"THE BEST OR NONE!" SPINSTERHOOD IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

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Reflecting on her single life, Catharine Sedgwick wrote in her diary: "I certainly think a happy marriage the happiest condition of human life . . . [I]t is the high opinion of its capabilities which has perhaps kept me from adventuring in it." This entry epitomizes the seemingly paradoxical connection, in practice, between the nineteenth-century idealization of marriage and the reluctance of many women to marry. Although Nancy Cott has made passing references to this connection, it has been largely overlooked by the literature on women and the family. Spinsterhood has usually been viewed either as individual misfortune or as a manifestation of protofeminist assertion of autonomy. To be sure, the latter view has been more conducive to the exploration of spinsterhood, given the tendency in women's studies to search the past for the roots of the present. Since they could be construed as pursuing autonomy and rejecting wifely dependence, spinsters are readily seen as "foremothers" by contemporary feminists. Because a number of the women who were active in reform movements or distinguished themselves as writers or professionals were single, this interpretation has seemingly even more credence. In her monograph on nineteenth-century spinsters Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, for example, defines elective spinsterhood as a "dramatic new form of female independence," rooted in the "individualistic ethic of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution" and emerging in the early nineteenth century. Women's rejection of marriage was the outcome of a "rigorous assessment of the marital institution that found it wanting and in conflict with female autonomy, self-development, and achievement." Carl Degler, in a chapter of At Odds on nineteenth-century women's "challenge [to] the family," attributes the increasing incidence of elective spinsterhood to a "feeling that married women lacked sufficient autonomy." Owing to women's challenge to the family, Degler claims, female autonomy had increased during the nineteenth century. Some women "spurned marriage and family altogether"; others "abandoned marriage when it did not provide autonomy or satisfaction."

However, this reading of the "progressive" character of nineteenth-century spinsterhood distorts its cultural context, its meaning and significance in its own terms. In this article I will focus on the cultural milieu within which young middle-class women pondered questions of love, marriage and vocation. I will argue that middle-class spinsters, as well as their married peers, took ideals of love and marriage very seriously, and that spinsterhood was indeed often a consequence of their adherence to those ideals. Today, ideals are understood as "existing as mere mental image[s], existing in fancy or imagination alone," but in the nineteenth century an ideal meant a "patterning idea, the archetypical idea," the ultimate measure of existing things. Ideals, in this sense, were central to nineteenth-century moral experience.

As their diaries and letters show, nineteenth-century women took ideals to be an ultimate, unchanging, God-ordained reality, while the existing reality
was seen as imperfect and transitory. This view was in keeping with the highly
voluntaristic and perfectionist outlook of the time. I will also argue that middle-
class women's insistence on self-development was not antagonistic to marriage
but, in their view, a necessary preparation for it within the larger context of
a Christian life. The ideals of self-development and self-reliance had a strong
affinity with Evangelical Protestantism and were disseminated in the Christian
culture of the 19th century, rather than having their roots in the Enlightenment.

As I will argue in more detail later, the nineteenth century saw the elevation
and spiritualization of love and marriage. The new understanding powerfully
linked love with marriage, and linked both with the larger social and moral uni-
verse. Marriage's importance transcended the temporal happiness of the couple;
yet marriage was also conceived of as an ultimately private arrangement. Thus,
by the nineteenth century the ideal of marriage based on love—mysterious and
unintentional love—had gained wide acceptance. At the same time a religiously
grounded morality informed the ideal of character, in the sense not simply of
a "complex of mental and ethical traits" but also of "moral excellence." High
ideals of love and marriage came together with high standards of character, and
it became socially and personally acceptable not to marry if marriage involved
compromising one's moral standards. During this time there emerged a new,
morally charged conceptualization of women's love and its mission which al-
lowed for a broader understanding of women's usefulness. As a consequence of
the above developments we see a strikingly novel portrayal of spinsters and spin-
sterhood: the image of the spinster as a highly moral and fully womanly creature.
This implied a change in the conception of the purported reasons for remaining
single—that spinsters could have married if they had chosen to compromise
their moral principles for the sake of matrimony. They remained unmarried not
because of individual shortcomings but because they didn't find the one "who
could be all things to the heart." Spinsterhood was increasingly viewed as an
outcome of intricate choices and spinsters as champions of uncompromising
morality.

This study is based on the written documents—letters and diaries—of about
forty Northeastern, white, Protestant, middle-class spinsters. Most of them were
born in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. These women re-
mainder single in spite of opportunities to marry. Yet their choice was not be-
tween marrying or not marrying but whether to marry a particular man. The
documents they left behind suggest a common mentality and morality charac-
teristic of their social generation. They shared a concept of self and society,
and also an ethos, an underlying attitude towards their world. Their behavior
makes sense in the context of the overwhelmingly Protestant culture of the
nineteenth-century American Northeast in which "the ideas, the convictions,
the customs, the institutions of society were so shot through with Christian
presuppositions."11

To appreciate the novelty of the cultural context within which nineteenth-
century women contemplated marriage, we need first to consider the older ideas
of love and marriage. Seventeenth-century Puritans affirmed the importance of
affection in marriage: to love one's spouse was a duty. However, the Puritans
were distrustful of marriages founded solely on mutual affection. Young people
were to choose someone they could learn to love. Yet being in love was not nec-
necessary; friendship and esteem were the solid foundations of a lasting union. Love, according to Benjamin Franklin, was merely a passion and as such, "changeable, transient, and accidental. But Friendship and Esteem are derived from Principles of Reason and Thought, and ... are lasting Securities of an Attachment."

However, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, mutual esteem was no longer regarded as a sufficient foundation of marriage. Love, based on a strong and mystical personal attraction, came to be viewed as the only legitimate reason for marriage. Rather than marry someone they could learn to love, young people expected to marry someone they did love.

The notion that marriage was to be based on romantic rather than rational love indicates a transvaluation of human sentiments. Catharine Sedgwick's reasons for breaking her engagement illustrate the changing understanding of love and marriage. She explained to her brother Robert that her fiancé "has been so generous as to relinquish the promise I then gave him and all is now ended forever ... He is very unhappy ... I am degraded in my own opinion but I cannot help it. It is strange but it is impossible for me to create a sentiment of tenderness by any process of reasoning, or any effort of gratitude." Sedgwick refers to the earlier understanding of love as friendship, i.e. love as a result of esteem and gratitude, a rational sentiment. But she already believes in the new ideal, the ideal of involuntary love. A later journal entry brings this new understanding even more into focus. Sedgwick was reminiscing about her feelings toward a former suitor: "I liked him, and not knowing quite as much of the heart (or of my heart) as I do I fancied that liking might ripen into something warmer." Knowing the human heart better—and the ideals that influence its emotions, I should add—Sedgwick came to realize that love is not simply an increase in liking but a separate emotion altogether.

The elevation of human love can be linked to the elevation of emotionality in revivalist evangelicalism. Evangelicals associated spontaneity of feeling with true faith. Thus spontaneous emotions in heterosexual love, although treated cautiously, were no longer discredited; now they were regarded as a sure, though mysterious, sign of Providence. The Puritan view was reversed: love came first, sympathy and understanding followed.

