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"Get Married or Teach School": Women's Writing and Women's Education in Antebellum America

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Abstract: This article will examine the views expressed by American female writers about the roles of women and purposes of women's education in the early 19th century. During the antebellum period (1820-1860), the American education system prepared white female students for two roles: to be teachers before marriage and to be ideal wives and mothers. This society believed that women, as wives and mothers, should manage the home and instill traditional American and Christian values in their children. During this period, women wrote a large body of nonfiction articles about social issues, such as education reform, and the roles of women. These writers advised their young female audience on how to be ideal wives and mothers. Additionally, the works by women most remembered from this period often come from the genre of domestic or sentimental fiction, defined as novels set in the home that glorify domesticity. The intention of many of these novels was also to advise female readers on how to properly manage their homes and families. This article analyzes how a selection of prominent female educators, nonfiction writers, and novelists consider women's roles and the reasons women should be educated in their writing. While these writers agree that women should be educated to be successful wives and mothers to an extent, they display complex views about how women should be educated, why they should be educated, and what they should do with their educations in both the domestic and public spheres.

Keywords: Women, education, antebellum, women writers

While the work of female writers of the antebellum period of American literature (1820-1860) is not well-known outside of the academic world, numerous women at this time worked as popular and influential writers of fiction and nonfiction. According to Lisa Logan in her article, "Domestic Fiction," these female writers addressed the same subject matter—the lives and spheres of women—and shared similar backgrounds; most were white, middle class, formally educated, and lived in New England (344). Critics often describe women's writing of this period as didactic and sentimental; however, examining this work is valuable because it reveals the minutiae of women's lives and the expectations their

culture placed on them. This genre is also illuminates the paradoxical roles of female writers. Although these writers are best known for writing in the genre of domestic fiction—novels set in the home that glorify women's roles as wives and mothers—writing allowed them to have fulfilling professional lives outside the home with a measure of self-sufficiency. These women also wrote nonfiction books and articles about a variety of social and political issues, from education reform to the abolition of slavery, with the goal of promoting social action; yet, their writing frequently dismisses the need for women to have active political roles.

Scholars have discussed the views female writers of the antebellum period express

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

concerning the role women's education in their nonfiction writing; however, little scholarship discusses how female writers portrayed women's education in domestic fiction and how these views compare to those expressed in nonfiction. Logan explains that this genre was written "by, for, and about women" (343). This statement means that authors of domestic fiction intended to reflect the lives and desires of their young female audience in their novels. They also used their work to give their readers advice on how to achieve an ideal of womanhood. As successful, educated women depicting female characters and their educations, female writers were naturally situated to influence the views and educational goals of their young female readers.

Education brings power to marginalized groups, and education did bring educated white women of this time a measure of increased power and access to the public sphere; however, despite the growing rigor of women's education, education did not dramatically change women's views of their roles. The views of educated women remained narrow because the primary aim of women's education was to train them to be teachers until marriage and to prepare them to be model wives and mothers. Consequently, the selected writers agree that education should prepare women to these roles to some degree; yet, the views held by these women are not entirely rigid. While all address women's roles as teachers, wives, and mothers, these writers display a spectrum of opinions on what women should be taught and what they should do with their educations. The views of these women are complex and occasionally contradictory, suggesting that, while traditional views of the aims of women's education influenced all of these writers, their experiences caused them to question these views to various extents. To gain a greater understanding of how women viewed the purpose of their educations, this article will examine the views of women's education found in nonfiction by prominent educators

Emma Willard and Mary Lyon and writers Sarah Josepha Hale and Margaret Fuller. Then, their views will be compared to those expressed in two popular novels of the period, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854).

