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Ironic deference : an inquiry into the nineteenth-century feminist rhetoric of Kesiah Shelton.

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IRONIC DEFERENCE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY
FEMINIST RHETORIC OF KESIAH SHELTON

By

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B.A., University of Louisville, 2014

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

IRONIC DEFERENCE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMINIST RHETORIC OF KESIAH SHELTON

Melissa Rothman

April 14, 2017

This project examines the works of Kesiah Shelton, a writer for popular magazines in the late nineteenth century who used irony in interesting ways to critique the social norms of the period. Although, scholars have noted that female authorship was a an expanding field during this period, there were very specific gendered expectations limiting what female authors wrote about; women were primarily limited to writing about domestic matters and were discouraged from taking up other topics associated with the male public sphere such as politics. Many scholars have noted how the cult of domesticity valorized women as superior moral beings, creating a stark contrast to the patriarchal norms that sought to silence them. Throughout this thesis, I will show how Shelton exploits this collision, juxtaposing these opposing social norms to set up an ironic stage in order to highlight the hypocrisy of traditional gender norms.

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INTRODUCTION

“Irony as a direct and classic device—not only of oratory but of every kind of communication where it occurs—it is this irony, intended but covert, stable and localized, that we shall now pursue, without worrying about whether it is “dried up pedantry.”

Wayne C. Booth—A Rhetoric of Irony

Irony occupies a precarious position in contemporary culture. Particularly over the last few decades, controversy surrounding the use of irony has surfaced in the media. Starting in the early 1990s, there was an urgent call for sincerity and authenticity in discursive practices in music, film, and literature. Jim Collins introduced the concept of the "new sincerity" to film criticism in "Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," claiming that it was a genre that emerged to counter the "hyperconscious eclecticism" that permeated contemporary film in an endless array of ironic juxtaposition.¹ Similarly, in the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," David Foster Wallace predicted "The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching [...] [and begin to] treat of plain old untrendy

¹ Collins, Jim. "Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (Routledge, 1993), 250.

human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.”²

Likewise, almost a decade later in the weeks following 9/11, several journalists attempted to declare the death of irony in the face of the tragic and fear-riddled reality Americans would endure. However, despite society’s repeated attempts to devalue ironic speech and prematurely declare its end, it remains a prominent feature of modern discourse.

Historically, irony has provided an effective rhetorical tool for communicating truth in situations where a direct approach may not be strategic. Its covert nature has been an asset for marginalized voices, particularly in nineteenth-century female authorship. Throughout this thesis, looking at one specific female author, the fiction writer and essayist Kesiah Shelton, I show how irony supplies a vehicle for subversive speech that might have otherwise been dismissed or even silenced, focusing specifically on the second half of the century where we see first-wave feminism begin to gain steam. Many scholars have noted how the era’s cult of domesticity valorizes women as superior moral beings, while at the same time devaluing them in ways that ultimately serve to silence them. This ideology placed women on a pedestal for embodying moral strength for their spouses and children. Conversely women were represented as weak and submissive individuals, thus discouraging their ability to voice their moral authority. Female authors exploited this collision, juxtaposing these opposing social norms to set up an ironic stage. Thus nineteenth-century culture creates a model scene for exploring how ironic rhetoric can function as a medium for truth

² Wallace, David Foster. "E unibus pluram: Television and U.S. fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993), 192-193.

in its ability to illustrate hypocrisy and bring to light social conditions that promote inequality.

In nineteenth-century studies, Fanny Fern is considered a pioneer of ironic prose. While Hawthorne and Melville have maintained esteem as ironists in canonized histories of nineteenth-century literature, Fern has become known as the most prominent woman to apply this rhetoric in depicting female experience. Unlike other female writers of the period, Fern wrote unabashedly about a variety of topics that were considered taboo, such as divorce, prostitution, birth control, education, children's rights, venereal disease, and the need for prison reform. Her works are not only explicitly polemical, but she was also well-known as an iconoclastic satirist when discussing the rights of women. Fern often employed verbal irony to satirize romantic conceptions of love and marriage, and her assertive tone challenged gender norms that dictated feminine submissiveness. As Joyce Warren notes, Fern's "ideas and writing style were far in advance of her day" (56).³ She not only argued passionately for female independence at a time when "to thus succeed independently was [considered] 'unfeminine,'" but she provided a role model for success for those who may have had similar ambitions.⁴

While Fern's writings may tell us much about how some women viewed their precarious position in Victorian America, they can hardly be considered representative. As Susan Belasco Smith notes in the introduction to *Ruth Hall*, despite Fern's overwhelming popularity, her unconventional style provoked

³ Warren, Joyce W. "Fanny Fern (1811-1872)." *Legacy* 2, no. 2 (1985): 56.

⁴ Warren, "Fanny Fern," 54.

mixed reactions from male and female readers alike.⁵ On the one hand, she was overwhelmingly popular and even lauded by authors such as Hawthorne for “throw[ing] off the restraints of decency.”⁶ On the other, she received harsh criticism from many of her contemporaries; even women operating outside of traditional gender roles who were in positions of power and influence often failed to challenge the oppressive gender norms of the period, showing just how exceptional Fern was in relation to other women of the period. As Aleta Feinsod Cane and Susan Alves point out in *“The Only Efficient Instrument”: American Women Writers and the American Periodical*, Sarah Joseph Hale, the editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, subscribed to the ideology of separate spheres, revealing how even magazines run and written by women played a role in reinforcing conservative gender politics.⁷ Cane and Alves also point to Harriet Beecher Stowe as “a woman who articulated advanced political ideas, [but] held conservatively to the traditional view of separate spheres for American men and women of her century.”⁸ Thus, while undeniably fascinating, Fern is most accurately characterized as an outlier in representing nineteenth-century female authorship.

However, it is quite possible that Fern paved the way for a new form of female expression to emerge in the American periodical. While I was digging

⁵ Smith, Susan Belasco. “Introduction” in *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*. (New York: Penguin Book, 2006), xlii.

⁶ Quoted in Smith, “Introduction,” xxxv.

⁷ Cane, Aleta Feinsod, and Susan Alves. “American Women Writers and the Periodical: Creating a Constituency, Opening a Dialogue,” in *“The Only Efficient Instrument”: American Women Writers & the Periodical, 1837-1916*, ed. Aleta Feinsod Cane and Susan Alves (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 4.

⁸ Cane and Alves, “American Women,” 5.

through the archives for a nineteenth-century reception study, I came across an author named Kesiah Shelton who uses irony in similar ways to critique the social norms of the period. Shelton not only wrote over 70 articles between 1879 and 1905, but also published an apparently autobiographical short novel named *Our Peggotties* (1878) that portrays societal expectations of women and the ways they limit a woman's autonomy even within the domestic sphere. While Shelton may not be quite as outspoken as Fern, her reserve may well be due to the same limitations that Fern faced from her contemporaries, and the way Shelton navigates the social expectations of what is appropriately "feminine" may provide a more representative case for understanding female authorship.

For this study, I will analyze a number of Shelton's texts to explore the ways irony is employed as a form of insider language. Traditionally, many analyses of nineteenth-century female authorship have used the novel as a primary source for investigation. However, thanks to modern technology and the growth of digital databases, there has been an increased availability of periodical literature which has helped make figures like Shelton more accessible and visible. In "Beyond the Bounds of the Book: Periodical Studies and Women Writers of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," Jean Marie Lutes writes that "Precisely because writing published in periodicals lacks the prestige and status of the bound book, it is an essential source for scholars who seek insight into writers who—by virtue of their gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or other

factors— have lacked access to the most privileged venues of American letters.”⁹ Fortunately, over the last few decades, scholars have worked diligently to recover lost works, not only expanding our understanding of female authorship, but also complicating our notions of female experience during this period. However, even then, works of humor are rarely viewed as serious texts for inquiry. Perhaps this is because comedy by nature can be very capricious, and thus is not initially viewed as a source for meaningful content. However, humor in itself can be iconoclastic, and ironic humor specifically can be an important aspect of feminist rhetoric.

Another possible reason scholars may shy away from examining works involving humor could be due to the ambiguity of the rhetoric involved, especially when dealing with ironic humor. For centuries, theorists have attempted to nail down an explicit definition of irony, either grounding it in humor and wit or vouching for its ability to serve a political purpose. Nevertheless, we still tend to be uncertain about how to construct a clear and concise definition that encompasses irony as a whole. As Ted Gornelos and Viveca Greene note in *A Decade of Dark Humor*, “the only thing that irony theorists seem to agree on is that there is no set definition of irony, no set way to tell if something *is* in fact ironic, and no clear path to understanding its potential impact beyond the fact that irony is, by definition, ambivalent.”¹⁰ Because irony always relies on social contexts for its existence, it is extremely fluid. Thus, the only way to obtain any stable understanding of the function of a particular irony is

⁹ Lutes, Jean Marie. “Beyond the Bounds of the Book: Periodical Studies and Women Writers of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 27, no. 2 (2010): 336.

¹⁰ Gornelos, Ted, and Viveca. Greene. *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), xxxiii.

to ground it within the historical context from which it was created. For this reason, Linda Hutcheon's description of irony as a "scene" in her book *Irony's Edge* will be useful in stabilizing potential political arguments that emerge in nineteenth-century texts. Hutcheon describes how irony cannot exist outside of cultural context because it is reliant upon contradictory ideological expectations that are ultimately socially constructed. "That discursive tension, that dangerous aesthetic" is what Hutcheon calls "irony's edge," in which "the 'scene' of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication."¹¹

Along similar lines, irony doesn't just happen on its own. It comes about as a response to ideological conflicts that exist in specific social climates. It can only occur within the juxtaposition of opposing forces that occurs in outside cultural contexts. For women in the nineteenth century, ironic expression appears to be a natural response to the logical inconsistencies they saw as sources of oppression. However, there are several questions we must contend with in this study. How do we know if an author is being ironic? Considering the subjective quality that texts maintain once they are released into the world, does authorial intention even matter? If so, when does it matter? In many cases, irony occurs organically in texts due to the narrative nature of literature and its ability to mirror the real world; that is to say, irony often happens without the author attempting to bring explicit attention to it. However, in Shelton's texts, there is evidence that she presumes an ideal reader, one who is aware of the ironic scene she exploits in

¹¹ Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

order to make an explicit political argument centered on women's rights. In this way, Shelton quite possibly sees herself as speaking to an "insider audience."

Many times, when we refer to an "insider audience," we are referring to a community of members with shared beliefs. With modern uses of irony, this audience is often well-defined. With the dust still settling from the recent presidential election, one has to look no further than the memes circulated on social media for endless examples of irony that is explicitly dichotomized between right and left leaning political affiliations. These are often composed with a specific audience in mind, those who "get" it. As Hutcheon argues "It is not so much that irony *creates* communities or in-groups; instead, [...] irony happens because what could be called 'discursive communities' already exist and provide the context for both deployment and attribution of irony."¹² Throughout this investigation, I will reveal how Shelton's irony is geared toward a diverse audience as she uses many different aspects of "insiderness" to connect herself with her readers. First and foremost, she's not merely speaking to those who are equally frustrated with the oppression of gender norms. Her ideal readers primarily meet one requirement; they are familiar with, and many times subscribe to, the many aspects of domesticity that Shelton seeks to critique. Therefore, her insider audience often consists of those who can identify with female experience in general and thus they may still be members of the community that still subscribe to the ideology of separate spheres. Her audience's familiarity with the circumstances that she speaks of is crucial to her development of an ironic stage.

¹² Hutcheon, *irony's edge*, 18.

By showcasing what is expected of women juxtaposed with the “real” conditions of female experience, Shelton is able to pose covert arguments against gender inequality.

