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Writing for Immortality

Anne E. Boyd

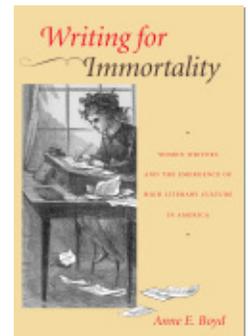
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“Prov[ing] Avis in the Wrong”

The Lives of Women Artists

Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson grew up in a middle-class culture that prized women who, like Lydia Maria Child’s “frugal housewife” or Catharine Beecher’s housewife in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, combined domesticity, housekeeping, and mothering with mental culture. Such women took a moment here or there from laundry or while the baby was sleeping to pen a letter, read a chapter in a novel, or even write a story to send off to *Godey’s* or *Peterson’s* as a contribution to the struggling family’s income. This was the ideal woman (writer) that Phelps’s mother and Harriet Beecher Stowe tried to be. The next generation of women who wanted to write professionally, while revering these women, did not feel capable of living up to this model. They no longer believed that a cultivated woman had enough energy to devote to both home and authorship. In 1867 Phelps declared, “As a general thing, it is next to impossible for a woman with the care of a family on her hands to be a successful writer.” For these younger women, the literary life was as much a commitment as life with a husband and/or children. They often thought of their literary products as children and their careers as mates, as Alcott did when she wrote in her essay “Happy Women” (1868), “Literature is a fond and faithful spouse, and the little family

that has sprung up around [me] . . . is a profitable source of satisfaction to [my] maternal heart."¹

For most postbellum women writers, the roles of wife and literary artist were not compatible. They found it difficult if not impossible to envision being both. Emma Lazarus wrote, about a romantic disappointment, "so I have to resume my position of old maid *ad infinitum* — unless I inherit a fortune or turn out a genius like . . . George Eliot."² In Lazarus's construction, to be a "genius" is a full life in and of itself and poses an alternative to having a husband (or a fortune, which would provide its own kind of life). In fact, a woman of genius is no longer an old maid; she is already married, in a way, and therefore no longer seeks a mate. She has a purpose apart from her domestic status. The women of this study, who had discovered such a purpose in their lives, felt that they had to forgo marriage, and they struggled throughout their lives with their decisions. Stoddard, having made the difficult decision to marry, bravely tried to be mother, wife, and author, although she eventually gave up and devoted herself almost exclusively to her husband and son. Phelps married late in life, but her marriage did not end her career; rather, it could be said that her career ended the marriage. And even though Alcott and Woolson decided not to marry, this did not entirely free them from familial responsibilities.

The difficulty of reconciling or combining the seemingly contradictory identities of "woman" and "artist" became a main focus of some of the most compelling fiction produced by Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson. The same is true for Rebecca Harding Davis, and this tension was a central theme of some of Emily Dickinson's most engaging poetry. These writers were influenced by groundbreaking works about women artists that had established this theme as a powerful subject for women's art, particularly *Corinne*, by Madame de Staël, and *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In addition, marriage had become a chief concern for American women, particularly those of the middle class. Throughout the nineteenth century, as the issues of women's rights and duties were increasingly matters of public debate, so were questions about when, whether, and whom a woman should marry. And because such decisions were, as many commentators often reiterated, the most important ones a woman would ever make, it is not surprising that marriage was a popular topic for literature. However, while most novels about women before the Civil War focused on courtship and ended with either engagement or a wedding, after the war, many novels examined the aftermath of the decisions women made.

One such novel, Phelps's *Story of Avis* (1877), was one of the most widely read

and debated works on the subject of marriage in nineteenth-century America. In depicting an artist heroine's attempt to combine marriage and art, this novel laid bare the difficult choices women had to make between living for themselves or living for others. Phelps's outlook was ultimately pessimistic; she was convinced that relations between men and women, as they then existed, precluded women's self-development and happiness. In her judgment, a woman was as yet incapable of being an artist while she was a wife and mother. Stoddard, Alcott, Woolson, and Davis came to similar conclusions in their fiction and in their lives. When Alcott's sister May (1840–79), an artist, was married, Alcott wrote to a friend, "May says — 'To combine art & matrimony is almost too much bliss.' I hope she will find it so & prove 'Avis' in the wrong."³ The apprehension in this statement suggests that Alcott believed *Avis* was right, however. Phelps's *Avis* had become the emblem of the postbellum generation of women artists that Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* had been for Phelps and her contemporaries as young women.

As Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson tried to figure out how to live their unprecedented and therefore unscripted lives as artists, they had to confront the age-old patterns of women's lives — domesticity, marriage, motherhood, and self-sacrifice. In spite of their many obligations as women, they tried to carve out spaces in their lives for the kind of solitude necessary to make art. And they dreamed of what life would be like in the future or in another place, particularly Europe, when and where solitude and freedom would be more possible. But difficult questions remained: would women ever be able to combine lives as artists with the love other women found in marriage and motherhood? Could they ever "prove 'Avis' in the wrong"? Would the woman artist forever have to choose between love and ambition? And was it true, as many had said, that only the woman who knew the love of a husband and children was capable of great art?

The Question of Marriage

Although the Civil War precipitated a period of decline in marriage rates and legitimated spinsterhood to a greater degree than ever before, the overwhelming majority of women continued to marry, and by the 1890s, marriage rates for women had returned to their norm of 90 percent. At midcentury, when Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were still young and forming their opinions about marriage, discontent about the institution was growing, and it became the locus of cultural debates about women's status in American society. Women's rights advocates attacked the laws that made a woman's husband her representa-

tive in all public dealings, devolved her property and money to him, and made divorce difficult to obtain. Elizabeth Cady Stanton made marriage a prominent issue in “The Declaration of Sentiments,” written for the first women’s rights convention, at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848: “In the covenant of marriage, she [woman] is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master — the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.”⁴ As Stanton’s language suggests, comparisons between marriage and slavery were rife during the early women’s rights movement.

The loss of control over one’s body and the menial drudgery most women experienced during marriage only amplified such comparisons. Women’s rights leader Sarah Grimké promoted the right “of woman to decide *when* she shall become a mother, how often & under what circumstances.” Too many women, she declared, discover once they are married that they are treated by their husbands as “legal prostitute[s] . . . Man seems to feel that Marriage gives him the control of Woman’s person just as the Law gives him the control of her property.” Methods of contraception and recipes for agents that would induce miscarriages can be found in nineteenth-century publications, although contraception and abortion (which some doctors and midwives practiced) were outlawed in many states as concerns increased about women’s freedoms and the decline in birth rates, particularly among middle-class white women.⁵ On the whole, once a woman married, she often had little agency in determining how many children she would bear. And of those pregnancies she did incur, a great number would end in miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death.

In addition, the responsibilities of housework and child rearing were tremendously damaging to the health of American women. Even Catharine Beecher, a major spokeswoman for the cult of domesticity, claimed that for every healthy woman, three were sick. Women’s household duties involved food preparation, including the continuous baking of bread and the laborious canning and preserving of fruits and vegetables; marketing on a daily or semidaily basis; tending fires for cooking and warming the house; cleaning floors, rugs, windows, furniture, and draperies; sewing, mending, laundering, and ironing clothes; knitting and all other needlework; caring for the sick; nursing infants and tending to small children; and instructing children in reading, writing, and math, as well as manners, morality, and religion. A woman might also have gardening added to her list of responsibilities, and if she lived on a farm, she could expect to participate in the tending and slaughtering of animals and perhaps to make many of the household’s

necessities, including soap, candles, cloth, and yarn. In addition to these daily duties, women also were expected to entertain and feed visitors, many of whom stayed for weeks or months at a time, and to care for the poor and underprivileged in their communities. Every woman of the household participated in each of these activities, so even unmarried women who stayed at home were rarely freed from housework. But when a woman married, she understood that all of these responsibilities, on top of the physical strain of childbirth, would comprise her daily existence. Is it any wonder, then, that few women had the time or strength to devote to literary or other pursuits? As Phelps asserted, “It is no easy matter to keep the ‘holy fire burning in the holy place,’ yet never be out of kindlings for the kitchen stove, nor forget to tell Bridget about the furnace dampers, nor let the baby have the match-box to play with.” Women’s myriad practical concerns crowded out virtually all other endeavors.⁶

In light of these responsibilities, marriage and motherhood were generally viewed as the endpoint of a woman’s development. When de Tocqueville visited America in 1831–32, he astutely summed up the condition of women: “In America, the independence of women is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony.”⁷ When young, a woman experienced a relatively great deal of freedom, but all that changed once she left her father’s house to enter her husband’s. As a wife and mother, she inherited duties that consumed her life and hindered any further growth. As Joanne Dobson has pointed out, nineteenth-century American women’s poetry and fiction focused almost exclusively on “the girl” because social conventions kept women in a state of immaturity and dependence. The sense of selfhood and personal agency that come with mature adulthood were either silenced or killed off in marriage, and marriage itself signified a kind of death.⁸ For the woman writer, this image of marriage was even more potent, for matrimony likely meant the end of her creative voice and aspirations. The woman writer who married was often more literally silenced than her nonartistic counterparts, and she probably experienced more palpably the death of a significant part of herself—the artist.

Despite the negative connotations of marriage for women, society, as de Tocqueville recognized, did not have to force women to accept this quasi death; instead they went willingly into matrimony, most of them convinced that they were not giving up all chance of happiness.⁹ In fact, women were taught that they were entering the period of their lives in which they would realize the fulfillment and happiness that were supposed to be their destiny as wives and mothers. There were at least two reasons why women believed that the price they had to

pay in marriage was not too great. The most prevalent one was the ideal of romantic love that had become prominent in the culture through novels, advice books, songs, and illustrations in periodicals and gift annuals. Grimké conveys the potency of this ideal: "Every man and woman feels a profound want . . . [a]n indescribable longing for, & yearning after a perfect absorption of [his or her] interests, feeling & being . . . into one kindred spirit."¹⁰ According to the romantic ideal, no greater happiness could be found on earth than that of a true and lasting love between a man and a woman, except, of course, motherhood, which was the logical outcome of such a union. So the two greatest sources of happiness and tranquillity for women were believed to emanate from the marital union. A woman who did not marry, therefore, was deprived of love and earthly bliss. Hawthorne's Hepzibah (in *The House of Seven Gables*) and Zenobia (in *The Blithedale Romance*) are representative of how the spinster was usually perceived: as miserable and forlorn and as someone who had missed out on life's greatest pleasures. Secondly, the loss of independence in marriage could also be a great relief to women who, in Stephen Mintz's words, felt "anxieties about independence, the psychological consequences of individualism, and the longing for a marital union as an anchorage in a sea of doubts and a shelter from selfishness and despair."¹¹ Women who married could feel absolved from the guilt they felt about desiring freedom. Marriage was the ultimate self-sacrifice that allowed women to feel they were leading virtuous lives.

Rare was the spinster who felt free to live independently and was financially capable of doing so. Most devoted themselves to aging parents or to siblings who had families. Employment opportunities for women were also limited, and remuneration was often barely enough to support oneself. So to choose the single state did not automatically signal a declaration of independence. Not until the Civil War did young women begin to articulate and realize dreams of living on their own. But Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson, all of whom chose lives as "spinsters" while still young, still felt bound to their families, especially aging parents. It wasn't until 1880, at the age of forty-seven, that Alcott established "a home of [her] own," claiming, "as the other artistic and literary spinsters have a house, I am going to try the plan, for a winter at least."¹² But unlike Dickinson, who also deliberately chose a life of "single blessedness," they did not remain at home for the whole of their lives. They traveled, lived with other women, and lived by themselves on occasion.

So-called Boston marriages, in which two women lived together in committed relationships, were another solution to the need for companionship in light of

many women's disdain for conventional marriage. None of the women discussed here formed Boston marriages, as Sarah Orne Jewett did with Annie Fields, but female friendships and support from other women were important to them as they strove to create lives as artists. In their fiction, they also depicted the significance of female community for single women. It is, in fact, quite possible that Alcott's, Phelps's, and Woolson's desires not to marry were due in part to their preference for the companionship of women. There are suggestions in their stories that this may have been the case. A few scholars have offered interpretations of some of their stories that suggest implicit lesbian themes, and stories by Woolson and Phelps have been included in an anthology of lesbian fiction by nineteenth-century women. For many women of this era, a life spent in intimate relationships with women allowed for more freedom and a greater potential for self-development than did heterosexual marriage. According to Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, "sisterly love provided opportunities to strengthen autonomy, support initiative, reinforce individual will, confirm vocational identity, and promote . . . aspirations."¹³ The support of "sisterly love" helped encourage and sustain many women's literary ambitions.

Alcott, for example, longed for her sisters to remain unmarried, like her, so that they could live together and pursue similar goals of self-reliance and artistry. For brief periods she shared the artist's life with her sister May while they roomed in Boston and traveled in Europe. Most tellingly, Alcott told Louise Chandler Moulton that she was "half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body . . . because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls, and never once the least little bit with any man." The same certainly could be said of Jewett, and Dickinson is well known for her intimate relationship with Susan Gilbert Dickinson, which has been the source of much critical commentary.¹⁴ Phelps was very close to Annie Fields, before the death of James Fields and long before Annie's Boston marriage with Jewett. Phelps also had an intimate friend, the doctor Mary Briggs Harris, with whom she lived off and on until the latter's death in 1886. Woolson's female traveling companions — her mother, sister, and niece — were important sources of support to her and preferable to a husband. Woolson, who appears never to have been in love with a man, once wrote in defense of a novel portraying "a woman's adoration of another woman[,] . . . I myself have seen tears of joy, the uttermost faith, and deep devotion, in mature, well-educated, and cultivated women, for some other woman whom they adored; have seen an absorption for months of every thought." Although these women went on to marry, she was sure that they still reflected fondly on "that old

adoration which was so intense and so pure.” As Woolson suggests here, such relationships were widely perceived as chaste and innocent girlhood fancies that eventually would be replaced with heterosexual marriages. As a young woman, Woolson had such a friendship that waned when the friend married. Similarly, Stoddard had an intimate friendship (most of it sustained via correspondence) with Margaret Sweat, which did not survive her marriage. But throughout her life, Stoddard continued to long for a close female friend and had many stormy relationships with women. She sought a deeper meeting of the minds and more mutual support than was possible with men, although she frequently complained that most women didn’t understand her because she was so different from them. For many women, life outside of marriage or without men did not mean a life devoid of intimacy and love. But it is probably also true that Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson did not take advantage of the support and strength derived from the “female world of love and ritual” to the extent that other women, particularly Jewett and Fields, did.¹⁵

Of the four, Woolson was the most pessimistic about marriage. She respected the institution deeply, and later in life she seemed to envy women who experienced marital bliss, yet she was unable to envision a marriage that would not stifle a woman’s artistic ambitions and talents. When her friend Arabella Carter married, Woolson tried to assure her that she approved of the match and her decision, using the romantic language of idealized love: “You don’t know how I rejoice in your happiness, Belle. I am *so, so* glad for you. A man’s true, earnest love is a great gift. If you do not accept it and enjoy it, I shall — shake you! . . . The glory of your life has come to you. Everything else is trivial compared to it. You and he are really alone in the world together. Two souls that love always are. Do give up your past life and duties and **BE HAPPY!**” In another letter after Carter’s marriage, Woolson contrasted her own life as a “desolate spinster” with that of her friend, who has “the constant companionship of your husband.” Woolson missed her close friend, although she assured her that “I highly approve of you in the character of Wife and Mother, but for all that I am none the less lonely.”¹⁶ At this point Woolson’s sister Clara had also recently married and left home.

While her letters to Carter seem to indicate that Woolson felt marriage to be the greatest joy of a woman’s life, and that she thought to be a “Wife and Mother” the holiest of a woman’s identities, other letters indicate that she thought marriage was the greatest destiny for some women but not all, and that she did not regret her own decision to remain single. In another letter to Flora Payne, who was traveling in Europe, Woolson revealed that she felt herself more drawn to

the life this friend was living than the one Arabella had chosen. “You are the most fortunate young lady I know, and ought to be the *happiest*. I envy you . . . , for although I am willing to settle down after thirty years are told, I do not care to be forced into quiescence yet awhile.” Whereas she had told Carter that she ought to “BE HAPPY,” suggesting that Woolson was perhaps trying to console Carter for what she was giving up, she frankly told Payne that she should be the “*happiest*.” And Woolson never confessed to Carter, as she did to Payne, that she envied her. It was Payne’s choice to travel, experience new things, and live an unsettled life (if only for a while) to which Woolson was most drawn. Later in life, she wanted her niece to have a similar opportunity. She wrote to her nephew, “I am extremely desirous that Clare should have happy years just at this time. Nothing can make up to a girl the free-from-care gay, lighthearted period after school is over, & before marriage.” But she also believed that “[t]his period must not last too long, or it loses its charm.”¹⁷ At fifty-two years of age, Woolson felt, perhaps, that such a life without ties and a home had lost its appeal for her; but years earlier, when still young, she had not been willing to let it go. Despite her claim to Payne, she was hardly content to settle down when she was thirty. For it was then that she initiated her career as a writer and began to travel all over the South with her mother, and it would be another decade before she followed Payne to Europe.

Nonetheless, as Woolson pursued the kind of life Payne had embarked upon, she felt the loneliness of a single life and seemed at times to miss the love and intimacy that other people experienced. Yet she consistently believed that she had to sacrifice love for the kind of life she wanted as a committed artist. She also felt compelled to defend herself against the charge of selfishness for remaining single. In her notebooks appears the clearest expression of her feelings on this subject. To an overheard comment about single people — “They never seemed to think that they had any *duties*. They have always traveled about as they pleased.” — she responded:

Why should they not? They did not marry and have children; then let them have the pleasures of such a life, since they have not those of a family. Family people appear to think that unmarried people are very self-indulgent because they want to amuse themselves. It does not seem to occur to them that they (the married) gave themselves the pleasures which *they* preferred. Let them bear, then, the accompanying cares, and not criticize those who refrained from such ties.

