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## Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

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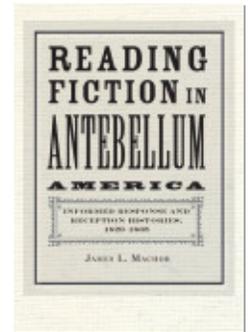
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## Response as (Re)Construction

### *The Reception of Catharine Sedgwick's Novels*

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO Catharine Sedgwick? The question is neither facile nor meant to be rhetorical, if considered through the lens of historical hermeneutics. Instead, the query can be—and needs to be—answered in several different ways, one of which is simply to say that she was forgotten as a fiction writer for most of the twentieth century, until a few scholars rediscovered her as part of the feminist project of recovering “lost” women writers. Certainly such an answer is accurate if we consider that the last twenty-five years have witnessed the republication of three of her novels—*A New England Tale*, *Hope Leslie*, and *The Linwoods*, all in scholarly editions—following almost a century during which her novels were out of print.<sup>1</sup> Since 1980, critical attention also has picked up noticeably. From 1921 to 1980, according to the *MLA Bibliography*, only five journal articles on Sedgwick were published, with only one before 1963. Since 1980, ninety-three critical articles have appeared.<sup>2</sup> Much of that attention has fallen on *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick's third novel, originally published in 1827. In its Rutgers University Press edition, *Hope Leslie* is now frequently taught in university courses in nineteenth-century American literature to the point where it could be called hypercanonical, in the mold of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

It would be a mistake, however, to claim that Sedgwick is now firmly established in the American canon. Despite the recent interest, most of her fiction—six to twelve novels, depending on how one counts, and seven collections of short stories—remains out of print. In fact, Sedgwick's position, comparatively speaking, is still at the margins of the canon if scholarly interest serves as the gauge. Contrast the number of critical articles on Sedgwick since 1980 to those over the same period on traditionally canonical antebellum fiction writers: 2,492 for Melville, 1,648 for Hawthorne, 1,793 for Poe, and 517 for Cooper. Among nineteenth-century

women fiction writers, Sedgwick lags substantially behind Chopin (470), Harriet Beecher Stowe (422), Louisa May Alcott (229), and Sarah Orne Jewett (210).<sup>3</sup> Even more telling, only three book-length studies devoted to Sedgwick have appeared in the last one hundred years, and only one of those has come as part of the reclamation work on Sedgwick since the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> What needs to be stressed is that there is still a substantial difference between Sedgwick's recovery and the much longer, more intense revival that Melville underwent through most of the twentieth century.

Ironically, the relative rankings of Sedgwick and Melville over the last eighty years—and still today—is nearly the exact inverse of the positions the two authors occupied in the antebellum decades. While Melville began as a popular author with *Typee* and *Omoo* but was largely forgotten by 1860, Sedgwick was one of the most popular American novelists throughout her fiction-writing career and the most successful women writer before the wildly popular debuts of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* in the early 1850s. Moreover, Sedgwick was one of the few women writers in antebellum America to enjoy both popular success and the public acclaim of periodical reviewers and editors. Frequently compared to Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper as a historical novelist, Sedgwick was also repeatedly linked with Cooper, Washington Irving, and William Cullen Bryant as "founders" of American letters.<sup>5</sup> The *Southern Literary Messenger* asserted that "[o]f America's female writers, we must consider her the first" and admitted no hesitation "in placing her upon a level with the best of our native novelists" (Dec. 1835: 57). The *Ladies Magazine* went so far as to "unhesitatingly place" Sedgwick "as the first and best American novelist" (July 1830: 320), a judgment echoed five years later by the *Museum of Foreign Literature*, which announced that "[b]y the more trained and fastidious of her countrymen, she is considered the first of American novelists" (Nov.–Dec. 1835: 540). While such claims may strike one as quintessential examples of magazine puffery, it is worth noting that in 1834, as a result of her literary reputation and broad popular appeal, Sedgwick was one of only four writers included in the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, literally a "who's who of statesmen, generals, ministers, and other cultural leaders."<sup>6</sup>

The difference between Sedgwick's antebellum status and her radical devaluation in American literary history for three-fourths of the twenti-

eth century leads back—perhaps inevitably, certainly provocatively—to the question of what happened to cause such a change. How did the virtual erasure of Sedgwick by the mid twentieth century occur? Was it a matter of Sedgwick's falling victim to the patriarchal institutionalization of American literary history in the twentieth century, which conceptualized fiction within a master narrative that Nina Baym has termed a "melodrama of beset manhood"? Or was it less a macrohistorical development of patriarchal prejudices and more a microhistorical phenomenon in which Sedgwick's fate paralleled what Jane Tompkins revealed as the fate of Susan Warner, who fell into literary oblivion because she had the wrong connections—or no significant connections—in the literary marketplace of publishing and reviewing?<sup>7</sup>

The answer to both questions is "no"—or, at least, "not exactly." Unlike Warner and many other nineteenth-century women fiction writers, Sedgwick did not lack professional and social connections with prominent members of the publishing industry and the antebellum literary world. From virtually the beginning of her writing career in the early 1820s, Sedgwick regularly mixed with writers and artists at her brother's and friends' houses in New York City. In the 1840s, the Sedgwick homes in Lenox and Stockbridge, Massachusetts, became a literary center for what would be known as the American Lake District, a region that developed into a gathering place—and in some cases served as the residences—for such literary and publishing luminaries as Bryant, Hawthorne, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James T. Fields. Sedgwick's short stories and brief nonfiction writings appeared in the leading periodicals of the times, including the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, the *New-Yorker*, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Graham's Magazine*, and *Godey's Lady's Book*, as well as in such prominent annuals as *The Token* (where several of Hawthorne's stories also first appeared). Though her novels were published by several different firms in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, the majority came out under the cachet of the Harper Brothers, the largest and most prominent U.S. publishing house. Indeed, the Harpers became Sedgwick's main publisher in 1835 because the firm deliberately sought to add her name—and her significant reputation—to its lists.<sup>8</sup>

While the phallogentrism of many twentieth-century literary historians no doubt affected Sedgwick's later demotion, this explanation for

Sedgwick's devaluation as a writer has its limits. For one thing, it cannot account for the consistent canonical status in the twentieth century of women writers such as Emily Dickinson, Edith Wharton, and even Harriet Beecher Stowe. Nor can patriarchal dominance explain how Sedgwick was received so favorably by the interpretive community of antebellum reviewers, a community that was just as phallogocentric as the twentieth-century literary historians who read—and wrote—Sedgwick out of the American canon.

Rather than invoke what have become standard assumptions regarding the reputation of nineteenth-century women novelists, we need to look elsewhere in history for answers about Sedgwick's fate. Specifically, was there anything about the way her novels were read and received in antebellum America that not only elevated them but also contributed to their eventual neglect? To ask such a question is to raise in a different way the query about what happened to Sedgwick. In this version, the query becomes part of a broader inquiry regarding what it meant to read Sedgwick in the decades leading up to the Civil War. What did reviewers and other readers make of *A New England Tale*, *Hope Leslie*, and *The Lincolns*, as well as *Clarence*, *Live and Let Live*, *The Boy of Mt. Rhigi*, and her other fictional narratives? What was it about the way her novels were received and interpreted in the public sphere that caused them to be the object of so much praise? In seeking answers to these questions, it is crucial to remember that the work Sedgwick's fiction did on or for her antebellum audience was a function of the work their interpretive practices—particularly the strategies of informed reading—did on her novels.

Although modern critics and historians have directed no attention to questions about antebellum interpretive practices and Sedgwick's fiction, some have addressed other dimensions of her relation to the fiction-reading audience and the literary marketplace. One of the most prominent has been Mary Kelley, who has argued that Sedgwick was one of the earliest examples of antebellum women writers who suffered the angst of authorship as a "literary domestic." According to Kelley, that angst resulted because, in entering the literary marketplace, Sedgwick transgressed social norms by violating the cult of domesticity, with its emphasis on home and private space as the proper female domain. Women writers such as Sedgwick thus "were torn between a desire 'for something

out of their condition'” as women and “a conflicting and contradictory desire for ‘a right appreciation’” of the domestic sphere as the domain of true womanhood. Finding themselves “private women” on a public stage, these writers experienced not only anxiety but also a “crisis of identity” that “hampered” them throughout their careers. For Sedgwick in particular, Kelley finds that anxiety in the novelist’s remarks about authorship in her letters and in the fact that Sedgwick published most of her novels and short story collections anonymously.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, however, one Sedgwick scholar has called this characterization into question, at least in regard to the practice of anonymous publication. For one thing, anonymous publication of fiction was used by such leading male novelists as Scott and the early Cooper. Moreover, while Sedgwick began her career behind the screen of anonymity, by the late 1820s her identity as the author of the anonymously published *New England Tale*, *Redwood*, and *Hope Leslie* was widely known among reviewers and middle-class readers.<sup>10</sup> Long after it stopped serving as a veil for her identity, Sedgwick continued to maintain the practice of anonymous publication. Indeed, so transparent had the “screen” become by the 1830s that a reviewer in the *American Ladies Magazine* could begin his review of *The Linwoods* by saying that “Miss Sedgwick’s name is sufficient to give any work, to which it is prefixed, a passport to public favor,” despite the fact that Sedgwick’s name appeared nowhere in *The Linwoods* (Nov. 1835: 653). Although one need not go so far as to claim that her continued use of anonymous publication was a market strategy, it clearly was for Sedgwick more of a convention than a symptom of feminine modesty or writerly anxiety.

Whether pseudo anonymity was a strategy or not, it does appear that Sedgwick possessed some savvy about the literary marketplace, including audience expectations. She seems to have been a regular reader of periodical reviews, including those of her own works, and repeatedly attended to the sales figures for her novels. While her family aided her in fiduciary relations with publishers, a letter to her brother Charles reveals she was quite comfortable discussing contracts and marketing issues. Speaking of the publication of her *Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man* in 1836, Sedgwick instructed Charles to “urge upon” the Harpers the “policy of letting it be known to their correspondents . . . what sort of thing it is, intended for popular consumption, that it may at once

be for sale in the country towns.”<sup>11</sup> This is not to imply that Sedgwick was a literary mercenary or panderer to the reading public. Such terms would be no more fitting to describe her interests than they would be for characterizing Melville’s desire to reach a broad, popular readership and his meticulous concern for securing publishing contracts in England to prevent pirating of his novels. Indeed, Sedgwick’s market awareness was typical of many writers of the time, including not only Poe and Melville but also most women novelists. As Ann Douglas has observed, women writers in antebellum America “showed an extraordinary degree, even by Victorian standards, of market-oriented alertness to their customers.” Lawrence Buell has shown, moreover, that antebellum women writers, particularly those who were, like Sedgwick, from New England, preceded men in identifying themselves as professional writers.<sup>12</sup>

Sedgwick’s awareness of the literary marketplace and the middle-class audience for fiction was an outgrowth of her conception of what successful authorship entailed—that is, reaching readers broadly for productive social and cultural ends. In part that concept was grounded in assumptions about women and women’s roles as defined by the cult of domesticity and its notions of true womanhood. Despite the limitations this ideological construction of gender placed on women, a number of modern feminist scholars have shown how the cult, ironically enough, provided a logic for women to enter the public sphere through writing and publication. As Susan Coultrap-McQuin has pointed out, “Although the ideology of separate spheres could be restrictive to women, it also gave them an area of authority (the home) and an expertise (domesticity and morality)” that some women seized on “to justify an expanded role in society” through authorship.<sup>13</sup> If women were, as the cult said, specially endowed with moral feelings and possessed an intrinsic virtuous authority, it made absolute sense that women were especially fit to help cultivate such attributes in others via the printed word. Who better, in fact, to write the novels that could do more good than harm?

Answering that question by saying “women,” the public sphere—led by periodical reviewers—welcomed women writers as fit contributors to the elevation of society. According to *Godey’s*, the work of female authors gave “proof that our women are doing their share to promote the moral improvement of society” (Jan. 1837: 48). A review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* claimed that the “[e]levated position assumed by the

softer sex in the various departments of elegant literature . . . has been justly deemed an unerring token of the rapid advancement of knowledge and refinement” in America (Sept. 1849: 579). By the early 1850s, an article on “American Female Authorship” in *Godey’s* could claim that “the time has gone past when literary tastes or pursuits are admitted as a stigma upon the social relations of any woman. . . . Let the needle and the pen lie side by side, they will not wrangle; for the one induces long, pleasant reveries, and the other can give them expression” (Feb. 1852: 147). Nor were such remarks exceptions to the rule. According to Baym, many reviewers shared this recognition and respect for women writers, treating their works “as serious entrants in the race for literary reputation.”<sup>14</sup>

While it is, therefore, necessary to qualify the claim that Sedgwick faced a crisis of identity as an author, it is important not to go to the other extreme and claim that she never experienced anxiety as a writer. On several occasions she expressed dismay over the quality of a novel she was writing and doubts about its possible success. While composing *Hope Leslie* in 1825, she warned her brother Henry, “you *must* moderate your expectation—or you will be sadly disappointed” with the novel, since “my education has been too defective, and my knowledge too circumscribed, to permit the expectation that I can do anything better or half as well as I have done.” Five years later, while writing *Clarence*, she lamented to Charles, “I am not satisfied with Clarence [*sic*], and never shall be with any thing that I write.”<sup>15</sup> Yet what writers do not have similar doubts about their writing? One need only recall Melville’s letter to Hawthorne bewailing his “whale” and lamenting that “all my books are botches” to recognize that Sedgwick’s dismay was comparatively mild. Moreover, Sedgwick’s remark in 1830 about “never” being satisfied with “any thing that I write” sounds like the expression of a demanding author, who is turning an interrogating eye on her writing and asking tough questions about it.