In much of European romanticism love, an all-consuming and private sentiment, was seen as a potentially subversive emotion, with a tendency to disregard the world and a potential for disaster. Themes of love and death were intimately connected. In American advice literature, in the emergent woman's fiction, and in reformers' hopes, romantic love was metamorphosed into true love, a sentiment in harmony with the social order, conducive to the betterment of humanity and society. The romantic notions of inexplicable attraction, oneness, forgetfulness of self in the other were transformed into Christian virtues. Attraction became the sign of a God-ordained union, oneness a spiritual ideal deemphasizing sensual and sexual implications, and self-forgetfulness the epitome of selflessness. True love was a stable foundation for the future family. True love, in the image of Christian love, was "not a folly; in its purity, it is a noble, unselfish thing, the inspirer and friend of moral excellence." It was domesticated love, whose "proper place" was the home. To be sure, the true-love model absorbed important elements of romantic love: it approved, if tamed, its fervor, and acknowledged its mystery. The ideal of marriage, based on true love,
was advocated by reformers and feminists alike. Gail Hamilton (pen name for Mary A. Dodge) maintained that training girls for marriage drove them into uncongenial unions, degrading both women and marriage: "deprecate marriage? I magnify it! It is you who deprecate, by debasing it. You lower it to the level of the market. You degrade it to a question of political and domestic economy. You look upon it as an arrangement. I believe it to be a sacrament ... I see in it the type of mortal and immortal union ... All that is tender, grand, ennobling finds there its home, its source of sustenance, its inspiration, and its exceeding great reward." She believed that "marriage, in its truest type, is spiritualizing life; the union of the mightiest and subtlest forces working for the noblest results."24

Love as spiritual union enhanced the expectation, already inherent in the ideal of romantic love, of finding completeness or wholeness through love in a perfect match of temperament and values. Lucy Larcom believed that "a life of 'single blessedness'" was preferable to "'marrying and giving in marriage' unless one is sure that the one is the one, and no other. You know that I never arrived at that certainty, but have always loved Frank as a brother."25 In 1863 Frances Willard, a year after breaking her engagement, wrote in her diary: "Oh, so much better to wait for years and years if we may hope to find at last the one who can be all things to the heart. I am glad, heartily glad, I did not perjure myself in 1862."26 Neither found "the one," neither married.

Love, involuntary and mysterious, held a strong grip on the imagination. However, even in the most "untamed" versions, the tragic side of romantic love was conspicuously missing, and love had an easy affinity with domestic bliss. This quality of American romantic love accounts for its harmonious coexistence with the social institution of marriage. The lovers were not pitted against social and familial forces, as was often the case in European romanticism, but were happily planning to walk down the aisle. This easy and intimate connection between love and marriage on the one hand and marriage and society on the other made the link between love and society seem more commonsensical, the implication being that even in their private emotions people carry the kernel of public responsibility. And we should not underestimate the attraction of the true-love ideal; it was influential beyond the realm of the advice literature. In the moralistic, serious idiom that informed women's self-appraisals in letters and diaries, romantic love seemed somewhat frivolous and selfish, while true love connected the individual with the larger moral universe in a satisfying way. True love led to marriage, and marriage could not be contemplated lightly. Susan B. Anthony found a deep resonance with her own values when she read Elizabeth Oakes Smith's *Bertha and Lily*. Bertha's opinion of marriage is that it "is very sacred, very lovely, in my eyes, and therefore, to be sustained from pure motives." Anthony sent a note of thanks to the author. "From the very depth of my heart, do I rejoice that the good Father put it into your heart to pen those noble truths."27

These "noble truths" about love and marriage influenced many a young woman's resolution not to marry unless she could give her whole heart to someone. As Emily Howland recorded with pleasure: "M.H. ... will not lower her ideals to enter the state of matrimony."28 For Lucy Larcom, "A true marriage ... is the highest state of earthly happiness—the flowing of the deepest life of the soul into a kindred soul, two spirits made one."29 This formulation expresses the promise
of marriage as most nineteenth-century middle-class women understood it, and
for some, it also implied that extreme caution was necessary when contemplating
such a union. If spiritual fusion was possible in true marriage, anything less was
a compromise. The Young Lady’s Friend (1837) urged women to remember that
“the great end of existence, preparation for eternity, may be equally attained in
married or single life; and that no union, but the most perfect one, is at all desir-
able.” For this end, young women were urged to set their standards high: “The
more perfectly you perform all your duties, the more diligently you carry on your
moral and intellectual education, the higher is your standard of character, and
the more spiritual are your aims, the less will be your danger from the tenderness
of your heart.”30 By “tenderness of heart” the author meant an indiscriminating
romantic sensibility. Mrs. Abell (1853) also believed that young women who did
not have high standards would fall in love indiscriminately, thereby compromis-
ing the very ideal of Victorian love.31 “Falling in love” was morally admirable
only if it was accompanied by a strong conviction that the beloved was one’s
other half.

Influenced by romantic notions of oneness and prevailing understandings of
women’s supreme capacity for emotions, many women questioned their own
feelings, measuring them against highly idealized expectations and finding them
wanting. One young woman wrote, “All the time I feel within me that I do not
love you with that intensity of which I am capable,”32 Lucy Larcom, at thirty,
wrote about her fiancé to a friend: “I love him warmly, but not passionately, as
some do, or as perhaps I might love . . . I shall refuse and defer no longer.”33 But
a year later she was still hesitating: “I love him still, better than other men, but
not as I could love, and he knows it,” she wrote to friends.34 A few years later, at
Frank’s urging, she was again scrutinizing her feelings: “I could almost believe I
love him enough to go to him at once,” yet “I am sure there are chambers in my
heart that he could not unlock . . . I do feel that it is in me to love, humanly, as
I have never loved him.”35

Many found it difficult to imagine how their high ideals of marriage could
possibly be realized. Harriot Hunt, who never married, described her ideals as
“that holy union of truth and good, that sum of light and warmth,—approach it
reverently; dare not ridicule it by sneers, slights.”36 William Barton recalled how
his aunt, Clara Barton, “said she had her romances and love affairs37 . . . but . . .
though she thought of different men as possible lovers, no one of them measured
up to her ideal of a husband.”38 These women did not define their emotional life
in terms of interiority, purely personal sentiments. They constantly contrasted
their own feelings with ideals that set an impersonal standard offering criteria
to evaluate emotions.

Thus Ella Lyman, at twenty-seven, wrote to her suitor: “Choosing to marry
is choosing to live a dual life, to bring two different lives into union and we
don’t do that unless the tie which unites them, the life in common, is holier,
higher than the work of either apart.”39 For two years, she could not decide
whether to marry Richard. In answering his marriage proposal, she assured him
of their closeness, yet was unable to accept: “Marriage is so vital and earnest
a responsibility that even to spare you suffering I cannot answer now.”40 Two
days later she wrote in the same vein: “Dear Richard, I am glad of this deeper
knowledge of you, glad in your love . . . As yet I have not realized the meaning of
marriage, and it is so sacred a tie that I must grow into the knowledge of it before I enter its presence. I am unworthy to share your life unless I can give myself to you with perfect oneness and I cannot now."41 Here Ella Lyman pointed to a crucial feature of the contemporary ideal of love-marriage: "perfect oneness" was not only an achievable goal but the goal to achieve. Given her belief in the possibility of perfect fusion, it is no surprise that she was still hesitating a year later.