In this defensive passage, Woolson also intimates, however, that “Family people”

were the ones who were truly happy and “self-indulgent.” George Eliot was a prime example of the happily married woman for Woolson (although Eliot was never legally married to George Henry Lewes), so much so that Woolson refused to pity Eliot for what appeared to be an otherwise hard life. After Eliot’s death in 1880, Woolson wrote of her that “she had one of the easiest, most indulged and ‘petted’ lives that I have ever known or heard of.” She had the “devoted love” of two men that most women never have from one. Although Eliot worked very hard, “she had the atmosphere she craved [of love and adoration] constantly round her. Thousands of women work as hard (in other ways) and finally die (as she did) of their toil, without it.”¹⁸ Rather than pity her, Woolson seemed to envy her.

Whether or not Woolson ever truly regretted her choice to remain single is not clear, although there is evidence that late in life her loneliness became overwhelming. While she earlier had reveled in the freedom that her solitary life offered, three years before her death she wrote to her nephew that family life was “the best thing in life; it’s the only thing worth living for; this is the sincere belief— & the result of the observations— of one who has never had it!” For this reason, perhaps, she tried, while overseas, to maintain close relationships with her nieces and nephew, feeling that her identity as an “aunt” was important to her. But marriage appears to have been always out of the question. In her notebooks, she expressed the importance of love: “You are afraid to love for fear of being duped, ill-treated, etc. But loving itself—the act of loving—is not only a pleasure, but a benefit. . . . ‘Tis better to have loved,’ (even if unloved in return) than never to know what loving is. Those who avoid it forever are dry, bitter, and sour.”¹⁹ It seems likely, therefore, that Woolson was no stranger to feelings of love, but to love from afar was preferable to becoming entangled in an actual relationship. Instead, she speculated in her fiction about what a union between a man and a woman who possessed ambition or predilections for self-development would be like, concluding time and again that while marriage meant the death of the soul and a silencing of the creative spirit for women, spinsterhood did not provide a particularly attractive alternative. In fact, the spinsters in her fiction are generally pathetic, isolated, misunderstood women,²⁰ although marriage is not always the blissful union of souls she portrayed to Carter. As Sharon Dean notes, “her short fiction presents a decidedly bleak view of marriage,” although in her novels “the view of marriage is more complex and more positive,” probably because she felt pressure to provide happier endings for her novels in order to appeal to a broader audience.²¹

Although Alcott appears to have been more comfortable than Woolson with her choice never to marry, her views on marriage were just as ambivalent and complex. Like most children, she played games of pretend marriages, but they taught her a decidedly different lesson than they did other girls. Years later she wrote, "I remember being married to Walter by Alfred Haskell with a white apron for a veil & the old wood shed for a church. We slapped one another soon after & parted, finding that our tempers didn't agree. I rather think my prejudices in favor of spinsterhood are founded upon that brief but tragical experience." Nonetheless, she was once tempted, at the age of twenty-five, to accept a marriage proposal from a man she did not love in order to provide for her family. Her mother dissuaded her from such a mistake.²² Perhaps it was this experience coupled with the importance society placed on marriage for women that made matrimony such a thorny issue in Alcott's novels. Alcott particularly battled the conventional marriage plot in writing *Little Women* (1868). Having published the first part, depicting the adolescence of the four March sisters, she felt compelled to make the second volume, titled *Good Wives*, resolve their lives in happy marriages. Although she preferred to make Jo a "literary spinster," her readers and publishers demanded another outcome. "[P]ublishers are very *perverse* [*sic*] & wont let authors have their way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style," she lamented.²³ Although the genre of children's literature certainly demanded a more conventional plot, Alcott's serious novels for adults allowed her the freedom to subvert the idea that marriage was the apotheosis of a young woman's life. Her first novel, *Moods* (1864), tackled the issue of divorce and portrayed the consequences of a hasty marriage. And her novel *Work* (1872) depicted an idealized, companionate marriage, but it is only one episode in the varied life of the heroine, Christie Devon. Instead of ending in marriage, the novel concludes with Christie's discovery of her talent as a public speaker after the death of her husband.

In her autobiographical essay "Happy Women," Alcott penned one of the most forceful arguments of her generation in favor of a solitary life. She first pinpoints the cause of so many unhappy marriages: "One of the trials of woman-kind is the fear of being an old maid. To escape this dreadful doom, young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness which astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called 'Mrs.' instead of 'Miss.'" Then Alcott presents the life stories of four "superior women" who found happiness and fulfillment in their careers instead of empty marriages. They are a doctor, a music

teacher, a philanthropist, and an author, the last modeled on Alcott herself, “who in the course of an unusually varied experience has seen so much of what a wise man has called ‘the tragedy of modern married life,’ that she is afraid to try it.” In lieu of a husband and children, she has chosen a literary career, and she claims that she is “[n]ot lonely, for parents, brothers and sisters, friends and babies keep her heart full and warm.”²⁴ Unlike Woolson living in exile, Alcott stayed close to home and had a large family, including nephews, who kept her from feeling isolated from loved ones. In fact, it is quite likely that she chose not to marry because her duties to this large family were already so demanding. Thus, she was very comfortable in her decision to remain single, convinced that her arrangement was the only one for someone who already had family responsibilities and ambitions as an author.

Phelps was also a vocal advocate of the single life, particularly during the first fifteen years of her career. “Because a woman hasn’t a baby to rock,” she proclaimed in 1867, “is no reason why she should be useless in her day and generation, a burden to herself and other people. One need not necessarily go to sleep while one is waiting for the Prince.” Instead, she encouraged young women to “do something. Don’t be afraid, ashamed, discouraged, deceived. Go to work.” Many of her early works elaborate on this theme, denounce matrimony, or at least deflate the ideal of wedded bliss. She does this most explicitly in her novel *The Silent Partner* (1871). Both of the novel’s chief female figures reject their suitors and become, instead of desolate, lovelorn spinsters, happy, useful women. Perley Kelso tells Stephen Garrick, “The fact is . . . that I have no time to think of love and marriage. . . . That is a business, a trade, by itself to women. I have too much else to do,” namely devoting herself to the care of the poor. Her protégé, Sip Garth, in spite of her love for Dirk, vows never to marry for fear of bringing children into the world to work in the mills as she has done. Instead, she becomes a preacher and a “happy woman.” The novel ends with Perley, after hearing Sip preach, walking through the streets, wanting nothing, “[l]ife brimm[ing] over” in her face.²⁵ Phelps portrays two women whose lives are full and complete without men. Any sacrifices they make by giving up heterosexual love are more than compensated for by the purpose they find in their work and their companionship with each other.

In addition to this argument in favor of women finding fulfillment outside of marriage, Phelps was also adamant in her belief that the time was not ripe for the kind of equal relationships between men and women that would allow women to fulfill their potential within the institution of marriage. Her article “The True

Woman" (1871) includes a powerful critique of marriage: "when marriage and motherhood no more complete a woman's mission to the world than marriage and fatherhood complete a man's; when important changes have swept and garnished the whole realm of household care; when men consent to share its minimum of burden with women," then the "true woman," rather than the cultural stereotype of woman, will reveal herself.²⁶ Men's selfishness required a corresponding selflessness from women, and only when men shared women's burdens, namely child care and housework, would women be fulfilled to the same measure that men were. In Phelps's ideal of domestic harmony, women would not find intellectual fulfillment through their husbands and only after all domestic duties were performed. But Phelps's message is essentially that because such conditions did not yet exist, those women who desired self-actualization should not marry. This was, of course, the path Phelps took herself, but over the years her single life became more and more of a burden to her.

Phelps lacked the close family relationships that Alcott had and sometimes regretted her isolation as a single woman, as revealed in a letter to the bachelor John Greenleaf Whittier, written eleven years after "The True Woman": "I write in my study alone . . . I think of you in yours. . . . These lonely lives are not right dear friend. God never meant them. We ought each of us to have married somebody when we were young. But as you say, it is too late now." In the same year, she published *Dr. Zay*, a novel that depicts the courtship of a woman doctor, who has devoted herself to a career and forsworn marriage, and a man who convinces her that their marriage will not interfere with her life as a doctor. This novel ends hopefully with their marriage. Although Phelps addressed many of the themes dear to her regarding women's independence, she allowed herself to gloss over the impracticality and even devastation of marriage for women who have strong commitments to their careers, which was a prominent theme in much of her other writings.²⁷

At this time, Phelps, like Woolson, envied women (especially her friends Annie Fields and George Eliot) for their happy relationships with men. After the death of James T. Fields, she wrote his wife that she should thank God for her "exceptionally blessed life. — He was always my ideal of a husband." In Eliot's companionship with Lewes, Phelps saw even more to envy (despite the social isolation Eliot suffered), for not only did Eliot have domestic happiness, but she also had a mate who helped make her a complete artist. In a piece in *Harper's Weekly* (1885) she publicly echoed Woolson's private comments about Eliot's full life:

In the companion with whom she chose to spend her life, George Eliot had the most unbounded and unusual domestic sympathy. She was invigorated into doing her greatest work by a man who . . . appreciated her. . . . No half-ripened life could have written *Romola* or *Adam Bede*. *Middlemarch* could not have sprung out of a famished heart. It needed a full woman's life, rich to the beaker's brim. . . . What glory, renunciation and loneliness may work in the human soul — and God grant they may! — it is not the glory of the great creative novelist.²⁸

Eliot was complete as an artist because she did not have to sacrifice love, as the lonely spinster did. The support of her husband had enabled Eliot to accomplish more than any previous woman author, in Phelps's eyes. This belief in the inability of the single woman to achieve greatness without love would haunt Phelps and her contemporaries.

In 1888, at the age of forty-four, Phelps thought she had found a man who could make her life "full" in the way Eliot's had been. He was Henry Dickinson Ward, a writer seventeen years her junior. As Phelps got older, marriage became a more attractive proposition. She was not close to her father, her mother had died, her "favorite brother had died," she had no sisters, and her friend Mary Briggs Harris had also recently died. As Carol Farley Kessler suggests, "To maintain her unmarried status in a society valuing the married, Phelps would have needed friends or relatives emotionally closer to her than was the case by the mid-1880s." Phelps appeared to have felt much more alone in the world than Alcott or even Woolson, both of whom had close sisters. And she thought that marriage to a younger man held more promise of equality, having the examples of Madame de Staël, Charlotte Brontë, Fuller, and Eliot before her. It is clear that she intended to continue her career, and it is even possible that she was inspired by Eliot's example to try marriage, hoping that it would make her a happier woman and a better artist. But her marital bliss was short-lived. Phelps, who had appended Ward to her name, soon returned to publishing under her maiden name. Only five pages are devoted to Ward in her autobiography (1895). One of her few statements about her marriage is an ambivalent one: "A literary woman's best critic is her husband; and I cannot express in these few words the debt which I am proud to acknowledge to him who has never hindered my life's work by one hour of anything less than loyal delight in it, and who has never failed to urge me to my best, of which his ideal is higher than my own."²⁹

Phelps's public assessment of her marriage echoes the idealized image she had of Eliot's relationship with Lewes. But, although Ward did not hinder her work,

he certainly did not support her in the way Lewes did Eliot. By the time Phelps wrote her autobiography, she and Ward had been living apart and essentially estranged for many years. Phelps indicated on one occasion that marriage had changed her as an author. Although she found marriage to be a rich topic for literature, she also believed that “the married are unfairly hampered in what they can say. I remember that when I wrote ‘Avis,’ I said — ‘Were I married, I could not write this book.’”³⁰ So although she portrayed Ward as urging her on to do her best, it is clear that she no longer felt free as an artist, certainly a precondition for the creation of one’s best work.

As a married woman and mother, Stoddard had the most difficulty of the four writers in sustaining her career as an author. Her fears about giving up her independence in marriage led to the depiction of courtships as intense struggles between strong wills, with men trying to gain mastery over women who try to maintain their identity and liberty. In her fiction, marriage is often portrayed as a kind of death for one or both parties, with the domineering male often subdued to make him a more suitable mate for a strong-willed woman.³¹ Although marriage to Richard Stoddard initially meant the opening of a new literary world, she still encountered difficulties in combining her life as a writer with her wifely duties. Having children, especially, seems to have interfered severely with her writing. Unlike Alcott, who during the late 1860s–1870s alternated between time at home caring for her family and time alone (or with her sister May) in Boston, where she kept rooms for the sole purpose of cultivating the solitude she needed to write, and Phelps, who found her escape in “a tiny cottage on Gloucester Harbor . . . where I keep old maids’ Paradise,”³² Stoddard had no room of her own. Nonetheless, she did make her own attempts at Thoreauvian solitude. While she found it difficult as a wife and mother to “worship” at the same “altar” of “[i]ndividuality” as Thoreau, she was nonetheless inspired by his experiment in solitude, for this is what was required to be an author. Somehow, she felt, she would have to carve out a space of solitude for herself in the midst of her home life. After her first son, Willy, was born, this proved increasingly difficult. Trying to work on her first novel, she wrote to her friend Edmund Clarence Stedman, “I pore over my Ms every day, struggle, fight, despair, and hope over it. I have a hundred and twenty-five pages done — not yet half completed. . . . I cannot work as fast as I am prepared in mind, on account of not being well, and the care of Willy. I have to do everything for him, wash, dress, feed, and watch him.” But as her novel progressed, she was determined to find a release from her time-consuming duties. As she prepared to return home with her son from a visit to

her family in Mattapoisett, she wrote to her husband, “At any rate have a woman there to help me. I am never going to do any more housework if I can help it, I am an AUTHOR.”³³ To adopt this identity, she would have to be released from the domestic duties that were her responsibility alone. But simply finding hired help to perform those tasks did not ensure the freedom and free time to focus on one’s art. And having a maid did not alleviate the feeling that as a wife and mother, one must be devoted to others first.

Stoddard’s sense of commitment to self and resistance to domestic encumbrance were at odds with her belief that she should be content as a mother and wife. In the poem “Nameless Pain,” the speaker admonishes herself: “I should be happy with my lot: / A wife and mother—is it not / Enough for me to be content? / What other blessing could be sent?” Although she had told her husband that she was an “AUTHOR,” not a housekeeper, when Willy died only a few months later (December 1861), she experienced a crisis of identity. “I am perplexed as to what I shall do, my occupation is gone, the sweet anxious cares and observances that have filled my life for six years and a half have vanished. My brain is smaller than my heart and I can do nothing with the former.”³⁴ She had already finished *The Morgesons*, but, despite her grief, she soon began work on another novel. Two years after Willy’s death, she was once again a mother, having given birth to Lorry, a son, who would grow into adulthood and would increasingly occupy her time and define her life.

In the summer of 1866, when Lorry was only two and a half, Stoddard was still determined to make time and space for her writing. She moved into a beach house in Mattapoisett and attempted an experiment in solitude, going for long walks on the beach, exploring nature, reading and writing after the house was quiet, and keeping a journal that resounds with the lessons she learned from *Walden*. Her brother, Altol, and Lorry lived with her, her husband visited, and they entertained other guests. But after Lorry went to bed, Stoddard would shut herself up in her room with books, pen, and paper and relish her freedom in solitude. Although she had been grateful to Richard for rescuing her from the backwater of Mattapoisett, she also longed for the opportunities her hometown afforded for solitude and communion with nature as she tried to establish herself as an author. James Matlack explains her “ambiguous attitude toward Mattapoisett” in this way: “she sometimes paints the town as a tight-knit, backward, repressive society from which she joyfully escaped. At other times, it is the blessed rural retreat to which she (or her protagonist) gladly repairs from the din and dint of the metropolis.”³⁵ While Richard found that the city and its literary

society nourished his creative energies, Elizabeth associated true genius with nature and solitude. All of her novels, and most of her stories, take place in a rural setting reminiscent of Mattapoisett.

By keeping a journal, Stoddard hoped on this visit to devote herself to exploring her psyche and courting the creative power of nature. In her first entry, for April 22, 1866, she looks ahead to the joys and the difficulties she anticipates: “when the books are arranged, I shall be ready to write my book, and the method of my life will be tantalizing, unique, picturesque, unsocial, sad, incomplete.” In the progression from positive to negative adjectives, she indicates how ambivalent she feels about the freedom of a writer’s life and the solitude necessary for it. Throughout the rest of the journal, she vacillates between reveling in her retreat from the world and feeling oppressed by her loneliness. She also feels pulled in two directions — toward solitude, self-knowledge, self-reliance, and the power of creativity, on the one hand, and toward her family and wifely duties on the other. In her second entry, she laments, “Splendid spot to read & write in, but Lorry will not allow either.” On April 25, she records, “My boy makes me love him so, and his exactions are so annoying and so winning that isolation seems impossible.” The next day, she writes only two sentences, one reporting that “Lorry has been ill today.” When her husband comes to visit, an even more troublesome distraction overtakes her. She enjoys his visit, but when he leaves she feels “lonesome” and must essentially start her whole project over. “The room here, does not seem the same — his coming and going have changed its tone, and I have got to fight myself back into the old channel.”³⁶

Within a couple of weeks she had fought her way back. As she sits in her room reading Wordsworth, she exclaims, “I shall never be *happier* than I am now. What makes me so? Because I am alone with *my own power!* It is the scene outside & the scene within.” Discovering the creative power of nature, she feels at one with the universe, but this feeling won’t last; transcendence is always temporary for her. Something — guilt, dedication, or fear of solitude — keeps pulling her back to her family, causing her to waver between moments of intense loneliness, frustration, and creative energy. And she enjoys taking care of the house and her family. On May 29, she writes, “There’s too much chaos here for me to be laborious with the pen. It is too pleasant a life here — I love to loiter over all that pertains to my domestic affairs, parlor & kitchen.” She also finds it difficult to be away from her husband. On June 1, she writes, “I feel dull, illish, and sad, homesick for Stod[dard].” However, at other times she sees her duties as “distractions” that keep her from her writing. But she manages to return to her work and find her

creative fire again. “Dull & unhappy as I may have been through the day, I feel a change at night — when the door is bolted, and the family are abed. My papers are like life then.” But the very next entry, written almost two weeks later, reveals that her husband has spent “several sick days with me. My novel lags, and so do I.” By the end of the summer, as she looked over her journal and assessed what she had accomplished, she was disappointed. “I thought how I had failed to write out the power that has passed and repassed in my life since I came here,” she wrote. She felt that her summer had been a busy one, but her journal did not show any intellectual achievement. She had lived much but had been unable to meditate on her experiences. In her last entry, she wrote, “I’ll leave this ineffectual record behind me, and look at it next year, or will another do it for me, Stoddard perhaps.”³⁷ Elizabeth Stoddard’s life as a writer and a wife and mother, as revealed in this journal, was not exactly like the complete life Phelps had idealized for Eliot. It was, Stoddard undoubtedly felt, more akin to the “half-ripped life” that Phelps suggested was lived by the unmarried woman writer. Of course, Eliot did not have children, and motherhood no doubt made Stoddard’s life more complicated. But Stoddard seems to have felt fulfilled by neither her “woman”’s life nor her artist’s life as each was to some degree neglected in her attempt to combine the two.

