hopkins’s judgment of the pursuit of personal pleasure and indicating her ambivalence about some aspects of New Womanhood. (“New Race” 93)

Hopkins reveals both her class bias and a certain conservatism with this conflation of the New Woman and the lower-class black woman, attributes that are repeated with other characters in
various parts of the novel. For example, Sister Robinson, a black woman of a similar class to Mrs. Davis, makes a distinction between a businesswoman and a laborer, saying “These ejecated folks is allers lookin’ to make suthin’. Most o’ them’s too lazy to work” (Contending 186). In addition to being too lazy to work, the “ejecated folks” in question are pejoratively referred to by Sister Robinson as “white-folksey colored ladies” (Contending 186). It is unclear here whether the ladies in question appear white or simply act white (or both), but what is clear is that Sister Robinson is an outlier among her peers, and should be criticized for her attack on the “ejecated” and “white-folksey.” Education and middle-class qualities that might be termed “white-folksey” are celebrated in other parts of the novel, and Sister Robinson’s failure in a competition with Ophelia and Sarah Ann White is evidence of the narrator’s feelings about her.

However, Hopkins’s portrayal of black women, both lower- and middle-class, can be compared favorably to her depictions of men characters in the novel. In Contending Forces the reader finds, for the most part, black women doing business while black men educate themselves or participate in politics. The novel centers around the Smith family, who run an apparently successful boarding house in Boston; we learn that “1896 found [the daughter, Dora,] taking full charge, and proving herself to be a woman of ability and the best of managers, husbanding their small income to the best advantage” (Contending 85). Similarly, the Smiths’ new boarder, Sappho, engages in skilled labor from home; as Dora explains, “she’s got a typewriter, and says she picks up a good living at home with it” (Contending 89). Not only is it portrayed as desirable for women to work from home, it is also in many cases necessary for educated women of color to do so. Sappho concurs when Dora suggests that “it [i]s very difficult for colored girls to find employment in offices where your class of work is required” (Contending 127-8). Noting racial discrimination and sexual harassment, Sappho describes her employment search:
“I shall never forget the day I started out to find work: the first place that I visited was all right until the man found I was colored; then he said that his wife wanted a nurse girl, and he had no doubt she would be glad to hire me, for I looked good-tempered. At the second place where I ventured to intrude the proprietor said: ‘Yes; we want a stenographer, but we’ve no work for your kind.’ However, that was preferable to the insulting familiarity which some men assumed. It was dreadful!” (Contending 128)

Finding respectable employment outside the home is framed here as both difficult and dangerous, though necessary for unmarried and unmoneyed women (of any race, but especially of color). As Sabina Matter-Seibel explains of Sappho in Contending Forces, “her employment is dire necessity and she has to work at home because the other employees do not want to work with a black woman” (79). Further, “living apart from family means not freedom, but danger for Sappho” (Matter-Seibel 79). Both Dora and Sappho have managed to make money from home, a preferable option for middle-class black women if they are to avoid the indignities that Sappho describes. But while preferable, making money from anywhere, even home, apparently causes Dora some anxiety; in her first appearance of the novel, Dora jokes, “See how mercenary I am getting to be since I undertook to direct the fortunes of a lodging-house” (Contending 81).

According to Contending Forces, Dora ideally would not work at all, and the boarding house is rented to the lower-class Ophelia Davis as soon as Dora gets married, who herself becomes a more suitable tenant when she reveals to Ma Smith that she will no longer be “a woman alone in the world” but will soon be married as well (Contending 363).

Meanwhile, though Will, Dora’s brother, has been employed as a bellboy, the hope is that he will soon “be free to choose a profession,” and the novel makes it easy to forget that he works
outside the house at all (*Contending* 85). Despite a relatively positive view of women making independent livings, however, the novel criticizes Dora’s fiancé, John Langley, for his reliance on women’s money, noting that “According to his way of thinking, the wife ought to contribute as much to the expenses of the household, by having a comfortable nest-egg before marriage, as the husband” (*Contending* 220). The novel does not directly suggest that Langley thinks women should work once married, but does characterize him negatively as interested in marrying for the money his future wife brings to the marriage, however she acquired it. Langley, of course, cannot be fully blamed for his avarice; attempting to move up in the “law business,” John is told by a white politician: “You know nothing about business, you’ve no capital, no money and we’ve got you every time” (*Contending* 233). Langley’s overzealous attempts to acquire money are likely responses to interactions like these.