Republican Roles and Responsibilities

The themes and features of women's fiction and nonfiction at this time stemmed from a new role for American women that emerged in the late 18th century: the role of republican mothers. During the antebellum period, the primary responsibilities of middle-class white women were to oversee the household and to raise children to be ideal future citizens, a role now termed "republican motherhood." After the Revolutionary War, women were given greater charge of the home. Married women managed their households and the education of young children. This role developed in part due to economic changes. Logan explains that the economic shift after the war to mercantile capitalism caused more men to work outside the home (344). This economic shift modified gender roles by contributing to the idea of "separate spheres." The public sphere became the realm of men, while the domestic sphere was the realm of women.

After the revolution, Americans believed that young citizens needed to learn patriotism and to uphold distinctly American values to ensure the nation's future success. As mothers, women were in an ideal position to teach their children these values, especially as both women and men believed women to be the moral center of the nation. Historian Mary Beth Norton in "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America" explains that "the ideal American woman was to be the nurturing, patriotic mother who raised her children...to be good Christians, active citizens, and successful competitors" (617). As Norton maintains, women also taught children Protestant Christian values. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, America experienced the

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Second Great Awakening. Many women converted to Protestantism, leading them to start many religious chartable societies and to gain the informal position as America's teachers of morality (Norton 615-616). Consequently, female writers advised their



Figure 1: "The Sphere of Woman." 1850. *Godey's Lady's Book*. Image. University of Virginia. Web. 3 April 2015.

mostly female audience to uphold traditional American and Christian values in their homes and to pass these values to their children.

The view that women were natural teachers and nurturers led logically to their involvement in the field of education. Education was a leading socio-political issue of this period, and female writers encouraged education reform. Most writers agreed that a woman's primary role was to be a wife and mother who instilled American values in her family. These writers often argued that middle-class women only needed to be educated to teach their young children basic skills, to be interesting companions to their husbands, and, in some cases, to fulfill a secondary role of working as teachers before marriage. Female writers and educators often led movements to improve American schools and to establish

teacher training schools for women. As teachers, women only needed education sufficient for a single job, while men required rigorous education to prepare them for a greater variety of jobs and to participate formally in intellectual discourse.

Feminine Life in Antebellum America

A large body of women's fiction and nonfiction of this period encouraged women to become teachers before marriage, but a greater focus of this literature was to directly instruct women on how to manage the home and become successful republican mothers. The following illustration from an 1850 edition of *Godey's Lady's Book* exemplifies how the press portrayed the role of women, as the image shows a mother overseeing her children's education in the home (see fig. 1). The young daughter is in the center of the image, suggesting she will someday be the center of her own home, while the older brother supervises his sister's progress, just as an ideal husband would lead his wife.

Despite its pervasiveness in the press and public opinion, the ideal of republican motherhood was not attainable by all women. Poor women and women of color were not part of this conversation and could not achieve this ideal. Poor women and free women of color often had to work to support themselves and their families, and they had little access to education. Enslaved women had entirely different roles than free women and even less opportunity for education. Because poor women and women of color did not fit into the national vision of republican motherhood, the selected writers only address women's roles and education in terms of middle-class to upper-class white women, excepting Fern, who does address the plight of poor white women. Even for privileged white women, the republican motherhood ideal was not always realistic; nevertheless, the view that women should run the home as wives and mothers

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

appears frequently in the writing by women of the time.

The proper roles for women was a common theme in the work of female writers. In her article "Women's Novels and Women's Minds: An Unsentimental View of Nineteenth-Century American's Women's Fiction," Nina Baym explains that women of the early 19th century were prolific writers who published a variety of written material, including novels, articles in periodicals, textbooks, and children's books (336). Women's domestic fiction was especially popular. This genre is comprised of stories set in the home featuring a young female protagonist who suffers trials but overcomes them by practicing moral values. According to John T. Frederick in "Hawthorne's Scribbling Women," several of these novels sold in the hundreds of thousands (231-232). While these novels are often deemed "sentimental" for their didactic style and melodramatic plots, the novels had a specific purpose. In "Domestic and Sentimental Fiction," Ann Boyd argues that these novels intended to portray the correct role for women, a role marked by serving others and providing moral guidance (339). Female writers held both public and political roles to an extent, as writing allowed them to support themselves and promote civic action; however, because they focused on themes of domesticity, they were still understood to be fulfilling the role of republican mother. While domestic fiction used stories to instruct young women to be successful wives and republican mothers, nonfiction by women often directly provided guidance to fulfill women's roles.