Similar qualifications need to be made about her comments on literary forms and the profession of authorship, and what such remarks indicate about her self-conception as a writer and her artistic ambitions—or lack thereof. These issues are especially important because several feminist critics have argued that literary women in antebellum America, unlike their male counterparts, did not conceive themselves as artists and

thus lacked aesthetic ambition.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, Sedgwick repeatedly made remarks in private, particularly early in her career, that seem to place her within this general pattern. In 1822, she wrote in a letter to Susan Channing, “I protest against being supposed to make any pretension as an author,” and five years later, in response to a letter from a reader of *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick claimed, “[l]iterary occupation is rather a pastime than a profession for me.”<sup>17</sup> On literary fame, Sedgwick was even more dismissive. Writing to Henry in the wake of the reception of her second novel, *Redwood*, Sedgwick asserted, “I have always been sincere in my declaration that I did not write for fame—the book has had much more praise and celebrity than I expected.”<sup>18</sup> Such a denial Sedgwick repeated throughout her career. In an 1837 letter to William Ellery Channing, she “thank[ed] Heaven that I am not now working for the poor and perishing rewards of literary ambition,” and four years later she maintained in a letter to Harriet St. Leger, “I never wrote for fame, never desired it.”<sup>19</sup> Sedgwick’s comments, however, may well reflect less feminine modesty or a lack of artistic ambition than a distrust of the transience of literary fame and the folly other antebellum writers saw in an ambition for popularity. Again one need only recall Melville’s marginal pencilings to find in them echoes of Sedgwick and to recognize them as part of an ambivalence, as Michael Gilmore has shown, shared by a number of male writers, including Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, rather than outright dismissal of artistic ambition, Sedgwick’s remarks were part of a similar ambivalence in that, on other occasions, she was quite ready to admit, as she did in 1830, that “I honestly confess that I earnestly desire and hope for success and expect it” with her writing. Or, as she put it in an 1834 journal entry about her fiction, “I have as much pleasure in success & certainly as much in the consciousness of deserving it . . . as others.”<sup>21</sup>

Ambivalence about fame and literary ambition hardly indicates that Sedgwick was distraught over her role as a woman in the public literary marketplace. On the contrary, Sedgwick seems to have been comfortable in the public sphere through involvements that were not limited to her writing. Influenced by her family’s belief that education and its transmission were obligations and that educated Americans ought to play a leading role in a democratic society, Sedgwick involved herself in social activism through visiting hospitals, establishing schools for im-

migrant children, and serving for over a decade as president of the New York Women's Prison Association.<sup>22</sup> In her activism, Sedgwick thought of herself as an instrument of the American republic—or even of God—and that idea colored her conception of her fiction and of herself as an author. In a journal entry Sedgwick expressed what she saw as the moral and spiritual instrumentality of her work when she wrote, “When I feel that my writings have made any one happier or better, I feel an emotion of gratitude to Him who has made me the medium of any blessing to my fellow-creatures.”<sup>23</sup>

Though admittedly more providential in its conception of her vocation, Sedgwick's view of the fiction writer's role—and of the nature and value of fiction—was very much in line with the assumptions of informed reading. Like most reviewers, Sedgwick valued fiction above all for its ability to instruct while delighting by fusing, in its best manifestations, the aesthetic with the didactic so as to be capable of performing ameliorative cultural work. Expressing the point in an 1830 journal entry, Sedgwick felt that a novel of the highest merit was one that not only interests its audience but also “elevates the feelings, or . . . allies itself . . . to the purest & highest attributes of our nature.”<sup>24</sup>

Such ideas, in turn, contributed significantly to Sedgwick's conception of the relation between author and audience, irrespective of gender; however, it was a conception quite different from Melville's and Poe's, despite the fact that all three writers were influenced in this area by the public discussion of fiction in periodicals. Although Sedgwick shared with Poe and Melville a desire to reach common and elite readers, she never conceived that engagement as the acrimonious battle for mastery—via artistic shape shifting and disruption of the audience—that Poe envisioned authorship to be. Nor was it for Sedgwick a matter of seeking to speak to a wide audience because she had something to say and wanted to be sure she was heard, as was the case for Melville. Or rather, it was never just a matter of an expression searching for a wide reach so much as a linkage of Melville's democratic aspirations with Sedgwick's unflagging desire to move readers to thoughts and feelings that would lead to more democratic and ethical social practices. Consequently, while Sedgwick did not conceive of an author's relation to audience as adversarial or unidirectional, neither did it involve for her a mere passive acquiescence to readers' demands. For Sedgwick that relation needed to develop in a

cooperative manner, enabling writers to exercise agency in shaping their identity while addressing their readership as bipartisan participants in the experience of fiction. It was a conception of authorship and reader relations to which she would subscribe during her entire career and one that would contribute to the substantial approval her fiction received in antebellum America.



Ironically, Sedgwick began her career with no intention of being a fiction writer. The impetus behind what would become her first novel came from her recent conversion to Unitarianism in 1821, in that Sedgwick originally conceived her book as a religious tract to promote that liberal branch of Christianity. Partly under the encouragement of her brother Henry, to whom she showed a partial version, Sedgwick modified and expanded her draft into a 277-page novel. It was published anonymously in 1822 under the title *A New England Tale; or, Sketches of New England Character and Manners*.<sup>25</sup> Though evidence of its sales is sketchy, it did sell well enough that the publisher quickly issued a second printing, which sold out in two months.<sup>26</sup> Reviews were laudatory, with the *Literary and Scientific Repository* proclaiming that *A New England Tale* was comparable in orientation and merit to Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* and the novels of Maria Edgeworth (May 1822: 340). Such public approbation, apparently, was matched by the private reactions of her readers, according to her brother Henry, who reported receiving one day "a large packet of letters . . . from Boston, all of them praising the tale."<sup>27</sup>

Readers sensed that Sedgwick was doing something new even as she was meeting reader desires that had been building in the wake of the heady nationalism that had developed since the American victory in the War of 1812. Seeking to extend that nationalism to the cultural front, the *North American Review* had published a series of articles in 1815 calling for the development of an indigenous American literature that would reflect the national character.<sup>28</sup> Feeding the fire four years later was Sidney Smith's now infamous taunt in the *Edinburgh Review*: "in the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?"<sup>29</sup> That remark kicked off discussions in American periodicals that carried through the 1820s.

It was in the midst of such discussions, and the eager expectations they produced, that American reviewers received and positioned Sedg-

wick's novel. Commenting on the "wide scope which our country affords" for social and historical fiction, the *North American Review* praised *A New England Tale* for its "beautiful little picture[s] of native scenery and manners" (July 1822: 279 n.). The review in the *Literary and Scientific Repository* went a step further, claiming, "of the books that profess to illustrate American society and manners, we have never met with one which so perfectly and agreeably accomplishes the design, to a certain extent, as the little volume before us" (336). No doubt such remarks emanated in part from the campaign to promote an American literature and, thus, rested squarely on ideology and literary politics. Like other formulations in informed reading, these remarks' ideological bearings constituted part of a pattern of response that interpreted *A New England Tale* within a specific horizon of expectations. For the reviewer in the *Literary and Scientific Repository*, that horizon involved not only national pride and topicality but also the interpretive assumption that, to be successful, a novel must fulfill reader expectations in an original way. Hence, the reviewer noted that, while "[o]ur political institutions, the state of learning among us, and the influence of religion upon our national character, have often been discussed and displayed," what set Sedgwick's novel apart was its representation of "domestic manners, the social and moral influences, which operate in retirement . . . and the multitude of local peculiarities, which form our distinctive features" (336).

Amid this view, other readers found Sedgwick addressing expressly one of the areas the *Repository* reviewer had mentioned only in passing: religion and its impact on the national—or at least the New England—character. Certainly, readers could have located any number of places in which religion is both a topic of direct discussion and a factor in Sedgwick's character depictions, particularly that of her protagonist, Jane Elton, and her guardian aunt, Mrs. Wilson, a hypocritical Christian whose "bitter spirit of the Jewish bigot," according to the narrator, "was manifest in the complacency with which she regarded her own faith."<sup>30</sup> Within the codes of informed reading, in fact, *A New England Tale* could be interpreted not only as a religious novel but as a dangerously sectarian attack on Calvinist theology, and a few readers responded to the novel in precisely this manner. The *New York Review* expressed "disgust" at the "narrowness, injustice, and sectarian bitterness" that "marked her 'New England Tale'" (Oct. 1837: 447), while another reviewer—this one in the

*Christian Disciple*—objected to the novel’s depiction of Mrs. Wilson as an embodiment of Calvinist tenets in “their most bold and pernicious forms.”<sup>31</sup> A similar dismay marked a letter Sedgwick received from a Daniel James, who, though praising the novel in other ways, nonetheless complained about Sedgwick’s depiction of Mrs. Wilson. Citing in particular a scene in chapter 11, when she disparages “some of the sublimest portions of holy scripture,” James objected, “Mrs. Wilson is a rank antinomian. She makes religion a mask for all iniquity. And I am extremely sorry” that “the benevolent author has confounded principles with the too common abuse of them.”<sup>32</sup> Although it is unclear how widespread such responses were, the *American Ladies Magazine* did summarize the reception of *A New England Tale* with the general comment that “the portraiture of religious hypocrisy which the work contained . . . brought upon its author the charge of sectarianism” (Dec. 1835: 659).

Given such charges and the tendency in informed reading to castigate sectarian and advocacy fiction in general, it is surprising that Sedgwick’s first novel was not sweepingly denounced in this area. On the contrary, several commentators defended the novel’s treatment of religious issues. A different article in the *American Ladies Magazine*, for example, asserted that, while “[s]ome christians [*sic*] have considered the character of Mrs. Wilson, as an unkind and uncandid caricature of their opinions,” such interpretations missed the point. “Had Mrs. Wilson been intended as a representation of the whole body of Calvinists, this [criticism] would unquestionably be just; but as an *individual*, Mrs. Wilson is true to life—most of us have met such in our pilgrimage” (May 1829: 235). Interpreting Mrs. Wilson’s character as representative, not of a particular creed, but of an all-too-common pseudo-religious sensibility, this reviewer read *A New England Tale* not as a divisive religious novel but as a form of moral commentary about spiritual hypocrisy. In effect, Sedgwick’s characterization of Mrs. Wilson was justified by its verisimilitude, an idea even the otherwise unsettled Daniel James admitted in his letter when he conceded, “of these Mrs. Wilson—I know many of them.”

For another reviewer, the charge of sectarianism was equally irrelevant, but not because of the novel’s vraisemblance. Rather, according to the *Monthly Review*, “Every character in the tale . . . seems to possess distinct notions on religious subjects; but the author has granted a wide tolerance to all of them,” except for the “bigoted” Mrs. Wilson.<sup>33</sup> While in-

terpreting the novel as a critique of religious bigotry, this reviewer did not see it as dangerous advocacy fiction. Rather, his formulation conceived the novel as an expression of nondenominational tolerance grounded in Christian principles. A related interpretation was at work in a remark in a letter from a Mrs. S. S. Wilde to Sedgwick, congratulating the author for “the excellent & Christian principles [that] are maintained in the *New England Tale*,” specifically the “doctrine of love, the forgiveness of injuries, & pity & compassion” to which no “reasonable being can object.” Likewise focusing on its nondenominational message of Christian piety and faith in the divine, Eliza Cabot congratulated Sedgwick for the way she “expressed . . . beautifully yourself in the *N. E. Tale*, the feeling of trust and confidence in the goodness of God.”<sup>34</sup>

It is perhaps significant that the last two responses were by women, since women were the leading force, as Douglass has demonstrated, in the cultural shift in antebellum America away from Calvinist theology to a more liberal, even feminine form of Christianity emphasizing divine forgiveness, a loving Christ, and the inherent goodness of humans.<sup>35</sup> If women such as Cabot and Wilde saw no sectarianism in *A New England Tale*, it may have been because the religious sensibilities they ascribed to it accorded so well with their ideas about the oppressive Calvinist creed that American women had started to reject. Given the progressive religious appeal such readers attributed to the novel, combined with what other readers saw as its democratic nationalism, it seems likely that the popularity of *A New England Tale* resulted in part because of the way middle-class women could find in the novel subjects and representations that met both their values and their horizon of expectations.

It would be a mistake, however, to attribute too much of the novel’s success to the work of women readers. For one thing, anti-Calvinist feelings were not limited to women—or to liberal ministers. At the time, middle-class antipathy was developing toward what were seen as the limitations of Calvinism in relation to the Christian nurture that were deemed essential to the moral education of children. Since “the saints were powerless to save their progeny,” notes G. M. Goshgarian, Calvinism came to be regarded as, in effect, binding the hands of both parents and educators, and “[i]n Jacksonian America, few middle-class parents shared [t]his sense of the limits of parental responsibility.” Given such dissatisfaction, it is not surprising that the subject of Calvinism and critiques

of its doctrine had entered American fiction as early as 1812—a decade before *A New England Tale*.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, many middle-class readers were not finding anything disturbing in Sedgwick's novel. The linkage of that familiarity and the embrace given the novel for its welcomed nationalism goes far in explaining why some male reviewers also did not take it as a divisive religious novel.

This linkage, however, does not mean that women's reading did not play a role in male reviewers' approval of *A New England Tale*. If Sedgwick's novel was viewed as promoting a religion of the heart founded in the "doctrine of love," that orientation aligned neatly with the assumption within informed reading that women were especially prone to respond emotionally to novels and tales.<sup>37</sup> In that linked logic, *A New England Tale* could be viewed as distinctively valuable for the way it met the needs of women readers. Even the verisimilitude ascribed to Sedgwick's novel had relevance here, since a common assumption of this era, both in England and in the United States, was that women readers paid greater attention to detail than did men.<sup>38</sup> Amid possible connections that readers may have found between a female audience and Sedgwick's novel, however, no reviewer identified *A New England Tale* as primarily or even especially suited for women readers. Instead, reviewers saw the novel's characterization, its verisimilitude, and its distinctive religious flavor as suitable for Americans of both sexes.

Equally interesting is that despite the commercial success of *A New England Tale* and the sheaf of praise it received in public and in private, Sedgwick was dismayed at the novel's reception. To Susan Channing, Sedgwick admitted, "I could not endure the idea that I had written myself out of the affections" of some of her neighbors and fellow New Englanders. Much as Melville did in responding to the reviews of *Mardi*, Sedgwick seems to have been struck most by the few criticisms of the novel as presumptively and offensively sectarian. In another letter to Eliza Cabot, Sedgwick, speaking of the occasional objections to *A New England Tale*, wondered aloud whether "is it not mortifying and shocking Dear Eliza to be held up before the public as an *indelicate & profane* writer?"<sup>39</sup>

Sedgwick, however, was hardly deterred by her dismay or by the comments that had precipitated it. Within a year she was at work on a new book, intended from the start as a novel. It was, moreover, a novel for which she had greater ambitions. In another letter to Eliza Cabot, Sedg-

wick explained, in what was already becoming for her a characteristic mix of diffidence and determination, that she wanted to “meet the charge of presumption, [by] attempting with my few literary qualifications to write a *real book*” this time.<sup>40</sup> That “real book” was *Redwood*.

