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Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

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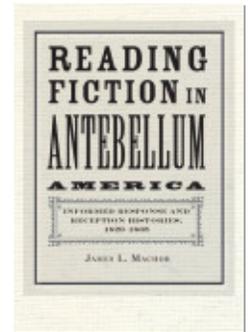
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Mercurial Readings

The Making and Unmaking of Caroline Chesebro'

ALTHOUGH THE QUESTION “Whatever happened to . . .?” could be as readily asked about Caroline Chesebro’ as it could about Catharine Sedgwick, a different preliminary query first needs to be raised. Who *was* Caroline Chesebro’?

Born in upstate New York in 1825, Chesebro’ was the author of over a dozen books of fiction from the 1850s to the 1870s. By 1900, however, she was largely forgotten, and she lingered in obscurity throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, unlike Sedgwick—or Elizabeth Stoddard, Susan Warner, Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, or Rebecca Harding Davis—Chesebro’ has undergone no recovery and continues to remain outside the canon of American literature—and largely unknown today.

Her obscurity is evidenced in the paucity of scholarly and critical attention to her fiction. Though brief entries for her appear in several standard biographical reference works, such as the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *American National Biography*, and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, since 1925 only one book chapter and two brief scholarly articles have been devoted to her writings.¹ Chesebro’ is not even mentioned in most of the important book-length studies of nineteenth-century American women writers published over the last thirty-five years, including Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Mary Kelley’s *Private Women, Public Stage* (1984), Gillian Brown’s *Domestic Individualism* (1990), Susan Harris’s *Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Novels* (1990), Susan Coultrap-McQuinn’s *Doing Literary Business* (1990), G. M. Goshgarian’s *To Kiss the Chastening Rod* (1992), and Lora Romero’s *Home Fronts* (1997).² Only one master’s thesis and no doctoral dissertations have been devoted to her in the last one hundred years.³ In light of this neglect, it is not surprising that virtually no at-

tention has been paid to the public response to Chesebro's fiction in the nineteenth century.⁴

In her own time, however, Chesebro's reputation and position in the literary marketplace were hardly obscure. Over more than two decades, she published nearly ninety short stories in major periodicals, including *Graham's Magazine*, the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, and *Sartain's* in the 1840s and 1850s and then in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and the *Nation* in the 1860s and 1870s.⁵ Perhaps more significant, the fact that she published nine novels and four collections of short stories indicates that Chesebro's fiction established sufficient marketplace magnetism to attract publishers, enabling her to maintain a successful string of book publications from 1851 until a year or two before her death in 1873.⁶ Nor were her relations with publishers limited to the third-class associations to which many other women fiction writers of the time were relegated.⁷ Although she never placed a book with the prestigious Harpers, as both Melville and Sedgwick had done, in her early career Chesebro published two novels and a collection of short stories with the New York firm of Redfield and Company, which also published William Gilmore Simms and Robert Montgomery Byrd (two of the leading antebellum southern novelists), as well as Edgar Allan Poe and the well-known poet Alice Cary.⁸ Chesebro went on to publish two other collections of tales and her novel *The Fishermen of Gamp's Island* with the firm of Carleton and Porter, a publisher that, according to one historian, was "one of the most successful of the time" and whose list of authors included the highly popular novelists Mary Jane Holmes, Augusta Evans, and Marion Harland.⁹

Nearly all of Chesebro's novels were reviewed in the leading magazines of mid-nineteenth-century America, including *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Putnam's Monthly*, the *Literary World*, *Harper's*, the *Nation*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Furthermore, the public responses to her fiction were often quite favorable, even laudatory. A reviewer in the *Knickerbocker*, for instance, asserted that "among the numerous candidates for literary fame . . . Miss Caroline Chesebro' has few or no superiors" (Sept. 1856: 303). The *National Era* called her a writer whose "genius . . . is totally unlike [that of] any other author of the age, and promises to make her immortal" (Sept. 11, 1856: 147), while an article in *Holden's Dollar Magazine* placed her among "our most brilliant and popular authors" in

whom “we take the most pride” (Jan. 1859: 61). Indeed, thirty years after her death, William Dean Howells would rank her just behind the leading lights of Hawthorne, Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, and Stowe in his list of American writers of “second brilliance”—a list in which Howells also grouped Henry David Thoreau and Henry James.¹⁰

Chesebro’, accordingly, was hardly one of the many obscure and ephemeral American fiction writers, male or female, of the antebellum and Civil War decades. It is just that she was not a particularly popular novelist, nor did she gain widespread attention in the public sphere. Her books never sold very well, and except for *Peter Carradine* (1863), none of her novels made it to a second edition.¹¹ Within twenty years of her death, all of her books were out of print. Despite the attention her novels received via reviews in major periodicals, none enjoyed the wide notice that Melville’s *Typee* and *Omoo* and Sedgwick’s novels of the 1820s and 1830s achieved. Indeed, despite extensive research, I have been unable to uncover more than a dozen reviews of any one of her books. In fact, her two 1865 novels, *Glen Cabin* and *Fishermen of Gamp’s Island*, appear to have earned no reviewer notice at all.

This rather unusual reception history makes Chesebro’ not only largely unique among antebellum and mid-nineteenth-century American fiction writers. It also offers a fascinating context and scenario for examining in more detail the shape of the contemporaneous response to her fiction and the reasons behind her subsequent modern neglect.



Not a lot is known about Chesebro’, and outside her published works of fiction, the archival record is thin. Fewer than fifty of her letters are extant, and none of the correspondence that might have included readers’ comments about her fiction has survived. However, the little we do know, along with the public reception of her fiction, indicates that Chesebro’ shared affinities with, yet differed markedly from, other nineteenth-century American women fiction writers, particularly in their profile as “literary domestics” and the way they were perceived by nineteenth-century readers.

Like many of the antebellum and mid-nineteenth-century women writers Mary Kelley has focused on, Chesebro’ seems to have turned to fiction writing from financial motives. Comments and questions about the economics of publishing and her relation to her publishers frequently

punctuate her few surviving letters.¹² Like Sedgwick, Chesebro' could be acute and even unabashed in her dealings with her publishers. At a time when the Duyckinck brothers were not paying most writers for their contributions to the *Literary World*, Chesebro' sent them a story and an accompanying letter in which she asked, "Will you publish the enclosed in your admirable 'World,' and . . . let me contribute to its columns in pay for it?" In another letter to the Duyckincks regarding a different story, Chesebro' boldly asserted, "I trust that it is worth to you, two dollars a page—printed" before adding, "[p]lease let me know if you can afford to pay for this article at that rate—or state *what* sum you are willing to pay for it outright."¹³ A letter to William Conant Church of the *Galaxy* reflects her negotiating know-how when it asserts, "I think [?] at the rates I am payed elsewhere, that two dollars a mss sheet . . . may be considered a fair compensation."¹⁴ Chesebro' was also intrepid enough to question her publishers as to the fairness of payment for her fiction. In a letter to the *Atlantic Monthly* she unabashedly pointed out that "[a]ccording to my computation, there are ten dollars yet due on Victor & Jacqueline. I received \$50. \$30 & \$77 on it, but the story filled two pages more than were in the reckoning."¹⁵

Unlike the literary domestics, however, Chesebro' was closer to Sedgwick in the manner in which she viewed her fiction. Despite her economic motivations and concerns as an author, Chesebro' could see her fiction as valuable in and of itself. As she explained in one of her letters to the Duyckincks regarding a newly submitted short story, "I have written it with uncommon care & feel convinced that it has a worth of its own, which I believe you will recognize."¹⁶ Moreover, at least one of her letters to Church indicates that she approached her writing with the care of an artist—or at least with the care of a skilled craftsperson. Referring to an unnamed story she had sent to the *Galaxy*, Chesebro' explained to Church that the "story is finished but I have only been able to re-read & correct it & do not quite like you to see it, until I have a clearer idea [in] regard to it than I have at the moment."¹⁷

Yet in her concern for her craft and her sense of the intrinsic value of her fiction, Chesebro' was unlike the Melville painted by modern criticism, who supposedly composed his fiction with an artistic single-mindedness that caused him to ignore his readership. Despite the claim of one modern critic that Chesebro' was oblivious to the impact of her

prose on her contemporary audience and thereby “failed to fulfill the expectations of her readers,” another of her letters to Church suggests that Chesebro’ was, if not keenly attuned to her readership, at least concerned about their reactions to and judgments about her work. Referring to a story entitled “One too Many,” which was scheduled to appear in a late 1868 issue of the *Galaxy*, she wrote, “I trust that the good opinion [Church had] expressed in regard to the story to appear in the December number will be seconded by your readers.”¹⁸

In this interest in her audience’s responses, Chesebro’, of course, shared a concern with many antebellum and midcentury writers, both male and female. And in Chesebro’s case, it was a concern well founded, not only because of the lack of strong sales for her books but also because her contemporary reviewers did not respond to her fiction in the way that they reacted to that of other women authors of the time. For one thing, reviewers did not read her novels as domestic or sentimental fiction—the category into which most of her few twentieth-century commentators have placed her work.¹⁹ Moreover, reviewers repeatedly responded to her style with terms seldom used to describe fiction by women. Frequently, as we will see, reviewers demarcated her writing as “masculine,” with one magazinist going so far as to label it “cold” and even “obscure” (*Appleton’s* Sept. 16, 1871: 330). More reminiscent of the responses to Melville’s prose than of reactions to the style of other women writers, such remarks indicate that her fiction presented unique pre-texts for antebellum interpretations of Chesebro’ as an author.



Although Chesebro’s contemporary audience would come to know her style—and her work as a whole—through her novels, her first book was a collection of short stories. Published in 1851, *Dream-Land by Daylight* consists of twenty-four stories, nineteen of which had already appeared in magazines.²⁰ The fact that *Dream-Land* was largely a collection of twice-told tales no doubt contributed to the small number of reviews it received. Nevertheless, those previously printed stories, along with the other sixteen tales she had published in the years before *Dream-Land*, served as an asset by making Chesebro’ already familiar to her readers and thereby helping to shape a horizon of expectations for her first book. A *Godey’s* review of *Dream-Land* claimed, with some hyperbole, that the “name of the author of this volume has long been familiar to American

readers . . . as that of one of the most gifted female writers of our country” (Mar. 1852: 231), while a reviewer in *Peterson’s* noted that, though Chesebro’s fiction “now first appears in a book of her own,” her work has “long been known in the magazines” (Feb. 1852: 134). Similar remarks were repeated in *Sartain’s* (Feb. 1852: 196), *Harper’s* (Jan. 1852: 274), and even the *Scientific American*, which called Chesebro’ “an authoress of merit well known to the magazine world for her piquant stories” (Jan. 3, 1852: 128).

What reviewers found in *Dream-Land*—and what they directed the middle-class fiction-reading audience to find there also—largely sat well with their horizon of expectations, both of Chesebro’ and of her collection. Most notably—and contrary to what they would say about her novels to come—reviewers characterized her stories as expressions of refined, moral sentiments. Repeatedly, magazinists spoke of the “purity of sentiment and glow of feeling which pervade the entire volume” (*Godey’s* 231), of the volume’s “great delicacy and beauty of sentiment” (*American Whig Review* Jan. 1852: 89), of its “depth of sentiment and feeling not ordinarily met with” (*Churchman* circa 1852), and of “its relation to the highest moral emotions” (*Albany State Register* circa 1852).²¹ A review in the *National Era* singled out the stories “The Phoebe Bird” and “Little Alvah” as especially evincing this element, calling the latter a tale of “plain, homely pathos . . . which goes straight to the heart” (Jan. 29, 1852: 19). Several reviewers even identified the collection as a version of domestic fiction, with the reviewer in *Harper’s* calling it one long, interconnected “tale of domestic life” full of “deep feelings [and] delicate sentiment” (Apr. 1853: 715).

