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“Married or Single?”: Catharine Maria Sedgwick on Old Maids, Wives, and Marriage

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[M]arried life is the destiny Heaven has allotted to us, and therefore best fitted to awaken all our powers, to exercise all our virtues, and call forth all our sympathies. (19)

Catharine Maria Sedgwick, “Old Maids” (1834)

As slaves must be trained for freedom, so women must be educated for usefulness, independence, and contentment in single life . . . as a mode of life in which one may serve God and humanity, and thus educate the soul, the great purpose of this short life. So considered, single life would not long be regarded as either “helpless, joyless, or ridiculous,” and that dreaded stigma, “old maid,” would soon cease to be a stigma, and in the lapse of ages possibly become obsolete. (2: 214)

Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Married or Single?* (1857)

One question seems to reside at the heart of Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s life and literature, as it does for the world of antebellum America of which she is part—*married or single?* Since Sedgwick’s (re)discovery, however, critics have read her relationship to marriage and her own spinsterhood as ambivalent at best. The consensus is that Sedgwick ultimately places her true sentiment with marriage, holding it up as a state that is more “natural” than and preferable to its opposite.¹ Mary Kelley’s essay “A Woman Alone” begins with the following claim: “The life of Catharine Maria Sedgwick was betwixt and between” (209). Kelley further explains,

Sedgwick is representative of the ambiguity to be found in the sentimentalists’ fiction. Her anchorless existence reflects its ideals and aspirations as well as its doubts and fears. . . .

Even when in her fiction Sedgwick sought to legitimate the status of the

unmarried woman, it is clear that her true sentiments lay in the home. In saying that the greatest fulfillment for woman was to be found as a wife and mother, she was automatically ascribing an inferior status to the unmarried woman, despite her protests. (224–25)

Later, in her study of nineteenth-century “literary domestics,” Kelley further developed these ideas, going so far as to claim that Sedgwick’s own position as a single woman left her feeling “unnatural,” alone, and in a state of domestic “crisis” (*Private Woman, Public Stage* 239).² She writes, “[L]ife was a crisis of domesticity, the woman’s crisis of being” (239). Susan Koppelman, introducing Sedgwick’s short story “Old Maids,” perpetuates this reading when she explains that “the bulk of [Sedgwick’s] fiction serves to reinforce the belief that a woman’s greatest satisfaction and fulfillment comes from marriage and motherhood” (“Catharine Maria Sedgwick” 10). Some twenty years later, Deborah Gussman concurred. Although she thinks less in binary terms than earlier critics, the result is much the same. Gussman argues that in Sedgwick’s *Married or Single?* “the novel’s ambivalent endorsement of single life (and its efforts to present fairly the challenges of marriage) is consistent with the views Sedgwick offered in her journal” (261). She then quotes a passage that admittedly does present what appears, at least in part, to be the author’s remorseful acknowledgment of the painful existence of single life: “[I]t is the necessity of a solitary condition—an unnatural state. . . . I would not advise anyone to remain unmarried—for my experience has been a singularly happy one” (261). Such quotations, used either as evidence for Sedgwick’s ambivalence or for her reluctance to honor spinsterhood, must be comprehensively analyzed to recognize the multiple meanings inherent in such claims.

Calling Sedgwick ambivalent implies contradiction. It suggests that she held two oppositional views simultaneously or that she alternated between the poles of married and single. In setting up marriage and singlehood as conflicting identities, critics imply that Sedgwick’s ambivalence means an inability on her part to claim one position or the other, that she regarded marriage as natural and best one moment, only to turn around and claim spinsterhood as woman’s ideal the next. I argue nearly the opposite, in an attempt to show that Sedgwick does not in fact hold being married or single as a binary choice, nor as a hierarchy of American womanhood and citizenship. While Sedgwick may surely seem ambivalent at times, saying one thing only to contradict it later, she ultimately resists and dismantles the binary implied by the question “married or single?” In making spinsters like wives, Sedgwick ultimately argues that the former are not simply peripheral to marriage, but actually part of its very workings and definition. In this reading of Sedgwick, I propose that the

problem is not with spinsterhood per se, but with the way marriage marginalizes spinsterhood.

Like Gussman, I do not wish to impose an epistemology of twenty-first-century feminism onto Sedgwick or the past.³ I do not claim that Sedgwick glorified spinsterhood nor that she was necessarily proto-feminist or anti-marriage. Sedgwick surely critiques the institution of marriage, but hers is not a critique that refuses marriage or argues that women should resist by no longer participating in it. Rather, she believes in the notion of republican marriage, of family and community; she knows the civic responsibility and duty that come with raising future citizens. At the same time, however, this does not mean that the way we construct marriage (in terms of its relation to the single state) is necessarily productive or useful to the nation's range of citizens. As Sedgwick herself claimed, her brothers' marriages left her always feeling "*second best*" ("Journal" 127). For Sedgwick, the problem arises when we use a language of hierarchy to define womanhood based on the qualifying marker of marriage—that is, when a single woman becomes a wife and thus assumes what she believes to be a position of rank. As Eleanor (Herbert) Esterly tells her husband in *Married or Single?* "Many a woman, when she gets a husband, looks upon herself as a general who has won the battle," at which point "she looks down upon her single sisters from her matrimonial height" (2: 80–81). According to Eleanor, who is a wife and mother herself, when that woman makes the transition from wife to mother, she only perpetuates the system. She, in turn, teaches her daughter that an "old maid" is "an impersonation of whimsicalities, at best to be pitied, and that her condition is, at all risks, to be avoided" (2: 81).