When Sedgwick's new novel appeared in 1824, her heightened ambitions for it were quickly validated in the *Atlantic Magazine*, which identified *Redwood* as an advancement in Sedgwick's fiction. “The promise held forth by the ‘New England Tale;’” asserted the review, “has been more than abundantly realized in *Redwood* [*sic*]” in its novelistic craft and greater maturity (July 1824: 239). This sentiment quickly was echoed in other periodicals. Part of the reason for this response lay in the fact that reviewers took *Redwood* as another religious novel, but one in which Sedgwick successfully avoided any tincture of what might be construed as sectarianism. The *United States Literary Gazette* asserted, “*Redwood* [*sic*] is a religious novel, but there is nothing like bigotry or fanaticism in the opinions of the writer, who displays a spirit of very liberal and rational piety” (Dec. 1, 1824: 254). Reviewers were especially emphatic about praising *Redwood* on this issue when it came to the novel's representation of the Shakers, a community that figures largely in the novel's plot. A review in the *New-York Mirror* noted that in the narrative “that well known [*sic*] religious sect called the Shakers, form a conspicuous group in the picture, and as far as our judgment extends, are painted with fidelity” (June 26, 1824: 380). *Graham's* seconded this interpretation of the novel's accuracy and taste in depicting the Shakers, calling *Redwood* “the best account we have ever read of life among the Shakers,” which is “traced with masterly discretion” (Aug. 1850: 135).

Perhaps more important to the view of *Redwood* as an advance in Sedgwick's craft was that reviewers saw additional connections between Sedgwick's first two novels: in their domestic focus and their American character. The *Southern Quarterly Review* boldly proclaimed that Sedgwick's second novel “entitle[s] her to a position among writers second to few” and solidified that claim by forging a link between those two elements—and by implication back to the way *A New England Tale* had been received. According to this review, what gave *Redwood* its imprimatur was its “delineation of household events, the portraitures of the serene, the domestic, even the humble” within a particular regional setting. The novel's domestic sketches of New England life and society “pos-

essed a particularity that,” according to this review, made them “highly valuable” (July 1850: 540). Reading the novel for its regional color, in fact, was one of the most common responses to *Redwood*. The review in the *New-York Mirror* praised the novel for the way its “delineations of New England manners is [*sic*] very correct, and form a faithful picture of that part of our country.” For the *Mirror*, that authenticity was especially notable in the character of Debby Lennox, a rural healer who plays a key role in the novel’s rescue plot. “The character of Debby,” intoned the reviewer, “is drawn with a masterly pen. It is replete with sound, but uncultured sense, and Yankee peculiarities” (380). Others made the same claim in responding to Sedgwick’s characterization of Debby. The *Atlantic Magazine*, styling Debby a striking “Yankee maiden” whose “peculiarities of . . . dialect are well preserved throughout,” called her “the most original [character] in the work” (239). Readers were most struck by what they saw as the regional verisimilitude of Debby. “Who cannot see,” asked a reviewer in the *American Ladies Magazine*, “the muscular, gray-haired old woman, with kindly heart, and the blunt freedom of manners, which so peculiarly characterises [*sic*] our good, honest, independent yeoman” of New England? “If there be an artist who hopes to surpass ‘Aunt Debby Lenox,’” the reviewer continued, “he may as well lay down his pencil and die.” Notwithstanding its hyperbole, the upshot of such a remark, as the reviewer explained in the next sentence, was that Debby, as a fictional character, “was as perfect in its kind as any character Sir Walter Scott ever imagined” (May 1829: 236). Nor were such laudatory responses limited to the public sphere. A letter Sedgwick received from a Mrs. K. Lazarus reported that a reader of *Redwood* had told her that it was “a work of superior talent” and gave special praise to “the character of Aunt Deborah [who] is first rate, in Scott’s best manner, yet not an imitation of Scott. It is to America what Scott’s characters are to Scotland—valuable as original pictures, with . . . the feeling of reality and life.”<sup>41</sup>

Such comparisons to Scott carried larger implications for the way the novel was seen. Its localized setting and what reviews saw as its authentic depiction of regional manners were seized upon as features that made *Redwood* an important contribution to a nascent American fiction. It thereby was given a status similar to Cooper’s *The Spy* and *The Pioneers* as America’s answers to the novels of Scott. The review of *Redwood* in the

*New-York Mirror* praised Sedgwick as one of a small but intrepid band of “writers of our own nation, who . . . add to the reputation of this country, by making it the scene of their stories” (380). More explicit was a review in the *Port-Folio*. After grouping *Redwood* with *The Spy* and *The Pioneers* as “filling” a hitherto empty place in the “description of American manners,” the *Port-Folio* reviewer went on to call Sedgwick’s novel “the first *American* novel, strictly speaking,” that offers “a faithful delineation of our fireside” (July 1824: 66). Indeed, intoned the *North American Review*, Sedgwick was a national American novelist in a way quite different than Cooper because *Redwood* provided “a conclusive argument, that the writers of works of fiction, of which the scene is laid in familiar and domestic life, have a rich and varied field before them in the United States” (Apr. 1825: 248).

Such characterizations of the novel both in itself and in relation to the fictions of Cooper and Scott led reviewers to conclude that, despite similarities among the works of the three writers, *Redwood* differed in ways other than its domestic focus. Just as reviewers agreed on what *Redwood* was, they also were in accord that it was not an historical novel. For some reviewers this was a problem. According to the *North American Review*, by setting her story in “the very days in which we live,” Sedgwick failed to “avail herself of the . . . abundant resources of interest” for a novel, “the scenes of which should be laid in the United States” (245). Invoking the comparison with Cooper’s fictions, the *United States Literary Gazette* found *Redwood* to be a lesser accomplishment precisely because it had “nothing of the historical interest which gives so much value to the works of the latter” (Dec. 1, 1824: 254). The irony here is that a factor in this critique was a feature that reviewers elsewhere identified as an asset of *Redwood*: its domestic focus. For example, while the *New-York Mirror* praised the novel for its depictions of “the humble beauties of a village life,” it added that that characteristic made the novel a “plain tale, unadorned by the brilliancy of exuberant figure”; “nor does it take the eagle flight,” continued the *Mirror*, “of Mr. Scott” (380).

One notable feature of the comments on *Redwood* as a national novel employing certain American materials (and leaving out others) is the virtual absence of commentary about what Lucinda Damon-Bach has recently called its “complex” treatment and “challenge” to “early-nineteenth-century ideas about gender, class, slavery” and the “relations

between Northern and Southern states.<sup>42</sup> What Damon-Bach refers to here regarding the issue of slavery is the book's narrative about Africk, a black slave belonging to the title character and the subject of a brief six-page tale of woe in the novel's third chapter. Only one reviewer—in the *Port-Folio*—mentioned it, merely noting that, while the “episode of Africk is an affecting story, and extremely well told[,] yet we could have dispensed with it, in the fullness of our entertainment” (67). In neither the public nor the private commentary that has survived about the novel did readers indicate that they found in *Redwood* any challenges to ideas about slavery—or gender.

Where they did agree with recent critical comments about the novel was in the idea that, despite the ostensible reference of its title to a male character, Henry Redwood, the novel's most memorable—and laudatory—characters were women.<sup>43</sup> Besides the attention given to Debby Lennox, Ellen Bruce (a young woman who turns out to be Henry Redwood's lost daughter) and Susan Allen (an elderly Shaker) received the most notice from readers. The *North American Review* believed that “next to the character of Debby, that of Susan is sketched with the greatest spirit and originality” (271). In a letter to Sedgwick, William Minot reported that “the book is talked of everywhere” and that “people . . . admire the character of Susan extremely.”<sup>44</sup> Of Ellen Bruce, the *New-York Mirror* declared that she is not only the novel's principal character but one from whose “beautiful lips the author seems to delight in speaking the purest sentiments of female virtue.” As to those who might think her “too good for reality,” the *Mirror* reviewer responded, “we are not of that calculating class, who do not believe” in “her delicacy of sentiment, and purity of thought” (380). Striking in this response is the way it combines antebellum notions of the nature of true womanhood with the interpretive code of fictional vraisemblance to locate the verisimilitude of Ellen's character in the idea that women such as she, though “seldom found in the scenes of real life,” are known to exist somewhere (380).

Not every element of *Redwood*, however, came in for praise from readers. Besides chiding the novel for its lack of historical ballast, some reviewers found its plot wanting. The *North American Review* was ambivalent about the novel's plotting, particularly the events that occur at the Shaker village involving Susan Allen, her niece Emily, and Reuben Harrington, a Shaker elder who is in reality a religious hypocrite with

salacious designs on Emily. The “episode of Emily, and her adventures among the Shakers,” including her rescue from Harrington, said the *North American Review*, “are too extraordinary and romantic, to harmonize well with the general strain of the narrative” (265). This reviewer found a similar “want of perfect verisimilitude” in the novel’s plot regarding Ellen Bruce’s veiled past and the revelation of her true identity as Redwood’s daughter: “There is something a little too strange, for a story of real life, in the obscurity that hangs about Ellen’s birth, and the mysterious box containing the miniature of her father. . . . These things remind us too strongly of the machinery of romance” (268). In an otherwise laudatory review, the commentator in the *Atlantic Magazine* expressed dismay not so much at the plot, per se, but with the way Sedgwick handled the narrative design of the plot and its impact on the novel’s momentum. In particular, this reviewer was “dissatisfied . . . with the manner in which we are called back so often in the first volume, to a detail of antecedent events, while the progress of the action is suspended” (236). But whether it was a matter of awkwardness or a lack of probability, the irony is that any disruptive or challenging dimensions reviewers found in *Redwood* obtained not in its themes or its representations of race and gender but in the way its structure disrupted readers’ expectations of the proper fit between the book’s actions and its otherwise realistic profile.

Despite such criticisms, Sedgwick had to be pleased with the otherwise highly positive reader responses to *Redwood*. She also had to be pleased by the general audience reaction as indicated by the book’s sales. Shortly after its publication, Henry informed her that “Redwood sells very well; about 1100 [copies] are gone.” Moreover, he explained, the “sale is constantly increasing, and the booksellers say that it is now better than Redgauntlet,” the Walter Scott novel.<sup>45</sup> The reference and comparison to Scott’s success no doubt provided a tonic for Sedgwick in light of the reviewer comments about the novel’s failure to tap historical materials in the manner of Cooper and Scott.

Clearly, Sedgwick was affected by those remarks, since she decided to set her next novel, *Hope Leslie*, in seventeenth-century New England. Whether Sedgwick, as Michael Bell has claimed, was actually “inspired” by the comments in the *North American Review* on the subject is far from clear, but a turn to historical subject matter was a logical choice for a writer who was quickly becoming attuned to the dynamics of the

literary marketplace.<sup>46</sup> Given the critical and popular success of Scott and Cooper, it seems clear that Sedgwick's choice was a calculated one. Such a turn was especially appropriate for a woman novelist, in light of the assumption in informed reading that historical fiction constituted a particularly suitable genre for women readers and for fulfilling the dual obligation that novels delight and instruct. Indeed, in the same year that *Redwood* had appeared, two other novels were published that demonstrated that historical novels by women could find a ready readership: Harriet Cheney's *A Peep at the Pilgrims in Sixteen Hundred Thirty-Six* and Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok*. It is difficult not to believe that the seventeenth-century settings of those two novels had an impact on Sedgwick's choice to set *Hope Leslie* in the same period rather than in the eighteenth century of Cooper's *The Spy* and *The Pioneers*.

As noted earlier, among all of Sedgwick's works, *Hope Leslie* has by far received the greatest scholarly attention over the last thirty years. Much of that has come from feminist critics, who have read the novel as a sophisticated, transgressive text that challenges the norms and values of patriarchal culture and its historical narratives. Judith Fetterley, for instance, sees *Hope Leslie* as offering a "radical argument" against antebellum gender ideology that "reifie[d] the separation of public and private by gender"; Lucy Maddox calls the novel a "self-consciously feminist revision of male-transmitted history" in its depiction of a "rebellion of Puritan women against the domination of men"; Barbara Bardes and Susan Gossett declare that *Hope Leslie* "offers a critique of women's place in the Republic under the guise of a historical novel"; Carol J. Singley styles it a "radical frontier romance" that, in "criticizing the 'Law' of the Founding Father," offers "history with a revisionary spirit"; and Elaine Showalter reads it as a critique of the way that "women are the victims of an exchange between men," in which "captivity is part of the female condition." So pervasive has been this interpretation of the novel that even Ann Douglas, who is otherwise extremely critical of antebellum women's novels for their feminization of American culture, attributes to *Hope Leslie* a "revisionist aim" via its "high-spirited heroine," whom Sedgwick uses to wreak "feminine anarchy" and "havoc with official records."<sup>47</sup> With its image of Sedgwick employing *Hope Leslie* as a narrative hammer to smash phallogocentric history, such commentary has dominated the criticism of the novel since its recovery, with claims for its subversive-

ness being directed, almost as often, to its treatment of race. Kelley calls *Hope Leslie* a “highly critical presentation of the Puritans’ subjugation of the indigenous population,” while Dana Nelson maintains that the novel “presented a clear challenge to Anglo-American policy toward Native Americans.”<sup>48</sup>

There is, however, little if any evidence that antebellum readers experienced *Hope Leslie* as a pyrotechnic challenge to the culture’s dominant assumptions about gender and racial norms. Given the differences between the interpretive climates of the antebellum United States and of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century academic America, such a gap is not unexpected. But the difference in responses cannot be attributed simply to a generalized Foucauldian genealogy of historical rupture or to the acuity of modern critics and the blindness of antebellum readers, who were ostensibly unable to see the transgressiveness of *Hope Leslie*. After all, antebellum readers did see some novels as transgressive, including, as the responses to George Sand and to Melville’s *Typee* indicate, fictional treatments of race and gender roles. Antebellum readers, moreover, would have to have been inexplicably dim-witted to miss Magawisca’s Native American counter narrative of the Pequot War in *Hope Leslie* and not to have shared with late twentieth-century readers the sense that Sedgwick’s novel gives its women characters substantial power and a capacity for bravery and actions outside traditional domestic spaces—actions that sometimes even transgress the law. If antebellum readers responded to such features of the novel without taking them as subversive, it was not, in other words, because of those readers’ exceptional obtuseness but because of the way they conceptualized and constructed the novel within a historically specific set of reading conventions that constituted the antebellum interpretive formulations of *Hope Leslie*.

