To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Margaret Ellen Cullen entitled "'And lead her to the promised land': Liberty and Containment in Antebellum Women's Narratives." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a Major in English.

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"AND LEAD HER TO THE PROMISED LAND": LIBERTY AND PATRIARCHAL CONTAINMENT IN ANTEBELLUM WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Margaret Ellen Cullen

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DEDICATION

To Karen Richardson Gee, who introduced me to nineteenth-century women writers:
"I think I was enchanted."

And to Pati Woodhull, who has an earned doctorate in love.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interplay between Protestant patriarchal containment and women's struggles for liberty in five antebellum women's narratives written by evangelical women. It examines two novels and three autobiographies in the context of nineteenth-century culture: Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850); Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854); Jarena Lee's *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1849); Zilpha Elaw's *The Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846); and Phoebe Palmer's *Way of Holiness* (1843). This work takes an exploratory and provisional approach to these little-known texts and places special emphasis on the spiritual dynamics of the tension between constraint and freedom in antebellum women's lives and narratives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1: THE MORE WOMEN, THE MORE ANGELS 12

CHAPTER 2: BIDE TOGETHER: *THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD* AND *THE LAMPLIGHTER* 46

CHAPTER 3: EXPERIMENTAL VERITY: THE SPIRITUALITY OF JARENA LEE, ZILPHA ELAW, AND PHOEBE PALMER 78

CHAPTER 4: THE HOLY ENERGY 134

CONCLUSION 175

WORKS CITED 185

VITA 192

Introduction

Antebellum evangelical American women writers were caught up in a tug-of-war between their desires for freedom and the containment of patriarchal religious authority. They believed that they were new creatures in Christ and totally free from external dominion. Yet, they were commanded to submit to the men's authority. These same men continuously praised them for their extraordinary spirituality. In the next breath, they told women how weak they were. Women formed the majority of the membership in Protestant churches and by the 1830s were active in a wide variety of religious groups whose interests ranged from tract distribution to radical abolitionism. On the other hand, they were barred almost completely from leadership roles; in many middle-class urban churches, they were prohibited even from speaking in public worship. They were part of a coalition of benevolent societies and churches which thought that preserving democracy was part of God's divine mission for the church, both in America and in the world. But they could not vote or hold public office in this sanctified republic.

Evangelical women wrote out of these contradictions. They were part of the first generation of American women who consistently and seriously wrote about their own experiences. None of these women had a solid female tradition of authorship to support them. Nor did they have a coherent philosophical, psychological, or

theological explanation for their writing. They had to improvise as they went along. Further, these antebellum American women, especially evangelical women, had to endure a barrage of patriarchal literature and related social practice which attempted to define them and dictate their place in society.

The contradictory and improvisational nature of evangelical women's experience produced a tremendous range of women's self-concepts and social roles within their literature. While all evangelical women authors would agree that they were saved by the blood of Jesus and would be obedient to the counsel of Scripture, they would not all agree on how best to represent evangelical women in their narratives. For example, in Susan Warner's novel *Queechy*, the protagonist Fleda conformed to the most conservative aspects of patriarchal ideology. She was weak, passive, and dependent on men. Stuck in a snowstorm on a train with her true love, she was saved by her strong (also rich and white) Christian fiance. He valiantly took off his huge fur coat and insisted that she wear it. Fleda survived the night nestled in the coat of her redeemer and emerged shaken but unharmed when help arrived with the dawn. Her fiance, of course, escaped unscathed from the killing cold by keeping watch over his beloved. At an opposite pole was the assertive and independent evangelical preacher, Zilpha Elaw. Although holding to the same evangelical faith as Warner did, she presented herself in a way that the conservative Warner would not have approved of: strong, active and independent of men. In her autobiographical narrative she described her first week in England on a preaching mission unsponsored by any denomination. She, a black, formally uneducated American woman from a working class background,

confronted a pompous and unsympathetic board representing the men of the English peace and antislavery societies who did not approve of her maverick mission to the Old World. Undeterred by their disapproval, Elaw went out in search of gospel work, ending up preaching to a crowd on the street until the police broke up the meeting. Such contrasts are almost dizzying, as are the variations of self and roles which are represented between those two poles. Often a single work contained strong contrasts within itself. The nineteenth-century total woman, Fleda, mentioned above, started out as an independent girl who lived freely and spontaneously with her grandfather in the country. Another example of unusual contrasts within an evangelical text is found in the autobiography of the preacher Phoebe Palmer, who was one of the most influential Protestant women in the nineteenth century. She wrote in her text that God had called her to speak "to the thousands" (*Holiness* 48) and then omitted most of the details of her preaching career from her narrative because public speaking was not considered a womanly activity. The variations and contrasts in the ways evangelical women depicted their experiences represent the texture of the life that they lived. There is no way to simplify these texts to fit into a neat theoretical formula. These narratives are amazingly unpredictable. Evangelical women, caught between patriarchal repression and yearning for liberty, continuously experimented with their selves and their social roles.

This study is an exploratory and provisional foray into the world of antebellum evangelical women's writing, taking their narratives as its special province. It will follow a fairly simply line of exploration, tracing out the tension between Protestant

patriarchal containment of women and the various forces which encouraged women's liberation, with a special emphasis on the spiritual dynamics of that struggle. The tension between containment and liberation runs through all evangelical women's narratives in one form or another. This tension also links evangelical narratives written by women, and their authors, to other parts of the culture where conflicts between containment and liberty are apparent, such as in the struggles for abolition of slavery and women's political rights.

This study is also selective, hoping to achieve a depth of understanding of five evangelical women's texts within the context of antebellum culture. Because the influence of patriarchal repression is so strong on these women, I will use the first chapter to develop the religious, cultural, and literary background for these texts. In the second chapter I will look at two novels: Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850); and Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854). In chapters four and five, I will examine three autobiographies: *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836; revised and expanded in 1839); *The Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846); and Phoebe Palmer's *Way of Holiness* (1843; revised and expanded in 1867). Unfortunately, for most of the twentieth century these and most other evangelical women's narratives have been buried in the religious and literary archives along with the rest of antebellum American women's writing. With few notable exceptions, such as the essays of Margaret Fuller and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the wealth of antebellum women's writing has been spurned by critics as being sentimental, and

the contribution of antebellum women authors has been scorned, neglected, or suppressed. But since Nina Baym's ground-breaking study of nineteenth-century women's fiction in 1978, many of these buried texts have been rediscovered, reprinted, and have again become part of the literary community (Harris 9).

This renaissance of nineteenth-century women's texts, however, has not yet fully resurrected the work of evangelical women. Most literary critics prefer to ignore overtly evangelical writing. Thus, Zilpha Elaw's and Phoebe Palmer's autobiographies have been published in studies of American religious history but are largely absent from literary discussions. And in the case of Jarena Lee, who has made it into the literary world, her value as part of the black literary tradition has far overshadowed her contribution to the tradition of evangelical women writers.

Novelists such as Warner and Cummins have had better luck. Caught up in the scholarly tide of interest in nineteenth-century women's novels, they have received critical attention at literary conferences, in articles, and in books. Their two novels also have been published by major secular publishers and made available widely in the academic community. Warner's text has been reprinted by the Feminist Press in 1987, with a thorough critical introduction by Jane Tompkins. Cummins's novel has been reprinted as part of the American Women Writers Series of Rutgers University Press, accompanied by a critical introduction by Nina Baym. But here again, the spirituality of these women has been dimmed in order to highlight their place in a secular literary history of American women's writing. For example, in Baym's introduction to *The Lamplighter*, she sums up her discussion with an emphasis on "the pleasure of the

text" (xxxi), emphasizing how nineteenth-century women loved to read, not discussing the way that they would have responded to the evangelical content of the novel. The only contemporary critic seriously to engage evangelical women writers in their own right is Jane Tompkins. Yet, despite her substantial contributions to our understanding of antebellum evangelical culture, she has oversimplified them. She established one text, Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, as the "Ur-text of the nineteenth-century United States" (*The Wide, Wide Word* 585), universalizing some of the elements in that novel to fit all evangelical women's writing. Her approach does not fully account for the complexity of evangelical women authors, their texts, their religious tradition, and the volatility of the era in which they wrote.

The paucity of adequate studies focusing on evangelical women writers and their texts has a parallel in historical investigations of evangelicalism. As Leonard I. Sweet has pointed out in a 1984 essay, " The Evangelical Tradition in America," until recently there has been a lack of good historical studies of evangelicalism, even though many historians agree with William G. McLoughlin's assertion that "{t}he story of American Evangelicalism is the story of America itself in the years 1800 to 1900" (Sweet 1). Sweet comments that "Unlike the Puritan tradition, which as a movement has been the focus of extensive critical debate, our understanding of Evangelicalism has by and large been shaped incidentally, almost as a tangent of historical inquiry" (2). Literary criticism has shared with historical studies a focus on Puritan influence and a lack of attention to evangelicalism. As demonstrated previously, the evangelical women writers who do make it into the scholarly

community gain attention for reasons other than their religion, which is usually approached tangentially.

But their writing is important and needs to be approached more directly by both historical and literary scholars, and by those who explore the boundaries between the two disciplines. It was evangelical women such as Stowe, Palmer, Warner, and Cummins who were the backbone of the women's publication explosion in antebellum America. They were a significant part of the first generation of American women who wrote about their own experiences. The first American novels to sell in the millions were written by these women and published in the 1850s--Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and *Queechy* (1852); Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852); and Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854).

This study depicts the interplay between constraint and freedom in these narratives as a complex process, and no single text will be set up as the normative antebellum women's narrative. The discussion does, however, focus most strongly on the autobiographies of evangelical preachers Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer. This special emphasis on them has three justifications. First, they have been neglected in literary studies. Warner, Cummins, Stowe, and other novelists have at least been brought into the discussion of the literary community, while Lee, Elaw, and Palmer have been neglected. Second, they exhibit some of the most audacious attempts to gain personal and social freedom in antebellum women's narrative. Third, the texts are especially fascinating to me and fill me with a special delight. Where else but in Zilpha Elaw's autobiography does an antebellum evangelical woman describe leaving

her body and merging with the sun? Who else but Jarena Lee could compare herself to Noah when she tried to preach to upwardly mobile Methodists who didn't want to endure the social embarrassment of allowing a woman to preach in church? And what other antebellum woman beside Phoebe Palmer would seriously compare men's reticence about letting women speak in church to the crucifixion of Christ?

However, not only Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, but all evangelical women writers deserve serious attention. In this nation which is strongly influenced, although certainly not redeemed, by Protestant evangelicalism, these women are part of our history. We cannot escape their residual influence, even though we may not be conscious of it. As C.S. Lewis points out: "Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we still are" (1).

Previous Studies

The most substantial study of evangelical women's narratives was written by Jane Tompkins. Her chapter entitled "The Other American Renaissance" in her book-length study of nineteenth century fiction, *Sensational Designs*, focuses on the general literary/cultural background of evangelical women writers, putting a specific emphasis on Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World.* My study is indebted to Tompkins' historical perspective and her close, serious reading of a previously neglected text. That reading is supplemented by excellent biographical material about

Warner in Tompkins' introduction to the Feminist Press reprint of the novel. I do not, however, as mentioned before, share Tompkins' emphasis on the primacy of Warner's novel in understanding evangelical women's narratives. As we will see in Chapter Four, Cummins critiques and rewrites *The Wide, Wide World* four years later, achieving the same popular success as Warner did. The nature of evangelical women's narratives is more fluid than Tompkins suggests.

Other studies related to this project are William Andrews's excellent introduction to the narratives of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote which provided the seed from which some of my historical and religious discussion grew. Susan Houchin's introduction to black women's spiritual narratives, published as part of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers was equally helpful, giving me useful insights on more purely spiritual issues. Thomas C. Oden has provided useful biographical information about Phoebe Palmer in his introduction to the volume of her selected writings which he edited. His comments on individual pieces of writing were also helpful.

Other important sources for this study are the recent critical surveys of nineteenth-century women writers and their texts, starting with Nina Baym's 1978 *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870.* Hers was the first book-length study of the character and plot of mid-nineteenth century fiction. Her accomplished scholarship opened the door for more serious studies of a literature which had previously been treated with contempt by twentieth-century scholars. Baym's work was followed in 1984 by Mary Kelley's *Private Woman,*

Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America and Susan Harris's 1990 text, *19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretative Strategies*. None of these studies deals specifically with evangelical women's narratives, but each discusses some of those texts, their authors, and useful historical background.

Organization

My first chapter discusses the social, religious, and literary aspects of antebellum male domination as they relate to these narratives written by evangelical women. Because Protestant men dominated women through an established, although certainly not absolute, base of cultural power, it is useful to survey thoroughly their concepts of women's role and women's identity before looking at evangelical women's texts.

The second chapter introduces the discussion of evangelical women's narratives by exploring how the tension between patriarchal containment and impulses for liberation are played out in two conservative, best-selling evangelical women's novels, Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, and Cummins's *The Lamplighter*. This chapter highlights the dual nature of evangelical women authors--their subservience to patriarchal ideals, and their ability to critique and rewrite these ideals while staying within the evangelical fold. It shows how in the case of these conservative fiction writers, patriarchal constraint wins out over desires for liberty. Warner's protagonist gives herself over to complete submission to one Protestant man's will. Cummins's

protagonist shows more independence, but allows herself to be enclosed in a domestic sphere.

In the third chapter, I discuss the narratives of Zilpha Elaw, Jarena Lee, and Phoebe Palmer, and I will also look at Palmer's personal writing and one of her polemical texts. The emphasis in this chapter is on how these women's intense spirituality affected their relationship with the Protestant patriarchs and their ideology, placing that spirituality in several interrelated historical and religious contexts.

Chapter Four focuses on the treatment of Lee's, Elaw's, and Palmer's preaching in their narratives and in their lives, giving a special emphasis to the historical context of preaching in western Christianity. The conflict between patriarchal containment and impulses for liberty in antebellum American women is made more explicit in this chapter because of the confrontational stance that women who preached in public were forced to take.

Chapter 1

The More Women, The More Angels

In the conflict that evangelical women writers experienced between patriarchal containment and impulses toward liberty, the odds favored the patriarchs. For in the early nineteenth-century, Protestant men, with their characteristic vigor, took it upon themselves to meld the various, and sometimes conflicting, images of women available in the culture into a fairly unified set of repressive idealizations. They devoted as much energy to the definition and control of women as they did to their other great enterprises: evangelism, moral reform, education, conquest of the continent, and, of course, making money.

To understand the cultural weight which pressed evangelical women writers toward conformity to the ideology of the Protestant patriarchy, one must understand both the content of the ideology and the massiveness of the effort to indoctrinate these women. Not only were women pressured through the pulpit to mold themselves into ideal ladies whose only desire was to stay quietly at home, they were inundated by literally millions of evangelical publications which promulgated the same ideas. The widespread influence of Protestant concepts about women was noted by Margaret Fuller in her essay about nineteenth-century women,"The Great Lawsuit: Man vs. Men, Woman vs. Women," published in an 1843 volume of the Transcendentalist journal,

The Dial. She says:

> [a] numerous party, whose opinions were already labeled and adjusted too much to their mind to admit of any new light, strive by lectures on some model-like woman of bridal-like beauty and gentleness, by writing and lending little treatises, to mark out with due precision the limits of woman's sphere, and woman's mission and to prevent other than the rightful shepherd from climbing the wall, or the flock from using any chance gap to run away. (1515)

In her description of the activities of the Protestant shepherds, Fuller astutely notes that the purpose behind the promotion of ideal images of women was to limit women's social roles. Within a narrowly defined mission, women could support, not challenge, the shepherds's rule.

It is obvious from Fuller's quotation that in creating their images of ideal women, Protestant men, even if they harbored misogynist ideas about women, did not want to display openly any fear, hatred, or suspicion of them. While many men would agree with the basic premise of the English divine William Perkins, who wrote in his witchcraft treatise of 1592 that women are "the weaker sex" (154), most would not endorse his conclusion: "Hence it was that the Hebrews of ancient times used it for a proverb, 'The more women, the more witches'" (154). For the late Puritans's increased respect for women and the notion of the noble Republican mother which grew up

during the Revolution merged with the realities of the middle-class economy, with its separate public/private spheres, to create a desire for a domestic sphere managed by women. Such women had to be weak so that they would stay in their place, but they could not be wicked, or else they would ruin the children. So pragmatic Protestant men kept the hidden root of misogynist religious thought but grafted on a more optimistic branch. In their weakness, then, antebellum women became not witches, but angels.

Female Spirituality

As Margaret Fuller suggests, the Protestant angel woman was an important figure who frequently appeared in the deluge of printed sermons, advice literature, conversion accounts, essays, poems, stories, and novels published by the Protestant shepherds (and some of their sheep) before the Civil War. A classic work from the late eighteenth century which continued to be popular in the early nineteenth century America is *Sermons to Young Women* by the influential London preacher, Reverend James Fordyce. He instructs women to cultivate a "religious life" (2: 14) which is under strict control, marked by "regularity and coolness, in self-command and mild affections" (2: 14). The wise woman, says Fordyce, is she who perceives her own imbecility" (1: 217). A truly pious woman needs to be grateful that "The Almighty, in consideration of their frailty, and from a regard to their innocence, has raised a kind of fence about them, to prevent those wilder excursions into which the other sex are

frequently carried" (2: 217). He warns that the world will overlook sins in men "which it never forgives in [women] . . . so that the honor and peace of a family are, in this view, much more dependent on the conduct of daughters than of sons" (1: 215).

In the early nineteenth century, a well-known American minister, the Reverend Ashbell Green, used *The Christian Advocate*, a conservative magazine published in Philadelphia, as a platform for his opinions. He was also president of the College of New Jersey and President of Princeton Seminary's board of directors which gave him a strong base from which to propagate his views. In a sermon entitled "The Christian Duty of Christian Women," preached to the Princeton Female Society in 1826 and published in the *Advocate* in 1827, Green reminds women that their savior "framed them with that shrinking delicacy of temperament and feeling, which is one of their best distinctions, which renders them amiable" (34). Admitting that this weakness makes them unfit for command and puts them under the power of men, he consoles women that within their sphere they exert "an appropriate and proper influence" (34). He tells women that "he who formed them with this natural and retiring modesty, and under a qualified subjection to men" (34) would never permit them to do anything that violated their nature, even in the service of God. In support of his position, Green quotes a text from a New Testament letter of Paul to Timothy, a text which is repeated over and over by those who want to confine women to restrictive roles and spheres: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (35). According to Green,

the proper role of women is to present "female offerings" (37) to God in prayer, which will rise "as sweet incense, before the throne of God (37). He urges them to pursue a spirituality which is free from "arrogant assumptions, or of any trespass on female decorum" (36). Under no circumstances are women to be "publik [sic] preachers and teachers, in assemblies promiscuously composed of the two sexes . . . " (35).

Green strictly delineates the areas of service open to Christian women. First, they are to allow the influence of religion to improve their personal relationships by making them "better wives, better mothers, better daughters, better sisters, better neighbors, and better friends, than they would otherwise be" (36). He urges them to attend especially to the duties of motherhood, a theme echoed by many nineteenth century writers. He allows them to direct family worship when the male head of the household is away and to engage in prayers with other women, provided the prayers are decorous. He also approves of their participation in all-women "Bible Societies, Tract Societies, Education Societies, Jews Societies, Charity Schools, Orphan Asylums, Widow's Asylums, and all institutions of similar character to these" (37). Above all, women are to be grateful for Christianity, "since the influence of that alone has ever raised [women] . . . to their proper rank in society, and sustained them in it" (37). So not only were women to accept their confinement to limited roles, they were to be grateful for that confinement.

C. Duren writes in a similar vein in an article published in a volume of the *Congregational Review* in 1868. Although the Congregationalists pioneered in ordaining women, most of them, and certainly Duren, remained members of Fuller's

"numerous party" which limited the roles of women to a narrow sphere. He says that women best serve God by "filling beautifully [their] proper sphere" (224). He affirms the personal and domestic duties of women in the same way that Green does, emphasizing that "their sphere is more private" (224) and "that their place in the church is not as public teachers, nor in any way to act as assuming authority" (224).

Characteristic of the literature of conservative writers is the linking of women's nature with social roles which directly support the needs of the patriarchy. Consciously or unconsciously, it appears that many men's real goals in encouraging women to stay in the sphere God created for them was to coerce women to perform their social duties willingly and meticulously. Women's experiences were valued only so far as they supported the male hierarchy, and women's identity was often discussed as if it were identical to social expectation. Barbara Welter, in her examination of idealized images of women in antebellum America, notes several titles of magazine articles in the popular press which reveal this reality: "Woman, Man's Best Friend" (32), "Woman, the Greatest Social Benefit" (32), and "The Wife: Source of Comfort and Spring of Joy" (32).

Historian Nancy Cott points out that the didactic works concerning women from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century define women "according to [their] . . . personal relationships as daughter, sister, loved one, wife and mother, not in terms of [their]. . . discrete individual status or aims" (165). The following passage from the 1837 text, *The Discussion: or the Character, Education, Prerogatives and Moral Influence of Woman,* exemplifies this practice:

> As a sister, she soothes the troubled heart, chastens and tempers the wild daring of the hurt mind . . . As a mistress, she inspires the nobler sentiments of purer love . . . As a wife, she consoles . . . cheers . . . In the important and endearing character of mother, she watches the various impulses of unfledged genius . . . consecrates to truth and virtue the best affections of our nature. (165-167)

Many men encouraged faith in women for the same reason the narrator in "Bartleby the Scrivener" encouraged charity--"it was a great safeguard to its possessor" (64). Religion, like "charity" helped preserve the patriarchal system. Because in this system women's spiritual experiences were valued only in so far as they supported the male hierarchy, their spirituality was often discussed as if it were identical to social expectations. Carol F. Karlsen's comment on the dominant Puritan view of women could easily be applied to the ideology of Protestant men: "Women who failed to serve men, failed to serve God. The only women who would be numbered among God's elect are those who acknowledge this service as their sole calling and believe that they were created for this purpose" (qtd. in Keller 137). So in the ideology of true womanhood, female spiritual life had little independent existence. It was welded to a configuration of social values that could, and often did, exist autonomously from any divine intervention. Many men would have scarcely noticed if the supposed cause of women's virtue--God--dropped away, as long as the effect--compliant behavior within

an enclosed sphere--held firm. In the conventional patriarchal religious system, woman's sphere was the temple and man's will the altar on which the woman placed her self.

". . . for God in him"

Nineteenth-century Protestant men's view of women developed from a variety of contemporary and historical sources. At a visceral level, the western Christian tradition was in line with William Perkins when he maintained that women were especially susceptible to evil, particularly spiritual evil. So even when promoting the most liberal separate-but-equal arguments, religious men frequently had an almost phobic anxiety about women taking control. In the Protestant religious imagination, often out of public view in the nineteenth century, all sorts of threatening images of women lurked: Eve seducing Adam into sin; Jezebel hunting Elijah; Salome dancing for the head of John the Baptist; the whore of Babylon corrupting great civilizations.

Even theology which did not view women as inherently evil defined them as inherently weak. And in a nation that valued the so-called masculine qualities of strength, resistance to opposition and firm determination, any weakness was an invitation to spiritual or temporal disaster. As much as many nineteenth-century Protestant men tried to prove their respect for women, most of them felt that, left to their own devices, women were morally feeble, unreliable in leadership, and in need of being ruled by men. C. Duren, in the same essay mentioned previously, sums up this

view:

> Why did Satan tempt the woman, rather than the man? Because he had reason to suppose that he could more easily prevail. Her nature rendered her more pliable, more easy to be persuaded. She was not formed with those stern and strong qualities that more particularly pertain to man. Therefore she is fittest, not to lead and command, and reason and teach, but to be in subjection, to be reliant. Her will is as strong as that of man, but it is controlled by feeling and impulse, rather than by reason. Her emotions are stronger; her understanding relatively weaker . . . [S]he is not a safe teacher. (228)

Because Protestant men felt that so much was at stake in their political/spiritual quest for a Christian republic, they could not risk giving women authority in either the state or the church. The weakness of women could hinder the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Protestant men's self-appointed mandate to contain women's liberty was also supported by an obdurate and long standing conviction in Christian thought that women, even if they were harmless to men, were created by God to be in subjection to them. This view finds its justification in the second chapter of Genesis where Adam is created first and Eve is taken out of his body to be a "helpmate" for him. Frequently the Genesis passage is linked to 1 Corinthians 11.3, which states, "the head of the

woman is the man." Further on in that chapter, in the midst of an extremely complicated argument, the apostle Paul states that the man "is the image and glory of God but the woman is the glory of man (1 Cor. 11.7). Linking together these and a few other verses, a number of theologians concluded that women are twice removed from divinity by nature and thereby incapable of receiving direct revelation from God. That opinion has been translated into Western culture in varied ways. Milton immortalized the notion in English literature with his description of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost.* Adam was made for "God only" and Eve "for God in Him" (320). So beneath the tinsel and glitter that decorated the woman's sphere lay unyielding metal: the conviction that women were created by God to be subject to men. C. Duren, in the same essay cited above, puts the matter clearly:

> The place of woman, in the family and in society, is one of subjection to man . . . The scriptural position of woman is one of subjection to man . . . The Jewish religion raised the sex far above her rank among the gentiles; the Christian religion has greatly elevated her. But Christianity has not changed her position in society. (223)

Men in the heat of revivalist energy, stirred to enormous intensity by their vision of America as the redeemer nation, both intellectually and emotionally reaffirmed this concept of the inherent subjection of women. Such a belief simplified theology while building up the strength of Protestant men's will to conquer. If God had put them in

command of women, they were obligated to provide for them and the children. Their domination, then, could be viewed as disinterested service to society.

Protestant Publishing

Conservative concepts of women which drove men toward the benevolent domination of them received wide circulation because of Protestant innovations in the publication and distribution of literature. Although many of the Protestant shepherds were backward in encouraging the liberation of women, they were in the vanguard of the publishing revolution which swept America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Protestant religious literature held its own against secular popular literature such as newspapers, magazines, and novels. Protestants supported all forms of literary production not only with scrupulous care, but with great fervor.

Undoubtedly, the efforts of conservative Protestants set the tone for American publishing before the Civil War. As Charles I. Foster points out, it was not necessary for Christian publishers to gain "a complete monopoly to achieve [their] purpose" (225). It was enough that such publishers created "a literary fashion, a climate of opinion favorable to this reading matter. It became profitable for any writer aiming at the vast Evangelical reading public to write as though his manuscript must pass the publishing committee at the American Tract Society" (225). Given this context, it is no mystery that the spectacular best-sellers of the 1850s were novels written by evangelical Christians. Much as Hawthorne might moan, and modern critics wonder

why what they consider religious propaganda overwhelmed the writing of their favorites in the American literary renaissance, the massive success of evangelical religious publication in the general market is natural and predictable. From 1816 when the American Bible Society was formed until the Civil War, conservative Christians had been the only American group to mass produce, distribute, and personally promote their literature. Their efforts created both a desire and a market for their own type of writing.

The bulk of this writing, as might be expected, maintained a conservative view of women. Mass-produced Christian texts were not usually the site of exploration, but of preservation and transmission of established values. (We will see later, however, that even within the most strict religious orthodoxy, there were some voices advocating innovation in women's roles.) On the whole, the American reading public both expected and desired predictable and didactic literature, especially when it involved women. As Karen Richardson Gee points out, even as independent a thinker as Emily Dickinson drank in conventional Christian-influenced literature. Gee cites an 1852 letter from Dickinson to a woman friend which reveals her taste for such writing:

> I have just read three little books, not great, not thrilling--
> but sweet and true. "The Light in the Valley," "Only,"
> and "A House upon a Rock"--I know you would love
> them all--yet they don't bewitch me any. There are no
> walks in the wood--no low and earnest voices, no

> moonlight, no stolen love, but pure little lives, loving
> God, and their parents, and obeying the laws of the land;
> yet read, if you meet them Susie, for they will do one
> good. (qtd. in Gee 57)

Gee comments that the texts Dickinson mentions are "hardly books at all but moral tracts which describe and prescribe moral conduct for their readers" (57).

Just how many of the "little books" and related texts which Dickinson recommended to her friend were available in the early nineteenth-century cannot now be calculated exactly. But by looking at the publication and distribution statistics of some major Protestant publishers, we can get an idea of the massiveness of their efforts. By 1830 the American Bible society produced over a million Bibles a year (Hatch 141). The American Tract Society publication was equally voluminous; it is estimated that by the 1830s they were producing about six million tracts, books, and pamphlets annually (Hatch 141). Not to be outdone, the American Sunday School Union, in its 1836 annual report, indicated that it produced over a million items requiring nearly seventy-three million pages (Foster 224). Also by 1830, the Methodist weekly *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, a monthly interdenominational periodical, had a readership of over 25,000, one of the largest of all such journals in the world (Hatch 141). Overall, the number of subscribers to religious journals jumped from four thousand to four hundred thousand in the first three decades of the nineteenth century (Hatch 141). Cincinnati, a center for the popular press, was the home of 40 different religious journals before 1848 (Hatch 144).