This connection also has much to do with the reader’s familiarity with female-gendered genre conventions. As Wayne C. Booth points out in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, “reconstructions of irony are seldom if ever reducible either to grammar or semantics or linguistics.”¹³ However, at the same time a central component to achieving legible irony relies on the reader’s ability to interpret texts in specific ways. And as Booth notes “the relevant context becomes the picture of a coherent whole, with every detail referring reciprocally to every other in the work.”¹⁴ There are cases in which Shelton uses specific genres such as love stories, and supplies ironic commentary on the unrealistic expectations encouraged by romantic conventions that ignore the “real” circumstances evident in female/male relationships that are grounded in inequality. In this way, her irony depends on her reader’s knowledge of both cultural context and how texts work to convey that meaning. As Booth notes, “it is impossible to say that only what is ‘in the work’ is relevant context, because at every point the author depends on inferences about what his reader will likely assume or know—about both his factual knowledge *and* his experience of literature” [emphasis added].¹⁵ By utilizing the conventions that are normative to female gendered writing, Shelton is able to move under the radar and create implicit arguments for challenging the same

¹³ Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1974): 43.

¹⁴ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 99-100.

norms she herself *appears* to be subscribing to. Therefore, her subtlety may perhaps be more successful than those more outspoken such as the feminist political writers of the period who could have alienated a portion of their audience by being so direct, rather than changing their minds.

Other aspects of this “insiderness” include class and cultural values. Shelton employs a “gossipy” style of language in many of her texts that serves two purposes. First, it gives her prose a lighthearted tone of a woman speaking among friends; thus she never appears to be overtly political. Second, she draws the reader into her community, and thus in her mindset so to speak. By using middle-class values to construct judgments of “others,” she creates a coalition with her reader based on a shared sense of superiority.¹⁶ Likewise, she draws cultural capital from a variety of sources such as her New England heritage, popular songs and productions of the period, as well as commonly referenced dilemmas that were prevalent in middle-class society such as “the servant problem” in order to establish herself as a person of authority among similarly positioned readers. Within this mix, by building herself as a person of authority while also using narrative to reveal the oppression inherent in gender norms, Shelton may be more successful in seducing her audience into adopting a more progressive point of view concerning women’s rights than others who took a more direct route.

¹⁶ The problematics of this will be hashed out further in the text since this is obviously elitist and contributes to the decline of intersectional thinking in terms of 1st wave feminism. However, for the purpose of brevity, I will only focus on the positive aspects that this has to offer to her purely “white, middle class” feminist rhetoric.

Of course, there is also a downside to irony's rhetorical function. In order for there to be insiders there must inevitably be outsiders and this exclusiveness often marks tones of elitism. As Hutcheon points out, "irony is often desperately 'edged': it has its targets, its perpetrators, and its complicitous audience," and thus is not exempt from "questions of hierarchy and power."¹⁷ In *Our Peggotties*, there are areas of play in Shelton's discourse that reveal that female frustration didn't just arise from recognition of the oppression of a male-dominated power structure, but that this frustration also emerged from a power struggle among women themselves. However, the ironic scenes she cultivates often highlight her own precarious positions at the expense of other women based on classist notions of feminine propriety. In other words, Shelton uses women of other classes and ethnicities to create a parody her main character's own powerlessness in her home. While she does well to showcase the power of the matriarch as a fantasy produced by the ideology of separate spheres, she does so by devaluing other women who more explicitly challenge norms of middle-class femininity. However, by revealing this complex view of how class and gender politics intersected in shaping female experience, I hope to present a nuanced account of the ways that first-wave feminist rhetoric not only utilized patriarchal ideology to critique women's subordinated status, but also how this ability to question their own precarious positions could have emerged from classist notions of their superiority over other women who didn't subscribe to bourgeois value systems.

¹⁷ Hutcheon, *irony's edge*, 40.

THE LITERARY SCENE OF THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

“Courtship and marriage, servants and children, these are the great objects of a woman’s thoughts, and they necessarily form the staple topics of their writings and their conversation. We have no right to expect anything else in a woman’s book.”

- *N.Y. Times* 1857

Kesiah Shelton entered the literary scene at a pivotal moment in American publication history. As Sydney Bland writes in “Shaping the Life of the New Woman: The Crusading Years of the Delineator,” “From 1860 to 1900 the number of monthly magazines rose from 280 to over 1800,” showing just how popular national magazines became in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ In *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940*, Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway observe that “there were far more readers of newspapers and magazines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than there were readers of books,” showing the increasing influence that the periodical had on society.¹⁹ Likewise, in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith describe how the rapid growth in popularity of periodicals created a job market for budding authors who formerly would never have had the ability to

¹⁸ Bland, Sidney R. "Shaping the Life of the New Woman: The Crusading Years of the Delineator." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 19, no. 2 (2009): 168.

¹⁹ Kaestle, Carl F., and Janice A. Radway. 2009. *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940. A History of the Book in America*, v. 4. (Chapel Hill: Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 19-20.

have their works read on such a large scale. They write that the “Periodical helped significantly in establishing American literary culture as an author sustaining formation” and describe how the growth in popularity of the periodical opened up a demand for female authors.²⁰ While changes in distribution systems and technological advances are often credited with this surge, cultural factors not only influenced the increased availability of periodical literature, but also the content. Higher literacy levels among the working class and women created a profoundly heterogeneous audience. Prior to the nineteenth century, pleasure reading and publishing were somewhat confined to the upper classes. However, with the growth of free public education that became available throughout the nineteenth century, literacy was no longer confined to the privileged. The increasing demand for cheap printed works opened up opportunities for authors such as Shelton to make their way into the literary landscape.

At the same time, authors like Shelton were held to specific standards that limited their ability to achieve success as writers. As the quotation in the beginning of this section suggests, female authors were expected to conform to strict gendered conventions, thus limiting what they could openly write about. Authors such as Fanny Fern appear to be the exception to this norm. Granted, Fern was criticized by her contemporaries and family members, both men and women, but she never appeared to allow this to silence her. As Warren notes in “Domesticity and the Economics of Independence: Resistance and Revolution in the Work of Fanny Fern,” “[Fern] was not humble—that is, not ‘feminine’—in

²⁰ Price, Kenneth M., and Susan Belasco Smith. *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 5.

her recognition of her own power.”²¹ Despite the immense criticism she faced, Fern is often seen “talking back” to those who condemned her and this was perceived by many as threatening to the existing social order. As Warren notes:

This kind of self-assertion in a woman was shocking and somewhat unnerving to men. When Fern was criticized by an editor for not doing her own washing, she replied “As long as Mr. Bonner pays me enough to buy out the editor’s office, I will do just what the editor would do—turn from the washtub to the inkstand” (NYL, September 18, 1869).²²

The fact that she had earned enough money to enable her to satirically suggest that it was possible for her to buy the editor’s office, shows just how much confidence her success and popularity had granted her. Thus, I can’t help but wonder how much Fern’s success may have warranted her an added degree of liberty in speaking out openly and assertively about social and political issues, as opposed to other female authors who may have had to find more creative means to covertly provide social critique. Fern was certainly an anomaly of nineteenth-century female authorship. It is likely that many female writers of the period were just trying to make a living while attempting to find avenues into a male-dominated workforce, and as a consequence wrote with more caution than Fern. For this reason, authors like Shelton may provide us examples of covert rhetoric that might have been influential in shifting cultural attitudes toward the women’s rights movement.

Shelton was writing in a male-dominated climate that was not only resistant to the idea of female authorship, but devalued works of women based on

²¹ Warren, Joyce W. “Domesticity and the Economics of Independence: Resistance and Revolution in the Work of Fanny Fern,” in *The (Other) American Traditions : Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993) 87.

²² Warren, “Domesticity,” 87.

a reluctance to accept the shifting cultural climate that came about as a result of the surge in publication that many elitists deemed less “literary.” This ambivalence about the rising competition in the literary market is illustrated in this famous passage, found in a letter Hawthorne wrote his publisher and friend, William D. Ticknor:

America is now wholly given over to a dammed mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the ‘Lamplighter’ and other books neither better nor worse?—worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000.²³

Despite the undeniable success of female-authored titles that Hawthorne himself reluctantly notes in this passage, many critics during this time-period, as well as throughout the twentieth century, failed to regard many of women’s works as serious literature. As Sarah Robbins notes in “Gendering the Gilded Age Periodical Professionalism: Reading Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Hearth and Home Prescriptions for Women’s Writing*,” a trend we see developing during this period was a “growing divide between an urban, ‘high culture,’ masculine model for literature making and an increasingly distanced alternative tradition, grounded in the values and practices of a more rural or domestic, middle-brow—and feminized—space for textual consumption and production.”²⁴ As Robbins describes, women’s writing became associated with making money, rather than as a validated form of artistic expression. Because “American women writers [...]

²³ Quoted in Frederick, John T. “Hawthorne’s “Scribbling Women”” *The New England Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1975): 231.

²⁴ Robbins, Sarah. “Gendering the Gilded Age Periodical Professionalism: Reading Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Hearth and Home Prescriptions for Women’s Writing*,” in *“The Only Efficient Instrument”: American Women Writers & the Periodical, 1837-1916*, ed. Aleta Feinsod Cane and Susan Alves (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 48.

have often written within a gendered tradition of entrepreneurship,” this expectation further divided texts between high and low culture, and reinforcing perceptions of women’s work as associated with the later.²⁵

We see an anxiety about this stigma connected to popular literature in the advertisement printed in the back matter of Kesiah Shelton’s first and only novella, *Our Peggotties*, released in 1878 as a part of “The Satchel Series.” According to a review from the *Boston Home Journal* cited in this ad, this series “comprises the brightest and best brief works of fiction by American authors who are, for the most part, well-known to the reading public.”²⁶ Of course, none of the authors are well-known among current literary scholars, which suggests one of two things: either their notoriety was overlooked through the canonization of more “literary” genres, or the assertion of their fame is just a fabrication used as an advertising ploy to sell more copies even though their works are not notable. While the note of cautious calculation present in “for the most part” would point to the latter, either way, this line reveals how the spectacle of celebrity is utilized as a marketing tactic. Likewise, the advertisement continues to assert that the books in this series “are not trashy reprints nor ‘dime novels,’” and goes on to describe the quality of the binding as evidence for this claim, further revealing how mass publication institutions themselves also helped perpetuate this separation between high and low art.²⁷

²⁵ Robbins, “Gendering,” 49.

²⁶ Shelton, Kesiah. *Our Peggotties*. (Authors' Pub. Co., 1878), 107.

²⁷ Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 107.

THE SATCHEL SERIES.

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Our Winter Eden. Pen Pictures of the Tropics. By Mrs. Carneau. 30c.
Our Peggotties. By Kessiah Shelton. 25c.
City of Fin. A trip to the bottom of the Sea. By Jas. R. Campbell. 30c.
Under the Allspice Trees. By Mrs. Wm. Leslie Carneau. 30c.

Figure 1

Likewise, the use of the terms "sententious" and "marrowy" seem to attempt to separate these works from the sensational novels that commonly circulated: "sententious" asserts the works' didactic value, while "marrowy" suggests substance as opposed to the shallow reputation that dime novels had acquired during this period.

Didacticism was one way that authors such as Shelton used gendered conventions of women's writing to redefine them as valuable contributions to

society. Using the moral authority provided by the tenets of the cult of domesticity, female authors were allowed to speak about issues connected to the domestic sphere. However, this expectation of female authorship was also limiting. As Cane and Alves note, “Adherence by both writers and readers to a conservative gender politic ensured that the Cult of Domesticity would have a fairly strong hold upon the women who wrote and read antebellum American Periodicals.”²⁸ We see evidence of this pressure in the content shifts that Shelton succumbs to throughout her career. Although Shelton’s early work published in *Potters American Monthly* between 1879 and 1881 suggests that she had an outlook that we could interpret today as progressively feminist, it appears that she may have succumbed to the mounting social pressures in pursuit of financial stability. Between 1882 and 1898, Shelton remained a prolific journalist, publishing in magazines such as *Arthur’s Home Magazine*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and *the New York Observer*. However, her content shifted drastically from the creative short stories that provided the author’s social critiques to much more conventionally “female” topics of gardening, cooking, beauty tips, and the occasional flowery poem. This shift reflects the changes in demand as the magazine business sharpened to appeal to more specific (gendered) audiences.

However, one clue that Shelton still desired to write pieces of more substance is hidden in three articles published in *The Chatauquan* between 1892 and 1895, which retain some of Shelton’s analytical persona. Each article traces the historical origins of religious holidays and customs. “Yuletide Evergreens” traces the origin of the holly tree and mistletoe as a symbolic staple in the

²⁸ Cane and Alves, “American Women Writers,” 6.