What reviewers pointed to most in Sedgwick’s third novel was its profile as historical fiction, but for them, *Hope Leslie* represented more than just another contribution to the form Scott had made famous. Linking *Hope Leslie* to Sedgwick’s previous two novels, reviewers saw it as another national novel grounded even more firmly in U.S. materials through its use of America’s past. According to a review in *Brother Jonathan*, “‘Hope Leslie’ is one of the best proofs extant that American writers may find in our own national characteristics and history fresher

and more excellent themes for American writers" (Sept. 17, 1842: 90). For a reviewer in the *American Monthly Magazine*, *Hope Leslie* was not only proof of the value of American fiction based on American materials but also a salutary transformation of historical fiction into a more American genre, since Sedgwick writes "evidently [as] a republican writer, in a department which has hitherto been devoted to glorifying the spirit of feudalism, and its consequent false views" (Jan. 1836: 20). The service Sedgwick provided thus had both aesthetic and sociopolitical value that encompassed, according to a review in *Godey's*, American readers. Claiming that the "best pens among our female writers, we are happy to notice, are chiefly devoted to national subjects," the *Godey's* reviewer lauded *Hope Leslie* for "illustrating the early colonial annals of Massachusetts" and thereby taking on "so patriotic an object as that of increasing the interest of the American people in the history of their own country" (Nov. 1842: 249).<sup>49</sup>

Within this broader formulation, reviewers especially attended to Sedgwick's depiction of the Puritans. Although far from taking the modern view that the novel critiques Puritan society for its patriarchal oppression, antebellum readers nonetheless did not read *Hope Leslie* as a patriotic celebration of those "Founding Fathers" of New England. Rather, readers both in public and private saw the novel as presenting a true-to-life representation of the strengths and flaws of the Puritans. In a letter to Sedgwick, Lucy Aikens noted that "very rarely indeed have the puritans of either hemisphere been drawn with so much impartiality as you display."<sup>50</sup> Periodical reviewers agreed. After noting the seventeenth-century Massachusetts setting of the novel and explaining that the "object of the story is to form a picture of the manners and state of society at that period," a review in the *New-York Mirror* congratulated Sedgwick for the way that "object . . . is admirably accomplished. The stern spirit of liberty for which the settlers of New-England [*sic*] were distinguished, clouded, however, by some dark shadows of fanaticism and misguided zeal, is here presented to our view in lively and glowing colours" (June 23, 1827: 383). Combining a similar view with the response that highlighted the value of the novel for its American readers, the *Baltimore North American* found among the book's "many merits" its capacity to "induce many of all ages to recur to the early history of our country, and to make themselves more thoroughly acquainted with the pure, intellec-

tual and virtuous, *though bigoted*, race of men who settled New England” (Aug. 4, 1827: 95, emphasis added).

In responding to *Hope Leslie* this way, reviewers were not seeing it as revisionist history that sought to counter a cultural filio piety toward the Puritans. On the contrary, antebellum readers came to the novel already steeped in cultural ambivalence about the Puritan colonists. The antebellum attitude toward the Puritans, as Buell has pointed out, was a mixture of “hostility and filio piety,” and it was a mixture known to virtually every reader of *Hope Leslie* and of the novels about the Puritans that preceded it in the 1820s, including Cheney’s *Peep at the Pilgrims* (1824) and Child’s *Hobomok* (1824). In those novels, readers would have found confirmation of that ambivalence in that, as Reynolds notes, “admiration for the heroism of the New England forefathers was usually qualified by a distaste for their intolerance, gloom, and logical rigidity.”<sup>51</sup> In this regard, Sedgwick’s own comments about her object in depicting the Puritans are telling. Explaining to one of her correspondents that “I meant to touch their characters with filial reverence,” Sedgwick nonetheless added that “[t]heir bigotry, their superstition, and, above all, their intolerance,” especially because of their “thralldom . . . to Calvin’s gloomy interpretation of Scripture,” were “too apparent on the page of history to be forgotten” or missed by anyone.<sup>52</sup> Such comments suggest that the historical critique Sedgwick saw herself making of the Puritans was directed not so much at their phallocentrism but at their “gloomy” Calvinist creed.

The situation involving the antebellum response to Sedgwick’s Indians was, however, a bit more complex. Though generally reviewers viewed the Puritans and other whites as more prominent characters in the novel, Sedgwick’s representation of Native Americans received nearly as much attention in the public discussion. Part of the reason lay in the fact that *Hope Leslie* was published amid a wave of popular interest in depictions of Native Americans in historical fiction. These included Child’s *Hobomok* and Cooper’s widely read *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and *The Prairie* (1827). Such interest was fueled by political debates over the status of Indian tribes living east of the Mississippi River, a concern that would shortly culminate in the Indian removal controversy in Georgia. What is interesting is the shape reviewer response took in the face of that growing controversy, given that, as Lucy Maddox has argued, the “widespread public conviction” of the late 1820s

was that Indian “presence anywhere in the eastern United States was an obstacle to the national progress of American civilization.” In light of such a conviction, how was it that, as one Sedgwick scholar has claimed, “most [readers] applauded Sedgwick’s depiction of American Indians” in *Hope Leslie*?<sup>53</sup>

One possible answer is that reviewers and other readers, just as they would do twenty years later with *Typee*, reconciled the novel’s sympathetic depiction of Native Americans with the dominant culture’s racist ideology by interpreting the text as an elegiac representation of the Indians’ regrettable but inevitable fate in the face of white civilization’s implacable advance. Certainly readers could have seized on several passages in the novel to construct such a reading, beginning with the book’s epigram, an eight-line poem that, in the first stanza, reads:

Here stood the Indian chief, rejoicing in his glory!  
How deep the shade of sadness that rests upon his story:  
For the white man came with power—like brethren they met—  
But the Indian fires went out, and the Indian sun has set!<sup>54</sup>

Readers could well have privileged this image, and combined it with passages in the novel that praise the Puritans for “open[ing] the forests to the sun-beam, and to the light of the Sun of Righteousness,” to place the novel within the cultural logic of the “vanishing American,” with its assumption that the demise of the Indian, though sad and even deplorable, allows for the admirable advance of Christian civilization.<sup>55</sup>

Such speculation, however, is not really needed to account for reviewer “applause” for Sedgwick’s depiction of Native Americans because such broad approval simply did not mark reviewer responses to the novel. Reviewers had little to say about Sedgwick’s treatment of Indian culture or of Native Americans as a people, nor did they comment on most of her Indian characters: Mononotto and Monoco, Magwisca’s father and mother; Oneco, her brother; and Nelema, an old Indian woman healer whom Hope Leslie rescues from prison. Instead, virtually all reviewer attention, when directed at Sedgwick’s Indians, focused on her depiction of Magawisca.

For some, Magawisca was a magnificent creation, admirable in her virtue and deserving of reader sympathy. “There are few nobler creatures than her Indian girl,” said the *New Yorker* (Sept. 26, 1840: 24), while a

review in the *American Ladies' Magazine* averred that "Magawisca inspires a loftier sentiment" even than Hope Leslie herself because the former, as a "representative of an injured race," "is full of moral grandeur" (Dec. 1835: 661-62). A review in *Littell's Living Age* compared Magawisca to Cooper's Indians and claimed that "her elevated and self-sacrificing heroism" was quite equal to his depiction of Indian courage and "poetical eloquence" (Oct. 19, 1844: 652).

Other reviewers, however, were troubled by what they saw as a lack of verisimilitude in Magawisca. A reviewer in the *North American Review*, while finding her a "charming conception," felt that she "is an Indian maiden only in name. She is the poetical, but not the historical, child of the forest . . . not having a drop of kindred blood with the copper-colored savages of our own primitive woods" (Jan. 1849: 205). An even stronger objection on this principle came in a review in the *Western Monthly Review*. Like the reviewer in *Littell's*, the *Western Monthly's* reviewer also linked Magawisca to Cooper's Indians, but in this case it was to find a common fault: "The authoress has fallen into the error, so prevalent in the works of Cooper and all American novelists, that have anything to do with Indians. They dress a figure in Indian costume; give it a copper skin; make it use extravagantly figurative language; and introduce it with . . . the delicacy of feeling and refinement of civilized life" (Sept. 1827: 294-95). Finding her so idealized, this reviewer dubbed Magawisca "the first Indian angel, that we have met with," a "very pretty fancy; but no more like a squaw, than the croaking of a sand-hill crane is like the sweet, clear and full note of the redbird" (295).

Such a divergence in responses is striking but certainly comprehensible as the product of reviewers' privileging two different criteria within the interpretive repertoire of informed reading: the desideratum of verisimilitude in characterization versus the valuation of inspiring and morally laudable characters. Several reviewers, however, were able to combine and reconcile these two criteria in responding to Magawisca, and they did so in several ways. One method marked the response of a different reviewer in the *North American Review*. Noting that Magawisca "is one of those creations of genius," the reviewer admitted that "[s]ome have questioned her verisimilitude as an Indian. They assert she is too novel, too delicate, too spiritual for an Indian." But in response, this reviewer declared, "This we are disposed to deny. That there were very

many Magawiscas, we do doubt ourselves, and therefore, we would not propose her as a fair sample of the Indian character; but that the best features of her character have had a real existence in savage life, that she is a possible Indian, we have no doubt whatsoever; and this is all which is claimed for her in the truly modest preface of our authoress" (Apr. 1840: 418). Following a rule of notice focused on the novel's preface and combining it with a flexible notion of plausibility, this reviewer granted Magawisca verisimilitude as an Indian character because, as an individual within that representation, she possessed enough credibility to enable readers to take her as a "possible Indian."

A different but related interpretive strategy marked the response of other reviewers, who did not stop at the possibility of the existence of a Native American woman like Magawisca. Instead, several reviewers interpreted her character by contextualizing it within American history (or legend) to claim that a person very much like Magawisca had existed. As a reviewer in the *New-York Mirror* put it while citing, in particular, Magawisca's willingness to sacrifice herself to save Everell Fletcher, "[t]o some, the magnanimity and delicacy of feeling discovered in Magawisca may appear unnatural and exaggerated, when attributed to a savage," but such readers must realize that "[i]n drawing the character of this noble child of nature, the author seems to have taken some hints from the celebrated Pocahontas, as, in many respects, they are strikingly similar" (June 23, 1827: 383). Likewise, the review in *Littell's* asserted that Sedgwick "had noble warrant for her creation" of Magawisca "in the well-known incident of the rescue of Captain Smith by Pocahontas" and added that Sedgwick was "only working out the devotion of that noble girl one step further" (Oct. 19, 1844: 653). Both of these reviewers, like the one in the *North American Review*, grounded part of their interpretation in a rule of notice in that Sedgwick's preface had itself brought up Pocahontas as a historical antecedent for the credibility of Magawisca, but it was a matter in both cases of reviewers' combining that move with several others, including a cultural knowledge and conception of Pocahontas widely shared by Sedgwick's audience as a whole. So well known was the story, in fact, that Robert Tilton has claimed that "the nineteenth-century audience for *Hope Leslie* . . . would have made the connection between the heroism of Magawisca . . . and the bravery traditionally identified with Pocahontas even without the aid of the prefatory clues provided by Sedg-

wick.”<sup>56</sup> It is, of course, impossible to say with any certainty whether that was the case, but reviewer comments indicate clearly that some antebellum readers did make the connection in a move that enabled them to ascribe verisimilitude to Magawisca while granting Sedgwick, as the *Mirror* reviewer did, some authorial license in accord with another assumption of informed reading: that accomplished fiction offered well-crafted characters that were both lifelike and artistically enhanced for inspirational effect. Indeed, the Pocahontas legend fit perfectly with this position since both her and Magawisca’s nobility could be interpreted within the logic of antebellum assumptions about the values of white ascendancy. That is, if Magawisca, like Pocahontas, could be viewed as an admirable Indian, it was in part because readers could interpret her as an inspirational embodiment of the willingness of the native Other to sacrifice herself for a white man.

In light of these reactions, it is not surprising that the largely laudatory response to Magawisca was part of the broader reception of *Hope Leslie* as a national historical American novel, which reviewers, on the whole, labeled as Sedgwick’s best work so far. As a second reviewer in the *American Ladies’ Magazine* asserted, “with regard to ‘The New England Tale’ and ‘Redwood’ . . . ‘Hope Leslie’ has more of the glow of vitality of genius” and “is a work of more power,” in part because “Magawisca is the noblest conception imagination ever formed” (May 1829: 227–28). Though not according the characterization of Magawisca such hyperbolic ascendancy, the *North American Review* agreed with the overall assessment that “‘Hope Leslie’ is the last of this lady’s three larger works, and, in our judgment, the best” (Apr. 1828: 411).

An interesting feature of the overall response to *Hope Leslie* is what was missing from it in comparison to what reviewers had noted about *A New England Tale* and *Redwood*. Except for the remarks about Magawisca, there were no comments about the vraisemblance of other individual characters or of characterization as a whole in *Hope Leslie*. On the contrary, when the criterion of verisimilitude came up at all, several reviewers directed it to the book’s actions and plotting, which they found problematic. The *Western Monthly Review* found a “want of piquancy in this work” owing to the fact that the “parties prosecute their affairs too much,” so that events “have not the free, natural movement of voluntary action” (295). According to the review in *Littell’s*, “the misconstructions

and adventures in which [Sedgwick] involves Hope Leslie are . . . gratuitously puerile,” making the novel’s “suspense . . . repulsively irritating” (652). Such disdain for the plotting of *Hope Leslie* echoed what reviewers had said about *Redwood*, thereby establishing a pattern that would characterize the reception of virtually all of Sedgwick’s full-length fictions. It was a response, as the comments in *Littell’s* and the *Western Monthly Review* indicate, grounded in the paired criteria regarding the effectiveness of a novel’s construction and its capacity to handle plotting in a way that met reader expectations. Given that double imperative, it is striking that reviewers could fault *Hope Leslie* and *Redwood* in this area yet still roundly praise her fictions with increasing enthusiasm. Such a pattern speaks volumes about the assets, both aesthetic and instructional, that reviewers found in the other elements of her novels.

The success that Hope Leslie enjoyed among reviewers appears to have been matched by the enthusiasm for the novel among the middle-class fiction-reading public. Although no overall sales figures have survived, *Hope Leslie* outpaced *Redwood* by quickly selling out its first edition of two thousand copies.<sup>57</sup> The popularity of the novel is also suggested by the fact that the tag “by the author of *Hope Leslie*” became the lead (or part of the lead) that Sedgwick and her publishers would use, in lieu of her name, as the identifying mark of her authorship on the title page of her novels throughout the 1830s. That strategy enabled her to sustain the pretense of demure female authorship while wisely making certain that any informed reader could identify a particular novel as being, in fact, by Sedgwick, whose name was virtually synonymous with *Hope Leslie* for a decade.

Riding her growing caravan of successes, Sedgwick completed her next novel, *Clarence*, in 1830 with expectations comparable to those she had had for *Hope Leslie*. However, she cast those expectations differently because she saw *Clarence* as different, not only from *Hope Leslie* but also, it seems, from her first two novels. While *Clarence* was still in press, Sedgwick spoke of it in a letter to Susan Channing as a narrative that “treats of the present times” by focusing on “the follies of the day.” Noting that the novel is set “chiefly in New York” and deals with “topics that concern every body,” Sedgwick explained that the book’s orientation “seems to me of more popular interest than a tale of the olden time.”<sup>58</sup> Given the popular and critical success of *Hope Leslie*, which was her

“tale of the olden time,” Sedgwick’s comments suggest she expected even greater results from *Clarence*.