The advantage that most of these religious publishers had over their secular competitors was that most of them were financially underwritten by religious groups. Profit was desirable, but not always necessary; their motive for producing large quantities of literature was not commercial gain, but the extension of the kingdom of God. In practical terms, this meant that they could usually effectively undersell their competition. And benevolent organizations such as the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Sunday School Union had enormous amounts of money backing them, especially before 1840 when sectarian splits broke up some of the power of what Foster called the evangelical "united front" (119). This coalition of evangelical benevolence organizations was backed by wealthy individuals, middle-class churches and fund-raising drives throughout the whole populace. Foster has supplied some interesting statistics to convey the huge amount of money available to evangelical benevolent organizations. He notes that "[f]rom its foundations to October 1, 1828, the republic had spent $3,585,534.67 on internal improvements; over the same period the revenue of the thirteen leading benevolent societies came to $2,813,550.02" (121). Aided by their technology and their financial resources, groups such as the Bible Society, the Tract Society, and the Sunday School Union, according to Foster, created "the first American experience of mass production at the lowest possible price" (140).

In addition to being able to undersell their competition, these three publishers often developed sophisticated distribution networks. According to Foster, these groups were the first to distribute American literature as a "national brand" (140) to well-

organized districts, each with "its own warehouse or 'depository,' district manager, and salesman" (140). Furthermore, even smaller denominational publishing agencies managed effectively to distribute books. Hatch points out that American Methodists, being faithful to John Wesley's commitment "to furnish poor people with cheaper, shorter, and plainer books" (qtd. in Hatch 142), required that its preachers sell printed material. So successful were their efforts that in Ohio, where the average yearly salary for Methodist ministers was one hundred dollars, the average book bonus for these ministers was seventy-five dollars (Hatch 141).

The distribution of religious material, however, was not limited to the efforts of paid agents or ministers. Unpaid lay people, including many women, who formed the heart of antebellum American Protestantism, organized massive literature distribution projects. According to Foster, one such ambitious enterprise was initiated in New York by the wealthy businessmen Arthur and Lewis Tappan in 1829 on behalf of the New York Religious Tract Society. Dividing each city ward into tract districts of about sixty families, the Society assigned a team to distribute tracts in each district (Foster 187). After the success of the New York venture, tract distribution schemes took hold by 1834 in Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh. The Philadelphia distribution team claimed that it had given out two million pages of tracts per month in 1834 (Foster 188).

The staggering publication efforts of organizations such as the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society and the American Bible Society, augmented by publications of a multitude of smaller religious groups, greatly

influenced antebellum American public discourse. And because of the steady increase of literacy rates among white middle class women and free black women, especially in the north, much of the audience for this literature was female. It was partially because of their wide-spread literature distribution which involved both women and men that Protestants gained so much power in antebellum America. To assert that this massive Protestant influence was a fact of American life is not to ascribe to it omnipotent control over every part of the culture. There were many other forces at work in the young nation with its experimental political system, unfixed borders and many religious sects. But Protestants, greatly strengthened by their massive and innovative publication enterprises, exercised tremendous power in antebellum America.

Of course, such Christian publishing did not have a monopoly on the market, and there was a wealth of other literature ranging in content from secular radicalism to gross sensationalism, including even pornographic novels, available to the American public (Reynolds 169-309). The Scottish social reformers, Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen, produced an important newspaper in New York called the *Free Enquirer* which challenged the dominant religious influence, encouraged the labor movement, advocated for secular public school, and fought for the equality of women (Foster 230). There were a number of other liberal publications in antebellum America, such as the *New York Correspondent* (Foster 230). Also, as David Reynolds points out, radical democrats such as George Pippard published daring and subversive reform literature (169-210). And even within the Christian community, individualistic leaders like William Miller used mass publication to gain national recognition (Hatch 126).

But as mentioned earlier, conservative Protestants set the tone for the whole publishing industry up to the Civil War, reinforcing repressive idealizations of women throughout the nation.

The Unity of the Fathers

The abundance of Protestant literature, with its traditional ideas about women's propensity to fall into sin, their weakness, and their natural subordination, entered into the tumultuous and unsteady post-revolutionary American society. Everything--the political order, the economy, geographical boundaries, religious beliefs and practices--seemed fluid and capable of change. Economic swings caused fortunes to be won and lost rapidly. All of this uncertainty, Hatch maintains, fostered "a terrible fear that the Union might not work" (63). This fear was deeply entwined with religious sensibilities because most Christians had taken hold of the notion that democratic America was a special gift from God. If the Union failed, American Christians like the famous Methodist preacher, Lorenzo Dow, feared they could fall back under "the galling yoke of Tyranny and priest-craft" found in Europe, as he put pamphlet published in 1811 or 1813 (qtd. in Hatch 185). In much religious thought, America was a gift from God, a new world where political liberty could give rise to increased spiritual liberty. Dow captured the opinion of many Christian Americans in his 1813 text entitled "The Dawn of Liberty" (Hatch 185). In it he appropriates Thomas Paine's deist arguments in *Common Sense,* placing them in a Christian perspective. He says, " America lay

undiscovered for several thousand years, as if reserved for the era, when common sense began to wake from her long slumber. As if the Creator's wisdom and goodness had a 'New World,' in reversion for a new theater for the exhibition of new things" (qtd. in Hatch 185).

One would think, looking back at the social fluidity of post-revolutionary America, that one of the "new things" which Dow anticipated would be a thorough liberation of women. And, indeed, there is no denying that in some areas of life, especially in authorship and in church and reform organizations, American women experienced significant liberation between the Revolutionary and the Civil wars. But at the same time, both political and Protestant ideology attempted to use an exclusively masculine ethos to create harmony and stability in society. As mentioned before, reversion to naked masculine power was often disguised by nineteenth-century men, but its roots were identical to earlier versions of masculine authority. In the first half of the nineteenth century, America embraced paternal images of the founders of the country to form a shared cultural tradition which would unify the nation. George Hutchinson, in his study of Whitman, shows how the poet's fascination with George Washington is representative of a general national response. He says, " Although the significance of the paternal image of the founders may have been peculiarly intense for Whitman, it was typical of the age in which he was raised" (6). Reliance on masculine icons as a means to achieve social cohesion was not confined to public life. Images of the nation's fathers were used to educate children. Hutchinson points out that such masculine "models from history served as chief elements in home and school

education . . ." (2).

In the creation of these icons of national unity, Americans had a difficult time separating political from religious elements. This not is surprising, given the great impact of revivalist Christianity with its consistent identification of political liberty with spiritual growth. So when Mason Locke Weems, in his best-selling biography of Washington, portrayed the general not only as a brilliant military strategist but as a benevolent father, it was inevitable that Washington's civic virtues would imperceptibly blur into Christian virtues. This process is made clear in Susan Warner's novel, *The Wide, Wide World.* When the orphaned teenage protagonist, Ellen Montgomery, is forced to live with unbelieving relatives in Scotland, her defense of the Christian faith extends to her defense of George Washington. In a discussion with her overbearing uncle, the usually submissive Ellen feels that it is her duty to defend the founder's virtue. Her first defense of Washington is that "he was an American" (515), as if the very fact of American nationality produces virtue in its citizens. That view would be consistent with the ideas articulated by Dow earlier. For many, the American nation had a special unction on it from God who desired to purify and renew the world through a literal new world of grace. When pressed by her uncle for a more specific reason for her admiration of Washington, Ellen states that "Washington always did right" (515). This is an unusual sentiment in the novel because Warner is clearly trying to show that humans are essentially sinful. Even the demi-god of Christianity, St. John Humphreys, who captivates Ellen with his will, admits to wrongdoing. That Ellen portrays Washington as perfect demonstrates that she views him not as a normal

human, but as a symbol of Christian/Republican virtue. Warner, as did many Christians, apotheosized the revolutionary leader into a nineteenth-century saint.

This reliance on paternal figures to unify a fused national/religious consciousness was also employed in more purely spiritual ways. Although women formed the majority of members in most churches, leadership was male. This was predictably true in traditional Protestant denominations, but it was also the rule in egalitarian and populist Christian movements such as the Methodists, the Christians, and the Disciples of Christ. Hatch points out that even the most democratic Christian sects "took shape around magnetic [male] leaders who were highly skilled in communication and group mobilization" (5)--for instance, the Methodist, Lorenzo Dow; the Adventist, William Miller; and the Christian, Elias Smith. Even among the radically heretical groups such as the Rappite Harmonists and the Owenite Perfectionists, women did not exercise control over men. The Shaker communities, founded by Ann Lee, were the only antebellum American religious groups in which organizational power was in the hands of women (Ruether 51). So although, in the free-wheeling Protestant religious situation in post-revolutionary America, women did start to preach, their portion of authority was no more than the crumbs dropped from the table of powerful men.

Ironically, it was probably the strength of democratic idealism in American Protestantism which solidified the ideology of containment which men imposed on women. For all the images of the "model-like" women promoted by the shepherds were intended to elevate women to higher social status, as befits ladies of a Christian

republic. In fact, just as the historical Washington was recreated into the image of a saint to respect his dignity as the nation's father, women were made over into the image of an angel out of respect for their dignity as the nation's mothers. Frequently in religious writing of all kinds, writers emphasized that in America women were not treated like dogs, or forced to walk behind the man, or burned on the funeral pyre with their husbands. Rather, in this godly democratic nation, women were elevated, treasured, respected. But the price of the protective idealization was the erasure of the women's selves and the constriction of their social roles. And unlike the dead Washington, American women suffered great existential pain when transformed from flesh and blood to a transcendent image of national virtue.

Furthermore, Protestant men seemed to have had an almost pathological need for "model-like" women who maintained the home. Such beings became a talisman against the evils of the marketplace in which men felt forced to do battle. In the 1852 best-seller, *The Lamplighter*, Maria Cummins portrays the male protagonist, Willy Sullivan, as a man driven against his will into the jungle of business. If he didn't do his manly duty and suffer in the pit of Mammon, then he, his widowed mother, his aged grandfather, and his true love, would remain in poverty. To save his soul while building a successful business career, which included being a colonial exploiter in India, Sullivan keeps his focus on the two most important women in his life: his mother and his true love. When his mother dies, she becomes a kind of guardian angel, whispering counsel in his ear and guiding his steps. The living beloved becomes a beacon by which Sullivan finds his way home through the perils of high society in

India and Paris. Both women have the power to impart supernatural goodness into Sullivan's consciousness, and without them he would be either a wastrel or an avaricious scoundrel. And no doubt the need for preservation from the ravages of American business and political life which Cummins portrays was real. Melville's image of the desiccated Bartleby staring at the wall symbolizes how devastating American commercial life could be to men. In this desolation, men, battered by the excesses of the free market in a sometimes chaotic political system, compulsively grasped the icon of the ideal woman to ward off the terrors of their own existence.

Unnatural Women

The ideas about women that Protestant men promulgated in their literature--that they should be weak, submissive, spiritual, sexually pure, should stay at home, and should be surrounded by an aura of shiny, cheerful, goodness--seeped into all sections of American social life. The ideology was easily accepted because it did not invent the suppression of women; it merely improvised on existing themes and adapted them to contemporary circumstances. Protestant men, as mentioned previously, drew from the deep well of belief about the inherent subordination of women which much traditional biblical interpretation supported and played on pervasive fears of what might happen if women broke out of patriarchal control. What gave the ideology its incredible vitality, despite many impulses in the culture toward liberation, was a subconscious perception by both men and women that if they didn't hold on to the

traditional gender pattern in some form or another, social order, as they knew it, would radically change. And we can see, looking back at them from the end of the twentieth century, their fears were correct. For when women broke out of their spheres, American culture was irreversibly altered. So the struggle about the identity and roles of women was played out for very high stakes according to ancient rules newly revised by antebellum American men. There are traces of this struggle in almost all the writing of antebellum women, and certainly in all the texts of evangelical women.

The South Carolinian sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimke engaged the full opposition of Protestant patriarchs when they traveled as public speakers with Theodore Weld's abolitionist group in the late 1830s. They received a stinging rebuke for straying out of their proper sphere by the Council of Congregationalist Minsters of Massachusetts in an 1837 pastoral letter. The ministers' chastisement fell on the Grimkes, not for their abolitionist ideas, but for their violation of womanly propriety. The letter reads in part:

> We invite your attention to the dangers which at present seem to threaten the female character with widespread and permanent injury; the appropriate duties and influence of women are clearly stated in the New Testament . . . We appreciate the unostentatious prayers of women in advancing the cause of religion at home and abroad; in Sabbath-schools; in leading religious inquirers to pastors for instructions; and in all such associated

> efforts as become the modesty of her sex . . . But when she assumes the place and tone of man . . . she yields the power which God has given her for her protection and her character becomes unnatural. (qtd. in Bartlett 2)

We hear echoes of Fordyce, Green and Duren in this letter with its emphasis on the biblical basis of confinement, the weakness of women in the face of male strength, and the need for a woman to be modest and retiring. This letter also hints at a theme which is seldom overtly stated but which delicately infuses much of the Protestant patriarchal ideology. As the Massachusetts Pastoral letter puts it, there is *danger* when a woman breaks out of the sphere "which God has given her for her protection."

Ministerial warnings and women's texts usually do not spell out exactly what danger "unnatural" women face. That kind of explicitness would be indelicate. But some of the more sensational literature of the era graphically demonstrates what can happen to a woman who tries to be powerful and independent. David Reynolds, in his extensive study of nineteenth-century popular texts, points out that in pulp literature it was taken for granted that once women were "released from the constrictions of female propriety" (363), they were "capable of becoming more ferocious and more sexually aggressive than [men]" (353). The author of an undated nineteenth century crime pamphlet asserts that "a woman makes more rapid strides in the path which leadeth to destruction, when she has once set her foot in it, than a man" (qtd. in Reynolds 363). In an 1835 crime pamphlet another author makes a similar assertion: " [a]woman [who] . . . in a virtuous state is more pure and refined than man, when

profligate sinks into a correspondent degree of depravity" (qtd. in Reynolds 363). These sentiments find an echo in Fordyce's advice literature cited previously. For he implies that women's sins are more devastating to them and their loved ones than men's sins are. One could read Fordyce's observation as a comment on social reality--deviant women are treated more harshly than men. But another reading is possible. Fordyce could be hinting at what sensational literature boldly portrays: the very nature of woman which gives her virtue also gives her a tremendous capacity for depravity.

As Joanne Dobson points out, one of the main ways of describing a woman who broke out of her appointed sphere was to say that she was "unsex[ed]" (17). But that loss of female gender identity did not usually give the escapee a masculine identity, nor did it render her sexually neutral. Rather, an "unsex[ed]" woman was usually a depraved woman whose depravity included some kind of sexual transgression. But the communication of the nature of this depravity was usually rather indirect in polite nineteenth-century literature. It is difficult for the modern reader, especially in evangelical texts, to get an idea of what happens to an "unsex[ed]" woman who goes wrong. It is almost as if the cultural code runs a dual-track message, one which is visible to respectable society, one which is visible only in disreputable literature. The Congregationalist pastoral letter hints at threats to "the female character" which could bring "widespread and permanent injury." A text such as George Pippard's novel, *The Quaker City*, supplies the details.

In this 1854 best-seller, "unsex[ed]" women are usually involved in manipula-

tion of men and illicit sexuality. Reynolds maintains that Pippard was subverting conventional ideas about womanhood by portraying these deviant women sympathetically. Even if that is true, he is still filling out the other half of the middle-class Protestant communication code by vividly depicting the fates of the "unnatural" women which the Massachusetts divines only hint at. One such woman is Mary Arlington, a woman who was initially pure, but who leaves her protected sphere for the illicit love. In describing Mary's fall, the narrator of *Quaker City* uses the same language about women that the crime pamphlets do:

> She knew not that in her own organization, were hidden the sympathies of an animal as well as the intellectual nature, that the blood in her veins only waited an opportunity to betray her, that in the very atmosphere of the holiest love of woman, crouched a sleeping fiend, who . . . would rise with hot breath and bloodshot eyes, to wreck eternal ruin on her woman's honor. (qtd. in Reynolds 363)

Here again is the suggestion that women have a secret vulnerability, a propensity for depravity that is lurking within them. The only way for a woman not to be betrayed by the very "blood in her veins" is to for her to assiduously maintain her role as a "model-like woman" and stay well within the bounds of her womanly sphere.

Looked at in this way, the nineteenth-century Protestant ideology about women is every bit as destructive as the pure misogyny of someone like the witch-hunting

sixteenth-century divine, William Perkins. He and his cohorts had believed in the natural propensity of women for sorcery and would strip women and search their bodies for signs of their demonic vocations. In the nineteenth-century, men stripped women psychologically. But unlike their seventeenth-century predecessors, antebellum American men suspected that all women had the marks of depravity. It was, as Pippard put it, "hidden . . . in the very atmosphere of the holiest love of women" So, the "model-like woman" was permanently poised, by her very nature, on the verge of depravity. Virtue protected her from nothing; it only made her, by some strange twist of logic, more vulnerable to evil. Her only protection was male control. Protestant men extorted submission out of antebellum American women by promising to protect women from themselves.

Another danger that women had to be protected from was the brutality of men. Just as there was an implicit threat in most Protestant ideology about women's essential depravity, there was a submerged threat that women who leave their sphere would be destroyed in the masculine sphere of society. As mentioned previously, antebellum business and political life was a competitive, indeed cutthroat affair, in which reputations and fortunes were won only to be lost the next month. Especially after the devastating economic panic of 1837, which shook not only the economy but many Protestant men's confidence in the providence of God, the social arena of men was very rough. Popular literature portrayed American men being eaten alive by an amoral and ruthless social/economic system. Women who stayed in their proper sphere became saviors of men, but if they entered the rigors of the male marketplace

themselves, they would not long remain unscathed. A strong female advocate of the woman's sphere, Catherine Beecher, in an 1837 essay, warns women that if they leave their proper place, they will lose the protection which their nobility and Christian virtue gives them. Beecher warns that "the moment woman begins to feel the prompting of ambition, or the thirst for power, her aegis of defence is gone" (312). In Beecher's view, which follows the dominant ideology fairly closely, anything that is outside of the conservative view of women's nature and role is ambitious. When women leave "their appropriate retirement" (312), even in such a noble cause as abolitionism, they expose themselves to "the ungoverned violence of mobs, and to sneers and ridicule in public places" (312). Women must keep away from the "arena of political [or business] collisions" (312) and use their power only as "peaceful mediators" (312) with a personal influence over men.

Given these threatening messages about women which were coded into nineteenth-century social life and literary texts, it is no wonder that women paid such careful attention to their own behavior. In 1835, the French writer de Tocqueville commented that the average American woman was not "slow to perceive that she cannot depart for an instant from the established usage of her contemporaries without putting in jeopardy her peace of mind, her honor, her very social existence" (qtd. in Dobson 14). In a similar vein, Harriet Beecher Stowe notes in a review of Mme. de Stael's novel, *Corinne*, published in Stowe's *Life and Letters,* that American women could not demonstrate the passions of Mme. de Stael's protagonist because of "the constant habits of self-government which the rigid forms of [American] society

demand" (qtd. in Dobson 17). No doubt, both of these writers were referring to the women they knew best--middle-class white women. But texts written by black women indicate that some of the social conformity exacted from middle-class white women filtered through barriers of race and class to constrain the lives of lower class and black women. The "social existence" of the free black woman and the slave was also jeopardized by deviations from the accepted code of women's nature.

Harriet Jacobs, in her 1861 ex-slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, portrays the values of her grandmother, who is called Aunt Marthy, as identical to conventional middle-class white women's values. Even though Harriet is held captive by slavery in the household of the lecherous Dr. Norcross, her grandmother expects her to conform fully to the ideals of womanhood while maintaining her spirituality, reticence, modesty and sexual purity. When Jacobs, both to escape her master's sexual harassment and to enact revenge on him, gets pregnant by a prominent white neighbor, her grandmother repulses her. Accurately reflecting middle-class white values, Marthy castigates Jacobs by saying, "I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother (56). Then, tearing both her mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble from Jacobs's fingers, the grandmother, who is a prosperous free woman, throws her out of her house. Eventually the grandmother is kind to her, but Jacobs notes that "She did not say, 'I forgive you' "(57).

The grandmother, even though supportive of Jacobs through her two pregnancies and the raising of the children, continues to expect her to conform rigidly

to the social mores governing "model-like" women. Even when Harriet and her children are to be sent to Norcross's son's country plantation, Marthy expects her to observe the maternal conventions of a middle-class white mother. When Jacobs, in a desperate lunge for freedom, decides to leave her children with the grandmother, thinking that they would be safer from Dr. Norcross's brutality if she were gone, the grandmother castigates her for being a bad mother. So fearful is Marthy and so attuned to the strictures imposed on women, that she not only would not help Jacobs escape, she begs her not to go. The grandmother would rather have Jacobs sustain a living death in a small crawl space over her shed then for her to violate proprieties by abandoning her children. Jacobs escapes her tomb only when an accident threatens her detection and the ruin of the whole family.

Jacobs, although definitely more daring than most white women in admitting both her sexual transgressions and her mixed motives for taking up with a white man, generally reinscribes traditional views of women throughout her narrative. Although she cannot rest in the refuge of her womanly purity, she consistently uses her motherhood as a the major focus of motivation in her life. Her children are described as ties to life; she, like the maternally-crazed Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* is sparked to heroic deeds on their behalf. So wedded is Jacobs to the middle-class code of womanly behavior, that she willingly embraces it when she is free. She becomes the confidant to two middle-class white women, the first and second wives of the prominent publisher Nathaniel Willis. A more uncongenial atmosphere could scarcely be imagined, for both women were married to a man, who, according to the account of

his sister, the famous author Sarah Parton (Fanny Fern), was heartless, egotistical and shallow (Warren xiv). Jacobs clearly knew that something was wrong with Willis, for she would not write her manuscript around him, nor did she want him to publish it (Yellin xviii). After the second Mrs. Willis buys Jacobs's freedom, she feels compelled to remain by her side, instead of just trying to pay her back. In the manner of a subservient middle-class Christian woman, Jacobs says that "God so orders circumstances to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side. It is a privilege to serve her . . . " (210). And even Jacobs's wish for an independent life is defined by the concepts associated with the true woman. She wants "a hearthstone" (20) of her own, but adds that she wants it "for my children's sake far more than [her] own" (201). Thus, from slavery to freedom, Jacobs stays enmeshed in what Sarah Grimke, her 1837 published correspondence with Mary Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, calls the "bonds of womanhood" (34).

True Women

In emphasizing the shaping power of conservative Protestant ideas about women, there is a danger of overgeneralizing their influence and homogenizing a complex American culture. But so much of the literature about or by women wrestles with the concepts of what Fuller calls the "numerous party" that one cannot escape the conclusion that the conservative shepherds exerted a great deal of influence in the

culture. They seemed to have set the agenda for discussions of women's identity and social roles, and most women felt that they had to at least acknowledge the traditional ideas even when opposing them. Dobson, in her study of Emily Dickinson, notes that this innovative poet freely used the conventional images about women available in the culture--the good little girl, the bride, the wife--in her often subversive poetry. Harriet E. Wilson, who wrote her 1859 novel, *Our Nig*, for a black audience, reveals in both tone and content her awareness of the constraints which middle-class white Protestant men had imposed on women's behavior and discourse. In describing her mother, a white woman who lived with a black man, Wilson stopped the narrative to address a comment to critical readers who would have been schooled in the notion of true womanhood, for her mother had violated both sexual and racial proprieties. Wilson says: "You can philosophize, gentle reader, on the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons . . . Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher Poor Mag, she has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She descended another step down the ladder of infamy" (13). Notice that Wilson, like Harriet Jacobs, affirms the basis of Protestant ideology about women, even when defending one of its victims. Her mother becomes an object to be pitied, "Poor Mag," who, abandoning the purity demanded of good women, was heading steadily down "the ladder of infamy."

Male authors also felt the pressure of Protestant concepts about women. For example, Hawthorne ended up, for all his talk about the coming of the new woman, reinforcing conservative ideas about women in his portrayal of Hester Prynne in his

novel *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1852, Prynne, who the narrator says believed that "a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground" (232) thought at first that she might be "the destined prophetess" (232) of this new order. But because she is a fallen woman, no matter how refined by her sorrow, she is too "stained with sin [and] bowed down with shame" (233) to take on that role. The narrator goes on to add that even a woman "burdened with a life-long sorrow" (233) that is not based on sin is not an appropriate vehicle for the revelation of a new era. For, as the narrator says, "[t]he narrator and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy" (233). Hawthorne is asking here, like the conservative Protestants, for an idealized "model-like woman." Both Hawthorne and evangelical men wanted to erase real, individual women and construct an idealized abstraction which would exercise some kind of purifying or soteriological power in patriarchal American culture.

Furthermore, even very radical Christian women, such as the black abolitionist and writer Frances Harper, had to deal with the ideals governing women's nature and roles. In her short story, "The Two Offers," published in 1859, Harper is clearly trying to promote a more self-sufficient and independent image of women and challenges some of the conventional images. The narrator introduces a more progressive view of women into the flow of the story:

> You may paint her in poetry or fiction, as a frail vine,
>
> clinging to her brother man for support, and dying when

> deprived of it, and all this may sound well enough to please the imagination of school-girls, or love-lorn maidens. But woman--true woman-- . . . needs more than the mere development of her affectional nature. Her conscience should be enlightened, her faith in the true and right established, and scope given to her Heaven-endowed and God-given faculties. (1928)

Obviously Harper cannot move herself and other women out of the Protestant idealizations without acknowledging the stereotypes directly, countering them with her own version of "the true woman."

It is clear that whether they supported the Protestant discourse about the protective containment of a "model-like" women as Catherine Beecher did, or opposed it as Margaret Fuller did, or like Harriet Wilson, fell somewhere in between, American women had to come to terms with the force of the idealizations thrust upon them by antebellum American Protestant men. Evangelical women felt the tensions between patriarchal containment and impulses for freedom especially keenly, for they lived in the belly of the beast. Their narratives show a wide range of responses to this conflict between constriction and liberty, ranging from total submission to male authority to rebellion against it. These texts, five of which we will explore in the following chapters, are windows into a complex and powerful cultural drama which shaped antebellum American women's consciousness.

Chapter 2

Bide Together:

The Wide, Wide World and *The Lamplighter*

Even within the constraints of the more conservative evangelical literature, there is a complex and often subtle tension between patriarchal containment of women and women's impulses for liberty. Submission to, subversion of, and rarely, open resistance to patriarchal authority do not always appear in these texts as fixed patterns. Rather interplays between these elements are apparent within a single text or between texts. This chapter will examine the interplay between patriarchal containment and impulses toward liberation in two conventional, and highly successful, narratives written by antebellum evangelical women: Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighters* (1854). As mentioned previously, these two texts were the best-selling books in America in the 1850s, except for the evangelical antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Warner's other successful novel, *Queechy*. Undoubtedly, their immense popularity sprang from their reinforcement of conventional representation of women. Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, a more radical and secular novel about women published in 1862, did not sell well in this era. Nor did the unusual autobiographies of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw garner large sales.

They were published by the authors and circulated privately at religious events. Phoebe Palmer's *Way of Holiness* sold well because of its conservative style of presentation but did not achieve the popularity of these even more conventional texts. Yet, despite their conventionality, *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* contain many surprising and sometimes disturbing insights about the lives of antebellum evangelical women.

Moreover, the two novels demonstrate the provisional nature of ideas about women in the evangelical culture. For only a few years after *The Wide, Wide World* was published, Cummins very consciously revised it. She signaled her challenge to Warner's text by lifting one of the major images in Warner's first chapter to begin her book--the image of a man lighting street lamps at dusk. In her revision of Warner's novel, Cummins tried to portray women with more self-determination and self-respect than Warner did, as if she were giving her a gentle, although firm, rebuke. So even within the limited framework of more conservative evangelical women's narratives, there were significant variations, and even conflicts, in women writers's understanding of their identity and social roles.

This study takes its lead from Tompkins's pioneering criticism of *The Wide, Wide World.* She speaks of "the claustrophobic atmosphere of the novel, its concentration on the moral consequences of even the smallest pieces of [women's] behavior" (*Sensational Designs* 177). Unlike Tompkins, I see, even within the claustrophobia of Ellen's constricted life, great conflicts between women's autonomy and patriarchal containment. Also, unlike Tompkins, I put more emphasis on Ellen's

relationship with Mr. John and less on her position in what Tompkins sees as a homogeneous social environment. Even though antebellum evangelical culture was often extremely repressive to women, it was not completely static. Women's lives, then as now, unfolded as part of a complex process which involved both individual characteristics and social forces. And, as mentioned in the introduction, although *The, Wide, Wide World* reveals a great deal about antebellum evangelical women's experiences, it is not the "ur-text" of the era that Warner claims it to be (Warner, *World* 587). It needs to be read with other evangelical texts. So, however indebted I am to Tompkins for her pioneering work in evangelical women's culture and her reading of *The Wide, Wide World,* this study's explorations are quite different than hers.