Views of Female Educational Leaders

In addition to writing popular domestic novels, women during this time also made immense contributions as writers and editors of nonfiction, especially for periodicals. Women edited many literary magazines during the early 1850s (Frederick 236). Like their domestic

fiction, women's nonfiction addressed social problems, prominently featuring the issue of education reform. Reform in public schools, teacher education, and women's education in particular occurred during this time. In "Women, Language, and the Argument for Education Reform in Antebellum Ladies' Magazines," John C. Baker asserts that magazine articles written and edited by female writers helped spur these reforms (49). Because of the prevalence of articles about women's education by popular female writers, these writers influenced the direction of public and private female education. Additionally, as Sarah Robbins explains in "'The Future Good and Great of Our Land': Republican Mothers, Female Authors, and Domesticated Literacy in Antebellum New England," periodicals, such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, also published speeches by male and female leaders in education, as well as curricula from prominent schools for women (584). Due to the popularity of periodicals, the opinions of leading female educators and education reformers concerning female education were well-known and influential.

These periodicals linked the idea of republican motherhood to women's roles in education. Women could be paid less than men, which helped the nation's economy, and women were seen as natural teachers of young children, which made them ideal public school teachers (Baker 49). Women's writing promoting the education of women reinforced gender roles. Writers depicted female education and teaching as opportunities to gain skills useful for wives and mothers. Women were also excluded from serious scholarship, which was viewed as the domain of men (49). Nevertheless, from the 1830s-1850s, female education reformers argued that women's education should be broadened to include the traditionally male subjects of math and science (Robbins 589). The encouragement of women into the teaching profession also allowed women to gain work and fulfillment outside the

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

home, even if the job was temporary until they were married.

Examining how female educators and writers portray the purposes of female education in nonfiction provides a better understanding of the relationship between women's education and women's societal roles. Female educators and leaders in national education reform offer vital perspectives on women's education and its purposes, as they actively shaped the system of women's education in antebellum America. Emma Willard, an advocate for women's education, was among the most prominent voices. Willard was a prominent educator and education reformer who founded the first institution for women's higher education in America. Her writing demonstrates the belief that women should receive thorough education in a variety of subjects and the training to become teachers. She also expresses that the most important reason to educate women is to prepare them for their role as republican wives and mothers. This perspective is evident in her speech "Advancement of Female Education."

Willard believed that the American system of education and its system of training teachers was superior to the methods of other countries. In "Advancement of Female Education," Willard calls for the formation of a female seminary in Greece, so the American system of female teacher education would spread to other countries. She claims that education, both in America and abroad, makes a woman a good companion to a husband and a successful, enriching mother. In the following statement about her former students, many of whom worked as teachers before marriage, Willard links the benefits of female education to the notion of republican motherhood, writing, "Many of my former pupils are now wives and mothers. As I travel... I see them looking well to the ways of their household—the pride of their husbands,—their advisers and companions" (38). Willard directly states that her students are now wives and mothers and

remarks that they are "looking well to the ways of their households." Her language implies that the success of her former students lies in their domestic roles. Willard defines successful wives as "advisors and companions" to their husbands, suggesting that their education at Willard's schools allows them to converse engagingly and intelligently with their husbands and even advise their husbands on their lives in the public sphere. The roles of "advisors and companions," only exist in the home, and Willard does not suggest that women should have public lives after marriage or use their educations to support themselves. Willard's position that women should only be wives and mothers is realistic for her time. Nevertheless, this statement demonstrates that a leading female educator held a narrow view of what women could and should do with their educations.