Christmas tradition, drawing parallels and differences between the Druid, the Persian, Anglo-Saxon, and even Norse traditions.²⁹ She does the same thing with “Easter, its Eggs, and Legends,” beginning the article by claiming “There is no trace of Easter as a Christian festival to be found in the New Testament nor any of the writings of the apostolic fathers,” going on to account for its cross-cultural origins.³⁰ These articles not only allow her to take a position of intellectual authority, but they also reveal Shelton’s acute awareness of how cultural norms are socially constructed. In “St. Valentine’s Day,” she performs a similar act of deconstruction but goes on to show how uneven power structures have roots in these socially constructed traditions. She begins by commenting how queer it is that we celebrate a martyred saint with a “day dedicated to special love making, the day accorded to mating birds.”³¹ Shelton goes on to describe what she views as the more appropriate historical account rooted in the ancient Roman feasts of Lupercalia, the Latin god of fertility. After unpacking several customs that included “incantations and charms and spells” that were performed to secure a mate, Shelton then shifts to the subject of the leap day proposal, praising Queen Margaret of Scotland for enacting a law in 1288 allowing women to propose to men on leap-year day.³² She goes on to describe how Margaret’s edict permitted women to refuse their suitors, but that men were ordered to pay a fine if they did the same. However, Shelton notes that if the man could “*make it appear*” that he

²⁹ Shelton, Kesiah. "Yuletide Evergreens." *The Chautauquan: A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 16, no. 3, (1892): 347. ProQuest

³⁰ Shelton, Kesiah. "Easter, Its Eggs and Legends." *The Chautauquan: A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 21, no. 1, (April 1895): 88. ProQuest.

³¹ Shelton, Kesiah. "St. Valentine's Day." *The Chautauquan: A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 16, no. 5, (Feb 1893): 604. ProQuest.

³² *Ibid*, 605.

was already betrothed to another woman, this provided him a loophole to manipulate the law in his favor. She then relates this issue to her own culture and the issue of women's rights: "Margaret is shown by this, to have been like the royal rulers of to-day subject to an authority that could easily destroy her kindest intentions. Every man would escape through such a loop-hole; it is so easy to 'make it appear.'"³³

However, while these articles provide evidence that Shelton's interests superseded conventional women's topics that were complacent with typical gender roles, and even provide hints of her own political affiliations concerning women's rights, Shelton's swing to more conservative content appears to mark a significant shift in her career path.³⁴ For example, in *Godey's Lady's Book*, perhaps the most prominent venue in which Shelton's work appears, of the eight pieces she published, six were flowery poems and the other two were love stories that lacked the ironic bite of her earlier works.³⁵ Authors like Shelton were not only constrained by cultural norms that dictated whether or not women *should* write in a professional sphere, but they were also limited by what they could write about. Aside from the issue of attempting to cater to a mass audience, if Shelton wanted to write about issues of women's rights, she had to do so in a way that

³³ Ibid., 606.

³⁴ Shelton's works published from 1879-1884 in *Potter's American Monthly* and *Potter's Home Magazine* comprise the most obvious uses ironic prose to critique gendered social norms and I will offer an analysis of many of these throughout the course of this thesis. Aside from the three articles in published in *The Chautauquan* from 1892-95, her works primarily consist of recipes (7 articles), gardening/housekeeping tips (20 articles), parenting tips (6 articles), beauty advice (2 articles), and feminine/flowery poems (7 pieces). While the other twelve articles I recovered that contain stories (some of which are love stories) could have feminist readings available, none are as overtly critical of social norms and lack the ironic indicators that are prevalent in her earlier pieces.

³⁵ It's also noteworthy that Shelton didn't publish poems in any other periodical.

combated the anti-feminist rhetoric that was rampant during her lifetime. For this reason, irony provides her an ideal tool for distributing arguments pushing for equal rights. However, in her earlier works, the double meaning available in ironic juxtaposition allows Shelton to critique the social hierarchy without alienating the portion of her audience that may not agree with her views. In its perfected form, irony functions as a mirror, revealing to us the things that we don't desire to openly acknowledge about ourselves. The same way that Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* to inspire shame for the superiority the English felt towards the Irish, I believe Shelton seeks to surprise attack those that would devalue women's abilities on the basis of socially constructed norms.

Likewise, the ironic stance allows Shelton to fabricate a position of authority for herself. Under the veil of irony, Shelton constructs the narrator as the one who *knows* more than the audience. This persona befits a specific trope that scholars have described as the moral exemplar. In "Types of American Womanhood," David S. Reynolds says "The female moral exemplar became a chief means of reconstructing moral value in a world of devalued, immoral males."³⁶ In the articles I've chosen, I will show how Shelton sets the stage for situational irony to occur. Many times she uses genre as a way that could potentially surprise her audience into adopting her point of view. Some stories appear to be typical love stories, but Shelton manipulates the convention in ways that actually reveal women's subordinated status. Other times, humor allows her to engage in serious social critique of gender norms that devalue women, and

³⁶ Reynolds, David S. "Types of American Womanhood," in *Beneath the American Renaissance : The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 342.

although her tone appears to be that of lighthearted banter, it nevertheless reveals situations of prejudice and injustice that would appeal to a nineteenth-century audience's sense of duty.

Many scholars have acknowledged the power that sentimentalist works maintain in providing similar feminist critiques of the period. However, one problematic aspect of sentimentalism is that it often paints the woman as a victim, and thus reinforces the stereotype that women are weak. Shelton bypasses this consequence with the use of irony. Even though she sets up scenes that reveal women's vulnerability under the current political system, none of her characters are the typical weak victims one sees in the sentimental fiction. Likewise, her comical tone allows her to emasculate men in a way that is both flirtatious and non-abrasive. By studying these works, we may grasp a better understanding of the scope of feminist rhetoric that permeated nineteenth-century print culture, and perhaps gain a more holistic account of the influence that written works had in reshaping cultural attitudes to support the advancement of first-wave feminism.

WHO IS KESIAH SHELTON?

While making rhetorical claims based on authorial intent is tricky, many times an author's private and public identities are helpful in determining a work's possible meanings.³⁷ Unfortunately, beyond Shelton's publication history, there is little that can be said about her with any certainty. While it appears that, like many other female authors, Shelton used a pseudonym, there is evidence in her works that tells us a bit about who she may have been, which may aid in our interpretation of her rhetoric.³⁸ Likewise, this background provides the contextual information needed to see how Shelton cultivates an insider audience. First, like many of her articles, *Our Peggotties* is set in New England. In her "prefix" (preface), Shelton offers a "Yankee apology for its [the book's] shortcomings"³⁹ and the narrator of the story declares in the first chapter that she has "the hereditary instinct of a New Englander."⁴⁰ A number of Shelton's articles also reference geological details and local histories of Rhode Island that suggest that it may have been her home state.

³⁷ For this project I will primarily be using Shelton's novella *Our Peggotties* as an entry point to talk about how her rhetoric works. However, I will also rely heavily on her periodical contributions for making claims about possible intentions.

³⁸ Census data records have no record of a "Kesiah Shelton" living in the northeast, and all records of that name do not fit the relative birth and death dates, or the demographics.

³⁹ Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

Her multiple references to local culture and landmarks appear to be a common trait in her writing and suggest that she views herself as talking to an insider audience, which is another aspect of her rhetorical style that is a central component for ironic discourse to be successful, specifically among an audience that shares her cultural context. In “Traces of the Past in Rhode Island,” Shelton appropriates the collective “we” in her descriptions of local history and geological features.⁴¹ In the short love story “Pinafore and Cupid,” Shelton’s protagonist describes in specific detail certain aspects of the historical environmental setting that is likely an extension of Shelton’s own insider knowledge of the culture that she is an active participant in. The main character proclaims that she has seen a particular production of a play a number of times performed “by the ‘regulars’ at the ‘Sans-Souci.’”⁴² According to George Owen Willard in *The History of the Providence Stage, 1762-1891*, “The Sans Souci Garden [...] was first opened as a concert garden in June, 1878” showing that Shelton is most likely drawing from real life places and events to build her settings, even though the story itself is most likely fictitious.⁴³ Likewise, this story centers around the comic opera *H.M.S. Pinafore* that Willard declares “was produced for quite a ‘run,’” suggesting that the popularity that the main protagonist describes may have been, an actual cultural phenomenon that occurred a few months before Shelton wrote this short

⁴¹ Shelton, Kesiah. “Traces of the Past in Rhode Island” *Potter’s American Monthly (1875-1882)* 14, no. 99 (March 1880): 183, ProQuest.

⁴² Shelton, Kesiah. “Pinafore and Cupid.” *Potter’s American Monthly (1875-1882)* 13, no. 96 (Dec 1879): 450, ProQuest.

⁴³ Willard, George O. *History of the Providence Stage, 1761-1891*. (Providence: Rhode Island News Company, 1891): 274.

story.⁴⁴ Likewise, the main character in the story goes on to describe how she desires to see the production at the Park Garden where the play is “really acted upon a man-o-war,” which mirrors Willard’s description.⁴⁵ As Willard notes, a famous feature of Park Garden was “A ship rigged like a man-o-war, the deck of which was 110 feet in length, was built in the center of the lake, and upon its deck the opera was sung every night.”⁴⁶ The intricate detail Shelton provides about the park suggests that Shelton herself may have visited the park and it’s probable that she had even seen the play herself, considering its popularity. Thus, the detailed references to the play indicates that Shelton it as a source of cultural capital to foster an insider audience.

Tone is another indicator that Shelton has a very specific audience in mind. In “Traces of the Past in Rhode Island,” Shelton appropriates the collective “we” when referencing the local landscape of Rhode Island and employs a tone of nostalgia when describing the setting:

We were once again in the happy days of childhood, wandering along the green banks of quiet, placid Abbott’s Run, in the northeastern portion of this state; we remember how, when watching the sun glinting upon its still bosom, we would fancy that we saw the scene enacted that gave the stream its suggestive name.⁴⁷

Using the pronoun “we,” Shelton not only signals to the reader that she is a member of this community, but she also draws readers into her narrative and invites them into the shared experience of the scene. Readers familiar with the local history that she is recounting are no doubt filled with the comfort of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Shelton, “Pinafore and Cupid,” 450.

⁴⁶ Willard, *History of the Providence Stage*, 275.

⁴⁷ Shelton, “Traces of the Past in Rhode Island,” 183.

familiarity and solidified as a member in the discourse community that the text is geared toward.

This use of “we” is one of many methods Shelton uses to cultivate the persona of an author speaking to an insider audience. In the beginning of this article, Shelton pokes fun at the “listless fashionables at our chief watering place” who brag about their “puerile attempts” to capture some remnant of the past by taking up the hobby of foxhunting.⁴⁸ Not only does her casual lighthearted tone give the impression of a one-sided conversation among friends, but Shelton often speaks to her reader with a tone of superiority that is both flirtatious and gossipy. This chatty characteristic is central to Shelton’s feminist rhetoric, in that her writing is recognizable and accessible to a female middle-class audience. Yet, this also allows her to provide critiques of patriarchal norms that fit within expectations of female discourse. While this strategy may appear to belittle the importance of any feminist message, this same tone of lighthearted banter permits Shelton to provide a serious critique that is amplified through ironic juxtaposition.

However, it must be noted that the air of superiority present in her works reveals a potential flaw in Shelton’s progressiveness as it pertains to modern conceptions of feminist rhetoric because it is exclusive and only appeals to a white middle-class audience. The narrator of *Our Peggotties* laments, “We could do nothing, however, with the ordinary class of help” when speaking about whom she might hire for her housemaid reveals hints of elitism that are a typical symptom of nineteenth-century bourgeois value systems.⁴⁹ Likewise, throughout

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 12-3.

the series of “Peggotties” that come and go (playfully named after the loyal housekeeper in the Dickens classic *David Copperfield*), the ones that she portrays negatively are always women who fail to conform to classist standards in regards to the way they dress or behave in specific social circumstances. However, this also serves to establish Shelton as a voice of authority. By speaking about a common middle-class “problem,” Shelton aligns herself as a voice of authority among an audience that is familiar with the same middle-class dilemmas.