Lucy Stone was similarly unconvinced by Henry Blackwell's ardent courtship: "You are dearest to me ... but all that you are to me, does not come near, my ideal of what is necessary, to make a marriage relation ... If there were real affinity between us—the elements by which a true marriage could be made, I do not think that I should so instinctively recoil from the thought of it."42 Suffragist and women's rights advocate Lucy Stone, who firmly resolved never to marry, was nonetheless willing to enter such a union if, as she assured Henry, "my love for you had in it, that glad self-surrender, and boundless trust which is a wedded love ... no nothing ... should or could prevent my public recognition of it ... So now, I ... wait for full assurance."43 Ellen Rothman has argued that in spite of culture's idealization of marriage, middle-class women did not want to marry so badly that any men would do. My argument is the opposite: it was precisely because of the idealization of marriage that middle-class women were severely selective in choosing husbands.44 Ella Lyman wrote about "perfect oneness" in marriage, Lucy Stone referred to the "glad self-surrender ... which is wedded love," Lucy Larcom understood matrimony as "two spirits made one." These spiritualized images of love and marriage were closely linked to the rise of "moral motherhood."45 The maternal ideal emphasized women's emotional qualities, which during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came to be more highly valued.46 As affection took on a moral and religious connotation,47 feminine affection was conceived of as above lust, passion, or sensuality. "The higher women rise in moral and intellectual culture, the more the sensual refined away from her nature, and the more pure and perfect and predominant becomes her motherhood." In this spiritualized understanding, feminine love was inseparable from woman's motherly nature and distinctive moral qualities.48 "Love is the very nature of woman. She may be said to possess it in a general sense, independently of individual applications. All the passions of woman relate in the last analysis to her maternal role."49 Feminine love was caring, tender, and selfless, not only in the prescriptive literature but in women's private accounts of their aspirations.

Maternal love was defined not so much by the existence of children but by the love's selfless quality, by its ability to improve and elevate. Thus, moral motherhood, as an ideal, embraced feminine roles other than motherhood itself: wife, teacher, charity worker, writer of didactic and advice literature were but expressions of woman's motherly nature.50 This generous, motherly love was not confined to marriage. Spiritual love, a necessary ingredient in true marriage, was viable outside it and might be directed toward missions other than marriage and family. This broader understanding of women's nature and feminine love was important in elective spinsterhood and in the framing of middle-class female experience. The spiritualization of love, which gained ascendancy with the rise of "moral motherhood," was furthered in the 1830s and 1840s by sexual purity
reformers, concerned with bodily control. This reform movement, addressed to young men, defined sexual self-control as a manly quality and made few distinctions between physical, mental, and moral order.51 Steven Seidman has argued that "women were a principal force behind the spiritualization of love," because it was "in woman's self-interest": it allowed them to "regulate sexual expression" within marriage.52 The spiritual understanding of love, however, was the outcome of a complex set of changes in religion, culture, and society, which cannot be reduced to the self-interest of a particular group. It also had implications beyond the regulation of sexuality and was in keeping with a broader middle-class preoccupation with self-control. Middle-class women, much like men, believed in and exercised self-mastery. Within the female sphere of responsibility, feeling, sympathy and love, their aspirations were not for emotional self-abandon but for emotional self-discipline. Ideally, feminine emotions were focused, purposful and articulated, not free-flowing and vague. Women regarded their heart as an asset, both in private and in public life; its feelings were not to be squandered. A much more expressively free emotionality flourished within the context of romantic love, as Karen Lystra has documented.53 Her argument holds for couples in romantic love: to abandon emotional self-control was a sign of true, authentic love. Those women, however, who did not find a romantic partner still firmly held onto the ideal of self-control. At the same time, the view of women's inherently spiritual nature deemphasized women's sexual nature.54 Just as women's motherly character was decoupled from their reproductive role, female love was dissociated from female sexuality. Woman's love was seen as the primary safeguard of moral order and a powerful force in human and social progress. The nature of female love, its private and social missions, strongly shaped women's self-understanding for generations to come.

Women both benefitted from and were constrained by this new understanding, which informed the doctrine of domesticity, as Ruth Bloch has convincingly argued.55 However, spinsters clearly benefited. The spiritual understanding of love enabled them to understand their own "purity" as in harmony with moral laws. Purity was more than simply chastity: it was also purity of motives. Although matrimony was God's design, purity of motives for marrying was essential to its dignity and sanctity. Defining women's worth in terms of morality and spirituality, rather than procreation, the new understanding made it possible for spinsterhood to be a respectable variation on motherhood rather than its antithesis.

Marriage and motherhood were women's primary private and social mission but not the only one. The changes described above, which led to the spiritualized and moralistic conception of womanhood and marriage, also opened the door to a broader understanding of women's vocation. According to Muzzey, "woman was not made for marriage; but marriage for woman. If in any instance it shall appear that her improvement will probably be retarded by her entering the state, or her usefulness less extensive, or her happiness evidently sacrificed, then... it is her duty to continue unmarried." God designed "some of this sex to remain single." Yet "He made all for the sake of character, usefulness, and happiness."56 The Girls' Manual (1836), quoting a religious account of world history, argued that "female nature is... part of the divine system, that it should have its beauties and benefits distinct from those which result from its social position as a mother." Conveying the message that woman's life is valuable and can be
useful under any conditions, it claimed that the "single state is no diminution of the beauties and utilities of the female character." Single women are a blessing to aging parents; they are governesses and teachers. "The single woman, therefore, [is ] as important an element of social and private happiness as the married one. The utilities of each are different, but both are necessary."57 Marriage was not woman's only mission, nor the only chance for a happy life. Women must be "taught that to be happy they must be useful in whatever sphere they might move ... [and ] impressed that life had many missions of which marriage was but one."58