Sedgwick's solution to the question of marriage and the spinster's relation to it is twofold. First, she counters negative stereotypes of the single woman by making a logical, reasoned, and unambivalent argument about an unmarried woman's usefulness to marriage, gender, and citizenship. Second, Sedgwick develops a case for (female) exceptional individualism, an argument that will become central for spinster and domestic literature of the nineteenth century. This line of thinking holds that if women are to be better wives or better old maids, they must not simply be average. Exceptional women must choose marriages of equality and single women must act as exemplary citizens. Wives and old maids must be both useful and independent. More important, they must simultaneously be connected to others. Isolating the married couple from old maids is not, after all, republican citizenship. Women, then, whether married or single, have the ability to redefine marriage itself.

The texts that allow me to make these claims span Sedgwick's career, demonstrating that she did not falter on this particular stance: From *Hope Leslie* in 1827, through "Old Maids" in 1834, to her last novel, *Married or Single?* in

1857, each narrative builds upon the former. Over the course of thirty years, Sedgwick worked out a theory of old maids and wives: She began with an introduction to (female) exceptionalism, which led into a critique of spinsterhood in relation to marriage, and finally brought these ideas together in *Married or Single?* Here, at the end of her career, Sedgwick highlighted how the lessons of spinsterhood done right might very well inform and prepare a woman to be a new kind of wife.

Hope Leslie opens not with the “early times in the Massachusetts” (as the subtitle suggests), but in England with the “son of a respectable country gentleman of Suffolk,” William Fletcher. Fletcher’s uncle, Sir William Fletcher, has “selected his nephew as the future husband of his daughter Alice” (5). Having “learned from observation, that love was a controlling passion,” Sir William hopes to establish his nephew’s fidelity to the king instead of betraying it for “the principles of civil and religious liberty.” Once he is certain the two lovers have established “their mutual dependence,” Sir William “cast[s] the die,” giving his nephew a choice: swear duty to the king or lose Alice (8). Fletcher forces a choice between liberty and love, between marriage and independence. Here, marriage means dependence on one another. One is not an individual in marriage or in love, and Sir William hopes to take advantage of Alice’s and William’s affections in this way—that is, to have William give up liberty for love. William chooses instead to leave England, and it is precisely masculine freedom that grants him this right of mobility. Such an opportunity does not afford itself to Alice.

When Sir William refuses to permit Alice to join William in New England, readers see her utter lack of agency. From the shore whence William departs, Alice is carried away by “Sir William’s carriage guarded by a cavalcade of armed men, in the uniform of the King’s guards” (11). Woman here stands at the mercy of patriarchal authority. Her father then has her marry Charles Leslie, as Alice, “in the imbecility of utter despair, submitted to her father’s commands.” Consequently, it was “reported for many years after, that she had suffered a total alienation of mind,” but, as the narrator explains, “if her mind had departed from its beautiful temple, an angelic spirit had entered in and possessed it.” Fletcher, now exiled to the new colony, marries “an orphan girl . . . who had, in the eyes of the elders, all the meek graces that befitted a godly maiden and dutiful helpmate” (12). Such unions do not allow for individuality or gender equality.

In both *Hope Leslie* and her other works, Sedgwick is clear about the types of marriages she approves and those she does not. For Alice Fletcher, marriage signals a lack of choice and individuality (for both men and women, but perhaps more so for the latter); the decision to marry is not mutual, but based on

parental authority, the importance of family ties, economics, and class. The narrator of Sedgwick's 1834 short story "Old Maids," Mrs. Seton, explains that a common reason for young girls to marry is "the éclat of an engagement—the pleasure of being the heroine of bridal festivities—of receiving presents—of being called by that name so enchanting to the imagination of a miss in her teens—'the bride'" (11). Worse still, in Mrs. Seton's estimation, are women who marry merely to avoid the stigma of being called an old maid, those of whom it is said, "she 'married to die a Mrs.'" (12). Each of these scenarios demonstrates Sedgwick's concern for the lack of independence and individuality granted to wives. At the same time, she also points out how the fantasy and/or the expectation of marriage alters the ambitions of girls. As she wrote in her journal, "I am inclined to think there is more individuality in single than in married women. . . . Their position is singular and forced. There is something peculiar in their history" (qtd. in Kelley, *Private Woman* 239).⁴

The marriage and family history of Alice and Charles Leslie, and then later of Charles and Mrs. Leslie, are the narratives that set the stage for *Hope Leslie* and for an important shift that Sedgwick will emphasize with the next generation in the characters of Hope Leslie and Everell Fletcher. As we shall explore shortly, these relationships establish an important dichotomy between old Puritan patriarchy and the younger generation, as well as between the old order of gender relations and the new. After Alice's children, Hope and Faith, are orphaned, they are put under the care of William Fletcher, Alice's former lover and Everell's father. A newly constituted family, reunited by former ties, will now be established at the Fletcher residence of Bethel. Faith is sent ahead without her sister; shortly before Hope and Mr. Fletcher arrive, an Indian attack (or retribution, as we later find out) occurs. Mrs. Fletcher is killed, Everell and Faith are captured, and the children of the Pequod chief, Magawisca and Oneco, are returned to the wilderness.