However, she uses these bourgeois value systems to speak to an insider audience, which allows her to provide implicit critiques the gender norms of the period. She does so by providing relatable “heroines” who both subscribe to gendered expectations of women, while also providing models for subversion. These heroines in Shelton’s stories often fit a particular mold, exemplifying the typical characteristics of what historians call the “new woman.” In “Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement,” Susan Cruea describes the changing roles in ideology of the nineteenth-century womanhood, mapping the overlapping transition as “True Womanhood transformed into Real Womanhood, then Public Womanhood, and finally the New Woman.”⁵⁰ Cruea notes how this transition came about as a backlash to the gendered bourgeois norms of “the nonproductive matron” as a status symbol for male wealth.⁵¹ Cruea explains how the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood laid the foundation for women to recognize the arbitrary boundaries dictating their economic dependence on men. Not only did the ideology of true womanhood

⁵⁰ Cruea, S. M. “Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement.” *ATQ* 19, no. 3 (2005): 187-204.

⁵¹ Cruea, “Changing Ideals,” 188.

paint women as morally superior to men, but due to changing economic and cultural necessities that occurred after the Civil War, this ideal clashed with reality in a number of ways that made it an unrealistic goal. As Crucea notes “Even middle-class girls raised to be idle and submissive found themselves overwhelmed when it came to managing household duties as wives and mothers. Massive economic changes in America also made arranging a desirable marriage difficult.”⁵² Likewise, after women entered the workforce to fill the vacant positions during the Civil War, “True Womanhood” gave way to “Real Womanhood,” which “permitted women a minor degree of independence, and stressed economic self-sufficiency as a means of survival.”⁵³ During this period there became a shift in the purpose of educating women to include teaching them to “attract the right kind of man.”⁵⁴ As women gained more access to the public sphere, “public womanhood” made an appearance as women began to voice their moral superiority through religious activity which eventually developed into first-wave feminist activism as women sought to address the problems they faced in American society. Crucea notes how the New Woman emerged in response to the failure of former feminine ideal types to address the needs of women:

Participants in this phase of the Woman Movement were interested in gaining greater access to education, employment, and economic and civic rights, and in changing expectations concerning personal behavior. They believed that gender, no more than race, should determine human rights or a person's sphere of living.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 190.

⁵³ Ibid., 191.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 199.

In *A History of American Magazines*, Frank Luther Mott describes how since the 1850s, periodicals increasingly began to take up what is commonly referred to as the “Woman Question,” noting that “It appears to have three chief phases: (1) the question of ‘female education’; (2) the matter of women’s activities outside the home circle; and (3) that scandalous movement for dress reform.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the women’s issues that Shelton takes up are not revolutionary by even nineteenth century standards. However, the ways she critiques the social issues provide us an account of how female authors used irony to navigate potentially hostile territory. Shelton appears to subscribe to these same ideals, but with a degree of caution. As I will reveal in the analyses of Shelton’s works in the following sections, Shelton makes implicit arguments for female independence that challenge the traditional roles of women. However, irony provides her a means for arguing for alternative modes of female existence. As Cruea notes:

The New Woman, however, by completely abandoning the role of wife and mother, had gone too far for much of the public. While Real Womanhood and Public Womanhood permitted women to work outside the home in cases of necessity or to benefit the public good, a woman's primary concern was still expected to be the well being of her family, physically and spiritually.⁵⁷

Therefore, while we do see Shelton appearing to conform to these social expectations of women, I will argue that this is merely a ruse for her to make a more advanced argument concerning women’s autonomy. She uses these social norms as a medium for appealing to a broader audience that shares these social values; however, her ironic commentary becomes recognizable to an insider

⁵⁶ Mott, Frank Luther. *A History of American Magazines*, v.2. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938): 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

audience that begins to recognize the hypocrisy presented in the ironic juxtaposition between domestic ideology and the reality of female experience. Likewise, the moral superiority described by Cruea as a central characteristic of “womanhood,” similarly provides Shelton a platform for her own feminist superiority that not only offers a stage for ironic juxtaposition, but grants her authority to criticize social norms that she deems unnecessary and that serve to limit female autonomy.

Lastly, there is a unique aspect to Shelton that also offers a possible look at how she utilizes aspects of her real-life identity to cater to an American audience. Shelton often draws from ideals of American exceptionalism to appeal to others who subscribe to the same Ben Franklinesque notion that “anyone with the will can succeed.” This idealism is evident in the fact that her characters prevail regardless of their own unique obstacles. Both in *Our Peggotties* and in one of her articles, Shelton alludes to a mysterious ailment that may suggest that she was disabled. In the article “In Mine Attic,” an advice column on the necessity of staying busy throughout the winter, Shelton refers to being confined to an “invalid’s chair.”⁵⁸ However, rather than using it as a sentimental device, Shelton uses it to showcase her own perseverance and how being confined supplied her the time to cultivate her talent:

The pen always possessed a magical attraction for me, but circumstances forbade my yielding to the passion—there was *no time*. In my chair the time was found; *there* has been written serials, sketches, letters, and book-reviews—thousands of pages! What if the publishers never guessed that those welcome packages were opened on the foot-board of an invalid’s

⁵⁸ Shelton, Kesiah. “In Mine Attic,” *Arthur's Home Magazine (1880-1897)* 51, no. 1, (Jan 1883): B59. ProQuest.

chair? It did not matter whether the hand was weak that wrote if the reviews were strong.⁵⁹

This aspect of her identity also appeals to those that identify with the virtues of the Protestant work ethic that is ingrained in American identity. In this article she goes on to warn her audience against idleness and says “Few are the hands or heads so weak but they can busy at something” and advises her readers “never to be idle except when pain filled the time.”⁶⁰

Shelton rarely refers to her characters as weak despite this mysterious ailment. In *Our Peggotties*, she only references the disability as a way of critiquing other women’s judgment of her and the story often portrays her fighting through the pain in order to fulfill her duties. This reveals a trait of female strength and determination that she illustrates in many of her female characters. In this way, Shelton is able to use these ideals of American exceptionalism, specifically its faith in meritocracy and the virtues of the Protestant work ethic, not only to cultivate herself as a figure of authority, but is also able to do this in ways that defy gendered expectations that define women as weak, fragile individuals.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Shelton, “In Mine Attic,” B59.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ One major limitation of American exceptionalism that must be noted is that it reinforces the myth of meritocracy and glosses over the fact that the social mobility is not equally available to all. While this aspect of her rhetoric is problematic in its inability to take up the cause of other marginalized voices, for the purpose of brevity, these aspects will not be taken up in any length throughout this paper.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF MATRIARCHAL POWER

The dedication page in *Our Peggotties* (pictured below) is every bit as ambiguous as the woman who

authored it.⁶² Considering the

repressive patriarchal structure of

the era and the fact that Shelton

appears to be referencing a

commonality in female experience, one might initially interpreted this condition

she refers to as “THE SITUATION” as an indication of feminist frustration that

would reflect the precarious position that women occupied during the nineteenth

century. However, the reader is quickly made aware in the “prefix”(preface) that

this “SITUATION” actually refers to a petty bourgeois complaint, commonly

referenced in nineteenth century literature as “the servant problem,” in which

mistresses had trouble finding and keeping “good” help. However, a closer

reading of the text as a whole reveals that neither feminist woe nor bourgeois

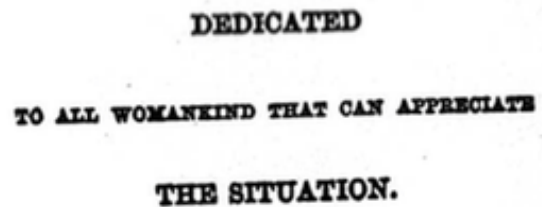
complaint can encompass “THE SITUATION,” but rather a combination of the

two that I don’t even think the author herself could disentangle. This condition is

a response to a number of intersecting variables affected by social constructions

of class, gender, ethnicity, and race that were all in a state of flux during this

period. Likewise, the way Shelton attempts to demonstrate this predicament is



DEDICATED
TO ALL WOMANKIND THAT CAN APPRECIATE
THE SITUATION.

Figure 2

⁶² Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 7.

often made evident through ironic juxtaposition that results from the uneven balance of power that occurs in the home, what ideally would be her authoritative realm dictated by the ideology of separate spheres. While her rhetoric can be criticized for illustrating her own white privilege and her blind faith in the myth of meritocracy, her work is still telling of how middle-class white women navigated these paradigms, and even used them to elevate their own status and construct alternative identities that challenged gender norms of the period. While her lack of intersectional awareness is obviously problematic for the way that she further marginalizes women who don't fit classist and racist standards, her texts nevertheless gives us insight on how middle-class white women participated in influencing shifting social standards concerning the role of women was very useful in promoting progress in the feminist movement.

We get our first glimpse of a gendered power struggle in the opening chapter of *Our Peggotties*. Shelton begins by illustrating the narrator, Kesiah's, reluctance about hiring help because she believes they would be more trouble than they are worth.⁶³ While Kesiah herself would prefer to board rather than hire someone, her husband refuses to "relinquish the comforts of a home" and insists despite his wife's continued requests.⁶⁴ As Cruea notes, the home is a primary status symbol for men's wealth, so his refusal "to board" could very well indicate his unwillingness to sacrifice social prestige:

An upper-class woman's primary function was to "display... her husband's wealth," for "idleness ... had become a status symbol" (191). Meanwhile,

⁶³ While it appears that the narrator of the story is Shelton herself, and that the story is autobiographical, when referring to the narrator in the novel, I will use her first name Kesiah. I hope that this will deter confusion when I'm speaking of Shelton the author.

⁶⁴ Shelton, *Peggotties*, 12.

middle-class women's purpose was to "elevate the status of [their] families]" through "setting 'proper' standards of behavior, dress, and literary tastes" (190). Materialism was at the heart of this ideal as women were expected to dedicate themselves to "the ladylike consumption of luxury goods."⁶⁵

Shelton makes it appear that Kesiah subscribes to the same materialistic values as she describes her cottage as “neatly and tastefully furnished, each room proudly displaying its pretty if not expensive carpet,”⁶⁶ as well as her “shelves and brackets, freely adorned with bric-a-brac too precious for constant exhibition.”⁶⁷ However, these descriptions provide Shelton the contextual stage to set up a parody of the necessity of domestic help:

With what feelings of exultation did I enter upon even the most menial duties! For was it not my very own? Did I not hourly realize that my new furniture was being robbed of its pristine freshness by the vandal hands of reckless servants? My silver could now be freely used without fear that it might be utterly ruined, lost or stolen each week. The food was properly cooked and well served on glossy, white, uncracked, and ungrazed dishes. When the “dinner things” were washed, and the dining-room brushed up, I could take a book or my work into the sunny parlor, and leave my care behind me in the kitchen realms to be taken up again at the proper time; or, better *that*, could have “my afternoon out” without asking Bridget’s permission! For it is to *that* we have come as a nation—the servant’s *rule*⁶⁸.

Kesiah’s “feelings of exultation” while performing her household duties displays the virtues of “true womanhood,” thus creating a bond with an audience that subscribes to the same bourgeois value systems. However, due to her mysterious ailment, she must rely on domestic help to maintain the home. Therefore, throughout this narrative, Kesiah goes on to describe her trials and tribulations

⁶⁵ Cruea, “Changing Ideas,” 189.

⁶⁶ Shelton, *Peggotties*, 10

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 10.

with six domestic servants *he* employs despite her objections, each of whom she condescendingly renames Peggotty in sarcastic reference to Dickens's character in *David Copperfield*. Dickens's Peggotty represents the ideal servant due to her loyalty and selflessness. Of the six domestic servants, only one lives up to this playful moniker, creating a satirical representation of "bad" servants and a comical depiction of the plight of the nineteenth-century housewife. While the failure of each servant to rise to Shelton's unrealistic expectations may seem trivial, the power struggle that occurs among Shelton, these housemaids, and her husband becomes a catalyst for her to demonstrate her own powerlessness in the one sphere over which she is supposed to hold authority.