The spinsters in this study searched for their place in the world so as not to live in vain. I will argue that the search for a vocation instead of matrimony was not the expression of a wish for self-actualization, self-fulfillment and achievement, as some scholars argue.59 It was not the expansion of autonomy in a secular, modern sense of the term, rather, it was exercising the autonomy of a moral agent, responsible to her God. The insistence on self-reliance should be placed in the evangelical tradition going back to the First Great Awakening. Young women were encouraged and expected to become their own person. This tradition emphasized the importance of self-scrutiny and self-possession, necessary for Christian life and preparation for death.60 On this view, autonomy was a duty, not a freedom to do what one pleases. This understanding was shared by a later generation of women who, in the the softer emotional climate of nineteenth-century Protestantism, were less afraid of God's wrath. They were, however, equally convinced that their lives served a higher purpose. Female self-direction, in the world of nineteenth-century spinsters, was not an ultimate good but a stepping stone to a life of usefulness and service, a life in accordance with God's purposes. The dignity of womanhood required that women think and act for themselves; as Alice Carey advocated in 1869: "to teach [women] to think for themselves ... not so much because it is their right, as because it is their duty." She also proposed to protest against "each and every thing that opposes the full development and use of the faculties conferred upon us by our Creator."61 Self-direction and self-reliance formed the morally responsible path for a woman who "understood/ Herself, her work, and God's will with her."62 The "self" was conceived of as the repository of human potential for good. Thus spinster Abigail May encouraged her niece, whom she brought up: "I think you will be better for beginning to depend more upon yourself ... What you want to do in life, is to help along the world in any little way that God permits. Another first best step towards helping others, is being able to do for yourself."63 The English authoress Dinah Maria Mulock Craik sounded a resonant chord with her appreciative American audience when she wrote: "Self-dependence ... is only real and only valuable when its root is not in self at all; when its strength is drawn not from man, but from that Higher and Diviner Source whence every individual soul proceeds, and to which alone it is accountable."64 Myrtle Minner shared the conviction that one was responsible only to God and should follow one's own moral conscience: "Keep your heart pure and true; that will secure you a higher, holier opinion than all the world combined could bestow. ... Self-consciousness of good or evil is the great law, and the only one for which you or I shall be held responsible before the Judge ... "65 Emily Howland also wanted to live "truly and freely": true to her higher principles and free of the world's opin-
tion. "Never shall any amount of suffering of the earthy slough off the divine."66 It was in this vein that Mary A. Dodge wrote: "There is nothing in life but to go on perfectly self-poised ... While we should pay proper deference to man's opinion the real dignity of life is to be independent of it."67 This, however, is not proto-feminist self-assertion; to be independent of men's judgement was possible for these spinsters because they shared the conviction that "human judgement is a most fallible tribunal; that if there is no higher and wiser power to decide the standard, we are at the mercy of unreason."68

A crucial link between Christian morality and worldly work was the notion of usefulness. The ethos of service and usefulness that permeated the vocational concept of wifehood and motherhood similarly motivated single woman: to be useful in the world, to provide help and guidance to those who need it. As profit and wealth came to be associated with men's worldly pursuits in the market economy, for women vocation retained the service element of the original concept. Vocation was closely linked to fulfilling one's God-given potentials in the service of community; this ethos of service went hand in hand with a vision of social perfectability. Thus from the viewpoint of the vocational understanding of women's work, home and the world, marriage and singlehood were not polar opposites but rather a continuum where the same ethos applied. Extending the values of the home into the world was, after all, at the heart of all 19th-century reform endeavors.

The moral emphasis on usefulness motivated single women to find their voca-
tion. The spinsters in my sample embarked upon their vocation after they decided not to marry, although most of them strove to live up to their ideal of usefulness from early on. Catharine Sedgwick was in her thirties when she began writing. Elizabeth Blackwell took up medical studies as a result of the strong attraction she felt for a man whom she considered below her standards. The "felt need of engrossing occupation" was "one of the chief reasons which finally decided my occupation."69 By devoting herself to medicine, she was hoping to place an "insuperable barrier" between herself and the "disturbing influences" of her attraction which she "could not wisely yield to, but could not otherwise stifle."70 Susan B. Anthony and Emily Howland embarked upon their life's work, women's rights and work with freed slaves respectively, beyond the age when most women married. Both Lucy Larcom and Frances Willard rejected suitors for reasons of the heart, and both found their calling later on in life, Larcom as a poet and edu-
cator, Willard as a temperance leader. To be sure, some of these women showed a fairly strong disinclination to marry, for a number of reasons. Fear of sexuality and very strong familial attachment influenced some women's capacity for "glad self-surrender." Ironically, however, among the women I studied, the only ones who opposed marriage on principled feminist grounds, because it interfered with their women's rights advocacy, were the ones who actually married.71

Alice James, an invalid spinster, who was well only for short periods, recorded in her diary the striking change in her attitude after settling in England in 1884. She felt liberated from the oppressive American cultural imperative of justifying one's existence by being useful. In England, alongside the ethos of the middle-
class, an aristocratic attitude was very much alive, disdaining usefulness and
regarding superfluousness as the mark of the lady and gentleman. "It is rather strange that here, among the robust and sanguine people, I feel not the least shame or degradation at being ill, as I used to at home among the anemic and fagged ... What need to justify one's existence when one is simply one more amid a million of the superfluous." 

But in the New World being "superfluous" was a sin. Many a young woman was troubled by a sense of uselessness. Frances Willard was shocked into thinking about being useful while recovering from typhoid fever: "I shall be twenty years old in September, and I have as yet been of no use in the world. When I recover ... I will earn my own living ..., and try to be of use in the world." A year later she was still dissatisfied with herself: "What am I doing? Whose cares do I relieve? Who is wiser, better, or happier because I live? Nothing would go on differently without me, unless ... the front stairs might not be swept so often! ... Nobody seems to need me ... I see so plainly how well the world can spare me. But perhaps I may be needed some day and am only waiting for the crisis." 

Emily Howland, at twenty-one, was greatly troubled by not having found her vocation. She wondered: "why a life so useless should ever have been granted or why perpetuated ... is the most unaccountable of our Creator's providences." In her late twenties, she was still "waiting for something to turn up." Her friend Carrie A. Rowland understood and encouraged Howland: "Thou art to be a worker in the vast arena of the world, it is no light task—can we devote so many years to worldly education and shall we be impatient because our spiritual training demands equal time for its completion?" She urged Emily to be patient: "I know thy spirit craves a high and holy life beyond that this outward world can give, and I would strengthen thee. I would encourage thee, not to sink down helpless and desponding, but work steadily onward and though thy advancement may seem slow to thee and the time cometh and the word goeth unto thee, 'cure for all things are now ready,' thou shall find thyself possessed of powers of which thou has taken no account, they have grown so silently." Rowland was encouraging Emily by suggesting that God would appoint the proper task at the proper time, and Emily's duty was to patiently prepare for some future calling.

When thirty-year old Emily Howland thought she found her calling she asked her mother's permission: "May I give a little of my life to degraded humanity? ... May I try if I really can to make the world a little better for having lived in it? Can't thee spare me a while to do what I think of my portion? I want to do something which seems to me worth of life, and if all my life is to go on as have the last ten years, I know I shall feel at the end of it as tho' I had lived in vain." Others contributed to the world by raising "noble, worthy families"; Emily Howland wanted to do her "share to the world" by being useful in other ways.

Catharine Sedgwick also "wanted some pursuit." She found that writing "relied me from the danger of ennui." But more than that, writing was her calling: "When I feel that my writings have made any one happier or better, I feel an emotion of gratitude to Him who has made me the medium of any blessing to my fellow creatures. And I do feel that I am but the instrument." Acknowledging the compliments of Rev. Ellery Channing, she wrote, "I thank Heaven that I am not now working for the poor and perishing rewards of literary
ambition ... they are not my object ... There is an immense moral field opening, demanding laborers of every class ... Neither pride nor humility should withhold us from the work to which we are clearly 'sent.'