No doubt such interpretive positioning of *Dream-Land* shaped reviewers’ conceptions about the book’s projected audience, for the consensus was that it was especially suited to female readers. The *American Whig Review* claimed that the collection “will be a favorite volume among ‘ladies of the land’” (89), while the *Southern Quarterly Review* asserted that *Dream-Land* was “just the sort of volume which a young lady of talent might be expected to write, and which young ladies of taste will be pleased to read” (Jan. 1852: 262). Announced *Peterson’s*, “Should any fair lady wish a delightfully readable book, . . . let her purchase ‘Dream-Land by Daylight’” (Feb. 1852: 134). For reviewers this was an obvious conclusion related to what they saw as the volume’s gendered genre profile. As

Godey's put it, the tales "imparted so great an amount of moral instruction to her readers" (231) that they did important cultural work—work that was intrinsically linked to Chesebro's success as a woman writer "true" to "her moral emotions" (*National Era* 19).

But if reviewers read *Dream-Land* as a conventional, albeit delightful, version of a well-worn genre, they disagreed over the cause of the book's success. *Sartain's* said it was precisely because the stories were not typical in their treatment of emotions. Making a distinction between true and natural sentiment and artificial sentimentality, the *Sartain's* reviewer asserted of Chesebro's tales that the "sentiment that pervades them, is far removed from the false sentimentality and moralistic twaddle, that crowd upon us in these latter days, in a class of compositions" that readers and reviewers greet with "sweeping condemnation" (196). By contrast, one reviewer linked the collection's genre profile with the code of verisimilitude to declare that the stories' "vivid delineation of human feeling" struck a note of realism that rendered Chesebro's "twenty-four tales . . . pictures of life" (*Home Journal* Dec. 21: 1851: [4]). Reviews in both *Harper's* and the *Ontario Messenger* found the book's attraction in a different combination that joined imaginative power to vraisemblance. According to the latter, *Dream-Land* "is a collection of beautiful sketches, in which the cultivated imagination of the authoress has interwoven the visions of Dream-Land with the realities of life."²² Said the *Harper's* reviewer, "we find in it . . . a rare faculty of seizing the multiform aspects of nature" as found in life, while "giving them the form and hue of imagination" (274).

Another area of divergence in response to the collection involved perceptions of Chesebro's style. Although a handful of modern commentators have characterized that style as severely flawed and have claimed that her contemporary audience responded to it negatively, the actual nineteenth-century reception of her work was more complex.²³ Admittedly, several reviewers were critical of the style of *Dream-Land*. The reviewer in *Harper's*, who was one of the first to call her writing "masculine," found that "[h]er style suffers from want of proportion, of harmony, of artistic modulation," complaining in particular about what he called her tendency toward "fantastic, alliterative" prose (274). Though not as troubled, *Sartain's* felt that Chesebro's "earnest desire to clearly explain her own conceptions, occasionally induces diffuseness in de-

scription and weakens her force of expression" (197). More frequently, however, reviewers praised her style in these tales. The *American Whig Review* believed that Chesebro' successfully matched form to content so that "her style is worthy to convey her thoughts" (89). While praising her "richly poetical fancy," the reviewer in the *Home Journal* mentioned that Chesebro' "writes in an easy and graceful style" ([4]). Finding her style more dramatically striking than "easy and graceful," the *National Era* reviewer asserted that "there is a certain intensity in her manner [of writing] which cannot fail to impress her readers" (19).

Despite the differences in responses to *Dream-Land*, the public reaction, in other words, was on the whole quite positive. No doubt in part encouraged by the reception of her first book, Chesebro' next turned to a more ambitious project: a novel that she published in 1852 entitled *Isa, A Pilgrimage*.²⁴ In their reception of Chesebro's first novel, reviewers once again focused part of their attention on her style as a fiction writer, and once again a minor note of concern emerged in their responses. A *Graham's* reviewer simply felt that the "chief fault" of *Isa* was "its unrelieved intensity" (June 1852: 665), but a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* was more captious: "As a literary performance the book is barely respectable,—what may be called heavy reading, and is full of affectations and bad English" (May 1852: 319). Interestingly, this remark about *Isa* as stylistically too intense and "heavy," along with the view that its prose was affected, echoed some of the public dismay expressed in response to *Moby-Dick* less than a year earlier. Amid these few objections, however, the majority of reviewers reacted quite positively to the style of *Isa*. A review in the *Knickerbocker* quoted extensively from the work's opening as a "specimen of the directness and vigor of Miss Chesebro's pen" (June 1852: 552), while the *Troy Daily Times* asserted of *Isa* that "the style is flowing and easy, chaste and beautiful."²⁵ The *New York Tribune* reviewer praised Chesebro's "rare gift of expression" in the novel, adding, "This whole volume is exhibited in a steel-like energy and brightness of style" (Apr. 17, 1852: 7). The *Harper's* reviewer agreed but went a step further to call the style an advance over Chesebro's previous efforts, which marked *Isa* as her best and boldest work to date: "This is a more ambitious effort than the former productions of the authoress, displaying a deeper power of reflection . . . and a more complete mastery of terse and pointed expression. On the whole, we regard it as a successful

specimen of a quite difficult species of composition" (May 1852: 853). So impressed by the novel was *Sartain's* that its reviewer boldly proclaimed that "the highest praise will be conceded to 'Isa.' The style is terse and vigorous, yet rhetorical and brilliant. . . . [E]very significant sentence tends sensibly to the development of the author's thoughts" (June 1852: 515). Together with the responses to *Dream-Land*, these paeans to the style of *Isa* call into question the modern view that the texture of Chesebro's prose was somehow problematic and a common target of censure in the antebellum public sphere.

Furthermore, reviewers made much of what they saw as Chesebro's bold and original handling of other elements of fiction. The review in the *New York Tribune* burst into fulsome praise about *Isa*: "A writer must possess a secret consciousness of strength to venture upon an experiment, where the usual common-places of fiction are unavailable. . . . We accordingly wish in the outset to give Miss Chesebro' full credit for the intrepidity which has prompted the present enterprise. No one but a genuine noble thinker . . . would have risked the uncertain chances of success in resting a popular tale upon a purely psychological foundation. No one who had not been conversant from deep experience or from still deeper intuitions . . . could have felt the necessity of recording such a spiritual history as forms the staple of this remarkable story" (7). So impressed was the *Tribune* that it declared the "vigorous originality" of *Isa* all that Chesebro' would need to establish her place in the halls of literary notoriety: "if she shall leave no other memorial of her gifted nature, it is no mean fame to have been the writer of 'Isa's Pilgrimage'" (8).

What sort of "vigorous originality" did the *Tribune* see in *Isa*? A hint lies in its reviewer's reference to the novel's "psychological foundation." A number of reviewers located the book's power and success in its insight into human psychology, passion, and the arcana of the soul. Speaking of Chesebro's development of characters in general, *Graham's* lauded her "insight into the workings of passion" as "remarkably bright and clear" (665), while the *National Era* spoke approvingly of the "earnest thought and analytical power" that this "psychological story" displays (Apr. 22, 1852: 66). The *Albany Argus* declared, "There comes out in this book the evidence of an inventive mind" capable of "deep knowledge of human nature," and a review in the *Christian Freeman* saw *Isa* as proof that Chesebro' "skims not the mere surface of life, but plunges into the hidden

mysteries of the spirit, by which she is warranted in making her startling revelations of human passion.”²⁶ *Harper’s* described *Isa* as a story “laid in the interior world—the world of consciousness, or reflection, of passion. In this twilight region . . . the author treads with great firmness of step” and with “rare subtlety of discrimination” (853). A significant feature of these responses is that they evince none of the ambivalence that ordinarily marked assumptions within informed reading regarding internal characterization. The main reason for that absence was that reviewers did not find Chesebro’s method in *Isa* to be intrusive, which was usually the problem associated with psychological fiction. Indeed, no reviewers saw her approach to psychological characterization as showing the kind of ponderous artlessness that one twentieth-century commentator has ascribed to her method.²⁷

Another noteworthy dimension of these overarching reactions to Chesebro’s characterization was their relation to responses to the novel’s plotting. While reading *Isa* as a psychological character study, the *National Era* also asserted that the novel has “little of plot or incident” (66), an observation repeated almost verbatim by the *New-York Evangelist* (60). Yet reviewers never concluded, as they had in responding to Sedgwick’s fiction, that Chesebro’s handling of her novel’s plot was a problem. According to the *Troy Daily Times*, *Isa’s* understated plot gives its events a “naturalness that seem to stamp them as real.”²⁸ For other reviewers, such minimal plotting served as a well-chosen match to the novel’s emphasis on character interiority and to its philosophy. Although *Isa*, said the *New York Tribune*, “has barely sufficient incident to serve as the basis of a slight narrative,” the novel, “[w]ithout aiming at dramatic effect,” offers a striking “record of spiritual experience” (7). The *Sartain’s* reviewer concluded that Chesebro’ successfully “disdain[s] the accessories of incident, in working out her illustrations of transcendental philosophy, nor does the reader need the usual machinery of the novel to rivet his attention” (515).

When explaining the basis for their view of the novel’s effective emphasis on characterization, some reviewers grounded their responses in the conventions of reading for verisimilitude. Speaking of the character of Gansevoort Norton, a “talented” artist and former lover of Mary Irving, one of the novel’s two main female characters, the *American Whig Review* claimed that he “is by far the most truthfully drawn” character

“of the prominent ones in the book,” though the *Whig Review* admitted that Weare Dugganne, an early influence on the novel’s eponymous protagonist, possesses “perhaps” as much naturalness (July 1852: 94). Reviewers attended less to verisimilitude alone, however, and more to what Chesebro’ did with her characters, especially Isa. According to *Sartain’s*, while the “characters, besides Isa, that are introduced . . . are skillfully delineated,” the “spell of fascination rests only with the proud, self-relying and gifted heroine” (515). Most frequently, reviewers found her to be a strikingly singular personage, who bespoke Chesebro’s imaginative power and insight. The *New York Tribune* called Isa an “exquisite and original creation” whose “spiritual development is traced with singular breadth of outline, betraying knowledge of character that is rare,” even in “veteran writers” (7). *Sartain’s* beamed that the “deepening phases of her [i.e., Isa’s] pilgrimage through life are detailed with a power of thought and imagination that reveals a calm consciousness of strength and mental resources admirable in any writer” and “truly remarkable” for a first novel (515).

Perhaps more significantly, this reaction to Isa involved a set of moves in which reviewers united ideas about characterization and thematic interpretation by repeatedly reading Chesebro’s protagonist for her social, philosophical, and moral implications. Such a move entailed, first of all, sorting out exactly what Isa did and who she was. To that end, the *Literary World* and the *Southern Literary Messenger* provided their readers with the following interpretive overviews of the incidents in Isa’s life: “Rescued from the poorhouse, at a tender age, by the humanity of a lady residing in Richmond, and brought up as a member of the family, she first falls in love with the son, but crushes the feminine sentiment in the bud, and, when arrived at womanhood, goes off to edit a socialist newspaper in some distant city” (*Messenger* May 1852: 318). The *World* explained that Isa “is a woman of intellect and beauty, who devotes herself to a literary life. Her mind is at an early age corrupted by the perusal of an infidel book, and, afterwards becoming connected with the author of the work in the editorship of a transcendental newspaper, she falls victim to the association—the pair being too transcendental to think of matrimony” (Apr. 17, 1852: 279). Clearly, these remarks function as more than just plot summaries. Within the logic of informed reading, they double as springboards to thematic interpretation.