The allusion to the home as a monarchy is a common trope in nineteenth-century discourse and a central characteristic of True Womanhood. Cruea describes how women are rulers over the household as a way of projecting social prestige: "A True Woman's role within this ideology [The Cult of True Womanhood] was to serve as 'Queen' over her household, which was supposed to reflect her husband's wealth and success, and to prepare her children to continue the husband's legacy of success."⁶⁹ Kesiah performs a type of role reversal of this trope in order to fabricate a scene of irony that illustrates her own powerlessness, suggesting that America has become a nation where "the servants rule,"⁷⁰ sarcastically distinguishing each Peggotty with a regnal number and invoking terms associated with royalty such as "coronation," "successor," and "reign" for a

⁶⁹ Cruea, "Changing Ideas," 189-90.

⁷⁰ Shelton, *Peggotties*, 10.

metaphoric comic effect.⁷¹ Kesiah's "Peggotties" contradict many assumptions about domestic labor during this period.⁷² Considering that female domestics were expected to conform to the expectations of female propriety demanded by the cult of domesticity, adding the fact that they depended on wages for their livelihood, an employer such as Kesiah might expect them to perform a subordinated role. However, her servants are not only defiant, but at many times outwardly insubordinate despite their mistress's claims to benevolence. By showcasing the ways that other women practice more autonomy than the matriarch herself possessed, even in her own home, Kesiah is able to fully realize her own oppression and thus Shelton is able to illustrate double standard evident in the ideology of separate spheres.

The ironic scene that Shelton constructs reveals that female frustration did not merely arise from the pressures of patriarchy, but also within a competition between women vying for a better position in a fluctuating social structure. In "The Domestic Balance of Power: Relations between Mistress and Maid in Nineteenth-Century New England" Carol Lasser discusses how the so-called "servant problem" came about in response to shifting economic and social structures, and how the emerging class of servants utilized the shortage in the labor market as a way to negotiate "at least limited autonomy" in the oppressive relationship between maid and mistress.⁷³ Lasser maps this transgression through

⁷¹ Ibid, 51.

⁷² Since all of the Peggotties share the same name, I will be adopting Shelton's use of regnal numbers to distinguish between each of them. However, while Shelton always spells out each Peggotty's number, I will sometimes use roman numerals in the interest of saving space.

⁷³ Lasser, Carol. "The Domestic Balance of Power: Relations between Mistress and Maid in Nineteenth-Century New England." *Labor History* 28, no. 1 (1987): 7.

the nineteenth century. Lasser begins by remarking how at the beginning of the century, domestic service retained a more personal, reciprocal nature in American society. Farm girls from neighboring families occupied roles as “helps” in return for training in housewifery and supplemental income. As industrialization began to change the marketplace, rural families struggled and increasingly both sons and daughters migrated to urban areas in search of employment. The increasing demand for unskilled laborers opened the door to women in the workplace. Further, by the 1840s, the economy balanced out and a large urban middle-class had been established, and due to a decline in American birthrates, there were fewer American women to fill these roles demanded by the growing labor market. As we see in “Peggotty the First’s” parting words: “She stated that she had no complaint whatever to make, but she thought she would ‘try that place a few weeks. Maybe I shall not stay long, but shall go out to sewing for a while, and see if I like that. I do not wish to settle down until I know what will suit me best.’”⁷⁴ This Peggotty’s self-perceived autonomy is unmistakable in her desire to try out the multiple options she recognizes that are available to her. This increasing demand for domestic workers is illustrated throughout the text by the numerous outside employment requests some of the Peggotties receive while working for Shelton. Within just one week of employment Peggotty I is visited by a gentleman who offers her employment “to go as a nurse and a housekeeper for an old lady that was nearly bedridden.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Peggotty III receives two letters from a bachelor “Peter Prue” in request of a housemaid, in which he not only offers

⁷⁴ Shelton, *Peggotties*, 24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

“good pai [sic],” but lists out the benefits of working in his household in hopes of drawing her into his employment.⁷⁶

Much of the didacticism of the era sought to address this imbalance of power by prescribing the female virtue of the matriarch as the solution. In *Love, Wages, Slavery: The Literature of Servitude in the United States*, Barbara Ryan analyzes the trend in sentimental literature where domestic help is treated like "family" as a response to an anxiety caused by shifting social conditions in domestic service that occurred after the civil war.⁷⁷ Ryan argues that “later nineteenth-century advice literature interlaced intricately with changing notions of served and serving roles.”⁷⁸ Ryan identifies ambiguity in these texts about the specific nature of these familial contracts and states that “the ideal of family-like service implied an orderliness and stability that were vitally attractive to ‘privileged’ Americans uncomfortable with the exigencies of a rank/gender status most would not have relinquished for the world.”⁷⁹ Similarly, in "The Business of Housekeeping: The Mistress, the Domestic Worker, and the Construction of Class," Laurie Ousley reveals how the rise of capitalism and the middle class impacted the relationship between the mistress and her domestic workers, transforming an idealistic democratic stage of equals to a struggle of power based on status.⁸⁰ Using Catharine Beecher’s *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* and

⁷⁶ Ibid, 45.

⁷⁷ Ryan, Barbara. *Love, Wages, Slavery: The Literature of Servitude in the United States*. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁷⁸ Ryan, *Love, Wages, Slavery*, 12

⁷⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁰ Ousley, Laurie. "The Business of Housekeeping: The Mistress, the Domestic Worker, and the Construction of Class." *Legacy* 23, No. 2 (2006): 132-147

Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Live And Let Live*, Ousley discusses the ways in which Americans mistakenly interpreted these relationships as a return to aristocratic value systems rather than the resulting alienation that wage relationships promotes. For this reason, authors such as Beecher and Sedgwick prescribed democratic ideology to remedy the class struggle that was occurring in the home. According to this system, mutual dependence is meant to keep things in balance. The worker will be a good worker due to her dependence on wages and the employer, who will in turn remain honest in order to keep good workers.

Shelton represents her protagonist as the ideal employer, following many of the recommendations of Beecher and Sedgwick, and this is one of the ways she maintains her supposed superiority to her workers. She doesn't commit any of the crimes of egregious exploitation sketched out in sentimental novels such as Sedgwick's *Live and Let Live*. Likewise, we see Kesiah applying many of Sedgwick's and Beecher's principles throughout the text. She not only supplies anticipated wages and only requires "the light duties"⁸¹ of the household in return, but also provides favorable living quarters, which Peggotty II exclaims are "as pretty as a parlor."⁸² Kesiah also appears to follow Beecher's model of an ideal housewife in attempting to treat her help as "one of the family." In her chapter "On the Care of Domestic," Beecher writes:

In some cases, this instability and love of change would be remedied, if employers would take more pains to make a residence with them agreeable; and to attach domestics to the family, by feelings of gratitude and affection. There are ladies, even where well-qualified domestics are most rare, who seldom find any trouble in keeping good and steady ones.

⁸¹ Shelton, *Peggotties*, 18

⁸² *Ibid*, 25.

And the reason is, that their domestics know they cannot better their condition, by any change within reach. It is not merely, by giving them comfortable rooms, and good food, and presents, and privileges, that the attachment of domestics is secured; it is by the manifestation of a friendly and benevolent interest in their comfort and improvement.⁸³

In applying the ideology of maternal benevolence to the role of the housewife in treatment of their workers, Beecher not only creates the necessity to treat employees with respect and dignity, but she attempts to redefine the emerging economic relationship in familial terms. However, with this self-perceived benevolence, there is an implicit assumption of reciprocation in which the housewife expects the servant's voluntary submission into a subordinate role in the hierarchy of the family. This belief is not only sustained by the capitalist ideology of contract theory, but also heavily grounded in ideals of domesticity. Ousley defines this tactic as "maternalist capitalism" which is a method that "both honors and subverts the ideal of the contract."⁸⁴ On the one hand the maternal aspect ensures that the employer respect the worker's autonomy due to the basic principles of an ideal familial relationship. However, at the same time, this tactic circumvents the contract due to its reliance on an alternative method of authority not grounded in the concept of supply and demand. In the end, the hierarchy of a family is still a structured relationship of power and I think that domestic workers began to reject this relationship because they were beginning to recognize it as a guerrilla tactic to get them to submit to their will. As Lasser points out:

Kindness and reciprocity often cloaked the locus of power in the caretaker relationship; benevolent mistresses defined the care to be taken, imposing it upon the object of benevolence. In the name of charity and uplift,

⁸³ Beecher, Catharine Esther (1850) *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*. (New York: Source Book Press, 1970): 206-207

⁸⁴ Ousley, "The Business of Housekeeping", 141.

mistresses had waged unconscious and unintentional wars of “cultural imperialism” upon their maids, struggling to win the hearts and minds of their employees, assuming both sides could establish a unity of interests.⁸⁵

When workers did not keep up their end of the “bargain,” housewives interpreted this as the worker’s failure rather than a justified expression of autonomy. This conflict creates division based on difference in cultural value systems in which the housewife fails to recognize how these values were more advantageous to those in a position of privilege than those such as her domestic workers in want of the same privileges. This resonates as the multiple accounts of perceived victimization of the part of the housewife that surfaced in nineteenth-century literature, and serves to discourage any feminist solidarity from occurring as each party in this power structure is divided in their singular quests for autonomy.

However, Shelton’s uses this “maternal capitalism” as a contextual element to set up ironic juxtapositions that critique gendered social norms by creating a scene where a mistress employs all the prescribed tactics, yet still fails to maintain the power necessary to succeed, revealing that this female power is a mythical fantasy. Shelton illustrates how the rhetoric of the matriarch isn’t sufficient for running a household because it presumes that the worker will faithfully submit to a position of subordination. While each Peggotty touts the same central demand, “to be treated as one of the family,” it becomes clear that each is uncomfortable with the idea of occupying the subordinated status of the child. For example, Peggotty I only shows contentment if her employer is working at her side, but when Kesiah turns to leave her on her own, Peggotty’s

⁸⁵ Lasser, “The Domestic Balance of Power...”, 20.

“sour visage” returns.⁸⁶ Likewise, Kesiah appears ambivalent about her dominant role:

[...] my attention was distracted from his conversation to the sour looks of dissatisfaction that were darted from those glittering grey eyes through the open door at us as “Peggotty” passed back and forth, from the dining room to the kitchen, intent upon her clearing up “duties.” These looks said as plainly as words to me, “Why don’t you come and ‘wipe’ the dishes? (a true new Englander never ‘dries’ but always ‘wipes’ the dish); I am as good as you are; I did not come here as a *servant*.”⁸⁷

While the reader may initially assume that Kesiah’s interpretation might just be in her imagination, perhaps due to her discomfort with her dominant role, her uneasiness becomes justified when the girl joins them in the sitting room after finishing her duties and accusingly remarks to Kesiah who is “tying worsted for lamp-mats”: “Then you are able to do fancy work; I didn’t know as you done *anything*’ with the most perfect sneer imaginable.”⁸⁸

However, the audience is well aware that Kesiah is not lazy as Peggotty suggests. Kesiah’s response that “such work is light and easy, and takes my attention from myself somewhat,” hints that she is working the mysterious ailment that Shelton alludes to throughout the text. In the beginning, Kesiah is hesitant about hiring help because she believes they would be more trouble than they are worth, but resolves that it is a necessary consequence of her faltering health.⁸⁹ In chapter three, the narrator laments the difficulty of managing the house on her own, but resigns: “But the flesh is weak while the spirit is strong,

⁸⁶ Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 19.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

⁸⁸ *Ibid* 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

and bow to fate I must.”⁹⁰ Likewise, in chapter four, there’s the appearance of a family doctor that visits often enough to cultivate a romantic relationship with Peggotty IV. However, the narrator’s illness is never explicitly described; instead, it is always looming in the background and only referred to when absolutely necessary.