To compare Alice Fletcher and Mrs. Fletcher, Sedgwick intentionally develops a rather different definition of early American womanhood with the novel's heroine, Hope Leslie. Here Sedgwick begins to establish a notion of (female) exceptional individualism that will remain central to her project. She creates women characters who trouble gender, who are difficult to define, and who challenge the status quo by embodying a radical sense of individuality. My point is not simply to highlight all the ways Hope is exceptional, for other critics have shown her to be an independently radical early figure of American literature.⁵ In fact, these character traits are difficult to miss. Instead, I emphasize that this rhetoric of exceptionalism is necessary for Sedgwick's later discussion of both gender and of what marriage means for women. Exceptional women make better wives because their very identity demands a new kind of equality in marriage and a new notion of individuality.

As in many novels featuring such exceptional women, Hope Leslie is paired with and juxtaposed to an opposite. While Hope contrasts sharply with the old order of womanhood represented by Alice Fletcher, Mrs. Fletcher, and Mrs. Winthrop, she also presents a challenge to women of her own generation, notably Esther Downing, Governor Winthrop's "godly niece" (118). At least initially, Esther is all that an early American woman should be. While Hope challenges what it means to be a woman, Esther embodies a reasoned and respectable version of femininity: "Esther was always respectful, always patient" and "appeared far more lovely than our heroine" (216). As the narrator explains, upon Esther's arrival in Boston, "she met Hope Leslie—a bright gay spirit—an allegro to her pensive. They were unlike in every thing that distinguished each" (145). The two women meet, it is important to note, as a result of Hope's radical nature, misbehavior, and challenge to Puritan order. After Nelema, the Indian woman, is charged with witchcraft, Hope helps her to escape. Mr. Pyncheon suspects Hope of the crime and thinks of her as a "rash and lawless girl, who had dared to interpose between justice and its victim." He judges that the "lawless girl" needs a "stricter control" than that offered by Fletcher and has her sent to Boston to live with Madam Winthrop (125).

Unlike Esther, Hope disobeys all the rules and codes of true womanhood. Judith Fetterley calls Hope Leslie a "representative American" who is "[w]itty, smart, compassionate, gutsy, . . . a lover of self and a challenger of arbitrary authority who, while insisting on her physical and intellectual freedom, is willing to take extreme risks for what she believes" (501). As I have demonstrated, the exceptional woman resists categorization and is often described as being beyond representation or definition. As such a woman, Hope proves problematic for those around her, especially her elders, to define: "Nothing could be more unlike the authentic, 'thoroughly educated,' and thoroughly disciplined young ladies of the present day, than Hope Leslie; as unlike as a mountain rill to a canal—the one leaping over rocks and precipices, sportive, free . . . the other . . . restrained within prescribed and formal limits" (126). Here, and elsewhere, Hope transcends both physical and linguistic boundaries. She misbehaves and, as Jennet declares, could never be kept "within the four walls of a house" (181).⁶

Hope's exceptionalism throughout *Hope Leslie* might, then, appear to be problematic when we reach the end of the novel. On the surface, the marriage plot resolution we find there may seem a troubling, even contradictory, indication of Sedgwick's ambivalence toward spinsterhood or her use of the traditional romance plot common to women's fiction, in which the heroine will surely be paired off by the novel's close. I argue, however, that Sedgwick offers an important critique of marriage, both through Hope's marriage and through

granting a renewed sense of individualism to Esther Downing, the woman who appears to be less than exceptional.

That is, Sedgwick chooses to represent Esther as quite content to remain single. Esther, not Hope, has the last word, as the novel ends with what has now become an often-quoted declaration: “She illustrated a truth, which, if more generally received by her sex, might save a vast deal of misery: that marriage is not *essential* to the contentment, the dignity, or the happiness of woman” (370–71). This closing remark might very well be read as Sedgwick’s own justification for spinsterhood. In other words, despite the absence of husbands, women can still be content, dignified, and, most of all, happy. But as Lucinda L. Damon-Bach points out, “Sedgwick presents options for women without dictating which is best, in fact preserving, instead, the range of possibilities by showing that what is good for one woman may not be good for another” (65).⁷ The author makes it clear that women may choose. Thus, although Esther’s “hand was often and eagerly sought” (370), she acts as an agent by rejecting marriage. If we compare the earlier Esther, our model of nineteenth-century womanhood, with the woman we find at novel’s end, we see the spinster where we least likely expect her to be.