". . . the last great evil"

Warner, at the beginning of *The Wide, Wide, World,* appears to be attempting to delineate an independent female spirituality that can covertly withstand patriarchal oppression. The story opens with the protagonist, the ten-year old Ellen Montgomery, and her dying pious mother, caught up in the will of the insensitive and domineering Captain Montgomery who believes that both his wife and his daughter should obey his will without question. And indeed, they usually do. Mrs. Montgomery is careful to heed the instructions she gives to Ellen, "[T]hough we must sorrow, we must not rebel" (12). For in all contested decisions, Mrs. Montgomery submits to his will because Captain Montgomery "adds the weight of [his] authority, insisting on her

compliance" to his wishes (12). Her open resistance consists of an occasional attempt at reasoning with him or a deep sigh. When a situation is really bad, as it is when Captain Montgomery decides one night to send Ellen away to his sister's house the next morning, Mrs. Montgomery "only closed her eyes and kept perfectly quiet" (57), and he "never suspected" (57) the depth of her resistance to his will. Clearly, Mrs. Montgomery perceives herself as being in a weak position in her patriarchal culture and feels that overt rebellion will bring down the wrath of her husband on her and her daughter's heads. So she counsels young Ellen, who passionately desires to resist her father's plans for her, "You will hurt both yourself and me, my daughter, if you cannot command yourself" (12).

Within this passive acquiescence to Captain Montgomery's will, however, Mrs. Montgomery develops a strong private spirituality which sustains her and which she tries to pass on to Ellen before she dies on a trip to Europe. (Her husband insists that she take the rigorous trip for her health, but she knows that she is going to die.) In their last days together at home, Mrs. Montgomery keeps Ellen home from school and instructs her in spiritual truths. She repeatedly tells the sorrowing Ellen that "We know that all things work together for the good to them that love God" (41), that God is a good shepherd (41), and that "[h]e does not afflict [them] willingly" (41). She puts their present sorrow in perspective by reminding Ellen that "[they] have no continuing city here" (41). Their true home, says Mrs. Montgomery, is heaven, "where changes do not come; and they that are once gathered there are parted no more for ever; and all tears are wiped from their eyes" (41). She says that "my greatest concern

is, that my little Ellen--my precious baby--may follow me and come there too" (41). Ellen, who does not understand spiritual things very well, but who desires to have the faith her mother possesses, gives her whole heart to her mother's spiritual instruction. So in their spirituality, they build a small shelter in a hostile world where they experience emotional bonding and share the hope of heaven.

Empowered by their private spirituality, Mrs. Montgomery finds the strength to disobey her husband before she dies. And although that defiance is discreet, it is significant. In order to prepare Ellen to meet her uncertain future with unsympathetic relatives after her death, Mrs. Montgomery wants to provide her with whatever material support that she can. Her husband grudgingly agrees to supply Ellen with a couple of new dresses, but refuses to get her anything else. But Mrs. Montgomery wants Ellen to have a Bible. Against both her husband's and her doctor's orders, the mortally ill Mrs. Montgomery leaves the house without male protection to sell her mother's ring, her only valuable possession, and also an object of much emotional importance to her. It is particularly significant that she takes Ellen with her to the jewelry store and has her witness the transaction. In doing so she reinforces their spirituality as a shared female experience, as the purchase price for the Bible passes from Mrs. Montgomery's mother to Mrs. Montgomery to Ellen with no men actively involved in the process. Also, Mrs. Montgomery allows Ellen to see both her pain at parting with the ring and her commitment to providing for Ellen. The Bible which they finally buy is surrounded by intense mother/daughter bonding. And in addition to the Bible, Mrs. Montgomery provides Ellen with a fully-equipped writing desk so that

Ellen can write to her during the short time remaining in Mrs. Montgomery's life. The eternal word of the Bible is to be reinforced by their sharing of human words through intimate correspondence. By such means Mr. Montgomery hopes to give Ellen some protection and spiritual counsel, preserving their communal spiritual shelter despite their separation.

This strong private spirituality that Ellen and her mother share does not, unfortunately, give Ellen the kind of strength necessary to maintain an independent sense of self. Despite the example of her mother's wretched life under the thumb of the callous Captain Montgomery, Ellen chooses to replicate her bondage. She not only gives in to patriarchal domination, she exults in her submission to her mentor and, eventual, husband, St. John Humphreys, a neighbor of the aunt whom she is sent to live with when her mother is dying. What is particularly compelling and disturbing is that as Ellen's behavior deviates further and further from her mother's admonitions, the narrator continually interprets Ellen's behavior as fulfilling the desires of her mother. So even when Ellen is totally dominated by St. John Humphreys, whom she calls Mr. John, Ellen or the narrator still talk about how she trusts only in God. It is as if Warner has a split consciousness about what she is writing. In one sense, she wants Ellen to be spiritually independent and capable of relying only on God. The dying Mrs. Montgomery's main message to Ellen is that she must depend solely on God for strength and guidance. She goes so far as to tell Ellen that God is taking her away from her daughter so that Ellen can draw closer to God. But on the other hand, Warner obviously wants Mr. John to be the master over Ellen's inner and outer

life. He gains complete control over her education, her personal reading, her daily schedule, and who she sees. Not one trifling thought or behavior escapes his notice. So snared is Ellen in the dominance of Mr. John, that she believes he can read her mind, and his voice affects her like a "spell" (349).

Under his influence, Ellen's fledgling independent spirituality collapses entirely. After knowing him a short time, her only concern is pleasing him. Even his smallest frown stuns Ellen, and she feels that "to have seriously displeased him . . . would [be] . . . the last great evil that could fall upon her in the world" (461). By the end of the novel, Ellen cannot even think without Mr. John untying "the very knot of her thoughts" (581). The context of her spirituality is so mutated by her obsession with Mr. John's authority that even when she uses the same words about God as her mother does, their meaning is irrevocably altered.

". . . a brother's right"

Warner's depiction of Ellen's swing from her mother's independent spirituality to her soul-destroying submission to Mr. John is not the only contradiction in the text. Warner's representation of sexuality is also puzzling. For instead of adhering to the reticence which is common in evangelical women's narratives, Warner includes some sexually-charged passages in *The Wide, Wide World.* These sections, of course, would not be considered very sexual by late twentieth-century standards. But read in their own historical context, Warner's erotic passages are startling. To be sure, as mentioned

before, sex was a staple in sensational or radical reformist literature such as *The Quaker City*. But it usually does not surface in middle-class texts, especially in the relationships between evangelical men and women. Unfortunately, Warner's representation of Ellen and Mr. John's sexuality is as negative as her depiction of their spirituality. For, in the novel, sexuality is one of the primary means through which Mr. John establishes his dominance over Ellen.

A dream which Ellen has in Scotland illustrates his sexual control over Ellen. After she is forced by her uncle to drink wine, Ellen falls into a deep sleep and sees John as "a king of Scotland . . . standing before her in regal attire" (520). She offers him a glass of wine, and he, with a "tremendous swing" (520) of a "sword of state" (520) knocks the glass out of her outstretched hand. In her dream, Ellen is "abashed" (520) and Mr. John "went forward with one of his old grave kind looks to kiss her" (520). The sexual dominance in this dream is obvious with its image of a king with a sword and Mr. John's insistence that the "abashed" Ellen kiss him. What is less obvious, but quite disturbing, is Ellen's perspective that Mr. John is being "kind" to her when he insists that she kiss him. But Ellen's view of him fits in well with the pattern of sexual dominance which he has established.

From their first encounter, he uses coercion to induce an intimacy in which he is in total control, justifying his behavior under the guise of brotherly kindness. Mr. John is the brother of Alice Humphreys, a young Christian neighbor of Ellen's aunt. Alice has informally taken charge of Ellen's spiritual and social development while her mother is dying. Mr. John meets Ellen at his family's home when he is

twenty and on vacation from his education in the ministry. When he enters the room for the first time, the normally placid Alice, who harbors an excessive, and possibly incestuous, admiration for her brother, quivers and sparkles, as the text puts it. The shy Ellen, so intimidated by Mr. John's charisma and Alice's uncharacteristic goofiness, bursts into anguished tears. The two of them unite to calm her down, and she agrees to accept Mr. John as a brother. Immediately he says, " 'Then if I am to be your brother, you must give a brother's right, you know' . . . drawing her gently to him, and kissing her gravely on the lips" (274). A few months later, during their first Christmas together, he gives her a present--not surprisingly, it is Weems's *Life of Washington.* She, in gratitude, exclaims, "O, I wish I could do something to please you, Mr. John" (329). He replies, "You shall, Ellie, you shall give me a brother's right again" (329).

In his initial interactions with Ellen, then, who at first thinks he is a person "to be feared" (274), Mr. John uses his charisma and powerful authority as a godly Christian man to make Ellen into a sexual object for his personal gratification. She is so young and naive that she has no way to resist his inappropriate behavior, and so learns to associate his sexual domination with filial affection. She starts to long for his kisses and feels upset when she doesn't get one, although she seems to have no conscious understanding of what her desires mean. After all, she is only ten when he initiates her into his sexual dominance.

The strength of their unhealthy sexual bonds is illuminated in the eighteenth chapter. On the way home from a nearby village, Ellen is accosted by a surly youth

who has a grudge against her. Although he does not touch Ellen, he sadistically assaults her horse with a whip, behavior which has an undertone of sexual sadism. Of course, Mr. John comes by just in time and confronts her tormentor. His cool and hostile confrontation with the youth, ends with him throwing the assailant off the road and into the nearby field. When she hears Mr. John speak to the ruffian, Ellen is "breathless with terror" (400), not of the young man, but of what Mr. John will do to him. The scene is charged with intense sexual and physical threat, and Ellen momentarily feels afraid of both men. After the incident, she breaks into convulsive sobs, so upset that "she could scarcely with great effort keep from crying out aloud" (401).

In this heightened state, she and Mr. John arrive home. He uncharacteristically leaves her on her horse and runs into the house when his sister arrives at the door. Ellen mopes outside alone by the horse because "John had forgotten the kiss he always gave her on going or coming" (403). She feels "jealous of it as a pledge of sistership" (403). When John returns to find her, she is hesitant to verbally express her desire. But, "he had her by the shoulders" (403) and "whatever that eye demanded she never knew how to keep back" (403). So she tells him how much she wants to be kissed, and he, of course, obliges. Before kissing her, he says, "You are a foolish child, Ellie (403)", a statement which has several negative messages embedded in it. Mr. John is reminding Ellie that he is the adult and she the child, so that whatever shame she feels about her sexual obsession with him is part of the ordained social order. He is also reinforcing her weakness and dependency by calling her foolish. In addition, he is also inducing in her a unconscious sense of shame by compelling her to

tell him what she wants, giving her what she wants, and then telling her that she is a foolish person for having or indulging in those desires. Whatever Mr. John's exact meaning is, it is obvious that his behavior in this incident is consistent with his overall pattern of sexual dominance over Ellen.

". . . it is enough"

Although Mr. John's sexual domination of Ellen is unusually explicit for a evangelical woman's novel, it fits snugly with patriarchal attitudes toward women discussed in the first chapter. As mentioned there, Nancy Cott points out how didactic literature habitually erases the importance of a women's individual selves and defines them according to their relationship with others, especially men. Mr. John just pushes that principle to include sexual control. But he does not limit his control to sexuality alone. He wants to direct every part of Ellen's life. He becomes her brother, father and husband, as well as her teacher, minister, policeman, and judge. He is distilled patriarchal power in human form, and Ellen gives her whole self over to his keeping. Warner's text is distinguished from other evangelical texts by the relentlessness with which it displays Ellen as an object to be perfected and controlled by Mr. John. The novel has none of the liberating spirituality of evangelical preachers Zilpha Elaw and Jarena Lee, who we will encounter later in this study, and even dispenses with the buffer zone of domesticity which Cummins uses. When Ellen and Mr. John marry, he provides her with a housekeeper and cash to take care of everyday cares; he wants her

to concentrate on the development of her soul under his guidance. Nothing in the novel softens the bondage and depersonalization to which Ellen submits.

No brief discussion of the novel can convey the intensity of Ellen's relationship to Mr. John. The novel portrays Ellen as being totally vulnerable to the implacable authority of Mr. John. When he is around her, he seldom lets her have a moment free from his command. For example, when Ellen is gardening, Mr. John takes control of all the details, allowing her no independent thought. And although he doesn't like gardening, when Ellen "hoed, and raked, and transplanted, and sowed seeds" (428), Mr. John "walked or read" (428) beside her, giving her advice "asked and unasked" (482). Lest gardening give her too much unguided time for private meditations, Mr. John makes sure that the hired man stays with her in the garden, for he never "allowed her to go down there alone" (482).

In every detail of Ellen's life, Mr. John's will "seemed to carry all before it, present or absent" (353). As he is untiring in ordering the details of her life, she is tireless in her zeal to carry out his plans. Ellen gives her "whole soul"(351) into "the performance of whatever he wished her to do"(351). He teaches or arranges for her to learn literature, geography, history and mathematics. He is her drawing and riding master, and he drills her thoroughly in those skills. He keeps her away from novels and critiques her naive reading of biography. Nothing is left to her will or desire. If she wants to read for an extra hour, he makes her get up and ride. If she wants to read a magazine, he makes her read a book of his choice. Even when he gives her a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, a book she really enjoys, he writes explanatory notes in the

margins. Describing Mr. Johns's meticulous control over Ellen, the narrator comments, "Of one thing she was perfectly sure, whatever he might be doing--that he saw and heard her; and equally sure that if any thing were not right she would sooner or later hear of it" (461).

In her extreme subservience to Mr. John, Ellen was not considered by the reading public to be an unusual character like the passive stage medium, the Veiled Lady, in Hawthorne's *Blithesdale Romance*. Instead, Ellen is deemed to be an exemplary model of young womanhood. An essay on Warner and her work in the January 1853 volume of the *North American Review* extols the book for its

> most life-like picture of the character and fate of a little girl . . . such as any of our daughters may be . . . showing, what all little girls cannot show, a degree of character, a firmness of principle, a sweetness of disposition to excite the imagination and stimulate the sympathy . . . . We care for all else only as this little piece of tender, budding womanhood is affected or influence. (qtd. in Baym 119)

This affirmation of Ellen's destruction of self and the linking of it with American girls, "our daughters," shows that Warner is not operating from the fringe of her culture but is expressing a social reality acceptable to a large number of Americans, whether consciously articulated or not.

Ellen's subjection must have touched a sympathetic chord in the public

imagination because the novel became extremely popular--sort of a national craze. In the essay mentioned above, the writer traces the popular acceptance of the novel. Although originally intended for "nice little girls" (qtd. in Baym 49), *The Wide, Wide World* found itself in the hands of elder sisters, mothers, fathers, and even "under the pillows of sober bachelors" (qtd. in Baym 49). The novel was "found on everyone's table and lent from house to house to house" (qtd. in Baym 49). So widespread was its popularity, that the *North American Review* went so far as to write that *The Wide, Wide World,* was a distinguished national novel. Linking it with a couple of other evangelical novels, the essayist rhapsodized about these evangelical texts: "Lo and behold, an American literature" (qtd. in Baym 246).

Given the dominance of patriarchal Protestantism discussed previously, it is no surprise that a national novel was also a Protestant novel. And there is no doubt that Warner intended her text to be overtly polemical in the same way that the pamphlets and books of the American Tract Society were. Jane Tompkins points out that many evangelical writers, critics, and readers "did not distinguish sharply between fiction and what we would now call religious propaganda" (*Sensational Designs* 149). In fact, Warner would not even acknowledge that she wrote novels. She preferred to call her texts stories and considered them to be in the same category as Biblical parables or allegories such as *Pilgrim's Progress* (*Sensational Designs* 149). This leads to some heavy irony in *The Wide, Wide World* because Mr. John is adamant that Ellen not read novels. When he leaves her in the temporary custody of her uncle, Mr. John concedes that Montgomery can conform to the household custom of drinking wine. He allows

this indulgence even though he and his protegee are both firm temperance supporters and do not drink. But he gives her an absolute command on parting with her--"Read no novels" (564). Obviously Warner does not expect her readers to put her novel down at that moment. The anti-novel attitude in her story just enhances her moral credibility as a Christian polemicist. For, as Tompkins says, "[t]he highest function of any art, for Warner as for most of her contemporaries, was the bringing of souls to Christ" (*Sensational Designs* 149). Like many Protestant non-fiction writers, Warner wrote "to educate [her] . . . readers in Christian perfection and to move the nation as a whole closer to the city of God" as part of a unified "world-historical mission" (*Sensational Designs* 149).

But in her fusion of spirituality and male dominance, Warner actually undercuts the very basis of the Protestant belief in unmediated access to God. Mr. John becomes a priest for Ellen, leading her to the holiness of God. At times he flirts with assuming the actual place of God in Ellen's heart. A final chapter of the book, recently rediscovered and published in the 1987 Feminist Press reprint of the novel, graphically demonstrates how far Warner actually goes in destroying the basis of her own evangelical beliefs. It is possible that the last chapter is omitted because it makes the idolatrous nature of Ellen's relationship to Mr. John too apparent. (There are no extant records explaining why the last chapter was omitted.) In the final chapter, Warner gives a glimpse of Ellen and St. John entering their married life together after she comes of age and can leave her Scottish relatives. On the second floor of their home, distant from the public gaze, Mr. John creates a private room for Ellen, furnished to

his taste. The only passage to this room runs through his own study, symbolizing his total control over Ellen, both physically and psychologically. In this patriarchal space, Ellen is to continue her development under St. John's meticulous tutelage. In the last few lines of the chapter, Mr. John and Ellen are examining the various objects in the room while he expounds on their significance. He then pauses to take their eyes off material goods so that they can consider the things of heave. He speaks of eternal life, saying that "them that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him" (583). Ellen, "nestling to his [Mr. John's] side," says, "'I am satisfied . . . it is enough. I want no more'" (583). This ending could be read in at least three ways--Ellen wants no more than eternal life, Ellen wants no more than to be nestled in spiritual and erotic submission to Mr. John, or Ellen's desire for eternal life has merged with her desire for Mr John. The last two readings, however, seem most convincing.

". . . whip and spur"

Not only does Warner destroy Ellen and undercut her own evangelical message through Ellen's idolatrous submission to Mr. John, she further complicates the novel through her negative depiction of him. It is clear in the story that Mr. John is being put forward as godly man. Yet this moral exemplar, who eventually becomes a minister, does not act like a good man. When Mr. John is contrasted with Trueman Flint, Gerty's protector in *The Lamplighter*, his flaws are especially apparent. For Flint embodies the gentleness, the forgetfulness of self, and the spontaneous generosity

which fits with evangelical women's ideals about men. He inspires no fear in Gerty, and they live together peacefully in a small urban apartment without any suggestion that he is either emotionally or sexually aggressive towards her. Mr. John, on the other hand, despite his excellent manners (when he wants to use them) is self-willed, frequently arrogant, sexually aggressive, and sometimes physically dangerous to anyone who opposes him. When Ellen first meets him, as noted previously, she is "quite sure that he was a person to be feared" (275). She only gets over her conscious fear of him by learning to be totally pliant to his will.

Although Warner does give Mr. John all the right Christian words to say, she allows an unflattering image of him to develop in the novel. For instance, at a Christmas house party he satirically goads to anger a rather dull young boy who is not his intellectual equal. As the boy is planning on how he will thrash Mr. John, he is counseled by a former victim of Mr. John's wrath not to take him on. Apparently, the previous Christmas the unfortunate man had fought and been thoroughly defeated by him. The man comments that when Mr. John is roused, he has "strength enough for twice his bone and muscle" (318). The man adds that he has seen him do "curious things once or twice!" (318). It seems especially odd that this kind of physical threat occurs two years in a row at Christmas, traditionally a time for Christians to at least feign peace. But it is during the nativity season, when attention is focused on the vulnerability of the Christ child, that Warner highlights Mr. John's propensity to violence. His violence seems to be approved of by the narrator, Ellen, and Mr. John's friends. But it seems discordant when placed in the larger context of evangelical

women's values which prize gentleness and self-restraint in Christian men.

Ellen is fully aware of St. John's nastiness but is reassured that he is never "ironical or severe" (461) with her. When a gracious friend of his family makes a superficial remark to Mr. John about his church, "Something like a flash of contempt" (474) crosses his face. But he quickly covers with a smile before proceeding to put the erring woman right. Toward the end of the story, when he is attempting to release Ellen from her Scottish relatives, a servant describes him to one of the them as "somebody that is not accustomed to be said 'no' [to] . . . (558). Barging uninvited around the Scottish manor, he answers a servant who wants to know how to introduce him by saying, "No name--stand back!" (559). Ellen, musing on Mr. John's performance in Scotland, defines his major character trait; she knows that "he would do what he pleased" (568).

Mr. John's aggressive behavior, coupled with his long-winded expositions about Jesus, salvation, and heaven, create a somewhat perverse impression of him. This is especially true when he is around Ellen, for he is always insistent that she show perfect courtesy and sacrifice her own desires to his will, or for the good of others when that corresponds to his will. Her slightest irritation or hesitancy to do her duty, as defined by Mr. John, is treated as a serious moral fault. For instance, he counsels her to be patient and obedient under the irksome authority of her Scottish relatives, but he has no compunction about spurning the lady of the house's wish that he not see Ellen. Forcing his way in to see her, he goes up to her private room for an intimate conversation.

All of Mr. John's worst characteristics--his dominating will, his arrogance, his sexual and physical aggressiveness coalesce--in his relationship with his horse. This horse is wild, and only Mr. John can ride him. When Ellen asks him if the horse is "good" (402), which in her mind means the horse unhesitatingly obeys Mr. John, he replies, "I hope so . . . if he is not, I shall be at the pains to make him so. We are hardly acquainted yet" (402). Mr. John establishes his acquaintance with the horse, in the words of has sister, by the use of "management" (377) which includes a "judicious use of whip and spur" (377). Some women friends of Ellen and Alice recoil at Mr. John's treatment of the horse, thinking his methods to be too brutal. Even his doting sister "could not look on" (377) as Mr. John subdues the horse. But characteristically, Alice and Ellen agree that however cruel Mr. John appears to be, he would never to anything "cruelly or unnecessarily" (377). The exclamation of Miss Sophie probably expresses a more common opinion of Mr. John's horse training: "My conscience! he frightened me to death" (376). One cannot help but think that Mr. John's approach to horses reflects a spirituality that is equally domineering. It does not take much imagination to picture "the whip and spur" which he so skillfully wields on his horse being aptly employed over the vulnerable psyche of Ellen Montgomery.

Although Warner's depiction of Mr. John's aggressiveness is unusual in that it includes such explicit sexual overtones, portrayals of male violence are not foreign in antebellum evangelical women's narratives. At times, the hostile underside of men's characters emerge in the texts, often in unexpected ways. Negative images of men's aggression sometimes simply erupt out of the texts without sufficient preparation from

the preceding sections of the narrative or in contrast to the avowed values in the text. In *The Wide, Wide World,* the disturbing behavior of Mr. John toward Ellen conflicts with a multitude of narrative comments and illustrative dialogue which are designed to show how deeply Christian Mr. John is.

Stowe demonstrates some of the same narrative peculiarities in her description of Christian men. Although she sets up Uncle Tom as the embodiment of Christian virtue, she, at the same time, praises men who are not forgiving and always loving. George Shelby, for example, the son of Tom's original master, is praised by Stowe for his violence toward Simon Legree, Tom's abusive new owner. When threatened by Legree, George ignites like a "powder-magazine" (447). His character appears to be much like that of Mr. John, whose inner being is described as "gun powder" (446). In his confrontation with Legree, George "turned, and with one indignant blow, knocked Legree flat upon his face" (447). The text notes approvingly that "as he stood over him, blazing with wrath and defiance, he would have formed no bad personification of his great namesake triumphing over the dragon" (447). Stowe's positive characterization of George, which flows so naturally into the narrative, is the exact reversal of her underlying theme of the power of persevering Christian love. Stowe presents a similar contradiction when Mrs. Shelby's personal slave Eliza, along with her husband and child, flees to Canada. Under the protection of a Quaker family, they are threatened by armed and violent bounty hunters. One of the Quakers, Phineas Fletcher, assists the fugitive slaves in repulsing their pursuers. Combining Quaker diction with overt violence, Fletcher says, "Friend, thee isn't wanted here" (217) as he

pushes an assailant off a thirty foot embankment.

Undoubtedly handling the aggression of Christian men was one of the greatest challenges that evangelical women, especially those who strongly supported complete male dominance, had to contend with. Stowe seems more aware of the contradictions in her narrative in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, than Warner is in *The Wide, Wide, World.* For Stowe puts in some dialogue about the nature of violence and aggression in the section when Eliza and her family are in the Quaker settlement. She doesn't resolve the issue there, or in the rest of the text, but at least the contradictions are mentioned. Warner, on the other hand, totally suppresses any expression of ambivalence towards Mr. John's aggressive and hostile behavior. Only a few minor characters question his arrogant assumption of mastery over everyone around him, and the narrator always proves those people wrong. Ellen, as mentioned before, is aware of the threat that Mr. John poses, but she simply erases all opposition in herself so that he will have no target. Ellen knows that with such a dangerous man she must, in Catherine Beecher's words cited above, retain her "aegis of defence" (312), an uncompromising passivity in the face of patriarchal dominance.

A Light in the Dusk

It is clear that in *The Lamplighter*, Cummins is deliberately trying to rewrite Warner's novel in a way which gives women more dignity and which frees them from the arrogance of middle-class Protestant men which is embodied in Mr. John. To

achieve her purposes, she picks up on a minor image in Warner's text and uses it to form the core of hers. On the second page of *The Wide, Wide World,* Ellen Montgomery, caught with her dying mother in a household ruled by her insensitive and domineering father, gazes out the window at dusk. Ellen sits "with her face glued to the window as if spellbound, gazing out at every dusky form that passed, as though it had some strange interest for her" (10). Then, at last, she sees who she is waiting for: the lamplighter. He moves from lamp to lamp, bringing light to the street. So fascinated is Ellen by the lamplighter that "[t]he veriest moth could not have followed the light with more perseverance than did Ellen's eyes, until the lamplighter gradually disappeared" (10). Her absorption with the lamplighter makes her forget that "there ever was such a place as in-doors" (10). When she finally takes her face from the window, she notices the room is "dark and cheerless" (10) as her ever-weakening mother sleeps on a sofa.

Warner never comes back to this image, but Cummins perceptively realizes the importance of this small scene. For it distills Ellen's predicament. She yearns for light, yet is separated from it by a pane of glass which represents social constraints imposed on her as a conventional young woman. So she must sit passively and watch for a light that is always outside of her reach. Ellen, being so conformed to patriarchal expectations, cannot, as the evangelical preacher Jarena Lee does, wait outside her house for the blessing of sanctification, which falls upon Lee like "lightning" (*Sisters* 34). Nor does she ecstatically merge with the sun, as does another preacher, Zilpha Elaw. The only illumination that she receives comes through Mr. John, her Protestant

high priest, who carefully controls her access to the divine.

For instance, one evening in Scotland, Ellen is patiently enduring a lifeless party, standing by the piano in a crowd listening to someone sing. Suddenly she has an interior vision of Mr. John at their initial meeting, the first time he claims his brother's "right" (274). Looking up, she sees the real John standing near her and is instantly transformed, as if by lightning. The narrator comments that "It wouldn't be easy to describe the change in Ellen's face. Lightning makes as quick and as brilliant an illumination, but lightning does not stay" (559). Here she receives as much sanctification as the patriarchy can give her, one which does not fill her, as divine light fills Jarena Lee, with the words of glory. Rather, Ellen, through Mr. John's illumination, loses not only her ability to speak for herself, but also her ability even to understand what she is thinking. The contrast between Warner's use of light here and Jarena Lee's and Zilpha Elaw's encounters with light is revealing. For the preachers, light is something which comes directly from God, which, as will be shown in the third chapter, energizes them to be independent from men and deepens their own understanding of God and the world. For Warner, light is a repressive force transferred from Mr. John's patriarchal fires to Ellen's dim heart. Under the influence of this light, Ellen becomes increasingly passive and succumbs to the will of her master.

