



PROJECT MUSE®

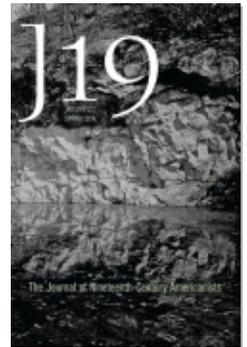
“Her Little Maid Mandy”: The Abolitionist Slave Owner
and the Rhetoric of Affection in the Life and Early Fiction
of E. D. E. N. Southworth

Paul Christian Jones

J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, Volume 2, Number
1, Spring 2014, pp. 53-82 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2014.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/541629>

“Her Little Maid Mandy”: The Abolitionist
Slave Owner and the Rhetoric of
Affection in the Life and Early Fiction of
E. D. E. N. Southworth

Paul Christian Jones

Ohio University

In August 1850, the *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter* ran a paragraph on the novelist E. D. E. N. Southworth:

She was born, raised, and now is, a slaveholder—as completely dependent upon servants for her domestic comforts as any other Southern lady. Amanda her laughing-faced, supple-limbed “maid of all work,” is a young girl of about eighteen, and the property of Mrs. S’s sister while her mother and an undivided interest in several others of the family, belong to Mrs. Southworth. She is evidently a most indulgent mistress, and thinks it is not in her power legally to free her slaves—or in fact to live without them if they were free. Amanda looks after Miss Emma, makes purchases and settles accounts—dresses the children and scolds them too, very much as if she were special guardian of the household.¹

This unsigned piece, likely written by *Visiter* editor Jane Grey Swisshelm, who had, months earlier, been a house guest in Southworth’s Washington, DC, residence, must have surprised readers of the *National Era*, the abolitionist journal where Southworth’s serialized fiction, some of which explicitly denounces slavery and argues for its abolition, had been appearing since 1847.² Though Swisshelm might not have all of her details correct, recently discovered documentary evidence, presented for the first time in this essay, confirms much of what she claims here,

including her assertions that a slave resided in Southworth's household and that Southworth herself owned one or more slaves. This revelation of Southworth's status as a slave mistress will necessarily complicate the already vexed scholarly understanding of the author's positions on slavery and its abolition but can also explain some of the ambivalences apparent in her work addressing these subjects. This essay recovers Southworth's personal status as a slave owner to argue that an awareness of this status can elucidate a reader's understanding of her fiction for the *Era*, fiction that has often puzzled critics with its intertwining of abolitionist assertions of slavery's injustice and immorality with rather sentimental depictions of slave-owning. I will argue that this ambiguous message emerges out of Southworth's own conflicted thinking about her moral obligations as the owner of human property, a conflict that her fiction may ultimately aid her in resolving as it leads her to the conviction of her need to manumit her slaves.

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars have been puzzled about how Southworth's positions about slavery should be categorized, about whether she personally was an abolitionist or an apologist for slavery, and about whether her popular serials, often set on slave-holding plantations, reflect her own principles or stand in opposition to them. Regis Boyle, among the earliest scholars to explore Southworth's writing, noted that she was "avowedly anti-slavery in feeling" but admitted that "this feeling is decidedly not apparent in all of her works," some of which seem to be "favorable towards the institution." Boyle reconciles this conflict by considering it an attempt at balance on Southworth's part, to reveal "the unfavorable as well as the favorable aspects of slavery."³ While the literary histories written in the previous century often grouped Southworth's fiction with the genre of proslavery plantation novels, other scholars, especially in the decades since the feminist recovery of Southworth's work, have followed Boyle and pursued varying explanations for the incongruity between her statements in support of abolition and the often romanticized depictions of interactions between master and slaves in her serials. The Southworth emerging from this recent critical discussion remains all over the map, spanning from Janet Gabler-Hover's depiction of her as "in the camp of antebellum proslavery apologetics" to my own previous presentation of her as a "strong abolitionist" whose novels present "explicit and implicit arguments urging the dismantling of the slave system."⁴

Participants in this debate, myself included, have tended to declare one or the other facet of Southworth's depiction of slavery—either her abolitionist expressions or her sentimental depictions of plantation life—as insincere, as a strategic pose. For example, Gillian Silverman, while acknowledging the fact of Southworth's employment by the *Era*, calls “Southworth's own record on abolition . . . sketchy,” insisting that Southworth “was little interested in the subjugation of slaves.” Similarly, Julie Husband, though solidly in the abolitionist school of Southworth scholars, notes that the author “used the antislavery press as a stepping stone into literary fame,” as she “learn[ed] how to play into emerging discourse on race and gender without inspiring the public revolt that even a talented propagandist like Lydia Maria Child did.” And, I previously argued that her depictions of benign slave owners and contented slaves were part of a strategy “to shape a fiction that . . . might be palatable to southern slave-holding readers while still maintaining an abolitionist argument.”⁵ These assertions assume that Southworth was either false in her antislavery expressions, making them in order to gain the career advantage of publishing in the *Era*, or in her sentimental depictions of slave-owning, using them as a strategy to deceive slave owners into reading abolitionist fiction. More recently, Christopher Looby has suggested that scholars are mistaken to read either aspect of Southworth's treatment of slavery, at least in her novels for the *New York Ledger*, as reflection of her personal convictions, since the “brilliantly opportunistic” Southworth “carefully tailored” her work to serve the *Ledger*'s “political nonpartisanship and antisectionalism.”⁶ This essay proposes that we might resolve this conflict differently by seeing both of these disparate elements as sincere. Through an exploration of Southworth's life in slavery and her early texts about the issue, we can observe an author capable of intellectually understanding the injustice of slavery and the moral conviction that it must be abolished at the same time as she feels tempted to cast it in a largely benevolent light that avoids demonizing slaveholders, who are similar to people with whom she has relationships, and perhaps similar even to herself.

Jeffery Clymer's recent discussion of Southworth's writing about slavery is particularly helpful in this exploration, though he finds little benefit to the effort to label her. In his reading of Southworth's “plantation heiress fiction,” he concludes that “Southworth's fiction . . . is compelling for the history of race and family in the nineteenth century

precisely because she takes seriously the Southern rhetoric of interracial familylike affection between slaves and owners.”⁷ Clymer’s observation that Southworth found it valuable for her readers to consider this affectionate rhetoric about slavery is a useful entry into understanding her abolitionist fiction, which often vacillates between denunciations and seeming defenses of slave owners. Indeed, the ambiguity reflected in Clymer’s own phrasing, that Southworth “takes seriously” this rhetoric, suggests one of my arguments, that not only did she insist that this rhetoric’s role in the institution must be understood by its critics but also that she herself, to some extent, believes in the characterization of slavery as a mutually affectionate relationship. This essay explores Southworth’s tendency to drift into descriptions of the institution that have been read as proslavery apologetics even while she attempts to produce antislavery fiction, to argue that these rhetorics could and did co-exist within discussions of slavery. My argument is broken into three sections: (1) a recovery of Southworth’s personal background within the institution of slavery up to and during the time she wrote for the *Era* and her predilection for the characterization of it as an essentially affectionate bond; (2) an exploration of how her antislavery fiction for the *Era* both critiques slave owners for their attachment to this affectionate view as ultimately dangerous to the welfare of the slaves and demonstrates Southworth’s own temptation to embrace this view; and (3) an examination of an 1854 dispute between Southworth and her family over a slave to illustrate that she seemed to learn the lessons of her own fiction, as she sets aside the sentimental view of slavery and asserts a more realistic understanding of the slave’s status as property and her own responsibilities as an antislavery slave owner.