Nonetheless, Langley is a financial and sexual threat to both Dora and Sappho. Luckily, Langley is already out of the picture by the time the Smiths meet Mr. Withington, who brings tidings of an inheritance windfall. Although the Smiths’ discovery of a benevolent rich white relative is a matter of pure serendipity, it is treated as an almost natural occurrence. Near the end of the novel, “the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars was awarded to Mrs. Smith as the last representative of the heirs of Jesse Montfort. *Justice was appeased*” (*Contending* 384, my emphasis). The idea that such a windfall is a matter of justice serves several purposes: first, it hints at support for government reparations for slavery. The Montfort money is being held by the “United States Government,” which a relative successfully “sued” for “damages” (*Contending* 376). Second, it acknowledges without commentary that a black woman can rightfully inherit from a white relative, and suggests that the U.S. government has no basis for, or even interest in, resisting such inheritance claims. Despite this progressive treatment of the Smiths’ inheritance,
however, the money itself seems to ensure wholly conservative lives for them: Dora marries, moves into a “very beautiful house,” and has a child, becoming “a contented young matron, her own individuality swallowed up in love for her husband and child” (Contending 389-90). Mrs. Smith is already planning to sell the boarding house she and her children run before their windfall, and to retire quietly in one of their homes. Just as money is not the reason that Hopkins claimed to write Contending Forces, money seems to be convenient but not particularly important to the Smiths, who are already middle class when the novel begins and can joke about how “mercenary” they are (Contending 81). Mrs. Smith promises that “every one who had ever been kind to her or the boy should be rewarded,” setting out to put the money toward community and race improvements (Contending 397).

Indeed, the fortunes of the majority of the characters in Contending Forces seem to go against ideals of self-making or significant upward progress. As we have seen in Hopkins’s non-fiction biographies of important black Americans in the CAM, in Contending Forces, ancestry contributes to success in greater measure than individual enterprise does, and most of the poorer enterprising characters are included for comic juxtaposition with the more respectable middle-class characters. However, this does not mean that black women are doomed to endure the same fates their ancestors did. Alisha Knight observes of Hopkins that

Her journalism provides explicit models for black female readers to aspire to while also illustrating to white readers how intelligent and capable black women are. In her fiction, Hopkins’s treatment of female success offers implicit critiques of the traditional archetype that merely judges all women according to the extent to which she has married a successful man. (Knight 79)
The word “implicit” is key in Knight’s observation, specifically because several women in Contending Forces marry either for or as a result of financial or social successes. However, Hopkins subtly reminds us that, unlike just a decade or two before the novel takes place, women have at least some choices about whom they marry and what kinds of work they do, no matter their class status.

Conclusion: Race Progress and Women’s Progress

Pauline Hopkins’s work at The Colored American Magazine, simply by including women in discussions of black progress, helped further women’s progress as well, if by smaller measure. Similarly, Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy and Hopkins’s Contending Forces strategically coopted and manipulated the popular romance genre so that average, sometimes white readers could relate to the plights of black women struggling through the turn of the century. Their forms and even sentiments were not always especially progressive; according to Jill Bergman, “in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras, while the white ‘daughters’ were abandoning domestic ideals as confining, black women embraced these newly accessible ideals as a means of claiming womanhood and citizenship for themselves” (“New Race” 88). Even if (and perhaps because) they sometimes did it in conservative ways, the women discussed in this chapter carved space in the middle class for intelligent, enterprising black women and worked toward helping them stand alongside both their black brothers and white counterparts to improve and celebrate their own lives.
Epilogue: The Diminutive Expands

On January 21, 2017 I stood with hundreds of thousands of others in the cold in D.C. for several hours, homemade “protest” sign in hand, watching a dozen or more speakers support women’s rights, lambaste the president, and encourage each other to take action against injustices to women in their many forms. The crowd was, at times, electrifying, making me feel as though I were an important, though small, part of a big change in U.S. culture; perhaps this showing of “what democracy looks like,” to borrow a popular chant from the march, could lead to tangible positive changes for women and other underrepresented people in the United States. Days later, however, I wondered how quickly we’d all return to complacency, unsure we had made a difference collectively and even less sure of our individual roles. Was this show of solidarity no more than that, and would it matter in a few months or years? So often, it seems, “what democracy looks like” is not so impressive, especially for women who might feel themselves at a distance from important work being done in governments or businesses. Were Henry James here today, would he treat this behemoth pussy-hat-wearing group as a momentary “fad,” just as Jennifer Fleissner argues he treated the women’s movement of the 1870s? More importantly, would he be right to do so?

What struck me most about the march was actually how organized, sanctioned, and even mundane it was—very unlike an uncontrollable and unreasonable fad. I wondered what a group of women that large would want in common, and decided that it was, perhaps, simply to be seen and taken seriously merely due to the group’s size. Although in a much more gradual and virtual way, the women professionals discussed in the previous chapters of this work can be said to have succeeded in a similar way to the Women’s March: by amassing enough numbers to be taken seriously by a large swath of society.
Postbellum women’s success in terms of financial independence gained through non-domestic work was not gained suddenly or forcefully, but by gentle and gradual pushing against boundaries of middle-class propriety. Nineteenth-century American women of the middle class are frequently categorized by modern-day critics in one of two ways: they are either meek followers of a “separate spheres,” “Cult of True Womanhood” ideal who convince themselves that domestic prowess is their only necessary attribute and that paid work is for husbands or the lower class, or they are radical “New Women” who agitate for voting rights and are the antitheses of domesticity. Although both types of women certainly existed, many middle-class women, especially in the second half of the century, fell somewhere between these two extremes: without sloughing off domesticity, they nonetheless prized financial and personal independence that came from working at non-domestic pursuits, at times much like the “Real Women” Frances Cogan describes. The work done here considers these women not as outliers struggling in vain to fit into a social status quo, but as successful professionals not necessarily forced to forego either domesticity or class status despite ongoing social stigmas against women working outside the home.