Lucy Larcom was desolate when she felt not needed: "It is a matter of fact life, with scarcely anything of hope or aspiration. Those that care for me, or that I care for, are not necessary to me, nor I to them," she complained to her friend. In another letter the theme came up again: "I do like to feel that others, that is, certain others, need me; and my life seems drying up when I may not do something for them." Life seemed worth living only when she felt that she was doing something for others: "I am very thankful for the few talents I have, not because they are mine, but because they can be given to God, to receive His inspiration, and to be worth something to others besides myself—Ah! living is not mere existence, when God breathe into [it] the breath of life!"

Harriot Hunt, one of the very few female physicians, wrote in her memoirs that as a young woman "the felt necessities of my soul urged me to open for myself some path of usefulness." She setup a school in the family's house. Although she loved her school, "I never felt it my true vocation. It seemed to be preparing for me something higher and more permanent." Her sister's long illness awakened in her an "absorbing interest" in medicine, and she believed "that this experience was given to me for a purpose!" Hunt saw "Divine Providence" in directing her attention to medicine through the experience of her sister's illness. Looking back on her life, she saw that "God's appointed designs wonderfully worked out" in her life.

As these spinster exemplify, for some women the vocational understanding of work implied waiting for some sign, some opportunity, some "crisis." They were yearning to be useful, to be needed, yet were waiting for some clear signal to indicate their path. Others were more active in looking for their field of usefulness, although they were not necessarily more satisfied with themselves. Louisa May Alcott recorded her discontent in her journal: "Seventeen years have I lived, and yet so little do I know, and so much remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire,—a truly good and useful woman." Catharine Beecher was twenty-three years old when, after the death of her fiancé, she was considering her future employment. She asked her father's advice: "My employments this winter have led to the inquiry whether there is not a course that might be pursued leading to a more extended usefulness." But either way, these spinsters clearly equated vocation with usefulness, with living and working for others. They saw usefulness as a universally applicable concept. As Catharine Sedgwick wrote to her statesman father: "A life dignified by usefulness, of which it has been the object and delight to do good ... does furnish some points of imitation for the most limiting routine of domestic life.... You may benefit a nation, my dear Papa, I may improve the condition of a fellow being."

Finding their life-work filled spinster with a sense of God-given purpose, with the satisfaction of working for others. Myrtilla Miner wrote about the satisfaction resulting from having found the work that was useful and beneficial for others: "I have never before felt myself exactly in my own 'niche,' fully satisfied with the work I had to do; because never before realized all the benefits resulting to the world from my labors."

Mary Lyon wrote to a friend who asked Lyon to work with her in the new Londonderry female academy, that her present work made
it difficult for her to consider anything else, because "This school has so far been a silent, retired, and powerful means of doing good ... my usefulness might be more extensive here than in almost any other place." And as she was longing to work with this friend, she added, "May the Lord direct our course. I cannot, I would not, choose for myself." She, like many others, perceived her calling as God-given: "I have felt more than ever before, that my field of labor was among the most desirable. I have felt that I could thank Him who has given me my work to do." Myrtilla Miner thought that "If God hath not sent me to do this work, I hope he will raise up means to defeat me in all my purposes; and if it is his work, and he has permitted me to be the instrument of its commencement, no man or men can frustrate the design." Mary Lyon contemplated that "the whole great business of life" was "to know and understand our relations to God, and to perform the duties arising from those relations." The most important purpose of her Mount Holyoke Seminary was that "the cause of Christ will be advanced by the influences that go forth from it." Her own ambition was to "labor with God as children with a father, to walk by his side, to unite with him in his great work.

Dorothea Dix wrote to her friend after her bill regarding the reform of insane asylums passed the Senate: "Congratulations flow in ... as I rejoice quietly and silently, I feel that it is 'the Lord who has made my mountain to stand strong.'" Like educators and reformers, the authors of domestic novels saw themselves as preachers of morality, as dependent upon, and guided by God's beneficence. When Dorothea Dix praised The Wide, Wide World, Susan Warner rejected any credit for her book: "You say 'God bless me' for what I have done,—nay but I say 'Thank him for it.'"

Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller regards these aspirations to do God's work in the world, as "justifications" for individual ambitions and aspirations for fame and influence. She claims that the "adoption of a religious identity allowed women to assert themselves in both public and private ways" and that "women's vocational identities were significant because they enabled individuals to detach themselves from the limitations of their immediate environment." She also argues that the "assumption of a new identity prepared women to embark upon new, vocational lives." But from the point of view of the spinsters in question, their "vocational lives" were not new lives at all. Most strove toward finding their vocation and expressed the belief that their whole previous life was but a preparation for it. They saw life as a continuous stream, leading towards ever fuller employment of their potentials, the realization and perfection of their abilities, and, eventually, to the perfect life beyond the earthly one. In their view, vocation was a God-appointed task, not a chosen career.

Chambers-Schiller finds that in public spinsters used the language of the "Cult of Single Blessedness," while in private they acknowledged their strivings, their "ambition and desire for recognition." Contrary to this interpretation, I see a striking consistency in the writings of these spinsters. In letters to friends, publishers, parents as well as in diary entries one encounters the same concerns: to be useful, always to do more and better. Some were almost chronically dissatisfied with themselves; however, this was not a sign of personal ambition for fame. Rather, it was the sign of frustration that one was falling short of fulfilling one's spiritual mission and potential. Similarly, expressions of a desire for perfection, for eminence are in harmony with Christian perfectionism, and were publicly
encouraged in nineteenth-century society. When Chambers-Schiller argues that by “justifying” their lives in religious terms, “women placed their work within an appropriate, socially acceptable context,” she implicitly treats culture as imposition. This interpretation is more explicit in statements like the following: “although their culture demanded the subservience of the female self, some women asserted their independence; they remained single and undertook their callings in an effort to achieve autonomy and experience self-actualization.” However, culture is not a set of restrictions that some manage to circumvent. These spinsters did not “assert their independence” and “achieve autonomy” in opposition to their culture; rather, their culture was constitutive of the meanings directing their actions. They were agents not against their culture but within it. Agency was only possible for them in culturally defined terms. The “Cult of True Womanhood” celebrated women as morally superior; it bestowed upon them a special sense of duty, mission, and responsibility in the world. Thus within Victorian culture the propagation of the values of the home and the extension of female influence were desirable. It was within the context of this culture that specifically female social action became possible. It permitted spinsters to construe plausible and possible forms of agency by including new areas in their female sphere. Much of the literature emphasizes the restricted nature of the female sphere, stressing the limitations of woman’s existence. While acknowledging the presence of limitations, I wish to stress the new possibilities for the extension of the domestic model into new areas.