The question remains: Why should Hope, a figure of exceptional individualism, choose marriage? Why have Hope marry while Esther chooses what would appear to be the more rebellious option of a satisfying, yet solitary life? One surely might argue that Sedgwick demonstrates her alliance with marriage, that she is not so defiant as to keep her rebellious and exceptional woman unfettered in the world. After all, what would the consequences be if she left free such a restless and uncontained spirit? Antebellum audiences might very well not have been ready to accept such a radical woman outside of marriage for fear of the damage she might pose to her local and larger communities.

What remains important here is the marriage Sedgwick does choose for Hope, a very particular and intentional union. If a marriage is to end *Hope Leslie*, it must not happen between the exceptional woman and a traditional man, an outside lover (like William Hubbard or Sir Philip Gardiner), or a dominating master. Rather, Hope marries her “brother.”⁸ Casting Hope and Everell as brother and sister, even desexualizing this union by casting it in a familial bond, is essential to Sedgwick’s point about marriage. Such a marriage allows for equality, individuality, and usefulness—both to the couple’s family and to their community.⁹ One’s brother does not possess the same kind of legal ownership over his sister that a husband does over his wife.

Through this familial union Sedgwick re-imagines marriage for men and women. This kind of marriage is unlike the damaging unions of the women in her own life and instead speaks more closely to the familial marriages in her

own brother/sister relationships.¹⁰ Sedgwick clearly felt a sense of separation each time one of her brothers married. She wrote in her journal on the anniversary of her brother Harry's death in December 1832, "I am loved and cherished but I believe there is none now that loves me with that partial and proud affection that you once loved me with. They all have *dearer* objects. They have not the same sympathy with me" (131). To emphasize her sense of loss, of both their presence and their sympathy, she writes, "Oh this *second best* to all is a hard condition—the want of it is that depression with me, [it] brings on a sort of paralysis of mind and heart" ("Journal" 127). And yet, as Mary Kelley explains, through her connections to her brothers and their families, Sedgwick was able to have a life of independence while maintaining a close kinship with the domestic: not as wife and mother, but as sister and aunt. Sedgwick "wanted to feel the embrace of familial intimacy without yielding her total self" ("Woman Alone" 211). But as an outsider to their marriages, Sedgwick was left separated from those closest to her and relegated, as she claims, to "second best."

I hesitate to treat Sedgwick's sentiments here as simply a rebuttal of spinsterhood; instead, I read them as a comment about what marriage does to those who are left outside of it and how it changes those who enter it. Moreover, what is presented in her fiction simply does not hold true to these analyses, and Sedgwick's anxiety over her feelings of isolation might have more to do with her attempt to rid the married/single binary of its hold. That is, under such a re-rendering, being married would not elevate one to a status above being single.

Further to explore this idea of separation, we turn for a moment to Sedgwick's sister Eliza's wedding. In her autobiography, Sedgwick twice describes this event, and in much detail, only pages apart. Her first entry includes the following: "I think her marriage gave me very early the impression that a wedding was rather a sundering than a forming of ties. . . . [T]here suddenly came over me an awful sense of the reality of the separation that was consummating and I burst out into outcries of grief" (84). Three pages later she describes this wedding as "the first tragedy of [her] life": "I remember where the bride and her groom stood, and how he looked to me like some cruel usurper" (87). While this scene might simply be a seven-year-old child's painful memory of losing her sister to a "cruel usurper," it also gets at the heart of Sedgwick's dilemma over marriage and what it means to be left out of such a union. Marriage comes to signify a painful separation, "rather a sundering . . . of ties," that does not so much bring two people together as destroy the couple's previous connections. The newly formed couple becomes alienated, turns inward, and is less accessible; their marriage changes not only their relation to each other, but also what they mean to other people.

Such a “sundering” informs Sedgwick’s rewriting of spinsterhood as that which must be included within marriage. In *Hope Leslie*, for example, Hope’s marriage to Everell, her “brother” and friend, does not separate, but joins, family and friends. The couple’s sameness makes it possible to imagine a different version of marriage, one that includes not only the couple but also those outside of their union, for together Hope and Everell reach out to bring others closer to them. They are not a privileged, untouchable couple; rather, as a couple, they offer a basis for wider relationships. Cradock, for example, becomes “a life-member of [Hope’s] domestic establishment.” Barnaby Tuttle is “not forgotten by our heroine.” And as for Digby, “A friendship between him, and Everell and Hope subsisted through their lives, and descended . . . through many generations of their descendants, fortified by . . . gratitude, and reciprocal affection” (370).

Sedgwick does not simply reiterate the importance of familial bonds (by making one’s brother one’s husband); she rewrites marriage. It here turns outward and includes the old maid in the national family, as well. Upon Esther’s return to New England, despite her previous attachments to Everell, she “renewed her intercourse” with the couple, “without any other emotions, on either side, than those which belong to warm and tender friendship” (370). In the last sentences of the novel, Sedgwick makes Esther’s role clear: “[T]hose who saw on how wide a sphere her kindness shone, how many were made better and happier by her disinterested devotion, might have rejoiced that she did not ‘*Give to a party what was meant for mankind*’” (371). Esther is more useful and more connected by giving her affections to many, rather than to just one.