And interpret reviewers did. The reviewer in the *Knickerbocker* found thematic resonance in Isa's developing philosophy. Explaining that Isa, in her studies, "has come to the conclusion that divinity lies in WILL" and that "the will of man is simply omnipotent," this reviewer claimed that Isa's subsequent relation with Althaus Stuart, her extramarital lover, demonstrates that amid "affection or passion" the "will is simply superfluous." From there the *Knickerbocker* reviewer spun out the philosophical implications he saw arising from these developments in the novel: "People whose affections are greatly satisfied are happy, and are so far discharged from any practical exhibition of the supremacy of the will. . . . The voluntary life is called for only when storms arise, when a conflict takes place between affection and intellect, and we are summoned accordingly to choose or decide between them. Here alone is the province of will. Where our prospects are clear and undisturbed, we have no occasion for it" (551). The review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* took a different view of Isa and her significance, seeing instead of a philosophical theme a political implication involving gender. "The heroine of the story is a sort of Greeley in petticoats," explained the *Messenger*, "who goes about talking obscurely of Women's Rights and Social Reform, and is represented by the authoress as that fearful thing—a woman of strong mind" (318). What clearly disturbed these and other reviewers, even as it appeared to fascinate them, was Isa's position as a thinking, and unsettlingly iconoclastic, woman. The *Messenger* felt that in her mental quest, Isa abandoned her true feminine feelings, while the *Knickerbocker* followed its thematic analysis with the assertion that readers "wish to see how surely and sadly this premature little theologian and philosopher will mismanage life" (552). Concluding that Isa is a proponent of transcendentalism, the *Southern Quarterly Review* claimed that she "would seem to have been drawn from outlines afforded by Margaret Fuller," who had been guilty of "a laborious mystifying of the commonplace" and of writing that was "simply balderdash, and very bad balderdash too" (Oct. 1852: 544).

But how was it possible for reviewers to be fascinated by Isa and drawn to a novel that seemed so disturbing? Within the logic of informed reading, such a book should have been seen as anathema, a danger readers should avoid rather than find compelling. One answer is that some reviewers reached exactly that conclusion. Explaining that Isa's traffick-

ing with “infidel books” and her “guilty” love with Stuart, which includes having an illegitimate child, carried dangerous implications, a review in *Peterson’s* declared, “We think the theme badly chosen, and doubt whether such fictions do good” (July 1862: 307). The *Christian Examiner* simply announced that “we cannot approve the moral” of *Isa* (May 1852: 458), and the *Southern Literary Messenger* agreed, giving a slight tip of the hat while wagging a large finger: “‘Isa,’ by Miss Chesebro’, is an anomalous production, of a psychological character, in which the author exhibits considerable but perverted powers.” Why “perverted”? Because, according to the *Messenger*, “Miss Chesebro’ has little notion of the vicious moral of her subject” (544).

Yet other reviewers saw the novel quite differently, reading it as an engaging and moving cautionary tale about an intellectual, well-intentioned, but flawed woman. Having identified *Isa’s* significance as inhering in her philosophy that “divinity lies in WILL,” the *Knickerbocker* added that “the logical scope of the story is to urge the practical fallacy of this conclusion” (551). The *New-York Evangelist* asseverated that the “fate of this strong-minded, earnest, and pure-hearted girl, trusting to herself, and . . . descending through subtle delusions . . . to the cold, depressing depths of utter infidelity, is a theme rather deep,” but the “lesson is a powerful and a good one” (60). The *New York Tribune* and *Harper’s* agreed that, in the words of the latter, “the story turns on the development of an abnormal spiritual experience, showing the perils of entire freedom of thought in a powerful, original mind” (853). Or as the *Tribune* put it, the “heroine is evidently intended as an awful warning of the perils attendant on freedom of thought” (7). In light of such comments, it is not surprising that the *Troy Whig* could beam that *Isa* “is . . . pervaded by a vein of pure ennobling thought.”²⁹

Other reviewers, however, were not so certain about what exactly Chesebro’ was getting at with her novel and protagonist. *Sartain’s* found the narrative to be ambiguous, noting that the “moral aspect of the book may not be so universally agreed upon” (575). “Amid all the trumpery about ‘Women’s Rights’” in *Isa*, explained the *American Whig Review*, “we can hardly discern what the authoress would teach us. Whether it were better for us to ‘dissolve the marriage contract’ . . . or whether it were better that we should continue to ‘marry, and be given in marriage,’ is left almost wholly in the dark” (95). Aware of the interpretive disagree-

ments about the novel, the *National Era* informed its readers that *Isa* “is a book about which many contradictory things are already said, for it is one liable to be misunderstood. . . . The authoress, herself conscientious and high souled, kept the true purpose close before her own mind, but she has not in all places made it clear to the eye of *all* her readers” (66).

But rather than interpreting these ambiguities as an attempt by the novel to provoke questions rather than offer clear-cut answers, several reviewers ascribed the uncertainty they found in *Isa* to Chesebro’s mismanagement, the nature of which was articulated at times by those who otherwise interpreted the novel’s moral thematics as salutary. The problem, as the *New York Tribune* reviewer saw it, lay in the fact that, while the “heroine is evidently intended as an awful warning of the perils attendant on freedom of thought, and a release from the thralldom of traditional opinions,” *Isa* is “depicted with such genuine nobleness, such transparent truthfulness of intellect, such a wealth of pure and generous feeling . . . that the reader is often tempted to lose sight of the dangerous tendency of her principles in admiration of the strength and loveliness of her character” (7). The *Knickerbocker* reviewer reached much the same conclusion. Although Chesebro’ “aims to portray character . . . of a perverted type,” the narrative “does not succeed in arousing the reader’s alarm. On the contrary, her sympathy remains with the *pervert* to the close of the volume” (551). According to this interpretive formulation, Chesebro’, despite her good intentions, was guilty of committing a cardinal error in the logic of informed reading: encouraging reader sympathy for an ethically suspect character.

The *Knickerbocker*’s comment about the novel’s conclusion indicates that it was problematic for readers. Although *Isa* dies in the company of Stuart, some reviewers invoked the rule of notice to read the ending as lacking something. In the process, several reviewers engaged in what Richard Gerrig has called “participatory responses” or “p-responses,” a term that refers to “all non-inferential responses in the [reader’s] performance of narration” and includes hopes and preferences and even the mental construction of alternative endings to a story.³⁰ For example, the *Knickerbocker* reviewer said that readers “wish to see how surely and sadly” *Isa* will be “cut off from the serene consolations of the affections” (552). “What displeases most of our ideas of propriety” in *Isa*, explained the *American Whig Review*, “is, that evil doing does not meet with its re-

ward. . . . Isa, although she has sinned—and the authoress hesitates not to call it sin—dies peacefully, calmly” and is “launched smoothly, and with love, . . . into the future.” Violating expectations about proper poetic justice, *Isa* struck this reader as unfitting at its close because “Isa’s death, horrible as it was . . . was not horrible to her” (95). Or, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* observed, the “conclusion of the story presents us with a death-bed (the heroine’s) made tranquil by unbelief” instead of with a death scene of suffering or one redeemed by Isa’s penitence (319).

Despite these disagreements and feelings of dismay, it should be noted that many of these reviewers were the same ones who praised *Isa* for its originality and called it a stunning accomplishment. It is as if Chesebro’ had managed to produce a novel that was strikingly unique yet disturbingly paradoxical, unorthodox yet undeniably fascinating and moving—one that could both disrupt readers’ expectations and be disciplined into a narrative that accommodated prevailing interpretive assumptions. To say this is not to claim that the novel was—and is—these things. Rather, in their aggregate, the antebellum responses to *Isa* constructed the narrative that way by operating as a multifaceted, and at times internally contradictory, formulation that gave to the text a multidimensional and textured profile. In the process, that interpretive formulation changed the horizon of expectations of Chesebro’s audience and thereby provided a new foundation for responses to her next novel.



Children of Light, which Chesebro’ published nearly a year after *Isa*, received attention comparable to that of her previous novel, in the sense that it was reviewed in a number of leading periodicals but did not receive widespread notice and commentary in the press.³¹ Moreover, in the wake of the new reading horizon for her fiction, the responses were much more in the mold of what they had been for *Isa* rather than for *Dream-Land by Daylight*. Once again, reviewers saw *Children* as a character-driven novel with minimal plotting. Its “plot is singularly barren of incident,” announced the *New York Tribune* review (Jan. 1, 1852: 8), while the review in the *National Era* thought that the “story is a very simple one, and is but the thread on which to string the sentiments of the author” (Dec. 30, 1852: 209).

Seeing *Children* as a relatively plotless novel and responding instead to its characters—a move that paralleled their reading of *Isa*—reviewers

nonetheless reacted differently to the characterization in Chesebro's new novel. Although believing that her characters indicated that the "author has evidently studied the human heart, as well as its proudest aspirations," which made *Children* "no common work of fiction," a reviewer in *Godey's* remarked that "these 'Children of Light' appear to us through a mist, rather darkly," as if they lacked clearly defined development (Feb. 1853: 179). Other reviewers also criticized Chesebro's skills at characterization in *Children*. The *Literary World* felt that the "personages of the tale fail to interest because they one and all 'talk like a book.' Ease and nature are wanting," which causes the personages to lack the verisimilitude readers had found in the characters in *Isa* (Dec. 18, 1852: 392). Indeed, the *New York Tribune* expressly saw *Children* as a falling off: "In depth of thought and natural delineation of character, we must regard this work by Miss Chesebro [*sic*] as decidedly inferior to her 'Isa'" (8).

Dissatisfaction with this element of *Children* tended to concentrate especially on Asia Phillips, whom reviewers agreed was the book's protagonist. The *Tribune* reviewer called her "a strange book of being," while describing her story as follows: "Asia Phillips, the heroine of the story, is introduced to us when a child, as the playmate and humble companion of the daughter of a proud, wealthy family, the occupants of Maderon house. A shy, solitary girl, she nourishes her young enthusiasms by the study of the paintings, which the Maderons had collected. . . . The nuns and martyrs in the gallery make a deep impression on her active imagination. She is led to meditate on the purposes of her being—longs to live for some great purpose. . . . Cherishing such visions, Asia grows up to early womanhood without finding the key to the riddle which occupies her thoughts" (8). The *Southern Quarterly Review* interpreted Asia and her story as more than "strange." Its reviewer found them dismaying because of what struck him as inconsistencies in her development: "The portrait of Asia, in this book, rather troubles than satisfies the reader. We are not sure that the author has not made the character to fluctuate with the events, at the same time that she undertakes to show a being superior to events, and with a native will and strength, to control and shape them" (Jan. 1853: 254). This reviewer was responding in particular to Asia's growth as an actress and its relation to her involvement with Aaron Gregorian, her mentor, who later abandons her to what she feels is ignominy. The reviewer asked puzzlingly, "To what end was all the training for the

stage? Only to give her villainous tutor his power over her? Could not this have been done without the training? and is the training itself to have no results? The great point to establish was this—that convention cannot make a profession illegitimate, when it is clearly indicated by the natural powers of the individual” (254).