Temple House, the novel that Stoddard began during the summer of 1866, would be her last. Thereafter she gave up her ambitions to be recognized as a serious artist and devoted herself to her husband and son. Although she wrote some potboilers, articles, and a few serious stories, she never again devoted herself to the single-minded pursuit of writing a great novel that might ensure her a lasting reputation. Many factors contributed to her giving up her ambitions, such as her self-doubts about her abilities, the lack of popular success, and the critics’ mixed responses to her novels, but the difficulty of combining domestic duties with writing played a major role. The last book she wrote, *Lolly Dink’s Doings* (1874), a children’s book that provides a telling look at how she viewed her home life, attacks her husband for leaving all of the parenting to her and devoting himself to his writing. It suggests that she felt, much as Alcott did about her father, that there was room for only one self-centered and self-committed author in their family.³⁸

For Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson, marriage was decidedly not the blessed institution or the quintessential goal of a woman’s life. In their own lives, they recognized that marriage, as it then existed, could not fulfill a woman who possessed artistic ambitions or other career goals. In their essays and fiction they

tried to revise the notion that marriage was the *sine qua non* of a woman's existence in a way that earlier American women writers had rarely done, with the exception, of course, of Margaret Fuller. However, while Fuller envisioned a spiritual union of complementary equals as the ideal marriage, women writers of the Civil War and postwar years had a more difficult time confidently promoting such a revolution in gender relations. Whether married or not, women writers of this generation understood that the ideal promoted by Fuller, which theoretically would allow women to realize their creative potential side-by-side with their soul mates, was a long way from being realized.

Narratives of Marriage and Art

In their fiction, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson approached the subject of marriage for women artists with a great degree of skepticism. Their narratives featuring women artists reject the formulation of the sentimental artist heroine promoted by their countrywomen in favor of the European romantic woman of genius. In both traditions, the question of the artist heroine's marital status was central to her characterization and the story's plot. For most nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans, this question boiled down to a tension between the essentially feminine nature of "woman" and the masculine conception of "artist." In their narratives of women artists, antebellum American women writers privileged the "woman" in the woman writer. Instead of the *Künstlerroman*, a novel of the artist's development, they wrote a type of female *Bildungsroman*, as the heroine learns to become a "true woman." However, in the European tradition of women artist narratives, the tension between "woman" and "artist" is not resolved in favor of "woman." Instead, the "artist" is privileged to a degree unseen in America before the Civil War. A significant marker of the postwar generation of women artists, then, is their break with their American predecessors in favor of engagement with the European women's *Künstlerroman* tradition.

The American sentimental artist heroine is best represented by Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall, in the novel of that name (1855), and Augusta Jane Evans's Edna Earl in *St. Elmo* (1866). Ruth Hall's story is one of repeated abandonment by the men in her life (through death or neglect). A widow with two children, Ruth must find a way to support her family. She eventually discovers that she can turn an exceptional ability for writing into a profitable vocation. Her talent is not integral to her identity, however, only a fortunate boon. She turns to writing only out of necessity and, even after her success, claims that she writes only to feed her

children. As Linda Huf remarks, "Her 'sacred calling' . . . is not art but motherhood. She writes not for glory but for her helpless children." The source of her drive to write, in fact, is her daughters. Fern writes of Ruth's self-sacrificial efforts at writing: "She had not the slightest idea, till long after, what an incredible amount of labor she accomplished, or how her *mother's heart* was goading her on." As a result, "ambition is . . . [a] hollow thing" to her in comparison with her role as a mother. Ruth represents the midcentury domestic woman writer whose identity as an author is subordinate to her identity as a mother. Edna, in Evans's novel, is in many ways Ruth's antithesis. She is neither mother nor wife and writes not for money but for fame. However, her ambition is clearly portrayed as destructive to her happiness and health. Having rejected the role of "feminine" popular author, choosing instead to write "masculine," intellectual novels, she is first punished for her choice and then rescued from her fate by a suitor. First, however, she rejects the proposal of Mr. Manning, who tells her, "You must let me take care of you, and save you from the ceaseless toil in which you are rapidly wearing out your life." He offers her his home and the tutelage of his niece and tells her, "You are inordinately ambitious; I can lift you to a position that will satisfy you, and place you above the necessity of daily labour—a position of happiness and ease, where your genius can properly develop itself." Whether he, an influential editor, promises to further her career or not remains vague, but this point is not integral to Edna's decision. At first, she is tempted to accept for fear of becoming an old maid: "Either she must marry him, or live single, and work and die—alone." Far from the happy women of Alcott's and Phelps's writings, Edna views spinsterhood as a curse and her work as a burden too heavy to carry alone. But her real reason for turning him down is her persistent love for the rake St. Elmo. In the end, she accepts the proposal of a reformed St. Elmo, who liberates her from the oppression of her authorial career: "To-day I snap the fetters of your literary bondage. There shall be no more books written! . . . You belong solely to me now, and I shall take care of the life you have nearly destroyed in your inordinate ambition." Love conquers all and rescues Edna from a literary ambition that, Evans has been suggesting all along, would have killed her. Just as the novel Edna writes promotes women's domestic role, so does Evans's in the end, and the contradictions inherent in the real and the imagined novel are never resolved as the "artist" is buried and the "woman" takes her place.³⁹

Ruth and Edna renounce or never even consider participating in the cult of genius, a realm that remains irrevocably male. Although both novels nonetheless participated in the legitimization of women's writing in the public sphere (*Ruth*

Hall by claiming authorship as a viable occupation for a woman and *St. Elmo* by depicting at length the intellectual achievement of a woman), neither novel allows women to be artists or blurs the boundary between high literature (associated with men) and middlebrow literature (the proper sphere of women, if they wrote at all). As a result, these works did not speak to Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson about the dilemmas that preoccupied them. Ruth and Edna were not role models for them or their heroines because these characters did not take their art seriously enough and did not confront the difficulty of combining the identities of “woman” and “artist.” On the other hand, the artist narratives by European women, particularly de Staël’s *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), gave them the pre-texts they needed not only to envision themselves as artists but also to create their own works of art. For these two works not only helped to suggest the identities and life possibilities of the woman artist; they also represented the most highly regarded achievements of women writers. By participating in this tradition, implicitly or explicitly reworking these plots and modeling their heroines after Corinne, Aurora, and other similar types, postbellum women writers created some of their most accomplished works of art.

Corinne, de Staël’s novel about a woman genius, was the first of its kind: an exploration of the special difficulties that faced the brilliant woman as she grew up and sought happiness and love. It depicted a gifted woman who was a poet, musician, singer, actress, dancer, artist, *improvisatrice* (improviser of poetry), and a national hero. In the opening scenes, Oswald Lord Nelvil travels from Scotland to Italy, where he stumbles upon a public ceremony paying tribute to the famous Corinne. The reader is therefore introduced to Corinne through the hero’s eyes, suggesting the significance of male opinion regarding the woman artist. Just as he overcomes his prejudices and falls in love with her, so is the reader invited to accept her brilliance as an exceptional woman to whom “the ordinary rules for judging women cannot be applied.”⁴⁰ In addition, as Oswald compares her to a work of art—her arms are “ravishingly beautiful,” and her figure is “reminiscent of Greek statuary” (21)—the reader also is initially invited to view her as an art object. But Oswald watches her transformation from woman/object to artist/subject as the crown of myrtle and laurel is placed on her head: “No longer a fearful woman, she was an inspired priestess, joyously devoting herself to the cult of genius” (32).

Having begun at the high point of her life and career, however, the novel begins its descent as Corinne falls in love with Oswald. She resists at first, feeling

“enslaved” by the emotion, and tells him, “Loving you as I do does me great harm: I need my talents, my mind, my imagination to sustain the brilliance of the life I have adopted.” Only the domestic woman who has no other commitments can love freely because love “absorb[s] every other interest and every other idea” (90). But, as Corinne says, her commitment to her art is not easily discarded; it is necessary for her survival. Nonetheless, de Staël suggests that Corinne’s life is not complete without love. This is the vicious circle that will become the defining quality of this tradition of the woman’s *Künstlerroman*. As a nineteenth-century “woman,” to be the object and the giver of love was one of life’s basic necessities. But, as Corinne confesses, to love as a woman is not compatible with being an artist: “Talent requires inner independence that true love never allows” (301). However, the artist’s life is not a career choice for Corinne, the woman of genius, as it is for Ruth or Edna; it is central to her identity. And, as the narrative goes on to show, to fall in love means the death of the artist. Here, both woman *and* artist die. First, Corinne loses her gift as she falls in love with Oswald, and then she slowly succumbs to a broken heart when he decides that he cannot accept her as a wife. Following his father’s wishes, he rejects her because she is too much the artist and instead marries her half sister, the sheltered, simple, and good Lucille with no talents beyond her domestic role. Oswald has fallen in love with Corinne’s opposite, “lost in a dream of the celestial purity of a young girl who, always at her mother’s side, knows nothing of life but daughterly affection” (317), in other words, a woman who feels no conflict between love and art because she is the apotheosis of womanly love. The story is a tragic one, ending with Corinne’s death, but not before she has taught the daughter of Lucille and Oswald to please him with the myriad talents Corinne herself possesses, a reminder of what he gave up and a complement to the sweet but talentless mother.

The contrast between the domestic Lucille and the genius Corinne is also manifested in their national affiliation. Corinne, with an Italian mother and English father, embraces her Italian heritage (representative of passion and the classical tradition of art and literature), while Lucille, who shares the same father, was raised by her English mother. After the death of her mother in Italy, Corinne spent her adolescence with Lucille’s mother but later escaped a dismal domestic fate in England under her oppressive rule. Her stepmother believed that “women were made to watch over their husband’s households and their children’s health, that all other ambition was harmful” and advised Corinne to “hide any ambition [she] might have” (255). But in Italy, de Staël insists, she was free to realize her genius.

In many ways a response to *Corinne*, Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, a novel in blank verse, also depicts a woman of genius whose artist identity is central to her understanding of herself. Like Corinne, Aurora is born of an Italian mother and an English father and is brought to England after the death of her mother and father to be raised by a woman (her aunt) who "had lived / A sort of cage-bird life."⁴¹ Aurora, who is "A wild bird scarcely fledged" (1.310), rebels against the traditional mold into which her aunt tries to put her: "We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight, / Producing what?" (1.457-458). Realizing that the domestic woman produces only slippers or cushions for her husband, she aspires to create something loftier for humanity, namely poetry, for poets are "the only truth-tellers now left to God, / The only speakers of essential truth" (1.859-860). Against the objections of her aunt "when she caught / My soul agaze in my eyes" (1.1030-1031) and "demurred / That souls were dangerous things to carry straight / Through all the spilt saltpetre of the world" (1.1033-1035), Aurora devotes herself to discovering the "Muse-Sphinx" (1.1020), or the source of poetic inspiration.

On her twentieth birthday, as she crowns herself with an ivy wreath, mimicking the similar ceremony at the beginning of *Corinne*, Aurora feels a tremendous faith in her future. "Woman and artist, — either incomplete" (2.4), she begins, in the famous phrase that neatly encapsulates the dilemma of *Corinne*. However, she continues, "Both credulous of completion. There I held / The whole creation in my little cup" (2.5-6). The purpose of *Aurora Leigh* is to solve the dilemma de Staël had established and to prove wrong the naysayers who claimed that a woman artist is neither a true woman nor a true artist. Her cousin Romney represents these voices, telling her, "The chances are that, being a woman, young / And pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes, / You write as well . . . and ill . . . upon the whole, / As other women. If as well, what then? / If even a little better, . . . still, what then? / We want the Best in art now, or no art" (2.144-149; ellipses in original). When he asks her to instead join him in his social reform as his wife, she rejects his proposal because it shows he forgets that "every creature, female as the male, / Stands single in his responsible act and thought" (2.437-438). A woman can join a man in his "work and love" only if they "are good for her—the best / She was born for" (2.441-443). Here Aurora directly echoes Corinne's belief, "Is not every woman, as much as every man, obliged to make her way according to her own character and talents?" (255). Although Romney only sees her, a woman, as his "complement" (2.435), she informs him, "I too have my vocation, — work to do" (2.455).

Aurora's assertion of her duty to pursue her vocation rather than marry Romney undoubtedly comes more easily because she believes there is no true love on either side. Just as Corinne rejected three offers of marriage before meeting Oswald because none of them inspired true love, Aurora rejects the loveless marriage, admitting that, had he loved her, "I might have been a common woman now / And happier, less known and less left alone, / Perhaps a better woman after all" (2.513-515). This part of the narrative is written with the hindsight of the Aurora who has since left her home to pursue her literary career in London and has found only an empty fame. She comes to hear Romney's voice more loudly in her ears, telling her that she "played at art, made thrusts with a toy-sword" (3.240). "And yet," she laments, "I felt it in me where it burnt, / Like those hot fire-seeds of creation held / In Jove's clenched palm before the worlds were sown, — / But I—I was not Juno even! my hand / Was shut in weak convulsion, woman's ill" (3.251-255). Instead of Jove's powerful hand, she possesses a hand crippled by overwork. Like Edna Earl, she is in danger of losing her health to her work. But unlike Edna, rather than wither until rescued, she goes back to Italy, her birthplace, to recuperate and rejuvenate herself after completion of her book.

Although Aurora has gained a wide reputation for her verses, she has not been content with her lonely life. She leaves her solitary writer's existence to participate in the world again and first comes upon Marian, a poor woman whom Romney had almost married as part of his social vision of uniting upper and lower classes. When Marian was lured away by the villainous Lady Waldemar to a French brothel, she conceived a child through rape, but Aurora overcomes her socially instilled prejudices and brings Marian and her baby to live with her in Italy. Reawakened to her desires for love by the example of this mother and child—whom God has granted "the right to laugh" (8.25), while for Aurora "there's somewhat less" (8.27)—Aurora is now ready for Romney to reenter her life, which he does, blinded in a fire set by the people he was trying to help. Romney proves to be not only weakened, as the formerly arrogant suitor is in so many women's narratives, but also reformed. He has become inspired by Aurora's book and grants her the supreme ability of a poet: "You have shown me truths" (8.608), by which he means universal, spiritual truths. Their reconciliation, however, is effected over a deeper matter. For Romney had not only declared women incapable of being great poets; he had also proclaimed the poet's work inferior to that of the reformer. Having failed at his social reform efforts, however, he now declares Aurora's work of the soul as superior to his work of the material world.

On her side, she has come to acknowledge the importance of the poet's grounding in the real, tangible world through "love," that mysterious last word of her father: "Love, my child, love, love!" (1.212). In order to effect in herself this unity between the soul and the material through love, she must fulfill the vision that was yet incomplete on her twentieth birthday. Then "woman" and "artist" were still incomplete; now she tries to fuse the two: "Passioned to exalt / The artist's instinct in me at the cost / Of putting down the woman's, I forgot / No perfect artist is developed here / From any imperfect woman" (9.645-649). By discovering her love for Romney, she unites what had been separate, imperfect identities into one. And rather than find them incompatible, as de Staël had, Barrett Browning insists, through Aurora, that they enhance each other. For love is not a distraction from genius, it is the source of genius: "Art symbolizes heaven, but Love is God / And makes heaven" (9.658-659). Having formerly rejected the way of "A simple woman who believes in love" (9.661), she now tells Romney that if "you'd stoop so low to take my love / And use it roughly, without stint or spare, / As men use common things . . . / The joy would set me like a star, in heaven" (9.674-679). The path to heaven, that which art aims to represent, is through love, which Barrett Browning romantically describes as a union of equal souls. This is not the motivation of sacrificial mother-love that Ruth Hall feels; rather, it is the divine inspiration to see universal truths that only the poet who knows love here on earth can experience. But, as this passage suggests, love need not be returned in order to effect the completeness Aurora desires. The point is more for her to realize her capacity to love (her "womanhood") than to be loved in return. Of course, however, Romney does love her, and the poem ends with the two lovers united in purpose and declaring that "Our work shall still be better for our love, / And still our love be sweeter for our work" (9.925-926).