While Willard argues that women should be formally educated to prepare them for domestic life, she does imply an active political component to the role of republican mothers. Willard links the American system of female education to the moral advancement of the world, asking, "And is it not this improvement of female education an important feature in the grand system of moral advancement now going forward in the world? Should we not...send it abroad?" (11). By asking women to teach their sisters abroad to advance morality, Willard implies that women need access to the world outside their homes to fulfill their role of modeling and teaching morals. Willard gives female teachers an even more far-reaching role by asking them to work as teachers abroad. She asserts, "By educating numbers, by bringing up teachers, and scattering them abroad, I may diffuse widely what I believe to be correct views of female education" (12). Willard's words reflect her intention to send teachers, educated in her schools, to Greece to spread her method of female education. This intention gives female teachers a political role as Willard tasks them

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

with spreading American education methods abroad. Angelo Repousis in "The Trojan Women": Emma Hart Willard and the Troy Society for the Advancement of Female Education in Greece," argues that "Willard was among the earliest American women who sought, in the name of social uplift, Christianity, and civilization to extend their public activity into not just the domestic but also the international sphere" (49). Willard's speech clearly demonstrates a belief that the goal of female education was to train teachers, wives, and mothers to help women fulfill the duties of republican motherhood; however, she does expand the definition of republican motherhood to include spreading American values to the rest of the world through teaching abroad before marriage.

Another remarkable figure in American education and women's education in particular, Mary Lyon, also engaged in the national conversation about female education. Lyon started Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1834 to educate female teachers. Like Willard, Lyon believed that women needed education because they were best suited to be teachers and because education would help them to be effective wives and mothers. Lyon wrote several circulars in her tenure as the president of Mount Holyoke to gain donations for the school. In one titled, "Female Education," Lyon relates the need for female education to the duties of republican motherhood: "The excellence of the female character...consists principally, in a preparation to be happy in her social and domestic relations, and to make others happy around her. Her duties are in an important sense, social and domestic. They are retired and private, and not public, not like those of the other sex" (10). Lyon confines the duties, which she deems "important," of educated women to the private sphere of the home, and she explicitly separates these from the duties of men. She equates the "excellence of the female character" with domestic and social duties and with serving others,

suggesting a view that women are inherently suited to domestic duties and caring for others.

Additionally, Lyon expresses the belief that women are ideal teachers, but she is careful to limit this role. She argues that the desire to teach should stem from a belief that a woman's purpose is to serve others, not from a desire to be self-sufficient. Lyon claims that "Female teachers should not expect to be fully compensated for their services, unless it be by kindness and gratitude" (16). In another circular, "General View of the Principles and Design of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary," Lyon further limits women as professional teachers by making it clear that teaching should only last until marriage, explaining that teaching is a way to fill the "idle and vacant hours" of "our adult unmarried females" (7). According to Lyon, the purpose of teaching should be to serve others nobly and fill time until marriage, which suggests Lyon's desire to shape her students into republican mothers who serve their country and families selflessly. Historian Norton relates the idea of women serving others directly to the duties of republican motherhood, arguing that the republican mother's "duty was to sacrifice herself to the family, freeing her husband and sons to express their individualism to the fullest" (617). Women were taught not to expect rewards for their domestic and familial duties but instead to sacrifice their interests and desires to serve others. Lyon upholds this view through her assertion that her students should teach without regard for payment or personal interest but rather for the improvement of others.