Amid this shift from the kinds of responses generated by reading encounters with *Isa*, this last reaction to *Children* points to a common feature in the reception of the two novels. As they had with *Isa*, reviewers took the characters in *Children* to be inherently yoked to the book’s various levels of meaning. The *Tribune* reviewer, for example, read Asia’s name as “emblematic of the wild, fierce life that glowed within her” and interpreted her story—and particularly her relationship with Gregorian—as an emblematic tale of “the crushed spirit of the desolate victim” (8). More broadly, *Graham’s* asserted that in “this novel, as well as in *Isa*, the author gives vivid representations of characters who represent the radical ideas of the time in philosophy, government, and theology” (Jan. 1853: 104). The *National Era* saw such philosophical representation via character to be most pronounced in Chesebro’s Mr. Borland, a friend of Gregorian. Calling Borland a “high priest of Nature,” the *Era* identified one of his speeches in chapter twenty-one as articulating “Miss Chesebro’s view of marriage” and the belief that “there is ‘better time’ coming, ‘when men, rejuvenated, regenerated, will no longer worship that ideal MAN . . . but instead, the Truth, NATURE’” (209).³²

Contrary to the claim of one twentieth-century critic, moreover, reviewers disagreed somewhat in the moral, sociopolitical, and philosophical implications they ascribed to the novel.³³ *Graham’s* felt that “we cannot see” Chesebro’ as “the champion of the heretics she represents” since “her object is to show the pernicious effect in practice of many opinions which seem beautiful and beneficent in theory,” but its reviewer then added that “many of her opinions [in the novel] are exceedingly immature” (104). The *Tribune* reviewer found that while “[m]uch is said in the novel about the mystery of life,” readers “are left in the dark . . . as to the convictions of the writer” (8). This reviewer, however, thought that the conclusion of the novel was not as thematically obscure as the rest of the narrative, but, invoking the interpretive code of final authority, he saw a problem even there: “The moral of the close is more obvious than the gist of the philosophising in the progress of the volume. Enforc-

ing the Christian precept of mercy to the erring, it rebukes the ferocity of trampling on the fallen. But the beautiful illustration of this ‘twice blessed quality’ does not atone, in our opinion, for the absence of definite aim and the blending of irreconcilable elements in the composition of the work” (8). For the *Tribune* reviewer, finally, Chesebro’s “taste” for “the extravagant, the distorted, and the unreal” in treating the “enigma of existence” made her novel too eccentric and unpalatable thematically. The reviewer added that he hoped Chesebro’ “will find more wholesome lessons” for her readership in other materials in novels to come (8).

This last addendum suggests that part of the concern reviewers had with *Children*—as they had had with *Isa*—was the relation between the novel and its audience’s responses. Several reviewers, in fact, were struck by what they saw as disturbing disconnections. Both the *Tribune* and the *National Era* reviewers, invoking the rule of notice, found a puzzling disjunction between the novel and its title. Admitting that *Children of Light* “is certainly an ambitious title,” the *Era* reviewer indicated that the audience would find it enigmatic, since “we see no congruity between the title and the contents of the book” (209). The *Tribune* was somewhat more explicit: “A shadowy gloom broods over the history, and we feel during its perusal that the title is a misnomer—for the ‘Children of Light’ dwell in a region of intolerable darkness” (8).

Partly for this and other mismatches they found in *Children*, reviewers were more critical of the stylistic finish of the novel than they had been with *Isa*. While admitting that Chesebro’s second novel “has much of the same vigor and freshness” of her first, *Putnam’s Monthly* felt that *Children* lacked “clearness of conception” and representation (Jan. 1853: 106). The *Southern Quarterly Review* maintained that the novel “works spasmodically, and . . . is not sufficiently deliberate of design, and is quite too rash and rapid in execution” (254). By contrast, the review in the *Literary World* found “diffuseness” to be the “main fault” of the novel’s style. The “book before us might have been compressed one-third in size,” said the *World’s* reviewer, though admittedly, “[i]t would no doubt have taken longer to write” (392).

Considered as a whole, the public reception of *Children* was more critical than it had been for *Isa*. While reviewers did not find Chesebro’s new novel as thematically challenging or controversial as her previous one, neither did they respond to it with the kind of impassioned interest

and debate about themes and characters that had marked the reception of *Isa*. In fact, except for the reviewer in *Peterson's*, who called *Children* “a better book, in every respect, than its predecessor” (161), reviewers clearly judged it inferior to Chesebro’s debut novel.

When antebellum readers encountered Chesebro’s work again, it was in a second collection of short stories, entitled *The Little Crossbearers*, which appeared in late 1853 or early 1854.³⁴ That collection was followed approximately two years later in 1855 by another, *The Beautiful Gate*. These two volumes signaled several new developments in the relation between Chesebro’s fiction and her readers and in her position in the literary marketplace.

Unlike most of those in *Dream-Land by Daylight* three years earlier, the ten stories in *Crossbearers* were previously unpublished. More importantly, the book was published not by Redfield, who had put out her previous three, but jointly by the Buffalo, New York, firm of Derby, Orton, and Mulligan and by Derby and Miller of Auburn, New York. Since no information about the reasons for this switch has survived in Chesebro’s letters, we can only conjecture as to the cause, but a couple of factors seem to have been at work. The negligible sales of *Dream-Land*, *Isa*, and *Children of Light*, along with reviewer consensus that the last book had not met the quality of *Isa*, may have caused Redfield to decline publishing the new collection. Perhaps, too, Redfield did not print it because volumes of short fiction tended not to sell as well as novels in the first place, and there was no need to put the firm at a disadvantage for a second time with Chesebro’s stories. Still, the move to Derby, Orton, and Mulligan and their partner firm was not necessarily a bad choice for Chesebro. Derby and Miller had published Jared Sparks’s well-received *Life of George Washington*, and Orton and Mulligan had put out Fanny Fern’s highly popular *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio* in 1853.³⁵ Since both firms had thereby achieved some notoriety and financial success, there was nothing to suggest that publishing with them would be unproductive.

The move, however, turned out to be less than propitious, at least in terms of securing public attention for *Crossbearers*. I have been able to locate only one five-line review of the collection—in *Putnam's*—and it is a phantom. Its claim that the book “is a picturesque and touching narrative, quite ingenious in its plot” indicates that the reviewer never opened

the volume to discover that it was a collection of ten different narratives (Jan. 1854: 111). Why was this slight glance the only recognition *Crossbearers* apparently received? Clearly, it was not because the book was merely a collection of twice-told tales. Instead, it appears that Chesebro's two new publishers did little to promote it. Neither firm did much advertising of new titles, and when they did, they tended to publicize their lists of nonfiction. The same seems to have been true of their approach to distributing copies to reviewers—an essential step to securing public notice. Although both firms did do some distributing, they seem to have focused on nonfiction titles or, within their fiction offerings, temperance tales.³⁶ In all likelihood, few if any copies of *Crossbearers* ever made it into reviewers' hands.

A similar fate seems to have befallen *The Beautiful Gate*, which was published by the newly formed firm of Miller, Orton, and Mulligan two years later, following James Derby's break with Miller in early 1855.³⁷ One factor for the little attention to *Beautiful Gate* was no doubt that it was almost completely a collection of previously published tales. Except for the title story, in fact, Chesebro's "new" collection was literally a reprint of the ten stories in *Crossbearers*, which virtually guaranteed its neglect in the public sphere. Like their earlier incarnations, moreover, Miller, Orton, and Mulligan appear to have done little to promote *Beautiful Gate*, choosing to favor their nonfiction and works by more recognized authors in their list, including Fanny Fern and Frederick Douglass.³⁸ Yet the firm must have been a bit more effective in distributing copies to the press, since reviews appeared in at least two publications, the *New York Tribune* and the *Cayuga Chief*.

Both tell us little about the reception of *Beautiful Gate* except for one thing: It was seen as children's fiction. The *Tribune* called it a "collection of juvenile stories" (Oct. 29, 1855: 1) that would position Chesebro' "in an eminent rank as a writer for juvenile minds" (Nov. 24, 1855: 6). That November issue of the *Tribune* quoted the remarks of the reviewer in the *Cayuga Chief*, who wrote that the book should "have interest for children" and expressed the "wish that the book could be read by every child in the land" (3). Whether other antebellum readers responded in the same way in the privacy of their homes is another question, but one index to the response of those readers appears in an inscription in a surviving copy of *Beautiful Gate*. It simply reads, "my dear gra[n]doter hear is a nice

buck for you to read from grandmother [*sic*].”³⁹ If typical, these remarks from both the public and private spheres indicate that antebellum readers took *Beautiful Gate* as fiction designed expressly for the young.

The paucity of attention and minimal success of these two collections—and particularly *Crossbearers*—did not, however, discourage Chesebro’ from continuing to write fiction. Between these two collections, she wrote a new novel, *Susan, the Fisherman’s Daughter*, which was published simultaneously by James Derby in New York and by his brother W. H. Derby in Cincinnati in late 1854.⁴⁰ In fact, with this new novel, Chesebro’ appears to have decided to redouble her efforts by taking on the most ambitious project of her writing career. Subtitled *Getting Along. A Book of Illustrations*, *Susan* is Chesebro’s longest novel, running to over 600 pages, and is peopled by her largest cast of characters.

Derby seems to have made some effort to promote *Susan*, since it garnered roughly the same degree of attention from major periodicals as had Chesebro’s first two novels.⁴¹ Moreover, working from the horizon of expectations built through their encounters with her longer fiction, reviewers responded to *Susan* in a number of ways that paralleled their readings of *Isa* and *Children of Light*.

Once again, reviewers were stuck by Chesebro’s style and disagreed about its effects and merits. Like the reviewer of *Children* in the *Literary World*, the reviewer in *Peterson’s* found *Susan* diffuse and somewhat turbid: The “novel, on the whole, is inartistic and vague, so much so, indeed, that one continually asks if the author really has any idea half the time what she wishes to bring out. If the story would have been told in half the space . . . the book would have been the best of the season” (Apr. 1855: 317). The *Knickerbocker* reviewer felt the novel was a bit sermonic, in a way that troubled its generic consistency: “The religious tone of the book is far from unpleasant, . . . but it is doubtful whether fiction is the best vehicle for such solemn truths. A sermon in a novel seems as much out of place as adventures related in a sermon” (June 1855: 626). On the other hand, several readers once again called her style “masculine” without finding that trait problematic. According to the *New York Tribune*, Chesebro’s “steel-like” imagination in “grappl[ing] with the most perplexing problems . . . gives a substantial masculine character to the work, which . . . will insure it both an elevated rank and a protracted date, beyond the reach of the ephemeral novelties, which flash and fade in a

single season (Mar. 30, 1855: 3). Likewise, *Harper's* said of *Susan* that its "style is always sinewy and masculine" and added that "we much prefer the robust and well-compacted phraseology of this work, animated as it always is by the workings of an original and active mind, to the soft and polished sweetness of many of our fashionable sentence-makers" (May 1855: 858). *Peterson's* went so far as to call "its general style . . . a great advance on former efforts," particularly in the way its "thoughts [are] frequently expressed with a felicity that rises to genius" (Apr. 1855: 317). Far more glowing than critical, in fact, reviewer reactions to Chesebro's style in *Susan* were in line with their reception of her prose in *Isa*.