In contrast, it is the gentle Christian love of the lamplighter Trueman Flint which controls Cummins's narrative and defines the way in which the protagonist, Gerty Flint, negotiates the perilous tensions between patriarchal containment and

impulses toward liberty. Cummins acknowledges the necessity of divine light for women's development. She chooses, however, neither the radical independent spirituality of Lee and Elaw nor the idolatrous obsessions of Ellen, who flies to Mr. John's lamp like a moth to a flame. Rather, she creates in the figure of Trueman Flint, the lamplighter in Gerty's neighborhood, an ideal Christian man, one who can help Gerty grow up, but who will not take over her being. As St. John embodies the worst of patriarchal Protestantism, Flint embodies the best. Thus Cummins tries to effect a compromise between autonomy and freedom which does not destroy a woman's spirit.

Gerty trapped "in-doors" as Ellen is, shares's Ellen's fascination with the lamplighter. The narrator says:

> "She loved to watch for the coming of the old man who lit the street lamp in front of the house where she lived, to see the bright torch he carried flicker in the wind; and then, when he ran up his ladder, lit the lamp so quickly . . . one gleam of joy was shed on a little desolate heart, to which gladness was a stranger. (2)

When her cruel foster mother Nan Grant kills Gerty's kitten and then throws Gerty into the cold winter night, she is delighted to encounter Trueman Flint on his evening rounds. When Nan refuses to take Gerty back, Flint decides to take her home and ends up adopting her as his own child. In their relationship, Flint does not try to control Gerty, nor does he threaten her either physically or sexually. At no time does he force intimacy, or assert his father's or brother's "right" as Mr. John does. Rather, he cares

for her compassionately and respectfully. The delicate humanity of Flint becomes daily light to Gerty in a way that Mr. John's volcanic spiritual and sexual arrogance could never does. The luminosity of his love permeates the novel, making it possible for Gerty to grow out of the rage and bitterness she feels into a more peaceful inner life. So pervasive is Trueman Flint's influence on Gerty that, at the end of the novel when she is happily married to her true love, Willy Sullivan, she muses on Flint as she and her husband stand together gazing out the window of their home at dusk, watching a new lamplighter go about his rounds. Gerty exclaims, "Dear Uncle True! . . . his lamp still burns brightly in heaven, Willie; and its light is not yet gone out on earth!" (419).

Where Mr. John is domineering, Flint is gentle, almost timid, but his influence is strong nevertheless. The first night that Gerty stays with him, he watches her troubled sleep during the night, grasping her small hand in his large rough one. He is attentive to her restlessness and the fears that she expresses as she cries out in her sleep. That attentive vigilance characterizes his relationship with Gerty. He loves, watches, and waits but doesn't try to dominate. Even when she experiences one of her fits of anger, which are, even by twentieth-century standards, quite vehement, he gently waits for it to pass. At one point Gerty gets so angry that she hurls a rock through Nan's front window, but Flint does not chastise her for that. Rather, he has compassion on her because he has been troubled and lonely too. As he watches over Gerty that first night he murmurs to himself, "All alone in this big world and so am I. Please God, we'll bide together" (15).

In *The Lamplighter,* it is Flint's love, not his power, which calms Gerty and helps her develop a sturdy character. The narrator discusses how influential this love is on Gerty's development:

> It was that deep love for her first friend, which, never wavering, and growing stronger to the last, proved, in later years, a noble motive for exertion, a worth incentive to virtue. It was that love, fortified and illumined by a higher light, which came in time to sanctify it, that gave her, while yet a mere girl, a woman's strength of heart." (34)

Here Cummins makes it explicit that the inner radiance of Flint's love is what makes it possible for Gerty to know the saving love of God. Flint, unlike Mr. John, does not become an idol for Gerty, but rather a non-coercive guide to divine truth.

". . . bide together"

Flint's attitude toward Gerty appears to be Cummins's attitude about the relationship between men and women--they should "bide together" in peace without male domination. She provides Gerty with a friend and lover who is equally as compassionate and gentle as Flint--his neighbor Willy Sullivan. He is three years older than the eight-year old Gerty when they meet. When he first meets Gerty, he estab-

lishes a familiar relationship with her. But he approaches Gerty in quite a different manner than Mr. John advances on Ellen. Because of Willy's gentleness, Gerty "suffered Willy to draw her out of the corner" where she hides, and coaxes her with "good-natured words and manners" (30). He encourages her to think of him as a cousin, but does not claim a cousin's "right" of sexual dominance. He merely diverts her from nervousness and easily makes friends with her. He, like Flint, absorbs much of her bad temper without remonstrance, trying to impart virtue by example, not by command. Through the years, they spend many hours together in conversation, study, and exploration of the city and never once does Willy assert his masculine prerogative to control her. When, after a long separation, they declare their true love for each other as adults, Cummins is careful to note that theirs is a bond of "mutual affection" (409) which they experience through "heart pressed to heart" (409), not through the impact of a man's "whip and spur" (Warner, *World* 377) on a pliant woman's heart.

In *The Lamplighter*, Cummins not only discredits dominance as a means to build relationships between men and women, she also give positive models of reciprocity throughout the novel. Indeed, reciprocity is the key concept in the text. When Gerty is a young woman, Flint suffers from a stroke, and she must become his protector, a role she willingly and competently performs. As the narrator points out, "True is no longer the brave, strong, sturdy protector of the feeble, lonely little child. The cases are quite reversed" (87). She manages to feed and clothe him, as well as to attend to a multitude of other small needs. She remains with him until the end, even finding the strength to read prayers for the dying to him on the night of his

death. In his last conversation with her, he affirms the concept of reciprocity between people. He says, "O we all depend on each other so!--first on God, and then on each other" (95). He reminds her of a mutual friend who needs help, saying, "you must lend a helpin' hand to her weakness, just as you do to mine" (95). In Flint's vision of reciprocal love, gender is not a barrier to service. Even the strongest man can become weak, and the weakest woman strong. How unlike Flint's ideal of human relationships is Mr. John's. When Ellen earnestly asks him what she can do for him, he smiles and asks her to kiss him. In doing so, he is cutting off her ability to act responsibly and with dignity in love by reinforcing her status as an erotic object. He must keep Ellen in that position because Mr. John's masculine identity rests on unconquerable strength. He cannot need Ellen and still retain patriarchal control over her. So he denies reciprocity. Flint, to the end of his life, affirms it, thus according even a young orphan girl like Gerty equality and respect.

Reciprocity also flourishes between Willy and Gerty. Although he, as the older child, and a boy, has more experience of the world than Gerty, he does not see himself as superior or self-sufficient. When Willy is fifteen, his employer Mr. Bray dies suddenly of fever without giving Willy a reference. Because he is young, inexperienced, and without references, Willy cannot find another job. He meets with failure and disappointment for many days, despairing of finding work. As he is the sole support of his widowed mother and elderly grandfather, it is crucial that he work. The financial and personal pressures on him are immense, and he starts to collapse beneath them. In his despair, Gerty is his strength, not only cheering him, but

giving him practical suggestions, helping him look in the papers for jobs, and debriefing him after unsuccessful interviews. One evening the normally energetic Willy is completely despondent, "his bright young head bowed down with care, and elastic figure looking tired and old" (81). Gerty, says the narrator, "knew at once his brave heart had given way" (81). In a reversal of the male/female roles depicted in Warner's novel, he sobs convulsively while Gerty comforts him. Looking back as an adult on his childhood relationship with Gerty, Willy describes their reciprocity to a friend: "We were constantly together; we had no thoughts, no studies, no pleasures, sorrows or interests, that were not shared. I was her teacher, her protector, the partner of all her childish amusements; and she, on her part, was by turns an advising, consoling, sympathizing and encouraging friend" (350). There is a tinge of patriarchal privilege in Willy's description of their relationship, such as his emphasis as being her teacher and protector. But such a relationship could exist between an older and a younger girl. Besides, the major emphasis of his recollection, as of their experience together, is of reciprocal love in which no one has to assume a position of dominance.

Cummins does not sanction any of the male aggressiveness which Warner allows Mr. John to indulge in. In fact, she graphically illustrates how irresponsible male violence can destroy both men's and women's lives. Gerty's close friend, Emily Graham, is accidently blinded by Philip Amory, the man she loves, while he and her father are having an argument. Both men are stubborn, hot tempered, self-indulgent with their anger; they are made of the same "gun powder" that Mr. John is. Their argument is so violent that Emily, thinking that it would come to possibly lethal

blows, tries to intervene. In the stress of that effort she, already sick with some minor aliment, faints onto the floor. The enraged Philip Amory, trying to be helpful, accidently spills a vial of acid on her eyes, mistaking it for cologne with which he wants to revive her. When Emily relates the story to Gerty, she creates a striking picture of male violence, all the more memorable because it is the last thing that Emily ever sees. Her final glimpse of the world is Philip Amory, with "set teeth . . . [and] deep and angry indignation" (319) overspreading his face, "slowly lifting his clenched hand" (319) towards Mr. Graham. Her father, with his back to Emily, is upbraiding Amory without restraint with "taunts and enduring reproaches" about his character, accusing him (it turns out unjustly) of financial misconduct in Mr. Graham's business. Cummins does not glamorize this naked aggression of men which Warner supports in *The Wide, Wide World,* and Stowe, at times, supports in *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Much as she loves Philip Amory and excuses him for his anger against her father's unjust accusations, Emily does not mythologize male wrath by transforming it into the heroics of St. George slaying a dragon. Rather she shows it for what it is: destructive, unproductive and dangerous.

Cummins's modifications of Warner's ideas, then, though by no means radical, are significant. She introduces elements of equality, reciprocity, and trust that are foreign to the patriarchal ideology about women that *The Wide, Wide World* endorses. By spotlighting the destructive effects of male violence, she lessens its appeal. But Cummins goes no further toward liberation. Instead she reinforces what Margaret Fuller describes as the efforts of the "numerous party" (1515) of Protestant men to

"make out with due precision the limits of woman's sphere, and woman's mission" (1515). Gerty is initiated into womanly conventions by Flint's neighbor, Mrs. Sullivan, who teaches her how to care for Flint's one-room home. After that, she becomes the consummate housekeeper and nurse, fulfilling perfectly the requirements of a thoroughly domesticated woman. She does teach for a short while, but gives it up to care for a needy friend at home. The novels ends with a typical vision of a partriarchally-designed domestic scene which will presumably contain Gerty for the rest of her life: "Willie, glancing around the well-lit, warm, and pleasantly furnished parlor of his own and Gertrude's home, [rests] his eyes, at last, upon the beloved at his side, whose beaming face but reflected back his own happiness" (419). In a sense, Cummins, despite her best intentions, ultimately does the same harm to Gerty that Warner does to Ellen--she erases her individual self. Gerty's face becomes part of the furniture of the parlor, a mirror. Her function is to reflect back Willy's happiness, not to radiate her own sense of self. Her being must be congruent with the well-furnished room; there is no place in this domestic scene for her autonomous existence.

So both Warner and Cummins, despite significant experimentation with women's freedom, end up reinforcing patriarchal containment. Warner entraps Ellen in one man's dominant will; Cummins ultimately encases Gerty within a domestic enclosure. These authors' unsatisfactory resolutions of the tension between patriarchal containment of women and their desires for liberty are probably typical of the experience of many antebellum evangelical women. Very few who remained within the bounds of evangelicalism broke free completely of patriarchal constraints. In the

next chapter we will examine the autobiographies of three of the rare antebellum evangelical women writers who did significantly challenge patriarchal control: the preachers Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer.

Chapter 3

Experimental Verity:

The Spirituality of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer

Some of the most fascinating interplays in antebellum women's texts between patriarchal containment and impulses toward liberation appear in autobiographical texts written by evangelical preachers Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer. Like their fictional counterparts, Ellen Montgomery and Gerty Flint, the texture of these women's lives was intricately woven with strands of resistance to and compliance with male authority; sometimes the two opposing forces melded into one contradictory experience. Yet, unlike the experience of those two fictional protagonists, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer had a conviction that God had empowered them for and called them to a special destiny. This certainty runs like a fiery thread throughout their narratives. However hesitant, confused, or embattled these women felt, they possessed a divine energy which sustained their resistance to patriarchal containment and their preaching. Their selves were not blotted out by this force; rather, their individual identities were strengthened by it. In her autobiographical narrative, published in 1849, Jarena Lee described this force as a "holy energy which burns like fire" within her (*Sisters* 36), and that description matched the experience of Zilpha Elaw and Phoebe Palmer as well. In this chapter we will look at the independent spirituality which fed

these women's "holy energy."

". . . botte for I am a woman"

The spirituality of Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, is personal, immediate, supernatural, and, at times, overwhelmingly intense. It runs beneath their texts, faintly heard even when the narrative deals with more external matters. In a sense, in their individual lives, they were enacting the larger pattern of Christian women's spirituality, which flows like a river hidden beneath Christian history. For women's spirituality has been essential in the church. And many women, including Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, have had a much more lively spirituality than what was shown by the unfortunate fictional protagonists, Ellen Montgomery and Gerty Flint. After all, a young girl bore the Messiah, and her cousin, a woman past child-bearing age, gave birth to the last prophet of the old order. Women were the first to proclaim the risen Christ, were present at Pentecost, and shared in the outpouring of the Spirit in Jerusalem. New Testament documents list the names of important women unselfconsciously beside the names of men: Priscilla, Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche, Lydia, Nympha, and Priscilla. In the early church, the narrative of Perpetua's (181?-203) faith in the face of martyrdom was widely circulated, becoming a model for both male and female Christian faith (Deen 3-6). Through the centuries, the spirituality of women has made strong, although sometimes short-lived, impressions on the people in their communities. A brief sampling of the names of important Christian women from the fourth to the sixteenth

centuries reveals both familiar and alien names: Helena (255-330), Macrina (327-379), Nonna (329?-374), Marcella (325-410), Monica (331-387), Anthusa (347?-407?), Paula (347-404), Hilda, Abbess of Whitby (614-680), Clare (1194-1253), Christian of Markyate (twelfth century), Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231), Catherine of Sienna (1347-1380), Joan of Arc (1412-1431), Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547), Margaret of Navare (1492-1549), Katherine Von Bora (1499-1552), and Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) (Deen). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the spirituality of women, especially of Quakers and Methodists, and in a more limited sense, Puritans, became more publically prominent. The spirituality of eighteenth-century Methodist women such as Joanna Wesley, Mary Fletcher, and Sara Mallet directly inspired the spiritual lives of nineteenth-century Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer (Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton 228-229).

But unfortunately, for most of church history, direct expressions of women's spirituality have been suppressed; women were frequently revealed through the words of male biographers. The spiritual autobiographical tradition of Christianity, which was encouraged by personal revelations in apostolic letters and brought to great refinement in Augustine, and through him to all of Western Christianity, was primarily male. Without any Biblical examples of women writing about their own spiritual experiences, and with few examples in the church, women have been hesitant to depict publically the depth of their spiritual lives. And more often than not, when they did, women encountered resistance from men in authority. One can hear the defensiveness in the question which the fourteenth-century writer and mystic, Julian of Norwich,

asks in her visionary autobiographical treatise, *Revelations of Divine Love*. "Botte for I am a woman, shculde I therefore leve that I chulde nought telle yowe the goodness of God?" (qtd. in Kempe 5) Julian's contemporary, the itinerant mystic and preacher Margery Kempe, waited twenty years to publish her autobiographical narrative, during which time she was continuously tested for religious orthodoxy by ecclesiastical officials. In the proem to her text, Kempe notes that she was "used to being slandered and reproved, to being chided and rebuked" (34). Even after she decided to narrate her story to a literate Christian, it took her several attempts to find someone willing to help her bring her hidden spirituality into a public form. Because of such opposition, only a minority of women's voices survived the embargo on spiritual expression imposed on them through the centuries. And although undoubtedly scholars will continue to discover new women's texts, there will always remain huge stretches of silence across the Christian centuries. Using their religious authority, Christian men have consistently suppressed or erased the visible traces of women's spirituality.

Patriarchal suppression of women's self-expression was still a thriving enterprise in the nineteenth century when Lee, Elaw, and Palmer started their spiritual journeys. As noted in the first chapter, although Protestant men wanted women to be religious, they desired that their piety be contained within strict bounds and dedicated to serving male authority and aspirations. Many nineteenth-century men would not be disturbed at all if a woman's personal awareness of God disappeared, as long as her sense of propriety and commitment to her domestic duties remained. The source of much of the suppression of women's spirituality in Protestant culture originated in

nineteenth-century men's insistence that the more spiritual a woman was, the more personally reticent she should become. Indeed, the womanly reticence that Protestant men pushed onto all women was grounded in these men's perceptions of feminine spirituality. All women were to practice, according to Dobson, "a personal reserve not cultural in origin, and thus open to dissent, but linked to spiritual imperatives: a reticence that is divine and thus incontrovertible" (4). In an 1871 sermon, the Rev. John Dudley, a friend of Emily Dickinson, extolled Mary, the mother of Jesus, for her spiritual reticence. He says, "Oh! how womanly, because how reserved; not ambitious of talk, of self-display, self-manifestation, but divinely reticent . . . How still have I been, many times reading those great words, pondered in her heart! Chaste, reserved, hiding, exalted" (qtd. in Dobson 4).

Of course, this concept of womanly spiritual reticence, which is mostly a middle-class white notion, was not universally practiced in the culture. Women at camp meetings, in urban revivals, and especially women in black communities, often broke out of what Dobson characterizes as a narrow "community of expression" (6) which bound women to reticence. At times, women shouted, prayed aloud, sang with gusto, and went out into their neighborhoods loudly proclaiming the name of Jesus. But the notion of womanly reticence, like other aspects of Protestant men's ideology, insinuated itself into large areas of women's experience. It is assumed in many women's texts, and certainly in evangelical women's narratives. In fact, it appears as if the very translation of women's voices into texts gave what Dobson calls "strategies of reticence" (xi-25) a greater hold on women's experience. Perhaps to become an

author was to enter more deeply into the limits of male rhetorical authority. This is not to say that women failed to subvert male-imposed limitations in their texts. The very act of writing, especially writing autobiography, was profoundly subversive. It moved women from being an object to be written into the social/historical text, to a subject who helps to write that text. But antebellum American women, however heroic in their opposition to the containment of men, could not comprehensively screen out the pressures of the patriarchal cultures, any more than we can perfectly screen out our own cultural influences. So even the most independent women felt the tugging of patriarchal injunctions that they be reticent.

Great causes such as moral reform, abolitionism, and temperance sometimes offered socially acceptable reasons for a woman to cast aside her reticence. But as demonstrated in the widely circulated pastoral letter aimed at the Grimke sisters in 1831, many Protestant men preferred that women's godly reform activities be screened from public view. Even activist women themselves adopted the rhetoric of reticence while discussing their actions. At the height of abolitionism in 1861, Harriet Jacobs displayed her reticence to narrate her life, especially because she had, by nineteenth -century "model-like" women's standards, lost her purity. In her preface, she excuses the indecorum of writing about her life by claiming that she is motivated by her compassion for other women caught in the pit of slavery. She says:

> . . . I trust my motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous. I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it

> would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to realizing a sense of the condition of two millon of women at the South, still in bondage. (1)

What is distinctive about Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer is that they did not justify the breaking of womanly reticence solely on the grounds that they had a greater cause to pursue, that of preaching the Gospel. They felt that their direct relationship with God, independent of their vocation, justified their vigorous self-expression. In fact, their vocations as preachers did not appear to be a response to duty; rather, preaching became a fulfillment of their desire.

". . . the Lord alone"

As they experienced and expressed the overflow of divine life in them, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer do not resemble the nineteenth-century version of Mary as expressed above by John Dudley. Rather they appear to go more directly back to the New Testament source in the gospel of Luke where Mary, pregnant through the Holy Spirit, travels alone to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is carrying John the Baptist. When Mary enters the house, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps and Elizabeth in an ecstasy of the Spirit proclaims praises of both her cousin and the Savior in a loud voice:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear (Luke 1.42). In response, Mary, who was certainly not Dudley's reticent Mary, proclaims that her soul "glories the Lord" (Luke 1.46) because the "Mighty One has done great things for me" (1.49). She exults not just in the fact of the Messiah, but that "[f]rom now on all generations will call me blessed (Luke 1.48). Further, Mary sees her story linked with acts of liberation, saying that God has "scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts/ He has brought down rulers from their thrones/ He has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1.51-53).

Lee, Elaw, and Palmer clearly aligned themselves more with the Mary of the Magnificat than with the reserved Mary constructed by nineteenth-century men. For these women, like Mary, encountered the Holy Spirit directly and were irrevocably changed. And like Mary, they testified to a remarkable work of God in their lives. Their testimony challenged a culture built on the supposition that God desires the subjection and silence of women. Their lives and worlds could bring down the Protestant rulers from their thrones. The independently sustained and overflowing spiritual experiences of these women threatened the very foundation of a Protestant tradition which preferred to have women twice removed from divinity under the headship of men--fathers, husbands, minsters, or lay leaders of parachurch societies. For what was really in danger from the unbounded expression of "unnatural" women was the entrenched authority of Protestant men.

In a letter to abolitionists Theodore Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier written in 1837, Angelina Grimke makes a perceptive comment about men's resistance to her

and her sister Sarah's abolitionist lecturing. Responding to the Massachusetts Congregationalist pastoral letter circulated in opposition to their public roles, she says:

> The ministers seemed quite panic struck at once and commenced a most violent attack upon us. I do not say *absurd* for in truth it can be fairly established that women can lecture, then why may they not preach, and if they can preach, then woe! woe be unto the Clerical Domination which now rules the whole country to inquire what right we had to open our mouths for the dum; the people were continually told "it is a shame for a woman to speak in the churches; Paul suffered not a woman to teach but commanded her to be in silence. The pulpit is too sacred a place for a woman's foot, etc. (313)

Clearly Grimke is saying here that for many men the threat of a woman's gaining a public voice within the church was more frightening than any actions spurred by reformist causes.

Grimke goes on in her letter to demonstrate a primary concern of many Protestant men, especially men in authority, was the preservation of womanly reticence in order to secure their own spiritual power. According to Grimke, men laid "deep scheme[s]" (314) against women, linking the public expression of their convictions with "shame" (314) and with the overturning of divine commands. She warns that men

"are springing a deep mine beneath our feet" (314). The repression that women lecturers for abolition such as the Grimkes felt was manifested even more vehemently in directly spiritual matters where the stronghold of Protestant men's power was at risk. That is why men conducted preemptive strikes into the hearts of women, encouraging the development of an enervated spiritual sisterhood of women such as Dudley's Mary.

But some women's spirituality, like that of Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, was just too powerfully charged to nestle within patriarchal enclosures. How dangerous such spirituality must have appeared to men. For under its influence, even white middle-class woman like Phoebe Palmer could plunge, as she describes it in her narrative, "into an immeasurable ocean of love, light and power" (*Holiness* 41) while alone with God in one of the nicer neighborhoods of New York. Such unpredictable and out-of-control spiritual energy, reasoned Protestant men, did not belong in the hands of women. So men tried the best they could to encourage only spirituality distinguished, in the words of the Reverend Fordyce cited above, by "regularity and coolness, in self command and mild affections" (2: 14). In essence, many Protestant men desired that women be a part of a religious system in which they were protected not only from their own imaginations but from the power of God.

That is why women such as Lee, Elaw, and Palmer were so insistent that their spirituality was independent of the control of men. There simply was no room for it in the patriarchal religion. And as mentioned before, even in the wilder Christian sects, or in the most extreme heretical groups, such as the Oneida perfectionists who preached a

doctrine of the fulfillment of perfect love through communal sex, men were in control. Where women ruled, as in Shaker communities, the passionate energies of women were still largely controlled by rigid community protocols borrowed from patriarchal practices. For all the diversity of American religions, there was little social support for women's unmediated encounters with God.

In nineteenth-century America, only Quaker women, relying on a personally apprehended inner spiritual understanding, Spiritualists, and radical Methodist women such as Lee, Elaw, and Palmer really achieved an independent spirituality which they could articulate. And American Quaker women, although extremely socially active, were not particularly expressive of the inner workings of their spiritual life. Their community used silence as a spiritual discipline so extensively that both men and women were reserved in the expression of their spiritual lives. Spiritualist women communicated directly with various kinds of spirits, but their experience is difficult to define because until the end of the nineteenth century, they did not have a formal organization, or meetings. So, even the latest historical research finds it difficult to define exactly what a Spiritualist was in antebellum American (Braude 7). The American Puritan tradition had by 1800 merged with the general revivalist spirituality of the first half of the century, and so did not exert much influence on either the Quakers or the Methodist women. The only surviving spiritual narrative written by a seventeenth-century Puritan woman, Elizabeth White, who died in 1669. She records vivid personal encounters with God similar to that which Lee, Elaw and Palmer experienced. She awoke one night full of "inexpressible Joy, earnestly longing to be dissolved, and to be

with Christ which is best of all" (336). In the eighteenth century, Sarah Edwards, the wife of the last great Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, was prone to extended divine raptures which sometimes prevented her from accomplishing her household responsibilities. But Puritan women's spirituality, being so much in submission to their patriarchal society, was like an egg dropped into the communal batter; it did not sustain its own identity. The few Puritan women who attempted to forge an independent spiritual life, such as Anne Hutchinson, were more likely to find the details of their lives published in ecclesiastical court proceedings than in autobiographies.

The narratives of Lee, Elaw, and Palmer were full of declarations of independence from external control. Because the major agency of control in their lives, the Protestant church, was dominated by men, when these women used a term such as "no human instrument" they were referring to men or women controlled by patriarchal religion. They used the generic "men," such as in "the feeble testimony of men," in the same way. For in their sharp conflicts over their right to preach, Lee, Elaw and Palmer made it clear that their primary human opposition was masculine. They typically saw women who did not support their preaching as victims of male indoctrination. The only exception to that pattern occurs in Zilpha Elaw's narrative where she portrays one woman as more hostile than her husband. But in that instance, the woman and Elaw develop tremendous rapport, and the woman learns to reinterpret Biblical truth in a way which includes women as active participants in the faith. In contrast, while some of their male opponents see their own sexist prejudice, many do not, and remain firmly entrenched in their error. Lee's, Elaw's, and Palmer's conscious resistance to

patriarchal domination is typical of a small minority of Christian women who voiced their opposition to it. They continuously put the moral responsibility for the subjection of women on men. In Sarah Grimke's published correspondence with Mary Parker, Grimke said, "All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy" (35).

Typical of Lee's, Elaw's, and Palmer's insistence on a spirituality independent of male control is Zilpha Elaw's claim in her 1849 autobiography: "The Lord himself was graciously pleased to become my teacher, instructing me in His Holy Spirit, in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. It was not by the aid of human instruments that I was first drawn to Christ, it was by the Lord alone that I was upheld, confirmed, instructed, sanctified and directed" (60). Lee echoes Elaw when she says in her 1849 narrative that "the Lord called me to his work, and he has kept me from falling from grace . . . he had proved himself a God of truth to me" (*Sisters* 48). In Palmer's 1843 autobiographical narrative, she looks back with regret on the times in her life when she was dependent on men. She observes that "uncertainty and spiritual depression were the consequences resulting from these repeated turnings away from the word of God to the feeble testimony of men" (*Holiness* 75).

Palmer illuminates the process through which she, Lee, and Elaw developed their independent spirituality in her first published writing in 1841, *Mary, or the Young Christian.* In this biography of a young friend, Palmer not only tells a story about Mary, but reveals her own underlying convictions about spirituality as well. As

a "model child" (*Selected* 144) Mary asks her elders many questions about eternal things, but does not receive satisfactory answers. Frustrated by the ignorance of those who were supposed to be "superior in years and in wisdom," (*Selected* 145) Mary takes up her question directly with God:

> Thus left in the dark upon subjects which she deemed of vital importance, she would retire to her chamber, and strive by her own efforts to solve the mysteries which perplexed her, and implore the Source of all wisdom to enlighten her mind on the great truths of the holy gospel whereby she might discern the good and right way of the Lord. (*Selected* 145)

This striving by her own efforts and going directly to the source of wisdom characterizes Palmer's approach to spirituality, as well as Elaw's and Lee's. As Elaw put it, their business "was not with mortal men, but with the living God" (145).

Because the center of their faith was an independent relationship with God, not conformity to male authority, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer valued the integrity of their selves over social demands. Through what Palmer described in her narrative as "naked faith" (*Holiness* 169) these women desired a re-creation of their selves so that they could be free of the falseness which their sinful natures, aggravated by male oppression, in which they had been clothed. In her description of her conversion, Lee actually employs the metaphor of being stripped of her clothing. She says, "It appeared to be, as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my

finger ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow, from my sight" (*Sisters* 29).