Since my focus is on the meaning spinsters derived from their culture and attached to their actions, the language of the spinsters’ documents is revealing. Language was not a veil or a justification. The experience of these nineteenth-century spinsters cannot be divorced from their language because it structured their experience, indeed, it made their experience possible. The use of religious language, as an expression of a religiously grounded culture, was not a disguise of pre-existing intentions. Thus, to say that nineteenth-century spinsters adopted a “religious identity,” as does Chambers-Schiller, suggests that they chose themselves the way present-day Americans are supposed to, or aspire to do. It implies that in the pursuit of their own interests, spinsters used religion to cloak their goals, to make them socially acceptable. However, what is distinctive about a religious perspective, as opposed to a secular one, is that belief itself is not a matter of choice: it comes first and shapes and structures other choices; it provides an idiom in which choices are conceived, framed, and pondered. The acceptance of a higher authority is the basis of a religious world view. This way of interpreting the world was certainly not something chosen as a matter of personal choice, nor an adaptive response to cultural and social expectations. Thus, spinsters were not “engaged in making a female self, in pursuing autonomy ... in the world.” They could not usurp God’s prerogative: creation. In this context it was not a “justification,” but rather a shared assumption that one’s work was part of a larger “design,” that the details made sense on a higher level of existence, and that the ultimate goal was not self-actualization, but salvation.

A conditional endorsement of spinsterhood followed from an insistence on uncompromising behavior as well as a continued emphasis on otherworldly goals. Spinsterhood was not the opposite but the complement of true marriage. The idealization and elevation of marriage and wifehood brought with it an emphasis
on pure motives for marrying, resulting, in turn, in the elevation of spinsterhood and a more dignified view of single women. The advice literature reiterated this view in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s, and the theme of true marriage and moral spinsterhood persisted into the last decades of the century. "True marriage is the holiest of all possible relationships," being of "God's own ordaining." To contract such true marriage one should accept only the best mate; "old maids" deserve "honor for living up to the principle, 'The best, or none!'" If the "true wife and mother is the queen among women," second to her is "she who has had the courage to remain single because the right man never came." Mrs. Abell insisted that "circumstances ought never to be such as to justify an ill-assorted or repugnant marriage. If indifference of heart be felt, better remain single." Muzzey (1840) also advocated the view that young women should have the moral courage to wait for one who matched their standards, rather than throw themselves away. Well-known and respected writers, like Louisa Alcott, advised in the same vein: "If love comes as it should come, accept it in God's name and be worthy of His best blessing. If it never comes, then in God's name reject the shadow of it . . ." In 1868, the Nation asked "Why Is Single Life Becoming More General?" and saw the explanation in the "process of civilization": "Men and women can less easily find any one whom they are willing to take as a partner for life; their requirements are more exacting; their standards of excellence higher; they are less able to find any who can satisfy their own ideal and less able to satisfy anybody else's ideal." Even though "no single life . . . ever fulfills its Creator's whole design," the single life is "supremely happy in comparison with her who . . . rushed headlong into the matrimonial flame and been singed for life . . . There cannot, by any possibility of accumulation of misery, come into your life so terrible a woe as that which results from a hasty, precipitate and rash marriage." Singlehood was advocated as preferable to marriage contracted for reasons other than love. Marrying for a home was called "servitude," marrying for money "bargain and sale" by Muzzey. Love was the only legitimate reason for marriage. "I would rather a young lady should be guilty of this imprudence [elopement], if she sincerely loves her companion, than that she marry one she does not love." The marriage ideal was upheld by the editor of Peterson's Magazine (1858): "Marry for a home! . . . How dare you, then, pervert the most sacred institution of the Almighty, by becoming the wife of a man for whom you can feel no emotions of love, or respect even?" The best-selling Titcomb's Letters (1858) was equally adamant: "All this marrying for money, or for position, or for any other consideration, when genuine love is absent, is essential prostitution." Louisa Alcott berated young women for recklessly rushing into matrimony for fear of remaining "old maids." "Fortunately, this foolish prejudice is fast disappearing," she continued, because of the example of an increasing number of happy, useful spinsters. She urged her fellow spinsters to use whatever talents they had "for the good of others" and in that work find their happiness.

Others, too, argued for the dignity and usefulness of singlehood. Catharine Sedgwick, attacking the common prejudice that the single life was aimless, useless, and undignified, wrote that "we raise our voice with all our might against the miserable cant that matrimony is essential to the feeblest sex—that a woman's single life must be useless and undignified—that she is but an adjunct to
man ... we believe she has an independent power to shape her own course, and to force her own separate sovereign way." This oft-quoted passage seems to suggest a strikingly modern conception of elective spinsterhood. However, Sedgwick went on, in a passage usually not cited: "we speak especially to those of our maidens whose modesty confines their efficiency to the circle which radiates from their home. We pray such to remember that their sex's share of the sterner sacrifices, as well as the softer graces of Christian love, does not belong alone to the noble Florence Nightingales of our day. She advocated, as well as practiced in her own life, the "natural circle of duties." "[I]t is not in the broad and noisy fields sought by the apostles of 'Woman's Rights,' that sisterly love and maidenly charity best diffuse their native sweetness."121 George Burnap (1841), too, criticized the "tone of ridicule adopted by the world when speaking of this most respectable and deserving class." Unmarried women "have their full share of the labors of life" and are "especially set apart to good works." "Being less closely connected with the world, their labors are more disinterested ... They are in fact the sisters of charity to the whole species. While the thoughts of others are shut up in themselves and their families, theirs go abroad to seek out the helpless and unfortunate."122 His portrayal of spinsters as more disinterested than married women was resonant in nineteenth-century culture, where the theological connotation of disinterested love was commonly understood. It was akin to God's agape, a sentiment without reference to self. Only through disinterested love, love that "seeketh not its own," could humans live in God. And in practice disinterested love, love that extended beyond the bounds of the family, informed female charity organizations and benevolent societies.

Fiction and poetry also portrayed spinsters as dignified, benevolent persons and models of unselfish behavior. Disappointment in love, far from making fictional spinsters bitter, led to a life of benevolence.123 Quite a number of these fictional spinsters adopted and brought up children124 (who called them 'auntie'), not infrequently the child of the man who betrayed them.125 The theme of spinsters bringing up children is significant because it points to unmarried women's inherently motherly nature and their disinterested love,126 as well as to their ability to forgive. These qualities placed spinsters high on the moral scale.

Lucy Larcom's good friend, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, also immortalized the selfless, charitable spinster, who "found peace in love's unselfishness," and who

Through years of toil and soil and care,
From glossy tress to thin, grey hair,
All unprofaned she held apart
The virgin fancies of her heart127

On the whole, the advice literature and the general discourse on marriage were more concerned about the danger of young women marrying in order to avoid working and being self-reliant than about the possibility of women avoiding marriage in order to find "self-fulfillment" in work.128 Much of the advice literature as well as women's fiction advocated the view that only a strong, principled woman, capable of supporting herself, was qualified to look for love and not merely support in a husband. Woman's dependence, when it sprang from resourcelessness, idleness, social pretensions, lack of education, and the like, was
widely conceived as personally demoralizing and socially dangerous because it compromised the purity of motives for marriage. (The dependence of a strong, able woman after marriage was a different matter: it was in harmony with the God-ordained institution of marriage.) Thus the same course was advocated for single women by many authors: accord priority to being useful, not to marriage; find your duty wherever you are, educate yourself and perfect your potentials, rely on God. If the right man comes along, you will be worthy of him, and he will be attracted to a woman who has integrity and dignity. And if he does not, the "world has plenty of work for you, as single women, after you have fitted yourselves to be perfect women."[29]

Some of the women who had doubts either about the strength of their own emotions or about the other ingredients necessary for true marriage—oneness, affinity, sympathy—were eventually convinced and married. Others never did. Their very doubts were a result of the high ideals of love and marriage. The ideals of love and marriage supplied the models for their aspirations, as well as the language for articulating their experience. Both these ideals and the ideal of character represented standards of perfection which were consequential in the most private domains of life. Clara Barton, Mary Abigail Dodge, Catharine Sedgwick, Harriet Hunt, Lucy Larcom, Emily Howland, Frances Willard, and others subscribed to these high ideals, and with many others of their contemporaries, refused to compromise. In their cultural milieu the behavior of nineteenth-century-middle class spinsters can be interpreted for what it was: an answer to their highly charged moral quest concerning duty, usefulness, and love rather than to our concerns about self-fulfillment and female autonomy.