Another carryover was their view of the plot—or more accurately the plots—of *Susan*. Once again reviewers saw plot as a minor element of Chesebro's narrative, the slightness of which, as the *Knickerbocker* explained, contributed to the novel's overall verisimilitude: "The plot . . . is neither intricate nor improbable" (626). The *National Era* indicated that *Susan's* sedate plotting also enabled it to engage its audience without the tumultuous sensationalism on which so many other novels relied. With an extended metaphor that sounds almost as sensual as it does nautical, the *Era* explained that *Susan* "has not the heady flow of the ordinary novel; the reader is not carried upon a current of story, ever swelling with fresh tributaries, driven by fitful winds, tossed by turbulent waves, and then dashed over the denouement into Lake Hymen, to rest after the riot" (Mar. 15, 1855: 43).

In light of its understated plotting, reviewers unsurprisingly interpreted *Susan* as one of Chesebro's character-driven novels. Noting the relative emphasis given to these two elements of fiction in *Susan*, *Harper's* concluded that in "composing the narrative, the writer seems to have aimed at the delineation and development of character, rather than to enchain the reader by a series of exciting outward incidents" (858). Instead of such focusing on "outward" events, reviewers repeatedly explained, *Susan* forefronted the inward unfolding of its characters' minds and temperaments. Reviews in the *New York Tribune* and the *National Era* invoked the rule of notice in reaching this conclusion by interpreting the novel's subtitle as an index to its emphasis on character. Said the *Tribune*, "we find on turning over a few pages, that under the guise of a popular romance, it is devoted to illustrations of character, the story serving merely as a framework to exhibit a variety of portraits" marked

by a “fineness of delineation” (3). Although feeling that the “drift of this book is not very well indicated by its first title,” the *National Era* added that “it richly deserves its second, for it is a book of Graphics—a sort of moving panorama” in which its cast of characters illustrate and even model various traits. The *Era* then enumerated several examples: “Mr. Horace Chilton [brother of Leah, one of the novel’s main female characters] is worthy of the grave consideration of the young gentleman of genius and jerking enterprise. . . . His sister affords a pattern for girls to live and die by, when living is laborious, and dying early inevitable; and Lucia Tree [an illustrator and another of the novel’s main women] and Young Vane [a house painter, fellow artist, and kindred spirit of Lucia] are safe instances of artistic enthusiasm for sympathy and emulation” (43). Despite reading these four as virtual character types, the *Era* reviewer agreed with others in interpreting the novel’s characters as true to life and marked by psychological depth. The *Era* found in *Susan* evidence that the “author is capable of the largest range of psychical investigation” and that “Hawthorne . . . is the only writer of fiction in this country who outranks the author of *Getting Along*” in this “vein” (43). Likewise, *Harper’s* asseverated that *Susan* evinces “rare insight into character[s]” and their feeling and motivations (858). The *Tribune* found that “the sharp outlines of reality circumscribe . . . every character” in the novel because of the consistency of “their salient individual proportions.” Although each character appears in a “singular diversity of relations, their identity is always sacredly preserved” (3). One interesting feature in the responses of the *Tribune* and *National Era* reviewers is that they saw Chesebro’s characters as both realistic representations and illustrative patterns for “sympathy and emulation,” with no incompatibility in those two qualities.

In dealing with specific characters, reviewers did differ regarding which ones they took to be the novel’s main focus. As might be expected, some reviewers, no doubt addressing this question through the rule of notice, took the eponymous Susan to be Chesebro’s protagonist. For example, the *National Era* explained that “the most frequently recurring character ‘illustrated,’ is a fisherman’s daughter, Susy, growing up from twelve to eighteen years of age, during the progress of the tale” (43). Instead of privileging Susan, the *Tribune* reviewer focused on Stella Cammon as the novel’s center of attention. Noting that a “considerable por-

tion of the work is devoted to the religious experience of a young Catholic maiden, Stella Cammon," who waivers "uncertainly between the nunnery and matrimony," this reviewer felt that the "character of this person is depicted with [such] consummate effect" that she "will, by many readers, be deemed the most valuable feature of the story" (3). The reviewer in *Harper's* concluded that no one character served as the novel's main focus but instead highlighted four as standing out from the "number of subordinate personages": "Leighton, the moody, contemplative student, half lover and half misanthrope—Stella Cammon, vibrating between religious enthusiasm and romantic affection—Falcon, the pure-minded, earnest, but dreaming philanthropist—and Susan Dillon, the noble, self-sacrificing idealist" (858).

This uncertainty about which characters readers were to concentrate on in *Susan* marked a departure from responses to Chesebro's first two novels. But reviewers did agree that, as illustrations, the characters in *Susan* functioned in relation to the novel's themes in characteristic Chesebroesque fashion. None, however, read its characters—and especially its women—as four modern commentators on the novel have seen them: as representations designed to question traditional gender roles and critically investigate marriage as women's proper condition.⁴² Instead, reviewers forged connections between characters and ideas to reach other conclusions about the book's themes. For the *Harper's* reviewer, Susan illustrated the philosophy of "wisely attempting to solve the mystery of life by the performance of duty" (858). The *National Era* found the thematic resonance of several characters by reading them not so much as models but as satiric mirrors designed to expose excesses. Hence, the "fashionable Miss Isadore [Baldwin] sits for the picture of her tribe, and there are some of the frivolous who will throw down the book when they see themselves in it, but they will not be able to run quite away from the reflection." Regarding the philanthropical Falcon, the *Era* reviewer interpreted him as a "personage [who] serves, as you take him, as well for honest satire as earnest eulogium" for the part he "plays [as] perpetual chairman" of the "standing committee on public misery" (43).

The conclusion several reviewers reached as a result of such readings was that *Susan* was something of a philosophical fiction—or at least a thinking-person's novel. Employing potable and seduction metaphors, which were commonly used at the time to describe fiction reading, the

reviewer in the *National Era* said that *Susan* will not “shock or surprise, or any way seduce, the idleness of the day into . . . solitudes and indolent intoxications . . . but it will be studied by everyone who reads it, and be appreciated by all who are capable of a good book” and the “truth they meet with” therein (48). The reviewer in the *New York Courier and Enquirer* simply maintained of *Susan* that “[w]e know of no book of the season more worthy of thoughtful minds” (qtd. in *New York Tribune* Apr. 20, 1855: 1).

Reviewers did not all agree on the merit of *Susan*, and some disagreed about Chesebro’s management of its plethora of characters. Nonetheless, praise and pleasure far outweighed such reservations in the novel’s overall reception. Taken as a whole, in fact, that reception marked *Susan* as the most favorably received and least controversial—and challenging—of Chesebro’s full-length fictions thus far. Unfortunately, *Susan* was no more successful than her previous books in garnering a popular readership for Chesebro’.



Despite the lack of popularity of *Susan* and the two collections of short stories surrounding its publication, Chesebro’ no doubt welcomed the favorable reviews of the novel, for within six months of the appearance of *Beautiful Gate*, she published two new books of fiction. The first, which came out in May 1856, was *Philly and Kit*, a volume composed of two novellas.⁴³ Although she managed to place it with Redfield, her original publisher, the new volume received little attention from reviewers, perhaps because one of its novellas, the “Kit” of the title, was another twice-told tale, having appeared in *Graham’s* in March 1855. Only one major periodical, *Godey’s*, and one major newspaper, the *New-York Observer*, carried reviews of the volume. Both were brief—and mixed. While the *Observer’s* reviewer asserted that these two tales of “humble life will be found no less redolent of [Chesebro’s] sympathies and philosophies than any of the previous productions of her pen” (May 8, 1856: 150), the *Godey’s* reviewer could offer no more than back-handed praise in an ironic comment on the verisimilitude of the two stories’ characters: “Though we have great confidence in the existence of such curiosities as honest newspaper boys, innocent apple-girls, industrious organ-grinders, and romantic image-sellers, and are extremely sure that be-

neath the rags and squalor of poverty the noblest virtues and sublimest charities lie hidden, we still think that such stories as the two contained in this volume are at present little needed, however brilliantly composed they may be" (Aug. 1856: 180).

Chesebro's other new work of fiction, which appeared two to three months after *Philly and Kit*, was a novel entitled *Victoria, or the World Overcome*, published by James Derby via his new firm of Derby and Jackson. The book itself marked a departure for Chesebro', since it is a historical novel set in late seventeenth-century Puritan New England. It was, moreover, a change that reviewers, as might be expected, highlighted in their reception of the novel. But they seem to have been somewhat puzzled by *Victoria*, and that difficulty manifested itself in what reviewers both said and did not say about the novel.

In a notable distinction from their reception of Chesebro's previous novels, reviewers said little about the style of *Victoria*, and the few who did found it wanting. The reviewer in the *United States Magazine* quipped that Chesebro' evidently "has been of late reading much of the old 'well of English undefiled,' and it has not improved her style, which is rarely elegant" in the novel (Sept. 1856: 244). A review by Elizabeth Stoddard in the *Daily Alta California* objected to what she saw as a faulty tone in the book, particularly its "external preachment about self-denial." Invoking the standard objection to intrusive narration, in accordance with the codes of informed reading, Stoddard subscribed to the view of that problem as a mark of faulty reader engagement, asserting, "I object to the position she takes in regard to the reader—that of a teacher."⁴⁴ Additionally, only one reviewer said anything about the novel's plot as a whole, but it was not to point out that the plot was minimal and avoided melodrama for realistic effect. On the contrary, that reviewer, in an unusual vein in Chesebro's reception, praised *Victoria* for the way its "plot is very absorbing and full of pathos" (*National Era* Sept. 11, 1856: 147). Although this reader did not specify what in the plot made the book such a moving page-turner, other readers did, via responses that were themselves marked by differences and by signs of interpretive perplexity.

A striking feature about other reactions to plot in *Victoria* is that reviewers who responded to it in specific terms repeatedly focused on events in the last third of the novel, involving three of the characters:

Maud Saltonstall, Archibald Kenesett, and Hope Rossiter. Pointing out that their “story is one of witchcraft,” the *United States Magazine* described it in detail:

Maud Saltonstall, a child of genius, glowing with life and beauty, and innocence . . . is attached to Archibald Kenesett, who loves her in return with that ardor of youth and romance so little understood in that Puritanic age. Hope Rossiter loves the youth also, and being a godly maiden, learned withall, and, under an apparently cold intellectual character, holding within her the elements of deep passionateness, unknown to herself and unsuspected by others, mistakes her natural human emotions for the action of one acted upon by a wicked, deluded spirit. She is affianced to a Puritan preacher, and bewildered and perplexed by emotions which were alike new and inexplicable, worn by study and hard mental action, she falls ill. Her mind had pondered much the stories of witchcraft, which at that period was the great delusion of the mother country, and with a profound self-delusion, she boldly accuses the beautiful Maud as the cause of her sufferings. (Sept. 1856: 243–44)

The reviewer for the *Knickerbocker* also provided a plot summary only for the final third of the narrative and exclaimed in particular that Maud, “whose poetic nature made her utter thoughts at variance with the Calvinism of the day, was tried, condemned, and executed for a witch!” (Sept. 1856: 303). Both reviewers indicated that they focused on this segment of *Victoria* because they found its plotting especially potent. The *United States Magazine* asserted that “[t]his part of the story is wrought out with genuine power and much artistic skill. It consummates a story” that “lagged heavily in the preceding pages” (244). The *Knickerbocker* compared reading this section to viewing a classic painting of religious suffering: “As we view that master-piece of art, the Martyrdom of Huss, while indignation and pity struggle within us, we are cheered by that faith which makes the fiery trial but the opening of Heaven’s gate to the sainted one; so, in reading the volume before us, the fate of the lovely Maud is not without the same consolation” (303). A curious feature of these responses to the plot of *Victoria* is not only their neglect of two-thirds of the novel but also their lack of comment on the other main characters in these events.