Lee's, Elaw's, and Palmer's desire to put off the swathing of ordinary life is similar in some ways to the desire of Edna Pontellier in the 1900 novel, *The Awakening,* who strips off her clothing on the beach before her last bid for liberation. It is instructive to compare Pontellier with these evangelical preachers, because they were all seeking both personal and social liberation, although in vastly different ways. Pontellier's story has entered into the American literary canon as a proto-feminist struggle, while Lee, Elaw, and Palmer have been left in the literary twilight reserved for evangelical antebellum women autobiographers. But comparing the evangelical preachers with the more modern Pontellier could illuminate previously unseen aspects of all of their texts and possibly aid in garnering more respect for Lee's, Elaw's and Palmer's quest for liberation.

It is no surprise to readers familiar with *The Awakening* that Pontellier does not discover her essential nakedness at church. Rather, as befitting the heroine of a naturalistic novel, she disrobes on the beach. The text describes the scene vividly:

> [S]he cast the unpleasant prickling garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.
>
> How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky: how delicious! she felt like some new-born creature.

(124)

Edna's nakedness is, like the nakedness of her early nineteenth-century Christian predecessors, an initiation into a new life. But Edna Pontellier, unlike Lee, Elaw and Palmer, does not enter into a new life. She passes from the moment of new birth into a lonely and meaningless death. The narrator comments that she is "absolutely alone" and that the sea, in which she will soon drown herself, was inviting her soul "to wander in the abysses of solitude" (124). As she swims out to die, Pontellier's mind is filled with fragmentary images of her life, and she regresses back to her unsatisfactory childhood. At the end of the novel her flickering identity merges with "the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks" (125), signifying not only the drowning of her body, but of her essential humanity.

In contrast, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, are not stripped naked before the impersonal natural world, but before the divine presence; they are born into a new, vital identity of eternal consequence. In attempting to describe her spiritual experience to a friend in the same letter mentioned above, Palmer says, "My soul was wrapped in . . . visions of glory . . . such a joyous consciousness of oneness of spirit, such a consciousness of identity in the atmosphere of glory" (*Selected* 143). For these women, even the most ecstatic spiritual experiences do not extinguish the self, but instead renew it. Through participation in divine life, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer have an increasing "consciousness of identity" which seems to grow throughout the narrative. They, like Mary in Luke's Gospel account, exalt that "The Mighty one has done great things" (Luke 1.49) for them.

And unlike Edna Pontellier, Lee, Elaw and Palmer do not anticipate ending their lives with a fragmentary and regressive identity slowly dissolving into the abyss of the sea. They clearly see the potential for eternal transformation ahead of them. In her narrative, Palmer envisions her spiritual life as an endless unfolding of understanding. This attitude informs the writing of Lee and Elaw as well. Palmer characterizes their progressive spirituality as "experimental verity" (*Holiness* 30). She claims that

> [a] field of investigation, boundless as eternity, is before [her] . . . Earth hath it boundaries; but the inquiring insatiate spirit of the heavenly traveler, is nowhere in all [her] . . .outward journeying, met with the interdict, "Hitherto shall thou come, but not further." No! the inspiring insignia is blazoned at every progressive point in [her] pilgrimage, "Then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know." (*Holiness* 6)

Such an optimistic and fluid vision of spirituality is what gave Palmer, Lee and Elaw their tremendous energy. For them to approach God without the clothing of false self and corrupt society is to enter an ever-expanding realm of freedom.

What is particularly powerful about these women's spiritual experiences is that they inextricably link their spirituality with the authority of the *logos*, the word of God. In doing so, they hook directly into the high-tension power lines which supply the culture, in however a distorted form, with its ethical and imaginative energy. As

Northrup Frye has pointed out, the Christian *logos* (The New and Old Testament Scriptures) was a "great code" undergirding western discourse. This was especially true in America, where Protestant theology was shaped by doctrine which stressed the primacy of Scripture alone over all forms of ecclesiastical and political power. By linking their intense personal energies with the *logos*, these revivalist women acquired authority to challenge the basic rules of antebellum women's discourse. Dobson points out that

> . . . accepted women's discourse operated as a discourse designed to direct social mores and inhibit social change. In Fredric Jameson's terms, the accepted modes of women's expression ultimately served as "strategies of containment," rather than as explorations or experiments in personal or cultural change. (2)

Backed by the mandate of the *logos*, Palmer's, Lee's and Elaw's independent spirituality resists containment and creates a way of life that is experimental, improvisational, and progressive (for its era). They retain much of the ethical content of the *logos*, such as sexual morality and the value of truth, but they regard their faith as more of a process of liberation than a protective containment of their personal energies. As Phoebe Palmer puts it in her narrative, "Communion with God must necessarily be transforming" (Holiness 158).

The Power of Pentecost

In justifying their independent spirituality and the powerful recreation of the self which accompanied it, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer relied heavily on what Palmer's biographer called "pentecostal power" (qtd in Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton 244) the doctrine of sanctification. Ideas about total Christian sanctification or holiness, of course, had been around since the first century, and Catholic monastics were particularly intrigued by the possibility of a sinless life. Sue E. Houchins, in an introduction to a reprint of Jarena Lee's narrative, actually links nineteenth-century sanctification with Julian of Norwich's idea of a "godly will" (xxxiv) which is in such intimate communion with God that it loses its desire for evil. She points out that John Wesley may have absorbed such a concept through St. Thierry, a predecessor of Julian's with similar theological ideas, whose writings John Wesley read at Oxford (xxxiv). In working out his interpretation of sanctification, Wesley arrived at a doctrine of sanctification which stressed the perfection of love. Houchins says that Wesley's ideas about perfect love were similar to Julian of Norwich's concept of "godly will" (xxxiv). Wesley believed that by a slow process of transformation Christians could become so deeply united with the love of God that all their thoughts, feelings and actions would spring from unblemished love. Wesley himself never claimed to have achieved this spiritual state.

Wesley's concept of sanctification entered into American religious life around 1800 amidst the successive waves of revivals in the Great Awakening. Although there

was considerable difference of opinion among revivalist leaders about the exact nature of sanctification, at the very least it was thought to increase the power and peace of believers by freeing them from the existential grip of sin. The most extreme proponents of sanctification believed that it made the believer perfectly holy in this world. By the 1830s even the more mild views of sanctification probably exceeded Wesley's definition. His gradual and tentative growth in grace was replaced by theologies which insisted that holiness was not only a special blessing, but a necessity of Christian life. In typical American fashion, many proponents of sanctification insisted that one did not gain that blessing by Wesley's long process, but could grasp it quickly by faith. Phoebe Palmer, with her husband and sister-in-law, started the influential Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness in their shared New York city home in 1836. She especially stressed the normative and sometimes instantaneous nature of the blessing. Palmer consistently argues in her narrative that if God gives direct commands to be holy in the Scripture, such as the one in Hebrews 12, then God will automatically supply every earnest believer with the ability to be holy. She identifies her version of sanctification as "a shorter way" (*Holiness* 19) to holiness. But Palmer, and most in her circle, did not insist that holiness would make believers faultless, only that it would give them sufficient power to consistently choose good over evil. They carefully distanced themselves from wildly antinomian views of people such as John Humphrey Noyes, the renegade Presbyterian mentioned earlier. He pushed the Wesleyan notion of perfect love to its farthest extension by arguing that all love, even love manifested in communal sexual experimentation, is perfect if practiced

by Christians (Hardesty 52-53).

As demonstrated in the narratives of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, sanctification was especially attractive to many black Americans because it provided access to areas of Christian experience that had not been polluted by white racism. For in most of Christian history after the early church, there had been little expectation that the ordinary Christian would be capable of great holiness; such spirituality belonged to the saints. The Protestant reformers and their descendants had other issues on their agenda besides holiness, such as the deconstruction of priestly authority and the spread of the vernacular Scriptures. Seventeenth-century English Puritans and their American associates were interested in personal sanctification only as far as it supported their communal covenant-based society. They would not have supported the individualistic version of holiness that started to spread in nineteenth-century America. Because the American version of sanctification was so new and undefined, black Americans encountered few barriers in making sanctification their own. The particular emphasis on experiential encounters with the Holy Spirit especially appealed to black Christians, many of whom preferred more spontaneity and expressiveness in worship than was permitted in middle-class Protestant churches.

Sanctification also had a strong appeal for women. For not only did it give them a new and freer religious/cultural space with which to experiment, it also gave them a theological way to get out from under the burden of being considered especially prone to sin. Women could argue that even if they were particularly susceptible to Satanic deception and depravity, the power of sanctification--which

takes away the power of all sin--would free them even from their essential weaknesses. Given the resources that sanctification offered to women, it is not surprising that a number of women enthusiastically adopted the doctrine. The American version of sanctification gave women confidence in their spiritual worth and equipped them to make decisive, sometimes bold decisions. William Andrews's comment in an introduction to a reprint of Lee's and Elaw's narratives applies to all antebellum women who accepted the doctrine: "Belief in the Wesleyan version of sanctification freed them to trust the prompting of their innermost selves because of the conviction that what came from within was from the Holy Spirit, not the corrupt ego" (15).

Women such as Palmer, Lee, and Elaw believed, according to Andrews, that they have "recovered their pristine identity in Christ" (15). Their religious duty, therefore, demanded that they preserve and strengthen that identity "to be faithful to that renewed and purified self" (15). If men attempted to take control of these newly liberated selves, sanctified women vigorously resisted, believing that their resistance was a sign of holiness. Thus sanctification gave women tremendous confidence to oppose patriarchal repression and preserve an independent spirituality which made re-creation of the self possible. Andrews, commenting on the spiritual development of Lee and Elaw, says:

> As they came to identify ever increasingly with an indwelling spirit of holiness--what Elaw called "the extraordinary direction of the Holy Spirit--they ceased to

> regard themselves as "week and feeble" females who had neither might, wisdom or ability to overcome their spiritual and social enemies. They began to feel empowered, indeed authorized by God, to listen to and act upon their intuitions, their long suppressed ambitions, their idealized self-images. (16)

The doctrine of sanctification supported the idea that God was engaged in an on-going process of personal and social transformation, not in building fixed patterns of religious experience. This type of process-centered theology, of course, was the basis of Transcendentalism. It also gave those who wanted to remain in the orthodox Christian faith a way to experiment with their spiritual experiences without leaving the faith. For despite the almost Romantic preoccupation with the self that latter-day Puritans such as Jonathan Edwards sustained, traditional American Christian Calvinist theology did not have the structural capability to absorb new forms of spiritual experience. One sees this problem in Edwards's *Personal Narrative*. Although Edwards is male and has power in the church establishment, he cannot escape his fate as a passive object in the celestial framework. God is sovereign and holy; Christ is the mediator; Edwards is the sinner. His passion and spiritual intensity could only enhance the pattern--the more he engaged in self-discovery, the more deeply he entrenched himself into the position of the sinner. What else could he do without usurping the sovereignty of God? So as Edwards's narrative progresses, he intensifies his depiction of his sinfulness. He says that his favorite phrase to describe his own evil is "infinity

upon infinity" (309). His concept of self, then, becomes a perverse mirror of the infinity of God from which there is no escape in this life. Puritan women were stuck in the same theological pattern as Jonathan Edwards was, but because they were women, their passivity was even greater. For the headship of man over women before God was frequently preached and practiced in their communities. Puritan women were trained to defer to all male authority: fathers, brothers, husbands, ministers, magistrates. Consequently Puritan women were submerged even deeper than men into an unyielding doctrinal framework.

Sanctification gave American Christians a way out of this box. God remained sovereign and holy. But the new doctrine maintained that God showed that He was willing to share not only His holiness, but also his supernatural power with believers, through the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost. Consequently Christians could let go of obsessive ideas about sin and gratefully accept the empowerment of the Spirit which can take away their propensity to sin. As mentioned above, the most extreme forms of the doctrine promised sinless, divine perfection in this life. Because of their reliance on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer could experiment in their spiritual lives in ways Puritans such as Edwards could scarcely dream. Their narratives, like antebellum women's fiction which Susan Harris discusses in her survey of nineteenth-century fiction, "function as a means of testing women's possibilities for alternative modes of being" (19). The purpose of their narratives, then, is not to reinscribe rigid doctrinal formulations on their personal selves, but to explore a process of spiritual transformation.

Also, the form of Christian conversion was altered by sanctification, so that Puritans and radical Methodists, both male and female, did not view the process of conversion in the same way. Carol Edkins, drawing on Edmund Morgan's analysis of Puritan experience, describes Puritan conversions as a four-stage process: "conviction or illumination" where the despairing person perceived his or her own helpless condition; "repentance or aversion" where the heart turned away from sin; "conversion" when the grace of God is received; and finally, what she describes as "post-partum" depression where the joy of spiritual birth is mixed with actual despair about salvation (42). Edkins notes that such post-conversion doubt was considered healthy in many Puritan conversion narratives. The Puritan community feared spiritual *hubris* more than they feared the perils of self-abnegation (42).

Nineteenth-century revivalist conversion conventions, on the whole, discouraged indulgence in post-conversion doubt, and so differed from Puritan traditions. But in the first part of the nineteenth century, most people felt that it was proper to express some hesitation about the assurance of salvation. As Nancy Brereton points out in her survey of nineteenth-century white middle-class conversion accounts, "absolute certainty about one's 'future state' was often considered bad form; rather, it was regarded as suitably humble (and perhaps demure, in the case of women) for converts to express tentativeness when describing their soteriological status" (38). In contrast, the sanctified revivalist conversion demanded that newly purified believers grab hold of a strong assurance of salvation to demonstrate the reality of their existential freedom from the bonds of sin. For example, Jarena Lee says in her

narrative that after seeing "a form of fire" (*Sisters* 37) and an angel who encouraged her to trust her sanctified faith, her assurance of salvation was sealed. She says:

> Since that time I have never doubted, but believe that God will keep me until the day of redemption . . . nothing could have separated me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus . . . From that time, 1807 until the present, 1833, I have not yet doubted the power and goodness of God to keep me from falling through sanctification of the spirit and belief of the truth. (*Sisters* 38)

In addition, most narratives written by sanctified Christians read their sanctification back into their lives in such a way that conversion, unlike in Puritan or unsanctified nineteenth-century revivalist narratives, does not occupy the center stage. It becomes an important step on a continuum of spiritual experience, not the fulcrum of one's life. This characteristic of sanctified-conversion accounts gives them an open-endedness that is antithetical to the precise and practiced limits of Puritan conversion. A reader of Palmer, Lee, and Elaw, for instance, gets the impression that any number of remarkable spiritual events could occur as their narratives unfold, as indeed they do. For instance, all three women record that they received supernatural calls to preach, which seem in the narratives nearly as spiritually important to them as their conversions. No Puritan woman, and almost no unsanctified revivalist woman, would advance such a notion.

Although sanctification attracted considerable interest in antebellum American Christianity, especially from the 1830s until the Civil War, it did not transfigure American Christianity, nor did it give the majority of Christian women access to the power which Palmer, Lee, and Elaw discovered. For reasons outlined in the first chapter, the patriarchal containment of women had enormous inertial power in the culture. That the political and spiritual forces of liberation available for antebellum Christian women should live so intimately with the powerful patriarchal repression of women seems inexplicable. But that was the social landscape in which nineteenth-century women, especially evangelical women, lived. Given these circumstances, it is sometimes difficult to determine the actual status of women in various communities. For example, it is true that in many revivals, particularly on the frontiers, women participated freely with men in worship. But freedom in worship did not necessarily translate into other areas of women's lives. A woman might prophesy on Sunday and live the rest of the week as oppressed as her silent neighbor. The process of evangelical, even sanctified, women's liberation was often slow, sometimes requiring more commitment than many women were willing to give. And even when women were willing to sacrifice everything for a spirituality which gave them more freedom, the means that they adopted might hinder them. For example, a number of women exerted great effort and endured financial hardship to attend Oberlin College, the first co-educational (also multiracial) institution in the nation, founded in 1833. (Oberlin was also a hotbed of sanctification in the 1830s [Hardesty 53].) Its first President, Asa Mahan, felt such a strong commitment to women's education that he requested that his

epitaph read: "The first man, in the history of the race, who conducted woman, in connection with members of the opposite sex, through a full course of liberal education" (Hardesty 47). Under his leadership, however, women were denied the right to debate, because it was considered an unfeminine activity. Women who wanted to become public speakers had to practice together in the woods (Hardesty 48). Nor were women allowed to read their graduation papers in public with the men. The feminist Lucy Stone, so bothered by this restriction, refused to write a paper (Hardesty 92).

In this odd cultural environment women, such as Palmer, Lee, and Elaw, who did receive sanctification, identified the blessing with open resistance to the patriarchal oppression alongside which they lived so closely. For sanctified women, spirituality was synonymous with personal power. But they did not see this power as a means for self-gratification, as modern people might. Rather, they saw it as fuel for service. Palmer's biographer gives a good illustration about the workings of such service. She notes:

> Mrs. Palmer's loving instructions were blessed, to the entire sanctification of a minister's wife, who was changed from a timid, shrinking, silent Christian into one of tearful, modest, but pentecostal power, who afterward spoke in public with remarkable effect (Hardesty, Dayton and Dayton 224).

Still, beneath the service was an appropriation of spiritual energy for use in a woman's self which would have been considered heretical in Puritan communities and which

shocked many antebellum American Christians. But to those who received the blessing, self-empowerment in the Spirit was a delight. As Sarah Lankford, Palmer's sister-in-law and close companion wrote in a letter to a friend, "Darling, get the blessing of holiness, and it will be a gift of power" (Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton 224).

Communion with God

In their expression of their independent, transformative, sanctified spirituality, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer were continuously violating the "strategies of containment" mentioned earlier which influenced nineteenth-century women's discourse. The most obvious example of their transgression is their preaching, which will be discussed in the next chapter. But all three also violated conventions of reticence in their writing by depicting their direct encounters with God or divinely appointed powers.

Nancy Brereton mentions in her survey of middle-class white women's conversion narratives that these women do not "dwell on the point of mystical communion with God or Christ" (21). Such experience would have been considered disruptive. Middle-class conventions could not assimilate what Zilpha Elaw calls in her narrative an "intimacy of communion" (59) with God. Describing this type of experience violates what Dobson describes as an "interdiction of the presentation of women's . . . passional life (xiv). Women were expected to practice a self-censorship when writing about "experiences reflecting passionate and intimate human energies" (4).

Much of what women expressed about their relationship with God was on the level of Harriet Jacobs' formalistic remark at the end of her narrative that "God so ordered her circumstances" (201) for her to remain dependent on Mrs. Willis. Women writers who wanted to elicit a stronger response from readers would use some kind of glowy piety which did not involve any embarrassingly passionate or intense relations with God. Gerty Flint's first prayer, as related in Maria Cummins's 1854 best-seller, *The Lamplighter,* captures the essence of the kind of spirituality valued by those submitted to the containment of women's discourse. Flint, a young orphan befriended by a Christian lamplighter, Trueman Flint (from whom she acquires a last name), slowly learns about God in the household of her protector. Under his and other Christians' tutelage, she learns to give her heart to God. The turning point of her spiritual life occurs in the beginning of the book where Flint offers up her first prayer:

> She rose from her little bed, approached the window, and falling on her knees and clasping her hands. . . she looked up to heaven. Her little uplifted heart throbbed vehemently. Was not each throb a prayer? . . . Many a petition did Gerty offer up in after years. In many a time of trouble did she come to God for help . . . But never did she approach his throne with a purer offering, a more acceptable sacrifice than when . . . her heart uttered, though her lips pronounced them not, the words of the prophet-child, "Here am I, Lord." (42)

Of course, no reader of evangelical women's narrative actually expected God to respond in any overt way towards Gerty. God wasn't supposed to say "And here I am." descending in power to greet the believer. Conventional religion demanded that God not disturb religious women's proprieties. A hush of peace, a friendly twinkle of a star, or a bird's song offered sufficient evidence of God's presence in such narratives. For even if God were so unruly as to dispense his spirit on revivals and camp meetings, he certainly wouldn't be foolish enough to insist that a woman write about ecstasy, direct appearances, apparitions, visions, or prophetic dreams.

In Phoebe Palmer's published narratives, she frequently conformed to restrictive conventions governing the depiction of spirituality. But as religious historian Thomas C. Oden has recently discovered, Palmer at times expressed tremendously passionate encounters with God in her personal correspondence. In an 1840 letter to her friend, Mrs. Mary D. James, she writes:

> I am reminded of a dream I had. . . I wanted someone to pray, who would take me right up in the arms of faith . . . Immediately, gentle chiding filled me with holy shame before the Lord, and the Spirit said, in language which I trust will ever rest as living truth on my heart, "The beloved Jesus will Himself take you up in his arms." . . . After this I was permitted to enjoy a very blessed state of experience. Condescending love seemed to invite me to take the place of the beloved disciple. I

> was conscious of the possession of that grace whereby I was able to feel the experimental blessedness of breathing out of my whole existence to God . . . and in the language of my own heart; and the frequently expressed sentiment of my life was
>
> While on His breast I lay my hand
>
> And breathe my life out sweetly there.
>
> My soul was wrapped in unutterable vision of glory . . . the holiness of God was presented to my ravished soul, yet it did not seem inapproachable . . . No voice issued forth, but love . . . Oh the beauty of holiness! My soul is increasingly captivated. (Selected 142-143)

This example of Palmer's ecstatic outpourings, only a part of one letter, shows the intensity of her spiritual experiences. Without drawing lengthy parallels between Palmer (as well as Lee and Elaw) and other Christian woman mystics, which would be outside the scope of this study, one can see the similarity between Palmer's expression of divine presence in her letter and earlier female mystics' writing. Houchins draws a parallel between medieval mystics and nineteenth-century black women revivalists which would apply equally well to their white contemporaries like Palmer. She says that both traditions share an "emphasis on the workings of the Spirit in the inner life, on the psychology of spiritual response, and on an intimate experience of Jesus" (xxxv). She cites the spiritually ecstatic language of the twelfth-century mystic, Christina of Markyate, as somewhat parallel to that of nineteenth-century women. In

her autobiography Christina describes an encounter with Jesus:

> For in the guise of a small child, He came to the arms of his sorely tried spouse and remained with her the whole day, not only being felt but also seen. So the maiden took Him in her hands, gave thanks and pressed Him to her bosom. And with measurable delight she held Him at one moment to her virginal breast. (qtd. in Houchins xxvi-xxxvii)

Obviously, this kind of intimately passionate spiritual experience would not be included in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One cannot imagine Mrs. Shelby pressing Jesus to her bosom. Equally intolerable to restrictive conventions governing women's discourse would be for the respectable middle-class Phoebe Palmer to write in her nationally circulated narrative that Jesus held her in his arms. And unfortunately, Palmer yields to convention in her autobiographical narrative, *The Way of Holiness*. Palmer severely edits her response to intimate divine presence. Little of the intensity and physicality so obvious in her letter comes through in her published text. For instance, at one point she says:

> She felt in experimental verity that it was not in vain that she had believed; her very existence seems lost and swallowed up in God; she plunged, as it were, into an immeasurable ocean of light and power, and realized that she was encompassed with "the favor of the Almighty as

with a shield". (*Holiness* 42)

The distancing strategies are clear. Most obviously, she writes about herself in the third person, as she does throughout her text. The implications of this self-erasing rhetorical technique will be discussed in greater detail in the fourth chapter. Here it is sufficient to note the obvious point that third person in an autobiography creates a deliberate division between the narrating self and what is being narrated. In this case, it separates the middle-class author, Palmer, from her ecstatic experiences with God. She also defuses the impact of her ecstasy by using more intellectual concepts such as "experimental verity" and "realization." In addition, in the heart of this section of narration, she interposes "as it were" which nudges the image of the ocean of love away from the immediate toward the metaphoric.

In contrast to Palmer, Lee and Elaw seem to express their spiritual experiences openly, although the narratives are by no means totally explicit. Still, the contrast between the liberty that these black women had to tell about intimate or dramatic interactions with God in their published writing and Palmer's obvious reticence is striking. In fact, Lee's and Elaw's texts are probably the only two evangelical women's published narratives with such self-revelation. It is evident that an intricate combination of cultural forces are at work, involving sometimes paradoxical interplay between the influence of race, class, and gender. As mentioned earlier, black women such as Lee and Elaw were particularly vulnerable to various kinds of abuse: verbal, physical, sexual. Also, as black women they were frequently cast into the role of the sexual shadow of American femininity, being forced to metaphorically carry the

obsessions, deviance, or even normal healthy passion, which the conventional images of the "model-like woman" sought to exclude. Also, most black women were forced by slavery and discriminatory hiring practices to take the most menial jobs, further distancing them from the white feminine ideal, which was decidedly a middle-class construct. The model woman might work, but her occupations were, on the whole, respected and genteel--teacher, governess, or seamstress for the wealthy. Most antebellum black women, therefore, found themselves pushed to the margins of the idealized women's sphere. Many of them perished silently in this wilderness of oppression, discouraged and physically broken from overwork.

But the narratives of Lee and Elaw indicate that those women who did survive this extreme oppression had a freedom to voice their convictions which white women could gain only after prolonged effort. Pushed to the periphery of the social relations of the white patriarchy, black women such as Lee and Elaw did not have to extricate themselves from its complex web of intimate relationships. White women, despite genuine aspirations for liberty, were bound to the patriarchal ideology by deep connections of blood and marriage. Asserting freedom from this system would rend the bonds of father and daughter, husband and wife, mother and son, sister and brother. Also, white women were accustomed to the economic privileges of the patriarchy. They knew that free expression could lead them to ostracism and poverty. Black women such as Lee and Elaw expected neither intimacy nor privilege from the white patriarchy. At best they were considered distant sisters in the faith. At worst, they were the illegitimate children, the mistresses, the workhorses, the

whores. They had little to lose from speaking out freely in their narratives.

And so they did, giving their readers considerably more insight into their spirituality than Palmer does. Elaw is particularly open about her communion with God. She provides details of her intimate and prolonged encounters with God in the months following her conversion. In doing so, Elaw goes farther than Palmer in challenging restrictions on expression of her "passional life" (Dobson xiv). Following her conversion, says Elaw, she is strengthened by "habitual communion with God" (58). She shares with God in secret all her "griefs and obtained both sympathy and succor" (58). The troubles that she encounters as a single black woman working as a servant in a (probably white) household "proved very congenial to increased intimacy of communion with Him" (59). In describing that intimacy, Elaw openly uses the language that Palmer reserves for her diary:

> At such times, an overflowing stream of love has filled my soul, even beyond my utmost capacity to contain, and I have thought, when in such ecstacies of bliss, that I should certainly die under them, and go to my heavenly father at once, from an earthly to an heavenly transport; for I could not imagine it possible for any human being to feel such gusts of the love of God and continue to exist in this world of sin. (58)

Lee doesn't provide as much detail as Elaw does about her ecstatic communion with God but does mention some significant encounters. She says that she had an

intimate union with God at the moment of her initial sanctification. She said that "a new rush of the same ecstasy came upon me, and caused me to feel as if I were in an ocean of light and bliss" (*Sisters* 24). She also says that during a six-year period she "continued to receive from above, such baptism of the Spirit as mortality could scarcely bear" (*Sisters* 40).

Also, because Lee and Elaw did not have the economic and social protection offered to Phoebe Palmer through her sympathetic physician husband, prosperous extended family, and numerous social connections in the heart of Protestant power, Lee and Elaw seemed to rely on the intimate presence of God, or other unusual supernatural experiences, to provide them with a shield of personal protection behind which they could be nurtured both personally and vocationally. In an essay discussing several black women preachers, including Jarena Lee, Jean Humez comments that personal accounts by these preachers

> offer invaluable insight into the functions of spiritual and visionary experience in the lives of the oppressed. For the woman with a call to preach [those] experiences gave a strong claim to exercise a public religious leadership. Beyond this, [they] enabled her to discover and tap sources of personal strength that might otherwise have been inaccessible. . . [they] are clearly . . . valuable resources[s] in . . . struggles for autonomy. (130)

As mentioned previously, at Jarena Lee's conversion, she had a vision of being

totally freed from her old self, which was stripped off of her like a soiled garment. After her old self passed "like a shadow" (*Sisters* 29) from her sight, she says that "the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead" (*Sisters* 29). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, glory is one of God's most potent attributes. When Moses ascended the mountain to receive the law, "the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai" (Exod. 24.16) like "a consuming fire" (Exod. 24.17). In a New Testament parallel, Jesus is transfigured by the glory of God one time on earth in front of three disciples (Matt. 17.2), and he will return in full glory at the end of the world. The ten Hebrew and Greek words which are translated as *glory* describe adornment, honor, beauty, majesty, preciousness, and desire (Young 339-340). One of the most frequently used Hebrew words, *kabod*, links weight and heaviness with honor. By linking her newly recreated self directly with the glory of God, Lee is taking on dignity and honor which is denied to her as a young black woman without money or family. In conventional antebellum spirituality, women are considered incapable of apprehending the direct glory of God--it has to be mediated through fathers, ministers and husbands. Further, as Andrews points out:

> Jarena Lee approached the Bible from a vast distance created not only by . . . [her] personal sense of unworthiness (a conventional admission in spiritual autobiographies) but also by a culturally imposed view of the Negro as a "canaanite, a man devoid of Logos" whose servitude is "a punishment resulting from sin or from

natural defect of soul." (64)

So from the first moment of her conversion, Lee supersedes restraints imposed on her by convention of race and gender and breaks free from cultural shackles by identifying herself directly with the glory of God.