Mandy: Southworth’s Personal Experience of Slavery

To begin to understand this complicated position Southworth assumed, where abolitionism and apologetics coexist, it is important to recover as accurately as possible the circumstances of Southworth’s life in slavery, something that has been absent from the previous critical discussion. For the most part, scholars have simply asserted that Southworth was born into a family with proslavery sentiments and that she emerged from this milieu with (either radical or lukewarm) antislavery opinions; no scholar has yet explored what Southworth’s experience with slavery entailed or considered how it might influence our reading of her fiction. As she recollected in 1890, “I had been familiar with the institution from infancy, as my forefathers and foremothers had been

for generations.”⁸ Indeed, slavery was part of her life from her birth in 1819, and members of her immediate family circle, including her grandmother, Dorothy Wailes; her father, Charles LeCompte Nevitt, who died in 1823; her mother Susannah Wailes Nevitt Henshaw; and her stepfather Joshua Henshaw, owned slaves before her birth and throughout her childhood.⁹ Southworth’s family’s ownership of slaves continued until 1862 when President Lincoln signed the bill abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia; during this process Mrs. Henshaw applied for compensation for the emancipation of three slaves, and Southworth herself served as witness to her mother’s ownership of these slaves as well as to her Union loyalties.¹⁰

The only accounts that Southworth provides of her childhood among slaves concern those owned by her grandmother, “a Maryland gentlewoman of the old school.”¹¹ These accounts feature elements that appear in Southworth’s later depictions of the institution as it is largely shown as a relationship of mutual affection between slaves and masters, and often the language used obscures the actual nature of the relationship between property and owner. In these accounts, Southworth avoids describing Wailes’s human property explicitly as slaves. For example, the biographical sketch included in *The Haunted Homestead* (1860) portrays her relationship with “Uncle Biggs,” “a faithful old family servant, who had followed Mrs. Wailes from St. Mary’s to Washington, and remained attached to the family in the united capacity of gardener, coachman, wood-chopper, marketer—in a word, man of all work, or rather *gentleman of all avocations*” (32–33). Notably, Southworth’s account erases all signs of the bondage and enforced servitude of slavery in favor of the romanticized notion that Biggs “faithful[ly] . . . followed” and “remained attached” to her grandmother. Southworth’s characterization of Biggs’s “devotion” to his mistress is consistent with Southern use of affectionate rhetoric to “cover over the coercive element of slave labor”; as Janet Gabler-Hover notes, “Maintaining that blacks were part of the extended plantation family . . . masked the underlying economic oppression.”¹² The depiction of Biggs’s affection for his owner extends to his interactions with her grandchildren; one scene casts him as a “spiritual instructor” who takes a five-year-old Southworth and her younger sister upon his knees, “amus[ing] the children for hours by telling ghost stories” with “his arm around each little form, and each little head pillowed against his kind breast.” Biggs, a “ghost-seer,” claims to hold “frequent communion with the visible spirits of the departed” and professes “to see and speak with the spirit of [Southworth’s]

father.” This tableau suggests a shared affection that becomes familial as Biggs acts as a father-substitute channeling Southworth’s actual father from the grave.

The avoidance of the term “slave” in these recollections has led readers to misunderstand or ignore Southworth’s immersion in slave-owning household economies. This confusion, produced by her use of affectionate discourse to describe the dynamics of slavery, extends even to our understanding of her own household as an adult, which has not previously been labeled a slave-owning household by any scholar. However, new evidence now makes clear that Southworth’s household, when she was a single mother deserted by her husband and left to raise two small children on her meager schoolteacher’s wages in the middle to late 1840s, and even as she began her employment with the *National Era* in 1847, was indeed a slave-holding one. In 1834, Wailes filed a document in the office of land records in the District of Columbia, dictating how her property should be distributed following her death. Wailes left most of her estate, including three slaves, to her granddaughters, Emma and Charlotte, noting that “the Plate is to be equally divided between my two grand Daughters, the small slave Carolina to be given to Emma E. Nevitt, Amanda and Lenn to Charlotte L. Nevitt absolutely.”¹³ The slaves mentioned here were the children of Cassy Taylor, who had been Wailes’s property since 1833.

In 1844, Southworth returned to Washington from Wisconsin, where she had been living with her husband since 1841, was soon deserted by him, and gave birth to her daughter, whom Southworth named Charlotte after her sister. Before or after the birth of this daughter, Wailes sent her slave Amanda (“Mandy”), a twelve-year-old girl who would eventually become Southworth’s sister’s property, to reside with and serve Southworth and her children. After Wailes died in February 1845, Mandy, now the legal property of Charlotte Nevitt, continued to live with Southworth, where she remained at least until 1850, when Swisshelm encountered her and when the Federal Census for the District of Columbia recorded in its slave schedule that one slave, an eighteen-year-old “mulatto” woman, resided with Southworth.¹⁴

Like her accounts of her grandmother’s slaves, Southworth’s written accounts of Mandy Taylor, whether published or in private correspondence, never specify that she was a slave but instead refer to her in terms such as a “little maid” and a “dear good nurse.” Mandy is mentioned twice in the sketch in *The Haunted Homestead* recounting the beginnings of Southworth’s literary career: during the evening South-

worth commences to write her first story, “her little maid Mandy” is “absent at a prayer meeting,” and on the afternoon that Gamaliel Bailey, the editor of the *Era*, brings Southworth the first payment for her work, she is “waiting in the empty school-room . . . until her little maid Mandy should bring her the umbrella” (37–38).

Southworth expands on this description of Mandy’s role during this period repeatedly in family letters written in the 1890s, now held in the Library of Congress’s collection of her papers. For example, on the occasion of daughter Charlotte’s fiftieth birthday, Southworth writes:

Monday is your birthday, when you came as an angel from the Heavenly Father to comfort me in my deep distress—came to me in my one room that was my only home and where an old midwife tended us and a poor little colored child Mandy nursed you. I had no doctor, no nurse, only the daily visit of the old midwife and dear little Mandy to wait on me. She slept on a pallet in my room. When you would wake in the night and cry, she would come to the bedside and take you out in the most tender way in the sweetest coaxing voice she would soothe you as she walked up and down the floor. Oh she was good. I would rather meet Mandy than any other human being in Heaven.

In a letter to her granddaughter Mary, she describes the difficulty of being a working mother: “I was teaching school then and had to go and leave [Charlotte] every day. I had to teach school to get money to buy our food and clothes and fuel and to pay our rent. And so I had to leave my poor sick child every day. But she had a dear good nurse named Mandy Taylor who took care of her and sung sweet hymns to her.” Another letter offers further detail about Mandy’s service: “It is half a century ago but seems as if it was but yesterday. Yes! there was my dear Mandy—my little 12 year old colored nurse, who used to go out into the woods at night and gather brush to make me a poor fire . . . No fire except from brush Mandy could pick up in the woods.”¹⁵

Nowhere in these accounts is it even implied that Mandy is enslaved or that these “kind” acts—tending to Charlotte, gathering firewood, and bringing an umbrella to Southworth—are actually compulsory labor. Instead, Southworth seems to prefer, decades after the abolition of slavery, to cast this relationship as one of mutual affection rather than of property ownership. As Saidiya Hartman has argued, “The benign representation of the paternal institution . . . depicted the master-slave

relationship as typified by the bonds of affection and thereby transformed relations of violence and domination into those of affinity.”¹⁶ While aspects of Southworth’s affectionate, even familial, characterization of her relationship to Mandy could have served as a mechanism of subjection during Mandy’s time in her household, in Southworth’s later recollections it is more important to consider how this rhetoric affects the slave owner. As Jennifer Fleischner explains, the description of a slave-owning household as “a ‘family’ served rhetorically to sentimentalize and naturalize slavery as a structure of relations based on domination and dependence.”¹⁷ If these recollections provide evidence of how Southworth viewed her relationship with Mandy during the girl’s enslavement, we see clear demonstration of her sentimentalizing the institution, likely a strategy to blind herself to the true nature of the practice in which she is participating, to keep her from questioning both mistress’s and slave’s position and to avoid the moral imperative she might have felt to act if she explicitly acknowledged it as a relationship of “violence and domination.” Indeed, we observe in Southworth’s account of the relationship between her family and Mandy what Gillian Brown illustrates in her exploration of “sentimental possessions.” Even if we impute “anti-market” motivations to Southworth (as Brown does to Stowe in her reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and the intention “to make property relations more sentimental, or truly sentimental—to stop things from circulating,” the outcome is that which Brown finds in Stowe’s novel: “replacing market relations with familial ones” does not effect change but only conceals the market dynamic, by its use of more appealing language, without materially altering the status of either possessor or possession.¹⁸

Interestingly, Southworth’s tendency to cast slavery as affectionate and familial does not confine itself only to reflections on her own experience as a slave mistress. It emerges even in pieces where she is discussing the abolitionist movement more broadly and acknowledging the necessity of ending slavery. In an 1890 recollection, she recounts describing to Lady Byron the “essential wrong of slavery even where the material condition of the slave was improved by it.” Even as she acknowledges these “essential wrongs,” she seems unable to resist insisting, likely based on her view of her own experience, that “protection and affection between master and slave was the general rule, and cruelty and hatred the rare exception.” In her 1893 reminiscence of her friendship with John Greenleaf Whittier, Southworth offers a similarly problematic account. While she laments “the heinous iniquity, shame

and disgrace of slavery in this so-called free country,” she again seems tempted to cast it primarily in sentimental terms, but in this text she catches herself in the middle of this error. Noting that Whittier in his travels witnessed slavery firsthand, she explains:

He had seen slavery at its home, and he saw two sides of it—not the dark and fair sides, for there could be no fair side to so black an institution,—but the dark and the less dark; instances in which the slaves were treated as affectionately as children; instances where they were treated more cruelly than brutes. He found that even in the Slave States where a man was a good son, brother, husband, father, and neighbor, he was also a good master, even beloved by his slaves as he was by his family. And that a man who was a bad son, brother, husband, father, and neighbor, was also a very bad master, hated and feared by his slaves. And between these extremes there was every grade of character.¹⁹

While Southworth does not here, as in the earlier piece, insist that most master-slave relationships were affectionate, she does cast slave-owning as an extension of the family unit by arguing that one’s performance in familial roles will determine the nature of one’s treatment of one’s slaves, and she implies that the slaves’ feelings toward a “good master” would be loving. In this piece, though, Southworth demonstrates awareness that even the possibility of an affectionate slave owner would not redeem the institution; she closes this passage with a self-correcting assertion: “But the very best and most tender and considerate master with the most faithful and devoted servants was no apology for the hideous moral monstrosity of the slave system.” This passage highlights the ambivalence in Southworth’s position, even late in her life, as she both articulates the brutality of slavery and offers us an affectionate characterization of it, often within the same sentence. She seems to have to remind herself of slavery’s “monstrosity,” even while repeatedly demonstrating a predilection to view it in more sentimental terms.