While Lyon supports the idea that women's education should form successful republican mothers, she also implies that women needed an education more rigorous than many of her contemporaries deemed necessary. A circular called "Prospectus of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary" detailing Lyon's plans for the 1837 school year includes many high-level math and science classes,

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

including algebra, botany, human physiology, chemistry, astronomy, and geology (4). Her science classes also required students to perform experiments. In their article "Rigor, Resolve, Religion: Mary Lyon and Science Education," Bonnie S. Handler and Carole B. Shmurak explain that Lyon believed that "doing experiments in science class was more important for females than males," because women would have fewer opportunities to engage in such tasks (140). Her inclusion of these courses shows that Lyon not only believed that women could accomplish this work but also that this knowledge would be useful to them in the future. Andrea L. Turpin in "The Ideological Origins of the Women's College: Religion, Class, and Curriculum in the Educational Visions of Catherine Beecher and Mary Lyon" states that, unlike other female leaders in education, "Lyon...envisioned an education where women would receive the same liberal arts training as men while relegating distinctly feminine pursuits to the extra-curriculum" (139). Through incorporating a curriculum similar to that of a men's college, Lyon seems to favor choosing courses to train her students to be effective teachers over preparing them for eventual domestic life. Women would need advanced math and science knowledge to teach professionally but would not likely teach these subjects to their young children as mothers.

Lyon's vision of women's education is noticeably contradictory. She argues that education should prepare women for domestic roles, but she also wants to give women the opportunity to learn all that men learn in school, even though this would not help them in their domestic roles. Additionally, Lyon's school included advanced classes intended solely to train teachers, not mothers. These facts suggest that Lyon placed a high importance on training professional and knowledgeable teachers; however, Lyon does not encourage her students to hold teaching in the same high regard. She states that women

should only teach to avoid being idle before marriage.

Lyon does directly address the relationship between education and domestic skills at her school, though this further complicates her inconsistent views. In "Prospectus," Lyon explains that, while she expected her students to help with the domestic chores of the school, "It is no part of the design of this seminary to teach young ladies domestic work...Home is the proper place for the daughters of our country to be taught on this subject" (8). Lyon's focus on the academic rather than the domestic further demonstrates her commitment to giving women a comprehensive education. Turpin explains that Lyon was part of the New Divinity school of education, meaning she rejected the "ornamental" style of women's education that "sought to make young women into good society wives" and instead believed a liberal arts education "would provide young women the breadth of knowledge and critical reasoning powers" (143). Lyon's rejection of the ornamental style in her school demonstrates a belief that women needed education to be temporary teachers and then wives and mothers, but she reasoned that women needed an in-depth, functional liberal arts education similar to that of men to succeed in those roles.

Perspectives of Female Writers

In addition to female educators, female writers also adopted the cause of reforming and improving women's education through articles and essays for periodicals. Female writers often directly provided advice to young female audiences, making their views especially influential on the country's future wives and mothers. A leading voice in education reform was the editor of the periodical *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale. Hale published articles and wrote editorials that primarily offered advice and discussions of current social issues for an audience of middle-class white

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

women. According to Baker, Hale was “responsible for the emphasis this magazine placed on education” (49). Like Willard and Lyon, Hale advances that women should be educated to develop their natural teaching abilities and prepare them for marriage and motherhood. In an editorial published January, 1856, Hale argues that more resources must be devoted to women’s education because women are “the moral thermometer of the nation” and because “women are the *best* teachers” (Hale). In these statements, Hale expresses a belief in women’s superior morality and innate nurturing abilities. She also demonstrates the practical reasons for women to be teachers, explaining that “they can afford to teach for a smaller compensation” as they do not have to support a family (Hale). She argues that teaching will satisfy the “unoccupied energies of thousands of young women from their school-days to the period of marriage,” while “qualifying themselves for the most arduous duties of their future domestic relations” (Hale). Like Lyon and Willard, Hale specifically limits women’s teaching to the period before marriage and contends that women should use teaching as a time to gain experience for family life. Like Lyon in particular, Hale does not believe women should teach for professional fulfillment or money. None of these women considers that female teachers may have to support themselves or their families.