Sedgwick reimagines both the couple and the old maid’s relationship to them. She creates a married pair that does not abandon, does not separate themselves from family, from their community, or from each other. In making the exceptional, radical heroine a wife, she envisions marriage as a union of equals. The wife possesses individualism, as does the old maid. Hope’s marrying Everell, her equal, has pointed significance for the ideal of marriage, as does Sedgwick’s decision to leave Esther single. Esther must remain a spinster because if she does not, it would suggest that she has learned very little; that is, were she to marry, she would be doing what is expected of her, what is generally done by women. She chooses instead what is least expected of her and proves that even traditional women can make exceptional decisions. Similarly, Hope must marry because in so doing she allows Sedgwick a space to rewrite what is meant by marriage: a relationship that is familial in nature and that will not erase the exceptional woman, but meet her on equal ground. The hope inherent in such a union is that Hope Leslie will remain as exceptional and

independent as she was when she was single. Thus the nature of marriage itself may change. In their time and place, this is ideal marriage—and spinsterhood.

Seven years later, Sedgwick returned to the subject of marriage and spinsterhood in her short story “Old Maids.” Susan Koppelman provides a useful overview of the purpose and structure of the old maid tale in nineteenth-century America. She explains that stories such as Sedgwick’s “defend unmarried women from cruel, demeaning and limiting stereotypes that are still used to frighten and coerce women” (Introduction 1). These “vindications” show that old maids were actually virtuous and useful “in the households of married women” (5). While Sedgwick’s tale is a defense of spinsterhood, it also shows a progression in her thinking on this question. “Old Maids” says as much about wives and marriage as it does about old maids. What Esther Downing began is here turned into a short story, as Sedgwick’s narrator, Mrs. Seton, tells a series of old maid vignettes; these stories, which serve as a critique within a critique, ultimately question the binary between married or single. Instead of critiquing marriage explicitly, Sedgwick allows a wife to analyze spinsterhood and, in so doing, marriage itself.

Each of Mrs. Seton’s four examples, “actual living examples—no fictions” (13), reveals a lesson about old maids *and* wives. The first is Violet Flint, who has been given the “old maidenish appellation” of “Miss Vily” (presumably *to vilify*). Her story presents a contrast between the apparent naturalness of motherhood and the unnaturalness of spinsterhood. Since Violet’s brother “married young” to “a poor invalid,” Violet, like a good spinster, takes on the physical care and responsibility for her brother’s family, one that is not, biologically speaking, her own. According to Mrs. Seton, “Without the instincts, the claims, the rights, or the *honours* of a mother, she has . . . done all the duties of a mother.” As a dutiful surrogate mother, Violet has “made the happy happier, tended the sick, and solaced the miserable.” In her position as “second best” (a line Sedgwick used in her journal entry five years before), Violet is never thanked, nor is her old maid’s duty appreciated as it would be if she were wife or mother (16).

Although Violet does not possess the “instincts” of motherhood (because spinsterhood is conceived of as *unnatural*), she proves them to be necessary. Both Violet and Mrs. Seton’s second example, Sarah Lee, disrupt the binary between married and single. Sedgwick might appear to believe that motherhood and marriage are a woman’s natural calling, but at the same time she questions the biological basis of motherhood to show that old maids are as maternal as wives and mothers. Later, in her novel *Married or Single?* Sedgwick will again emphasize this point when the heroine, Grace Herbert, reads in a family letter, “It is not necessary to have borne a child to love it with a moth-

er's perceptive, anxious, relying fondness. The affections are not dependent on the *instincts*, though they be best adapted to the conservation of the race, and its general happiness" (1: 35; emphasis added). Sedgwick therefore negates the hold mothers have on nature and on femininity. Old maids do the labor of wives and mothers but simply are not granted the same kind of recognition as their married counterparts. They, too, shape nations and their future citizens. Republican marriage might very well be necessary to form families, communities, and nations, but marriage as an institution also marginalizes spinsterhood and defines only husbands and wives as valid citizens.

Being a wife, then, validates one's existence and usefulness. As Mrs. Seton asks, "How many married dames are there who repeat every fifteen minutes, *my husband, my children, my house*, and glorify themselves in all these little personalities, who might lay down their crowns at the feet of Violet Flint!—Miss Vily, the *old maid*" (16). The problem Violet reemphasizes is that *marriage* makes spinsterhood "second best," a position to which old maids do not inherently belong. If we were to reverse our thinking, if spinsterhood could be perceived differently, if old maids could be held in similar esteem as legal wives and biological mothers, then old maids would no longer be "first to none," as Sedgwick once described herself (qtd. in Kelley, "A Woman Alone" 224). The answer is not that all women should marry, but that single women should be brought into the center of marriage.

Sedgwick's true stance, however, is at times difficult to read. Even though Mrs. Seton declares that she would not advise any woman "to *prefer single life*" (19), she is herself a wife and might very well feel compelled to defend marriage. Nevertheless, this does not prevent her from pointing out the isolation and lack of respect given to old maids. If women could have marriage at its best, then why would they choose a life of duty and usefulness that others regard only as "second best" to wives and mothers? Society has legitimized wives and mothers, their relationships, and their domestic labor; they have been granted connection, sympathy, and homes of their own.