This glimpse into Southworth’s personal struggle over how to think about the relations between slaves and owners suggests that the author herself experienced a dilemma like that faced by the abolitionist-minded slave owners populating her serials for the *Era*. Because of their own family feeling toward their slaves, these figures become blind to the “moral monstrosity of the slave system” and forget their slaves’

vulnerability as legal property. Even though she herself was susceptible to similar blindness, Southworth, in these fictions, portrays this tendency to romanticize the master-slave bond as extremely dangerous for the slaves, as an obstacle to their chances for future happiness. In these narratives, she encourages slave owners to remove these tempting blinders, to acknowledge the reality of the slaves' status as property, and to pursue any legal means to emancipate them.

From Minny to Winny: Southworth's Fiction of the Slave Owner's Dilemma

By the time Swisshelm's *Visitor* piece announced to the world that Southworth lived with the slave Mandy in her household and that she was the owner of Mandy's relatives, Southworth had been producing antislavery fiction for the *National Era*, the publication that would soon become famous for its serialization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for over a year and would continue to do so for several more.²⁰ Accounts of Southworth's relationship with the *Era* offer differing views about whether she was hired specifically to write antislavery fiction or whether she began to do so subsequently because of her interactions with the abolitionist figures she met among the *Era* circle. For example, Swisshelm asserted the former view, stating that Bailey, the paper's editor, "had hoped that [Southworth], a Southern woman with Northern principles, could weave into her stories pictures of slavery which would call damaging attention to it," while Joseph Snodgrass, a contributor to the *Era*, embraced the latter perspective, recollecting that Southworth's employment by the *Era* "brought her under new influences, which resulted in her conversion to the principles of the anti-slavery reform,—a conversion whose fruits have since been shown in . . . her writings."²¹ Because Southworth's earliest publications in the *Era*, in 1847 and 1848, did not feature antislavery plots, it seems doubtful that she was employed initially for this purpose. And given that a substantial subplot involving slavery was omitted from the *Era*'s serialization of Southworth's first novel-length work, *Retribution* (this subplot was restored in *Retribution*'s book publication), it seems unlikely that Bailey viewed her or any of his literary contributors as a potential source of abolitionist-themed fiction in these early years of the *Era*'s existence.²² However, this is what Southworth becomes beginning in 1849, and all of her contributions to the *Era* through 1856 include substantial antislavery arguments. Ironically, given Southworth's own situation, these serials are, like other antislavery texts, critical of slave owners who perceive "bondage as a cluster of personal relationships," typically affectionate or familial relation-

ships, rather than as “a legal system of domination,” even when these representations are the product of sincere “ideological blind spots” rather than political calculation.²³ As Clymer has argued, Southworth’s fiction offers a compelling exploration of “the ironies, violence, and ideological blind spots in the slave South’s frequent conflation of ‘affection’ and ‘possession.’”²⁴ Indeed, in her fiction from this period, readers find Southworth being critical of not only others’ ideological blind spots but, by implication, her own as well, even as they also observe her succumbing at times to this very blindness. While Southworth’s depictions of slave-ownership are indeed shaped by her perception of affection between masters and slaves and thus open themselves to charges of ambivalence or even apologism, the overriding message of her fiction is that owners who see the truth about the institution of slavery to which others are blinded must respond to the moral obligations of this awareness by manumitting their slaves.

In her first novel-length serial, *Retribution* (serialized from January through April of 1849), Southworth presents readers with slave-owning characters who have moral objections to slavery, including Hester Gray, a young orphan who is “the heiress of an immense estate in Virginia” and “three hundred negroes.”²⁵ Though she is raised by the abolitionist Dent family and is married at the age of nineteen, a legal complication, produced by the terms of her father’s will, prevents Hester from “emancipating [her] people until [her] twenty-first birthday.” In the meantime, she and her husband, Ernest Dent, plan on “educating” the slaves “for freedom” over “the next three years” (30). Though Hester is not actually blind to the exploitative nature of slavery, the affectionate feeling that she holds for her slaves and believes they return to her leads her to forget this at times. This dilemma for Hester as a slave owner is demonstrated most dramatically when Ernest sends Minny, a seventeen-year-old slave girl, as a gift to Hester, claiming that he has purchased her “with the purpose of saving her from the hands of a southern slave dealer . . . and from the horrors of a fate worse than slavery, and which her extreme personal beauty would seem to invite” (29).

Southworth possibly had in mind the slave Mandy as she characterized this figure of Minny, as their names are quite similar, as Mandy also came into Southworth’s household as a gift from a relative, and as Mandy herself would have also been seventeen in the year the novel was published. The position Minny attains in the household does compare to that which Southworth describes Mandy as holding in Southworth’s own, especially after Hester gives birth to her daughter. Minny

becomes a devoted caretaker of the baby and Hester romanticizes her service, as Southworth did Mandy's, describing Minny as a "faithful little girl," with "ardent affections" for and "matchless constancy" to the child (33–35). Notably, these descriptions come soon after Hester has recovered from an actual blind spell, a temporary loss of sight described as "hereditary" and as a "calamity of [her] family" (31). And indeed Southworth suggests that Hester's affection for and growing reliance upon the young slave might be a continuance of the family "blindness," to which she is vulnerable, as she risks forgetting Minny's property status, a status explicit to readers from Minny's arrival as part of a parcel of gifts, including a piano, a harp, and a pony, from Ernest to his wife. Hester "could not help pitying the girl thus consigned to [her], as a packet of goods" (29). Though she is aware of the fact that this woman in her service is actually a legal possession, the growing closeness between them risks obscuring this fact as well as the consequential responsibility that Hester and Ernest will have over Minny's future as her owners. Hester is not completely blinded by her fondness for Minny and we are told that she "sees" the truth of the young woman's situation: "I *looked* at her pale young brow and felt as though my heart must break to *see* her, youthful, beautiful, in bondage, severed from all her relations, without one friend on earth to soothe her" (35, my italics). Yet her impulse to become this "friend" that Minny lacks and to create a sentimental bond with her slave makes it possible for her to ignore the larger injustice under which Minny suffers.

To emphasize this danger, the novel offers Minny's recounting of her history as a warning to Hester and the reader of being blinded to the property status of a slave by affectionate feeling. Minny was the daughter of a Cuban sugar planter and his slave and was raised as his child, without being told of her status as her father's property. Minny describes her father/owner as "the very picture of warm, genial, cheerful benevolence" but also acknowledges that "his love was ever stone-blind to the good of its object—not from hardness, but from thoughtlessness" (36). As a teenager she marries a Frenchman and gives birth to a daughter. It is only after her father's unexpected death that Minny learns of her status as property, that she will be auctioned to settle his debts, and that neither she nor her husband has claim to their own child. At the time of these incidents, her husband is in France and unable to purchase her or the child. An older slave woman explains Minny's predicament to her: "You 'longed to old massa jes' as much as any of us; . . . mudder slave woman—darter slave, too." She tells Minny that even the

arrival of her husband cannot save her, as “You don’t ‘long to him. Property is property, and you anoder man’s property.” In her account to Hester, Minny faults her father for raising her as “the very spoiled child of a devoted father” (39) rather than assuming his obligation as property owner: “If he had even manumitted me, (for I was slave as well as child,) he would have saved me and others much sorrow . . . He did not. He deferred it from day to day—from week to week—from month to month” (37).