Other comments by Sedgwick in a letter to her brother Charles only a week before her missive to Channing indicate, however, that some dismay accompanied her opinions about her new novel. “I am not satisfied with Clarence,” she confessed to Charles. Yet her next sentence indicates that this reaction did not stem from the conventional modesty and self-deprecation expected of women writers. Sedgwick explained that the reason for her dissatisfaction was her “familiarity with fine works, carrying your taste so far ahead of your capacity.” Such a remark suggests that Sedgwick’s aesthetic and literary sensibilities had developed to a point where she was becoming increasingly demanding and rigorously critical of her own art. Yet even as she questioned the merit of *Clarence*, she qualified her doubts by striking a note that anticipated her comment to Susan Channing: “I do think, nevertheless, that it has a great deal more in it than any thing else I have written, and that it is better adapted to the general taste of novel-readers I am sure.”<sup>59</sup> Significantly, if Sedgwick believed that *Clarence* represented an advance over *Hope Leslie*, she did so by linking its novelistic merit to its relationship to her audience in a move well tuned to the assumptions of informed reading.

Sedgwick’s guarded optimism about *Clarence* found its echo in the novel’s reception. Although modern Sedgwick scholars have asserted that *Clarence* “did not achieve the critical success of its predecessors,” particularly *Hope Leslie*, such a characterization is only partly accurate.<sup>60</sup> As one of the leading novel-reviewing organs of the time, the *North American Review* declared that Clarence “has all the fine qualities—of head and heart which have so favorably recommended the former works of the fair author,” adding that “had she written nothing but Clarence [*sic*], she would amply deserve our praises” (Jan. 1831: 73–74). This review added, however, that as good as *Clarence* was, it did not quite measure up to one of Sedgwick’s previous novels, but the one it cited was not *Hope Leslie*. Instead, the review opined that *Clarence* “is perhaps not so finished as Redwood” (73). Such qualifiers, however, were rare. Indeed, one notable feature about the public commentary on *Clarence* is that, unlike the reception of her previous novels, reviewers raised virtually no objections to any part of *Clarence*.

On the whole, reviewers read *Clarence* as a welcomed and represen-

tative addition to Sedgwick's oeuvre. For some, that representativeness lay in what they saw as the novel's American character. According to a review in the *Ladies Magazine*, *Clarence* "effected to prove . . . that American characters, scenes, and circumstances . . . may be wrought into a romance, which shall be intensely interesting, and yet not foreign to our habits of life" (July 1830: 320). The *Literary World* agreed, pointing out in its review that *Clarence* continued the trend that had marked Sedgwick's fiction "since her first entrance into the world of letters," with "literary productions [that] have been mainly, in every sense of the word, American." For this reviewer, moreover, that national character lay not only in the way "her works of fiction have been drawn from the history of their country or its domestic manner" but also in the way *Clarence* and her previous novels "completely reflect the prominent characteristics of the American mind" (Oct. 6, 1849: 297).

When they moved to particulars, reviewers focused, as they had with her earlier fictions, on her characters and especially on Sedgwick's skill at making them true to life. The *North American Review* asserted, "the best part of [the] novel consists of its sketches of character," not only because they are "copies of nature" but also because Sedgwick has "given us a great variety of characters, each of which has the distinctiveness of individuality" (90). A Review in the *New-York Mirror* agreed, noting that "the characters are finely drawn, carefully defined and contrasted. . . . There are no embodied angels. . . ; but in the record of our memories we may find written many a name whose proprietor might have sat for the author's delineations" (June 19, 1830: 394). The *Mirror* reviewer cited in particular Charles Clarence, the novel's title character and father of the tale's female protagonist, Gertrude, as being "a well-drawn personage," not because he is original but because he so faithfully resembles people readers know: "His character may not be new to the reader, for such men are not unfrequent among us, but he will dwell upon it, as upon a good likeness of a valued friend" (394).

Such praise of character verisimilitude was a common response to *Clarence*. A review in the *American Monthly Magazine* found the character of Mr. Layton, the gambling-addicted father of Gertrude's friend Emilie, a "most forcible sketch" because of its "truth to the principles of human nature." For this reviewer the same verisimilitude inhered in Mr. Layton's "heartless sensibility and Gertrude's strong, but perfectly

feminine qualities,” which are “both so familiar to our commonest experience” (July 1830: 281). Gertrude Clarence, in fact, was singled out most frequently for her resemblance to actual people, and reviewers were not the only ones doing the pointing. Having read the novel for a second time, Ellen Follen informed Sedgwick that “I know not how it is but Gertrude reminds me of you dear.”<sup>61</sup> What is interesting is that Follen’s remark was not grounded in the interpretive assumption that a novel’s narrator was a reflection of the author, since *Clarence* is not told from Gertrude’s first-person point of view. Instead, Follen’s interpretation appears to have inhered in the assumption in informed reading that characters, and particularly a novel’s protagonist, served as an index to or would in some way be a reflection of an author’s temperament and mind.

A unique feature of the response to *Clarence* was that, for the first time in the reception of Sedgwick’s fiction, reviewers found in the novel’s plotting a parallel degree of vraisemblance that was also dramatically effective. In *Clarence* Sedgwick “has a clear and direct manner of telling her story, which leaves an almost irresistible impression of its truth,” explained the review in the *Ladies Magazine*, which added, “yet her fancy is so fertile, that none of our novel writers equal her in the involution of plot, in that gradual and as it were incidental unfolding of the web of destiny” (320). The reviewer in the *American Monthly Magazine* found strong plotting to be a new and welcome turn in Sedgwick’s craft. Noting that “the good traits” of her previous novels had been their “singular unaffectedness and truth to nature” in their characterizations and domestic scenes, this reviewer explained that the “work before us is quite of another character,” but not because it abandoned verisimilitude. “Without abandoning the field, in the selection of which she has done credit . . . , the authoress has brought into her plot . . . a dramatic power which . . . astonishes us” (280). Continuing, the *Monthly Magazine* reviewer found this asset especially in the novel’s subplot involving Emilie and Padrillo, the story’s “Spanish” villain. Praising Padrillo’s characterization as “an uncopied, powerful, yet most natural villain,” the reviewer asserted that the “*denouement* of Pedrillo’s history is a specimen of the finest dramatic invention.” Indeed, in this response it was precisely Sedgwick’s success in characterization combined with her expert plotting that marked the singular success of *Clarence*, in that Padrillo’s “whole history shows a depth

of the study of the human heart, and a maturity . . . in the plot which are not at all common in a modern novel" (280–81).

Although the response to *Clarence* was not seamless in its commendations, reviews did treat the novel as a ringing success, in part because they felt that Sedgwick was doing something new for her art and, perhaps, something "not at all common," as the *American Monthly Review* put it, "in a modern novel." While that newness obtained for some in the novel's effective plotting, other readers concluded that Sedgwick had added topics that her fiction had not before addressed. Pointing out that previously the "scenes and incidents of her works of fiction have been drawn from the history of the country or its domestic manners," the *Literary World* observed that in *Clarence* "her more directly and perhaps most praiseworthy efforts have been in illustration of its social habits and tendencies" (297). Likewise, the review in the *Ladies Magazine* interpreted the "plan of 'Clarence'" to be Sedgwick's design "to display the characters that move in the rich and fashionable circles" (320). Nor was it simply that her audience saw her taking on what was a new area for her: upper-class manners and, as the *North American Review* termed it, the "fashionable society of New-York" (Jan. 1831: 74). Readers interpreted the novel as doing with that subject something fresh and satisfying. In what reads like a fan letter to Sedgwick, one L. T. Osborne explained "how truly I am pleased with the work" because of the way "Fashionable life in N[ew] York is very nicely satirized."<sup>62</sup> The *Ladies Magazine* was even more impressed by what it saw as the novel's comic critique of fashionable society because, ultimately, such satire underscored the broader "moral . . . lessons" of *Clarence*: "to remind the dwellers of this 'bank note world,' that there are objects more elevated, more worthy of pursuit than wealth" (325). In such remarks readers were not crediting Sedgwick with taking the novel, as a form, in a new direction. Rather, reviewers read through what had become, within the interpretive formations of the time, two established sub-genres of fiction, the novel of fashionable life and the satiric novel. In their interpretation of *Clarence*, what readers saw as new was that Sedgwick for the first time was working in these subgenres and successfully combining elements of each without creating a generic cacophony in her novel. As such, *Clarence* was, for a good number of readers, her greatest accomplishment to date.



Although Sedgwick published only short stories over the next four years, when she did return to novel writing, perhaps the largely unchallenged positive response to *Clarence* encouraged her to try something new with her next book, *Home*. Despite that title, which would no doubt have struck antebellum readers as a signifier linking it to Sedgwick's previous domestic fiction, *Home* represented a departure from *A New England Tale*, *Redwood*, *Hope Leslie*, and *Clarence*. For one thing, its genesis was quite different. In 1834 the Reverend Henry Ware, who was in the process of commissioning from several different writers a group of novels that exhibit "Scenes and Characters Illustrating Christian Truth," asked Sedgwick to write a new novel as part of that series. Sedgwick agreed and in the next year composed *Home*, which was published in 1835 and was identified as being "by the author of 'Redwood,' 'Hope Leslie,' etc."<sup>63</sup> As the first and only novel Sedgwick produced under a specific commission, *Home* also differed from *Redwood*, *Hope Leslie*, *Clarence*, and *A New England Tale* by being considerably shorter. At 158 pages, it was slightly over half the length of *A New England Tale* and only a third as long as the other three.

When modern Sedgwick scholars have discussed *Home*, they have identified it as a work altogether different from her first four full-length fictional narratives. Linking it with two of Sedgwick's works of fiction that would follow—*The Poor Rich Man*, and *the Rich Poor Man* (1836) and *Live and Let Live* (1837)—critics over the last twenty to thirty years have defined *Home* and its two companions as, not full-fledged novels, but "moral tales," "didactic tales," "didactic novellas," "moral tracts," brief "domestic" fictions, "conduct tales," a "didactic trilogy," or fictional versions of domestic self-help manuals such as Louisa Hoare's *Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline* (1826).<sup>64</sup>

Such a distinction, however, in no way marked the antebellum response to *Home*. Instead, reviewers linked it to Sedgwick's previous novels as another domestic tale performing valuable cultural work. A review of *Home* in the *New-York Mirror* pointed out that "the amiable authoress of 'Redwood' and 'Hope Leslie,'" who "has not disdained to devote her fine talents and elegant fancy to the illustration of the quiet walks of life" in those books, was doing the same service with *Home*. "Such books are invaluable," continued the review, because they provide a service that all good fiction should, according to one assumption of informed

reading: they facilitate reader tranquility by demonstrating the “positive gain . . . to be acquired by being contented in the station in which Providence has placed us” (May 30, 1835: 383). Arguing in more general terms, a review in the *American Monthly Magazine* viewed *Home* as consonant with Sedgwick’s fictions to date, since “we see in all her works . . . the marks of a true genius for commencing a literature for the mass of the American people which shall bring up their moral tone to the spirit of their institutions.” Identifying *Home* as a work that was both domestic and national, this reviewer interpreted the narrative as another representation of the “peculiar dignity of republicanism,” particularly for the way it demonstrates how “naturally this form of society wedds Christianity” with the “simple temple of Family” (Jan. 1836: 21).

Besides seeing *Home* as sharing purpose and value with Sedgwick’s previous novels, reviewers also found it to be a work of high literary merit, equal—or even superior to—her earlier fictions. Far from demoting *Home* to the level of moral tract, a review in the *Boston Observer* asserted, “Its literary merit is so high, its story so well conducted, the style so beautiful . . . that those who seek in books . . . the gratifications of taste as a relief from the vacuity of idleness, will be eager to read it.”<sup>65</sup> The *North American Review* went so far as to proclaim, “We know not a more beautiful example of the faculty and grace” by which the “power of women’s intellect” and skill could be expressed “than is presented in Miss Sedgwick’s little tale, entitled ‘Home,’” the scenes of which, the *Review* felt assured, would “win for their accomplished author a more enduring title . . . and exalted fame” (Oct. 1835: 444).

This ligature between Sedgwick’s previous novels and *Home* extended to the marketplace success of the latter, which not only matched but outstripped the popularity of *Redwood* and *Hope Leslie*. In its first two years, *Home* went through twelve editions, and within a decade of its publication, it reached its twentieth edition.<sup>66</sup> It is not hard to see the reason for this success, given reviewers’ reactions to it. Like reviewers, readers most likely saw *Home* as a book that gave them more of what they associated with and found attractive about Sedgwick’s fictions; they were entertaining and informative, domestic and American in a way that met and reinforced the middle-class horizon of expectations. Sondra Smith Gates has suggested that part of that reinforcing appeal resulted from the economic message antebellum readers could take from the book,

particularly in its story of William Barclay, the novel's male protagonist, who rises from poverty to become a successful artisan and businessman as a New York printer. For middle-class readers, Barclay's story may have confirmed the triumphalist American exceptionalism of the time, which viewed penury as a "structural flaw" in European society but believed that "in America it is simply the ground floor upon which the industrious can build happy homes, given the tools of democracy."<sup>67</sup>

Whether readers' responses to Barclay's story or to other elements of *Home* were the cause of its success, Sedgwick was not only pleased by its popularity and notoriety but also admittedly surprised by the extent of her achievement. In an 1836 letter to Louisa Minot, Sedgwick confided that *Home* "has been received with far more favor than I expected—nothing that I have written has seemed so well suited to the *country* market." Quickly and sagaciously sizing up the market for her fiction, Sedgwick added in the next sentence that she had learned something important from the success of *Home*: When she again sat down to "write any thing more than a letter, it will be books of this description which suit the mass of readers."<sup>68</sup> What is interesting, however, is that following *Home* and in the year leading up to her prognosis for success, Sedgwick did not turn to writing the two books that modern scholars have grouped with *Home* as a subgenre trilogy different from Sedgwick's "true" novels. Instead, Sedgwick composed and published later in 1835 her second novel set in America's past: *The Linwoods*.<sup>69</sup>

That move, along with Sedgwick's resolution following the reception of *Home*, are significant in two ways. Her comment to Minot indicates that if Sedgwick herself saw any difference between *Home* and her previous novels, it was one of degree, involving the relation between text and audience. That is, for Sedgwick, *Home* had had an appeal to an even broader readership than the already large audience she had reached with her previous novels. Moreover, her decision to turn next to *The Linwoods*, a book modern Sedgwick critics relate to her first four novels as a different type of work than *Home*, suggests that Sedgwick viewed her new novel, in terms of its relation to her audience, as being in the same mold as *Home*.