In the next step of her spiritual journey, her sanctification, Lee further links her own identity with the glory of God. She says of her baptism into holiness: "So great was the joy, that it is past description. There is not language that can describe it, except that which was heard by St. Paul when he was caught up to the third heaven, and heard words which it was not lawful to utter" (*Sisters* 34). Besides claiming equality with the apostle Paul, a bold claim for a woman, especially a black one, Elaw here follows the trail of glory right into heaven. She is saying that her spiritual experiences are so profound that earthly language is inadequate to express them; she, like the apostle Paul, needs the language of paradise to communicate the depth of her consciousness of God. That language, being so glorious, is too intense for earth, and thus cannot be spoken within the confines of human discourse. Lee's narrative here becomes profoundly subversive. She claims to have power within her that not only breaks open the linguistic containment of the women's "sphere" but breaks open the containment of all human language. In the context of a religious culture, Lee claims the ultimate authority--she has words of glory within her.

Elaw is equally subversive in her narrative. In fact, she claims to have met Jesus face to face: apparently the only nineteenth-century evangelical woman to make that claim. After a gradual period of conversion, which Elaw describes as "the

dawning of the morning" (55), one evening when she is milking a cow, she "distinctly saw the Lord Jesus approach [her] . . . with open arms, and a most divine and heavenly smile upon his countenance" (56). She repeats the phrase "with open arms" later in her accounting. She also repeats that Jesus moves toward her and that he smiles. At this moment God becomes flesh for Elaw not just in past history, but in her own experience, in a barn which parallels the stable of Jesus's birth. Curiously, Elaw says that Jesus doesn't speak to her, but that she is able to read "his very looks" (56). Jesus' human/divine "countenance," what the gospel of John describes as the word made flesh (John 1.14), then becomes a spiritual text for Elaw, one in which she can read about the nature of her true self. By supplying Jesus' words herself, Elaw is not questioning the reality of Jesus; she believes he is with her in the flesh. Rather she is saying that Jesus is affirming her own worth as a created and redeemed being by letting her define her own spirituality. This is especially important for her as a poor black woman because men in authority, especially religious men, never accord her the permission to read the spiritual texts herself. Now that Jesus has let her read his face, no matter what the world tells her about her state as a woman and as a black woman, Elaw now believes that God trusts her wisdom and understanding.

Jesus's face, says Elaw, tells her "Thy prayer is accepted, I own thy name" (56). To own something is to confess fully and openly about it. The New Testament pattern is for the believer to confess, or fully own, the name of Jesus. Here we have an unusual reversal where the lord of creation is confessing the name of a believer, thus conferring on Elaw infinite value. Also, the concept of Jesus owning Elaw's name

resonates with a passage in the New Testament book of Revelations where it says that those who "overcome" (Rev. 2.17) will receive a stone "with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (Rev. 2.17). It is likely that Elaw would be familiar with this passage. It holds the promise of inviolate identity that is impervious to the deforming pressures of sex, race, and class. So confident is Elaw in this identity that she receives in a few moments the assurance of salvation which Lee takes years to attain: "From that day to the present I have never entertained doubt of the manifestation of his love to my soul" (56). As a result of this interaction with Jesus, Elaw says her "soul was set at glorious liberty" (57).

Elaw's encounter with Jesus brings into sharper focus the incarnational aspect of mystical communion with God. For as much as revivalist spirituality, especially the holiness branches, stressed the work of the Holy Spirit, that spirituality remains firmly rooted in the sublime paradox of incarnation. As Houchins observes, "at the core of . . . [Christian] traditions is the belief in the profound union of God with humanity, which is a reflection of that essential Christian teaching of the incarnation--the symbolic (and . . . historical) enfleshment of God in the person of Christ" (xxxv). Yet so incredible would even religious nineteenth-century people find Elaw's account of the physical appearance of Jesus, that she feels compelled to defend her testimony. She admits that "I might have tried to imagine, or persuade myself, perhaps, that it had been a vision presented to the eyes of my mind" (56), something like Lee's vision of an angel through "the eye of faith" (Sisters 37). But Elaw claims that not only she, but the cow she was milking, sees Jesus, and that the cow actually

prostrates itself on the ground before him. Despite folk traditions of animals bowing to Jesus, such as in Hardy's poem "The Oxen," such a description of a kneeling cow, then as now, invites ridicule. Elaw is especially vulnerable because she is black, formally uneducated, and a woman. But so important is this meeting with Jesus to her that she persists both in narrating it in detail and defending its reality. She insists that the incident is recorded "with conscientious veracity and scrupulous adherence to truth" (57).

Elaw has another major spiritual experience when she is sanctified at a camp meeting in 1817. In a prayer meeting following a sermon, Elaw becomes "over-powered with the presence of God" (66) and falls to the ground. "Prostrate on the earth" (66), Elaw perceives that "her spirit seemed to ascend up into the clear circle of the sun's disc . . . surrounded and engulfed in the glorious effulgence" (66). She says that while she saw "no personal appearance while in this stupendous elevation, but [she] discerned bodies of resplendent light" (67). She does not seem "to be in this world at all, but immensely far above [it]" (67). So powerful is this experience that Elaw does not dare move and "for a space of several hours [she] appeared not to be on earth, but far above all earthly things" (67). In describing her experience, Elaw shares with Lee the use of light images to express spiritual reality. At Lee's sanctification she feels as if lightning darts through her, and as mentioned previously at a second experience of sanctification she has an interior vision of fire. The intensity of these images is used to convey the concentrated energy which these women experience in their dealings with the divine. Physical illumination also symbolically

represents the opening up of these women's understanding. These images of luminosity set Lee's and Elaw's narratives apart from more conventional antebellum women's spiritual discourse which does not usually employ such images. Brererton notes that most women use more abstract and opaque descriptions in narrating their experiences. She says, "Repeatedly, converts characterized the closer relationship with God in such terms as 'striving for the heavenly crown,' standing before the 'throne of grace,' or 'gathering' at the mercy seat' "(22).

Uncharacteristically, Elaw neither explains nor defends her extraordinary vision. Immediately after relating the incident she says, "I had not at this time offered up public prayer on the camp ground; but when the prayer meeting afterwards commenced, the Lord opened my mouth in public prayer" (67). But that juxtaposition of her story about merging with the sun and her bold sermon afterwards gives the reader a strong indication of the significance of the vision to Elaw. Empowerment, a word too often bandied around, has substantial meaning to Elaw at this point. For she is literally powered by the sun; she believes that she has left earth and gone to the source of all light and energy. By going to the source of light, Elaw transcends imperatives of race, gender, and class which tell her to be silent. William Andrews, commenting on extraordinary black visionary experiences, comments:

> For women, the singularity of these experiences, replete with their imagery of special selection and elevated status, had especially far-reaching consequences, for through these visionary moments they saw themselves

> transformed, inspirited, and for the first time, chosen for
>
> a providential purpose. (11)

Palmer's narrative does not match the vitality of Lee's and Elaw's. Yet despite her conformity to the containment of women's discourse, Palmer does have one area in which she is able to successfully subvert patriarchal control. Palmer effectively claims the authority of *logos* for her own liberation. Although Lee and Elaw also both use the authority of scripture to authenticate their transformations, Palmer is the only one of the three who constructs a strategy for appropriating it. Always affirming the absolute value of the *logos*, she gradually reinterprets its message so that for her the *logos* becomes a proclamation of God's will for achieving women's liberty. At the beginning of her story she sets up her goal, one which no religious nineteenth-century man would resist: "My chief endeavors shall be centered in the aim to be a humble Bible Christian. But by the grace of God, all my energies shall be directed to this one point" (*Holiness* 20). She then amplifies that goal by saying that the more a person ignores "the opinions and experiences of professors" (*Holiness* 20) and relies on her own understanding, the closer she will grow to God. Next she shows that adherence to the Scripture is not merely following a set of guidelines, but is an experimental process. One must be willing to take "each progressive step" (*Holiness* 27) in order to gain consistent spiritual "enjoyment" (*Holiness* 28). Finally, Palmer exults that "God dost reign unrivaled in my heart!" (*Holiness* 42). As men, children, and domestic duties are God's chief rivals in an antebellum American woman's heart, this consecration to God necessarily frees her from the ethical mandate to be totally

absorbed in those concerns. She can justify this major shifting of her priorities because "The Spirit now bore full testimony to her spirit, of the TRUTH OF THE WORD!" (*Holiness* 41).

So although she cannot openly speak of intimate or directly empowering encounters with the divine with the vigor that Elaw and Lee achieve, Palmer still shares with them an independent, sanctified spirituality which relies on divine power to achieve personal transformation. All three women, in their own ways, are energized by their autonomous interactions with the divine. They move from weakness to strength, from silence to speech, and from defined woman to defining woman. They call on the powers of heaven to free them from the entrapment of men.

". . . sweet, perfect, pious"

In telling their stories, Palmer, Lee, and Elaw not only violate the convention which limits narration of "mystical communion with God or Christ" (Brereton 2), they also transgress the rules which govern representation of grown women. As Dobson points out "women in writing that conforms to conventional expectations are to be depicted as sweet, perfect, pious, domestic, and content" (12). If a writer desires to depict conflict within a woman, she often relies on the popular image of the rebellious little girl. Before marriage this girl can, like the heroine in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, throw herself down on the ground in a rage of grief and resentment. But after a woman is married and settled, she has to demonstrate a calm, sweet domesticity

and faith in God.

Mrs. Shelby, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is a good example of the type of woman which conventional narratives sought to represent. She is "a woman of high class, both intellectually and morally. To . . . natural magnanimity and generosity of mind . . . she added high moral and religious sensibility and principle, carried out with great energy and ability into practical results" (20-21). When faced with calamity, as Mrs. Shelby is when she finds out that her husband has sold Uncle Tom and a valued young boy, the good Christian woman cannot give in to intense emotions. Mrs. Shelby, after briefly and "vehemently" (44) denouncing the slave trader (but not her irresponsible husband), by saying "[T]hat wretch!" (44), recovers immediately. "Recollecting herself" (44), Mrs. Shelby asks her husband's forgiveness for her hasty and impulsive remarks. Then, although stricken, she calmly suggests several concrete plans to save the slaves, all of which turn out to be impossible. Through this all, she controls her expression of anger, bitterness, desperation, and grief.

Given this narrative convention, rarely do women's narratives depict prolonged anguish or torment in grown up Christian women. Only a damaged woman like Simon Legree's mistress, Cassy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, displays such extreme emotions. In fact, such emotions mark women as damaged or fallen. In this context, it is significant that Elaw's and Palmer's narratives show even brief glimpses to the underside of nineteenth-century women's public performance.

When Palmer recalls the severe trials she had met with, she says that although some struggles "arose from outward causes, {they} were generally inward"(94). At

other points in her narrative she speaks of "wrestling with God" (*Holiness* 134) through the night, or of encouraging other women to do so. This is similar to Lee's statements that she "struggled long and hard" (*Sisters* 37) over sanctification and that one other time she "wrestled with [God] for victory" (*Sisters* 37). But for Palmer, unlike Lee, these spiritual struggles do not end with an assurance of sanctification. Palmer says:

> These mighty conflicts were repeated again and again and through each succeeding year of her pilgrimage; with each conflict it seemed, while engaged in the contest, as though it had reached the summit of human endurance, yet the succeeding one was found to be proportionate in magnitude to the increase of strength which had been gained by the former trial. (*Holiness* 98)

Elaw provides us, in the description of the death of her sister, with a specific example of the agonizing conflicts which mature, sanctified Christian women go through. Her honesty and psychological perceptiveness are startling. For as any veteran reader of nineteenth-century narratives knows, the death bed scene of a righteous woman is a place for an author to demonstrate the power of the angel woman who radiates Christian virtues of humility, patience and charity to the fallen world. Necessarily the angel fulfills her role by denying all her conflicting desires, her passions, and the complexities of her inner life. And also necessarily, the angel must die peacefully, and in her passing reinscribe the safe boundaries of cultural

Christianity.

As she starts the story, Elaw sets the reader up to expect the culturally authorized version of a good woman's death. When her sister, Hannah, a godly woman, is dying, Elaw travels twenty miles to attend her. Hannah, although wasted away, is in a "happy frame of mind" (71) and displaying a "heavenly" (71) spirit. Her Christian friends are gathered around her, waiting to send her to glory. Elaw weeps beside the bed and says that her sister's body "seemed almost unable to detain so heavenly a spirit" (71). Hannah, caught in divine glory, reaches over to Elaw and says, probably repeating a line from a hymn, "I'll take my sister by the hand and lead her to the promised land" (71). This scene is similar to the one which another Christian writer, Julia Foote, portrays in a chapter of her autobiography appropriately entitled "Early Fruits Gathered Home." Foote's dying Christian friend, Mrs. Simpson, shows "calmness, patience and resignation toward suffering" (194) as she approaches death. At the end she floats toward eternity with "a heavenly smile upon her countenance" (195), edifying the family and friends who attend her. And of course, there is Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose beatific death causes tears and repentance to flow throughout her household, covering everyone from the humble slave, Topsy, to Eva's arrogant father, St. Clare, with a warm supernatural glow.

But in Elaw's narrative, her sister's journey to the promised land is not peaceful. She unexpectedly falls into a deep depression, convinced that she is going to hell. When concerned friends try to engage her in prayer, she vehemently resists them, saying that it would only hasten her damnation. And Hannah remains in what Elaw

calls a "horrible state" (72) not for a few minutes but for a week. During this time, Hannah draws all her friends and family into her anguish. Hannah does not, like little Eva, gently give out locks of her hair to comfort her community. Rather, she makes them struggle with her, makes them suffer with her, makes them enter into the depth of her conflicted experience. According to Elaw, Hannah's and the community's struggles are so powerful that the prayers at the bedside shake the whole house.

In her account of her sister's death, Elaw goes beyond Palmer's "mighty conflicts" of faith into previously unexplored territory of women's spiritual experience. For Elaw ascribes to her sister an agony that nineteenth-century narratives reserve for the wicked. Her story of her sister's death exactly parallels Lee's story of "a very wicked young man" (43) for whose soul she and a group of praying women labor. Lee speaks of a "horror in the room- -a darkness of a mental kind" (430) which sounds identical to Hannah's "horrible state" (72). Lee's sinner is released from sin, like Hannah, through a mighty show of supernatural power generated by a praying community.

By linking the agony of deep sinfulness with the death of "a very pious woman . . . {who} conducted herself very strictly . . . in all her movements . . .so sanctified and devoted a Christian" (71), Elaw breaks all the rules of antebellum women's discourse. Allowing "horror" to be a part of her sister's experience, Elaw shatters the superficial image of women that is popular in the culture. Instead of depicting an angel woman of the household, Elaw portrays an unpredictable, complicated, passionate woman who has a profound relationship with God unmediated by pastor or husband. Hannah, like Jacob in the Old Testament, wrestles with God in the depths of

her soul and is wounded in the process. A woman like this is capable of escaping from any containment that her culture offers. Despite her true Christian faith, Hannah proves to be a dangerous woman, because her intense spirituality on her death bed blurs conventional boundaries between "good " and "bad" women. She also is a visible symbol of unexplored depths beneath the surface of women's lives. For whatever drives Hannah into depression is not visible to her family or friends. There is in Hannah, and by implication in other women, unseen springs of consciousness where they meet God. Here crucial decisions were made, battles fought and character formed. These hidden regions, referred to by Palmer as the "great deep" (*Holiness* 26), do not belong to the patriarchy. Indeed, the patriarchy, so busy creating restrictive images angel women, seems to know nothing of these regions. They are part of a hidden, interior life.

What is equally unusual is that the struggling Hannah is the only person in Elaw's, Lee's and Palmer's narratives who eventually speaks the language of paradise. As mentioned previously, Lee longs for the words to express her spiritual experiences, but feels that such language is not allowed on earth. But Hannah, whose intense and wild interiority violates all rules, is given a heavenly language just before she dies. Elaw says:

> My dear sister . . . revived . . . and said . . ."I have overcome the world by the kingdom of heaven;" she then began singing, and appeared to sing several verses; but the language in which she spoke was too wonderful for

> me, and I could not understand it. We all sat or stood around her with great astonishment, for her voice was as clear, musical, and strong, as if nothing had ailed her. (73)

One of the messages of Elaw's story about her sister is that interior conflict and anguish can be a part of women's spirituality. In fact, Elaw is implying that depth of consciousness is necessary for the heights of glory. For the difficult Hannah is the only one Elaw knows who was gifted with "pure language . . . unalloyed by . . . fulsome compliment . . . double meaning . . . weakness and poverty . . . bombast, and other defects which all human languages are clogged with" (74).

But interior processes such as Hannah underwent went largely unreported in antebellum women's narratives. The fictional Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the real Harriet Jacobs can cross icy rivers and be confined in a crawl space for seven years for their children--that kind of sufferings fits into the women's sphere. But Hannah doesn't struggle for her children; she struggles for herself. In doing so, she reveals something unknown beneath the "sweet, perfect, pious . . ." image of the ideal antebellum woman.

The Angel over the Right Shoulder

The desolation behind the image of the "model-like woman" is depicted in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 1852 story, "The Angel Over The Right Shoulder." Judith

Fetterley points out that this is an autobiographical narrative, documenting Phelps' life as one which is "sacrificed by and to a culture" (203) which could not endorse her needs for an independent self. Phelps, a Christian painter and a writer, forces herself into the narrow mold of a model woman. Despite periodic bouts with depression, and excruciating frustration, she maintains a cheerful exterior as a minister's wife and a good mother. In 1851 Phelps published a novel called *The Sunny Side; or, the Country Minister's Wife*. In that same year she wrote in her journal, "I work in the dark. Everything lies in chaos before me" (qtd. in Fetterley 206). The next year saw the publication of "The Angel Over the Right Shoulder" and her death at the age of thirty-seven.

In the story, an overworked and unhappy good Christian woman, Mrs. James, sees her life, much as Phelps did, as one of "fruitless effort" (213) which is "all broken and disjointed" (213). In a New Year's Eve reverie over her sleeping daughter, Mrs. James laments that she does not have more to offer the child. She wishes that she could shield her daughter from "disappointments" (214) and that somehow, "in fighting the battle" (214) for integrity in her own life, she could have some kind of victory for both of them. Instead of wholeness and satisfaction, Mrs. James "was conscious of yearnings for a more earnest life than this" (213). She feels "unsatisfied longings for something which she had not attained" (214). She muses on what it is that she really desires, wonders if she needs to see "results from her life's work" (213). Was there, she asks herself, "a golden cord {which} bound her life-threads together into unity of purpose--notwithstanding they seemed, so often, single and broken?" (213).

Throughout the preceding year, Mrs. James had tried, under the direction of her husband, to develop time for self reflection and perhaps find a sense of purpose for her existence. He had prescribed a "system" (209) in which she spends two hours alone each day. But all her attempts at such a discipline fail, often sabotaged by her husband, who needs a button sewn on his good shirt, the rip in his glove mended, or who forgets to bring the meat home for dinner. Speaking of Mr. James' attempt to give his wife time to develop her inner life, Fetterley remarks:

> Mr. James' response places the burden for her predicament squarely on her shoulders, while at the same time his "advice" indicates his assumptions that she neither understands nor can solve her own problems. Although she knows that he does not know what he is talking about, she is nevertheless forced to promise that she will follow his advice. Since his plan is based on contradictory premises--you are responsible, you are not responsible; you are free to act and command your time, I must act and command you--and since it is generated, not only in complete ignorance of the conditions it proposes to solve, but also from an unarticulated and presumably unconscious commitment to maintain those very conditions, it is obviously doomed to failure. Predictably, Mr. James plays a large role in the failure;

indeed, his system insures it . . . . (207)

After weeping over her sleeping daughter, Mrs. James "sought her own rest" from the pain of her unsatisfied yearnings and her fears that her daughter will repeat the pattern of her life. She dreams that she sees a woman with a group of children traveling over a vast plain without trees, except some at the far horizon which are wreathed with golden clouds. Unbeknownst to the female traveler, two angels are watching her, one over her right shoulder, one over the left. They record all her actions, however small, in a golden book with, of course, a golden pen. The dreamer notices that "Not a deed, not a word, not a look escapes their notice" (214). The angel on her right records what she does correctly--"soothe an angry feeling or raise a drooping eyelid, or kiss away a little grief" (214). The angel on the left, with sorrowful eyes, records every "evil, however trivial" (214). When the lone women repents of an evil, such as trying to advance to the light too rapidly, the angel on the left blots our her sin with tears. As Mrs. James watches the dream woman and children move across the desolate plain, she realizes that the angels are God's agents, preparing a book of deeds for judgment day. Wanting to warn the woman and exhort her to "be faithful and patient to the end," (215) she overtakes her and touches her. As the traveler turns, Mrs. James "recognized or seemed to recognize *herself*"(italics are Phelps's) (215). This recognition startles and alarms her, and she wakes, as she had gone to sleep, "in tears" (215).

Here Phelps appends what Judith Fetterley calls a "weak and unconvincing resolution" (208) to the story. But the ending, however unsatisfactory to contemporary

readers, fits perfectly into the logic of the patriarchal system, snapping shut like a tight-fitting lid on a box, or perhaps on a coffin. As the story closes, Mrs. James's children enter the room, greeting her with childish glee. She "returned the merry greeting most heartily" (215). All of the sudden she understands "herself" (215) and enters into "a new existence" (215). No longer burdened by "undefined yearnings and ungratified longing" (215), she realizes that she has found her way "through the thicket in which she had been entangled and a light was now about her path" (225). She welcomes in the "*Glad* New Year" (215).

Mrs. James accomplishes this transmutation of consciousness by giving up her sense of self. She totally accepts, as a spiritual and social duty, the merger of her identity with her social role. She believes that God, as represented by the angels, is concerned only with her faithful execution of "all those little household cares and duties on which the comfort and virtue of her family depended" (215). She vaguely acknowledges that "it is right and important for her to cultivate her own mind and heart," (215) but is convinced that none of that interior work has any transcendent significance. Eternal accounting only applies to restricted social duties. These responsibilities "could not be neglected without danger" (215) to her eternal life. So Mrs. James' hidden self, and the yearnings which rise up from it remain unknown. Her spirituality, then, operates as a powerful enforcer of social conformity. Her very subconscious betrays her into a bondage which she believes is the will of God.

It is against this living death that Palmer, Elaw, and Lee fight. Where Mrs. James sees danger, they see opportunities for freedom. Their narratives are both testimonies

and act of defiance. And their resistance, although not typical of evangelical women, represents a small minority of such women who struggled to develop a spirituality independent of male control. Their narratives, especially Lee and Elaw's, show a depth of understanding of the personal self, and a more radical transformation of it, than does the writing of their peers. They have a sensitivity to the confinement and erasure of the female self which religious women such as Mrs. James endured. Drawing from the resources of this spirituality, Lee, Elaw and Palmer each answer a divine call to preach, further challenging limitations on women's discourse. As we will see, their call to preach burned like fire within them.

Chapter 4

The Holy Energy

Lee, Elaw, and Palmer used the full intensity of their independent sanctified spirituality to break out of patriarchal containment and sustain them in their vocations as preachers. No other antebellum evangelical women pushed so vigorously toward liberty as they did. They broke the silence imposed on women who wished to speak with authority within the church. For although as the nineteenth century progressed, women were allowed to be more vocal in some denominations, only one woman, Antoinette Brown in 1853, was ever ordained to the ministry before the Civil War (Hardesty 97). Those like Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, who answered a call to preach, found themselves beset by opposition. As Sarah Grimke points out in a letter to Finney associate and abolitionist Theodore Weld, who was bragging because he had encouraged women to testify in revivals, small concessions about women speaking in church did not indicate any lessening of the patriarchal proscriptions against women preaching. Grimke says:

> I do not think women being permitted to pray and tell their experience in revivals is any proof that Christians do not think it is wrong for women to preach. This is the touchstone, to presume to teach the brethren. Let a

> woman who had prayed in a revival claim to be the appointed minister of Jesus and to exercise that office by teaching regularly on the sabbath, and she will at once be regarded as a fanatic, or a fool. (qtd. in Hardesty)

The "touchstone" of preaching became the focus of intense repression, as Protestant men, seeing their authority seriously questioned, vigorously resisted what they considered female encroachment onto their territory. In another letter written by Sarah Grimke, part of her 1837 published correspondence with Mary Parker, Grimke succinctly explains why her brothers in the faith refused to allow women to preach. She says, "It is manifest that if women were permitted to be ministers of the gospel . . . it would interfere materially with the present organized system of spiritual power and ecclesiastical authority, which is now vested solely in the hands of men" (qtd. in Hardesty 99). Given the seriousness of patriarchal resistance, it is obvious that women who did preach--and there was a small, hardy band of preaching and evangelizing women before the Civil War (Hardesty 97-98)--frequently met with overwhelming barrages of hostility. Protestant men, both in personal confrontation and in print, attacked women preachers. And, as seen in the first chapter, the opposition of these men could be translated into a multitude of tracts and books distributed nationally. As can be imagined, all the threats about the fate of "unnatural" women fell heavily on women preachers. They were especially chastised for violating the supposedly divine code of womanly reticence.

Still, as the writing of Lee, Elaw, and Palmer illustrates, in many cases the

intensity of the call to preach which burned in women was stronger than all the repression men could muster. In their zeal for God, these women violated the most stringent codes of reticence which kept them from the pulpit. And although, as we will see, Lee's, Elaw's, and Palmer's appropriation of the right to preach was not a pure or uncompromised freedom, it was one of the most vigorous challenges to patriarchal power depicted in evangelical women's narratives. Lee and Elaw openly described conflicts with men, sometimes even naming specific individuals. Palmer, not unexpectedly, seemed more constrained by the codes of womanly reticence and didn't engage in open controversy in her autobiographical narrative. Yet, she wrote a remarkable treatise, one of only a handful of such works before the Civil War, condemning men's repression of women's preaching. She actually accused Christian men of crucifying and entombing women. And all three women demonstrated the reality of their call by sustaining their preaching missions in the midst of patriarchal repression for many years.

". . . a woman must not speak in the church"

The nineteenth-century American proscription governing women's preaching is well-rooted in Christian history. Over the centuries the few Christian women who had attempted to preach the Gospel had usually met with strong and frequently violent resistance from men. After all, in most of the church's history, women were enjoined to be completely silent in church, sometimes not even being allowed to give liturgical

responses or to sing. A preaching woman disrupted the very fabric of church tradition and was usually considered extremely dangerous. Historically, most men had agreed with the evangelical nineteenth-century man, C. Duren's opinion that "their [women's] place in the church is not as public teachers, nor in any way to act as assuming authority" (224).

Even a brief and informal survey of the history of opposition toward those who preached can convey the seriousness of the resistance that women faced. In the seventeenth century, Quaker women, who started the first consistent tradition of women's preaching in England, suffered greatly to establish their rights. A representative example of what happened to Quaker women who tried to preach in established churches is the case of Dewens Morrey. In 1657, she was arrested in Hawkchurch, England, and brought before her parish priest. He insisted that she be punished for her crime of speaking out in church, because "[a] woman must not speak in the church" (qtd. in Huber 154). Morrey was "{w}hipt until the blood did come, which was done the next Morning early, she receiving many cruel, bloody stripes" (qtd. in Huber 154). In a similar incident, and only one of many such incidents, in 1660, seventeen-year old Elizabeth Fletcher, and her friend, Elizabeth Leavens, publically rebuked the young divines at Oxford University who responded with violence:

> [F]letcher and Leavens] suffered . . . by the scholars--for they dragged them first through a dirty pool, afterwards had them to a pump and holding their mouths to the

> pump, endeavored to pump water thereunto with other shameful abuses; after threw the said Elizabeth Fletcher down upon a grave stone . . . and bruised her so sore that she never recovered. (qtd. in Huber 164)

Quakers met with similar treatment in the seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay colony. Elizabeth Hooten, a women in her sixties who had royal authorization to live in Boston, was tied to a cart which led her to whipping posts in the towns of Cambridge, Watertown and Deham. At each post she was stripped to the waist and beaten. Then, she was left to die in the wilderness (Huber 168). Amazingly, she lived to testify: "So they put me on horse and carried me into . . . [the] wilderness many miles, where was many wild beasts both bears & wolves . . . and many deep waters" (qtd. in Huber 168). Mary Dyer, who was an influential member of the Rhode Island colony, was actually hanged on the Boston Common in 1660 for refusing to be silent about her Quaker beliefs (Huber 168-171).