At the same time, spinsters do not want what they do not have, as Mrs. Seton's final example, Agnes Gray, makes clear. Her story tells of a spinster's pain, but the result is that loss should not paralyze, but lead to greater action, productivity, and connection. Agnes's mother dies while giving birth to her sister, Lizzy, who was "not only the pet of [her] father, brothers, and sister at home—but the plaything of the village." Catered to by both her family and community, Lizzy "seemed formed to be sheltered and cherished" (20). Should Lizzy ever be a wife, such qualities would not serve her well, for wives must possess more self-reliance and independence than simply being the "pet" and "plaything" of others. When Lizzy wants to go to a city boarding school, Agnes

decides to run a local school to help pay the tuition. Shortly after Lizzy leaves for school, their father dies and Agnes thus remains as the sole provider for her family. Her school continues to grow; she takes in young female boarders; and “[t]hus, she not only was able to pay ‘dear Lizzy’s’ bills regularly, but to aid her younger brothers,” as well. Agnes’s duty to her family and her community makes her “quite the queen of the village” (21). Shortly thereafter, Agnes meets Mr. Henry Orne, to whom she becomes engaged. Orne, however, becomes infatuated with Lizzy; Agnes yields; and Orne and Lizzy are married.

According to Mrs. Seton, Orne’s betrayal of her sister should have been a warning sign to Lizzy: “[Y]ou cannot expect much from a man, who, at eight and twenty, acted the part of Henry Orne. He was unfaithful in engagements with persons less merciful than Agnes Gray. He became inconstant in his pursuits—self-indulgent, and idle, and finally intemperate, in his habits.” Lizzy, however, endures a life “checquered with many sorrows” and remains with him to the end (26). On the other hand, Agnes’s school, which she began as a means to provide for Lizzy’s education and the stability of her family, flourishes. Agnes’s independent nature, her exceptionalism, makes her better suited for a life as an old maid than as a wife. At the same time, Lizzy’s lack of independence has made her ill suited to marriage and destined her for a life of suffering.

In “Old Maids,” Sedgwick reiterates her argument that the degree of separation between being married and single, between wives and old maids, is insignificant. She points out that the difference is due primarily to the connotation of their names. In her 1857 preface to *Married or Single?* Sedgwick again emphasizes the point that ridding our vocabulary of “old maid” and changing our relationship to her has much to do with eliminating the married/single binary. She ends the preface by saying that the “story will not have been in vain, if it has done any thing towards raising the single women of our country to the comparatively honorable level they occupy in England—any thing to drive away the smile already fading from the lips of all but the vulgar, at the name of ‘old maid’” (1: vii–viii). Sedgwick asks us to imagine a reverse response to the dilemma of the single state in relation to marriage. Single women are as useful to citizenship and families as are wives, and, in this way, they make obvious their position not *outside* marriage, but within it. Sedgwick does not put wives above single women; she sees them working together. Only the latter gets constructed differently and ranks always “second best.”

Of Sedgwick’s final novel, *Married or Single?* Deborah Gussman writes, “[T]he novel endorses the idea of a single life” that can be “an acceptable alternative to marriage,” but it “fails to present a character who could be said to embody that idea wholly successfully” (261). Unlike Gussman and others who argue that Sedgwick’s work signals ambivalence and failed attempts to celebrate the single

life, I maintain that in *Married or Single?* Sedgwick finishes what she began to implement in *Hope Leslie* and “Old Maids.” This overlooked novel tells the story of two sisters, Eleanor and Grace Herbert. Much of the novel revolves around their changing status from single to married. In the end, the novel’s exceptional heroine, Grace Herbert, is not yet married, although her wedding is implied as the narrative closes. As Sedgwick does with *Hope Leslie*, she does not choose to keep Grace single, for the very act of allowing the exceptional woman to marry opens a greater potential for change within marriage itself.

Being married versus being single is a socially constructed binary, and one position is not necessarily superior to the other; both benefit the family and the nation. One who chooses to marry must be well suited to be a wife. In fact, those who learn the lessons of spinsterhood (independence, exceptionalism, and usefulness) ultimately make better wives and better marriages. For both Sedgwick and the women characters she creates, the act of choosing marriage does not disparage single life. The two positions are intertwined, not oppositional and conflicting. As Sedgwick writes in *Married or Single?* “[M]aidens have a mission to fulfil as serious and as honorable as those of a wife’s devotion, or a mother’s care—a mission of wider and more various range” (1: vii). At the same time, Sedgwick does not reject marriage by gainsaying “the miserable cant that matrimony is essential to the feebler sex” (1: vi).¹¹ Marriage, in theory, in its original conception, or as it was ordained by God, is not flawed; rather, what we have done to it by marrying for the wrong reasons and by excluding others from its center blemishes it. Sedgwick’s opening stance in favor of spinsterhood rejects the idea

that a woman’s single life must be useless or undignified—that she is but an adjunct of man—in her best estate a helm merely to guide the nobler vessel. . . . [W]e believe she has an independent power to shape her own course, and to force her separate sovereign way. Happily no illustration is needed at this day, to prove that maidens can perform with grace and honor, duties from which wives and mothers are exempted by their domestic necessities. (1: vi)

Gussman and Kelley might ask a question similar to the one raised in our earlier discussion of *Hope Leslie*: If Sedgwick felt so strongly about the position of old maids in antebellum America, why not retain the heroine’s status as spinster at the end of her tale? Would that not verify once and for all her position that being single was a viable, productive, and useful choice? Why not leave one sister happily single and have one happily married, thereby making a simultaneous case for married *and* single women?