Not that reviewers ignored other characters, but in responding to the novel's characterization, reviewers repeatedly treated it not in relation to plot but as a self-contained feature of the book. In one way, this category of reader reaction echoed responses to Chesebro's previous novels. Explaining that Chesebro "does not aim" at striking narrative movement "so much as at the analysis and development of character," a *Harper's* reviewer found *Victoria* quintessentially Chesebroesque, in that the novel's "persons . . . are all the subject of curious psychological experiment" presented through "the gradual evolution of character" (Oct. 1856: 696). The *New-York Observer* reviewer largely agreed, announcing that the "great power of the writer appears to lie in a delineation of the deep workings of the human heart under the influence of its various passions and sensibilities" (Aug. 7, 1856: 251). This shared sense that development of the characters' interiority was the novel's most salient feature extended to the reviewer in the *Knickerbocker*, who found that in *Victoria* "Miss Chesebro's characters display to us, in a remarkable and interesting manner, the secret springs of action" (303). But as positive—and characteristic—as these responses were, they also pointed to a departure from previous reviewer reaction. In the past, reviewers had seen the minimal plotting of Chesebro's novels as a successful strategy for forefronting character, so that these two elements worked together to enhance verisimilitude. But in reading *Victoria*, reviewers seemed unable to find a relation between its striking plot at the novel's end and the sustained inward development of characters in the book as a whole.

One thing reviewers did agree upon, however, was to find *Victoria*, as they had found Chesebro's earlier novels, to be a story in which theme and idea played major roles. As is the case with *Susan*, moreover, reviewers thematized *Victoria* quite differently than have the novel's few modern commentators, who have read it either as conventional sentimental fiction supporting gender norms or as a feminist novel that questions patriarchal values.⁴⁵ Instead, antebellum reviewers interpreted *Victoria* as a novel about religion. Noting that the narrative "is drawn from a melancholy chapter of New England history," the review in the *New-York Observer* explained that "the story is designed to be religious in its character, illustrating the power of fanaticism and the influence of defective views of true religion" (251). The review in the *United States Magazine* took a different tack in articulating the book's religious ideas, focusing not

on its criticism but on its salutary ideas: “A vein of religious sentiment, evidently the characteristic of the writer’s own mind, divested of cant, and wholesome and healthful, gives a lasting touch of value to a book remarkable in itself” (244).

These thematic interpretations, however, raise a question. Given such a reading, why did 1850s reviewers not take *Victoria* to be a sectarian religious novel and thereby take it to task, within the assumptions of informed reading, as dangerously partisan? The responses to the novel’s plot suggest one explanation. That is, reviewer focus on the plot in the last third of the novel as the locus of its theological thematics indicates that antebellum readers did not see the entire novel as a narrative dealing with religious issues. The plot summaries in the *Knickerbocker* and the *United States Magazine* suggest, moreover, that it was not so much the religion of the Puritans—or the residual Calvinism of nineteenth-century America—as much as individual delusion and idiosyncratic religious perversion that reviewers saw as the plot’s focus. Hence, reviewers read *Victoria* not as an attack on Calvinism but as an exposé of its abuse, safely removed in history. Such an interpretation prevented reviewers from reading Chesebro’s novel as an exercise in divisive sectarianism that promoted an alternative creed at the expense of Calvinism. Just as important was that by the mid-1850s, seventeenth-century New England Puritanism had been the subject of enough criticism in fiction (recall the reception of Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*) that an additional critique of some of its mistakes—especially such a qualified one—would hardly be taken as culpable of fomenting religious controversy.

Responses to the thematics of *Victoria*, as a function of its plot in the last third of the novel, also help explain why reviewers, despite their apparent difficulty in creating an interpretive gestalt for making sense of the narrative as a whole, praised *Victoria* as much as, if not more than, any of Chesebro’s previous novels. The *National Era* quoted an unidentified review to rank *Victoria* with Hawthorne’s fiction (Sept. 11, 1856: 147), and several reviewers stoutly declared it Chesebro’s best novel to date. “*Victoria*,” proclaimed the *Harper’s* reviewer, “is the most finished performance of the gifted authoress,” who “has no rival but herself” (696). A review in *Putnam’s* announced that “*Victoria, or the World Overcome*, by Miss Caroline Cheseboro [*sic*], is by far her best work, evincing great vigor of conception and rare skill in the execution” (Nov. 1856: 539). A

review in the *New York Courier*, moreover, offered praise seldom employed in discussing Chesebro's fiction by ranking *Victoria* as a novel matching the "earnestness" of *Jane Eyre* (qtd. in *National Era* 147).

Despite such praise, nearly eight years would elapse between the reception of *Victoria* and Chesebro's publication of another novel. During that interval, she wrote short stories for the periodical press, returning to the genre and medium she had largely abandoned between 1852, when *Isa* was published, and 1856, when *Victoria* appeared. Though this eight-year span was not as productive as the years between 1849 and 1852, when she had seen thirty-nine stories into print, Chesebro' wrote and published seventeen new tales from 1856 to 1863, with most of them appearing in *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.⁴⁶ Short stories also composed her next volume of fiction, *Blessings in Disguise*, a collection of five previous unpublished tales, which was put out in 1863 by the New York City firm of Carleton and Porter.

Chesebro's turn to yet another publisher for *Blessings* seems to have resulted, at least in part, from circumstances other than what had produced her previous shifts. Redfield, who had published four of her earlier books, had sold his firm in 1860, and while the new owner, William Widdleton, "inherited" the copyrights to the Poe, Simms, and Byrd volumes that Redfield had put out, Widdleton appears not to have been interested in continuing as Chesebro's publisher.⁴⁷ To complicate the matter, three years earlier, Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, who had done Chesebro's previous two collections of stories, had gone out of business. Several years after their failure, George Carleton took over a number of Miller and Orton's authors, and apparently Chesebro' was one of the writers who came over to Carleton.⁴⁸ But Chesebro' may have had few other options, not only because of Redfield's departure from publishing but also because Derby and Jackson, which had put out *Susan* and *Victoria*, had dissolved in 1861.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the turn to Carleton and Porter ostensibly was a promising choice for Chesebro', since the firm had recently published an English translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, which would go on to sell fifty thousand copies by 1865. Though Carleton was one of New York's smaller publishers, his was an up-and-coming firm that had a knack for latching on to promising American authors and best sellers.⁵⁰ The problem was that Carleton was selective in the books he promoted. None of the firm's advertisements in the *New York Tribune* or the *Ameri-*

can *Publishers' Circular*, two of the main venues for promoting books of fiction, included *Blessings* as a touted title, and apparently, much as Miller, Orton, and Mulligan had done with Chesebro's two story collections in the 1850s, Carleton did not distribute copies of *Blessings* to reviewers. Indeed, Carleton and Porter's selective treatment of its authors is reflected in the fact that Elizabeth Stoddard was so upset by the firm's neglect of her novel, *The Morgesons*, that in exasperation she turned elsewhere to publish her next novel, *Two Men*.⁵¹ Nor was Stoddard the only dissatisfied author in Carleton and Porter's stable. A writer named Fannie Bean went so far as to bring suit against the firm, charging that her novel, *Dr. Mortimer's Patient*, "had never been advertised or placed on sale except in the publisher's offices," even though she had paid Carleton a \$900 subvention.⁵² One consequence of such selectivity, at least in Chesebro's case, was that no reviews of *Blessings* appeared in any major newspaper or magazine.

In the same year that *Blessings* was being neglected, Chesebro' completed a new novel, *Peter Carradine, or the Martindale Pastoral*, published by Sheldon and Company. Chesebro's decision to change publishers yet again was probably motivated in part by Carleton's lack of promotional enthusiasm for *Blessings*, but another factor may have been that Sheldon had taken over several titles originally published by Derby and Jackson following that firm's demise, which made Sheldon something of a logical choice.⁵³ Happily, her newest firm made an effort to get *Peter Carradine* some notice, placing advertisements for it in the *New-York Observer* and *New York Tribune* and apparently distributing enough copies to gain a degree of reviewer attention somewhat comparable to what Chesebro's four previous novels had earned.⁵⁴

In what had almost become a signature feature of responses to Chesebro's novels, reviewers saw *Carradine* as a true-to-life fiction. But they did not necessarily find its naturalness in minimal plotting. The *New York Tribune*, for instance, located the book's vraisemblance in the way Chesebro' wove the novel's action—and, in a sense, the way she refused to weave it: "The plot is composed of three histories, which although in fact separate, are perhaps sufficiently interwoven with each other for the idyllic character of the story. A more lively artistic ambition might have blended the course of events in each in ingenious complications; but their connection is precisely such as often exists in actual life, where

true and vital interests of different persons come into superficial contact with each other, without melting into the cohesion of dramatic unity" (Oct. 21, 1863: 3). As a result, the interest and "sympathy of the reader" get engaged "not so much by any stirring incidents of external condition" but by "unfolding" the "inner life" of characters so "well-rounded" that they seem like "an intimate acquaintance" (3). A reviewer in *Arthur's Home Magazine* offered a parallel assessment in noting that the "narrative is . . . without the sensational element," presenting instead a story "in which the reader's interest is absorbed by the inner life of the characters." Indeed, claimed the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, Chesebro' was at the forefront of novelists both as a portrayer of lifelike characters and as a social realist, since "[s]he has boldly emancipated herself from the entire dependence upon plot which marks most of her contemporaries, and uses incidents as a thread upon which to string" lifelike "delineations of character . . . and social ideas."⁵⁵

Although not quite willing to go that far, virtually all reviewers of *Carradine* were struck by what they saw as its verisimilitude in characterization, though they differed as to the factors behind that achievement. For the *Tribune* reviewer it was that "the personages of her story are always models of dramatic consistency; their identity is admirably preserved" and "they never cease to be true" (3). The review in the *Independent* found the title character, as well as "Mercy Fuller, a cultivated teacher of the school, who marries him" and "Miranda Roy, her unsuccessful predecessor," to be "conceived with much truth, force, and clearness," in part because their "conversation[s] . . . have much that is lifelike" (Oct. 8, 1863: 2). *Harper's* felt that Chesebro's "power of unfolding character" through the "phases of their development" gives readers the impression that "[h]er characters are here persons who might really have lived in this world" (Nov. 1863: 850). A review in the *New-York Observer* discovered verisimilitude in a different vein—the distinct individuality of each character: "There is no danger of ever confounding Peter Carradine with Mr. Collamer, of 'Mandy' with Mercy Fuller or Sally Green . . . each true to life and once seen, always afterward recognizable" (Sept. 24, 1863: 311). Taken in the aggregate, such comments formulated *Carradine*, for all intents and purposes, as Chesebro's most accomplished work of realism, via characterization, to date.