Hester takes the lesson of the consequences of thoughtless blindness to heart and makes plans to free her slaves as soon as she reaches her majority, a date that is quickly approaching.²⁶ However, an unexpected event thwarts these plans. While Dent is away, she is struck by illness. Worried that she will die before her birthday and that the slaves will then become the property of her infant Julie (and thus will not be freed until Julie herself reaches majority), she summons her attorney to her bedside to draw up deeds of manumission for them. He explains to her the complicated circumstances: “You can do nothing legally, even after you reach your majority, without your husband’s presence and co-operation.” Hester claims to understand her limitations as a married woman, but insists she must act in some way because Dent

can do nothing at all, if I die without affixing my signature to these deeds, for the property would then go to our daughter, and he would have to wait until she was of age . . . Then Colonel Dent himself might die before our daughter grows up, and Julie and her property fall into other hands, and so my poor people and their children, to remote generations, remain in slavery. (65)

Though the deeds are signed by Hester before her death, they are declared “invalid” as she “wanted twenty-two hours of her majority at the hour that she signed these deeds” (68). As Hester feared, the hundreds of slaves in her possession become the property of her daughter and must wait decades for freedom. Unaware of Hester’s deathbed efforts, the slaves believe “that she broke her promise” to them and that “instead of setting them free, has left them all, with their children, and their children’s children, forever and hopelessly enslaved” (74–75).

We might consider this depiction of the legal complications serving as obstacles to Hester’s intentions—including that of a married woman’s limited property rights—as to some extent a personal defense on Southworth’s part, if at this time she did believe, as Swisshelm reported, that

it was “not in her power legally to free her slaves.” However, beyond any relevance to her personal situation, the novel suggests that slave owners free of such limitations should manumit their slaves with expediency. Following Hester’s death and his remarriage, Dent manumits Minny, the one slave over whom he has legal ownership, and offers her paid employment as Julie’s “nurse and governess, at a fair salary” (89). As a happy ending for this character, Southworth reunites Minny with her husband and child, who arrive with news that her father had actually drawn up a will “acknowledging [her] . . . as his daughter, and setting her free; and then endowing her with all his property, real estate and personal,” but it had been in the possession of Minny’s husband at the time of her father’s death (91). As Hester predicted, her inherited slaves must await her daughter’s majority for their freedom; in the closing pages of the novel, an adult Julie “carried out her purpose of emancipation. Every man, woman, and child, to the number of three hundred, were freed” (108). Without legal proscriptions, Minny’s father, Dent, and Julie use their power as property owners to emancipate the slaves in their possession.

Though the overt message of *Retribution* urges abolitionist-leaning slave owners to reject the blindness caused by their affection for their slaves in order to prevent further jeopardizing the slaves’ welfare, the novel demonstrates blind spots on Southworth’s part of the very sort that the narrative cautions against. These blind spots distinguish this work from the abolitionist novels better known to us today, like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As Julie Husband has observed, in *Retribution* “the injustices of slavery . . . are hardly depicted.” Instead, Southworth’s focus is “the treatment of white women . . . rather than the exploitation and abuse of slaves,” making her work “atypical among feminist abolitionists who usually were devoted to a thorough unveiling of the brutality faced by slaves.”²⁷ While Southworth clearly comprehends the nature of this brutality, her novel displays either unwillingness or inability to admit its extent. Other than the separation from family caused by a slave’s property status, the dehumanizing violence endured by slaves is not described in any detail (sexual exploitation is only implied in the justification of Dent’s purchasing Minny to “sav[e] her . . . from the horrors of a fate worse than slavery”), and the slave owners depicted are, for the most part, benevolent and even abolitionist. More significantly, the novel’s imperative message that owners must act immediately or they will place their slaves in great danger is muddied by the fact that Hester’s slaves’ emancipation is deferred for decades to no demonstra-

bly ill effects; this deferral comes across as more of an inconvenience to the masters' schemes than as an endangerment to slaves' lives. This plot point seems to show Southworth drifting back into her blindness of thinking that slaves owned by kind masters will be protected from the ills of the institution by their masters' benevolence. Given Southworth's own circumstances, this plot twist might serve as a comforting self-reassurance that waiting to free one's slaves might not always be harmful to them, even as it weakens the admonition of the novel.

The Mother-in-Law, Southworth's subsequent serial for the *Era*, covers similar terrain. One of its subplots criticizes these blind spots, yet it more successfully avoids succumbing to them in a way that the previous novel does not.²⁸ Susan Somerville has been raised in the Virginia home of her grandfather, attended by his slaves, the Wood family, Anna and her parents George and Harriet. Like Minny in *Retribution*, Anna recalls Southworth's Mandy. She is a “devoted little maid,” whose “love for her little mistress was *her* religion.”²⁹ Southworth portrays the relationship as mutually affectionate. The two girls have been constant companions from a very young age, and Anna even attends school with Susan, where she surpasses her young mistress in her academic studies. Susan employs affectionate familial terms to describe her relationship with her grandfather's slaves. As she explains to a friend, Anna “has been my intimate companion from babyhood up. I do not remember the time when Anna was not by my side.” She declares that “Anna has been and is dear to me as a sister” (28) and characterizes their childhood as “when we were sisters and companions, and walked with our arms around each other's waists” (29). Later she calls George and Harriet “my foster-parents” and Anna “my dear foster-sister” (30). However, this family feeling for the Woods does not prevent Susan from understanding the actual legal position of the slaves. On one occasion she asks her grandfather, Major Somerville, to free Anna; he dismisses her request, telling her that “young girls knew nothing of such things” and explaining his concern about Susan's economic future as her “patrimony in land and negroes was too small to bear abatement” (29). Contrary to her grandfather's characterization of her as ignorant of financial realities, Susan is quite aware that he is “overwhelmed with debt” and “at the mercy of creditors, any one of whom at any time may levy on his property, and swe[p] off house, land, and people” (29–30). This knowledge creates in her “the daily expectation of seeing” the Woods “sold into *redemptionless* slavery,” which becomes “the great terror of [her] life” (30). Even though she sees the danger the Woods are in, she has no

power to protect them from this threat because she is not their legal owner. Her position at this point is similar to Hester's in *Retribution*, as she observes the danger into which property status places slaves yet remains unable to remedy the situation.

Susan's circumstances change after her grandfather dies and his slaves become her possessions. She intends to travel to Richmond as soon as she can to "take measures for their emancipation" (117), but her plans are thwarted by the arrival of a deputy sheriff and an assessor, who have arrived to seize Susan's property as payment for her grandfather's debts. In Susan's encounter with these men, Southworth explicitly highlights the contradiction between Susan's familial rhetoric about the slaves and their actual legal status. When the deputy asks her how many slaves she owns, Susan answers "none, sir" and then adds, "I have my foster-parents, George and Harriet, who brought me up, and my foster-sister and companion, Anna . . . I do not call them slaves" (117). The novel points out that Susan's preference for familial terminology, while perhaps easing her own moral qualms with the institution of slavery, neither alters the reality that these people for whom she cares remain pieces of property with monetary value nor protects them from being claimed as repayment of her grandfather's debt. The assessor appraises the family, valuing sixty-year-old George at one hundred dollars, forty-five-year-old Harriet at two hundred, and eighteen-year-old Anna at between twelve to fifteen hundred because of her beauty and light skin, under the assumption that she would easily bring such a price in a New Orleans slave auction, where she will be purchased presumably for sexual purposes. Following this valuation, the deputy pronounces that he is "attach[ing] this property at the suit of Spier & Co., Grocers, Peakville"; thus, Susan's "sister" and "parents" are reduced to their monetary value to satisfy an overdue grocery bill (119). Unlike the happy ending featured in *Retribution*, this subplot ends tragically as Anna dies later that day, in what is described as a "VISITATION OF GOD" (121), a suggestion that divine intervention mercifully protected her from the degradation awaiting her if she had been auctioned. While still omitting description of potential slave suffering and depicting only kind slave owners, this novel does avoid the ambiguity of the previous one in its assertion that manumission must be enacted as soon as possible, without even an hour's delay, in order to protect slaves from economic and legal realities.

In these two novels, Southworth seems to be addressing slave owners like herself, who have affection for their slaves but who have

not acted to guarantee their future safety by emancipating them legally. While this might seem to us an odd audience for fiction appearing in an antislavery publication, this imagined reader is quite consistent with how the *Era's* editor, Gamaliel Bailey, conceived of his target audience. Unlike many of the Northern abolitionist editors, Bailey considered fair-minded Southerners a key portion of his readership, believing that “southerners should be treated as reasonable beings, who, if not offended by abolitionist tactics, might be persuaded to act against slavery.”³⁰ Given Bailey’s goal of persuading Southern readers, Southworth’s depiction of slave owners as essentially just people and her minimization of the outrages enacted upon slaves by owners are well suited to Bailey’s goals, even if they are likely the products of Southworth’s own biases rather than a strategic appeal to particular readers.