One problematic aspect of revealing how women are powerless under the system of patriarchy is that Shelton could possibly reinforce the gendered norm of women *as* powerless individuals. Likewise, it would appear that Kesiah’s disability could serve the same purpose. However, while many authors of the period, including Fanny Fern, utilized sentimental depictions of women in precarious positions to form feminist arguments, Shelton refrains from using Kesiah’s disability to cultivate empathy from her audience. Instead, Shelton uses this predicament to highlight Kesiah’s perseverance in ways that not only depict her as a model of physical and emotional strength, but also serves to fuel her indignation, which becomes a key component in the ironic scenes she cultivates. While the irony is evident in Kesiah’s ability to embody an inherent contradiction to social norms that would define her as weak, this irony becomes compounded throughout the story. So while it may indeed be ironic that Kesiah, a disabled woman, performs a strength and determination that is usually reserved for men, as the ironic scene unfolds to illustrate Kesiah’s position of power in respect to her husband depicts a polemical argument against the disempowerment of women based on biological determinism.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

EMASCULATING MASCULINITY

Throughout the story, Kesiah begins to realize that despite her self-supposed superiority over her domestic help, she in fact possesses less autonomy than her servants. This becomes especially evident in her relationship with her husband as she illustrates an interesting aspect of female experience that contradicts the tenets of the cult of domesticity. In *The Bonds of Womanhood*, Nancy F. Cott describes women's role as "to be wives and mothers, to nurture and maintain their families, to provide religious example and inspiration, and to affect the world around them by exercising private moral influence."⁹¹ This moral duty began to take on the traits of a vocation in response to the separation between work and home, and didactic literature continued to emphasize the virtues of the home sphere in comparison to the evils of the sphere of the working world. However, as is evident in *Our Peggotties*, the irony of her predicament is exaggerated by her inability to perform this role in the shadow of her husband's socially prescribed superiority. Shelton further exploits this hypocrisy by infantilizing and emasculating the male characters who would supposedly be her intellectual and biological superiors.

Cott, Nancy F. *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*. (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1977): 8.

Despite Kesiah's repeated requests to board rather than hire help after things don't turn out with each of the Peggotties (as she has foreseen), her husband not only ignores her appeals, but also often dismisses her opinions about the nature of the situation she occupies. With Peggotty I (as well as with the others), Shelton insinuates that there is a potential problem brewing due to the elevated status Peggotty I occupies. However, he immediately dismisses this allegation: "What nonsense. Of course she expects to do the work. She was hired for that. She only stipulated that she should be treated like one of the family. The work she knows she must do."⁹² However, beginning a trend we see developing in her experiences with the rest of the Peggotties, he soon is made to realize that his wife was right all along. When Peggotty I willfully refuses to arise in time to tend to breakfast for multiple days despite their explicit instructions, an awkward triangular power struggle is catalyzed that the narrative never fully resolves.

On the first morning that Peggotty neglects her duties, the husband awakens Shelton, expecting her to make breakfast rather than imposing on the servant. Kesiah suggests that he call Peggotty instead, since that's what they hired her for after all; but her husband responds, "Oh! I do not wish to do that; she might not like it,"⁹³ revealing a comically emasculated male figure, too scared to bother a female servant; thus, like most men, he impositions his wife with the dirty work. Kesiah then rises to the task, assuming that this was a one-time mistake and that Peggotty would surely "not be impertinent enough to repeat it."⁹⁴ However, Peggotty continues this act of passive resistance for the remainder of

⁹² Ibid, 16.

⁹³ Ibid, 18.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 19.

her weeklong employment, and when Shelton attempts to discuss this and other insolent behavior with her husband, he dismisses it as “girlish bashfulness” that would wear away with time and suggests that his wife “will soon learn how to *manage* her.”⁹⁵ Readers are made aware of the protagonist’s precarious position within this power structure. Her husband not only puts the needs of the housemaid before those of his own wife, but also assigns to her all responsibility of managing the help despite her evident lack of power to do so. She expresses her awareness of the hypocrisy of her situation explicitly when Peggotty II too fails to rise to perform the breakfast duties on her first morning of employment. After he attempts, yet again, to rouse *her* instead of the help to do the breakfast duties, Kesiah launches into a witty line of questioning:

“My dear, what do we pay ‘Peggotty’?”

With a look of surprise he answered, “Why?—three dollars a week.”

“And allow her every Sunday to go to her sister’s, and each afternoon to sew for herself, or go out unless I am sick (always provided, of course, that she does the ‘housework’ *first*—which she can do easily), do we not?”

“Yes.”

“When I was somewhat stronger than now, though far from well, did I not do the same, and in addition to all the *making* and the mending?”

“Yes”

“How much would you have thought I ought to have been allowed for spending money, in consideration thereof—twelve dollars a month?”⁹⁶

While Shelton obviously uses this logic to leverage power in her favor, there is a clear recognition that she has been undervalued in her own her role as housewife

⁹⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 28.

that is made more clearly evident by the presence of the maid in the hierarchy. Likewise, Shelton's witty retort not only devalues her spouse as the intellectually superior of the two, but also elevates her own status in the realm of women's work.

This is not the only instance in which Shelton uses irony to highlight her frustration with the devaluation of women's work. In the article "Cyn," Shelton illustrates a picture all too familiar to the nineteenth-century audience of a "chimney-corner lawyer" lounging by the fire discussing his take on the current political climate.⁹⁷ Armed with a hint of bitter cynicism, Shelton strategically employs italics when referring to how "*he* would philosophically sit and toast his feet before the crackling fire and dreamily watch *her* as she was rapidly rounding doughnuts and dropping them continuously into the smoking fat,"⁹⁸ not only highlighting the differences in gendered expectations within the home, but also revealing how women were not only capable of discussing politics, but able to do so while also balancing the responsibilities of a housewife: "And she, without neglecting her work for a moment, or allowing a single particle of hot fat to drip upon the floor, would not only listen, but join in the discussion, throwing in many a shrewd suggestion."⁹⁹ This scene not only reevaluates so-called "women's work," painting a picture of skill that is normally lost in the happy narratives of women at work in the kitchen, but she does this in a way that shows women's ability to balance multiple tasks with a dexterity in a way that highlights the irony

⁹⁷ Shelton, Kesiah. Shelton, Keziah. "Cyn: Glimpse I-VIII." *Potter's American Monthly (1875-1882)* 16, no. 111 (March 1881): 226, ProQuest.

⁹⁸ Shelton, "Cyn," 226.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

of the “strong” man lounging while his wife works away.

As Hutcheon notes, “Operating almost as a form of guerilla warfare, irony is said to work to change how people interpret.”¹⁰⁰ Authors such as Shelton use the ironic scene to “recode” what is accepted and internalized through social norms, “And it is often the transideological nature of irony itself that is exploited in order to recode into positive terms what patriarchal discourse reads as negative.”¹⁰¹ This is achieved in two ways, first, through the juxtaposition of reality (the reality of female experience) with the ideological expectations of feminine delicacy and the conflict this entails, and second, through Shelton’s own ironic deference. What I mean by ironic deference is that Shelton continually paints herself as a passive observer of this conflict, using a lighthearted tone and comical style to downplay her own investment in the dilemma at hand. However, this stance itself is ironic because within it Shelton is “posing” as one thing, while arguing for the opposite such as in the several cases she showcases Kesiah deferring to her husband’s insistence on hiring help despite the fact that she knows that it will be more trouble than it’s worth.

In her article “Widows. Ferns. and Romance.” Shelton similarly emasculates the male characters.¹⁰² This story is an account of a small group of people vacationing at a country boarding house where two of the characters fall for each other, Dr. Melbone and Grace. At first glance, this would appear to be a typical romance where two people are brought together by some unforeseen

¹⁰⁰ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Shelton, Kesiah. “Widows, Ferns, and Romance.” *Potter’s American Monthly (1875-1882)* 14, no. 101 (May 1880): 141, ProQuest.

tragedy. However, Shelton's use of comedy and her sarcastic undertones reveal a much deeper critique of the social construction of gender. Shelton sets up a scene of chivalry in Dr. Melbone's treatment of the widow, but does so with a mocking tone, alluding to his dutiful attentiveness to the widow's every whim:

With us now all was sunny; the doctor gallantly cared for the widow on all our excursions. If we geologized, he faithfully chipped and hammered each rock that struck her fancy; if we botanized, his middle-agedness appeared no obstacle to his clambering up to all sorts of impossible heights, or down to dusky depths to assist in adding to our list of hard-to-get-at-able plants.¹⁰³

Although she uses the term "gallant" in the beginning, the "clambering" "middle-agedness" that she alludes to illustrates the comical depiction of a man trying to act like something he is not. This scene even relays a childish quality in the doctor that is both emasculating and infantilizing.

Likewise, the following lines to this parody of male chivalry provide the keystone for the ironic scene that Shelton devises:

If piscatorially inclined, he patiently wormed her hooks, though it must be acknowledged that he did join with the other horrid men in laughing at the idea of a strong-minded, politically- inclined female, requiring one of the sterner sex to stand at her elbow to arrange her bait so that she could catch a fish. He thought her vaunted independence but an empty boast.¹⁰⁴

After this, while Shelton contends that the women catch the fish unaided, the men still poke fun at them stating that they must have sympathy for the fish, considering the emotional nature of women. Then, when the women refute, he

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

changes his story stating “that woman never had any mercy upon her game.”¹⁰⁵

While much of this comes across as typical playful banter, it does nevertheless highlight the fact that women can’t win when attempting to assert their independence. Even when they challenge social conventions, showing their ability to perform “manly” tasks without performing the typical weak traits of femininity, they are chastised for being heartless.

However, lighthearted sarcasm directed at the women for attempting to perform “unfeminine” tasks becomes inverted back onto the men as Shelton creates uses irony to create a stable political argument in the events that follow. In the next chapter we find that on this excursion the couples are collecting plants, and that Grace finds a cluster of ferns that were just out of her reach. Again, the doctor ridicules her democratic notion of gender equality stating “I thought a woman could do anything a man could do; how is that? You have failed: I will succeed.”¹⁰⁶ However, when the doctor “clammers” to fetch the ferns for her, he slips and we are led to believe that he has injured himself quite severely: “as he turned triumphantly to return, his foot suddenly sank through, and without a moan he lay as still as death.”¹⁰⁷ However, Shelton uses this opportunity to highlight the inner strength of women in the face of tragedy: “Grace for a moment nearly fainted; then, like a woman, was calm and ready for any emergency.”¹⁰⁸ Cruea notes how tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood defined women with two seemingly oppositional virtues: “Ironically, while a True Woman was assumed to

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

be a pillar of moral strength and virtue, she was also portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting and illness. She dared not exert herself too much physically or be emotionally startled for fear of her health.”¹⁰⁹ Shelton recognizes this same irony, and plays with this opposition in order to challenge these gender stereotypes regarding women, setting up the emblematic scene where someone may presume that a woman in distress would typically faint at the prospect of her lover’s injury, but instead rises to the occasion. Likewise, she further emphasizes women’s strength by stating “like a woman,” explicitly redefining what it is to be a woman in a way that still fits within the ideological system thanks to the opposing virtue of women as a pillar of strength.

The situational irony is fully realized when it takes the entire party, including the “three weak women,” to form a stretcher and carry the doctor out of the woods.¹¹⁰ After they carry the doctor to safety and he receives medical attention for his sprained ankle, the widow nurses him back to help for the remainder of the vacation, and they end up getting engaged. The story concludes with the narrator stating that she intends to send a painting of ferns to them for their wedding gift. The painting can serve as a subtle reminder for the doctor’s folly in devaluing the ability of women. Not only did the women challenge the men’s assertions about their weakness by providing the physical strength to carry the doctor to safety, but the fact that Grace nursed him back to health illustrates male dependency on women’s nurturing characteristic.