In the writings by American women of the Civil War and postbellum years, we see a tremendous debt to *Corinne* and *Aurora Leigh*, particularly in their depiction of women artists committed to the pursuit of genius. *Corinne* and *Aurora* made it possible for American women writers also to create autobiographical artist heroines who reject the path of ordinary women and develop masculine ambitions. However, these later writers shared neither the romantic fatalism of de Staël nor the passionate idealism of Barrett Browning. While they were drawn to the depiction of romantic genius in *Corinne* and *Aurora Leigh*, they were less inclined to adopt a romantic attitude toward love. In short, they were more realistic in their depiction of the woman artist's life choices. None of their artist heroines dies of the grief that killed *Corinne*, although there are plenty of deaths, real and

metaphorical. Most importantly, though, none of their works envisions the unity of love and art in the woman artist's life the way *Aurora Leigh* does. Their fictions end time and again in the death of the "woman," the "artist," or both. Unable effectively to resolve this issue in their own lives, they wrote realistic narratives of how women writers and artists were forced to choose between their desire for expression and self-realization as artists and their desire for heterosexual love. None of them envisioned a female community supportive of the woman writer, as Jewett would to some extent much later in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). Instead, perhaps out of a desire to enter into a tradition of women's artist narratives and also motivated by autobiographical concerns, they engaged the dilemma presented by *Corinne* and seemingly, but unrealistically, solved by *Aurora Leigh*.

Stoddard's short story "Collected by a Valetudinarian" (1870) can be read as participating in this women's *Künstlerroman* tradition. Written at a time when Stoddard had given up writing novels herself and was essentially looking back on her own career, the story splits Stoddard's consciousness into two or three different female characters, suggesting the incompleteness she felt as a woman and an artist. The story's narrator is Eliza Sinclair, who possesses the same initials as Stoddard as well as a shortened form of her first name. Returning to a place familiar to her in her youth to recover from some unnamed grief, Eliza seeks solace in the past and in solitude. She is no longer known in this town, suggesting an absence of identity. Having established a romantic atmosphere by declaring her determination to "remain as long as the perturbed ghosts, my present rulers, would permit," she soon meets a romantic double, Helen, who is the cousin of a "woman of genius," Alicia Raymond.⁴² All three women are linked in the story: Helen "bore a shadowy resemblance to myself" (288), Eliza claims, and Helen tells her that "Of all the persons I ever knew, you might have understood and aided [Alicia]" (289). The names Eliza and Alicia are also nearly homophonic. As Eliza and Helen, who have no past of their own ("Mrs. Hobson [Helen] never told me her history; I never asked it. Having no wish to reveal mine why should I demand hers?" [288]), dwell on Alicia's past, the three women merge. Reading Alicia's diary, Eliza thinks, "I was Alicia, or I was the dream of myself—which?" (296).

As Eliza and Alicia, in particular, melt together, they also become connected to a long line of earlier women of genius. In lamenting the obscurity of her cousin, Helen compares Alicia's life to that of the Brontë sisters: "I say, what a mockery the life of genius is! What half of a community knows it?" Fame is "all

luck,” Helen continues, using the example of the Brontës, who had “starved every way — most of all, starved for Beauty,” and only after such a desolate life had found fame (289). Like them, Alicia had been deprived and isolated, but nonetheless, “this gifted woman, Alicia, discerned a world of beauty and truth that made an everlasting happiness for her great soul, as did Charlotte Brontë” (290). Alicia is also linked to George Sand, whose portrait she has on her wall and whose work she reads. She may also be linked, obliquely, to Corinne. Alicia’s brother, Alton (named after Stoddard’s brother Altol), punning on his own metaphor likening the creation of art to the formation of coral in the sea, calls her “Coralline” (294). The name is likely derivative of Corinne, or even of Corilla, an Italian *improvisatrice* who was “crowned with laurel at the Capitol . . . in 1776” and may herself have been a model for the fictional Corinne.⁴³ Alicia’s name may also be linked to “Aurora,” and her last name, Raymond, to “Romney.” Alicia is therefore much more than an individual woman; she is an American manifestation of the woman of genius embodied by Brontë, Sand, Corinne, and Aurora. Alicia’s fate, though, is quite different from Corinne’s or Aurora’s and suggests the ways in which American women writers found it difficult fully to envision the woman of genius.

Intertextualities with *Aurora Leigh* can be seen in the evocation of a young woman’s discovery of her individuality through the symbol of birds and descriptions of nature. The landlord of the boardinghouse where Eliza and Helen are staying condescendingly tells them: “Birds of a feather flock together” (288), suggesting by this cliché that they are unusual women. Birds are a recurrent and potent metaphor for the woman writer (poet in particular) in *Aurora Leigh*, as they are in many women’s writings, including *Jane Eyre*.⁴⁴ The bird sings beautifully but can also be silenced or domesticated and caged, its free flight restricted, making it a perfect symbol for the woman writer. In fact, it was so widely used that we could read the landlord’s comment here as a not-so-veiled statement that Eliza and Helen are artist figures. In the beginning of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora feels like “a nest-deserted bird” (1.43) when her mother dies. Then, as we have already seen, she contrasts her aunt’s “cage-bird life” with her own free, “wild bird” nature. The “Muse-Sphinx” she invokes is also a kind of bird, as a Sphinx has wings. Before she finds her voice as a poet, the sun tells her, “I make the birds sing — listen! but, for you, / God never hears your voice, excepting when / You lie upon the bed at nights, and weep” (1.658–660). As she later prepares to crown herself, she describes her harmony with everything around her: “I was glad, that day; / The June was in me, with its multitudes / Of nightingales all singing in the

dark" (2.9–11). She goes on to describe the "green trail across the lawn" that her gown makes and the "honeyed bees [that] keep humming to themselves" (2.21, 27). In "Collected," a nearly identical scene is described when Eliza visits Alicia's house to read her diary: "I was glad to be alone. The grass on the lawn waved me a welcome; butter-cups glistened in it; bees and butterflies hummed and hovered every where . . . and birds constantly twittered over my head" (296). It is at this point that she wonders if she is Alicia or is dreaming of herself, or, one could extrapolate, dreaming of Aurora Leigh. Clearly Stoddard was drawn to the early parts of Barrett Browning's *Künstlerroman*, particularly the description of Aurora's discovery of herself as a poet. Stoddard must have been less sure about the latter parts in which Barrett Browning expresses her idealism about the ability of Aurora to combine "woman" and "artist." Alicia attempts this fusion as well but with slightly different results.

Alicia's diary, which covers the span of one summer, borrows extensively from Stoddard's diary from the summer of 1866. However, condensed within one season's reflections we can see the course of a life that in significant ways mirrors the lives of previous women of genius, including Corinne, Aurora, and Charlotte Brontë. Alicia certainly resembles these women in her isolation and difference from other women. As in *Corinne*, this difference is brought into focus by contrasting the woman of genius with a so-called ordinary woman. Here the two are rivals not for a lover but for Alicia's brother, who is a kind of platonic lover to his sister and therefore does not present the same threats as a sexual lover. Julia is "the pretty creature" who does not understand Alicia's work, just as Lucille was incapable of comprehending art in general and Corinne's genius in particular. To Alicia she is a "child" who "has never suffered" (305), in stark contrast to Alicia's own life of suffering. The source of this suffering is the same as for earlier women artists: isolation, lack of understanding, and lovelessness. When a suitor comes to ask for her hand, she "wish[es she] could fall in love with him" (300) and thereby reconnect with human beings. But his ardor, expressed in his willingness to "mend your pens to my dying day" is finally not tempting: "what would become of my literary career? A strong man's love might interfere with my hero; and my heroine might interfere with him" (301). Her work comes first. It is clear, though, that Alicia is not rejecting the "true" romantic love that Corinne and Aurora found. After he leaves, however, she feels first "free" then "lonely," and her work suffers while the world is "Blank to me" (302). Memories of an earlier love, Arnold, also recur: "He had the best of [my soul], yet left me. Eternally my heart is his." This true love, although enshrined safely in the past, continues to

threaten her work as she finds “No motive for writing” and doubts her abilities (300). By now, she is also making frequent references to her impending death. After having read Emerson and George Sand one evening, she felt “the walls of an invisible, fearful destiny . . . slowly closing round me” (299), bearing out the romantic imagery from the beginning of the story. It appears on the surface that Alicia is meeting the fate of so many women artists — mysterious death for lack of love and for committing herself to her art.

However, Alicia’s life is not entirely loveless. Her brother provides her companionship, even if he doesn’t share her literary tastes and appreciation for art and doesn’t require of her the duty that a husband would. Also, his impending marriage to Julia provides her with the understanding of love that she needs to complete her novel. In fact, as Alicia slowly dies, Alton’s and Julia’s romance (the inspiration for her art) picks up. Sensing a “shadow” on their love because she is dying, she is convinced “that will pass. Love will have its way, George Sand says, upon the bones of the dead” (305). After she dies, their love will continue, as will her novel. By living vicariously through them, though, she discovers the love necessary for great art: “The drama here [between the two lovers] refreshes me. One way I see that I have failed in the story I am writing; that is, they teach me so” (305). Although she sees Julia as taking her place in Alton’s heart, it is their love that teaches her how to finish her novel (she is at least on “the last chapters” [306]). Even Julia, who admits she does not “understand” the book, recognizes the “truth about us women” in it (306). The next diary entry, two weeks later, is Alicia’s last.

This story’s obvious reflection of Stoddard’s life suggests that Alicia is, in part, the author’s self-construction as a misunderstood artist. In trying to understand her isolation, Eliza sums up Stoddard’s self-image at this time: “I dare say no one understood her. . . . What should drive one into solitude, if a lack of comprehension of one’s sincerest feelings and motives can not?” (295). She claims here, through Eliza and Alicia, to have stopped writing because she was unappreciated. Others previously have read this story as one of compensation or wish fulfillment for Stoddard,⁴⁵ but even more significant is how she creates Alicia as simultaneously a representative of herself *and* a composite figure of the nineteenth-century woman of genius. Always anxious to distinguish herself from other American women writers, who she thought were inferior, Stoddard places Alicia, and by extension herself, into the tradition of European women artists. But Alicia, like her author, did not meet the same fate as those earlier idols and their creations. Without even reading her work, only the diary, Eliza decides to leave

Alicia's writings unpublished. Although Alicia seems to have briefly found completeness as an artist, and Eliza has told Alicia's story, the narrative ends with a closed circle of silence as Eliza tells Helen, "She had her world in Alton, in you, and will have in me. . . . That is enough" (307). She is therefore like Corinne, who is surrounded by Oswald, Lucille, and their daughter as she dies, but also unlike Corinne, who was simultaneously mourned by a nation, commemorated by a "funeral procession to Rome" (419). While Corinne remains as a symbol—warning or inspiration—to later generations, and Aurora looks into a future of prophetic art as a poet-wife, Alicia is buried and forgotten beyond a small circle. Such is the case for nearly all of the woman artists created by American women writers, who not only found it difficult to combine love and art but also found it nearly impossible to achieve the recognition that de Staël and Barrett Browning did.

What we have not yet seen in these narratives of women artists' lives is a woman's attempt to combine the life of a "wife" with the life of an "artist." Corinne loses her genius just by loving, and the implication is that if she did marry, her art would become purely domesticated. Aurora becomes "woman" and "artist," but we do not see her become a "wife." And Alicia feels compelled to choose one over the other, assuming that the two cannot coexist. It is in Phelps's magnum opus, *The Story of Avis*, that full consideration is given to this most complicated aspect of the woman artist's life. With a high regard for romantic genius but a stark realism in her portrayal of the married woman artist, Phelps created the most important novel of her generation about a woman artist. But before analyzing this novel in the context of the European women's *Künstlerroman*, we must consider two other works that had a profound impact on its creation.

The first of these, George Eliot's verse drama *Armgarth* (1871), provides an epigraph to one of the chapters of *Avis* and serves as the basis for the proposal scene in chapter 7. *Armgarth* was published one year after Stoddard's "Collected" and is a clear participant in the *Corinne–Aurora Leigh* debate about love for the woman artist. Armgarth, a famous singer, soundly rejects the man in her life, Graf (Count) Dornberg, despite her apparent love for him. She feels like a "bride" when she sings and proudly relishes the recognition she receives from her audience. When "Graf," as Eliot refers to him, tries to tempt her with his audience of one and tells her that fame is fickle while love is lasting, she is not convinced. He wishes that she would subordinate her art to her womanhood: "Nay, purer glory reached, had you been throned / As woman only, . . . Concentrating your

power in home delights / Which penetrate and purify the world.” Resenting his suggestion that she “Sing in the chimney-corner to inspire / My husband reading news,” she insists that nature has “willed” her to be an artist for the world. “I am an artist by my birth, — / By the same warrant that I am a woman : / Nay, in the added rarer gift I see / Supreme vocation.” She refutes the implication that she is less a woman for being an artist and tells him that he has not learned, since he last proposed, how to win her: “As I remember, ’Twas not to speak save to the artist crowned, / Nor speak to her of casting off her crown.” She tells him that he asks of her what he would never consider for himself: “one of us / Must yield that something else for which each lives / Besides the other.” While he wants her to live for him alone, he will have both her and his vocation. She explains that her refusal is not due to lack of love for him: “it is her sorrow / That she may not love you.” Knowing that “my kind is rare,” she urges him to “seek the woman you deserve, / All grace, all goodness, who has not yet found / A meaning in her life, or any end / Beyond fulfilling yours. The type abounds.” The suggestion is that Graf will go on to meet his Lucille, having been rejected by his Corinne. Meanwhile, like Alicia, Armgart feels complete without marriage: “O, I can live unmated, but not live / Without the bliss of singing to the world, / And feeling all my world respond to me.”⁴⁶

In the remaining five pages, however, Armgart must learn how to do just that. She has lost her beautiful singing voice owing to an illness. Grief-stricken, she accuses her doctor of murdering her voice; she cries that his cures “hold me living in a deep, deep tomb, / Crying unheard forever!” This Gothic image is the most poignant expression of the pain associated with the death of the artist in any of these narratives. In a more conventional metaphor, she also calls herself “songless as a missel-thrush.” Insisting that she would not marry Graf now, for “It would be pitying constancy, not love,” she must find a new direction for her life. After complaining that her “lot” is now the old story of all ordinary women, “The Woman’s Lot : a Tale of everyday,” her lame cousin Fräulein Walpurga admonishes her for her selfishness. Brought down to Walpurga’s level by her “[m]aim-[ing],” Armgart learns to have “a human heart.” Walpurga shows up Armgart’s hubris: “For what is it to you, that women, men, / Plod, faint, are weary, and espouse despair / Of aught but fellowship? Save that you spurn / To be among them?” In the end, Armgart vows to “take humble work and do it well, — / Teach music, singing, what I can” and to return Walpurga to her home, which she had left to support Armgart in her career.⁴⁷ Armgart therefore seems to embrace the worldly purpose of Aurora and Romney, but she finds it through homosocial

kinship and bonding instead of heterosexual love. In addition, she had to lose her gift in order to sympathize with the lives of others. Although Eliot addresses the same kinds of issues that are integral to the woman artist's narrative, she appears to be the least approving of women's commitment to art. Armgart is presented as selfish and self-centered, and the main impetus of the story is to teach her to feel for others rather than be absorbed in her own career or the pain that results from losing it. Unlike *Ruth Hall* and *St. Elmo*, *Armgart* does not promote motherhood or marriage as superior to art; however, it clearly portrays self-sacrifice as the proper aim of a woman's life.

The renunciation of the selfishness of artistry is also the main theme of another pre-text of Phelps's novel, her mother's story "The Husband of a Blue" (1853). In this story, however, the message is about the superiority of domesticity, and therefore it has more in common with *Ruth Hall* and *St. Elmo*. Shortly after her mother's death, Phelps's father published a collection of her mother's stories, including "The Husband of a Blue," a work that, like *The Story of Avis*, focuses on the complications of marriage for a woman committed to her work. The heroine, Marion Gray, is a young woman who accepts a marriage proposal even though she is more devoted to her studies and her intellectual development than to being a wife and mother. Her name recalls Phelps's given name, Mary Gray Phelps, making it plausible that this story was the mother's lesson to her daughter about the decisions that would confront her one day. Marion has no mother, just as Mary Gray Phelps soon would have no mother to guide her through her young adulthood. Unfortunately, Marion makes a bad decision about marriage. The problem is not whom to marry, as is usually the case in female *Bildungsromane* like *St. Elmo*, but marrying without any idea of the pitfalls that await her. When Marion tells her lover that she is not cut out for housekeeping and that she is committed to "her books," he responds, "A housekeeper he could hire, but where could he find another woman like Marion Gray?"⁴⁸ Yet shortly after their marriage, the misfortune begins. Marion is "selfish" and locks herself up in her study, "apparently forgetful of her husband's comfort," while he, in contrast, is "generous" and "indulgen[t]" of her moods (101–102). The narrator claims that she is incapable of the "self-sacrificing devotion" necessary in a wife (103), while he appears more willing to sacrifice his needs. Soon she descends into a deep depression. "How utterly unfitted did she find herself for domestic life; how unfortunate that her passion for literary pursuits should have been so strong! But, then, ought she to be blamed for the domestic discomfort which resulted from it? Did she not give her husband full warning of what he might expect?" (106). She even

accuses him of “deceiv[ing]” her, to which he replies that he believes no woman, “married or unmarried,” would be happy if she was wholly without domestic duties (107–108). After they have children, the situation worsens. Mr. Ashton must sacrifice his own work in order to care for the children, whom Marion neglects. When her aunt comes for a visit, she makes their house a “*home*” (113), and Mr. Ashton finds that he prefers her company to his wife’s, which Marion interprets as evidence that “he did value domestic accomplishments more than much learning.” Despite his earlier admiration of the intellectual stimulation she offered him, it becomes clear that what he really wants in a wife is “*recreation*,” a peaceful haven from his “great pursuits” (115).