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ENDNOTES


2. Nancy Cott refers to the connection between the idealization of marriage and spinsterhood without developing this theme. She claims that "some young women expressed a preference for 'single blessedness' above a less than ideal marriage. Some spinsters attributed their lifelong singleness to their high romantic ideals, which no man could actually approximate" (Cott, "Young Women in the Second Great Awakening in New England," Feminist Studies, 32 [Fall 1975]: 15–29, quoted at 18). Elsewhere she argues that some women, when confronted with the reality of imperfect marriages, resolved to live up to their ideals of a perfect marriage rather than abandon the ideal. Also, "women who sincerely envisioned beaux ideals and neither found them in reality nor would settle for less refused ever to marry"; see Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835 (New Haven, 1977), 76, 80. Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller also mentions the existence of romantic ideals and high standards but does not give this line of argument much weight in her analysis. Chambers-Schiller, Liberty, A Better Husband. Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840 (New Haven, 1984), 38.


7. Webster's, second ed.

8. Most of my sources are from the antebellum period; some, however, are from later. Toward the end of the century a slow and complex change led to a more secular culture which in turn had implications for the understanding of women's nature and for spinsterhood. In this study I use "nineteenth-century" to refer to much of that century, saturated as it was by a pervasive and influential Christian culture. On the changing conceptualization of women's nature, see Rosalind Rosenberg, Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism (New Haven, 1982).

9. Since these women were elective spinsters, I will focus on the cultural, and not the demographic context of spinsterhood. However, I am not suggesting that the higher instances of spinsterhood in the Northeast was the outcome of purely cultural factors. (In Massachusetts 14.6% of women were unmarried in the 1830s as opposed to 7.3% nationally; 16.9% to 7.7% in the 1850s; and 22.6% to 10.9% in the 1870s; Yasukchi Yasuba, "Birth Rates of the White Population in the United States, 1800-1860," The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science 79, no. 2 [1961]: 109; Peter R. Uhlenberg, "A Study of Cohort Life Cycles: Cohorts of Native Born Massachusetts Women, 1830-1920," Population Studies 23 [1969]: 420.) In the following, I am offering a corrective to the often one-sided treatment of nineteenth-century single women by concentrating on their motivations.

10. On social generations and social character, see Philip Abrams, Historical Sociology (Ithaca, NY, 1982), 241-258.


13. In 1831 The Lady's Book, the magazine that became very popular under the editorship of Sarah J. Hale a few years later, denounced the notions that "'love' is but a fanciful term for the feeling of esteem beyond which ... [everything] is empty nonsense" as "very erroneous." Instead of regarding mutual esteem as a stable foundation of marriage, the article found it degrading: "the husband taking the wife just as he would a piece of furniture for the decoration of his house, and, very likely, with just about as much regard!" See "Happiness in the Marriage state," The Lady's Book (June 1831), 289-290.


15. CMS to Robert Sedgwick, Albany, March 24, 1819, CMS Papers, MHS.

16. Journal, 12 October 1836, CMS papers, MHS.
17. One of the most successful revivalists, Charles G. Finney, repeatedly described revivalist emotions as "spontaneous" and "overwhelming." See for example Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney, (New York, 1876), 161, 163. The adjectives most often used in his memoirs to describe meetings and conversions were "powerful," "overflowing," "overwhelming," "spontaneous." People responded to the experience by "pouring out all their hearts"; the narratives of Christian experience were "overflowing with love" (e.g. ibid., 161, 163, 77). On the connection between evangelical Protestantism and romantic emotions, see Ruth H. Block, "The Gendered Meaning of Virtue in Revolutionary America," Signs, vol. 13, no. 1 (1987): 57; also Lystra, Searching the Heart, chap. 2.

18. Lystra calls this process the development of the lovers' "shared identity" in Searching the Heart, chapter 2. Also, she places romantic love in the context of religious sensibility and shows very convincingly the progress of the "new theology of the romantic self" in ch. 8.

19. Nina Baym shows how nineteenth century woman's fiction, defined as written by, for, and about women, advocated the true marriage ideal for its heroines: sincere and deep love was not blind in these novels and united the heroine with a worthy, strong, loving man; see Baym, Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870 (Ithaca, NY, 1978), chap. 2.

20. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton put it: "It is a sin, an outrage to our liberal feelings, to pretend that anything but deep fervent love and sympathy constitute marriage. The right idea of marriage is the foundation of all reforms." (Letter to Susan B. Anthony, 1853, quoted in Degler, At Odds, 175.)

Elizabeth Blackwell, spinster and doctor, also held that "the early and faithful union of one man with one woman is the true ideal of society. It ... is the foundation of social and national welfare." Quoted in Ronald G. Walters, Prurients for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), 156.

21. A good example of this transformation can be found in the courtship correspondence of Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld, both noted abolitionists. "I have gone to my Heavenly Father ... and asked Him if it was wrong to love you as I did; WHY He had constituted me a being imperfect a half only of myself as it were ... Do you believe that our Father ever begets pure and holy feelings in one heart without touching the other? I feel my Theodore that we are the two halves of one whole, a twain one, two bodies animated by one soul and that the Lord has given us to each other," Grimké to Weld, Brookline, February 11, 1838, in Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké and Sarah Grimké 1822–1844, ed. by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond. (New York, 1934), vol. II, 537, 538. Weld's feelings were reciprocal: "I felt you to be a constituent half of my being somehow mysteriously sundered from me and as tho during all my previous life I had been a lone exile wandering and seeking you ..." (ibid., Feb. 18, '38, 562).


24. Gail Hamilton, A New Atmosphere (Boston, 1877 [1864]), 15, 20, 93. Mary Abigail Dodge (1833–96) was a writer and journalist.


26. Quoted in Mary Earhart, Frances Willard. From Prayers to Politics. (Chicago, 1944), 75. Frances E. Willard (1839–98) was a moral reformer and founder of Women's Christian Temperance Union.

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29. Lucy Larcom to Esther S. Humiston, Norton, June 1, 1858, Addison Papers, MHS.