Vocal seventeenth-century American Puritan women were also treated harshly. Anne Hutchinson was censured and banished as much for effrontery of addressing both men and women in her home meetings as she was for any doctrinal controversy. New England judicial records indicate that other Puritan women who attempted to speak or preach in public were also punished. Sarah Keayne was convicted of "irregular prophesying in mixed assemblies" (qtd. in Keller 141). And in one of the strictest interpretations of the authority of men to control women's voices, Joan Hogg was punished for her "disorderly singing" (qtd. in Keller 141).

It seems reasonable that in eighteenth-century America, Enlightenment thought, the growing movement toward independence, the Revolution, and the postrevolutionary disestablishment of religion would have eased repression directed at women preachers, and in some ways it did. The formal persecution of women preachers seemed to have diminished. But except in Quaker sects, women were not allowed to preach in Protestant churches. Also, there is substantial evidence that violence towards woman preachers from family or mob action was still a threat. For example, in her 1735 journal, Elizabeth Ashbridge revealed the violence her husband directed against her for joining the Quakers and then wanting to preach. He forced her to move several times to avoid meeting Quakers. When she defied him and decided to go to Quaker meetings against his wishes, he refused to buy her shoes. Because she was not deterred by that hardship, he took sterner measures. Ashbridge says of her husband that

> . . . [H]e several times Struck me with sore Blows,
> which I Endeavored to bear with Patience, believing the
> time would Come when he would see I was in the right
> . . . he once came up to me & took out his pen knife
> saying, "if you offer to go to Meeting tomorrow, with
> this knife I'll cripple you, for you shall not be a Quaker."
> (166)

According to Ashbridge, her husband's violence towards her was exacerbated by a general contempt for preaching Quaker women which flourished in the

culture. She says in her narrative that when she started to attend a Quaker church, "Neighbors . . . began to revile me . . . they supposed I intended to be a fool and turn Preacher" (160). Her husband felt intense embarrassment about his wife's preaching. He told Ashbridge: "I can't bear the Reproach. . . to become a Laughing Stock to the World" (168).

Ann Lee, founder of one of the most radically feminist of American religious sects, the Shakers, met with severe and eventually lethal opposition in response to her preaching. To be sure, she was far more unorthodox than the Quaker preachers or women like Anne Hutchinson. For she did not just preach the Messiah, she claimed to be the female version of the original Christ. But she preached before the Second Great Awakening when church attendance was at an all-time low and when many of the enlightenment-trained deist leaders of the revolution, such as Jefferson and Franklin, were Christian heretics. An account of Lee's life preserved by her associates after her death indicates that she was persecuted as much for being a woman preacher as for being a heretic. It was written in 1827 and is entitled *Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann Lee and the First Witnesses of the Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing, Given by Some Aged Brethren and Sisters of the United Society*. The narrative describes one of Lee's preaching tours in 1781 or 1782. One night during that tour, a large group of men broke into the house where Lee was staying and dragged her out of bed by the feet. They took her to a tavern under the order of a local Captain of the militia, who eventually released her under the conditions that she would not press charges against her assailants. During her

captivity, the account states, her abductors performed "acts of inhumanity and indecency" (310). At her release, Lee's clothing was "torn in a shameful manner" (310). Apparently the men wanted "to find out whether she was a woman or not" (310). If they didn't actually rape her, it is likely that her captors assaulted her sexually.

As she preached in the early 1780s, Lee met with violence everywhere she went. Her associates relate a typical disruption of one of her sermons. Three men entered the hall, pulled her off the platform and carried her toward the door. A number of "sisters" (310) grabbed hold of her, and because one of them was "a large, heavy woman" (310) and the passage narrow, the ruffians were thwarted. Lee was not so fortunate in Harvard, Massachusetts, in 1783, when she sustained a particularly savage beating from which she never recovered. She died a year later (Ruether and Prelinger) 267.

Ann Lee's fatal beating took place only thirty-four years before Jarena Lee started her preaching career in 1818. The basic attitude toward women preachers had not altered. In fact, in some sections of the huge Protestant revival, it appeared that resistance to women preaching increased. In the great social upheavals following the revolution, and extending into the nineteenth century, there was a strong desire to use the traditional concepts about women to maintain social harmony. The woman's sphere became for many men a fantasy projection of a stable and morally uplifting force in a competitive and unpredictable social order. Any unusual assertions of liberty by women, such as preaching, were seen not only as challenges to traditional assumptions

about women, but real threats to a precariously balanced American society.

So strong was conventionally religious men's desire to prevent women from disturbing their position, that when in the 1820s the revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney permitted women merely to speak aloud at his revival meetings, he was severely criticized by many of his fellow ministers. The Reverend Nettleton characterized such open participation of women in worship as "evil" (qtd. in Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton 230) and warned Finney that his liberal ways could foster "an everlasting quarrel in . . . churches generally" (qtd. in Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton). And although the quarrel was not everlasting, it certainly was substantial. Finney's challenge to the proprieties of the age was called "unscriptural and inadmissible" (qtd. in Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton 230) by the heavyweight evangelical, Lyman Beecher.

Given these historical circumstances, we can assume that Jarena Lee's and Zilpha Elaw's description of the opposition, ridicule, and contempt that they experienced was accurate. In fact, as we will see later, they probably downplayed their depictions of violence as part of a rhetorical strategy which emphasized their victory in Jesus. If they were beaten or sexually abused, it is unlikely that they would report it. For their preaching to have authority, they had to demonstrate that supernatural powers protected them. They would keep any major breaches in their spiritual defenses secret.

As black women, especially when they travelled alone, Lee and Elaw were vulnerable to more verbal, physical, and sexual abuse than most white women

were. Because white ideology pushed them to the periphery of the domestic sphere, they were not granted even the small protection given to white women to guard them against abuse. What is worse, Lee and Elaw, like all nineteenth-century black women, were continually vulnerable not only to being raped, but to being defined as sexual temptresses, sirens who because of their basically animalistic nature provoked uncontrollable sexual outbursts in white men. Even middle-class white women associated with blackness through abolitionism became identified as sexually loose women. For instance, in a pamphlet denouncing abolitionist-built Philadelphia Hall, white women were depicted as prostitutes lolling in the upper windows of the building or seen in lascivious poses with black men. When middle-class white women tried to calm a mob which stormed Philadelphia Hall just before its official opening, they were rudely thrust aside and the building burnt to the ground (Yellin 48-49). If the veneer of deference towards "respectable" white women was so thin, it was likely to scarcely exist for black women.

In their lives and in their narratives, then, Lee, Elaw, and Palmer displayed remarkable courage and tenacity in the face of fierce opposition. They defied a centuries-old prohibition against women preaching and the American Protestant obsession about the reticence of good women. And further, Lee and Elaw wrote authoritatively, even enthusiastically, about their ministries. Palmer, not surprisingly, was extremely reticent about describing her preaching. But it must be remembered that however weak her narrative was in describing her preaching, Palmer was one of the most influential Protestant women in antebellum America. The excruciating reticence

of her narrative was offset by her boldness in writing about theology and in her preaching. Looking at all three women's lives against the historical context of repression and violence, one can easily feel a sense of wonder about how these women sustained their faith and mission surrounded by such hostile forces.

Lee and Elaw: "Go Preach the Gospel".

Lee's and Elaw's narratives show that the direct and conscious confrontation with men that they were eventually able to sustain grew out of a long process of self-development in which the tension between patriarchal containment and the desire for liberty was apparent. After the first stage of their lives, when both women had fully accepted their calls to preach, they went on to complete their missions, consistently defiant of men's efforts to stop them.

Lee initially had little internal resistance to accepting a call to preach the Gospel. After a difficult conversion process, during which she was twice tempted to suicide, she settled into a steady faith which was bolstered by her sanctification. Her confidence in her own ability to discern God's will, even in such a momentous occasion as receiving a call to preach the Gospel, was remarkable. After she heard a voice tell her "Go Preach the Gospel" (*Sisters* 35), she desired confirmation of the mandate so that she would know that she wasn't being deceived by Satan. Instead of talking to a pastor or other male authority figure, she immediately went to "a secret place" (*Sisters* 35). There she "called upon the Lord to know if he had called [her] to

preach" (*Sisters* 35). She then had a vision of a pulpit and a Bible which convinced her of the authenticity of her call.

After her call, Lee, who had great respect for the influential black Methodist minister, the Rev. Richard Allen, wanted to be licensed to preach under his authority. There was a precedent for such a procedure in the Methodist tradition, for John Wesley licensed several women to preach in late eighteenth-century Britain. But in Philadelphia in 1811, Allen was involved in a struggle for the autonomy of his black fellowship from the white Methodists who generally were conservative about women preaching. Previous to his conversation with Lee, he had refused an Englishwoman the right to preach at his church, citing the disciplines of the American Methodist Churches (Andrews 5). He told Lee that he would allow her to hold prayer meetings and to exhort the congregation after the licensed ministers finished their sermons, but he would not authorize her to preach.

After Allen denied Lee the right to preach in the Methodist church, she lost a great deal of her motivation for life. She says in her narrative that "that holy energy which burned within me, began to be smothered" (*Sisters* 36). Looking back on that time of her life, Lee later concluded in her narrative that her failure to preach the Gospel when she was originally called was an evasion of prophetic responsibility; she said that she behaved like Jonah (*Sisters* 44). But she makes that observation as a seasoned Christian and established preacher. As a young black woman with two children in 1811, she did not have any easy options. She could have preached independently, or she could have aligned herself with the Quakers. But she did not

mention either of these options in her narrative. The independent route would have been extremely difficult, for she would have had no network of support and would have had to create her own congregations to preach to. And from her experience before she joined with the black Methodists, she knew that white racism was as strong in the church as it was in the secular world--even Quakers harbored racial prejudice.

Lee sublimated her real desire by marrying a Methodist minister. And, although she seemed to have been personally fond of her husband, her marriage was unhappy. Her husband was transferred out of Philadelphia, where all of Lee's close friends were, and they lived in an isolated town. Her health declined, and she became seriously ill. When she thought she was dying, her only desire was that she be able to preach the Gospel. She recovered, but her husband and four of her six children died shortly afterwards. She then returned to Philadelphia, still wanting to preach. So strong was her urge to preach, that Lee literally took over a sermon one day at Allen's Bethel Church. After the Rev. Richard Williams had read his text, Lee stood up, interrupted him, and preached. She defended her apparent "indecorum" (*Sisters* 44) by saying that she was motivated by "an altogether supernatural impulse" (*Sisters* 44). Richard Allen, impressed by her boldness and powerful preaching, finally gave in to her request and granted her the right to preach under Methodist auspices. Thus, Lee started her vocation, nine years after her initial call.

Elaw's first obstacles to fulfilling her call to preach came from within. As mentioned in the second chapter, she had experienced a thorough conversion and strong sanctification and, like Lee, had an independent and steady faith. But when she

first received her call to preach, through a deathbed vision of her sister Hannah, Elaw felt totally inadequate to respond to it. She simply couldn't believe that she was worthy to preach: "I could not at the time imagine it possible that God should select and appoint so poor and ignorant a creature as myself to be his messenger, to bear the good tidings of the gospel to the children of men" (75). Even after she received encouragement from another woman preacher, Elaw still could not picture herself as capable of preaching, and proceeded for several years to ignore her call. Even her young daughter knew something was wrong and gently rebuked her. But Elaw's insecurity about preaching was strong. Only after a protracted illness, a supernatural visitor, and the luminous vision at a camp meeting (which was described previously), was Elaw finally able to accept her own worthiness to preach. Throughout her long struggle, Elaw needed constant assurance from God that she was adequate. And, by her account, she received the affirmation she needed. She says:

> How often have I said, "Lord! send by whom thou wilt send, only send not by me; for thou knowest that I am ignorant; how can I be a mouth for God!--a poor, coloured female: and thou knowest we have many things to endure that others do not." But the answer was, "What is that to thee? follow thou me." (90)

It is not clear from her narrative, or from Methodist records, what Elaw's formal relation with the Methodist church was. She says that after her experience at a camp meeting, which prompted her to spontaneously preach, she had brought up the

issue of her call with a preacher at the meeting, Mr. John Potts. He approved of her call and through him Elaw "obtained the approbation and sanction of all the minsters and of the society" (83). On her return home, she laid her case before the ministers of her congregation, the mostly-white Methodist Society of Burlington, New Jersey. They encouraged her "to proceed, and to preach wherever and whenever opportunities offered. They saw no impropriety in it, and therefore advised [her] . . . to go on and do all the good [s]he could" (83). This strong encouragement from the leaders of her congregation do not mean that she was licensed to preach. The historical record does not reveal any names of licensed white women preachers in the Methodist church before the Civil War. If white women were not licensed, it is unlikely that black women were.

Elaw's best hope for getting a preaching license from a mainline denomination would have been though the AME. And it seems that she had some affiliation with the AME church because in Jarena Lee recounts in her narrative a season of preaching they shared together. In commenting on her work with Elaw, Lee mentioned some kind of official document which authorized Elaw to preach with her. It is likely that some officials of the AME church encouraged Elaw. Because some of its founders, such as Richard Allen, were ex-slaves, they had an interest in liberation issues, even if they were not overt supporters of women's rights. Jean M. Humez points out that "women were involved from the outset in creating and supporting the grass--roots organizational units . . . --the class meetings and praying bands--and contributing to the communities of the AME churches" (130). But, as demonstrated by Lee's exper-

ience, even in progressive AME churches, preaching licenses were hard to come by. Because Elaw's narrative does not indicate that she spoke to Allen before she started preaching in 1828, it is unlikely he commissioned her as he did Lee. After his death in March of 1831, there was little likelihood that Elaw would have been licensed to preach. The AME grew more and more conservative, finally embracing the most repressive aspects of constrictive Protestant ideology about women. Andrews concludes from his research of Zilpha Elaw that neither the black or white churches licensed her formally (2).

However reluctant Allen had been to license women, he was one of the few Christian men in authority who was willing to do so. After Allen's death, the AME became more class conscious and with that awareness critical of women's open expression of their spirituality in church. The leadership became sensitive to the negative public image generated by their unconventional practice of allowing some women to preach (Humez 312). Daniel A Payne, a former South Carolina school master who became one of the most powerful bishops of the AME, records in his 1888 memoirs how he energetically lobbied for higher educational requirements for all AME ministers. As most theological schools did not accept women, Payne's promotion of an educated clergy undercut women's preaching. He said that he desired to "rive the mass of general ignorance and force the ministry of our Church to a higher plane of intellectual culture" (qtd. in Humez 313). Further, he declared war on "some of the customs of worship" (qtd. in Humez 313) which he viewed as "extravagant" (qtd in Humez 313) and "heathenish" (qtd. in Humez 313). He was particularly hard

on women's "praying and singing bands" (qtd. in Humez 312). He tried to drive such groups out of the AME and was willing to sacrifice church members in order to clean up the excesses of "the ignorant masses" (qtd. in Humez 312) who regarded women's participation in church life as "the essence of religion" (qtd. in Humez 313).

Payne went so far as to revise the actual history of the AME in his memoirs by denying that women had received licenses to preach. In Lee's narrative she clearly states that Bishop Allen and the general conference fully authorized and supported her role as a preacher. She mentions that she participated in the yearly Conferences, sometimes traveling to them with Allen. Payne speaks about women such as Lee as outsiders trying to get in:

> [C]ertain women members of the AME Church who believed themselves divinely commissioned to preach by formal license, organized themselves into an association with the avowed intention of laying out a field of usefulness for themselves, and making out appointments for such a field after the manner of our Annual Conference. (qtd. in Humez 313)

In 1852, the all-male general conference denied, for the second time, a women's petition that they be allowed to preach in AME churches. The attitude of the church leadership at this point was so conservative that the women didn't even ask for the right to be licensed, a right a few had enjoyed for several decades. At the same time, the AME leadership publically aligned itself with what Margaret Fuller had

called the "numerous party" of Protestant shepherds who tried to manufacture model women who would adhere to restricted social roles. An 1852 editorial of the *Christian Recorder,* the official AME journal, argued that women were weaker than men "both physically and mentally" (qtd. in Humez 313) and should stay in their "sphere" (qtd. in Humez 313) of "easier toils" (qtd. in Humez 313). Rhetorical questions in this editorial show how deeply AME men had imbibed the Protestant white middle-class definitions of women:

> When the Messiah's grand mission was to be executed, was the male or female form assumed? When His mighty truths were to be promulgated to a listless world, who were sent forth by heaven's son, the tender, gentle daughters of Israel, or her more hardy enduring brothers? (qtd. in Humez 313).

This kind of reactionary language about women is surprising, coming as it does from a church body which was founded to provide liberation for black Christians. Clearly, even Allen's cautious support of women's equality in the church was totally effaced in the twenty years following his death. The black AME church, desiring the respect of the white middle-class, adopted one of the worst aspects of that culture. No doubt the "tender, gentle, daughters of Israel" were the younger sisters of the "model-like" women Margaret Fuller commented on in 1843.

One can see the deleterious effect of this change in the AME on women in Lee's writing. When she published her first narrative in 1836, at the beginning of the

conservative reaction of the AME, she did not mention encountering any obstruction within the church after Allen licenses her, nor does she appear on the defensive. Only once does she chide Allen and the other leaders of the AME for delaying her preaching ministry. She says "O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life" (*Sisters* 36). In her expanded and revised version of the narrative, however, published in 1849, Lee seemed to be on the defensive. She mentioned two incidents at Bethel Church in Philadelphia when she met with strong opposition over the issue of female preaching, even when Bishop Allen was alive. She mentioned several times that Allen and the conference gave her ministry their full support. At the end of the revised narrative she drew authority from the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, by paraphrasing a quotation from him about being opposed in preaching the Gospel. Then she declared herself as "the first female preacher of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church" (*Sisters* 97), clearly challenging Payne and his party. Also in the second narrative, she gave in a bit to the stereotyped conventions about motherhood being pushed in the culture. In her first version, Lee proudly said that she was able to leave her sick child with a friend and not think about him at all when she traveled. In the second version, she retained that story, but went on to demonstrate what a good mother she was and how well her son turned out. That addition was clearly a concession made to the power of the conservative elements of the AME.

Comparing Lee's and Elaw's narratives with the history of the AME which Bishop Payne wrote in 1888, one sees that even within one generation, the tradition of

women's preaching in the AME was distorted and then destroyed. Payne and the AME substituted the myth of the model woman for the real women who had been vigorously participating in church life. It is possible then, that in the 1850s younger AME women could first have seen their mothers or grandmothers preach, and then have witnessed the erasure of that ministry from contemporary church life, and eventually from church records. Perhaps Lee and Elaw were not only writing about their own gospel ministries, but trying to preserve the memory of women preachers within the AME. At the end of her narrative, Elaw seems to have posterity in mind when she says that "these humble memoirs will doubtless continue to be read long after I shall have ceased from my earthly labours and existence" (160).

Lee and Elaw: Preaching with "the holy energy"

After they established themselves as preachers, Lee and Elaw carried on a running battle with Protestant men, both black and white. In these skirmishes with men, Lee and Elaw followed the wisdom of the adage which says that the best defense is a good offense; the bulk of their narratives dealt not with the opposition they encountered, but with the success they enjoyed as preachers. They were determined to show that after they started preaching, "God gave forth proofs" (Elaw 91) that their ministries were "from Him" (Elaw 91): sinners were converted, backsliders recovered and believers sanctified. This emphasis on results was common in American evangelicalism and was frequently used as an argument for women's roles in the ministry-

If women could do the same gospel work as a man, many argued, there was no reason to restrict them from preaching.

Both Lee's and Elaw's narratives were structured by their strong need to show proofs of their ministry. In Lee's second chapter, "The Subject of My Call to Preach Renewed," she stopped the flow of the narrative about her interactions with Allen after the first paragraph of the chapter in order to provide a story about her, and by implication, other women's spiritual potency. She tells of "the singular conversion of a very wicked [colored] young man" (*Sisters* 42) who openly ridiculed the Christian faith and the AME. Even after falling ill with consumption, he had no interest in spiritual things. The Rev. Mr. Cornish, an AME minister, could not get through to this reprobate soul. Lee, along with Jane Hutt, whom she praised as "as a mother in Israel" (*Sisters* 43), and two other sisters, took on the care of this dying man. Through their prayers God manifested his power in remarkable ways. Lee had a vision of Jesus in the midst of intense spiritual activity, and the young man repented moments before he died "full of hope and immortality" (*Sisters* 44). In the next paragraph, Lee, returns to her efforts to secure a preaching license for Allen, saying "But to return to the subject of my call to preach" (*Sisters* 44). She is obviously using her spiritual victory with the wicked young man to prove the validity of her call to preach.

This is the most obvious example in Lee's and Elaw's texts of how they used spiritual victories to defend their right to preach, but it is typical of how they tell their stories. How important these proofs were, not only to structuring the narratives, but to sustaining these women's missions, is shown in a conversation which Elaw

recorded. She was defending the validity of women's right to preach with fierce opponents whom she called Mr. and Mrs. D. She told Mrs. D. about "some of the methods, by which the Lord made known to me His will, that I should go and preach the gospel" (147). Mrs. D. then told Elaw that she was misled. Elaw responded by producing "testimonials and certificates" (147) which Mr. D scorned as being no substitute for Biblical warrant. Undeterred, Elaw "related some of the manifestations made to [her] by the Holy Spirit" (147). Clearly, to Elaw the manifestations of the power of God were the major justification for her work. It was not that she denied the authority of the Scripture; she did not. She considered her preaching biblically based. But she believed that the basis of the authenticity of her preaching only started in the Bible and had to be confirmed by spiritual deeds in daily life.

In a sense, Lee's and Elaw's reliance on tangible proofs of ministry as the primary justification for their work set up another ahistorical paradigm of women's natures to counteract the dominant one of the Protestant shepherds. This is not to say that they fabricated their accounts. Probably the documents are highly reliable in what they describe. But in shaping the narratives to reflect mostly victory and power, they were creating a counter-mythology to overcome the model woman myth. When the shepherds rendered them weak, Lee and Elaw showed they were strong. When the shepherds told them that there was danger outside the authorized fold, Lee and Elaw showed that there was victory in independent spirituality. When the shepherds said that God did not ordain women to preach, Lee and Elaw showed by their works that He did.

The second part of Lee's and Elaw's resistance to the prohibition of women preachers involved direct conflicts with men. In her revised narrative, which was ninety-pages long, Lee mentioned thirteen conflicts which specifically hinge on men challenging her right to preach because she is a woman. But she nowhere comments on whether such opposition was common. Some of her antagonists were lay men, such as the one who thought that she was not a woman but a man dressed in female clothes. Another man tried to shout her down at an assembly at a school. Most of her opponents, however, were ministers. One greeted her in a "cold and formal manner, as though he thought [her] . . . capacity was not equal to his" (*Spiritual* 22). One would not shake her hand; another did not believe that anyone had ever been saved by a woman's preaching; another told her to go to the Quakers, which was another way of telling Lee to get lost. Elaw, in her one-hundred-page narrative, mentions only eight instances when men opposed her preaching simply because she was a woman. But she, unlike Lee, explicitly stated that such opposition was common. She says, "I endured a considerable share of persecution from opponents of female preaching; some opposing my ministry of mere caprice and others from mistaken convictions" (155). Elaw especially noted the ill treatment she received from ministers, saying that many of them treated her preaching "with great contempt, and reprobated the ministry of a female" (123).

In responding to this male oppression, Lee and Elaw did not, as so many women writers did, demurely refuse to defend themselves, trusting in heaven to convince the erring males to repent. In some of their interactions with men, they

created effective counter arguments which undercut men's arguments and redefined the situation. At times they even identified eminent and respectable Christian men with evil Biblical characters, wild animals, or the devil. Not even in women's anti-slavery texts, such as Harriet Jacobs's 1861 narrative, was the depiction of the conflict between male authority and women's liberty so strong, focused and vehement. In Lee's and Elaw's narratives one gets a glimpse of evangelical women's discourse of direct resistance to patriarchal containment.

Once when Lee was invited by Bishop Allen to the prominent Bethel Church in Philadelphia, "a spirit of opposition arose . . . against the proprieties of female preaching" (*Spiritual* 32). She says that those who opposed her were "scoffers" (*Spiritual* 32) who were concerned with "non-essentials" (*Spiritual* 32), part of a "gain-saying and mis-loving generation" (*Spiritual* 32) who behaved like the "antidulivians"(sic) (*Spiritual* 32) Noah so unsuccessfully preached to. There is little doubt that the people she castigated were the conservative men of the AME with middle-class aspirations, who, by 1852, tried to enclose AME women into the model-woman mold. They were probably some of the best educated and the most successful black people in the community. No doubt these men saw themselves not only as good Christians, but very important men in black, and possibly white, Philadelphia. Attacking their own view of themselves, Lee aggressively identified these men with one of the most corrupt generations of human beings recorded in the Bible. The people who lived before the flood were so wicked that God repented at having made humans at all and destroyed them all except Noah and his family. Lee, personally familiar with

the Bible, and immersed in a culture which used Biblical images as a common code, knew full well the weight of her imprecations against the men at Bethel Church. If she had wanted to be conciliatory, she could have used a gentler image, perhaps from the story of Peter being restored to Jesus after denying him. She did not want to be conciliatory or to placate these men in any way. She wanted to denounce prophetically their wickedness. In her mind, their great sin was prejudice against God's work in women preachers.

In another incident she was asked to preach at what seems from the context to be a white Methodist Church. Afterwards, a minister of that church who opposed women's preaching, voiced his questions about and opposition to her preaching. She says that she found "prejudice in his mind" (*Spiritual* 38) and that the minister "talked as if he had not known what the operation of the Spirit of God was" (*Spiritual* 38). She added that one might say that "he had not tarried at Jerusalem long enough" (*Spiritual* 38). That comment did not have the prophetic kick that her denunciation of the men at Bethel had, but it is strong nevertheless. For the supposed basis of a man's qualification to be ordained as a minister was his capacity for spiritual life. Here, Lee is saying that this man was spiritually impotent, devoid of the "holy energy" necessary to preach. She is also saying that she is spiritually powerful and has the full presence of the Holy Spirit to back up her words.

A little later in the narrative, Lee, without much explanation, described Thomas Voris, a local preacher in Princeton, as a "beast" (*Spiritual* 46) and said that there is another such creature who opposes her on the "Bucks country circuit" (*Spiritual* 46).

Her use of "beast" parallels the apostle Paul's usage when he mentioned that he was attacked by wild beasts near Ephesus. Many commentators consider that passage to be metaphorical and that Paul was actually talking about attacks by hostile religious men, either Jews or renegade Christians. Also, in the last book of the Bible, Revelations, the image of the beast was associated with the anti-Christ. Clearly, Lee was identifying men who oppose women's preaching as spiritually deviant.

Elaw also followed Lee's pattern of assertively countering the attacks of her male opponents. The one exception is how she treated her husband. (Lee's husband was dead when she started preaching, so there is no point of comparison here.) Elaw had married a man who had only feigned spirituality during courtship. After they were married, he started to oppose her spiritual activities, trying to get her to be more worldly. As far as spirituality was concerned, their marriage was, at best, an uneasy truce. Elaw never told him when she started to preach, and he only found out when acquaintances taunted him. He was strongly opposed to her preaching. In words identical to those of Elizabeth Ashbridge's husband, he says that he was afraid his wife would become a "laughing-stock for the people" (84). He would repeatedly say, "Now, child we are undone" (84). Elaw showed tremendous compassion for her husband, whom she repeatedly called her "dear husband" despite his obstruction of her spiritual life. She, however, continued to preach. Yet despite her mildness toward her husband, it is possible that the shock of her preaching damaged his health. For, Elaw notes that after their confrontation, her husband sickened and soon died of consumption. In doing so, he unintentionally enacts a parody of many stereotypical nineteenth-

century narrative plots. For usually when a willful wife resisted her husband, she came to a sad end, frequently death by consumption.

In Elaw's other run-ins with male authority, she, like Lee, was not sorry to see men disturbed. When "the most influential members of the Presbyterian body greatly opposed [her] . . . " (104), Elaw unhesitatingly asserted that their behavior was directed by demonic forces: "the principalities and powers of evil spirits" (104) who police the "empire of darkness" (104) run by "the prince of the power of the air" (104). To Elaw, these generally respected divines were like "Sanballat" (104), a man who opposed the work of Nehemiah as he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. In assigning distinguished Presbyterians the role of the hostile disrupters of the work of God, Elaw, like Lee, completely reversed the conventional perceptions of the men she opposed. In another instance, Elaw dismissed a minister's opposition to her preaching as merely "worldly wisdom, self-sufficient reason and opinionated faith . . . which always rejects the operations of the Spirit of God" (147). His spirituality, says Lee, "falls far short of the standard" (148) to which Elaw is accustomed. She was challenging the spiritual ability and competency of this minister and claiming that she was more spiritually powerful.