Perhaps the most important message of “Husband,” however, is not about the domestic disharmony that results when a wife has her own “great pursuits,” but that those pursuits are necessarily in vain. The narrator suggests that Marion’s efforts and “aspirations” will not bear fruit because she has developed only one part of herself: “just in the ratio in which her intellect was cultivated, her heart was neglected” (116). She only begins to comprehend her mistake when she meets Mrs. Graves, the model of the perfect woman, as intelligent as Marion but more accomplished, but whose name suggests once again the death of the woman artist.⁴⁹ “I love my books,” Mrs. Graves informs her, “but . . . I never open my writing desk until every domestic duty is performed. I do not neglect [my husband], or his house, for my studies. I think a woman loses more than she gains by such a course” (123). Mrs. Graves is the model woman writer of the antebellum years who, like Ruth Hall, always puts her family first. Faced with this model, “Marion felt reprov[ed] and humbled. Might it not, after all, prove true, that there was some such mysterious connection between a woman’s intellect and her heart that the one could never develop its full vigor unless the heart grew strong with it; and that in the charmed duties of a *home* must it exercise its best affection?” (123). Here we see a construction similar to the combination of “woman” and “artist” in *Aurora Leigh*: love is the key to completing the woman artist. But, Barrett Browning did not take this argument to its logical conclusion for most nineteenth-century women: as Mrs. Graves says, art, even reading, must take second place to her “duty” to loved ones. However, perhaps more concerned with the idea that by taking second place, her work will suffer, Marion quickly dismisses Mrs. Graves’s implicit advice and returns to her “selfish” ways. As a result, the narrator suggests, she fails to fully mature as a writer. “[G]enius” leaves as quickly as it appears, sending her “back to earth” (125). Meanwhile, her husband, in spite of his many cares, writes a profound article for the “North American” (126).

Although Phelps (the mother) found it difficult, if not impossible, to cultivate her mind while running a household, in "Husband" it is the husband who is stretched so thin that his intellectual endeavors are threatened. When Marion grows ill and demands his constant attention, he wonders, "What could be accomplished, with such broken time?" (127). *He* must juggle domestic responsibilities with his writing, but the outcome is very different for him than it is for the first Phelps's married woman writer in *The Angel over the Right Shoulder* (1852), who must compromise her intellectual development, devoting only stolen hours now and then to her study and never able to write productively. Mr. Ashton, by contrast, successfully completes his work and gains recognition for it. Meanwhile, Marion self-destructs, succumbing to her "nervousness" (128). The husband, who, as the title implies, has been the real focus of this story, is the martyr who triumphs despite his wife's "criminal neglect" (133). While she gains nothing more than "the reputation of a 'deep Blue,'" he, "made strong by nobly enduring suffering, became, at length, one of the great men of his day" (133). Interestingly, there is never any mention of the fruits of Marion's seemingly ceaseless literary endeavors. Apparently, she toils away at no tangible product. By trying to be what she cannot and should not be, she fails. The narrator confides in the last lines that only by uniting her intellect with her husband's and by joining in his work could she "have ascended the meridian with her husband" (134). This is similar to the lesson graciously learned by Mrs. James in *The Angel over the Right Shoulder*, namely, that if she is to receive her heavenly reward for a life well lived, she must be equally committed to "cultivat[ing] her own mind and heart" and "perform[ing] faithfully all those little household cares and duties on which the comfort and virtue of her family depended."⁵⁰ "Husband" suggests that a woman is incomplete without love and domestic happiness, that she could not be the kind of intellectual light that a married woman could be. Marion's failing is that she tries to continue living her life as if she were a single woman, implying that even if a woman remains unmarried, she cannot hope to achieve what men achieve.

Retelling her mother's "Husband of a Blue" from the wife's perspective in *The Story of Avis*, Phelps takes a similar heroine and puts her to the same test as Marion, although Avis is allowed a long period of self-development and dedication to art (including six years of study alone in Europe) before she is wooed. The outcome is different for her but tragic nonetheless. In the daughter's portrayal of the problem, it is the wife, not the husband, who is the martyr. Unlike Marion, Avis rises to the occasion and sacrifices herself and her art rather than neglect her

husband and children for selfish ends. However, the blissful union of two strong souls, which her mother held up as the ideal at the end of “Husband,” is not possible in the daughter’s story because, she implies, men are not ready for such a relationship with women. Like *Corinne*, *Avis* blames a man for the woman artist’s decline. But in *Corinne*, Oswald is only responsible for killing the “woman”; the death of the “artist” is deemed inevitable. In *Avis*, however, the man kills the “artist,” luring her, as in “Husband,” with unrealistic promises.

Avis is deeply intertextual with these earlier women’s artist narratives, particularly *Aurora Leigh*, *Armstrong*, and her mother’s works, but also, by extension, *Corinne* and “Collected.” As in each of these previous works, the heroine is autobiographical and decidedly different from ordinary women. *Avis* is also contrasted with her friends, the conventional Coy and Barbara, who possess the usual feminine attractions and have no other ambition than to be wives and mothers. Instead, *Avis*, like her fictional predecessors, is devoted to her career and sees herself first and foremost as an artist. Additionally, just as earlier artist heroines had, she falls in love and has to confront the dilemma of whether to mix love and art. However, by combining the female *Künstlerroman*’s valorization of romantic genius for women with her mother’s focus on the aftermath of the woman artist’s choice to marry, Phelps created the most realistic narrative of the woman artist’s dilemma. Rather than idealize romantic love or the artist’s isolation, Phelps wrote a stark critique of the pressures that still made it impossible for her generation of women to achieve the ideal unions promoted in either *Aurora Leigh* or her mother’s works. For Phelps, men were not capable of granting women the necessary equality in marriage, and the woman artist could not so easily renounce her ambition.

The novel begins with *Avis* at the height of her powers, before she has fallen in love. Like *Corinne*, then, this is perhaps less a *Künstlerroman* than a novel of the woman artist’s decline. For the story of her youth and her development as an artist is brief, told in only two chapters. As a young girl, *Avis* asks her mother, “what shall I be?”⁵¹ In contrast to Barbara, who wants to marry, and Coy, who wants to be a “lady,” *Avis* prefers the boys’ aspirations: college president or even dog-store owner (23). In this conversation, *Avis* discovers that her mother had desired to be an actress and senses the depth of the pain associated with the renunciation of her ambitions when she married *Avis*’s father. The lesson to the young *Avis* is that marriage is not full compensation for the lost opportunity to develop one’s unique talent. But *Avis*’s mother, as in the case of Phelps’s own mother, wastes away under an unknown illness, leaving the young daughter, like

Mary Gray and Marion Gray, to make her way in the world without any guidance. Although Corinne's and Aurora's mothers also died when they were young, here the loss is portrayed as even more inauspicious. The lack of a supportive maternal guide and kindred spirit seems to ensure Avis's downfall, as she succumbs to the same lure of love that her mother did and suffers the same grief over the loss of her art.

After her mother's death, Avis, like Corinne and Aurora, is raised by a surrogate mother (an aunt) who tries to instill the domestic, feminine virtues in her. Avis's rebellion is more thorough, however. Avis tells her father, "I hate to make my bed; and I hate, hate, to sew chemises; and I hate, hate, *bate*, to go cooking round the kitchen. . . . mama never cooked about the kitchen" (27). Avis identifies more with her deceased mother than with her Aunt Chloe, who epitomizes the traditional woman. This section of the book very closely mirrors *Aurora Leigh*, which Avis reads at the age of sixteen, discovering her ambition to be an artist. In addition, the symbol of the bird is utilized throughout the novel to an even greater extent than in Barrett Browning's work. Avis's name, in fact, means bird, and suggests the common phrase *rara avis*, highlighting her uniqueness. Her mother was "bird-like" (23), and Avis is likened to birds throughout the novel. This relationship is established in the opening chapter, when the narrator initiates one of the ruling metaphors of the book. Seating herself where she will be placed against a bold color, "Avis went to it as straight as a bird to a lighthouse on a dark night. She would have beaten herself against that color, like those very birds against the glowing glass, and been happy, even if she had beaten her soul out with it as they did" (6-7). Later, Avis gets caught in a storm trying to rescue birds flying into the lighthouse, and as she falls in love, she is described again by the same metaphor. By choosing to fly instead of nest, Avis is headed for destruction because she flies toward an ideal—a light that calls her and that she instinctively obeys, even though it will kill her. This metaphor, more than any direct statement in the novel, suggests the inevitability of her capitulation to romantic love. Whereas, in *Aurora Leigh*, the symbol of the bird is used to signify artistic aims as well as strength (Aurora is likened to a falcon and an eagle, among other birds), in *Avis*, the bird is a decidedly ominous symbol encapsulating the tragic fate of the woman artist, as in the following passage describing her mother's thwarted ambitions: "The sparrow on her nest under your terrace broods meekly; but the centuries have not wrung from one such pretty prisoner a breath of longing for the freedom of the summer-day. Do her delicate, cramped muscles ache for flight?" (23).

Aurora Leigh is also overtly invoked in the novel when Avis reads the epic in a scene reminiscent of the same one that inspired Stoddard's description of Eliza reading Alicia's diary. Taken together, these three scenes link the reading of a woman artist's life story to the inspiration of the romantic genius through nature, the power that Aurora first felt on that June day. In this scene is expressed all of the hope of the young woman finding her voice and discovering that her purpose in life is to be an artist. The month is again June, and "In the meadow the long grass rioted; and black and brown and yellow bees made love to crimson clovers" (30). Avis has picked up the book to check the quote she used that day to explain to Aunt Chloe her impatience with housework: "*carpet-dusting, though a pretty trade, was not the imperative labor after all*" (31). She senses that her life is intended for something more, but she is not yet sure what that is. In her reading that day, seeking to "solve the problem of her whole long life before that robin yonder should cease singing," she discovers, like Aurora, that "purpose and poetry were . . . one." Rushing in to tell her father that "It had come to her now . . . why she was alive; what God meant by making her" (32), she declares, "Other women might make puddings," but she was going "to be an artist." She decides she will study and "paint pictures all my life" (33). Again quoting *Aurora Leigh*, she insists upon the seriousness of her commitment to art: "*I who love my art would never wish it lower to suit my stature*" (34).

After her father agrees to send her to Europe as part of the education of a refined young lady, Avis surprises him by requesting to stay on after the traditional year of travel. He reluctantly agrees, and she devotes herself to six long years of serious study. Like Aurora in London, she dedicates herself with "un-girlish doggedness" to the task of acquiring "a disciplined imagination" (37). When she finally succeeds in gaining her teacher's endorsement, she is ill for two days from the shock of success and feels like a woman who has won a proposal, the man of her dreams "kneel[ing] at her feet" (38). Shortly afterward, she ventures into the streets of Paris where she first encounters the young man Philip, who will try to replace artistic achievement as her lover.

After they both return home, Philip, a tutor at the town's college, ingratiates himself by rescuing Avis from a storm and sitting for a portrait. His conquest of her is very gradual and is drawn out over many chapters. While her time in Europe was described in a mere three pages, this episode is clearly the most important to Phelps and requires a much more detailed explanation. The chapter in which Philip first proposes to Avis begins with an epigraph from *Armigart*:

ARMGART: *I accept the peril;
I choose to walk high with sublimer dread
Rather than crawl in safety.*
GRAF: *Armgart, I would with all my soul I knew
The man so rare, that he could make your life
As woman sweet to you, as artist safe.* (66)

Phelps juxtaposes passages from two different parts in scene 3, in which Graf renews his proposal to Armgart, and she claims her high ambitions as an artist, accepting the dangers of failure. Graf's comment comes later in the scene, after Armgart has made it clear that she will not marry him. By uniting these two passages, Phelps invokes the beginning and the end of the conflict — Armgart / Avis is an artist first, and in the end, no lover's reasoning will obscure the fact that she requires a man who can accept her as "artist" and "woman." That Philip is not such a man becomes clear, however, very quickly, for he plays the role of Graf to Avis's Armgart in this chapter. And, as Graf also indicates, he is not the man who can be everything a woman artist needs. By first rejecting Philip, Avis willingly makes the same sacrifice of love for art that Armgart does. Although she has never loved before, she thinks to herself but does not admit to him, "I am human, I am woman! I have had dreams of love like other women!" But she decides that "God gave her the power to make a picture before he gave her the power to love a man." Feeling the pain of this loss, Avis "almost wished that she could have loved like other women" (69). But she holds fast to her ideals of art while Philip confronts her with the same arguments as Graf confronted Armgart: "But suppose . . . that your future should fail to fulfill its — present promise. . . . You dare the loss of what nineteen centuries of womanhood has held as the life of its life; you dare the loss of home and love" (71–72). Echoing Armgart's claim that Graf is the man she refuses to love, Avis tells Philip, "For your soul's sake and mine, you are the man I *will* not love" (73).

Nonetheless, Avis is beginning to love for the first time, against her will. This awakening love is not portrayed with that romantic combination of anguish and bliss that we see in *Corinne*. Instead, Phelps begins to employ death imagery, allowing the reader to feel no joy in Avis's discovery of love. As Philip walks away defeated, Avis lies down: "She thrust her cheek down into the cool, clean earth, and let the grass close over her young head with a dull wish that it were closing for the last time" (72). From the moment that Philip saved her from a snowstorm but was unable to rescue the bird she had endangered herself to save (the bird dies in

his coat pocket on his heart), it is clear that Philip will kill part of Avis, namely her artist self. And sure enough, soon after Philip's proposal, the war between the "artist" and the "woman" begins in earnest, and her art suffers. Having heard of Philip's enlistment in the Civil War, Avis goes back to her studio but finds that her powers have left her: "she found the lips of her visions muttering in a foreign tongue. She sat entire days before an untouched canvas. She stared entire nights upon untapestried darkness. Her father found her one day, burning the sketches in her studio in a fever of self-despair" (76–77). Here Phelps obviously borrows from *Armigart*, but even more, perhaps, from *Corinne*. For it is the wars going on within and without, both of which are related to her dawning love for Philip, that distract her from her work and rob her of her genius. The power that she had felt upon first returning home to "[t]he elemental loves of kin and country" is lost. She had discovered in her home the inspiration of the "afternoon sun in her father's study," which "thrilled her as no glory or story of Vatican, Pitti, or Louvre, had ever done" (77). In other words, she found close to home the supportive place she needed to be inspired, the contact with the "real" that Aurora finds in Romney. But here we see Phelps's departure from Barrett Browning in her insistence that however important home and love may be to the artist, the woman artist should not look for that support in the context of heterosexual love. While before, "Every sense in her [had] quivered to homely and unobtrusive influences" (77), Philip's love is anything but unobtrusive.

As Avis confronts this supreme crisis presented by Philip's love, she makes a desperate attempt to invoke inspiration: "She had fallen into one of the syncopes of the imagination in which men have periled their souls to stimulate a paralyzed inspiration. By any cost — 'by virtue or by vice, by friend or by fiend, by prayer or by wine' — the dumb artist courts the miracle of speech" (78). Summoning vision with a liqueur, she takes a Faustian plunge and discovers a series of images, holy and profane, ending with the supreme symbol whose vision is both the beginning and the end of her full realization as an artist: the Sphinx. The dilemma of the woman artist narrative is here given more levels of symbolic signification through the metaphor of the Sphinx, the subject of Avis's most ambitious painting. Just as Phelps channeled her highest aspirations into *Avis*, Avis invests her greatest energy and inspiration in this work. Phelps may have derived this symbol from *Aurora Leigh*, where Aurora invokes the "Muse-Sphinx" (1.1020) as the source of poetic genius. But in order to discover it, Aurora believes, "The melancholy desert must sweep round, / Behind you as before" (1.1021–1022). This is, of course, at the beginning of the epic, before Aurora learns the true source of

inspiration, namely love. In *Aurora Leigh*, therefore, the “Muse-Sphinx” becomes a symbol of the older ideal of poetic genius that Barrett Browning is trying to replace with a new ideal of the poet inspired by the world in which she lives. Phelps takes this symbol and, recognizing that the Sphinx as muse is also, historically, female and a winged creature, gives it multiple levels of meaning.⁵² On one hand, it represents, as it did in Barrett Browning’s work, the mysterious origins of romantic genius, which has traditionally been more accessible to men. On the other hand, it represents the woman as muse, either an awesome force that has the power to destroy men or that is locked into the role of the male artist’s helpmeet (the role in which Romney tried to cast Aurora), a sort of divine but decidedly domestic muse, such as Phoebe in Hawthorne’s *House of Seven Gables*. In this role, then, the Sphinx represents the legions of women from which Armgart tries selfishly to disassociate herself. Phelps describes them as “the silent army of the unknown” (82). These are, once again, Phelps’s “unhappy girls,” who have no agency or vocation of their own and are therefore the objects of man’s art, power, and scorn. Finally, the Sphinx represents the dilemma of the woman artist, “[t]he riddle of ages” (83): how to discover the source of ancient, mysterious, divine inspiration, or romantic genius, when one is also a woman.

But Phelps makes it clear that she believes the dilemma is not simply socially imposed but is inherent in woman’s nature. Whereas de Staël understood romantic love as absorbing a woman’s interests and therefore replacing a woman’s genius once she discovered it, and Barrett Browning saw love as the key to a woman’s poetic genius, and Stoddard and Eliot portrayed women artists who believed romantic love and art to be incompatible and therefore chose art over heterosexual love, Phelps’s novel makes the dilemma overtly irreconcilable. She portrays a figure in whom the two identities of woman and artist do not harmonize, as they do in *Aurora Leigh*. Avis tells Philip that God “has set two natures in me, warring against each other. He has made me a law unto myself—*He* made me so. How can I help that?” (107). As Karen Tracey argues, Avis tries to “reconcile her warring natures by giving the Sphinx a voice” through her painting.⁵³ In this paradox is perhaps Phelps’s most devastating message: Avis’s great work is born out of Avis’s recognition of love and the war between woman and artist, but the war itself means that the woman artist will not survive. Picking up where *Aurora Leigh* left off, *Avis* goes on to show how the woman artist who loves—not platonically like Armgart or vicariously like Alicia but heterosexually—is doomed as both a woman and an artist. For Avis’s painting of the Sphinx remains unfinished and her marriage to Philip is a failure.