Among the most compelling of Southworth’s work from this period for observing her own fraught thinking about slave ownership is “The Little Slave,” a story published in 1850 in the *Friend of Youth*, a children’s magazine edited by Margaret Bailey, the wife of Gamaliel Bailey.³¹ This story focuses on a young heroine who receives a slave as a gift. When Lizzie Simpson is twelve, her father gives her as a “pet” an infant slave girl, whom she names Winny.³² From the beginning, Lizzie embraces a familial description of her relationship with Winny, calling her “my baby” and teaching “the little one to call her ‘mother’” (342–43). While the story ultimately demonstrates the dangers of owners’ affectionate blindness, the narrator herself embraces this language at points and refers to Winny as Lizzie’s “little daughter” (343). When Lizzie is married at the age of seventeen, she takes Winny to her new home with her husband, Bob Orrison. The familial discourse continues within the new household, even as years go by and the Orrisons have children: “Winny called Lizzie ‘mother,’ and Bob ‘father,’ and they both loved her as a daughter. Indeed she seemed from the affection they bore her . . . like their eldest child.” For the younger children, Winny “seemed like their eldest sister—she loved them so dearly, and took such great care of them” (345). As in Southworth’s depictions of Mandy’s service to her own family, lines between slave labor and acts of affection are completely blurred, and there seems to be no awareness at all here, from characters or narrator, that Winny has little choice and that what Lizzie prefers to see as love might be nothing more than a coerced response.

Southworth shatters this affectionate blindness by introducing the reality of Winny’s status as property through a dispute between Lizzie and her father. When Lizzie is twenty-four years old, her mother dies

and her father remarries to “a young, frivolous, vain, and selfish girl” (346). Upon learning that her husband rather than Lizzie is the legal owner of Winny, this stepmother encourages Mr. Simpson to reclaim the now twelve-year-old slave, arguing that he never gave Lizzie a deed for the infant slave and thus the property remains his. After Lizzie’s father requests the return of Winny and Lizzie refuses to comply, he has a court issue a writ of attachment, an order allowing an individual to seize the property of another. The sheriff comes to Lizzie’s home to “arrest this girl as the property of Elisha Simpson” and “[takes] possession of Winny” (349). Here, the fact of Winny’s legal status as human property contradicts Lizzie’s casting of the girl as a member of her family and breaks the illusion that the relationship between these characters is merely or even primarily affectionate. Though Lizzie continues to describe Winny as “our child,” the circumstances require that she explicitly acknowledge the reality of Winny’s slave status and her own responsibilities as ostensible owner of this human being. Lizzie and her husband go to the judge who issued the writ of attachment and explain the history of Lizzie’s possession of Winny. After the judge learns that Lizzie “had possession of [Winny] since she was an infant,” that Lizzie’s father “never received any sort of wages for [Winny],” and that he “never demanded her [return] during all this time,” he declares that her father “has no sort of claim” to Winny and executes a writ of replevin, a court order allowing the retrieval of wrongly seized personal property (350). With this writ, the Orrisons reclaim Winny from the slave trader to whom Mr. Simpson has sold her. In this sequence, especially in its specificity about the writs the Simpsons and the Orrisons obtain as they battle over Winny, writs that place this dispute within the realm of property law, Southworth makes one of her strongest cases about the dangers of the affectionate blindness of slave owners; she suggests that slave owners truly concerned for the welfare of their slaves must see through the sentimental view of their relationship with their slaves, a view likely to obscure the truth of the slaves’ circumstances. That is, for Winny’s sake, Lizzie must acknowledge that Winny is not her child but a piece of property, to which there might be competing claims.

Though “The Little Slave” makes a strong argument about the blind spots of affectionate rhetoric of slave owners, its conclusion illustrates Southworth’s own blindness better than either of the texts discussed above. Unlike those plots, which assert that slaves will only be truly safe after emancipation, “The Little Slave” ends with Winny’s recovery from the slave trader and her restoration to Lizzie’s household without

any depiction of the Orrisons' emancipation of the girl or even discussing its necessity. That this return is presented as the happy ending to the tale is quite disturbing, as the threat to Winny lingers even as the characters are said to be “enjoy[ing] uninterrupted happiness” (354). As the reader was given a look into Winny's experience in the slave trader's pen, “sitting in a distant corner, with her elbows on her knees, and her chin resting on the palms of her hands, and her hair all hanging about her face—the picture of self-neglect and despair,” the brutalizing institution of slavery is presented by Southworth as a place where Winny does not belong and should not be condemned (352–53). Yet in a sense this is where Winny remains at tale's end, as the Orrisons are blinded by their affection for the girl to her continued peril, a peril they expose her to through their inaction. Indeed, the tale places similar blinders upon the readers themselves if we forget the reality concealed by the concluding homecoming. As another legal dispute, a death in the family, or an economic misfortune could return Winny to the slave trader, the only way to protect her from this potential is to manumit her, to legally change her status as property. This lesson is one that the narrator herself seems to forget in her preference for the familial characterization of slave-ownership.

Despite the ambivalence of the conclusion to “The Little Slave,” the overriding message of these stories is that slaves must be manumitted if their welfare is to be protected. However, because of Southworth's own status as a slave-owner during these years, scholars may be tempted to read these works written for antislavery publications as gross hypocrisy on Southworth's part, considering that she was being paid to write texts advocating legal actions that she herself appeared unwilling to take. I propose instead that we should consider this fiction, in which abolitionist arguments and depictions of benevolent slave owners intermingle, as, at least in part, a reflection of Southworth's struggle with her personal dilemma as she weighs her obligations and perhaps gathers the courage to defy her slave-owning family. Indeed, the personal difficulty produced for her by even attaching her name to the sentiments in these tales should not be minimized. In later recollections of this period, she describes herself as “out of favor with my friends and neighbors on account of my writing for an abolition paper,” specifically noting that “my mother and my step-father were slave-holders, [and] . . . of course, they turned against me.”³³ Like the abolitionist protagonists in her works, Southworth apparently held sincere affection for the slaves owned by her family and out of this feeling likely preferred to ignore the

fact that the people she cared for were actually pieces of chattel, yet at the same time her fiction demonstrates an intellectual understanding of the risk such thinking posed to these slaves. Certainly, then, Southworth must be addressing, to some extent, her own situation, as she writes these stories asserting that if one is concerned with the future well-being of one's slaves, a realistic acknowledgement of the property status of slaves and the precarious position in which this status places them is absolutely necessary. Just as we saw Southworth correcting herself in her Whittier reminiscence, these fictions function similarly, countering her tendency to romanticize the master-slave relationship with the omnipresence of the realities of slavery. They suggest that once antislavery slave owners, including Southworth herself, abandon the comforting appeal of the affectionate rhetoric, they will more clearly see their own responsibility to assure their slaves' future happiness through manumission.

In these works, Southworth depicts a number of obstacles that might delay abolitionist slave owners' actions to free their slaves, including legal prohibitions or familial pressure. Both of these likely factored into Southworth's sense of her inability to free the slaves she owned. She probably worried about the complications provided by her status as a married woman abandoned by but not divorced from her husband. And she certainly feared her proslavery family's response to any action toward emancipation. Because of her own circumstances, I think it is appropriate for scholars to consider Southworth herself as a central audience for the plots she authored in these years, as she tried to convince herself that the only moral resolution to her dilemma involved emancipating her slaves, despite potential legal difficulties and familial objection. As suggested by the wavering tone in these 1849 and 1850 fictions, this process was likely gradual, waxing and waning over several years. Yet when she depicts a young Southern man announcing to his family that he will free his plantation's slaves in her novel *Mark Sutherland*, serialized in the *Era* in 1853, she perhaps reflects her emerging resolve to stand up to her proslavery family.³⁴ In that novel, Sutherland (whose name intriguingly evokes Southworth's own, as if she is providing herself with a braver—and male—alter-ego) arrives at his Mississippi home after finishing his studies in the North and proclaims “his purpose of emancipating all the negroes on his plantation and sending them to Liberia.”³⁵ Later, he explains to his cousin India, to whom he is engaged to marry, that his “purposed action” is “a measure of conscience,” risking his family “los[ing] all esteem for me” (127). As

Mark anticipated, his family, including India, turns viciously against him, and a “tremendous storm of indignation, opposition, and persecution . . . arose and hurtled around him” (137). In these pages, the fear of igniting such a reaction from one’s family is presented as a potential deterrent to anyone’s intentions to emancipate their slaves: “There are no wars so bloody as civil wars; . . . there are no enemies so bitter, so cruel, so unrelenting, as those of our own blood, when they *are* enemies!” (137). Though Southworth presents a hostile reaction from Sutherland’s family and likely imagines a similarly vehement reaction from her own family if she ever moved to manumit her slaves, she does seem to be steeling herself for this response as inevitable. We do still see wavering on her part in this novel in her casting her abolitionist slave owner Sutherland as male, implying that such defiance might still be quite difficult, even impossible, for a female—especially a married one—to accomplish. In spite of these difficulties though, the prevailing trend in this body of fiction suggests that Southworth believed following her character Sutherland’s model to be the right action to pursue.