¹⁰⁹ Cruea, “Changing Ideals,” 189.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

THE MENACE OF MATRIMONY

Despite the fact that “Widows, Ferns, and Romance.” ends in the expected “happy ending” of matrimony, it also demonstrates a signature way that Shelton conforms to social expectations of the genre without “fully” conforming. The fact that fern serves as an implicit reminder of *who* is really dependent on *whom*, showing male dependence on women rather than the reverse, thus setting the stage for Shelton’s critique of the necessity of the institution marriage. Her earliest known article, “Pinafore and Cupid,” highlights her ambivalence toward marriage as a social norm for women to conform to in the interest of both economic and social stability.¹¹¹ Upon first look, this appears to be a quaint love story recounting the events leading up to a couple’s engagement, but a closer reading reveals the ways that Shelton uses everyday subject matter for arranging a scene of irony in a way that critiques women’s precarious position in the patriarchal hierarchy of nineteenth-century society. This story opens in the midst of a discussion between a mother and daughter, Kate, who are working together sewing aprons and dresses for the daughter’s four younger siblings. Kate chides her mother for having so many children, eight girls of which she is the middle child. After calling her mother absurd, Kate laments, “The idea, eight daughters in one family, and in the years to come eight old maids,” revealing her own anxiety

¹¹¹ Shelton, Kesiah. “Pinafore and Cupid.” *Potter's American Monthly (1875-1882)* 13, no. 96 (Dec 1879): 450-2, ProQuest.

about her ability to secure a man, and thus establish stability in her own future.¹¹² The reader might well expect that the mother's response to echo ambivalence similar to the daughter's. However, the mother responds by coolly noting that finding a man may not be a woman's best answer to solving all her woes:

Perhaps so, dear; At least I pray that nothing worse than being respected old maids will ever be the portion of my girls. The fate of many a married woman is such that she has many temptations to envy the happy, contented 'old maids;' and the woman who has 'a husband to support her' is much to be pitied.¹¹³

Kate relaxes at this and continues to go about her work, singing "Yes, I know that is so," a refrain from the popular song "Things Are Seldom What They Seem," that premiered in the comic opera *H. M. S. Pinafore* which debuted during this time period and was a wild success. Kate wishes for a man, thinking it will buy her happiness, but mother reminds her that just as the song in the play suggests, things are not always what they seem; "happily" married women are rarely happy, and the stigma of a "miserable" old spinster is inaccurate.

Kate then changes the subject to the opera, telling her mother how much she would love to see *H. M. S. Pinafore* again and her mother wittily responds "I thought a very few moments ago that pinafores for four were a great trial for you?" referring to the aprons they were sewing for Kate's four younger sisters.¹¹⁴ The mother's witty retort is not only an example of how Shelton's use of wit

¹¹² Shelton, "Pinafore and Cupid," 451.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

creates aesthetic pleasure for the reader, in her connection of the play to the pinafores they are sewing, but also serves to create an authoritative character worthy of the audience's respect. Using the rarely challenged aphorism of "mother knows best" Shelton creates a feminine persona that possesses an intellect. When it came to domestic matters, women were able to openly practice these traits, although we rarely see them employed outside the home. However, Shelton uses this authority to build an implicit argument for an unconventional lifestyle, one not governed by a male authority figure: spinsterhood.

Kate then laughs at her mother's joke and then cleverly responds again in song, "Yes I know, that is so."¹¹⁵ Kate continues to press her mother to allow her to see a current production of the opera playing that evening, but her mother responds that the only way she can go, is if she has an escort to accompany her, and suggests that her father could go with her. Here is the first case of situational irony that truly begins to create a tension that is meant to critique social conventions that inherently disempower women. On the one hand, the mother warns her daughter that married life isn't necessarily the key to happiness. On the other, we see how the lack of a male partner is already limiting this girl's ability to do what she wants. This turning point is central to the reading of the rest of the story.

As Kate remarks how her father doesn't like to go out, the reader is compelled to think about the fact that while the father is not readily available for her now, he most certainly won't be available as her chaperone for the rest of her

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

life. Kate is then forced to concede to the norm, stating “I wish I had a beau, then I could go as other girls do.”¹¹⁶ Kate clearly isn’t interested in having a partner for love; she just wants one for pragmatic reasons, for the freedom that having a spouse would provide her. Although her mother is shocked by her daughter’s “immodest speech” and criticizes her to tears, Kate defiantly supports her statement claiming that “It’s true, anyhow, if it isn’t modest.”¹¹⁷ This again shows how social convention prevented women from voicing their concerns. Kate is not only stuck in a position where she can’t leave the house unless accompanied by an approved chaperone, but she is even unable to voice her discontent with the situation. This scene shows how social expectations of “modesty” served to silence women. However, at this moment, the dilemma is solved when Kate’s friend enters the room invites her to go to the play, begging her mother’s permission to take her. However, while this resolution has a way of relieving the tension created by Shelton, this scene creates an uncertainty as the remainder of the story unfolds.

The scene then shifts to the evening of the play, and we find out that Kate has been secretly set up on a blind date with Edgar Raleigh, the best man of Kate’s friend who we learn is engaged at this point. Despite her friend’s well-meant intentions, the reader is well aware that Kate is not romantically interested in Edgar. In fact she doesn’t appear to have any interest in men at all; she only desires to be with someone so she can “go as other girls,” and unlike other girls, “she was not one that saw a possible or probable lover in every shadow that

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

crossed her pathway.”¹¹⁸ Likewise, Shelton illustrates Edgar’s character with an air of ambiguity. “Edgar Raleigh was as courteous to Kate as his (probable) ancestor would have been; though, as yet there were no mud-puddles in Shirley and Reeve’s well-ordered paths, his gallantry was not tested to extent.”¹¹⁹

Shelton’s sarcasm is subtle but evident as she cautiously pokes fun at chivalry in order to further highlight Kate’s precarious position. Edgar appears to come from a station of privilege, as revealed in the mentioning of his “probable” ancestors. But after all, just like the theme of the play they are viewing, things aren’t always what they seem.

The story closes by noting that Cupid’s plan to pair the two was a success and we find out that there will be a double wedding come Christmas. However, Shelton’s added commentary is what sets this aside from a typical love story when she notes the precariousness of Kate’s decision to go to the play and get trapped in cupid’s “nets of airy lightness, yet of strength untold.”¹²⁰ Shelton leaves the reader further unsettled with this so-called happy ending by stating “We hope Kate will never regret that she did see and hear the realistic Pinafore” which is ultimately the cause of her intended marriage. Shelton goes on to say “Until then (Kate’s wedding) without a doubt she will enjoy the pleasure of having someone ‘to go with,’ and afterwards, too, we will hope, though with little precedent for such faith.” Here Shelton is fairly explicit in suggesting that the marriage will fail to bring Kate the happiness she seeks. By recalling Kate’s wish

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 492.

to have someone “to go with” we are reminded of the ironic tension that occurred in the beginning of the story, the irony that the liberty Kate seeks, which would allow her to “go out like other girls,” is actually only provided through the prison of matrimony. This ambiguity is further amplified by Shelton’s use of the word “hope” twice. After implicitly noting that marriage doesn’t equate to happiness through the authority figure of the mother, and her cautious advice to her daughter, Shelton achieves a bitter cautionary tone, and when she uses hope the second time, and even goes so far as to state that we have “little precedent for such faith,” thus the audience is destabilized by the ending due to her use of verbal irony, rather than comforted by it.

ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Shelton appears to offer alternative solutions that imagine new forms of identity for both women and men. Of all of Shelton's works, "Cyn" is by far the most progressive in imagining alternative modes of identity that explicitly challenge the gender norms of the period. Shelton juxtaposes two female characters who were born on the same day in order to explore issues of "Women's Rights," while also making an argument for a reevaluation of cultural norms that require women to marry. While this story does retain some of the conventional tropes of the sentimentalist writing of the nineteenth-century, Shelton also at many times breaks this traditional mold in a way that opens new spheres for gender diversity.

Glimpse I opens the tale with the arrival of a "good old slow country doctor" and the birth of a child named Cyn in the Hathaway household.¹²¹ Immediately, Shelton juxtaposes this "tiny bit of femininity" with another child born the same morning to "equally poor and humble parents."¹²² While it is evident that the first child is beloved by her parents the second is subject to less admirable circumstances:

This child found a swarm of brothers and sisters in full possession of the house and the hearts of its parents, and was merely looked upon as another

¹²¹ Shelton, "Cyn," 225.

¹²² *Ibid.*

baby. For a long time, indeed, it was of so little consequence that it was not even thought necessary to call it anything but it, or baby.¹²³

Shelton further marks the second child as a member of a lower social class by using vernacular speech that contrasts the proper tone of the doctor: “When asked its name, the answer was invariably, ‘Name? La sakes, taint got any; dunno, but ‘suppose we’ll have to think up sunthing or other afore spring.’”¹²⁴ The conventional doctor that delivered the second child takes this opportunity to argue on the issue of “Women’s Rights,” “declaring vehemently that it was all a mistake; that women were growing discontented with their normal sphere; that it would be just as sensible for a man to howl because he had to plant and hoe instead of staying within doors and sitting down by the kitchen-table to chop hash for supper.”¹²⁵ This reveals a central component frustrating the progress of the women’s rights movement; since “women’s work” was undervalued, which the doctor makes clear by suggesting the husband “take a rocking-chair into the field to sit in,” women’s position in society was deemed privileged enough to justify unequal rights.¹²⁶ This was a common tactic used against more explicit activists in the feminist movement. As Mott notes, “The comic papers satirized the suffrage movement unmercifully.”¹²⁷ Much of the language employed illustrated suffragists as whiners or belittled their activism by satirically portraying them as geese or hens. Shelton similarly illustrates the “sneering faces of the disgusted old women” as they debated the old doctor on the issue of “women’s rights.”

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Mott, *A History of American Magazine* V.3, 91.

¹²⁸However, by appearing to take a “non-stance” on the issue, Shelton disarms her reader in order to prime them for her argument that she makes through the ironic juxtaposition of the two girls.

The following Glimpse begins to develop the character of each girl in opposition to one another, setting up Cyn as the vain “queenly daughter,” and “Baby” as her “mother’s right hand.”¹²⁹ It is here that we begin to see Shelton illustrate how gender norms promote the opposite of what they are set out to achieve. It was commonly thought that girls should be sheltered from the outside sphere and placed on a pedestal to retain their morality. In Cyn’s case, her parents shielded her from all hardship as they toiled to provide for her a life that suited the ideal conditions for raising a girl. However, this pampered life promoted by essentialist assumptions of women as weak conversely fosters the growth of a shallow, materialistic character that is a stark contrast to the image of woman as pure and homely when raised in her proper sphere. Likewise, Shelton argues against the necessity of marriage for security through Cyn’s unstable relationship history. She marries each of her husbands for wealth rather than for love. The first dies a drunk. The second marries her for love, but she leaves him and blackmails him for alimony until he dies of a broken heart. Her third husband marries her for the same reason she marries him, for the prospect of wealth, so we get a dose of poetic justice.

Conversely, the other daughter, Barbara “Baby” Bell, does not fit the traditional mold of femininity. Unlike Cyn, Baby was raised to take care of

¹²⁸ Shelton, “Cyn,” 226.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

herself independently and was even allowed to seek out other “subjects worthy of study.”¹³⁰ She grows up to become self-sufficient and lives an unconventional lifestyle. Although she never marries, it is clear to the audience that she leads a far more fulfilling life than Cyn. In this way, Shelton provides a positive image of woman in a non-normative role. Likewise, Shelton further challenges conventional gender roles with Baby’s brother George, who “hated farming, and loved birds, feathers, and flowers,” and thus becomes a man-milliner.¹³¹ But despite his success and happiness in this profession, his own father was ashamed of him. His assertion that “I’d rather he’d chopped wood all of his life” reveals just how absurd gender norms are that would influence a parent to prefer their child toil in hardship their whole life rather than be successful and happy earning an “income thrice of any farmer.”¹³² By revealing the absurdity of the situation Shelton not only provides a progressive argument for how gender norms repress men as well as women, but also illustrates alternative modes of existence that challenges gendered stereotypes.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

ELITIST LIMITATIONS

Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who “get” it and those who don’t, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its “victims.”