In reading Lee and Elaw's descriptions of their encounters with men who opposed them, it is not always clear whether their judgments of the men were held privately or expressed openly during their encounters. Even if these women's ideas were private, and expressed for the first time publically in their narratives, Lee and Elaw would have been breaking new ground in evangelical women's narratives with

their boldness. But in their texts, they each recorded one conflict during which they actually spoke their minds during a confrontation. The ease and naturalness with which they depicted those encounters suggests that it is possible that they usually voiced the thoughts about men that they expressed in their narratives. It is also possible that they preached on such themes.

Lee related a conflict with someone she calls "an antagonist" (*Spiritual* 54) who was attempting to destroy both her character and her ministry. After identifying this man as a person with a "bitter" (*Spiritual* 55) heart, "a spirit like a viper" (Spiritual 55) and a co-worker of the Devil in a conspiracy to destroy Elaw, she relates what she said to him:

> I told him that he was a worse enemy to me than I was aware of, and I was ashamed of him, professing to be a Preacher in charge, and setting such an example in a strange land, and begged him to throw away his prejudices, as he would never inherit the Kingdom of God. (*Spiritual* 55)

Elaw took on an influential church leader, Bishop Hedding of Lynn, Massachusetts, whom she met at a Methodist conference. He implied that her preaching disrupted church unity because of many men's aversion to female preachers and asked her if she would be willing to stop preaching for the good of the church. She not only refuted his arguments, but she commented on the character of people who would advocate such positions:

> . . . as to such Christians as take up ignorant and prejudiced objections against my labors; men whose whims are law, who walk after the imaginations of their own hearts, and to whom the cause of God is a toy; I could not for a moment study their gratification at the sacrifice of duty . . . it is an easy matter to adopt a string of notions on religion, and make a great ado about them; but . . . religious obligation, and the principle of conscientious obedience to God are quite another matter. (136)

Both Lee's and Elaw's responses were strong words for antebellum evangelical women to say to a minister, or to any man for that matter. Lee was saying that men's opposition to women's preaching could keep them from the kingdom of God. This is a novel interpretation of the patriarchal Christian tradition which few people shared. And in both these instances, Lee and Elaw claimed that their direct confrontations were successful. The viper-like antagonist in Lee's narrative faded away at her rebuke. And Elaw claimed that Bishop Hedding heeded her admonition and became one of her supporters. Even if Lee and Elaw made up these dialogues, and their other conflicts with men, their texts would stand out from the fiction of evangelical women. As we have seen, prominent evangelical novelist Susan Warner advocated that women submit to men's authority. The equally popular Maria Cummins does allow her characters more freedom to oppose unjust male authority, but her heroines are extremely

discrete. The spunky Gerty Flint confronted her tyrannical benefactor, Mr. Graham, with the most extreme of evangelical women's rebukes to Protestant men: "I am very sorry to displease you, Mr. Graham, but . . . " (146).

Lee and Elaw, unlike Gerty Flint and the multitude of evangelical women she represents, were not usually sorry about displeasing men. In fact, they seemed to enter into their resistance to illegitimate male authority with enthusiasm and creativity. Their jeremiads against men were full and abundant. They drew on all the Biblical and ecclesiastical resources available to them for ammunition. And, one gets the impression that what they have presented in their narratives was only a sampling of the rich resources of opposition that they commanded. If they could turn the class-conscious AME men into "antidulivians" and staid Presbyterians into Old Testament Canaanites, they could rhetorically transform the whole face of the antebellum patriarchal culture.

This power to transmute powerful antebellum American religious ideas and images probably was nurtured by the propensity of the black Christian communities to subvert white religious culture. Mark A. Noll points out that black Baptists and Methodists were the only mainline Protestants who consistently denied the notion that America was the new Israel, a redeemer nation destined to bring the kingdom of God to the world. Black Christians, especially slaves, frequently identified America with Egypt, the place of bondage, and the black community with the people of Israel who needed liberation (48-51). Being black, and also being marginalized from white power by their poverty, Lee and Elaw could draw on a tradition of subversion which was unavailable to white, especially middle-class women.

They also drew on the power of their robust spirituality, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Sanctification freed them from a Puritan-like preoccupation with sin so that they could use their energies for mission. It also gave them greater trust in their own ability to discern what was going on and to make intelligent choices. Further, their extraordinary spirituality made them feel powerful against all spiritual and human opposition. One story of Elaw's demonstrates both literally and symbolically the power Lee and Elaw gained from their sanctified spiritual energy. Elaw says that when she was on an independent solo mission to the slave states in the 1830s, she encountered four ferocious dogs who belonged to slave holders. Everyone in the neighborhood was afraid of these dogs. But when the dogs saw Elaw, who was full of the Holy Spirit, the dogs lost their fierceness and remained quietly at her feet throughout her preaching (94). Such a story, like Elaw's account of a cow prostrating itself before Jesus, invites incredulity from the modern reader. But because Elaw's (and Lee's) texts are so trustworthy in other ways, it is hard just to discount Elaw's claims that ferocious dogs responded to her spirituality. Besides, looking at Elaw's situation as an itinerant black woman preacher in antebellum America, it is not more amazing that her spirituality calms wild animals than that it prevented unprincipled white men from seizing her for sale in one of the slave states that she visited. Any way we look at it, Elaw's and Lee's spirituality is powerful.

Palmer: The Third Person Protagonist

Jarena Lee's and Zilpha Elaw's ability confidently to narrate their exuberant efforts to preach the gospel and their willingness to write about open conflicts with the men who opposed them differed greatly from the approach adopted by Phoebe Palmer. She, despite being an extremely prominent evangelical preacher, an internationally-known writer, an editor of a widely circulated religious publication, and a close friend or associate of a veritable Who's Who of evangelical male leaders, showed little of the freedom to describe her preaching vocation that Lee and Elaw manifest. Her auto-biographical narrative is a case study in nineteenth-century womanly reticence. Because of Palmer's conformity to patriarchal conventions, it was the black Lee and Elaw, less privileged in the dominant white society, who paradoxically manifest the independent sense of self necessary to narrate accounts of their preaching. The privileged white middle-class Phoebe Palmer had to resort to indirection in narrating her own life. So hampered was she by the social and rhetorical constrictions imposed on white middle-class women that she literally effaced her self before she could write about her experience. Although in the introduction of her text, she calls *The Way of Holiness* her "narrative of journeying" (6), she writes about her life in the third person. Even in a supplement to that narrative, *Notes on the Way,* compiled from her journal, she introduced the first-person material with forty pages of third-person narration.

Palmer's inability to sustain a first-person account of her preaching illustrates the strength of one of the restrictive conventions governing women's discourse--a

woman must not portray individual independent protagonists in their narratives. Dobson points out that none of the proscriptions governing women's expression was "more pronounced than the stunting of the female protagonist" (17). Yet, an antebellum woman preacher, by the nature of her circumstances, became a verbal protagonist in a great cultural drama. Women preachers defied social and religious practice and repeatedly faced conflicts with men in authority. In this drama, preachers were invested with enormous cultural significance. For Protestant America saw its religion as a catalyst for bringing the kingdom of God to the earth. Lee and Elaw, finding power within the marginal position which the white culture had assigned them, could enter the cosmic fray with their "I-ness" flying like a banner over the battle. Palmer, who could not withstand the heat of patriarchal expectations, had to dissolve her personal agency into the impersonal "she" of third-person narration.

In Palmer's narrative she not only dissolved her authority as a first-person narrator, she also dissolved the reality of her preaching. She began her story, like Lee and Elaw, by describing a process of personal development which led up to a call to preach. Raised in a Christian family, she had a slow, almost imperceptible growth in faith. As a child, she spent many nights wrestling with God, and publically professed her faith as a teenager. Throughout her early twenties she was active in the Methodist church, showing an interest in not only purely spiritual activities, but also in temperance reform and mild versions of abolitionism. Following the death of her three children, the last one dying in a freak crib fire, Palmer, after a prolonged season of prayer, consecrated herself totally to God.

Out of that consecration came a call from God to make public the blessings of holiness which she had been given. She, like Lee, actually heard a voice commanding her to preach. She says that the Holy Spirit told her: "You will be called to profess this blessing before thousands"(*Holiness* 48). Then, to get her firm assent, the divine voice asked Palmer, "Can you do it?" (*Holiness* 48) Palmer felt intimidated by this divine mandate and thought that "it would require an extraordinary miracle to sustain her amid the array of unpropitious circumstances which like a mighty phalanx crowded before the vision of her mind" (*Holiness* 48). She was acutely aware of the resistance she would encounter if she dared to take the message of her spiritual blessing publically "before thousands." But God, said Palmer, gave her a supernatural assurance that she would have the miraculous power to complete her public calling. She was able then "to count the cost of coming out in the profession of this blessing before thousands" (*Holiness* 48). She resolved to go forward with her commission from God no matter how daunting the circumstances. Palmer vowed that "if it literally cost [her] life in the effort to go forward, [she] . . . would still proceed; and though a martyr to the cause, she would be content because Almighty God had said 'Go forward'"(*Holiness* 51).

But God himself did not get Palmer to break free of narrative conventions containing women's discourse, although he did get her to preach. There is a radical disjunction between Palmer's account of her preaching and what she actually did. In her 1843 text she only mentions personal interactions with people and an occasional brief testimony in an informal church setting. But after she received her call to take

the message to the thousands, she had been increasingly involved in public ministry. In 1840 she was put in charge of a Methodist class meeting in a New York City church, an unusual position for a Methodist woman. She traveled around the eastern United States, spreading the message of God's holiness. In an 1841 letter to her husband from a mission in Mount Holly, New Jersey, she apologized for not writing and said that she didn't know "what to say about coming home" (*Selected* 152). She said that "the interests of the Kingdom of God" (*Selected* 152) keep them apart. In 1841 she wrote to her friend, Mary D. James, describing meetings in Jersey City and Burlington. At these meetings she felt a great "weight of responsibility" (*Selected* 153) and heard God tell her, as he did at her initial call, to "Go Forward" (*Selected* 153). In an 1842 diary entry, she said that she attended ecumenical meetings where she was asked to give her testimony.

After the 1843 publication of *The Way Of Holiness*, Palmer was much in demand as a speaker. In another diary entry she said that at a New Jersey service, she was called upon to "make the opening prayer, speak, etc." (*Selected* 211). This became the pattern for her life for the next thirty years. But her original narrative, revised, expanded and put through fifty editions from 1843 until 1867, never does acknowledge her preaching. A sentence from the 1843 diary entry mentioned above gives the key to her attitude: "How my nature still shrinks from this publicity" (*Selected* 211). The version of her narrative published in 1867 contained only a few instances of her public speaking, even though by that time she had conducted revivals all over the United States, Canada and Great Britain. The information she provided about her preaching

was meager and understated. She concentrated on private conversations, as if she took the blessing to "the thousands," as a good Christian woman should, one by one. She says that at one meeting she made "a frank statement of the views and intention that had . . . been influencing my mind" (*Selected* 116). At another meeting, Palmer felt the power "to speak to others: to warn entreat and testify of his grace for the acceptance of all" (*Selected* 138). At another God "condescend[ed] to bless . . . [her] endeavors to be useful to others beyond what had been ordinary" (*Selected* 168). At a camp meeting, Palmer was "permitted to feel sweet freedom of spirit, while conversing on the things of God" (*Selected* 177) during a public session. At a Sunday evening service at her church which consisted of about eight men and three women, Palmer took the initiative to give a testimony of God's work in her life. At another camp meeting she says that she felt an unusual liberty to speak, but doesn't detail what happened. So scanty was Palmer's account of her own ministry that without her other writing, and a wealth of contemporary sources testifying to her power as a preacher, it would be impossible to identify her as a major nineteenth-century preacher. There is nothing in her narrative to indicate that she was instrumental many conversions, or that she influenced hundreds of powerful evangelical men (Oden 1-13). The discrepancy between Palmer's real-life accomplishments and her narrative representation of her life is an excellent illustration of the contradictory experience of antebellum evangelical women.

". . . this crucifying process"

The puzzling contradictions in Palmer's life and writing become even more fascinating when one reads her defense of women's right to preach. For in her polemical treatise, *The Promise of the Father*, first published in 1859 and then reissued in a condensed form in 1869 as *Tongues of Fire on the Daughters of the Lord*, Palmer displayed no reticence in accurately defining and vigorously condemning both the theology which justified barring women from preaching and the practices which sprang up from such error. She came after her brothers in Christ vigorously because their churches, "with but few exceptions, have imposed silence on Christian women, so that her voice may but seldom be heard in Christian assemblies" (37). With impressive theological scholarship, she refuted various aspects of repressive Protestant ideology which prevented women from preaching.

What is more, she linked Christian men who prohibited women from preaching with those who crucified Christ and those who martyred the saints. Speaking about the prohibition of public preaching by women, she says:

> We believe that hundreds of conscientious, sensitive Christian women have actually suffered more under the slowly crucifying process to which they have been subjected by men who bear the Christian name than many a martyr has endured in passing through the flames. We are aware that we are using strong language; but we do

> not use it in bitterness, but with feeling of deep humiliation before God that the cause of truth demands the utterance of such sentiments. We conscientiously believe and therefore must speak . . . [many] are in this day enduring this crucifying process, perhaps as never before. (42)

In this passage Palmer goes much farther than Sarah Grimke, or even Margaret Fuller, in denouncing the behavior of Protestant men. Neither of those women hit the nerve of Protestant repression as Palmer does when she highlights the destructiveness of patriarchal ideology. In this passage Palmer makes it clear, as no other antebellum woman does, that Protestant ideas about women are slowly killing them. Her emphasis on "process" is insightful, because many women were locked into a slow destruction of the self which ground on relentlessly day after day. Also, Palmer, in an indirect allusion to her own liberating "naked faith" (*Holiness* 169), pictures Christian women in general as unclothed, exposed upon the Golgotha of contemporary America. In a Biblically-influenced culture such as Palmer's, it does not take much imagination to visualize the full details of crucifixion, nor to imagine women hung up in public to die. Elaw's unusual image cuts right to the soul of Protestant America and is one of the most radically subversive images of women produced in American culture during that era.

She extended the image of crucifixion at the end of the text, by saying that the Christian church itself was the sepulchre in which women and their gifts of preaching

are entombed. Such imagery is richly suggestive. Most obviously, it links women in a special way with Jesus, who was also crucified and put in a tomb. Also, by making the church the tomb, Palmer is implying that the preaching gifts of women are more powerfully alive than the institutional structure of the church, which has become nothing more than a container of death. Further, Palmer is suggesting that the hope of this moribund church is in the resurrection of women from its midst. She says: "And what a resurrection of power shall we witness in the Church, when, in a sense answerable to the original design to God, women shall come forth, a very great army, engaging in all holy activities" (48).

Unlike some evangelical women like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who tried to exhort white men without harsh confrontation, Palmer blasted away at Protestant men's cruelty and hypocrisy. She says that the restriction of women's right to preach is a work of the anti-Christ, the "Man of Sin," whose aim, says Palmer, "is to withstand the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom on earth" (39). She vigorously asserts that there is absolutely no justification for restricting women's right to preach and that any infringement on that right is evil, pure and simple. She provided no room for Protestant men to rationalize or excuse their behavior. In addition, she claimed that the slow torture and entombment of women in the church dishonors the glory of God and makes the visible body of Christ ugly, deformed and distorted.

Palmer backed up all this heavy denunciation of Protestant men with substantial scholarship, including readings of Latin texts. She quoted the fathers of the church and more recent scholars to support her contentions. Her scholarly method

appears to be much more thorough than that of someone like the Rev. Ashbell Green who was quoted in the first chapter. The largely self-educated Palmer dug deeper into primary sources and linguistics than the seminary-educated Green did. Thomas Oden points out that Palmer anticipated modern feminist Biblical studies by preferring the non-sexist "kins-folk" to "kinsmen" in her reading of Romans 16:7, by her use of what is now termed "audience criticism" (32) in her analysis of text reception, and by her investigation of patristic sources which support women's right to preach (33).

It is difficult for a modern reader to understand how a woman who could write such a knife-sharp indictment of Protestant men could be so painfully reticent in her autobiographical narrative. But such is another of the contradictions embedded in antebellum evangelical women's experience. In the crazy-quilt pattern created by the tension between patriarchal containment and women's desire for liberation, no combination of defiance and acquiescence to male authority was unimaginable. Elaw, for example, included one paragraph in her narrative, which if supported further, would totally undermine her whole spirituality and her vocation as a preacher. In the beginning of her narrative, she exhorted Christian women, in the best tradition of Fordyce, Green, and Duren, to submit to all men in authority over them, especially fathers and husbands. She totally ignored that advice in the rest of her narrative, breaking all the rules of female reticence and traveling wherever the Spirit of God led her. When she defied her husband, he quickly died. Her dual response was totally contradictory, and she might, with some mental gymnastics, have believed them both. But in the reality of her life, she always opts for liberation. In the same way, Palmer,

the third-person protagonist, whose conformity to patriarchal standards was much more thorough than Elaw's, wrote one of the most scathing attacks on Protestant men produced by an antebellum woman.

But as mentioned at the beginning of the second chapter, beneath all the contradictions which beset Lee, Elaw, and Palmer in their lives, they, more than any other antebellum women, experienced a unifying energy which undergirded all that they did. The "holy energy" (Lee, *Sisters* 36) within them was fueled by their vital spirituality and was manifested in their audacious preaching. In looking at their remarkable lives, even the most skeptically-minded person can believe that for them the fire of spirituality which burned deep in their bones empowered them to take risks and appropriate their spiritual "gift[s] of power" (Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton 244).

Conclusion

In the introduction to this text, I said that my study would be an exploratory and provisional foray into the world of antebellum evangelical women's writing. I chose the word foray intuitively and then liked the fit of it. For it caught the tentativeness that I felt approaching the material. For this study is my initial venture into territory that is not well marked on the map of literary studies. The other meaning of foray pops up here also, the military usage. In another sense, a foray is a sudden violent raid or military advance. That word is also applicable to this study. For it expresses the danger inherent in this, and probably any other scholarly work. The line between disciplined attention to other people's texts, especially people who are dead and cannot defend themselves, and intellectual aggression is very fine. The pressure of contemporary theory and professional expectations is intense on any scholar, particularly a novice. There is a temptation to raid nineteenth-century women's literature for booty that is negotiable in the current market.

Fortunately, my deep affection for Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Phoebe Palmer, preserved me from many temptations. Most of the time that I wrote this study I saw myself as a fellow pilgrim in the spiritual life, walking some of the same roads that they did and willing to be guided into unfamiliar territory. This attitude kept me

from raiding their texts as an intellectual mercenary. With Susan Warner and Maria Susanna Cummins, however, whose texts were much more conventional and uninspiring to me, I had to work more consciously at maintaining a respectful attitude.

My tremendous attachment to Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, however, created another problem. For my instinctive reaction to these women's writing seemed to be more devotional, for lack of a better word, than scholarly. By that I mean that I did not want to analyze the texts and then synthesize my understanding with secondary sources, which seems to be the function of most scholarship. Rather, I wanted to share in Lee, Elaw's, and Palmer's experiences. I found myself several times standing still, thinking of someone who had wronged me, and then echoing Jarena Lee's words, "Lord, I forgive every creature" (*Sisters* 29), hoping that another layer of my false self would be stripped off like a soiled garment and the glory of the Lord would cover me in its stead. Zilpha Elaw's narration of her sanctification, in which her spirit seemed to ascend to the sun, moved me so that I cannot put words to my response, at least not in a scholarly context. And Phoebe Palmer's description in her private correspondence and diaries of the tremendous overflowing of the presence of God that she felt filled me with longing. So many times over the past year I have just stopped writing and contemplated the mysteries of faith embodied in these texts. Lee, Elaw, and Palmer have lead me to prayer as often as they have led me to scholarly research and writing. Even now, as I am attempting to complete this study, I want to simply linger and observe. My faith is so similar to theirs. And they remind me of my friends. Just

this spring a good friend of mine commented, in the midst of a discussion about spiritual issues, that sometimes she feels that if she just stepped outside her door, Jesus would be there. If that does happens someday, I have no doubt that her dogs, in the same manner of Zilpha Elaw's cow, would prostrate themselves before him.

As I conclude this study, I will offer a few observations about my initial venture into antebellum women's narratives more suitable for academic discourse. I will not, however, attempt a conclusion. For I am just starting to understand these texts and the era in which they were written. What I offer are field notes and queries.

Observations about Genre

As I have been finishing up this study, I have been experimenting with an idea about genre. It seems to me that autobiography offered evangelical women more room to experiment with freedom than fiction did. I do not have a well-tested theory to support my hunch yet, but I will offer some of my preliminary thinking here.

It would seem probable that fiction would give antebellum American women writers a lot more freedom than autobiography could provide. Authors could hide behind fictional characters, even use pseudonyms to shield themselves from public scrutiny, and then experiment with all kinds of identities and behaviors not permitted in the patriarchal containment of women's discourse. And indeed, as David Reynolds points out, both male and female authors in sensational literature did just that,

inventing such bold characters as women who dress up as men to serve in the army, or even better, female land pirates (337). But evangelical fiction writers were very conservative about their representation of women in fiction.

My theory to explain this reticence centers on the genre itself. As mentioned before, Jane Tompkins makes a good case that evangelical writers such as Warner and Cummins made no distinction between fiction and polemic; their stories were extensions of their doctrine and served the same function as tracts. But the novel was a suspect genre in evangelical circles, associated with moral laxness and wasted time. Amazing as it seems to us today, Phoebe Palmer wasn't sure if she should read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it was a novel. When evangelical women such as Warner and Cummins did write novels, they had to avoid being tainted with any of the negative associations of the genre, and they had to use it solely to propagate the faith. Because of this, there is little experimentation or self-expression in their texts, and no longing after the beauty of holiness because such desires would seem too advanced for an evangelistic tract; they would belong in a treatise on Christian growth.

The genre of autobiography, on the other hand, did not have any negative connotations in the antebellum evangelical community. It was seen as a longer version of the conversion testimony that was expected from any truly converted person. As Brererton points out, "conversion carried with it the obligation to declare, to proclaim, and to invite emulation" (4). There was no inherent defensiveness toward the genre either by the authors or readers of autobiography. Also, spiritual autobiographies were seen as beneficial to both the unbeliever and the faithful. In many instances they were

treated as manuals for Christian growth, and in such cases, people would be eager for more depth and detail about a person's spiritual development. But although autobiography was free from the taint of immortality and wastefulness which was associated with the novel, it had severe limitations because it, like the novel, also functioned as an extension of doctrinal orthodoxy. In addition, it had a form imposed on it that novels did not. Spiritual autobiographies had to follow some version of the Puritan formula mentioned previously--conviction, repentance, conversion, and spiritual growth. Because of this, many narratives about women's spirituality are quite predictable.

But I would assert that as a genre autobiography had tremendous potential for expressing innovative perceptions of women and that is why Lee, Elaw, and Palmer used it instead of fiction. First, an autobiographer could always defend herself from criticism by an appeal to truth. She could assert that she was just recording what happened, not producing something from her imagination. Whoever assailed an autobiography, might be challenging a genuine work of God.

Further, autobiography had a more direct connections with the Scriptures than fiction did. Both the Old and New Testament frequently represented doctrine through biography or autobiography. For example, in the eleventh chapter of the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews, the writer calls upon believers to remember the "great cloud of witness," mentioned in the previous chapter, who surround them--Abraham, Rahab, David, to name a few. Nineteenth-century women could add witnesses of their own to the list: Miriam, the sister of Moses who led the women in

worship after Israel passed through the Red Sea; Huldah the Old Testament prophetess; Mary, the mother of Jesus; Phoebe, described by the apostle Paul as a deaconess in the early church. Indeed, these women from the Scriptures are mentioned at various times in the writings of Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, who saw themselves as part of the sacred genealogy of Christian women.

Because autobiography has such a direct connection with the Scriptures, it could make use of some of the more transforming aspects of the Scriptures more easily than fiction could. For instance, it is obvious that Lee and Elaw tapped into an intense Biblical spirituality in their lives and narratives. There is only a small step from Moses meeting the burning bush in the desert to Jarena Lee's vision of spiritual fire at her sanctification. Elaw is clearly drawing on Jesus's transfiguration when she describes her own transfiguration at a camp meeting. Furthermore, the Scriptures encourage the language of spiritual desire. The Psalms are full of longings for, or panting after, God, or ecstasy in God's presence. These desires, as we have seen, find their echoes in Lee and Elaw's autobiographies, and certainly in the personal writings of Palmer.

Because autobiography was a culturally approved genre, and because it gave women writers divine authorization for unusual experiences and access to intense experience in the Scriptures, it helped nurture women's self expression.

The Black Women's Tradition

There is not doubt that the Jarena Lee's and Zilpha Elaw's ability to communicate freely their personal experience far surpassed the abilities any of their white peers. They seemed to be able to disentangle themselves from the expectations of the patriarchy much more quickly than Palmer, Warner, and Cummins could. White women were more bound by blood and marriage to white patriarchy; they lived with white men and bore their children. Black women such as Lee and Elaw, pushed to the margins of the white patriarchal domain, could find strong original voices if they could survive white oppression. They were not as viscerally bound up with the patriarchs as white women were.

Also, on the whole, the black antebellum rhetorical tradition was liberationist. The major texts which defined the tradition were ex-slave narratives. The archetype of this tradition is Frederick Douglass deciding to resist his evil master Covey to the death if necessary, and emerging from that conflict with a free mind which urged him to claim his physical freedom. Even a conservative text, such as the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs discussed earlier, demonstrates a desire for liberty. Because of enslavement in the south and oppression in the north, black people who learned to express themselves in writing gained knowledge of injustice as soon as they gained knowledge of themselves. Self-consciousness and consciousness of repression are inextricably linked in the black literary tradition. It is no surprise, then, that both Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw spoke out against slavery in their narratives and

mentioned attending anti-slavery conventions. Phoebe Palmer opposed slavery but would not identify with the activism of the abolitionist cause.

Hidden Women

As mentioned in the first chapter, in the great tug-of-war between patriarchal containment and desires for liberty which many evangelical women experienced, the odds were stacked in favor of patriarchal power. Yet still, as is clear in the autobiographies of Lee, Elaw, and Palmer, a number of women defied the odds and pushed for greater freedom. One gets the impression that there was a network of women interested in liberation within the evangelical community who helped each other find and hold on to liberty. These women were not, of course, the radicals who showed up at Seneca Falls in 1848. Yet they surfaced in the texts of these evangelical preachers, giving support and encouragement to Lee, Elaw, and Palmer.

Elaw's sister Hannah is one of these hidden women. She not only had one of the most remarkable deathbed experiences recorded in antebellum evangelical literature, but it was she who gave Elaw the call to preach. In addition, Elaw mentioned other women who spurred her on at crucial moments, exhorting her to preach or caring for her when she was sick. Lee, although she didn't talk about anyone quite so unusual as Hannah, mentions a number of women who encouraged her. After a particularly terrible encounter at Bethel AME church in Philadelphia, one of her sisters in the faith nurtured Lee's wounded spirit so that she could regain her

confidence. Palmer had a rich correspondence with a number of women friends. She also had a particularly close relationship with her sister-in-law Sarah Lankford. These women, unrecorded in traditional historical accounts of antebellum literature and history, would make an interesting study in themselves.

The Value of the Texts

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons I value the texts by antebellum evangelical women is because they are guides to a deeper spirituality. In this regard, the autobiographies of the preachers are more useful to me than the novels, for they are less conformed to conventional ideology. The three preachers, but especially Lee and Elaw, have personal authenticity that translates across barriers of time, race, and class.

I know that modern people nursed on the milk of the secular theories such as those of Freud and Marx, or more recently, feminist or radical black theory, find it difficult to value these women's narratives in the way I do or to see in Lee's, Elaw's and Palmer's spirituality struggles to preserve authentic female selves. Because their faith appears to stay within the bounds of patriarchal Christianity and does not overtly address twentieth-century definitions of sex, anger, and power, these women appear to evade reality.

Yet even though Lee's, Elaw's, and Palmer's spirituality is alien to the convictions and sensibilities of most contemporary educated readers, their narratives

deserve to be read and respected. All texts which portray such radical female independence in a culture bent on suffocating women's selves in a male-controlled domestic enclosure merit careful scrutiny, if only as historical curiosities. But these narratives are more than literary/historical artifacts. They preserve the voices of women who not only overcome destructive forces, but who also find resources in God for significant personal transformation. We would do well to listen to them carefully, rather than silence them with contemporary ideology. Perhaps the remarkable resistance of these women to nineteenth-century patriarchal forces which were bent on destroying women's selves will give all of us at the end of the twentieth century resources to confront our own destroyers.

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