Annie and Caroline: Southworth’s Manumission of Her Slaves

Whatever specific actions Southworth took in the 1850s to emancipate her slaves and to extricate herself from a position of slave-ownership is largely lost to history. Mandy Taylor disappears from the historical record after being named in the 1850 census slave schedule as Southworth’s slave, and she appears only in the past tense in Southworth’s later recollections and personal letters.³⁶ It is possible she traveled with Southworth’s sister when she moved to Mississippi for her health in the early 1850s. Or, perhaps, as she did with her characters, Southworth was able to find some way to manumit her, and a liberated Mandy enjoyed a free adult life. However, because of a frustrating gap in the slave manumission records for the District of Columbia held in the National Archives, a gap spanning from 1846 to 1855, we can probably never determine what actions, if any, Southworth took on Mandy’s behalf.³⁷

Without documentary evidence, we might assume that Southworth’s abolitionist politics were confined exclusively to the pages of her serialized narratives. Fortunately for the historical record, a portion of her struggle to emancipate her slaves in defiance of her family occurred in the pages of Washington, DC, newspapers, where she engaged in a public war of words with her stepfather, Joshua Henshaw, over the ownership of a slave. This dispute shows Southworth boldly following the lead of her character Mark Sutherland as she stands up to her family in

order to free the slaves she owned. This real-life dispute also replicates key details from “The Little Slave,” without its dodging conclusion, as Southworth finds herself in a legal battle with family while the fate of a young slave girl hangs in the balance.

On March 22, 1854, Southworth published the following statement, under the title “A Warning to the Public,” in the *National Intelligencer*:

Whereas Annie Taylor, a young mulatto girl, aged nine years, once my property, but recently manumitted by me, and lately in the service of J. L. Henshaw, Esq. has disappeared from her friends; and whereas it is supposed that she has been carried off, or secreted to be sold, all persons are hereby warned against purchasing Annie Taylor; or, if a sale of the girl has been hastily effected, the purchaser is hereby advised to take immediate steps towards the recovery of the purchase money.³⁸

This statement in a local newspaper, initiating the public disagreement between Southworth and her stepfather, is significant as the first known instance in Southworth’s writing wherein she acknowledges herself as a slave owner.³⁹ In Southworth’s *Era* fiction, an acknowledgment of this status was often the first step out of the moral bind of slave-ownership. Her own fictional slave owners, upon abandoning their sentimental blinders, could exercise the power they possessed to emancipate their human property. Though Southworth still uses some affectionate terminology in her reference to those who have enslaved Annie as “her friends,” these newspaper announcements depart starkly from her writing about her relationship with slaves like Mandy and Biggs. Here Annie is described explicitly in the language of property, property that might have been fraudulently sold by Henshaw and purchased by an unwitting buyer. Just as it was for her characters, Southworth’s characterization of Annie as “property” is a necessary step toward extricating the girl from slavery.

Following Southworth’s implication that she suspects Henshaw of selling a slave whom she had already emancipated, Henshaw counters with an announcement casting doubt on Southworth’s claims to ownership and her motivations in publicizing the matter (though, tellingly, he never expresses any concern about Annie’s whereabouts). His reply to the “advertisement . . . addressed to the public ostensibly for the protection of a mulatto girl whom [Southworth] alleges was once her property” asserts that Southworth’s warning was “conceived in bitter

malignancy against me.”⁴⁰ He rejects her claims to Annie and her mother Caroline, who, he asserts, “are absolutely of right and in law my property.” He insists that “no right ever existed in Mrs. Southworth to manumit them.” He explains that “the woman Caroline has been in my possession (and my right of possession unchallenged and unquestioned) for more than eighteen years. The girl Annie was born and raised in my house, and has never left it for a day until she was stolen from it on Friday last.”⁴¹

In the next issue of the *Intelligencer*, Southworth’s warning reappears, but with a postscript, in which she denies the capacity for “bitter malignancy” and says that she “has forborne to accuse” him of misdeeds. The slightly different version of this postscript appearing in the *Evening Star* on the same day expands this denial by noting that she had “permit[ed] Mr. Henshaw the use of these negroes for some time” and suggesting that he is the wrong-doer for “us[ing] such permission to deprive her of her property.” In response to his assertion of ownership, she states that “her title to the negroes in question may be found recorded in . . . the land records of Washington county, D. C.” and specifies the volume and folio number of the records, referring to the document in which her grandmother deeded her Caroline.⁴² The following day, Henshaw cites evidence of his own by referring to other documents in the records office, which, he claims, “show conclusively that the deed of trust upon which she rests her title is not worth the paper upon which it was written.” He concludes, “I deny the existence of any title in law or equity to this property, even in the husband of Mrs. Southworth.” The closing phrase of this assertion implies that even if Southworth were the owner of Caroline and Annie, she would be unable to manumit them without her husband’s consent.⁴³

The final installments of this exchange by each party propose that they will resort to the courts to settle this dispute. In Southworth’s second postscript to her announcement, she denies the relevance of “the three instruments of record cited by Mr. Henshaw” to prove his ownership of the slaves: “two of them do not relate to the property in dispute; and the *third*, whilst supporting my title, is directly opposed to his pretensions.” She asserts that the document she cited previously, “the deed of absolute gift,” is “perfectly sound and incontestable,” an opinion she believes “will be established before a judicial tribunal, to which I now adjourn this contest.” In his last word on this dispute in the *Intelligencer*, Henshaw commends Southworth for referring the matter to the courts, avowing that “it would have better become her to have

commenced her efforts *legally* ‘in a court of justice.’” He predicts that the court will reject her claims: “She failed to get possession of the only one [Annie] of the three negroes I desired to hold in servitude, and I feel perfectly well assured she will have no better success in her attempt to effect a judicial robbery.” He concludes with another attack on Southworth’s character, snidely reminding readers of her success as a novelist: “Mrs. S. has dealt largely in fiction for many years, is highly imaginative, and so long as her imagination confines its flights to the regions of romance, I shall not criticize her or her works; but when she imagines things, and asserts them, affecting the property or character of persons in real life, it becomes a duty at least to deny her assertions.”⁴⁴

The manner in which this dispute was resolved remains unclear. No evidence exists in the extant District of Columbia chancery court records, held in the National Archives, of Southworth and Henshaw meeting in court or a judgment being rendered from the bench to establish the ownership of Annie and her mother. Despite this lack of evidence, it remains possible that the matter was pursued in the courts. In a vague statement that Southworth published in 1855, explaining why her serial *Vivia* had been repeatedly postponed, she characterized the travails of the previous two years that had interrupted her near-continuous production of fiction:

The worst of what we suffered I will not even hint to you, because it implicates others, whom I would much prefer to leave to the sure judgment of God. But besides our greatest sorrow, sickness, death, litigation, the parting from friends identified with our lives—all followed in close succession, until I am tempted to believe that the evil destinies had received permission to test the full strength of my human heart. I cannot dwell upon the trials of those last two years, or even give you the least details about them.⁴⁵

Because she avoids specifics, we cannot be sure if the litigation referred to in this catalog of suffering involved her dispute with Henshaw. However, an 1872 profile of Southworth in the *Evening Star*, recently attributed to Walt Whitman, does suggest that a conflict over a slave’s manumission was connected to this gap in Southworth’s productivity: “After this her abolition principles got her into hot-water again; she felt it her duty to free a negro in dispute, and this involved her in some difficulties so that she was hindered from writing for some months.”⁴⁶

Two other accounts, also short on specific details, reinforce the likelihood that Southworth took some action to free slaves in her possession. In an 1866 article about Gamaliel Bailey, Joseph Snodgrass mentions Southworth’s “conversion to the principles of the anti-slavery reform” from her acquaintance with the *Era* circle and notes that the “fruits have since been shown in her deeds as well as her writings.” While Snodgrass does not clarify the nature of these “deeds” or that they might involve freeing personal slaves, a piece from the late 1850s makes this claim explicitly. A profile of Southworth published in *The Christian Inquirer* characterizes her circumstances prior to literary fame: “thankful to procure a situation as public teacher, on a salary of \$200, with two children to provide for, and the faithful servant who had clung to her in her varied fortunes.” Though this “faithful servant” is not identified as the slave Mandy, the profile does later assert that Southworth was the owner of inherited slaves and that she emancipated, rather than sold, them: “The slaves that she inherited were liberated; she could suffer and toil, but she could not dispose of those she had loved and cared for. There is a long record of Southern kindness like this whose book will one day be read, when the judgments of earth are faded from sight.”⁴⁷ This piece, published in a New York periodical, interestingly reproduces the affectionate rhetoric—faithful slaves and loving owners—that Southworth preferred, while also suggesting that the liberation of their slaves was the truest testament to any claims to kindness from owners.