As many have noted, Phelps takes a page out of *Aurora Leigh* and *Jane Eyre* by wounding Philip before having Avis “surrender” to him (111). In addition, Avis is won by his claims that he will support her art and is not asking her “to be my housekeeper!” (110), echoing the suitor’s promises in “Husband of a Blue.” Not long into her marriage, they both realize the folly they have committed. Her studio becomes completely neglected as she is forced by a series of incompetent servants to take on household duties for which she is unprepared. Eventually the care of two children is added to her list of responsibilities, and, she realizes, her hopes for artistic accomplishments have been effectively extinguished. The narrator points out the common nature of Avis’s sacrifice:

Women understand—only women altogether—what a dreary will-o-the-wisp is this old, common, I had almost said commonplace experience, “When the fall sewing is done,” “When the baby can walk,” “When house-cleaning is over,” “When the company has gone,” “When we have got through with the whooping-cough,” “When I am a little stronger,” then I will write the poem, or learn the language, or study the great charity, or master the symphony; then I will act, dare, dream, become. (149)

As Avis’s responsibilities accumulate, she begins to falter under the heavy burdens she carries, and Philip also begins to falter in his appointed role as breadwinner and husband. First he loses his position at the college; then Avis discovers his infidelity with her rival, Barbara. As she gains in strength after a near mortal illness, his health worsens, and he travels to Europe to recuperate. During his absence, their son becomes ill and dies. After Philip returns, Avis resumes her wifely role, taking him to Florida for the winter, where they are gradually able to rekindle their love for each other shortly before he dies.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that after Philip’s death she has fewer responsibilities and more time for her art, Avis’s talent has been extinguished. When she was in need of money to pay one of Philip’s debts during his absence, she had hastily finished the Sphinx, putting a child with its finger to its lips in the foreground to silence the Sphinx. Unable to fully realize the vision she had once had of revealing its secret, she “struck the great sphinx dumb” (205) in an hour and sent it off. She has been reduced to the status of a painter who, like Ruth Hall, works for money to support her family rather than the inspired romantic genius she once aspired to be. However, the painting was immediately sold and won her instant fame: “New York has gone wild over you in one week’s time!” her old teacher tells her (204). But she soon discovered that this would be her one and

only great work. Like the Sphinx in the painting, she herself is silenced. Unable to paint with her previous energy and talent, she tells her father that “the stiffness runs deeper than the fingers” (244). Looking back on her marriage, she wonders if the dream she had during their engagement of combining love and art had ever been possible. When Philip had encouraged her work and told her, “I think you would make a greater picture of it [the Sphinx] after we are married,” the implication is that love and a home would enable her to fulfill her ambition (121). She wove herself from these words a beautiful vision, which serves as an ironic comment on the idealism of *Aurora Leigh*: “Down through the years she suddenly saw herself transfigured by happiness. She saw her whole nature deepening, . . . herself idealized, by love. . . . [T]his man brought her, she thought, that transcendent experience which is so often given to a man, but alas! so unknown to women, . . . in which love shall be found more a stimulus to than a sacrifice of the higher elements of the nature” (121–122).

Men had found support and inspiration in the context of family; why not women as well? But, as we have seen, daily cares and Philip’s inconstancy made love a bitter thing to her and sapped her desire to make art. “She was stunned to find how her aspiration had emaciated during her married life. Household care had fed upon it like a disease” (206). Even when they later reconcile and rediscover their love for each other, Phelps is less than sanguine: “She did not cheat her clear nature by telling herself or him that she found in her married lot vicarious atonement for what she had missed. A human gift is a rebellious prisoner, and she was made human before she was made woman.” However, Phelps seems to tone down this depressing admission by continuing, “But *she thought* it mattered less to her than it did once, — all this lost and unquelled life. They had saved the life of life, they had saved their wedded love: the rest could be borne” (234; italics added). Phelps does not say categorically that it now matters less, but that she thought it did, suggesting that Avis is still learning to cope with the situation. Even if love is “the life of life,” Avis is barely living. Love can never make her a better artist, even after Philip’s and her son’s deaths. Her life now is simply about survival as she tries to provide for herself and her child by giving art lessons. Knowing that she still loves Philip simply makes it easier for her to keep on living, even in the absence of creating. Now, in spite of her earlier image of a life and art enriched by love, “She did not know how to express distinctly, even to her own consciousness, her conviction that she might have painted better pictures — not worse — for loving Philip and the children; that this was what God meant for her, for all of them, once, long ago. She had not done it. It was too late

now" (244). Although Jack H. Wilson argues that the novel ostensibly indicts society but really implies "that it was not God's intention to make [her] an artist at this time,"⁵⁴ this passage suggests that God's plan had been for Avis to become a better artist. This is not simply the author's vision, she claims, but God's ideal vision as well.

Phelps can't let Avis's ambition materialize even now because a happy ending would undercut the seriousness of her warning to her female readers. However, Phelps softens the blow of this tragic ending by having Avis focus her energies on her daughter, who is, significantly, named Wait. Avis, therefore, does not fail, for, like her own (and Phelps's) mother, she will help her daughter to become what Avis herself cannot. As Carol Farley Kessler explains, "Avis [is] a pivotal link in the change from constrained womanhood of her mother to liberated possibility for her daughter."⁵⁵ Avis took an important step forward, but Wait must complete God's plan. Phelps herself, in the voice of the narrator, argues that the process to make "A WOMAN" must span over three generations, and only then will "such a creature" arise who "is competent to the terrible task of adjusting the sacred individuality of her life to her supreme capacity of love and the supreme burden and perils which it imposes upon her" (246). Sensing the promise of the future, Avis wonders, "Had the stone lips of the sphinx begun to mutter?" Avis can live on through Wait, for she realizes it will "be easier for her daughter to be alive, and be a woman, than it had for her" (247).

Wait provides a kind of hope, therefore, that was not present at the end of the romantically tragic *Corinne*. Corinne did not pass on her talents to Oswald's and Lucille's daughter to create a tradition of women's art but in order to keep her own memory alive. For the daughter's talents are not her own and do not represent the future but the past. And whereas *Armigart* renounces an artistic vocation as essentially selfish, Phelps never has Avis renounce her former ambitions. Likewise, the narrator never undercuts the significance of the woman artist's vocation, as the narrator in *St. Elmo* does. *Avis*'s ending is also more hopeful than that of Stoddard's "Collected" because even though Avis is silenced, her daughter will not be. Alicia, by contrast, has left no legacy for future generations. As is the case in "Collected," however, the autobiographical nature of Phelps's book suggests the author's own desire to see not only her work but also her life in the chain of great women writers beginning with de Staël and including Barrett Browning and Eliot. The novel itself, therefore, like "Collected," seeks to establish a legacy of artistry for American women writers.

European Possibilities

A significant component of the American woman artist's narrative was the opportunities provided by travel to Europe. *Corinne* and *Aurora Leigh* had depicted Italy as the place where women artists could both realize their genius and gain recognition. At the end of "Collected" we learn that Alicia has died abroad. Stoddard probably thought it fitting that her artist heroine should end her days in Europe — "the Old World, cities whose legends enchant you, . . . the birth-place of genius you worship, the cradle of the arts you revere," as Alicia's suitor tells her. "Oh, the pictures that flashed across my soul as he spoke the glowing vision of life without being aware of it!" Alicia responds in her journal (301). Again, Stoddard was writing out a fantasy of her own. She longed to go to Europe for her "development" and hoped her brother would get a post abroad and take her with him. But Stoddard was never able to make the pilgrimage to the Old World of which many nineteenth-century American artists dreamed.⁵⁶

Phelps also longed to go to Europe, but, like Stoddard, she was not able to because she had no one to accompany her. She wrote to Annie Fields in 1882, "Yes; of course I ought to be in Europe, and I would gladly dare the experiment if I had anyone to dare it with me."⁵⁷ She was now thirty-eight years old, yet even grown women felt they needed companions, if not chaperones, to venture the long and dangerous trip. When Avis traveled to Europe, Phelps sent her over with friends for the first year. Thereafter Avis stayed on alone for five more years. She started out among the circles of American artists in Italy, some of whom were women, and she lived in a high tower like Aurora (and Hilda in Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*). Finally, she made her way to Paris, where she studied diligently with the most prominent masters, proving that she possessed true genius. A great future was predicted for her. Returning to America was, in a sense, Avis's downfall. Only in Europe could she truly succeed as an artist. It is the place of her greatest opportunities, while America is her tomb.

For Alcott, the idea of the freedom provided in Europe inspired her to begin to write a woman artist's novel that also engages the female *Künstlerroman* tradition. It is, like the others, autobiographical, as she based it on her and her sister's experiences in Europe. By the time Alcott and her sister May (and later, Woolson, who lived abroad even longer) made their respective journeys to the Old World, the American literary market had already been flooded by European

travel narratives depicting travel abroad as full of adventure, freedom, and never-ending encounters with the magnificent and the picturesque. Europe held a special importance for nineteenth-century American artists and writers who sought there the kind of rich, tradition-laden culture they believed the United States lacked. In their desire to create for the New World a high culture to rival that of the Old, many felt that a European education (formal or informal) was essential. Almost all of the century's influential American male writers, painters, and sculptors had traveled to or lived in Europe. Many published accounts of their excursions or residences abroad, and some made Europe a subject of serious literature, as in Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* (1860) and James's *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The American* (1877). In such books, Europe emerged as the world's art gallery, as the repository of the highest accomplishments in art, and as the sublime and picturesque subject that had inspired the master geniuses of Western civilization. For American men, travel abroad also meant escape from a utilitarian, materialistic society that thwarted their development as artists and writers. As James Buzard argues, "Insofar as domestic society appeared to stultify feelings and imagination, touring seemed to offer opportunities for the exercise of thwarted human potential."⁵⁸ This was, of course, even more so the case for women, whose desires to pursue lives as serious artists also were hindered by a patriarchal society. Yet the dream of artistic fulfillment for these women in Europe became less tenable by the 1880s as the scrutiny of American women abroad intensified.

Margaret Fuller and Julia Ward Howe initiated the exodus of American women writers and artists to Italy in the 1840s and early 1850s. Following them, other American women writers and artists established the foreign sojourn as an important part of a woman artist's development, just as it had been for men. Actress Charlotte Cushman traveled abroad with writer Grace Greenwood and sculptor Harriet Hosmer in 1852, and Harriet Beecher Stowe went on a tour of England in 1852 after the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Many of the experiences of these early pioneers were published for American consumption in Fuller's columns for the *New York Tribune*, Greenwood's *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe* (1854), and Stowe's *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854). In addition to Hosmer, the sculptors Vinnie Ream and Emma Stebbins became associated with Italy, drawn there by the examples of de Staël's Corinne and Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh. These women found an independence there that they could never gain at home. As Leonardo Buonomo has written about Howe, in Italy, "She was confronted with the prospect of uncontrolled social and intellectual experimentation." For her, Italy was "associated with the idea of unhampered movement

and expression, while home [Boston] gradually came to stand for stifling rigidity of manners and feelings." Hosmer shared her view, writing home to a friend in 1853, "I wouldn't live anywhere else but in Rome, if you would give me the Gates of Paradise and all the Apostles thrown in. I can learn more and do more here, in one year, than I could in America in ten." Hosmer's success was widely publicized in America. She stood out in Rome because of her gender, and her example was carefully watched by all. As Lydia Maria Child observed in 1858, "the cause of woman-kind had so much at stake in her progress." Eventually, she proved herself worthy of the title "genius." Having met Hosmer, Hawthorne was inspired to write about her and her sister artists in Rome in *The Marble Faun*, where he described his heroine, Hilda, as "an example of the freedom of life which it is possible for a female artist to enjoy at Rome. . . . all alone, perfectly independent . . . doing what she liked. . . . The customs of artist life bestow such liberty upon the sex, which is elsewhere restricted within so much narrower limits."⁵⁹

Before the Civil War, few American women traveled to Europe on their own and for their own purposes. While men crisscrossed the Continent, often by themselves, or went abroad to take up diplomatic posts, as Hawthorne and Howells did, women were most often dependent on the support of others to get them abroad and to show them around. But by the late 1860s, with the advent of the "luxurious 'steam palaces,'" foreign travel had become more comfortable and accessible to (well-to-do) women, and, as Mary Suzanne Schriber writes, "American women began to journey to foreign lands in significant numbers, for their own reasons and independent of men."⁶⁰ The numbers of American women who fled a constrictive home life and found their destiny in Europe quickly increased, and their European ventures were widely publicized. As a result, Europe became in women's minds a kind of otherworldly place where they could enjoy more freedom than in America. Leo Hamalian sums up their fantasy: "For most women, immobilized as they were by the iron hoops of convention, the term 'abroad' had a dreamlike, talismanic quality. It conjured up a vision composed of a whole cluster of myths, half-myths, and truths — of sunlight, of liberty, of innocence, of sexual freedom, of the fantastic and the healing, of the unknown and mysterious — all those concepts that stood in direct confrontation to domesticity."⁶¹ Going abroad was first and foremost a release from duties at home, freedom from the sacrifice of self to others that marked women's lives.

For the exposure to art and the opportunities for freedom that Europe offered, it was natural that Alcott would want to go to there. When she first went, in 1865, she confided to her journal, "I could not realize that my long desired dream

was coming true.” While life at home was reality, even drudgery, life abroad was magical, an opportunity for fulfillment that seemed almost too good to be true. In London, she wrote, “I felt as if I’d got into a novel while going about in the places I’d read so much of.”⁶² Unfortunately, she went as the companion of an invalid and her brother, an arrangement that prevented Alcott from experiencing the freedom she desired, although she was exposed to many of the cities and sights considered essential for a cultured American’s trip abroad. After her year-long trip, she was anxious for May to see them as well.

Louisa, eight years older than May, viewed her younger sibling as a sort of surrogate daughter. She hoped to help May achieve the kind of life that she felt was slipping through her fingers, much as Avis hoped that her daughter would have an easier time of it than she had. May represented to her the future for women artists, and Louisa watched over her with maternal eyes, trying to keep May on the straight and narrow path of becoming an artist. They had both started out with the same encouragement and aspirations — May was referred to as “Little Raphael,” while Louisa was the family’s “Little Shakespeare.”⁶³ But by the 1870s Louisa felt that her own time had already come and gone. Her health was failing (largely due to overwork and the aftereffects of the mercury treatments she had received during the war), and her attempts at gaining a serious reputation with *Hospital Sketches* and her novel *Moods* had failed. Although Louisa sometimes resented the advantages that May so easily received, she also was May’s greatest benefactor. Her success with *Little Women* in 1868–69 enabled her to provide an artist’s life for May in Europe, which she did until May’s death in 1879. When the two of them went abroad in 1870, with a friend of May’s, Louisa went for rest, she said, for she was worn out from the heavy burden of caring for her family and trying to satisfy the publishers’ demands for new work, whereas May was embarking on her life as a professional artist.

May had also dreamed for years about going to Europe. She wrote home, “You ask if after dreaming of foreign parts for so many years I am not a little disappointed in the reality. But I can say that everything so far has been quite as picturesque, new, and lovely as I expected.” May exemplified the adventurous American woman who relished her freedom from duties at home and the opportunity to flout convention. She bragged to her family about her exploits, including a daring hike to the pass of St. Bernard in a potentially deadly storm and a ride atop the “coupe” with the luggage in order to better view the Italian countryside, while crowds of Italians jeered at them and Louisa sat inside, “begg[ing] us to come down.”⁶⁴

Louisa capitalized on their trip abroad by publishing *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag, Shawl-Straps* (1872), in which she portrays herself as Lavinia, a "poor, used-up, old invalid" who is reluctant to go to Europe but is lured by the prospect of "no spring cleaning," a much-needed release from domestic duties. Lavinia is predisposed not to enjoy herself or experience much but merely to chaperone her younger sister, Matilda, and her friend, Amanda, while she also tries to regain her health. These "infants," as Lavinia calls them, refer to her as "Granny." In the preface, Alcott apologizes for focusing so much on Lavinia's views (which provide the book's humor), suggesting that the book should be about "the younger and more interesting shawl-strapists."⁶⁵ The three single women, making "the last Declaration of American Independence," relish their freedom from men and traveling in foreign lands, although Alcott is quick to point out that they do so within the bounds of propriety.

No lord and master, in the shape of brother, spouse, or courier, ordered their outgoings and incomings; but liberty the most entire was theirs, and they enjoyed it heartily. Wisely and well too; for, though off the grand route, they behaved themselves in public as decorously as if the eyes of all prim Boston were upon them, and proved by their triumphant success, that the unprotected might go where they liked, if they conducted themselves with the courtesy and discretion of gentlewomen.