While the views of Hale, Lyon, and Willard have differences, they tend to represent the most common opinions on the purposes and methods of women’s education; however, a few female writers challenged these ideas. One of the most prominent feminist writers of this period, Margaret Fuller, argues in her essay “The Great Lawsuit” that women should be educated to be more than wives and mothers. She asserts that women should receive education for the same purposes as men and using the same methods as men’s schools. In “The Great Lawsuit,” Fuller directly challenges

common assertions by female writers and educators. She acknowledges that a current goal of education during this period was to give girls “as fair a field as boys” (Fuller 768). However, she criticizes how “the improvement in the education of girls is made by giving them gentlemen as teachers, who only teach what has been taught...at college” even though improvements “could better be made by those who had experienced the same wants” (768). While Fuller’s claim ignores that the majority of teachers of girls at this time were likely women, her criticism reveals that the education system tried to reform female education by hiring more male teachers. Fuller disagrees that this reform is actually an improvement. Instead, she proposes that female teachers could better relate to female students and would therefore be better positioned to address their students’ unique needs and goals.

Fuller also criticizes the female heads of female institutions, who she claims “have seldom been thinking women, capable to organize for the wants of the time” (768). While female educational leaders like Willard and Lyon clearly worked to give women advanced, challenging educations, Fuller’s disapproval suggests a belief that female leaders in education were not progressive enough. In Fuller’s view, women should be equal to men socially and under the law, and therefore educated in the same way as men were educated. “The wants of the time” to which Fuller refers could include the fact that female educators did not prepare their students to hold paying jobs and ignored that many women had to support themselves and their families. Her criticism suggests that female educational leaders did not serve their students because the design of their schools limited what women could do with their educations.

Fuller’s criticism stems from the emphasis on educating women to be successful republican mothers, a view she engages directly. She states that “So much is said of women being educated that they may be better

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

companions and mothers *of men!*" (768). Fuller does not completely contradict this view but offers a wider definition of companionship than Willard, Lyon, or Hale, claiming the following:

Earth knows no holier view than that of a mother. But a being of infinite scope must not be treated with an exclusive view to any one relation. Give the soul free course, let the organization be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called. The intellect...is to be cultivated, that she may be a more valuable companion to man. (768)

In her argument that education will make women better companions to man, Fullers refers to all of humankind. She expands the role of women to include having relationships with all people, not just their families. Consequently, this suggestion expands women's domain to the public sphere.

Despite her criticisms, Fuller does concede that the current system of women's education makes women "better aware of how large and rich the universe is, not so easily blinded by the narrowness and partial view of a home circle" (768). This criticism of women's relegation to the domestic sphere shows that Fuller envisions a much wider view of women's roles and the reasons women should be educated than other women writers or educators of her time. Fuller, however, was in the minority, and the republican motherhood ideal drove the majority of discourse in women's nonfiction. Willard, Lyon, and Hale—unlike Fuller—express and value the republican motherhood ideal; however, differences are evident even in the views of Willard, Lyon, and Hale about women's roles, about the purposes of female education, and about what this education look like. These differences suggest that, although most female writers and educators agreed that women should be educated to be teachers, wives, and mothers, their discourse still contained diversity and complexity. The views expressed

in women's domestic fiction further complicate this discourse.

Education in Women's Fiction

Because domestic fiction focused on the day-to-day lives of young female protagonists, novels from this genre reveal much about how education was realized over the course of a woman's life. These novels also address views concerning women's education during this period. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) exemplifies the typical domestic fiction plot. As a child, Ellen Montgomery is sent away from her dying mother to live with an uncaring aunt. Despite her unhappiness at her situation, Ellen finds many friends among her neighbors, notably siblings Alice and John. Alice teaches Ellen about Christian values and domestic duties, while John provides her formal education. Both types of education serve to stem Ellen's spirited nature and mold her into an ideal woman who expresses domestic values such as piety, selflessness, and humility. When Ellen reaches adulthood, she and John marry, achieving domestic bliss. Through the various forms Ellen's education takes, Warner suggests that women should be educated to manage the domestic sphere and to serve the nation as wives and mothers. Nevertheless, the novel also places value on educating women to satisfy their curiosity about the world around them.