Until further evidence comes to light, much will remain unknown about Southworth’s status as a slave owner and emancipator. However, from the existing evidence of the dispute in 1854, we can observe Southworth’s apparent learning of the lesson of her abolitionist fiction. Like her character Lizzie in “The Little Slave,” Southworth appears to understand that the effort to protect the welfare of her slaves must take place within the realm of property law, despite her own preference to view the relationship between slaves and owners as primarily affectionate and familial. But, unlike Lizzie, who was blinded by her feeling for Winny, Southworth no longer appears comforted by the notion that as long as she is a kind mistress, her slaves will be protected. In March 1854 she seems to have finally resolved that only the immediate manumission of the slaves in her possession would protect them from the potential misfortunes of property status.

The evidence I have presented here of Southworth’s own slave-ownership and her efforts to emancipate her slaves necessarily revises

our reading of her antislavery fiction for the *Era* and expands our understanding of how such fiction might approach its subject. What has been previously viewed as her apologetic depiction of slave owners might be more accurately seen as an intentional effort to avoid demonizing them and instead to address them more directly as people who hold tender feelings for their human possessions as a more persuasive means to advocate for emancipation. What has been seen as a lack of interest in slave suffering and a puzzling emphasis on the whites involved in the institution of slavery might instead be seen as Southworth's understanding of the owners' consciences as the battleground upon which slavery would be fought. Southworth constructed the slave owners in her fiction along the lines of her own experience: they sentimentalize their relationship with those in their possession yet display uncertainty about the right action to take for their slaves' welfare. Thus the fiction illustrates her awareness that this affectionate view of slavery, even as it might motivate some masters to free their slaves, could likely also function as an obstacle to the antislavery effort, blinding owners to the injustice in which they are participating and preventing necessary action. As this essay has shown, Southworth herself frequently demonstrated the tendency to embrace this comforting blindness both during and after her experience as a slave owner and even within her abolitionist fiction. Ultimately, however, this fiction makes the case for shedding these blinders, coming to terms with the realities of slaves' property status, and understanding manumission as the only protection for the slaves. With the discovery of this 1854 dispute between Southworth and her stepfather, we can see Southworth acting as her imagined Southern reader would act—successfully removing the blinders she wore, not only acknowledging her responsibility for the humans in her possession but also acting legally to change their status. Certainly she hoped that this action would be reproduced by many of her readers, who she imagined must share her dilemma as affectionate slave owners.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge gratefully the invaluable advice and suggestions for revision from the anonymous reviewers of *J19* on an earlier version of this essay. Also, the essay has benefited from the advice and support of Melissa Homestead, Nicole Reynolds, Carey Snyder, Jeremy Webster, and Dale Bauer.

1. "Mrs. Southworth," *Pittsburgh Saturday Visitor*, August 10, 1850.

2. Swisshelm was in Washington in April and May of 1850 as a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, when she "became the guest of Mrs. Emma D. E. N. Southworth": Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Jansen, 1880), 129. Swisshelm lost her *Tribune* position after writing a column claiming that Daniel Webster kept black mistresses with whom he had chil-

dren. She later named Southworth as her source for this gossip, “The Indictment against Daniel Webster,” *Independent*, April 11, 1878.

3. Regis Boyle, *Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, Novelist* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1939), 77, 82. For a summary of the twentieth-century discussion of Southworth and slavery, see Paul C. Jones, *Unwelcome Voices: Subversive Fiction in the Antebellum South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 158–60.

4. Janet Gabler-Hover, *Dreaming Black / Writing White: The Hagar Myth in American Cultural History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 38; Jones, *Unwelcome Voices*, 156, 169. For other contributions to the recent discussion of Southworth and slavery, see also Christopher Looby, “Southworth and Seriality: *The Hidden Hand* and the *New York Ledger*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 59 (2004), 179–211; Julie Husband, *Antislavery Discourse and Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Incendiary Pictures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Jeffery Clymer, *Family Money: Property, Race, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. Silverman, “Sympathy and its Vicissitudes,” *American Studies* 43 (Fall 2002): 20, 27; Husband, *Antislavery Discourses*, 64; Jones, *Unwelcome Voices*, 156.

6. Looby, “Southworth and Seriality,” 181, 202, 210.

7. Clymer, *Family Money*, 93.

8. Southworth, “With Lady Byron: Mrs. Southworth’s Memorable Visit to the Poet’s Widow,” [Washington, DC] *Evening Star*, October 25, 1890.

9. Surviving records document the family’s long history of slave-holding. Chancery Court Records in the Maryland State Archives document an 1803 case in which Dorothy Wailes and Charles Nevitt are named as defendants in a dispute over slave woman and her child (Maryland State Archives, Schweningen Collection, document 2, volume 4239–5, page 2). The slave importation records of Alexandria County record Nevitt importing slaves in 1807 and Wailes importing them in 1809 (including a twenty-year-old man named Len, who is likely Len Taylor, the father of Mandy and other slaves mentioned in this essay), Timothy J. Dennee, “Slave Importation Certificates in Alexandria County Records, 1790–1845,” <http://www.freedmenscemetery.org/resources/documents/importation.shtml>. For several weeks in 1819, Nevitt ran an advertisement, selling “a Negro man, accustomed to gardening and driving a carriage,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 17, 1819. An 1823 record shows that Wailes hired a slave, Cassy, from her owner, Timothy J. Dennee, “Slaves of Non-Residents Hired to Residents of Washington City, 1818–1827 and 1839–1851,” http://www.h-net.org/~dclist/Hired_2.pdf. This Cassy is probably Cassy Taylor, whom Wailes would eventually purchase and who is the mother of Mandy and other slaves discussed in this essay. Washington DC census records show the presence of slaves in Wailes’s household for decades, including four slaves (three males and one female) in the 1820 census and four (two male and two female) in the 1840 census. Southworth’s stepfather Henshaw is recorded as the owner of slaves in both the 1840 and 1850 censuses. A more distant relative, her paternal uncle, John Nevitt of Natchez, Mississippi, owned a large plantation and hundreds of slaves.

10. Susanna Henshaw asked for compensation for the emancipation of Leonard Taylor, age 70; Alexander Taylor, 33; and Leonard Taylor Jr., 29, DC Slave Owner Petitions, 1862–1863, National Archives, RG 21. She was awarded compensation of \$788.40. This amount is recorded in Salmon Chase’s report to Congress in 1864, “Emancipation in the District of Columbia: Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury,” *Executive Documents Printed by Order of the House of Representatives During the First Session of the Thirty-Eight Congress, 1863–’64* (Volume 9), 50.

11. Southworth, *The Haunted Homestead* (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1860), 30–31. Subsequent references to this sketch will be cited parenthetically within the text.

12. Gabler-Hover, *Dreaming Black*, 57.

13. Liber W. B. 49, folios 198–199, National Archives, RG 21.

14. The 1850 Federal Census for DC, Slave Schedule, lists Southworth as the “owner” of an eighteen-year-old “mulatto” woman. However, this should not be read as evidence that Southworth, rather than her sister, legally owned Mandy, but only that Mandy resided with Southworth when the census was conducted in July 1850.

15. Southworth to Charlotte Lawrence, May 2, 1894; Southworth to Mary Lawrence, October 10, 1895; Southworth to Charlotte Lawrence, June 22, 1895, container 1, Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte Southworth Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

16. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88.

17. Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 31.

18. Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 44.

19. "With Lady Byron"; "Reminiscences of the Poet, John Greenleaf Whittier," unpublished typescript, dated June 17, 1893, bMS AM 1844 (664), Houghton Library, Harvard University, 4. Southworth has one of her characters make a very similar point in the novel *India* and casts it in a negative light. When India defends slavery by claiming that "I never heard of a bad master, who was not also a bad son, brother, husband, father, [and] neighbour" and describes it as "a beautiful and happy correspondence" between slave and master, her abolitionist fiancé asserts that the happiness is "*all on one side*" and that "selfishness so blinds us" that slave owners do not see this. *India: The Pearl of Pearl River* (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1856), 123–24.