Lavinia, as narrator and chaperone, is careful to check the younger women's independence, expressing her discomfort with the new freedom all three are experiencing. By the same token, however, she also resents intrusions on their independence. Throughout the book, she is on the lookout for men who threaten their liberty. Above all, romance with a European man must be avoided. When the three witness a young French girl married off to a French colonel whom they believe to be a "fiend," they cry "Spinsters for ever!" Later, they meet an American girl who is going to marry a Russian and feel "much pity . . . for the feeble girl doomed to go to Russia with a husband who had 'tyrant' written in every line of his bad, *blasé* little face and figure." Matilda is in the greatest danger because of her sociable nature. When she flirts with a French count on the train, Lavinia thinks, "If the man don't get out soon, I'll tie her up in my shawl, and tell him she is mad." Lavinia also prevents Matilda from throwing away her good name by not allowing the soldiers of Albano, Italy, to lure her into "gambading away for a ride *sans duenna, sans habit, sans propriety, sans every thing*."⁶⁶ So the freedom Europe represents to these women is a fragile one. Lavinia is sending a clear message to

her female readers to beware of the romantic traps that Europe also represents. But at the end of the book, Lavinia argues for women's freedom not only to travel in Europe but also to live there, not as wives of European tyrants but as independent women artists. She is now ready to leave Matilda alone in London to "enjoy the liberty with which American girls may be trusted when they have a purpose or a profession to keep them steady." Alcott encourages other young women "to strap up their bundles in light marching order, and push boldly off. . . . Wait for no man."⁶⁷

For May, going abroad was about more than new sights and daring adventures; it was also about being someone new. She wrote to her mother on her second trip, "As soon as I land on this side [of the ocean] it always seems as if I were someone else . . . and in a measure I lose my identity and feel like a heroine in some novel."⁶⁸ Arriving in Europe brought new possibilities of selfhood. Once there, she could exchange the identity of daughter for that of artist, a transformation that felt unreal. She went abroad to "[gather] up the advantages of the Old World" in the form of exposure to the greatest works of art the world had produced. She also found a new mode of life that suited her immensely: "[A]rt life abroad is very charming and after my day among the Turners [paintings in the National Gallery she was copying], I heartily enjoy wandering through London, taking a trip to Hampton Court, Kew, or Richmond, a row on the river, a brisk canter in the park, or a ten-mile tramp to see the May-Pole Inn. So free, so busy, so happy am I that I envy no one, and find life infinitely rich and full."⁶⁹

This trip inspired May to write *An Artist's Holiday* (1877–78), a work part autobiographical travel narrative and part fiction that was never published in full. In it, she characterizes herself as intent on experiencing England to the fullest without heed to conventions or restrictions: "[A] great advantage of being among strangers in a foreign land is that one may do just as one pleases." With this feeling to embolden her, she follows her impulse to row down the Thames, ignoring the shock of her friends and the shouts of men on the shore, and she "play[s] vagabond" by roaming the countryside alone, experiencing "the most charming episode of my life." She felt so free during her solo residence in London that she even recorded her desire to join her male friend in smoking a cigarette, although someone later crossed out this apparently scandalous passage in the manuscript.⁷⁰

Although May came home twice, on her third trip to Europe she began a new life, never to return to America. Over the next two years, Louisa followed May's adventures closely, anxiously hopeful that May would devote herself to her ca-

reer and wishing she could join her. Paris had become the mecca for painters who wanted to make a name for themselves, so May made Paris her destination. The American artist Mary Cassatt lived there and was a member of the burgeoning Impressionist school, greatly impressing her French counterparts. Young women, eager to follow in her footsteps and those of the French painter Rosa Bonheur, filled the studios of respected teachers like Couture, Julien, and Müller. May had already gained the attention of John Ruskin, the famous art critic, who had praised her copies of Turner as the best he had ever seen. Now, at thirty-six years of age, she regretted that she had not been able to devote herself sooner to serious art study and felt that this was her last opportunity to make her mark. Early on she decided that she would have to stay for a lengthy period, and she explained to her mother, "This is what I think my life must be . . . for I am awfully in earnest now and can do nothing at home for some time to come." She went on to study under two famous art teachers (both men) and launch a very promising career, exhibiting twice at the Salon, the pinnacle of achievement for an artist.⁷¹

But when May married the Swiss Ernest Nieriker in 1878, settling permanently in France, she embarked on a new adventure, that of attempting to combine marriage and an art career. May continued to find life in France the "ideal" one for a woman artist, because, as she wrote, "We mean to live our own life free from conventionalities." A year after she married, her life there still seemed no more real than when she had first come abroad. She wrote home to her family, "*Here* it is possible for a woman to pursue art with sufficient diligence to achieve success, & at the same time be faithful to her domestic duties. . . . In America this can not be done, but foreign life is so simple so free. [W]e can live for comfort not for company." She was able to shut out the world and worry only about her art and her new home. As an expatriate, she occupied a unique position; she was a member of neither American nor French society, so she was essentially free to define for herself what her life would be. In fact, she could no longer imagine any other way. She told her family, "This foreign life is so satisfactory so full of the picturesque, so independent & charming that Concord or Boston would be like a prison to me, & home could never seem the same."⁷²

How Louisa, sitting at home, must have felt reading this, we can only imagine. May had come to the realization that she could never return home, and Louisa would have to learn to accept that she could never experience the European life that May was leading. In April 1878, Louisa had contrasted her life with May's new one: "How different our lives are just now! — I so lonely, sad, and sick, she so happy, well and blest. She always had the cream of things, and deserved it. My

time is yet to come somewhere else, when I am ready for it." The following month, she wrote, "I plan and hope to go to them [May and Ernest], if I am ever well enough, and find new inspiration in a new life. . . . I doubt if I ever find time to lead my own life, or health to try it." May's new life in Europe inspired Louisa to view Europe differently, as not just a place for her recuperation and May's art study but a place where she could start her life over, free from the care and duties at home. But as the months wore on, she had to give up her plan. She remained at home, caring for her widowed father and sister. To make up for her lost dream, she began to write *Diana and Persis*, a *Künstlerroman* about May's life and what her own life abroad might have been like.⁷³ Because she herself could not return to Europe, she imagined in *Diana and Persis* joining May in her pursuit of artistic excellence and fame in Europe. Apart from the autobiographical reason for the double heroines, the split also suggests, as in "Collected," the incompleteness of the woman artist's life and her divided psyche. With these two artist figures, Alcott explores two different life paths, trying to resolve the dilemma posed by earlier women artist narratives.

While it is impossible to confirm Alcott's ultimate intentions for this unfinished work, it is clear that she was inspired by May's example to try to fictionalize more fully than Phelps was capable of doing how women could achieve the "full" life that Eliot seemed to have led but that no woman writer had yet completely imagined in verse or prose. This story is much more than an autobiographical catharsis of her "jealousy" toward May and her resentment that "May Alcott's self-realization depended upon Louisa's self-abnegation," as Natania Rosenfeld argues.⁷⁴ Rather, it is Alcott's attempt to work through in fiction, if not in life, the choices between love and art confronting women artists. By responding directly to *Avis*, hoping to prove that novel "wrong," she also thereby invokes a long tradition of women's *Künstlerromane*. While *Avis* could not realize the possibility of becoming a better artist by combining love and art, Alcott's artist heroines, Percy and Diana, seem on their way to doing so. Unfortunately, they don't reach that goal because Alcott had completed only four chapters when she stopped writing, grief-stricken by May's death in childbirth.

Persis (Percy) is closely modeled on May, but Diana is like Louisa only in her personality and relationship to Persis/May. Like Louisa, Diana is firmly committed to spinsterhood, but unlike Louisa, she is young, healthy, and a sculptor, suggesting Harriet Hosmer as a model as well. Her most significant difference from Louisa is that she has no family and hence no obligations to anyone but herself and her work. She is even more solitary than Alicia Raymond because she

has no brother or cousin, only her friend Percy, another artist. While Percy and Diana possess the same aim in life (“success and happiness”),⁷⁵ Diana is more firmly committed to the pursuit of art in the absence of “happiness,” or the joys of conventional womanhood, namely marriage and family. Like Alicia and Armgart, Diana does not believe that combining the two is possible, and so she chooses her art, sacrificing the love of a family. She also tries to hold Percy to the same commitment. “Diana, devoutly believing that ‘Success is impossible, unless the passion for art overcomes all desultory passions,’ held Percy to her ideal with stern vigor, always hoping that the time would come when her friend would give all to art and let love go, as she herself had done” (393). When Percy decides to pursue her painting in France, Diana applauds the idea, believing the trip will free Percy of her suitors’ distractions. Like the other women artist narratives, this one sets up a striking contrast between female characters, but this time it is between two types of women artists rather than the artist and her typical foil, the ordinary, domestic woman. Having set up this contrast, it seems likely that Alcott will take the two heroines on journeys that allow both of them to learn to combine love and art and thereby become “full” women artists. Diana must learn to love, and Percy must learn to devote herself more to her art.

The second chapter shows Percy’s growing commitment to her art. It is comprised of letters from France, taken, in large part, from May’s letters home. Here we see the narrative of a woman artist’s development, which Phelps only briefly alluded to in *Avis*. Percy lives with other young women and attends art classes and has a painting accepted at the Paris Salon. There is no mention of a romance. But suddenly, in the next chapter, Percy has married and given birth to a child, and Diana decides to visit her to “see how well Percy’s experiment succeeds. If she can combine art and domestic life harmoniously she will be a more remarkable woman than even *I* think her” (410). Diana is obviously not optimistic about this experiment, and later Diana jests with Percy’s husband, August, about the situation. “But you know,” she declares, “the wiseacres say we women cannot have all, and must decide between love and fame, so I am curious to see which of us [Percy or me] will fare the best” (423–424). His response is very revealing: “Pardon, I believe a woman can and ought to have both if she has the power and courage to win them. A man expects them, achieves them, why is not a woman’s life to be as full and free as his? . . . I not only cherish this belief but I hope to see it beautifully realized by the success of this splendid wife of mine, who is to be the greater artist for being a happy woman, please God!” (424). The idea, a further take on Graf’s wish for Armgart and Phelps’s hope at the end of *Avis*, is given even more force

by the fact that it is expressed by a man. Like Phelps, Alcott allows for the possibility that marriage and motherhood can make women superior artists, although Phelps puts that possibility off until future generations. Therefore, contrary to Rosenfeld's argument that "Persis/May . . . is quickly going the way of Phelps's Avis,"⁷⁶ it seems possible that with such an enlightened husband Persis will "prove 'Avis' in the wrong." However, while the author may be suggesting as much, Diana is more skeptical. She does not respond to August's optimistic speech; instead she "bowed gravely, charmed with his warmth but not one whit convinced by it" (424).

Throughout Diana's visit she sees signs that make her uneasy. When she first arrives, she notices that Percy's easel is dusty and the paint on the palette is dry, indicating a long period without use, just as Avis's studio gathered dust during her long absences when familial duty called. She also sees Percy looking into the "unknown future of [her] child" (413) rather than her own bright future as an artist. But Percy endeavors to reassure her: "it has been such a rich and perfect year. . . . [I] only wonder how I ever lived so long alone" (414). Percy is clearly adjusting to the situation much more easily than Avis did, another suggestion that it will not crush her artist's spirit in the long run. For Avis's loss of talent was due not only to household cares but to a negligent husband and many family illnesses, including her own. There is no ominous sign that such despair is around the corner for Percy. However, August's progressive attitude is cast in doubt. When Diana and Percy get the studio back in order and take the baby as their model, August perhaps shows his true colors by bursting in upon what he calls their "painting frenzy" and declaring, "Unnatural mother! Would you sacrifice your child at the altar of your insatiable art?" (421). Percy immediately whisks the baby up and wraps a blanket around her. The optimism that Alcott had allowed for earlier in this chapter is muted by the end. But it is not at all certain that Percy won't, once the child is older, be able to return to her art. She is not weighed down with cares and stifled to the extent that Avis was. In contrast to Avis, Percy has a capable husband and it seems likely that Alcott, had she concluded the book, would have made her a better artist for her love of family, rather than worse. For this is the direction in which she takes Diana in the last chapter she completed.

In this final chapter, Diana travels to Rome, where she is prolific, alone once again, and immersed in her art. However, she is not fulfilled. Like Aurora, she increasingly discovers that her life is incomplete without human relationships. One day, while observing the "gay throng" of visitors to the tourist spot of Pincio, she reflects on "her own life, so high and lonely, its ever growing ambition, and

the sense of power that strengthened every year. Yet at times she was conscious of a deeper want, an unconquerable yearning, a bittersweet regret for something lost or never found." As if in response to her thoughts, a young boy, Nino, solicits her attention, "evidently hungry for the fostering tenderness mothers alone can give" (428). Diana responds, surprised at her own capacity for affection. Touching the boy "thrilled her sensitive hands chilled by long contact with cold marble and damp clay. . . . all the pent-up tenderness of her nature seemed to gush out" (429). She has not had time to notice children or to lament their absence in her life until this moment. As it turns out, the boy's father is the famous sculptor Stafford, who is a widower. He meets Diana, and it is through him that she discovers the support a man is capable of giving to a woman artist. He praises her sculpture of Saul for its "virile force," a compliment that impresses her, for "[f]ew men would say that to a woman" (438). His response reveals that he is willing to accept women as comrades and does not want their talents restricted to "womanly" art and domestic subjects. Instead, he invites women to take on "masculine" subjects and blur gender distinctions. In a sense, then, he is Alcott's improvement on Romney. Stafford is not weakened in order to bring him down to Diana's level. Instead, the equal relationship is created by his lifting her up to his level — or allowing her to ascend on her own.

Inspired by her new friends, Diana has begun work on a head of Nino, revealing a motherly tenderness that touches Stafford. Diana, in his eyes, possesses the capacity to be both mother and artist. And given the fact that Nino is not an infant like Percy's child and does not demand as much care, the prospects for Diana's successfully being mother and artist, at least in the short term, seem more promising. One senses the possibility of a union between the two sculptors, but the issue is not broached by Alcott. The final paragraph of the unfinished novel reads: "'One feels as if there was a fine man and a fine woman working there together [in Diana], and one scarcely knows which to admire most,' [Stafford] thought to himself as he went away, leaving Diana to work with enthusiasm on the arched head of the boy, to which she added a pair of winged shoulders and called it Puck" (441).⁷⁷ Stafford's parting thoughts reveal that Diana is complete in herself, not "half a person" but whole, capable of realizing the capacities traditionally accorded to both man and woman, which might indicate that she has no need for a husband. At the same time, though, Stafford appears to have integrated his male and female sides as well, as revealed in his role as affectionate father and in his appreciation of Diana's work, both the Saul and the Puck, which represent masculine and feminine artistic sensibilities. Charles Strickland notes that Alcott

sought to “portray men who possessed what sentimentalists might have regarded as feminine sensitivity to the needs of others.”⁷⁸ For Alcott, Stafford represents the possibility of a new man who is the only possible heterosexual companion to the woman artist, unlike Phelps’s pessimistic portrayal of Philip’s failure to appreciate his wife’s ambitions. This chapter could also be about Diana’s learning that to be a great artist she must recognize and develop her feminine as well as her masculine side. That a man and a child awaken her femininity leads one to suspect that Alcott was trying to understand the “happiness” that May had found, and that she was speculating about the effect it would have on a woman artist who, like herself, had renounced any such relationship. Diana seems to be discovering that August was right: when women did find such happiness, they became more complete, and hence better, artists.

We will never know if Alcott intended for Stafford and Diana to marry.⁷⁹ One cannot even tell if Alcott herself knew how Diana’s and Persis’s “experiments” would end. While Diana’s seems more likely to succeed, I would argue that Alcott most likely was trying to envision a way for both women to achieve the union of love and art. That Alcott ultimately failed to do so probably has as much to do with her own disbelief in the possibility than with her grief over May’s death. As she intimated to a friend in 1880, women had to choose one role or the other. May’s desire for love had cost her the very life she had always hoped for and had so recently found: “‘All for love,’ seems a mistake to my eyes, but those who have tried it say the world is well lost if even a short taste of the divine madness is all that is gained. So I try to think my brave bright sister did not give her life in vain, & was satisfied with two years of happiness instead of many as an artist.”⁸⁰ After May’s death, Alcott’s life was taken up with caring for Lulu, May’s daughter, whom Louisa now called “my daughter.” Echoing Avis’s desires for Wait’s future, Alcott wrote in 1881, “I hope I may live to see May’s child as brave & bright & talented as [May] was, & much happier in her fate.”⁸¹

Like the Alcott sisters, Woolson was drawn to the opportunities for travel and freedom that Europe offered; however, as she would discover during her stay from 1879 until her death in 1894, the kind of liberty May had found was increasingly tempered by the serious scrutiny American women abroad were beginning to receive. The idea that American women were cavorting all over Europe without appropriate protection or restraint captured the popular imagination in America. Louisa and May were aware of the criticisms directed at American women abroad, who were portrayed in the press as lacking any seriousness of purpose beyond catching a duke or a count for a husband. In 1876, May

wrote that she wanted the “brave” American women who had gained entrance to the foremost art schools in Paris to be remembered over “the indiscreet, husband-hunting butterfly” who most commonly represented “the typical American girl abroad.”⁸² But those May preferred to represent American womanhood in Europe were also ridiculed by the popular press as too independent and ambitious. Girls in America, commentators agreed, were already more independent and “indulged” than in any other country. As they ventured abroad, watchful eyes recorded the stir they made. In her “American Women Abroad” (1876), Lucy Hooper condemned “the fast girls” who were “loudly uproarious and boldly self-asserting” and, worst of all, who flirted with foreign men and went to balls with them unchaperoned. It was these girls, she lamented, who were making a bad name for all American women in Europe. A year later Albert Rhodes asked, “Shall the American Girl Be Chaperoned?” His answer was a resounding yes. “Our girls are the boldest of all,” he wrote, as he recounted many disastrous incidents which could have been avoided had the girl in question been properly chaperoned.⁸³

Therefore, when James’s “Daisy Miller” was published in 1878, all eyes were already on the “American Girl.” Daisy’s main sins were a flirtation with a courier and an excursion with an Italian man, alone, to see the Coliseum in the moonlight. James’s story hit a nerve at the right cultural moment and created an uproar in America, where many felt offended that James had portrayed “our girls” in this way. Others rose to James’s defense and were eager to castigate the “Daisies” they had met abroad. Among James’s defenders was a close friend of his and Woolson’s, John Hay, who, in the *Atlantic’s* “Contributors’ Club,” declared James’s story a “truth[ful]” portrayal and an important “lesson” to women not to exercise their “freedom” abroad if they were to avoid serious consequences. After the publication of Hay’s piece, Woolson wrote to him, “I am glad you said what you did about ‘Daisy Miller’; it was needed. . . . As the ‘Daisies’ are what they are through pure ignorance, Mr. James’s work —, and yours in calling attention to it —, is a sort of ‘Tract for the Times’ which will do good.” When she wrote this letter, Woolson had not yet been to Europe, but as she prepared for her voyage overseas eight months later, she must have had these warnings to American women travelers on her mind, desiring to distance herself from such admonitions.⁸⁴ The intense scrutiny of women abroad made Woolson and others more cautious and self-conscious than emboldened by the possibilities of self-transformation in Europe. The many portrayals of American women in Europe criticized not only their indiscretions but also their desires for self-improvement. Hooper had taken aim

not only at the “fast” girls but also at the “strong-minded *Americaine*” who was “middle-aged, energetic, and undaunted by fatigues or obstacles.” Indeed, she lamented that this “ubiquitous and indefatigable” type of American womanhood, who “c[a]me abroad to improve her mind,” was so visible in Europe. The best examples of American women abroad were those who “come and go amid the sights and salons of Europe, and who leave no trace behind, . . . pass[ing] by unnoticed and unknown,” which certainly was not the case with the many women writers and artists traversing the Continent.⁸⁵