Yet these readings of *Carradine* included a number of subtle but im-

portant shifts. Only the reviewers in the *New York Tribune* and *Arthur's Home Journal* found the novel's realistic characterization to be of the kind previously ascribed to Chesebro': development marked by inner depth and, as the *Tribune* put it, "psychological combinations" (3). In fact, the review in *Harper's* argued just the opposite, by declaring that the realism of the characters in *Carradine* was a new departure and by redefining her previous fictions as not realistic at all by comparison, because "her novels have mainly drawn from her own imagination, rather than from observation of the moving world around her" (850).⁵⁶

Just as important was a shift in the way reviewers interpreted the novel's and its characters' significance, not so much in relation to ideas and philosophy, but as a factor in what they saw as the book's purpose—a reading that carried implications for the generic profile of *Carradine*. Reviewers repeatedly saw the novel as engaged in cultural work by promoting human welfare. The *Tribune* approvingly quoted a comment by the *Hartford Courant* that described *Carradine* as "pervaded by spirit of vital philanthropy" (Oct. 2, 1863: 6). The *New-York Observer* announced that the novel was permeated by the "soul of the philanthropist" (Sept. 24, 1863: 311), and that response was echoed verbatim by a review in the *Continental Monthly* (Dec. 1863: 708). The *Independent*, in fact, found the philanthropic purpose of *Carradine* to be so pronounced "as to tinge its whole tone with gravity, and to leave a certain impression of didactic weight upon the reader" (Oct. 8, 1863: 2).

But what was the philanthropic work that readers saw *Carradine* engaged in? A comment by the *Tribune* reviewer provides an indication: "The theme of the story may be described as the influence of woman in the common life,—of woman not as an angel of impossible perfection, but as invested with the natural feminine graces of sympathy, tenderness, and . . . high moral courage . . . as she ministers, with the benignity of a Divine Providence, to the holiest needs of man . . . in the sacred relations of daughter, wife, mother, and friend" (3). In this view, the philanthropy of *Carradine* resides in its cultural work of reinforcing traditional female gender roles grounded in domestic service and self-sacrifice. One interesting feature of this interpretation is that it has been echoed by the few modern critics who have commented on the novel by characterizing it as squarely in the mold of conventional sentimental/domestic fiction—a form that usually is treated as being, if not the antithesis of realism, then

at minimum a substantially different genre.⁵⁷ The irony, however, is that the relative paucity of antebellum comments about intense emotional characterization in *Carradine* suggests that reviewers as a whole saw the novel as anything but an expression of what the *United States Magazine* called the “Matilda prettiness and sentimentalism” often associated at the time with women’s domestic novels (Sept. 1856: 242–43).

But another reading of *Carradine*’s cultural—or philanthropic—work carried different implications for its genre status. Several reviewers saw the novel’s contribution to be its accurate portrayal of a particular way of life in the United States. The *New-York Observer* found it especially noteworthy for “bringing out fresh and piquant” views of “rural life” in America (310). The reviewer in the *Continental Monthly* felt that *Carradine* disclosed the “variety of character, motive, and action” otherwise “confined within the limits of a country neighborhood” (708). Likewise, the *New York Tribune*’s reviewer was impressed by the novel’s presentation “of the very homeliest details of every-day country life” in upstate New York (3). Precisely which elements of the narrative reviewers were responding to with these comments is unclear, but it may have been the colloquial speech and regional dialect that appear from time to time in the novel. The significance here, however, is not so much what reviewers found “in” the book but how they constituted its true-to-life properties and the implications such an interpretation carried for Chesebro’s profile as a fiction writer. For, according to the public response to *Carradine*, Chesebro’ was not so much a novelist of ideas working through the psychological depth of her lifelike characters—as she was viewed in the 1850s—but rather a didactic realist depicting the ways and people of a particular segment of rural America. In that formulation, *Carradine* became a regional novel doing the “philanthropic” work of apprising readers about life in rustic upstate New York. In effect, Chesebro’s reviewers were now redefining her as a fiction writer through new interpretive categories that were developing in the 1860s as a response to—and as a way of conceptualizing—what was coming to be called local color or regionalist fiction. It was, moreover, a reconceptualization that at once elevated Chesebro’ as a novelist at the forefront of a new form and demoted her as a writer whose fiction, owing in part to its regionalist profile, was not quite a full-fledged probing of the inner life of “real” people.⁵⁸

In the same year that reviewers were remaking her in this way through

their responses to *Peter Carradine*, Chesebro published her fourth collection of short stories, *Sparrow's Fall*. For her printers, she returned to Carleton and Porter, and once again the firm apparently neglected to promote the book, for the collection received no public commentary. What is surprising is that the same fate by and large befell her next three novels: *Amy Carr* (1864), *The Glen Cabin* (1865), and *The Fishermen of Gamp's Island* (1865). Of the three, only *Amy Carr* received any attention in the press, and it was minimal, consisting of one notice and one brief review. For these three novels, however, the failure of attention cannot be attributed solely to the practices of Carleton and Porter, since that firm published only *Fishermen*. *Amy Carr* was published by M. W. Dodd, while *Glen Cabin* was put out by the American Tract Society.

Reviewer neglect of *Amy Carr* is puzzling because Dodd was no small, financially strapped firm that could not afford, or did not know how, to promote its novels. Fifteen years earlier, Dodd had published Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, which not only had become a best seller but had been widely reviewed. The firm, moreover, was thriving by the mid-1860s and would go on to become the prosperous twentieth-century publisher Dodd, Mead, and Company.⁵⁹ Hence, why *Amy Carr* languished unnoticed under Dodd's auspices is something of a mystery.

The situation was different for *Glen Cabin* because of the American Tract Society's methods of distributing its titles. The society relied mostly on its large cadre of agents and booksellers around the country to disseminate its books to readers. As Gregory Haynes explains, "none of the [society's] publications reached their audience through conventional book trade outlets," and those eschewed outlets apparently included the review pages in periodicals and newspapers.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the distribution practices of the society would suggest that *Glen Cabin* may have reached a fairly wide readership. The problem is that we have no direct record of how that audience read the novel.

Some evidence nonetheless does exist regarding how *Glen Cabin*, as well as *Amy Carr* and *Sparrow's Fall*, was received by readers and book buyers. That evidence indicates that all three volumes were taken as juvenile fiction designed to inculcate traditional, largely Christian, social and moral values in the minds of young readers. For *Amy Carr* that sense is conveyed both by the notice of the novel in the *Christian Examiner*, which listed the book as a "juvenile" under "New Books Received" (Jan.

1864: 156), and by the brief review in the *American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular*, which styled the book an "excellent juvenile" unsullied by "those episodes of reflection and disquisition which young readers are apt to find irksome and dull" (Jan. 1, 1864: 187).⁶¹ For the other two titles, the evidence comes from the same indices that suggest something about the antebellum reception of *Beautiful Gate*: extant copies of those two books. Pasted inside the front cover of one surviving copy of *Sparrow's Fall* is a piece of paper on which is printed "Bell Plaine Methodist Episcopal Sabbath School no. 544," followed by the enjoinder, "Keep this book neatly, read it carefully, and return it promptly to the library in two weeks." Inside the cover of the copy of *Glen Cabin* that I examined is affixed a color illustration of two children pulling a sled. On that copy's flyleaf is a handwritten inscription reading "Amy Smith / From her affectionate / Teacher C. E. C."⁶² Such archival markings, when viewed from the perspectives of book history and textual bibliography, suggest that the mid-nineteenth-century audience took these books as belonging to the niche market of children's literature.⁶³

Although Chesebro' would follow *Glen Cabin* and *Fishermen of Gamp's Island* with eighteen new stories over the next five years in the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, the *Galaxy Magazine*, and *Appleton's Journal*, she published no new novels or story collections during that half decade. However, this drop in productivity does not necessarily indicate that Chesebro', in the wake of the neglect of her three latest novels, suffered from the same type of disappointment that contributed so heavily to Melville's withdrawal from fiction writing in the late 1850s. Rather, other pressing work intruded. In 1865 Chesebro' accepted a teaching position at the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, New York, while simultaneously assuming the post of director of composition at that school. While the job did not completely replace her work as a writer, it clearly swallowed enough of her time and energy to cause a significant drop in her literary output.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, in 1871 she published what would be her last—and at 114 pages, her briefest—novel, *A Foe in the Household*.⁶⁵ The book was put out by yet another publisher, James Osgood, a former partner in Ticknor and Fields, the firm that had been Hawthorne's publishers and that Osgood bought when Fields had retired in 1870.⁶⁶ The pedigree, however, turned out to be less than salutary for Chesebro'. Though Osgood regularly placed announcements and occasionally advertised his

new books in the *American Literary Gazette and Publisher's Circular*, not one announcement of *Foe* appeared in that periodical or, as far as I have been able to discover, in any other magazine or newspaper. In spite of this lack of publicity, however, Osgood seems to have made some effort to distribute the novel to reviewers, since at least a half dozen magazines included either reviews or notices of the book. Though small in number, those comments provide some sense of the responses to *Foe*, which constituted the last phase of Chesebro's public reception in her lifetime.

In contradistinction to their reception of Chesebro's early novels but continuing the pattern that had marked their responses to *Victoria* and *Peter Carradine*, no reviewer commented explicitly on the style of *Foe*. It was as if the striking masculine prose that reviewers had found in *Isa* and *Children of Light* had transformed itself in a decade and half into a typical and unremarkable style. Or was it that what had struck reviewers as a distinctive way of writing fiction by a woman in the 1850s had been transformed by interpretive assumptions of the 1860s and 1870s into something that they felt was hardly worth noticing?

The few twentieth-century critics who have remarked on *Foe* have called it Chesebro's best novel and have read it as a critique of patriarchal religion, somewhat akin to some of the modern interpretations of *Victoria*.⁶⁷ Readers in the 1870s, however, took a different view. As they had with *Victoria*, none interpreted *Foe* as a censure of phallogocentric religion or even, as some had seen *Isa*, as a reproof of more general patriarchal ideology about the nature of womanhood, marriage, and traditional gender roles. In fact, unlike the responses to Chesebro's other novels, the reception of *Foe* did not include any instances of reader interpretations linking plot and/or character with theme and idea.

Where several reviewers agreed with modern commentators was in calling *Foe* Chesebro's best novel. But while this response did parallel what some reviewers had previously claimed about *Victoria*, praise for *Foe* grounded itself in terms that had seldom, if ever, been explicitly applied to Chesebro's fiction. The *Atlantic* first sounded the new note when its reviewer asserted, "No book of our time has combined such high qualities of art and morals with greater success than 'The Foe in the Household.'" In fact, continued the reviewer, *Foe* "deserves to rank with the very best American fictions, and is surpassed only by Hawthorne's romances and Mrs. Stowe's greatest work" (July 1871: 126). What is sig-

nificant in this remark is not the claim that Chesebro's novel was one of the best of the time or the ranking of her fiction right alongside (or nearly so) that of Hawthorne. Both moves had occurred before. What is new is that Chesebro's novel merited being called "high art." The reviewer for *Appleton's* concurred, exclaiming that *Foe* "is far more artistic" than many a "brilliant rival" and "has many of the high characteristics of art" (Sept. 16, 1871: 330).