Grace Herbert ultimately helps to close this binary. Grace has to become a good spinster before she can become a good, knowledgeable wife. Like Hope

Leslie, she exemplifies the lesson that one must choose the *right* marriage. The novel begins with the sisters, Grace especially, learning the lessons of history through a trunk filled with old family letters. The narrator asks, "Is there any thing sadder than files of old family letters, where one seems to spell backward one's own future!" (1: 9). Through these letters the sisters learn of the failed marriages that came before them. Grace believes that this unavoidable matrimonial "fate" looms over her family and reveals to her "a cruel destiny" (1: 33). But Eleanor, the woman of reason, explains to her younger sister that it is not *fate* that dooms one; instead, it is actually a matter of "free will" (1: 33). Sedgwick maintains that women should think of themselves as being in control of their own lives. Their free will can in fact influence their fate—for better or for worse.

Grace escapes the seduction plot by coming to learn the truth about Horace Copley, the man to whom she is engaged. Copley "is a man of elegant tastes, elegant manners, and elegant 'idlesse'" (1: 158). Grace's other suitor, Archibald Lisle, claims that Copley is "everywhere the man of leisure" (1: 175). Copley pursues not only Grace but also Mrs. Tallis, another woman who has married for all the wrong reasons: Her father would not let her marry the man she wanted; in turn, she does not love the one chosen for her. Thus, Mrs. Tallis lacks the independence she needs to be a good wife. Not only would Copley make a terrible husband, but Grace would probably be fated to a failed marriage as well. Eventually, Anne Carlton, Grace's stepsister and foil, weds Copley, for she clearly is more suited to his immoral and flawed ways.

Before Grace can turn any attention to Archibald Lisle, however, she must first defend and learn the independence of spinsterhood. Gussman says it best: "[I]ndeed, [Grace] must be a worthy person, a Christian, before her 'choice' can be meaningful" (263). When Grace discovers the truth about Copley, she begins to understand the illusion of marriage: "I craved, and *expected*—as I believe most young women do—an adoring, exclusive love, as if we came into this working world merely to worship idols, and be idols in turn" (2: 104). Grace needs to appreciate single life before she can marry—or before she can decide to remain a spinster. She here "renounce[s]" marriage and for her own exceptional individualism sacrifices all the amenities that might have come with marrying a man like Copley: fortune, a life of leisure, and "lady-like indulgence" (2: 172). Instead, she turns to a life of work for herself and others, including Eleanor's family.

In her moment of what Sedgwick calls "maiden meditations" (2: 196), Grace contemplates her fears of single life. Her anxiety does not last, but it raises important points about the seclusion of marriage and the subordinate position in which it places spinsters. "I can not live without affection," Grace thinks to herself (2: 196). She then realizes those relationships she does have: Eleanor

and her husband, their children, and her friend, Alice. Marriage, as it is sanctioned by God, “had instituted relations, and human dependencies, had so bound man to man, had made the happiness of one so dependent on the happiness of another, that no one could sunder the tie and *live*, in the highest sense of that significant word” (2: 196). Yet again, Sedgwick writes the old maid into marriage by arguing that relationships should, in fact, open up to include, not exclude, intimate connections with others. In an ideal world, one that altered our perception of the marriage and the single state, there would not be such a vast difference between the two.

Once she has come to know herself, Grace can own her affection to Lisle, a man she originally thinks would be more appealing if he were only “less reserved, and more a man of the world, more polished” (1: 75). Had Grace remained true to such thoughts, she would have proven herself unfit for marriage. In *Lisle*, Grace chooses the man who represents the very best of mid-century manhood—the single, self-made, hardworking man who is also intent on marrying her. By allowing Grace to be both spinster and wife, Sedgwick makes room for this argument. Although we never actually see Grace as a wife, Sedgwick implies that she is ready for the position based on her education, so to speak, as a spinster. Grace has developed the usefulness, self-reliance, and independence necessary to be *either* a spinster *or* a wife. She is thus fully prepared to be married or single—it is now only a matter of her choice.

In her final conversation with Mrs. Clifford, Grace explains the very point of *Married or Single*? That is, a choice is simply a choice; it does not imply a binary or a hierarchy of categories. Mrs. Clifford tells Grace of a friend, a “great religious and moral writer,” who once wrote letters to two young women, telling them “to consecrate themselves to a single life, in order to demonstrate how happy, beneficent, and honored it might be.” Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Clifford continues, “he married one of [the] young women.” Grace responds, emphasizing, “He did not disparage one condition, by preferring the other.” The novel ends, then, not with a wedding, but with Grace explaining her “theories”: “While I contended that there might be golden harvests reaped in the fields of single life, that it was not a condition to be dreaded, scorned, or pitied, but infinitely preferable to the bankruptcies in married life, did I not admit there was a happier fate?—and is not that fate mine?” Mrs. Clifford agrees: “You are ‘equal to either fortune’ . . . ‘married or single.’ May others profit by your theories” (2: 284). In choosing or *preferring* one over the other, a woman simply decides for herself what might best suit her own specific situation.