*The Linwoods*, in fact, was received as a novel that had links both to *Home* and to *Hope Leslie*, a connection Sedgwick sought to cultivate by once again—as she had done with the title page of *Home*—identify-

ing her new novel as “by the author of ‘Hope Leslie.’” No doubt seizing on that identification and on the book’s subtitle, “*Sixty Years Since*” in *America*, readers opened *The Linwoods* expecting a historical novel set during the American revolution. Engaging in precisely such a rule of notice, a review in the *Boston Pearl* explained that the “title of the book indicates that the time selected is the darkest period in the history of our country . . . not soon to be forgotten by those enjoying the benefits at that time so dearly purchased” (Mar. 12, 1836: 206). Taking the book’s subtitle as an echo of one of Scott’s while citing, as well, some comments in Sedgwick’s preface, the *North American Review* led off its thirty-five page review of *The Linwoods* by identifying it as a historical novel, the “plan” of which evinced “the same general character” as Scott’s fictionalized histories (Jan. 1836: 160).

As was the case with the response to *Hope Leslie*, reviewers had high praise for *The Linwoods*, beginning with Sedgwick’s decision to set her new historical novel during the American Revolution. The *North American Review* declared, “We think this work the most agreeable that Miss Sedgwick has yet produced” precisely because it “possesses the great additional attraction, that it carries us back to the period of the revolutionary war, the heroic age of our country” (Jan. 1836: 160). A review in the *Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* agreed, asserting that “the period of American history, which she has chosen for her tale, is, as the title indicates, one that must ever possess unparalleled interest” (Nov.–Dec. 1835: 613). Although the *Museum’s* reviewer believed that *The Linwoods* was “more of a domestic than a historical novel” (613), the initial significance of that remark lay less in the relevant weight it gave to each component than in the way it configured the novel within the prevailing horizon informed reading had established for Sedgwick’s novels as a meld of domestic and national/historical materials.

To say this, however, is not to dismiss the qualification raised by the *Museum* reviewer, since it involved an issue other reviewers brought up regarding the genre of *The Linwoods*. That issue was not a matter of readers taking the novel as a problematic generic hybrid that failed to conform to a proper novelistic profile. Virtually all reviewers interpreted Sedgwick’s novels as possessing the double dimension of being domestic and nationalistic fictions, and reviewers applauded that duality. What was at stake with *The Linwoods*—and what marked a departure from

the responses to her previous novels, especially *Hope Leslie*—was which half of that hybridity dominated. A review in the *Knickerbocker*, for example, agreed with the *Museum* reviewer that *The Linwoods* “cannot be judged as a historical romance” per se because, “while the action of the tale is connected with historical events,” the linkage of those events to the novel’s plot and main characters is “slight and casual” (Oct. 1835: 368). Such interpretations, in fact, dominated reviewer responses in this area. According to a second review in the *Museum of Foreign Literature*, *The Linwoods* was not a “strictly historical novel. Washington, and General Putnam, and Governor Clinton, it is true, all of these figure in her pages, but merely as accessories to the true-hearted, noble Isabelle Linwood, and the beautifully gentle and melancholy Bessie Lee” (Nov.–Dec. 1835: 540). Similarly, a review in the *American Ladies’ Magazine* asserted that “The Linwoods’ is essentially a domestic story, though the scene is laid during the war of the American Revolution” (Nov. 1835: 653). It is important to understand that none of these comments were couched in critical tones or offered pejoratively. In fact, one of the reviews in the *Museum* applauded Sedgwick for avoiding a “strictly historical novel,” adding that “we are inclined to think that this, her last work, is her best” (540).

Reviewers extended this formulation to the novel’s characterization by focusing on its nonhistorical characters, and the ones reviewers most frequently commented on were women. To be sure, occasionally a reviewer did refer to several of the males, though surprisingly little attention went to the two male protagonists, Herbert Linwood and Eliot Lee, both officers in the continental army. Instead, reviewers tended to remark briefly on Kissel, Eliot’s comic, feeble-minded sidekick, or Jasper Meredith, a foppish, conniving Tory, who is Eliot’s rival. Moreover, despite the fact that Herbert and Eliot take up the greatest percentage of the novel’s narrative attention and figure most prominently in its plot, the characters that drew the most notice were Isabelle Linwood and Bessie Lee, the book’s female protagonists.

What seem to have been at work here were several assumptions that had come to constitute a frame for interpreting Sedgwick’s fictions. Assuming that Sedgwick’s novels possessed a strong domestic character and that Sedgwick was at her best in constructing women characters, reviewers came to *The Linwoods* predisposed to interpret the novel much

as they had interpreted *Clarence* and *Home* (in which Sedgwick had also placed a male character, William Barclay, at its center)—as a story about the domestic sphere and, thus, a novel about female characters. Moreover, reviewers interpreted Isabelle and Bessie as exemplary female characters.

What the exemplariness consisted of, however, was not the same thing that readers had noted about the women characters of *Hope Leslie*, *Redwood*, and *Clarence*. Responses to those earlier novels had highlighted Hope Leslie's "enthusiasm" and "gaiety and wit" (*North American Review* Apr. 1828: 420) and called Debby Lennox an "active" and "all-sufficient" woman (*Port-Folio* July–Dec. 1824: 67), who possesses a "mixture of intelligence . . . and decision, of masculine habits with those of her sex" (*North American Review* Apr. 1825: 266). Regarding Gertrude Clarence, the *American Monthly Magazine* enthused over her "strong, but perfectly female qualities" (July 1830: 281), while the *New-York Mirror* forefronted her "energy" and "maturity of intellect" (June 19, 1830: 394). Although an important part of the plot of *The Linwoods* involves, as the other three novels do, women engaged in acts of heroic rescue—with women, in both *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods*, rescuing a man—reviewers never highlighted such intrepidity or the intellect and energy of the women in *The Linwoods*. Instead, Isabelle and Bessie were admired for their beauty, affection, loyalty, and vulnerability.

Reviewers particularly focused on Bessie and the subplot of her unrequited love for Jasper Meredith, which leads to a mental and physical breakdown nearly fatal to her. "Seldom has a sweeter creature," intoned one reviewer, "risen upon a novelist's eyes than this frail-minded girl" (*Museum of Foreign Literature* Nov.–Dec. 1835: 540), while the review in the *American Ladies' Magazine* said that Sedgwick's depiction of "the lovely, gentle, melancholy Bessie Lee . . . is one of the most powerful spells of the author" (653). A review in *Godey's* went so far as to proclaim that "Bessie Lee, is one of the most effective presentations to be found in our fictitious literature, and may lay claim to the distinction of originality—no slight distinction where *character* is concerned" (Sept. 1846: 131). What is somewhat puzzling about this last remark is that it came amid observations by several other reviewers that Bessie closely resembled Shakespeare's Ophelia and was, by implication, anything but original. The extensive review of *The Linwoods* in the *North American Review*

observed that, owing to Jasper's perfidy, "Bessie . . . loses her reason, and becomes a sort of modern Ophelia." Added the reviewer, "in returning to Meredith certain locks of hair and other presents . . . she seems to copy the example of her fair prototype in Shakespeare" (Jan. 1836: 168–69). Not that this reviewer, or others who noted the parallel, seemed to have been bothered by such a "copy." If anything, they appeared to see it as an accomplishment, testifying to Sedgwick's abilities to match the Bard. Indeed, that logic was behind William Dillingham's remarks in a letter to Sedgwick shortly after the novel's appearance. "We are delighted with your story of 'The Linwoods,'" wrote Dillingham, adding, "I cannot help saying that your 'Bonnie Lee' [*sic*], in pathos, power and beauty, in nature, truth & delicacy, is scarcely inferior to Shakespeare's inimitable Ophelia."<sup>70</sup>

When the novel's other main female character, Isabelle, received attention, it was not as the feisty, bold individual who defies her Tory father and helps concoct the rescue plot of her brother Herbert. Instead, most reviewers interpreted her as an exemplary woman through her devotion, beauty, and high-mindedness. The review in the *Boston Pearl* declared, "We are peculiarly pleased with the high-minded Isabelle Linwood," especially for the way she acts "like a woman" (Mar. 12, 1836: 207). The *New England Magazine* called Isabelle "so gentle; so gifted, yet so simple; so beautiful, yet so unconscious; so majestic, yet so affectionate"—in short, so strikingly yet unassumingly feminine (Nov. 1835: 381). Even when reviewers saw in Isabelle's character a certain strength, as did one of the reviewers in the *Museum of Foreign Literature*, the perception was linked to her feminine "elevation of mind" and "devotion to duty" (Nov.–Dec. 1835: 613).<sup>71</sup>

Clearly, a good part of the popularity of *The Linwoods* lay in what readers saw as its appealing female and feminine characters. And popular it was. Of the 5,000 copies of the novel the Harper Brothers printed in late 1835, nearly 4,300 sold in a little over a year. In the mid-1830s, these were impressive numbers, given that at the time, according to the publisher George Palmer Putnam, sales above 2,000 copies were unusual.<sup>72</sup>

It is important to recognize that readers' engagement with and enthusiasm for Sedgwick's latest narrative involved the way they saw it fulfilling what was coming to be expected of her as a woman novelist, one whose association with the domestic and the womanly had been especially re-

inforced by readers' experience with *Home*. To be sure, Sedgwick's status as a women writer had colored the response to her novels to some degree since *A New England Tale*. But what the response to *The Linwoods* began to evince was a shift in emphasis that is apparent if we compare an early remark by a reviewer of *A New England Tale* and *Redwood* with one twelve years later on *The Linwoods*. Writing at a time when Sedgwick's authorial identity was not yet fully known, a reviewer in the *United States Literary Gazette* said in 1824, "Common fame has attributed these works—*Redwood* and the *New England Tale*—to a lady; if this be so, we can only say we think it surprising." Citing both books' "elegance" and "style," the *Gazette* reviewer went on to note that "the literary execution of these volumes, would in no degree discredit an author who had disciplined and fortified *his* mind by severer studies than ladies are apt to love" (July 15, 1824: 101 emphasis added). By 1835, however, such characterizations of Sedgwick's style as striking, even somewhat masculine, in its discipline and strength were giving way to comments exemplified by the review of *The Linwoods* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*: "The character of her pen is essentially feminine. No *man* could have written *Hope Leslie*; and no man, we are assured, can arise from the perusal of *The Linwoods* without a full conviction that his own abilities would have proven unequal to the delicate yet picturesque handling. . . . Woman is, after all, the only true painter of that gentle and beautiful mystery, the heart of woman" (Dec. 1835: 57). By such responses, Sedgwick the domestic-national novelist was beginning to be reconfigured by reviewers as the delicate limner of the gentle female heart.

This recasting—and, in effect, typecasting—of Sedgwick's novels as women's fiction did not, however, progress tendentiously in the reception of her next novel, *The Poor Rich Man, and the Rich Poor Man*, which appeared in 1836. Furthermore, although this book and *Live and Let Live*, which followed it a year later, were brief fictional narratives, as *Home* had been, reviewers did not link these two latest novels to *Home* as a "didactic trilogy" distinct from Sedgwick's other "real" novels. In fact, only two reviewers made any overt distinction between Sedgwick's previous novels (including *Home*) and *Poor Rich Man* and *Live and Let Live*, and it was only to remark that the latter two were "shorter" (*Godey's* Sept. 1846: 130).<sup>73</sup>

In contradistinction with even such a minor differentiation, most re-

viewers responded to both new novels by aligning them within the interpretive formulation they had constructed for Sedgwick's previous novels. Such positioning entailed reading both as quintessentially Sedgwickian American domestic novels. A review in the *Christian Examiner* explained that in *Poor Rich Man* Sedgwick "has more of the character and features of the nation at her disposal than any of the ambitious politicians in this land" because of the book's powerful theme, which the reviewer interpreted as, "Let our families be well ordered, let love and rectitude rule in social intercourse and common affairs, and all will be well. Let domestic economy be perfect, and political economy will take care of itself" (Jan. 1837: 398). Reading the novel as a reassuring reminder of the benevolent partnership among the happy home, the political sphere, and national well-being, this reviewer found in *Poor Rich Man* precisely the idea that antebellum middle-class, patriarchal culture had fashioned as one of its building blocks. In less hyperbolic tones, a review in the *Knickerbocker* said essentially the same thing about *Live and Let Live*, characterizing it as a "charming little book," owing to its "thorough knowledge of American domestic life" and its "spirit of generous kindness toward all" (July 1837: 86).

As they had with Sedgwick's previous books, reviewers also heaped praise on the two works' characterizations. The *North American Review* concentrated on the female characters in *Live and Let Live*, particularly the successful variety Sedgwick gave them, from the "rule-worshipping Mrs. Broadson," the "well-disposed, but inconsiderate, incompetent and always afflicted Mrs. Ardley," and the "lofty, fashion-enslaved and fashion-hardened Mrs. Hartell" to the novel's protagonist, "Lucy Lee, a gentle, patient, bright, heroic creature" (Oct. 1837: 480). The *New York Review* was especially taken with the novel's Mrs. Hyde, in whose "character and house-keeping maxims . . . the writer gives us her *ideal* of a *true lady* and good mistress" of home and hearth (Oct. 1837: 448).

Another parallel between reviewers' responses to *Live and Let Live* and *Poor Rich Man* and the reception of Sedgwick's previous fiction came in interpretations of the two new works as social commentary in the mold of what reviewers had inferred about *Clarence*. Focusing on her depiction of the monied class in *Poor Rich Man*, the *American Quarterly Review* explained that Sedgwick offers some instructive satire. But the review also was careful to warn readers, "let it not be supposed . . . that

Miss Sedgwick joins in the foolish outcry against the rich as such." Sedgwick was no Jacksonian leveler, the review explained, since "it is only against wealth misapplied that her satire is directed" (Mar. 1837: 28). Though not invoking the term *satire*, the reviewer in the *New York Review* described Sedgwick's "graphic sketches . . . of the vices and follies that abound in fashionable life" in a way that made clear his assumption that satire was at work in *Live and Let Live*. Indeed, said the reviewer, "the faults and follies of higher life are mirrored" in the novel "to expose and correct the faults of master and mistress" (448).