Linda Hutcheon –Irony’s Edge

There are several limitations to irony as a political rhetoric; aside from its reliance on the reader’s ability to “get it,” and the potential to downplay the seriousness of the issues taken up through the use of humor, there is an apparent smugness that many have noted as a central component to the ironic stance. As the quote suggests above, this has an affective limitation in its exclusionary nature. However, throughout this section I will limit my discussion to explore whom Shelton excludes and why.¹³³ While this aspect exposes the problematic nature of irony, it also will reveal the ways in which Shelton’s irony is dependent on the availability of the “outsiderness” of a marginalized other in order for her to appeal to her class-based insider audience. As Hutcheon notes, “Historically, Western discourses about irony have been divided in their judgements and their explanations of irony’s intention and impact; they have been split between models of seduction and aggression, between views of its inclusivity and its exclusivity,

¹³³ Many have taken up a problematic aspect of the use of art for political rhetoric, stating that in making something beautiful, you downplay the seriousness of the issue at hand. Similarly, the capricious nature of humor is an obvious concern considering the potential for catharsis. However, since we have no concrete way to evaluate this aspect of affect, I will contain this discussion to the more prominent concerns of elitism that are evident in our interpretation of the text that relates to more reliable details of cultural context of the period.

between ideas about de-fusion (and diffusion) and about violent denotation of effects and affect.”¹³⁴ However, as she notes, this is what creates “that rather pointed edge” that is an essential characteristic of irony. Thus, taking up the exploration of irony from one side limits our understanding of how it functions. In the end, the nature of irony isn’t evident in any of these characteristics independently; it is rather the combination of them that create the “discursive edge” that makes it so unique in comparison to other rhetorical strategies.

However, Shelton most likely didn’t recognize her own elitism, and quite possibly saw herself as an advocate for the lower classes. For example, in “Cyn,” she paints a lower-class character in a positive light in relation to the higher-classed antagonist. At the same time, it must be noted that most of Shelton’s works reflect the integral role of white privilege in her feminist fantasy of equality. Of course, the autonomy that the servants perform in *Our Peggotties* was only available to white women. Southern domestic servants, especially women of color, faced a far more challenging set of obstacles following the Civil War. Thus, it is important to note that racism and discrimination are obviously present in this narrative, and Shelton’s refusal to hire anyone from “the ordinary class of help” limits our discussion of her understanding of female oppression to white lower to middle-class working women.¹³⁵ However, by confining the scope in this way, this text allows us to discuss class relations in more detail as it pertains in the Northeast in a way that recognizes that at this time in American history, there did not exist one homogenous class of servants.

¹³⁴ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 39.

¹³⁵ Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 13.

Likewise, another problematic element in the interpretation of Shelton's irony evident in *Our Peggotties* is the implication that Kesiah is better than her employees. However, some of her attitude of self-superiority stems from clashes in cultural differences that relate to ethnicity. In *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930*, authors Margaret Lynch-Brennan and Maureen O'Rourke Murphy describe a shortage of servants that occurred during the period affected both America and Great Britain, and how many Americans cited the influx of Irish immigrants as the cause of the lack of quality in service:

American's looked longingly back to an imagined golden age of service, before the advent of Irish to America when servants were faithful family retainers known for their skill, loyalty, and long tenure with the family. To no avail, they urged that Irish servants be replaced with native-born American girls.¹³⁶

Shelton's character reflects a similar type of ethnocentrism throughout the text. When she first considers getting a servant, she is clearly under the same assumption that a native-born girl would be most suitable in her initial desire for "a nice American woman."¹³⁷ In fact, of all the Peggotties that Shelton employs, only one is of "Scotch-Irish Descent," and the fact that this girl is "a Protestant and a church member" likely diminishes some of Shelton's prejudice by curtailing the anti-Catholic sentiment that characterized discrimination against Irish Americans in the period.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Lynch-Brennan, Margaret, and Maureen O'Rourke Murphy. *The Irish Bridget : Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930*. (New York: Syracuse University Press. 2014): 80.

¹³⁷ Shelton, *Our Peggotties*, 13.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

Lynch-Brennan and Murphy lay out several factors related to cultural differences shaping Americans' negative views of Irish domestic servants. Firstly, most Irish immigrants were ill prepared to care for middleclass American homes. While Irish homes demanded an equal amount of labor to maintain, the type of domestic work required of the inhabitants was entirely different. Their homes consisted of dirt floors, didn't have indoor plumbing, and had a fireplace instead of a stove. For this reason, Irish women not only learned to clean in entirely different environments, but due to their limited diets, they didn't have very much experience cooking American cuisine. For this reason Americans simply assumed that they were stupid.¹³⁹ Secondly, Irish women were also drastically different from the submissive ideal of women supplied by the cult of true womanhood ideology. Despite the similar "patriarchal nature of Irish society" Irish women were given "a certain broader latitude, in terms of acceptable female behavior."¹⁴⁰ Moreover, as Lynch-Brennan and Murphy point out "it is likely the most spirited and ambitious of Irish women who came to America."¹⁴¹ We see this assertiveness in the beginning of the novel when Shelton recalls a conversation with a friend in search of help at what she refers to as a "(non) intelligence office." After the girl is presented she obstinately begins to question the employer about the working conditions while thwarting the employer's attempt to gain any insight as to her qualifications. The girl reveals her assertiveness by asking "her how large a family have ye, mum?" and enquiring about whether the rooms were carpeted and whether or not she could "have a well furnished room all to myself?"

¹³⁹ Lynch-Brennan, Margaret, *Irish Bridget*, 2-12.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid* 35.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid* 71.

After this “the ‘gurr!’ dropped an impudent curtsy, saying, ‘I don’t think ye’ll suit me at, all mum!’”¹⁴² Thus, while this autonomy could provide a model for American women to adopt in their own search for equality, the stark cultural differences limit Shelton’s ability to embrace a similar assertiveness. However, it is also this “outsiderness” that provides Shelton the ironic stage for Kesiah’s precarious position in her own home, as well as the means for communicating a common experience to the insiders in Shelton’s discourse community (i.e., other women with the same bourgeois complaint about “the servant problem”).

Likewise, similar to other lamenting housewives of the period, Shelton finds little reprieve by avoiding the “ordinary class of help” and sticking to “American women.” Thus, Shelton’s elitist stance is also staged upon classism as well as ethnocentrism. Kesiah’s “American” Peggotties prove to be every bit as obstinate (if not more) as their Irish counterparts. Viewing themselves as equals to their mistress sets the stage for class conflict as each Peggotty and Kesiah gauge their own status in relation to the other. As noted in the previous sections, this is central to Shelton’s ironic stage that reveals her limited power in the domestic sphere in relation to her husband. However, through this conflict, we also see Shelton implicitly suggest that the character flaws she observes in the Peggotties could be remedied with the correct upbringing, one teaches women to view men with a an added degree of suspicion rather than blindly accepting men as their ultimate savior and protector as taught through the norms of the Cult of Domesticity.”

¹⁴² Shelton, *Peggotties*, 11.

While Shelton often downgrades the other Peggotties through trivial means such as criticizing their choice of clothing, she often appears to be mainly concerned with their gullibility when it comes to relationships with men. We find out that Peggotty II is torn between two lovers: one has moved away and she hasn't heard from him, and the other dotes on her but she's not really interested. Yet she dangles him along just in case the first falls through. Kesiah relays that she is "disgusted with this simpleton's folly and wickedness" but becomes further shocked when she produces a letter from a third suitor, signed "Black Moustache," who she met on the train and sought out her address to tell her he looked forward to seeing her again.¹⁴³ Of course, this method of courting is viewed as scandalous by nineteenth-century conventions, so after trying to explain the dangers of consorting with men on trains, Kesiah becomes amused with the girl's "idiocy."¹⁴⁴ Of course this would appear to complicate our perception of Kesiah as a "moral exemplar," and the fact that her audience would share similar values in the belief that girl occupies a lower class status allows Kesiah to criticize the Peggotties openly. Likewise, Kesiah's attempts to teach Peggotty supplies her a stance of benevolence.

Shelton uses these Peggotties to show the limitations of confining women's education to domestic knowledge. In this way, Shelton uses the servants' devalued class status to make arguments for the necessity of education. She makes his argument mainly through her positioning of the ideal Peggotty in the middle of the story in juxtaposition with the other Peggotties. Peggotty IV

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

represents Shelton's ideal woman. The fact that she is educated and witty illustrates Shelton's respect for her and suggests that Shelton believes that education is key to uplifting women from their subordinated status. Likewise, in many of Shelton's periodicals, she notes explicitly that her heroines are educated.¹⁴⁵ However, this too is closely associated with middle-class standards and is balanced upon other hierarchies of oppression. In *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*, Louise Michele Newman describes how "women's rights arose simultaneously with the spread of evolutionist ideas about racial development, sexual difference, and social progress."¹⁴⁶ As Newman argues "it was evolutionist theories that made possible new social and political roles for white women as 'civilizers' of the race, strengthening longstanding beliefs in (white) women's moral superiority" (23). So even though, Shelton does leave a glimmer of hope for the status of women to find a higher station in the social hierarchy, it still relies upon the adoption of middle-class value systems that were embedded in ideas of racism.

¹⁴⁵ This is evident in "Cyn-Glimpse V," "She [Mrs. Bell] had interfere very rarely with Baby's school-hours" (6). Likewise, in "The June Box," the protagonist Mabel "is the best scholar in the district" (2).

¹⁴⁶ Newman, Louise Michele. *White Women's Rights : The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 22.

CONCLUSION

Shelton's works echo an ambivalent political consciousness that circulated during the second half of the nineteenth century. As recent women's studies scholars and historians have noted, many accounts of this period not only draw their assumptions primarily from political writers, but also often imagine the movement with a very stagnant progression. The former accounts constructed to describe first-wave feminism often follow a common linear narrative, beginning with the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 and culminating with the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920. However, this narrative has not only fixed suffrage as the primary goal of first wave feminism, but it also oversimplifies the range of female interests that emerged during this period. Recent revisions have sought to complicate this model. In *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U. S. Feminism*, Nancy Hewitt critiques the wave model for its false implication that feminism is a forward progressing motion, mainly because it privileges dominant value systems that often reflect elitist and racist ideologies.¹⁴⁷ However, new approaches seek to reveal ways of teaching early feminist movements that complicate simplified explanations that fail to take into account the vast number of conflicts that occurred. Hewitt calls for a revision of

¹⁴⁷ Hewitt, Nancy A. *No Permanent Waves : Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

the wave model to resemble more closely the non-linear and non-uniformity of radio waves:

Radio waves allow us to think about movements that grow louder and fade out, that reach vast audiences across oceans or only a few listeners in a local area; movements that are marked by static interruption or frequent changes of channels, and movements temporarily drowned out by another frequency but then suddenly come in loud and clear.¹⁴⁸

This model is useful for reconstructing alternative narratives at play within the dominant discourse. It allows us to see that while some forms of subtle rhetoric get drowned out by more explicit prominent voices, we can recover the ways that other arguments (pro and anti-feminist) were dispersed, reshaping cultural attitudes toward gender. I believe that in understanding the ways that Shelton's irony conforms to and subverts typical gender norms will not only complicate our notions of feminist rhetoric, but also provide a broader understanding of female identity that contradicts the stereotypes inherent in the typical sentimental heroines. Nineteenth-century women were not only just as witty as men, but perhaps even more so considering their ability to sneak attack the patriarchy under their watchful eye. While their efforts may seem trivial in respect to 20th century feminist rights movements that demanded change through more direct discourses, I believe that irony was a necessary component for the seeds of those arguments to first be heard.

While we may not be able to pinpoint the exact role that reading Shelton's articles had in the lives of women exposed to her work, we can still hypothesize about the impact of works similar to hers. Likewise, by studying authors like her

¹⁴⁸ Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*, 8.

we may be able to uncover characteristics of female authorship. While studying popular authors such as Fanny Fern is indeed extremely beneficial to the field of feminist studies, I believe that studying writers such as Shelton can provide a more holistic account of how first-wave feminism surfaced in mainstream media. Like many other writers of the period, Shelton pushed for a gradual change in the roles of women, and subtly pushed for a move away from the domestic sphere into a more independent role that would be gained through education and the push for self-employment. Under the scrutinizing eye of patriarchy, Shelton obviously could never be too vocal about her political views, or else she wouldn't be published. For this reason, Shelton's feminist critiques of nineteenth-century culture may seem conservative especially by today's standards. However, the rhetorical devices that she and writers like her developed reveal the ways that female authors innovated their literary style to communicate subversive ideas under a veil of submission.

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