This essay has shown that far more was involved for Sedgwick than simply a literary decision to have a heroine marry or to leave her single. In fact, Sedgwick’s fiction attempts to resolve and erase this binary. The distance

between marriage and the single state consequently closes. Being single should, in fact, adequately prepare one to be married, if that is the choice one makes. Being a good, useful, and exceptional spinster makes one a better and more independent wife, or, if one chooses to remain single, a better woman. And this, in the end, is the condition needed for improving families and relationships. While Sedgwick's literature and personal writing might at times appear to be ambivalent, in that she never fully takes a stand on what it means to be married *or* single, my reading attempts to prove otherwise. It seems clear that to change marriage, we must, in fact, open its parameters to include spinsterhood. Only then will Sedgwick's question—"married or single?"—seem less oppositional and more interconnected.

NOTES

1. Here I use "natural" to refer to essentialist constructions of gender in the nineteenth century wherein marriage and motherhood served as the identifying markers of a woman's proper relationship to femininity.

2. See chapter nine of Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage*. Kelley even attributes Sedgwick's depression to her spinsterhood, claiming that "depression on Sedgwick's part about her failure to engage in what she considered her primary calling, namely a domestic one, remained her prevailing state of being" (244).

3. Gussman, citing "several [other] recent critics," observes that "we need to be cautious in ascribing the term 'feminist' to Sedgwick" (254).

4. Kelley interprets this quotation differently. She writes, "Conditioned to believe that the marital state was woman's natural condition, [Sedgwick] could not help but believe that spinsterhood was in turn a forced, an unnatural state of being" (*Private Woman* 239). While Sedgwick's description of spinsterhood as singular, forced, and peculiar might lead Kelley to such a conclusion, other meanings attached to these words suggest a much more positive interpretation. Sedgwick also implies that spinsterhood affords one more individuality by describing it as singular and peculiar. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "singular," both before and during the nineteenth century, denoted that which lives alone or "apart from the herd"—away from others, solitary, rare, one of a kind, unique. Considering that in the early decades of the antebellum period, only one woman in ten remained single, Sedgwick's description of the old maid as singular and/or peculiar seems fitting. Sedgwick's second novel, *Redwood*, includes a description of another old maid, Deborah Lenox: "Miss Debby's person, mind, and history, were altogether singular" (30).

5. For example, in *Woman's Fiction*, Nina Baym discusses *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods* as early historical romances wherein "women are endowed with heroic capacities unrestrained by probabilities" (53).

6. When Mr. Pynchon wants Hope removed to Boston, where she will be more strictly supervised, Governor Winthrop says of her, "I have thought the child rests too much on *performances*; and you must allow . . . that she hath not, I speak it tenderly, that passiveness, that, next to godliness, is a woman's best virtue" (160). He then adds, "It is difficult . . . to suit a maiden who hath more whim, than reason" (161). Later, Jen-net describes Hope as a "crazed body of moonlight nights" (181).

7. See also Robert Daly, who explains the choice that comes with "alterity" (152–53), and Kelley, who writes that Sedgwick "made connection and choice complementary imperatives for both sexes" (Introduction 41).

8. Hope signs her letter to Everell, which comprises all of chapter eight, "Farewell, dear Everell, forget not thy loving friend and sister" (119). For further discussion of this brother/sister relationship, see Fetterley, who writes that "Sedgwick carefully positions Everell as Hope's brother—his father should have been hers, her mother should have been his, they are raised together, and Hope signs her letter 'sister,' addressing him as 'brother'" (498).

9. As Jay Fliegelman and Elizabeth Barnes have pointed out, the notion of familial bonds was an essential component of early American culture, citizenship, and literature. Fliegelman looks to the changing function of "patriarchal family authority" in post-Revolutionary America and the transformation of filial relations into more compassionate and egalitarian exchanges (1). Barnes recognizes the domestic novel's roots in the seduction literature of the eighteenth century, arguing that "what remains consistent in the story . . . is . . . the emphasis on family feeling as the basis of sociopolitical allegiance" (15). She argues that instead of seeing such sympathetic and familial feeling as democratic, we should consider the way such literature's obsession with incestual and "familiar objects" ultimately teaches readers "to love [only] those to whom one already feels related" (3). Sentimental literature, then, teaches sameness, not difference. Surely Sedgwick's decision to marry Hope to Everell raises questions about familial and/or incestuous bonds. As I will soon establish, this sameness is necessary to ensure the potential change the couple will bring to marriage.

10. For a discussion of the marriages within the Sedgwick family, see Kelley's introduction to *The Power of Her Sympathy* (12–14, 18, 22–24). Marriage left Sedgwick's mother lonely and overworked, while her sisters' lives stood as "cautionary tales" about gender hierarchy in marriage (22).

11. Zsuzsa Berend uses this phrase in her discussion of the way Sedgwick and others "argued for the dignity and usefulness of singlehood" (948).

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