Yet the responses were not all echoes of the reception Sedgwick's earlier fiction had received. A strain in reviewer commentary on *Live and Let Live* paralleled and thereby continued the slight shift that had started to appear with the public discussion of *The Linwoods*: the interpretive formulation that identified Sedgwick as a womanly writer of domestic fiction designed to be read, in particular, by other women. Identifying the readership it saw as most suited to *Live and Let Live*—and most likely to benefit from it—a reviewer in *Godey's* explained, "We entreat every good lady, and every lady who wishes to learn how to do good, to read this book" (Sept. 1837: 140). Similar interpretations about the novel's audience marked reviewer comments in the *Knickerbocker* and the *North American Review*. The latter "assure[d] our fair readers, the young housekeepers, that here, in the form of an hour's delightful reading, they have a directory for the rule of that world of infinite interests, their home" (480). Ascribing authorial intention and linking it to conceptions of reader engagement, the *Knickerbocker* review proclaimed, "We cannot doubt that the warmest hopes of the benevolent writer, in relation to her work, may be realized; that it *will* rouse female minds to reflection upon the duties and capabilities of mistresses of families" (86).

Besides the explicit gendering of Sedgwick's audience, relatively new was a second strain in reviewer conceptions of *Live and Let Live* and *Poor Rich Man*. Minor at first, this other strain would become an important step in the eventual demotion of Sedgwick's fiction. The *North American Review* was careful to direct *Live and Let Live* not only to women but especially to "young housekeepers." The review in the *New-York Mirror* made a parallel remark in orienting the novel-reading audience to *Poor Rich Man*. While the *Mirror* "strongly recommended this little book to

every reader," it specifically drew attention to the novel "to the young for its usefulness, and also for its interest" (Nov. 14, 1836: 151).

I call this strain "relatively" new because it had actually begun in a similarly understated manner in some reviewer comments about *The Linwoods* in 1835. The review in the *American Ladies' Magazine* in November had asserted that the novel "surely will find favor with every young, pure, and innocent heart" (653), and an article on "Caroline Maria Sedgwick" in the same magazine a month later said of *The Linwoods*, "its influence on the young will be most salutary" (665). The review in the *Museum of Foreign Literature* offered a similar identification of the audience for *The Linwoods*, declaring that Sedgwick's "aim has been to give her young American readers a true, if a slight impression of the conditions of their country at the most trying time of its existence" (Nov.-Dec. 1835: 618). Admittedly, reviewers appear to have been responding in this case to a sentence in the preface to the novel, since the *Museum's* comment actually is an unacknowledged quotation of part of that sentence. However, the preface to *Hope Leslie* contained a sentence that had said virtually the same thing about a possible audience of "young people," yet reviewers did not identify that novel as especially suited to a juvenile readership. Conversely, the absence of such an identification in the prefaces to *Poor Rich Man* and *Live and Let Live* did not prevent at least a couple of reviewers from ascribing to those two texts an implied audience of young readers. Such responses, in other words, marked a turn in the reception of Sedgwick's novels that cannot be attributed to the inherent orientation of *The Linwoods*, *Poor Rich Man*, and *Live and Let Live* or to reader reaction to the subject matter of this trio of novels.

Something else was going on, and part of it may have been that, since the appearance of *Hope Leslie* and *Clarence*, Sedgwick had published several pieces of short fiction and nonfiction in media pitched to a young audience: *The Youth's Keepsake* (an annual) and the *Juvenile Miscellany* (a periodical).<sup>74</sup> Additionally, in the same year that *Live and Let Live* came into print, the Harpers published Sedgwick's *A Love Token for Children*, a collection of seven stories whose readership was announced in its title. The fact that Sedgwick has started in the late 1820s and early 1830s to write and publish short stories geared to younger readers probably played a role in some reviewers' decision to position her three most recent novels as part of a new phase of Sedgwick's authorship. That in-

terpretive decision started a trend that continued with the reception of Sedgwick's next book, *Means and Ends*, published in 1839.

Although most late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century readers would likely call *Means and Ends* a nonfiction conduct book, Sedgwick's contemporaries did not necessarily see it that way.<sup>75</sup> Reviews in the *Expositor* and the *Boston Quarterly Review* identified *Means and Ends* as being of a piece with Sedgwick's other books, with the latter specifically citing its "truly American feeling . . . which breathes through all of Miss Sedgwick's works" (July 1839: 389). Noting that whether Sedgwick "sets her hand to . . . a novel or a moral essay"—a remark that suggests *Means and Ends* was being read as a combination of the two—the reviewer in the *Expositor* identified this volume as once again marking "the character of her mind," which, tellingly enough, the reviewer found "manifested in her writings [a]s essentially feminine" (June 22, 1839: 315). *Graham's* saw *Means and Ends* as typically Sedgwickian in the way it goes about "enforcing truths by anecdote and short story" (July 1842: 60).

What characterized reviewer responses most visibly was their interpretation of *Means and Ends* as a book for juvenile readers. The review in the *Expositor* explained that "the principle object of the work" is to address "the mind of young ladies" (315); "for the formation of the character of the young, the work is addressed," announced a reviewer in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (Aug. 1839: 128). The *New-York Mirror* intoned that the book "is full of excellent and judicious advice . . . interesting to young ladies in their teens" (June 15, 1839: 407). Apparently drawing on a sentence in chapter two in which Sedgwick's narrator explains that the "following pages" of the chapter are "for girls from ten to sixteen years of age," several reviewers, including the one in the *Mirror*, extrapolated from that remark to conclude that "Sedgwick has dedicated this little volume to her young country women" (407).<sup>76</sup> It is little wonder, in light of such associations and interpretive assumptions, that a review in the *New-Yorker* predicted that *Means and Ends* "will be bought by kind fathers and mothers and friends, and will be put into the hands of young Misses to read, with lots of good advice in the bargain" (July 28, 1839: 286).

One of the ironies of these responses on the heels of the reception of *The Linwoods*, *Poor Rich Man*, and *Live and Let Live* was that just as Sedgwick was being interpretively reconstructed as a different kind of

author whose audience was now being more narrowly defined, she enjoyed her greatest popularity to date, even in comparison to *Home* and *Hope Leslie*. While the latter had quickly sold out its first edition of 2,000 copies, the Harpers published *Poor Rich Man* in a first edition of 9,000 copies, and all were sold within six months. By late 1839, the reading public had gobbled up nearly 20,000 copies of that novel. *Live and Let Live* enjoyed comparable success, with a first printing of 8,750 copies and a sales total in two years of nearly 13,000 copies.<sup>77</sup> Even in comparison to *Home*, these two novels performed extraordinarily in the literary marketplace. While *Home* had gone through fifteen editions in six years, *Poor Rich Man* took only three years to go through sixteen editions, and the sales of *Live and Let Live* exhausted twelve editions in less than two years.<sup>78</sup>

In the meantime, the growing conception of Sedgwick as the author of books for the young no doubt was reinforced when the Harpers in 1840 published her collection of short fiction, *Stories for Young People*, which identified itself as “By the author of ‘The Linwoods,’ ‘Poor Rich Man,’ ‘Love Token,’ and ‘Live and Let Live.’” Linking the new collection with exactly the four books that had been the site for this new interpretation of Sedgwick, that signature helped reinforce audience perceptions of Sedgwick as a woman author writing primarily for a juvenile readership.

What had begun with *The Linwoods* as a few drops from a spigot turned into a full torrent with the reception of *The Boy of Mt. Rhigi*, published in 1847. Reviewers en masse spoke of Sedgwick’s new novel as juvenile fiction. Here is a representative sampling of their remarks: *Sartain’s* called the “volume before us . . . an agreeable fiction, designed more especially for the young” (May 1849: 350); *Littell’s* observed that “it was written . . . to awaken in those of our young people who have been carefully nurtured, a sense of their duty” (Apr. 14, 1849: 95); and the *Knickerbocker*, quoting part of the preface without acknowledgment, announced that the novel is “designed for the young people of our country” (Nov. 1848: 457). Nor did such characterization of *Boy of Mt. Rhigi* come only in the public sphere. In a letter to Sedgwick, a Reverend Bellows said that after “reading at one sitting—a few pages last evening excepted—of the ‘Boy of Mount Rhigi,’ . . . I feel it safer to have children . . . when such books are extant, and waiting to throw their mantle of purity and protection over them.”<sup>79</sup>

A suggestive feature of Bellows' comment is that his admission of having read the book himself would indicate that, pace reviewer conclusions, adults were drawn to and actually reading *Boy of Mt. Rhigi*. Indeed, calling a work such as *Boy of Mt. Rhigi* juvenile fiction does more than ignore its broader appeal. Such a characterization, as one Sedgwick scholar has argued, "obscure[s] the productive cross-fertilization" of genres in the novel, particularly its "rhetorical techniques" that "overlap . . . literary categories usually dichotomized today (children-adult, straightforward-complex, didactic-aesthetic)."<sup>80</sup> The point here is not that this modern critical view of the book is correct and the antebellum conceptualization is a misreading. What we are looking at are interpretations grounded in different sets of reading codes, and central to the horizon of expectations of Sedgwick's antebellum readers was the assumption, which had become a "fact" by 1848, that Sedgwick was a writer of juvenile fiction.

What was happening to Sedgwick is especially striking if we compare her career to those of other novelists, particularly male ones. Not only did Hawthorne and Dickens write children's fiction without being labeled juvenile authors. As Henry Steele Commager pointed out over five decades ago, "almost every major writer . . . wrote for children as well as adults" in the nineteenth century.<sup>81</sup> Yet few were typecast as writers for the young. Such was not the case for Sedgwick. Rather, as a result of the responses first to *The Linwoods*, *Poor Rich Man*, and *Live and Let Live*, and then especially to *Means and Ends* and *Boy of Mt. Rhigi*, by the late 1840s Sedgwick's entire corpus began to be reinterpreted in a way that reflected this new formulation. For instance, an article in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, amid discussing Irving, Hawthorne, Cooper, Poe, and Dana, called Sedgwick "pre-eminent among American female writers" because of "her home pictures and tales for children" (June 1846: 472). A reviewer of a new edition of *Redwood* in the *New Englander* took the opportunity to recall how "[y]oung misses" in the 1820s had "languished over the loves of Ellen and Westfall," and then he expressed his hope that "some of the younger generation will be anxious to learn what kind of work pleased their parents" (Aug. 1850: 484). As to the view that *Redwood*, *Hope Leslie*, and *Clarence* were national American novels suited to the needs and interests of adult readers, that too was being rethought. For example, following the reprinting of *Clarence* in 1849, the *Literary World*, speaking of "Miss Sedgwick's

writings” as a whole, denied that “Americanism . . . is their most satisfying ingredient” (Oct. 6, 1849: 297). In the same year, the *North American Review* declared that *Hope Leslie* was not really a historical novel but more of a costume drama that “kept the historical element quite in the background” (Jan. 1849: 205). Even when readers continued to praise the Americanness of Sedgwick’s novels, that description took an altered form. According to one commentator, while Sedgwick’s novels are “*always* and thoroughly American,” her status as a “national writer” depended on the way “Miss Sedgwick says, ‘let the little children come unto me.’”<sup>82</sup>

Such remarks might have been less problematic for the status of Sedgwick and her fiction had they not been part of a pattern that unfolded simultaneously with the rise of the conceptualization of juvenile literature as a specific genre with distinct features designed for a particular category of readers with a particular level of intelligence and reading abilities. At this time the American Sunday School Union was taking upon itself the task of codifying standards for children’s literature, specifying “adaptation to the understanding of the child” as a desideratum. Soon librarians would begin assembling lists of novels and other books suitable and “recommended” expressly for children.<sup>83</sup> According to Beverly Lyon Clark, this literature came to be viewed, particularly by reviewers, as “being less serious” than adult reading matter.<sup>84</sup> While Clark demonstrates how this view came to prominence especially after the Civil War, such an assumption was already beginning to appear in the late 1830s, as demonstrated by a review of Sedgwick’s *Means and Ends* in the *Christian Examiner*. Following up an earlier review in that periodical, which had linked *Means and Ends* with a juvenile readership, this second review explained that “the author of this book, Miss Sedgwick, is favorably known in our country by those who are familiar with lighter literature” (Dec. 1839: 624). The upshot was that juvenile fiction was being conceived as “lighter” literature for a niche market, and Sedgwick was being sutured to both.

What needs to be added is that, as Clark also points out, such a pejorative view of children’s literature was inflected by gender ideology, in that it was assumed that the audience for such fiction was primarily girls.<sup>85</sup> That equation was extended to authorship as well, as evidenced by a remark in the *North American Review*. “Such being the importance

of juvenile books, who are the best qualified to make them?" asked the reviewer, who then announced the answer: "Women." Subscribing to the logic of the cult of domesticity, this reviewer went on to explain that women writers were especially suited to produce such books since their "natural sympathies unite them most closely with children," which enables women writers to "best know the minds, the wants, and the hearts of children." In what can be taken as an ironic, ominous precursor of what was to come for Sedgwick, these ideas appeared in an 1828 review of *Hope Leslie*.<sup>86</sup>

The publishing regimen the Harpers employed for reissuing Sedgwick's novels in the 1840s further contributed to the perception of Sedgwick as a writer of juvenile fiction pitched to a niche market. With the exception of republishing *Hope Leslie* in 1842, the Harpers throughout the decade concentrated on reissuing *Poor Rich Man* (1840, 1841, 1842, 1843, 1847), *Live and Let Live* (1840, 1841, 1842, 1844), *Love Token for Children* (1844, 1848), *Means and Ends* (1842, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846), and *Stories for Young Persons* (1841, 1842, 1846).<sup>87</sup> A large part of the firm's motivation was no doubt financial. *Poor Rich Man* and *Live and Let Live* had had the best track records for sales, which provided the greatest promise for future profits. Additionally, in the wake of the panic of 1837, which hit the publishing industry hard and reduced the buying power of middle-class readers, the fact that four of those five books were under 220 pages meant they could be printed more cheaply and sold at a lower price than Sedgwick's slightly older and substantially longer novels—no small consideration for stimulating sales.