This middle path seems at times like a mediocre compromise. As opposed to those written about (in)famous figures such as Victoria Woodhull and Madam C.J. Walker, few biographies will ever be published concerning women who wrote about the ways “authoresses” could find both financial and personal success, or about Virginia Penny, whose work about women’s sanctioned entrance into employment seems to be more interesting than her life was. Nonetheless, the work done by Penny and her ilk both reflects a period in which more women were needed to enter the workforce, and helped create opportunities for such employment to become possible. Despite our lack of knowledge of the woman herself (or perhaps in part
because of it), Virginia Penny’s work is the glue holding these chapters together, helping us consider the ways women could find for themselves almost unlimited opportunities for employment in a culture reluctant to give them any. Penny’s failure to achieve lasting financial success for herself, more than evidence of any sort of radicalism on her part, reveals the lack of structures in place, even into the twentieth century, to help women attain individual success.

When they did succeed financially, the women discussed in this text, whether real or fictional, can nearly all be said to have succeeded in their various employments and paths in life without substantial help. From Alcott’s Christie Devon, who voluntarily leaves the safety of her uncle’s home in pursuit of independence, to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s Doctor Zay, who seems completely self-sufficient without masculine support, to Francine Harper’s Iola Leroy, who refuses marriage in order to reunite her family and pursue her own successes, the fictional working women in this study defy demands that they uphold ideals of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” while nonetheless embracing several of these qualities at various times on their own terms (Welter 152). These women and their authors as well as the other authors and characters discussed here, could rarely be considered radical or even feminist, but can be seen to have helped bring about large-scale changes to the ways middle-class women who worked were both depicted in fiction and seen in real life.

In order to bring about these changes, middle-class women had to not only dare to enter the workforce despite pushback from their families and peers, but also they had to convince those families and peers that they could be successful in professions while simultaneously succeeding in marital and domestic roles. Even authors who themselves never married often portrayed their heroines settling down into married life, with or without leaving their careers, or encouraged women to acquire job training just in case they did not find husbands or met with
financial difficulties. A woman who did not entirely leave the home was less threatening to men who acknowledged women’s superiority in some fields and feared being usurped by them in new ones. If a woman was an “authoress,” for example, she fell into a different category from a masculine “author” and was therefore not in competition with him. Women could sometimes even work alongside men if they convinced them they were still separate, still “working in the diminutive,” as it were.

This model could not work for all women, of course; this dissertation glosses over or omits most of the women who could find success in careers but perhaps could not convince others of their domestic prowess or even their femininity, in some cases. These are the women being ridiculed, shunned, caricatured, or contrasted by most of those detailed in this work. Additionally, women of lower classes, many of whom by necessity both worked and fulfilled domestic duties, are of considerable interest but could not be accommodated by the scope of this study. Some mill workers might aspire to the life of middle-class women, for instance, but their aspirations mostly took different forms from those of women already entrenched in the middle class.

Whether their moves are sincere or strategic, most of the women featured in “Working in the Diminutive” are not apparently critical of the situation compelling them to reaffirm gender stereotypes while pursuing careers. In contrast, authors working primarily after the turn of the century, such as Edith Wharton, Nella Larsen, and Anzia Yezierska, among others, proved to move beyond the scope of this project, in that their novels tend to critique many aspects of women’s positions in U.S. culture. They also illustrate anxieties about class, race, and ethnicity that are compounded when appearing in enterprising women. One is struck by the solitude faced by these authors’ protagonists, who in many cases decide to forego personal happiness in favor
of professional or social successes, and rarely find the happy endings with which much of the nineteenth-century literature discussed here is replete. One might argue that without a critical eye, these happy endings are incomplete or insincere, but their authors, it seems, did not see them as such. With previously impossible professional success came compromises to older ways of viewing gender roles, because many women realized that drastic changes could not come all at once. Small, diminutive steps toward independence, like the tortoise’s fabled race, would ultimately allow women successes that they never could have achieved by leaps and bounds.

The literature covered in “Working in the Diminutive” reflects such small steps, and is important to consider because it largely succeeded in socially sanctioning women’s non-domestic employments, even if it had to convince readers of its proximity to and friendliness with women’s domesticity. Today in the United States, women are attempting to socially sanction speaking out against sexual harassers and abusers in the workplace and elsewhere, and continue to fight for women’s equal pay measures that have not been new since Virginia Penny wrote about them. Their success may lie in convincing others that these are not giant changes in policy, but natural, diminutive steps toward better lives for all.
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