30. The Young Lady's Friend, by a Lady [Eliza Ware Farrar] (Boston, 1837), 288, 312.

31. Mrs. L. G. Abell, Women in Her Various Relations (New York, 1853), 262.


33. 15 May, 1854, in Marchalonis, Lucy Larcom, 92.

34. 11 May 1855, In Marchalonis, Lucy Larcom, 97.

35. Lucy Larcom to Esther Humiston, Beverly, Dec. 2, 1858, Addison Papers, MHS.

36. Harriot K. Hunt, Glances and Glimpses (Boston, 1856), 406. Harriot K. Hunt (1805-75) was one of the first female physicians.

37. “Love affairs” refers to romantic, not physical love.


40. Ella Lyman to Richard Cabot, August 15, 1892, Ella Lyman Cabot Papers, SL.

41. Ella Lyman to Richard Cabot, August 17th [1892], Ella Lyman Cabot Papers, SL


47. “Christianity is preeminently the religion of affection,” wrote Chapin, simplifying and popularizing Protestant theological thinking on the subject, reaching back to Jonathan Edwards; see Jonathan Edwards, Ethical Writings, ed. Paul Ramsey. (New Haven, 1989); Chapin, Duties of Young Women, 17.

49. Satan in Society, by a Physician (Nicholas Francis Cooke) (Cincinnati, 1876), 380.


53. Lystra, Searching the Heart, esp. chap. 2.

54. See, for instance, Cott, "Passionlessness."


59. See, for instance, Carl Degler, At Odds; Mabel Collins Donnelly; The American Victorian Woman; Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, Liberty, A Better Husband.

60. See Irene Quenzler Brown, "Death, Friendship, and Female Identity During New England's Second Great Awakening," Journal of Family History 12, no. 4 (October 1987): 367–387. Charles Taylor also talks about the "American 'tradition' of leaving home, encouraging young people to become independent. The young person learns the independent stance, but this stance is also something expected of him or her. Moreover, what an independent stance involves is defined by the culture... (in which the meaning of independence can also alter with time)"); see Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, MA., 1989), 39. For a sensitive and lucid discussion of the Evangelical understanding of "autonomy" and "selfhood," see Ann Taves, "Self and God in the Early Published Memoirs of New England Women," in American Women's Autobiography, ed. Margo Culley (Madison, Wisconsin, 1992).


63. A. W. May to niece Nelly, Sept. 14 '64. May-Goddard Papers, Sl... Abigail Williams May (1829–88) teacher and educator. Chambers-Schiller quotes this as proof of the ultimate importance these spinsters attached to independence (Liberty, A Better Husband, 81).

64. Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, A Woman's Thoughts about Women (New York, 1856), 41–42.


66. Quoted in Breault, Emily Howland, 46.
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68. Ibid.
69. Blackwell, Reminiscences, 16, Blackwell Family Papers, SL.
70. Ibid., 18–19.
71. Lucy Stone eventually married Henry Blackwell; her friend Antoinette Brown married his brother, Samuel Blackwell.
74. Ibid., 129.
75. Quoted in Chambers-Schiller, Liberty, a Better Husband, 94.
76. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 5.
81. Ibid., 63.
82. LL to Esther Humiston, Norton, Nov. 14, 1858. D. D. Addison Papers, MHS.
83. LL to Esther Humiston, Norton, Feb. 28. 1859, Ibid.
85. Harriot Hunt, Glances and Glimpses (Boston, 1865), 54.
86. Ibid., 81.
87. Ibid., 85.
88. Ibid., 126.
91. Quoted in Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, 23.
92. Ellen M. O'Connor, Myrrilla Miner, a Memoir (Boston, 1885), 41.
93. ML To Zilpah Grant, December 1, 1823, quoted in Marion Lansing, Mary Lyon Through Her Letters (Boston 1937), 42–43.

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94. ML to her mother, May 12, 1834, quoted in Lansing, Mary Lyon, 134. Mary Kelley describes how nineteenth-century women writers perceived themselves as following God's appointed path even when financial strains prompted them to write, in Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1984), 294.

95. Quoted in O'Connor, Myrtille Miner, 39.

96. Fisk, Mary Lyon, 224.

97. Ibid., 102.

98. Quoted in Beth Bradford Gilchrist, The Life of Mary Lyon (Boston, 1910), 131.

99. Francis Tiffany, Life of Dorothea Lynde Dix (Boston, 1891), 188.


101. Ibid., 439.


106. Rosalind Rosenberg makes a similar point, arguing that those women who sought to expand women's role did so by stressing female uniqueness and society's need for feminine skills. See Rosenberg, “In Search of Woman's Nature, 1850–1920,” Feminist Studies, 3, nos. 1–2 (Fall 1975): 142–143.

107. Cott, Degler, and Daniel Scott Smith were among the first to emphasize various enabling aspects of domesticity, and Mary Kelley called attention to the unparalleled new possibilities that opened for “literary domestics” from the 1820s on. See Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, 200–201; Degler, At Odds, 27–29; Daniel Scott Smith, “Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America,” in Hartman and Banner, eds., Clio's Consciousness Raised (New York, 1974); Kelley, Private Woman, Chapter 1.


111. Much of the literature on nineteenth-century women offers an unexamined stereotypical treatment of contemporary views of spinsterhood. However, Chambers-Schiller gives an exceptionally good account of the increasingly favorable portrayal of spinsters in Liberty, a Better Husband, Chapter 1.

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113. Abell, Women in Her Various Relations, 209.


117. Muzzey, The Young Maiden, 189-190, 192.

118. "Honorable Often to Be an Old Maid," May 1858, quoted in Cogan, All-American Girl, 107. Barbara Welter found that "women's magazines tried to remove the stigma from being an 'Old Maid.' They advised no marriage at all rather than an unhappy one contracted out of selfish motives" (Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 169). Similarly, Degler claims that "in the first half of the nineteenth century, advice books were beginning to rise to the support of young women who did not marry" (Degler, At Odds, 161).


120. Alcott, "Happy Women."


122. George W. Burnap, Lectures on the Sphere and Duties of Woman and Other Subjects (Baltimore, 1841), 125–126.

123. See for example "Fruits of Sorrow, or an Old Maid's Story," by Mary C. Vaughan, in Old Maids: Short Stories by Nineteenth Century US Women Writers, compiled and edited with an introduction by Susan Koppelman (Boston, 1984), 89–96; "Old Maids," by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, in Old Maids, 11–28. This lifelong commitment to benevolence included such acts of forgiveness and sympathy as attending in their illness the men who betrayed them. See, for example, "The Romance of an Old Maid," by Clara Augusta, The Lady's Friend, vol. V, no. 2 (April 1869): 93–95.

124. See for example "A Spinster's Story," The Lady's Friend, vol 1, no. 9 (September 1864): 630–635.


126. As Burnap wrote of spinster:s: "They have woman's hearts ... the mother’s feelings become developed without the mother's relation ... She is pointed to a mother's toils and self sacrifice without the certainty of ... return of gratitude and affection" (Burnap, Lectures on the Sphere and Duties of Woman, 126–127).


128. See for example Croly, For Better or Worse, 109–112; Studley, What Our Girls Ought to Know, 206.