20. I confine my discussion of Southworth's fiction to her early work published in abolitionist periodicals, wherein her work can be seen as in service to the editors' antislavery agenda. As Looby has demonstrated, the nature of Southworth's fiction for these "partisan publication[s]" differed from that of the serials she would later produce during her exclusive engagement, beginning in 1857 and continuing throughout her career, with the *New York Ledger*; a publication that "maximize[d] circulation by avoiding taking ideological sides, eschewing political motivation, and editorializing in as cautious and noncontroversial a way as possible," 196.

21. Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 126; Snodgrass, "A Pioneer Editor," *Atlantic Monthly* 17 (1866), 749.

22. See Vicki Martin, "E. D. E. N. Southworth's Serial Novels *Retribution* and *The Mother-in-Law* as Vehicles for the Cause of Abolition in the *National Era*: Setting the Stage for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *E.D.E.N. Southworth: Recovering a Nineteenth-Century Popular Novelist* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 6–12, for discussion of *Retribution's* serialization and the sections of the novel omitted by Bailey and restored upon its book publication.

23. Clymer, *Family Money*, 30. Clymer uses these phrases in his discussion of Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*. Though Clymer sees Southworth's fiction as less interested in slave suffering than in the plight of married white women, I argue that the dynamic he observes in Webb's novel is at work in Southworth's fiction as well.

24. Clymer, *Family Money*, 72.

25. *Retribution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1849), 11, 16. Subsequent quotations from this novel are cited parenthetically within the text of the essay.

26. It should be noted that Hester overlooks the most immediate action that she and her husband could take to remedy Minny's suffering by manumitting her. Because Minny was purchased by Dent and is not subject to the dictates of Hester's father's will, the Dents could end her enslavement at any time.

27. Husband, *Anti-Slavery Discourse*, 65–66.

28. *The Mother-in-Law* was serialized in the *National Era* from November 22, 1849, to July 18, 1850, and published in book form in 1851.

29. Southworth, *The Mother-in-Law; or, The Isle of Rays* (New York: D. Appleton, 1851), 28. Subsequent quotations from this novel are cited parenthetically within the text of the essay.

30. Stanley Harrold, *Gamaliel Bailey and the Antislavery Union* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), 85. Harrold offers a thorough discussion of Bailey's thinking about his Southern readers as a prominent facet of his abolitionist appeal in the *Era*, 85–93.

31. "The Little Slave: A True Story" appeared in the August and September 1850 issues of the *Friend of Youth* and was included in her collections *Old Neighbourhoods and New Settlements* (Philadelphia: Hart, 1853) and *The Wife's Victory, and Other Nouvelletes* (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1854) under the title "Winnie."

32. "Winnie; A Child's Story," *Old Neighbourhoods and New Settlements; or Christmas Evening Legends* (Philadelphia: Hart, 1853), 339–54, 340. Subsequent quotations from this story will be cited parenthetically within the text of the essay.

33. Southworth, "Reminiscences of . . . Whittier," 3; Southworth to Joseph Henry Allen, October 23, 1895, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, 2.

34. *Mark Sutherland* was serialized in the *National Era* from January 13 to August 25, 1853, and was published in book form as *India* in 1856.

35. Southworth, *India*, 77. Subsequent quotations from this novel will be cited parenthetically within the text of the essay. It is notable that we never see Sutherland engaged in affectionate interactions with slaves, and while he does denounce the "fatal blindness" of his family, it is not a blindness of affection but selfishness that he observes in them (137, 124).

36. While DC census records in subsequent decades include a number of African American women named Amanda of the appropriate age, without knowing whether Mandy remained in the city, whether she married, and what her married name might have been, it is difficult to ascertain her situation after 1850. In addition to Southworth's recollections of Mandy in her letters and autobiographical sketches, Mandy serves as a model for characters in Southworth's fiction. For example, a slave named Mandy plays a major role in her 1862 serial *Astrea* (published in book form as *The Fortune Seeker*). And the 1871 serial *Between Two Fires* (published in book form, in two volumes, as *A Beautiful Fiend and Victor's Triumph* [Philadelphia: Peterson, 1874]) includes a slave family, clearly based on the Taylors, the “cook Cassandra, or ‘Cassy,’ and Cassy's two pretty dusky daughters, Caroline and Amanda, otherwise ‘Calline’ and ‘Mandy.’” *A Beautiful Fiend*, 143.

37. The Manumission and Emancipation Records for DC, 1821–1863, held in the National Archives in Washington, DC, as part of RG 21: Records of the District Courts of the United States, 1685–2004, are missing the volume that covers the period from July 1846 to August 1855.

38. Emma D. E. N. Southworth, “A Warning to the Public,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 22, 1854. Southworth also placed this warning in the *Daily National Era* from March 22 to 27 and in the *Daily Evening Star* on March 24.

39. A letter to the *Evening Star* (dated March 21) from Henshaw provides some details about the events leading to this dispute as he describes Caroline removing her daughter Annie from his home without permission: “A colored woman, the mother of two children, . . . of whom I have held quiet and undisputed possession for more than eighteen years, but from whom I have required no service for nearly a year past, but have given her her time in consideration of her having a young child. This woman obtained employment in the family of Mr. Smith. On Friday last she came to my house and carried off and concealed the eldest of her two children, a girl nine years old. . . . On Saturday morning, having received information which induced me to believe that she was at Mr. Smith's house, I went alone to his door . . . I obtained an interview and received from him assurance, upon which I rely with entire confidence, that he was wholly ignorant that she was a slave woman, or that I, or any one had a claim to, or right of control over her . . . The child was released from the confinement in which she had been kept during the night previous, . . . and I forebore to arrest the mother, which I had contemplated only as a measure of coercion, to obtain information where she had concealed the child,” “Georgetown Correspondence,” *Daily Evening Star*, March 23, 1854. Henshaw's letter responded to the *Star's* coverage of “runaways” being recovered (“Runaways,” *Daily Evening Star*, March 20, 1854) and its subsequent printing of a correction that claimed that “the two negroes for whom search was made” were not runaway slaves but “were, and are, as free, as right and law can make them,” (TRUTH, “Correction,” *Daily Evening Star*, March 21, 1854).

40. Henshaw, “To the Public,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 23, 1854.

41. Southworth's claim to Annie surely is based on her belief that she is the owner of Caroline and thus any children she had borne.

42. Southworth, postscript to “A Warning to the Public,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 24, 1854, and *Daily Evening Star*, March 24, 1854. She specifically cites Liber W. B. 49, folios 198 and 199, now held in the National Archives, RG 21. A typescript version of this document, made during the WPA, also exists in the DC Archives, though the pagination of the typescript is different than the National Archives manuscript version.

43. Henshaw, postscript to “To the Public,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 25, 1854. He provides citations to land records in Washington, DC, now held in the National Archives, RG 21: “Liber W. B., No 31, folios 180 and 181, Liber W. B., No. 37, folios 406 and 407, and Liber W. B., No. 44, folios 325 and 326.” It is unclear why Henshaw believed these documents countered Southworth's claims or bolstered his own. The first is an 1830 bill of sale for Caroline, when she was eighteen months old, from Dorcas Galvin to Catherine Greenfield, possibly a relative of Dorothy Wailes, whose maiden name was Greenfield. The second is an 1831 bill of sale, for which Henshaw served as attorney, of Cassy, Caroline's mother, along with “an unnamed female infant age 10 months,” from Greenfield to Cynthia Woodward. The identity of this infant is unclear, but her age does not match that of either Caroline or Mandy. The final document is an 1833 bill of sale of Cassy and “her two Children named Amanda and Leonard” from Greenfield to Wailes. From his reference to these documents, the only case I can imagine Henshaw making is that Wailes herself was not the legal owner of Caroline (but only of Cassy, Mandy, and Leonard) and thus had no right to bequeath Southworth Caroline upon her death. Of course, if Wailes was not Caroline's owner, this would also complicate any case Henshaw would be able to make for his ownership as the husband of Wailes's daughter.

44. Southworth, second postscript to "A Warning to the Public," *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 27, 1854. Henshaw, "To the Public," *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 28, 1854. The unspecified third of the "three negroes" in dispute is likely Caroline's younger child.

45. Southworth, "To the Readers of the Saturday Evening Post," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 2, 1855.

46. "The Authors of Washington," *Evening Star*, January 6, 1872. The profile incorrectly places this family dispute over freeing a slave in the late 1840s rather than in the early 1850s. For the attribution to Whitman, see Martin Murray, "Two Pieces of Uncollected Whitman Journalism: 'Washington as a Central Winter Residence' and 'The Authors of Washington,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 20 (Winter 2003): 151–76.

47. Snodgrass, "A Pioneer Editor," 749; M., "Washington Letter: A Visit to the Capitol," *Christian Inquirer*, April 23, 1859.