For several reviewers that artistry resided in what they repeatedly had identified as one of Chesebro's signature strengths: her representational verisimilitude. The *Appleton's* reviewer itemized the novel's "characteristics of art" as its "fidelity to Nature and probability" and its "accuracy of delineation." Indeed, declared *Appleton's*, the "story, in its probability, its unity, its coherence, the natural outgrowth of its actions," and "its truthful characterization, seems essentially a history of real things" (330). The reviewer in *Harper's* had a similar reaction. Speaking in particular about the novel's Delia Holcombe (née Rose), the "daughter of a Mennonite bishop," and the plot involving her "secret marriage . . . to an outsider—an act which . . . involves her in difficulties from which it takes many years to extricate her," this reviewer lauded the way these "events . . . are . . . so simply, naturally evolved, one from the other, that all sense of romancing is taken away" (Sept. 1871: 623). Likewise focusing on Delia and the complications involving her marriage first to Edward Rolfe and then to the Reverend Holcombe, the reviewer in the *Atlantic* warned that even informed, experienced novel readers needed to be alert because of the subtle artistic verisimilitude of *Foe*: "It is so very quietly and decently wrought, that perhaps the veteran novel-reader, in whom chords of feeling have been rasped and twanged like fiddle-strings by the hysterical performance of some of our authoresses, may not be at once moved by it; but we believe that those who feel realities will be deeply touched. Delia Holcombe, in the lifetime expiation of her girlish error, is a creation as truthful as she is original" (126). A review in the *New York Tribune* offered an interesting riff on this note in the reception of *Foe*. Instead of linking Chesebro's characterization to art, the *Tribune* review decoupled the two by claiming that "the singular reality of all her characters," grounded as it is in the "record of their experiences, . . . reads more like personal biography than a creation of art," and that quality gives her writing "the air of a rehearsal of facts, rather than of artistic invention."⁶⁸

Despite this overt decoupling, however, what the *Tribune* review seemed to imply is that the art of *Foe* lay in Chesebro's ability to craft her verisimilitude so effectively that it subtly disguised the novel's artistry.

However, as was the case with *Peter Carradine*, reviewers did not invoke this view of Chesebro's vraisemblance to interpret her writing as the work of a full-fledged realist. Despite their view of *Foe* as art, reviewers in the *Nation* and *Harper's* indicated that they saw the novel primarily as regionalist fiction. *Harper's* yoked its remark on Chesebro's verisimilitude to the stipulation that the "scene is laid in Pennsylvania" with a specificity that marks the characters as "thoroughly American" (623). Citing the characters Father Trost, the Mennonite deacon August Ent, and Friend Holcombe, and the novel's depiction of the Mennonite community as a whole, the *Nation's* reviewer explained that of this "local coloring . . . there will be praise, we imagine, from those whose knowledge qualifies them to speak." As if to cement this idea in readers' minds, the *Nation's* reviewer added that, rather "than by trying to describe this aspect of Miss Chesebro's works, we can illustrate our meaning by saying that as a novelist she [is] of a kin to a better known anatomist . . . Mrs. Rebecca Harding Davis" (Feb. 27, 1873: 150). By linking Chesebro' to Davis and extending this profile to Chesebro's "works" as a whole, this reader implied that "as a novelist" Chesebro' had actually always been a painter of "local coloring."



Although Chesebro' followed *Foe in the Household* with half a dozen new short stories in *Appleton's*, *Harper's*, and the *Nation*, she published no new book of fiction before she died in 1873. Following her death, only a few obituaries appeared in newspapers and magazines, and most were brief. After giving the date of her death as February 16, *Harper's* simply identified her as a "well-known writer, and often a contributor to the pages of this magazine" (Apr. 1873: 794). The obituary in the *New York Tribune* ticked off the titles of her work in eight lines that ended by nonchalantly remarking that "the most important perhaps were 'Victoria, or the World Overcome,' 'Peter Carradine,' 'The Foe in the Household,' and others" (Feb. 19, 1873: 1). The *New York Times* merely listed her with twenty others under the heading "Died," noting only that she expired "On Sunday morning, Feb. 16, at her residence near Piermont, N.Y." (Feb. 18, 1873: 5). Although *Appleton's* was a bit more generous, with a sixteen-

line obituary acknowledging that her “art was admirable” and “her style smooth and choice,” that journal also pointed out that Chesebro’ “has died almost without public notice or comment” (Mar. 8, 1873: 348).

Appleton’s remark was both accurate and prescient. By the turn of the century, Chesebro’ was hardly remembered at all, and when she was, it was as a diminished author of attenuated reputation. William Dean Howells’s 1907 “Recollections of an Atlantic Editorship,” while grouping her among writers of “second brilliancy,” also noted that she was among those whose names “are faded or fading beyond recall.” Though an entry for her was included in Oscar Fay Adams’s 1904 *Dictionary of American Authors*, it consisted of a mere fifteen lines, which listed the titles of her books and described her as a “writer of stories and sketches who was during the later part of her life a teacher in the Packer Institute in Brooklyn.”⁶⁹ Chesebro’ was not mentioned in Barrett Wendell’s 1900 *Literary History of America*, Walter Bronson’s 1902 *Short History of American Literature*, Richard Burton’s 1903 *Literary Leaders of America*, or, for that matter, any of the standard American literary histories and surveys discussed at the close of this book’s chapter on Sedgwick. Not even those who mentioned Sedgwick only to reduce or dismiss her bothered to say anything about Chesebro’. By the 1930s and 1940s, she was, in effect, off the radar to the point where her name, unlike Sedgwick’s, did not come up even once in Robert Spiller’s *Literary History of the United States*, which remained the most authoritative reference work on American literary history for decades following its 1946 publication. Even today, as noted earlier, Chesebro’s fiction continues to be largely ignored and, for all intents and purposes, forgotten.

Why did Chesebro’ end up in such dismal obscurity? Certainly it was not because, like Sedgwick, Chesebro’ was redefined—and then demoted—by readers as a writer whose fictions were suited primarily for children—despite the fact that Chesebro’ published four to five books that nineteenth-century readers took to be juvenile literature. Nor can Chesebro’s neglect be attributed solely or even primarily to her demotion as a writer of local-color fiction. Though that reduction no doubt was a factor, such a designation did not, after all, keep Bret Harte or Sarah Orne Jewett out of the canon or prevent the twentieth-century recrudescence of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Rebecca Harding Davis. The modern view that Chesebro’s style and plots were the culprits—and that

nineteenth-century readers found her stories tedious and shopworn—is equally problematic.⁷⁰ As we have seen, mid-nineteenth-century reviewers overwhelmingly found her style noteworthy and engaging and repeatedly praised her plotting as well suited to her novels' verisimilitude.

Offering a different rationale, a couple of modern critics have suggested that Chesebro's obscurity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries resulted because her fiction in its form and content was conventionally sentimental—or an inferior version of sentimental/domestic fiction—and thus indistinguishable from the hundreds of other run-of-the-mill and equally forgotten novels by women in the 1800s.⁷¹ However, both the claims of other modern commentators that her novels—particularly *Isa*, *Children of Light*, and *Victoria*—are bold feminist works and the absence of mid-nineteenth-century comments linking her novels to domestic/sentimental fiction suggest that her writing was anything but that.⁷² Indeed, there is something paradoxical about this last modern explanation because neither feminist boldness nor conventional sentimentality—as traits of nineteenth-century American women's fiction—have prevented the recovery of Kate Chopin on the one hand and Susan Warner and Maria Cummins on the other.

The point here is not so much the inadequacy of any one of these explanations but the problems that result from any attempt to explain Chesebro's nineteenth-century status and twentieth- and early twenty-first-century obscurity by pointing to her texts themselves and their supposedly intrinsic traits. Chesebro's fiction was not and is not inherently iconoclastic or conventional, neither stylistically problematic nor regionalist or realistic by its nature. Rather, whatever her fiction "is" has been the product of what readers have made and continue to make of her texts. Indeed, if we want to understand what happened to Caroline Chesebro, we have to turn to the history of her reception both as a function of readers' responses and as a product of the literary marketplace.

In that light, Chesebro's relation with her publishers appears to have had some effect. Although her publishers included several of the leading firms that handled writers who either achieved popular success in the nineteenth century or have become part of the modern canon, albeit sometimes at its margins, the fact that she was never in a position to develop a reliable, ongoing relation with a publisher who promoted her

books throughout her career or kept them in print after her death—as Harpers had done for Sedgwick—no doubt was a factor in her fate.

But more important, I would argue, are the shape and diversity that marked public conceptions of her fiction—and of Chesebro’ as a writer—in her own time and that have continued among modern commentators. What did that diversity have to do with the (de)valuation of Chesebro’? Pierre Bourdieu provides a relevant clue in his assertion that “the value of the arts, genres, works and authors depends on the . . . marks attached to them,” which entails a “particular case of the ‘labeling’ effect.” That is, “the capacity to recognize” a body of works’ “legitimacy and perceive them as worthy of admiration in themselves . . . is inseparable from the capacity to recognize in them . . . traits appropriate to characterizing them in their singularity.”⁷³ Bourdieu’s point here is related to Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s argument that axiology and taxonomy are closely related. As Smith has pointed out, “When we allude to a work as great, good, bad, or middling, we usually employ great, good, bad or middling . . . *as* something.” That is, “judgment of the work will also be part of . . . the *classification* of the work.”⁷⁴ What is true for individual works, moreover, is true for a writer’s entire corpus. Valuation depends on such a corpus being classified *as* something in a way that is recognizable as such by an interpretive (and axiological) community. Such a requirement suggests that when a recognizable classification does not materialize—or when readers construct a corpus in such a diverse way that its “something” is amorphous—valuation gets short-circuited. To put this matter in terms of literary history, such dependencies, in conjunction with the dynamics of literary interpretation and history, suggest that for a writer to achieve notoriety and popularity in his or her own time and/or to gain an ongoing place in that history and its canon(s), readers have to construct a fairly consistent topographical profile of that author’s corpus, which audiences can share as a horizon of expectations and an agreed-upon landscape of recognition (as has been the case for Poe as the haunted genius of Germanic/gothic fiction) or which becomes a basis against which readers construct an alternate interpretive horizon and axiology (as was the situation for Melville—and even Sedgwick—in the twentieth century).

For Chesebro’, however, nothing like a consistent conception of her corpus of fiction developed during her lifetime or in the 130 years af-

ter her death. Was she, after all, a full-fledged realist *avant la lettre* or an early practitioner of the more minor genre of regionalist fiction? Do her novels offer controversial challenges to nineteenth-century ideas of womanhood, or are they philanthropical narratives promoting traditional values, especially about women's social place? Are her novels marked by the conventional, unrealistic ideals and characters of sentimental romances or by the verisimilitude that represented the truth of inner lives? Are they sermonically didactic or thematically ambiguous? Were those qualities a product of Chesebro's mercurial genius or of her artistry—or are they marks of her lack of art as a fiction writer? Was her style extravagant and at times obscure, in the mold of Melville's? Or was it unusually masculine, awkward and uncontrolled, femininely chaste, or nondescript and unremarkable? Is her fiction all—or none—of those things? Or are we looking at a swirling set of variations composed of a medley of nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpretive formulations that, in the aggregate, have constituted Chesebro's corpus as a protean puzzle? If the last is the case—and the history of her reception suggests that it is—then the absence of a consistent authorial profile and of an overarching interpretive paradigm for making sense of Chesebro's fictions goes a long way in explaining her limited success in her own century and her continued neglect in our own.

To point to these developments as factors in Chesebro's ongoing obscurity is not to argue that critics and literary historians need to develop a single, uniform profile for Chesebro's fiction that would claim for it a particular, inherent set of characteristics, which in turn could serve as the basis for reclaiming her texts. Although such a move would no doubt be useful, it would also be as misleading as any one of the many interpretive formulations that already exist for her novels and tales, not because such a profile would reduce the "intrinsic" complexity of that fiction, but because it would ascribe to her texts themselves what is, instead, a product of interpretive practices. What we need to recognize, rather, is that recovery can take a number of forms and that, in Chesebro's case, turning to the history of her reception can be an important component of that work. Such a turn can also be a prod for helping us understand that her fiction, like the novels and tales of any writer, is ineluctably linked to the work readers have done—and will continue to do—on her texts.