A point to stress here is that the popularity of these texts and reviewer conceptions of Sedgwick as a writer of lighter fiction for a juvenile audience did not signal a disparity between the way reviewers and other middle-class readers were responding to her writings. Rather, that popularity resulted because readers acquiesced to the idea, advanced publicly in periodicals, that these fictions were worth buying as reading materials well suited to their children. The irony is that even as Sedgwick continued to have a high public profile and her writings sold well, at work was a subtle but significant devaluation of her fiction as fit primarily for youths.<sup>88</sup>

Reviewers, however, hardly seemed to recognize what was transpiring. Instead, some began to feel in the late 1840s that Sedgwick's novels

as a whole were no longer relevant to adult readers. Part of the logic here lay in reviewer conclusions that Sedgwick's novels before 1835 (specifically *Clarence*, *Hope Leslie*, *Redwood*, and *A New England Tale*) were out of date, the relics of a simpler time that had been enjoyed by an unsophisticated, callow American audience. An article in the *Literary World*, entitled "Miss Sedgwick's Works," said that *Clarence* belonged to a "class" of novels "which modern improvements in fiction have rather elbowed out of popularity" (Oct. 6, 1849: 297). Responding to Putnam's reissue of *Clarence* in 1849, the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* commented that in the "twenty years since 'Clarence' first made its appearance . . . the public has undergone considerable change," which has "rendered less attractive . . . the works of Miss Sedgwick" (Nov. 1849: 478). Also asserting that novels and the "public taste" have advanced, the *New York Albion* said of Sedgwick, "Though long since recognized as a standard writer, her works ha[ve] almost gone out of print" (Oct. 1849: 472). Although the remark about her novels being out of print was a patent error, it bespoke a perception of Sedgwick as a writer whose time had come and gone for the broader fiction-reading public.

Some of Sedgwick's letters at this time indicate that she herself believed that she was losing an audience for her earlier novels, partly because her original readers were dying off without being replaced by new ones. Writing to Katherine Minot in 1857, Sedgwick explained how "worried, and anxious, and utterly discouraged" she was when she thought of "all those whose hearts beat for me . . . at the publication of my early books" but who are now "all gone." Such thoughts also shaded Sedgwick's view of the novel she was then working on, *Married or Single?* A month before her letter to Minot, Sedgwick informed Orville Dewey that she was "getting [her] book ready, and working as hard as I dare," but she then asked rhetorically, "Is it not rather a folly . . . to perpetrate a novel without any purpose or hope . . . but only to supply mediocre readers with small moral hints on various subjects that come up in daily life?"<sup>89</sup> The self-deprecating view of her subject as "small" and the conception that her audience now consisted of "mediocre readers" reflect the lowered status that was beginning to envelop Sedgwick and the public perception of both her corpus and her current audience.

In the decade between the publication of *Boy of Mt. Rhigi* in 1847 and Sedgwick's 1857 letter to Minot, that lowering via conceptions of

Sedgwick as a children's author continued, despite the fact that in 1850 Hazard and Mitchell published Sedgwick's *Tales of City Life*, a collection comprised of two long stories that had previously appeared in the adult-oriented magazine *Sartain's*. That volume, however, was overshadowed by the Harpers' continued practice of publishing new editions of Sedgwick's fiction that readers and reviewers had come to view as fiction for the young: *Live and Let Live* (1854), *Means and Ends* (1854), *Stories of Young Persons* (1852, 1855), and *Poor Rich Man* (1856). That pattern and the associations it reinforced were furthered when Crowley and Nichols put out new editions of *Boy of Mt. Rhigi* in 1849, 1850, 1851, 1854, and again in 1857.<sup>90</sup> The last appeared in the same year that Sedgwick published what would be her final novel, *Married or Single?*

*Married or Single?* could have signaled for antebellum readers a return to Sedgwick's earlier works, in a way analogous to the modern scholarly view that this book belongs with the five other full-fledged novels that Sedgwick published before 1835. Certainly, reviewers might at least have seen it as a novel addressing larger social issues relevant to women and men of all ages: the social status of women, female rights, the relative value of life in and outside of marriage, and the problems of fashionable society. Instead, reviewer responses went in a different direction. The *North American Review* focused on "all the moral axioms and postulates which the story illustrates" to group *Married or Single?* with *Live and Let Live*, *Home*, and her other briefer works of the 1830s as signature Sedgwickian fictions, among which her latest was "the best of the series" (Oct. 1857: 563). The *Christian Examiner*, after noting that "Miss Sedgwick was one of the most popular writers of a generation which is now fast passing away," suggested whom her current audience consisted of by sandwiching its brief review of *Married or Single?* between reviews of John Browner's *A Child's History of Greece* and Worthington Hooker's *A Child's Book of Nature* (Oct. 1857: 645). What the *Christian Examiner* implied, a review in the *Ladies' Repository* asserted explicitly, declaring that, while some "old people" will enjoy *Married or Single?*, its "moral" is such that "young folks will get as much profit as pleasure" from the novel (Sept. 1857: 564).

What morals and axioms did reviewers find in *Married or Single?* Taking their cue from the novel's title and preface, nearly all concluded, in one form or another, that "the author's prime aim," as the *North Ameri-*

*can Review* explained, “is to exhibit, as parallel with the holy and benign ministries of the true wife and mother, the no less sacred and lofty sphere open to self-respecting and voluntary maidenhood” (Oct. 1857: 563). But instead of seeing it as a novel that might be challenging the dominant culture’s ideas about gender, marriage, and women’s place, readers found *Married or Single?* to be an affirmation of wifehood as the true role for young women.<sup>91</sup> The review in the *Ladies’ Repository*, for example, observed that the “beginning of the volume gives one the idea that the authoress is about to insist upon the reality of female single blessedness. But the moral—was it accidental and inevitable, or done of a forethought?—is strongly in favor of married life” (Sept. 1857: 564). A review in *Harper’s Weekly* agreed and specified a reason: The “moral can scarcely be said to be in favor of single life, since Grace, the heroine, around whom the whole interest of the story moves, like a true woman, loves and marries at last” (July 1857: 470).<sup>92</sup>

Though widely sharing this interpretation, critics disagreed over whether the novel’s denouement constituted the book’s theme or contradicted it. While the review in the *Ladies’ Repository* assumed the former, a review in the *Knickerbocker* declared that, while the “whole moral of the story . . . is that married life is not essential to the cultivation of the warmest affections and noblest traits” of women, “[i]ts force is diminished, however, by the tender relenting of the author, who seems, at the close of the volume, to have departed from her original plan, and after all, marries the heroine” (Oct. 1857: 412). Such a disagreement led reviewers to raise questions about the novel’s consistency and, as the *Knickerbocker* implied, Sedgwick’s artistic control over her materials. Only hinted at in the *Knickerbocker* review, the problem of ineptitude in this area was more explicitly raised by a reviewer in the *New York Albion*, who grouched, “judging from the Preface” of *Married or Single?*, the “tale was designed to plead the cause of Spinster-hood. If this be so, the case is not well pleaded; in fact the object is well-nigh lost sight of.” The *Albion* reviewer also found the novel formulaic and even a bit stale, since “the old subject of marriage and giving in marriage is the staple of this, as of ninety-nine out of a hundred kindred works” (Aug. 15, 1857: 393). The irony in these responses is that reviewers came to *Married or Single?* with what had become a standard view of Sedgwick as a safe, domestic writer of novels for the young—and especially young females—but when reviewers found

in the novel precisely what they wanted to see, some charged it with being structurally flawed or, worse yet, clichéd.

The damage of familiarity also emerged in a second area of the public response. *Married or Single?* struck most reviewers, in the words of the *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, as being "of a similar character to that of her previous stories" in that it centers on the "quiet, domestic sphere, where she is particularly at home" (Sept. 1857: 549). For some, however, it was precisely this familiar domesticity that proved disappointing. A review in *Russell's Magazine* found the novel undistinguished because it is "an ordinary domestic tale, meager in incident, and undramatic in action." The *Russell's* reviewer added that such a novel "is not likely to be widely popular" with the "host of novel readers," who desire the "sort of intellectual nutriment" provided by "such skillful artists as the Brontës, Thackeray, [and] Dickens" (Sept. 1857: 572). Displaying a similar impatience with *Married or Single?*, the *Christian Review* found that the book's subject and its treatment resulted not only in an "injured" plot but in a "story spun out to a tedious length" (Oct. 1857: 645). One likely factor in such responses was the publication of a number of highly popular domestic novels in the early 1850s, including Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter*, and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Combined with the growing reconceptualization of Sedgwick as a womanly author of mild domestic tales for young females, the public saturation of the genre through such marketplace successes helped provide some reviewers with a ground for reconceiving Sedgwick, not as the author who had pioneered and excelled at writing national novels of the home, but as the author of a tedious and hackneyed narrative in an overworked mode. In the midst of such developments, the *Russell's* reviewer concluded with a remark about *Married or Single?* that would have been unthinkable in the public reception of a Sedgwick novel twenty years earlier: "it should have been better policy to have permitted the book to remain unpublished" (572).



Despite such criticisms and their role in the subtle but significant devaluation and pigeonholing of Sedgwick's novels, her reputation remained surprisingly strong, albeit in a modulated form, right through the Civil War. When Sedgwick died in 1867, the editor of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* looked back over her career to remind the audience that "she

was the first very noted female author in the United States" (Oct. 1867: 665). Four years later, another article in the same magazine said of Sedgwick, "her career of authorship has classed her, with Irving, among those who first created an American literature worthy the name" (Nov. 1871: 826). Yet even such kudos came with qualifications, as the editor of *Harper's* exemplified in his 1867 remarks when he explained that by the 1850s, "when the more modern school of American writers were [*sic*] becoming known," Sedgwick's "name and fame" had fallen into "comparative retirement" (665).

To the new generation of postbellum American readers, moreover, Sedgwick was known largely during the 1870s as the author of *Live and Let Live*, *Poor Rich Man*, *Means and Ends*, and *Love Token for Children*—the books that had come to identify her as a writer for young people and the very ones that the Harpers kept in print throughout the decade.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, public discussions of Sedgwick began to reveal a tendency to focus not so much on her fiction, its value, or its artistry, but on the woman herself. This shift is most evident in Mary Dewey's 1872 *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*, in which Dewey characterizes Sedgwick's life not as a writing career built upon a substantial corpus of novels and tales but as a story of "no remarkable occurrences," traced as a genteel "unfolding and ripening amid congenial surroundings of a true and beautiful soul." Besides her own remarks interwoven with excerpts from Sedgwick's letters and journals, Dewey included in the volume several literary reminiscences in which the same emphasis is evident. One by William Cullen Bryant admits that, while Sedgwick's "literary life" was "admirable," "her home life was more so." Bryant adds, "Her unerring sense of rectitude, her love of truth, her ready sympathy, her active and cheerful beneficence" comprised a sterling womanly character that "I would not exchange for any thing in her own interesting works of fiction." In a nineteen-paragraph reminiscence, Orville Dewey devotes a mere three paragraphs to Sedgwick's fiction only to emphasize how "[h]er sweet and graceful nature" repeatedly "was expressed in her writings."<sup>94</sup>

Over the next decade, all of Sedgwick's books except for *Home* would go out of print, and when she was mentioned at all in periodicals, it was almost as a historical relic of an earlier young generation. An article on "The Native Element in American Fiction: Before the War" in

the *Century Magazine* admitted that Sedgwick, along with Cooper and James Kirk Paulding, “once held the entire ground of important novelistic literature” early in the century, but in a move that continued the altered conception of Sedgwick, the article added that in her case it was by “charming the youth of New England.” Indeed, explained the *Century*, “in ‘Redwood,’ . . . ‘Clarence,’ ‘The Linwoods,’ etc. she took strong hold on the hearts of the New England youth” (June 1883: 288–91).

By 1900 Sedgwick’s fiction was starting to be neglected to the point of being completely left out of important literary histories, including Barrett Wendell’s path-breaking *Literary History of the United States* (1900). That pattern would continue over the first five decades of the twentieth century. Neither her novels nor Sedgwick herself receives any mention in Richard Burton’s *Literary Leaders of America* (1903), John Macy’s *Spirit of American Literature* (1913), Percy Boynton’s *History of American Literature* (1919), and Carl Van Doren’s *What Is American Literature?* (1935). In Arthur Hobson Quinn’s *American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey* (1936), Sedgwick gets no mention in his chapter on “Washington Irving and Other Pioneers” of antebellum American fiction—a chapter followed, tellingly enough, by one devoted entirely to Cooper, the writer with whom Sedgwick had been most frequently paired in the 1820s and 1830s as leading voices of America’s new national literature.<sup>95</sup>

Moreover, even when Sedgwick was referred to in early twentieth-century literary histories, it was in a diminished capacity or by some dismissive remarks. Vernon Parrington, in his *Romantic Revolution* volume in *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), made a passing reference to Sedgwick’s “modest career as a ‘lady novelist.’” Fred Lewis Pattee’s *The First Century of American Literature* (1935) referred to Sedgwick only as a contributor of short pieces to gift books and annuals. In his *Flowering of New England* (1936), Van Wyck Brooks briefly mentioned Sedgwick as a writer of “stories of New England life” that were “sometimes too-too simple” and concluded, “no one could have supposed that her work could live.”<sup>96</sup>

Such disparaging typecasting most frequently took the form that first appeared in the responses to her novels in the mid-to-late 1830s. William J. Long’s *American Literature* (1913), in a risible instance of fractured history, claimed that the reviewers of Sedgwick’s day dismissed her

novels as “weak copies of English originals” and then paired Sedgwick with Louisa May Alcott as the authors of “*Little Women* and other juveniles.” Characterizing Sedgwick as a fiction-writing schoolmarm, Walter C. Bronson’s *Short History of American Literature* (1902) explained that Sedgwick was “for half a century principal of a young ladies’ school at Stockbridge, Mass.,” where she “wrote many novels, naturally of a pale hue”—a remark seconded in William B. Cairns’s *History of American Literature* (1912), which dismissively smirked that “her novels, *Hope Leslie*, *The Linwoods*, and others have the moral qualities to be expected in the work of a preceptress.” In 1917 the monumental *Cambridge History of American Literature* referred to Sedgwick roughly a half dozen times in passing but only to call her an “unread” novelist whose “moral stories” were “obvious” and to mention her fiction amid a discussion of antebellum “books for children.” By the 1950s Sedgwick’s niche was sealed to the point where even *Hope Leslie* was demoted to the status of a child’s book in Ernest E. Leisy’s *The American Historical Novel*, which blandly announced, “Miss Sedgwick . . . conceived of her task in *Hope Leslie* as illustrating for juvenile readers domestic manners in the seventeenth century.”<sup>97</sup>

And what of the view of *Hope Leslie*, *Clarence*, *Redwood*, and *A New England Tale* as striking national novels fit for Americans of all ages? What, too, of the conception of Sedgwick as a fiction-writing pioneer and major novelistic voice in antebellum America? Those interpretations were gone and, it seems, virtually forgotten. For most of the twentieth century, such responses to her novels were replaced by a master narrative built with an interpretive formulation that, at its most “generous,” ghettoized Sedgwick as a feminine writer of tepid domestic tales, whose “modest career” was devoted to producing light fiction for the young. Thankfully, it is a formulation from which Sedgwick’s fiction has finally started to recover.