Woolson’s dreams of going abroad had always been strong, but her duty to her mother after her father’s death kept her in America. She had to “give up again my plan for going abroad,” she wrote in 1876. “So much for myself.”⁸⁶ In November 1879, following her mother’s death, she finally made the trip with her sister and niece, who over the next fourteen years would be her frequent companions, although she often preferred to live and travel on her own. In the late 1870s, Woolson had become an admirer of the writing of Henry James, most certainly reading about his European travels in the articles he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly*. By the time Woolson embarked on her own European experiment, she was eager to meet James, to explore the places he and others were writing about, and to join their ranks by publishing European sketches and stories in the *Atlantic* and other prominent magazines. Some of her first publications after going abroad were “A Florentine Experiment,” “The Roman May, and a Walk,” and “In Venice,” two of which were published in the *Atlantic*.⁸⁷

In late April 1880, Woolson finally met James, something she had been trying to do since she first arrived in England. His friendship had a profound impact on her experience abroad. He showed her around the many galleries and shared his love of the masters she was trying to learn to appreciate. And it was primarily through him that she came to know many other Americans of artistic temperament, most importantly Francis Boott and his daughter Lizzie, who was an artist. With them, and James himself, she felt, for a while, part of a community of like-minded and mutually supportive artists. But she ordinarily shunned society and preferred to have her days “serenely free” to write. Like May Alcott, she felt that her life in Europe freed her from the obligations of visiting.⁸⁸ But she also found the comfort and strength to live a solitary writer’s life abroad in the company of James and his friends. After Lizzie Boott’s marriage to the artist Frank Duveneck, she shared a villa in Florence with the newlyweds and Mr. Boott. She wrote Mary Mapes Dodge, “I have made a temporary home for myself in a villa (Aurora Leigh’s) at Bellosguardo.” She also wrote to many of her friends about the joy she

felt at living in the villa where Barrett Browning had written *Aurora Leigh*, and from where she could see “Hawthorne’s tower,” a reference to Hilda’s abode in *The Marble Faun*. She was fulfilling all of her dreams about coming to Europe, and she was excited at the prospect of living in a sort of artist’s colony with the inspiration of Barrett Browning and Hawthorne to spur her on. As she anticipated moving in, she wrote about sharing the villa with her friends: “They too, have a garden — in which they Paint! And I shall write in mine!” In another letter she confided, “I was so happy to be here that it was almost wickedness!”⁸⁹

Italy, especially, possessed a dreamlike quality for Woolson. From Florence she wrote, “here I have attained that old-world feeling I used to dream about, a sort of enthusiasm made up of history, mythology, old churches, pictures, statues, . . . vineyards, the Italian sky, dark-eyed peasants, opera-music, Raphael and old Michael, ‘Childe Harold,’ the ‘Marble Faun,’ ‘Romola,’ and ever so many more ingredients.” And in Rome, she wrote that she was “stirred . . . by the thought that I was really and actually in ‘Rome!’ the city I have dreamed about since childhood with a real, and sometimes, very intense longing.” Now that she was finally there, she didn’t plan to leave anytime soon. She felt she belonged in Europe, much like May had. From Venice, she wrote to James (who was temporarily in America), that she “wonder[ed] . . . whether the end of the riddle of my existence may not be, after all, to live here, and die here.”⁹⁰

Beholden to none, Woolson was experiencing total independence for the first time in her life. She wrote to her friend Edmund Clarence Stedman that the greatest “advantage” of her new life was “liberty. If I were to take a fancy to go to China, or the North Cape, tomorrow morning at ten precisely — there is absolutely nothing in the world to prevent it!” Ironically, though, she did not grant her female protagonists the same kind of freedom in Europe that she herself experienced. For example, “In Sloane Street” (1892) portrays a sensitive, cultured single woman whose trip to Europe is determined not by her own desires but by those of her companions, who neither understand nor appreciate her. And “A Florentine Experiment” (1880) depicts the life abroad of Miss Margaret Stowe, who is tied to her invalid aunt, while the American expatriate Mr. Morgan heads off to a new destination whenever he feels the urge to do so. He is the one, not Margaret, who experiences the kind of “liberty” Woolson claimed for herself.⁹¹ Perhaps eager to keep her distance from the ridicule showered on the Daisies and female artists abroad, she shied away from portraying the liberating potential of Europe for American women.

It is also notable that in her stories of women writers and artists in Europe,

Woolson depicted Europe as lacking opportunities for women to develop their creative potential. They do not discover the supportive environment or the artistic fulfillment that Corinne and Aurora do. Instead, they meet their literal or figurative deaths. In “‘Miss Grief’” (1880), a woman of genius dies, penniless and friendless, and is buried with her unpublished manuscripts in Rome. In “The Street of the Hyacinth” (1882), an ambitious woman artist’s marriage to an arrogant art critic is called a “great downfall” and likened to the demolition of the street on which she lives.⁹² But “At the Château of Corinne” (1887), as the title suggests, is particularly intertextual with *Corinne* and *Aurora Leigh* and comments specifically on the failure of Europe to liberate the woman artist. In this story, Woolson, even more disturbingly than Stoddard, suggests that the legacy of the woman of genius, which Corinne and de Staël represent, is no longer available to women writers. In many ways, it represents an endpoint to the nineteenth-century women’s *Künstlerroman* tradition. If Alcott could see no way to complete her optimistic contribution to this tradition, Woolson’s “Château” sounds the death knell of the woman artist’s development and the tradition that began with *Corinne*.

Woolson first wrote the story in 1880, shortly after her arrival in Europe and about the time she visited Coppet, Switzerland, de Staël’s home in exile. Woolson also immersed herself in the writings of de Staël and her friend Madame Récamier, who is also invoked in the story. But she laid aside “Château” for seven years until, during her stay in Bellosguardo, in Florence, she remembered the story. As Cheryl Torsney argues, she probably recollected it owing to her new villa’s associations with *Aurora Leigh*. But unlike the rebirth that both of these earlier artist heroines experience in Europe, Woolson’s protagonist is robbed of her independence and, hence, her voice. The story is pervaded with images of death. “Château” begins in late August, rather than the June of *Aurora Leigh*. It ends even later in the fall, the end of October, as winter is about to set in. And the story is centered around four visits to Coppet, the home and the final resting place of de Staël. The château shows “not a sign of life,” and the famous author’s burial there becomes a metaphor for the death of the artist as well as the death of the tradition of women of genius.⁹³

“Château” suggests many corollaries to de Staël’s and Barrett Browning’s texts. Katherine, whose name is reminiscent of Corinne, is a composite figure of the two earlier artist heroines. She is widely admired for her beauty and literary talent. And, like Corinne, she has her own money, having inherited it from her dead husband. She is a “very complete, woman of the world” (215). Her chosen

art form is poetry, aligning her with Aurora. Most importantly, though, she is a devotee of de Staël and visits her château frequently. Like de Staël, she is in exile, enjoying the freedom of being away from home and feeling a kinship with this woman of genius from the previous century. She wonders, though, if her life here is a product of her “imagination only, her longing dream” (215). She voices Woolson’s own feelings about Europe as a kind of fantasy, but as the story progresses, we learn that her freedom is a dream and that de Staël and the legacy of the woman of genius is “something from fairy-land” (215).

The other significant characters are also figures inherited from the tradition of women artist narratives. The American John Ford is reminiscent of both Oswald and the young Romney. Like Oswald, Ford represents a more traditional, rigid culture that refuses to grant women the right of independence or artistic ambitions. Upon his arrival, he also discovers a woman of considerable talents who is the center of attention, but unlike Oswald, he refuses to participate in the universal admiration of de Staël or Katherine. He declares de Staël “eager and voracious” and delights in recalling how Goethe and Schiller objected to her forwardness (229). And although Katherine’s book of poetry “received a good deal of praise” (231), he cannot share the world’s opinion. It becomes clear, however, that his aversion to de Staël and Katherine’s poetry is the result of his disdain for women with ambition. “[W]hat is the very term [women of genius] but a stigma?” he asks. “No woman is so proclaimed by the great brazen tongue of the Public unless she has thrown away her birthright of womanly seclusion for the miserable mess of pottage called ‘fame’” (229–230). Although he proclaims to be no “critic,” Katherine forces him to judge her poetry. When he finally does, he objects foremost to its “daring,” or ambition. Echoing the Romney of book 2 of *Aurora Leigh*, he tells her, “We do not expect great poems from women any more than we expect great pictures.” By trying to create great poems, she has committed an “unpardonable sin. . . . For a woman should not dare in that way” (233). But Katherine soundly rejects his characterization, secure in the love of another man who appreciates her talent.

Lorimer Percival, Katherine’s fiancé, is a sincere admirer of de Staël and of Katherine, but he proves to be a sham, like Oswald. His relationship with Katherine is a literary romance, as they close themselves up in the library and make visits to Coppet. On a visit to de Staël’s home, Percival pays homage to de Staël and other “[f]air vanished ladies of the past” and suggests that “the more rigid costumes of our modern age” have been responsible for their decline in reputation (226). However, Percival makes the same choice as did Oswald, selecting a

younger, simpler, more conventional woman over Katherine. In fact, his supposed regard for Katherine is put into question when we learn that his broken engagement with her was a “great sacrifice” because his new wife has no fortune (246). The imputation is that Percival, who has already squandered his own inheritance, was more interested in Katherine’s money than her genius.

“Château,” therefore, enacts the female doubling we saw in *Corinne*, “Collected,” and *Avis*, casting Mrs. Percival and Sylvia Pitcher as conventional women in contrast to Katherine. Sylvia, who is Ford’s aunt and Katherine’s cousin, plays the role of the traditional, domestic woman, similar to Corinne’s and Aurora’s aunts. She takes a decidedly maternal attitude toward Ford, suggesting her essential womanliness. She also lacks a true appreciation for art. Although Sylvia admires de Staël and reads Byron, she secretly prefers Charlotte Yonge — who is meant to represent the conventional, feminine writer — and her favorite hobby is making wax flowers, a feminine, domestic art form. She is everything that Katherine is not, as is Mrs. Percival. As Ford tells her, Percival’s wife reminds him of his aunt because these two ideal women are “very lovely and very lovable” (238). The seventeen-year-old girl also “cannot in the least appreciate the true depth of [Percival’s] poetry” (237), a skill neither necessary nor desirable. She cannot be the kind of literary soul mate that Katherine would have been. But Ford understands her appeal to Percival and wishes that Katherine were more like her. She is a “beautiful young girl, with a face like a wild flower in the woods,” Ford tells her. “She has . . . an expression of sweet and simple goodness, and gentle confiding trust.” In response to his gushing adoration, Katherine recommends that he find a woman like her. Not in the least offended at his preference for this Lucille-like woman, Katherine must, however, be stung by Percival’s decision, although the narrator never tells us she is. Instead, the reader, like Ford, continues to see only her pride, which he believes is a “barrier” between them (243).

Like other woman artist narratives, this story is focused on the conflict between “woman” and “artist,” represented by opposing characters and contained within the artist heroine herself. Katherine seems to believe that she can combine the two in a literary marriage with the poet Percival. However, when Percival rejects her, she does not begin her slow march toward death, as Corinne does. Instead, she remains independent and defiant of Ford, who has made his wishes clear. He will not admire her as a poet, and he cannot love her as a woman until she gives up her writing and shows him “the sweet side of your nature, the gentle, womanly side” (234). Rejecting this “condition,” however, she mocks his devotion to the ideal woman. To win his love, she tells him, “I need not have been in

earnest. I had only to pretend a little, to pretend to be the acquiescent creature you admire, and I could have turned you round my little finger" (235). In other words, he is not interested in real love, the union of souls that Aurora and Romney or even Corinne and Oswald have. He is only interested in the image of the devoted, dependent woman who reflects his own worth and possesses none of her own. It is clear that Katherine can never love this man. On the one hand, he cannot appreciate her art, and, on the other, she cannot willingly give up her art for the bliss of love. His efforts to "rival the printed page" (227) — to take the place of literature in her life — must fail, until she loses her fortune and, hence, her independence.

Just as in so many of these women's texts about marriage, the courtship between these two is portrayed as a power struggle. When Katherine shows Ford her poetry, he believes she is trying to make him her "victim" (234) or make him fall in love with her. Although she believes him impervious to her tactics, artless though they may be, he responds, "perhaps I conceal my wounds" (232). Ford is never literally wounded as Romney and Philip are, nor is he appreciably weakened. Even though he finally wins her hand by going down on his knees and getting tears in his eyes, he is kneeling before his image of a dependent woman, not Katherine. As he had told her before, when woman "is her true self she is so far above us that we can only be humble" (235). What finally humbles him in the end is not her tremendous talent, as is the case in *Aurora Leigh*, but her weakness. She is the one who is wounded — by the loss of her fortune. Now she is reduced to playing the role of the "acquiescent creature" he desires. When he tells her, "It will be very hard for you to give up your independence, your control of things," her reaction clearly conveys that she has decided to adopt the mask of his ideal woman: "she turned towards him with a very sweet expression in her eyes. 'You will do it all for me,' she answered" (245). This response is so unlike every other thing she has said in the story that clearly she has made a conscious decision to wrap him around her finger by playing to his only weakness — the cult of idealized femininity. However much we may wish to find some sign of strength in her manipulation of him, though, the conquest is clearly his. He lights a fire and produces a meal, turning the chateau of Corinne into a domestic space and signaling Katherine's transformation from artist to wife. The loss of her independence and her repudiation of her poetry make her lovable to Ford, like Sylvia and Mrs. Percival. He promises to "forget" her book or that she ever wrote poetry (246) and wins from her the promise never to write again, essentially burying her artist self beside Madame de Staël in Coppet.

As Ford proposed to her, a “wet and bedraggled little bird . . . in the tree above” sang one last note and then began to “arrange his soaked feathers” (241). This image, suggestive of Katherine’s loss of voice, conveys the extent to which this story, like *Avis*, is about the demise of the woman artist. Here, as in Phelps’s novel, the bird is rendered flightless and is silenced. Although this little bird will survive, like Katherine (her marriage being a survival strategy more than anything), the ending of the story provides no ray of hope. There is no faith in a future generation, as in *Avis*. Instead, the gardens at Coppet are “a picture of desolation; all the bright leaves, faded and brown, were lying on the ground in heaps so sodden that the wind could not lift them, strongly as it blew.” The château rises “among the bare trees, cold, naked, and yellow, seeming to have already begun its long winter shiver.” To Katherine, this place is “the end of the world” (240). And although Ford enters and rescues her from her desolation, this is no victory, as the marriage at the end of *St. Elmo* is for the nearly destroyed woman writer. For there is no indication that Katherine has ever loved Ford. Although *Avis* was widely considered the most pessimistic depiction of the woman artist’s fate, Woolson’s story is much darker. *Avis* was at least allowed to love and could hope that her daughter would be able to fulfill her potential. But Woolson suggests that it is not the ravages of love that destroy the woman artist, as in *Corinne*, or the pressures of domesticity, as in *Avis*. Instead, it is men’s rejection of women’s genius, which makes the combination of love and art impossible, and the lack of money, which makes an independent life as an artist impossible. Of course, Woolson herself was able to lead such a life without a great fortune. But she was something that Katherine was not—a professional artist. Having lost her money, Katherine possesses neither the strength nor the vision to turn down the support of the chauvinist suitor as Aurora Leigh did when she chose to be a poor, struggling poet rather than marry Romney or accept his money. By modeling herself after Corinne, an “antique” (247) ideal of the woman artist who was supported by the admiration of her friends, Katherine has adhered to an outmoded form of the woman artist’s life. She gives into Ford precisely because she cannot imagine her writing as a moneymaking activity. Like Alicia Raymond, her refusal to enter the literary marketplace is what truly silences her.

In the end, Ford returns Katherine to a conventional life in America and irrevocably consigns de Staël to the past: “Here’s to you all, charming vanished ladies of the past, . . . may you each have every honor in the picturesque, powdered, unorthographic age to which you belong, and never by any possibility step over into ours!” (243). Tellingly, Katherine has no dialogue in the final scene of the

story. She is seen but not heard. In each of Woolson's European artist stories, Europe fails to offer new opportunities for self-creation. Instead, the promise it had held is a thing of the past, what only Corinne and Aurora Leigh could achieve. After "Château" sat for seven years in a drawer, Woolson remembered the story upon hearing the lyrics "le temps s'en va, le temps s'en va, ma belle," which Ford repeats in the story (219).⁹⁴ The days of Corinne are over, and whatever recognition and happiness she was able to achieve are not available to Woolson's generation.

The fantasy of Europe as a place where women could experience the freedom and independence they were denied at home and as a place where they could more fully develop their artistic abilities, even in marriage (as Eliot and Barrett Browning had done), seems to have given way for American women artists and writers in the 1880s and 1890s. The reality was that even in Europe they could entirely escape neither the bounds of women's lives nor the watchful eyes of a society that tried to keep their ambitions in check. Furthermore, financial security was as elusive abroad as it was at home. Ultimately, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were unable and unwilling to "prove 'Avis' in the wrong." Combining love and art, even in the haven of European exile, was still beyond the grasp of the new generation of serious women writers, whether love took the form of a romantic alliance or a supportive community. Nevertheless, none of these four authors suffered the fate of Avis, or Alicia, or Katherine—silence. They were all at least partially successful at making room in their lives to pursue their art seriously and to complete important works of art that reflect their high ambitions to be remembered alongside European women writers.