Ellen's education throughout the text is both formal and informal. Her first informal teacher is her mother, who serves as a model of the ideal republican mother. Her mother instructs Ellen on domestic skills, such as housekeeping and shopping, to help prepare her for future duties. Mrs. Montgomery also teaches Ellen the proper behavior for a future wife and mother, which is evident in her goals for Ellen: "I wish you to be always neat, and tidy, and industrious; depending upon others as little as possible; and careful to improve yourself by every means and especially by

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

writing to me” (31). Through revealing her desire for Ellen to be hardworking and organized, the mother places importance on behaviors that will help Ellen successfully grow into an ideal wife and mother who will effectively run her household. The insistence that Ellen will improve, especially by writing to her mother, indicates that Ellen can receive instruction on situations in her life from her mother even when they are separated. The value placed on correspondence between mother and daughter reveals an important practical reason that young women learn to write: to communicate with family members. Ellen's mother serves as a model of the woman Ellen will strive to become throughout the text and the type of woman Warner believes her readers should also desire to be.

The novel directly engages education for women through the portrayal of Ellen's life after she goes to live with her Aunt Fortune. Unlike Ellen's mother, Aunt Fortune is neither warm nor nurturing, and she is uninterested in furthering Ellen's domestic or academic educations. Aunt Fortune is a successful and independent landowner who values practical skills over domestic or academic ones. Warner's criticism of Aunt Fortune corresponds to criticism of this type of woman. When Ellen asks if she can attend school, Aunt Fortune dismisses the idea and asks, “Why do you want to learn so much? You know how to read and write and cipher, don't you?...What do you want to learn besides?” (139). Aunt Fortune represents the view that women only need a basic education in practical skills. Ellen's response, however, demonstrates the view expressed by contemporaneous influential women, such as Willard, Lyon, Hale, and Fuller, that women needed extensive formal educations. Ellen explains that she wants to learn “French, and Italian, and Latin, and music, and arithmetic, and chemistry, and all about animals and plants and insects” (140). These subjects were all taught to young women at this time in female seminaries like Willard's

and Lyon's because educators believed knowledge of them would make young women appealing wives and would prepare them to teach children professionally and as mothers. Warner's inclusion of these subjects suggests a similar view of the purpose of women's education. Warner expands this purpose by suggesting that women should be educated to satisfy their natural curiosity.

Ellen often asks the adults in her life questions about natural phenomena, suggesting she holds an interest in science, a subject educators such as Lyon believed women should learn. For example, Ellen asks her neighbor Alice, “What makes the leaves fall when the cold weather comes?...I asked Aunt Fortune the other day...and she told me to hush up and not be a fool” (185). Warner presents adults who dismiss Ellen's questions, like her aunt, unfavorably, but she depicts adults who answer them, like Alice, positively. This difference implies Warner's belief that women should be educated because they have academic interests, not solely to train them for their future roles. In her book *Woman's Fiction*, Nina Baym asserts that “Not only does the novel report many of Ellen's questions, it reports answers, thereby modestly introducing readers to diverse academic subjects including physics, astronomy, plant physiology, botany, chemistry, and history” (341). By depicting Ellen's informal education, Warner contributes to the informal education to her readers, thereby allowing her to emphasize the value of women learning to satisfy their own interests.

Warner's depiction of Ellen's formal education also places a strong importance on women receiving instruction on advanced subjects. After her aunt denies her the opportunity to attend school, Ellen resolves to learn on her own. Ellen makes the most progress in high-level subjects when she receives more formal instruction from her neighbor John, an extensively educated divinity school student. Warner emphasizes how Ellen masters many academic subjects under John's

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

instruction, writing the following: "French gave her now no trouble; she was a clever arithmetician; she knew geography admirably, and...both English and American history. He put her into Latin; carried on the study of natural philosophy...[and] he gave her some works of stronger reading than she yet tried" (463). The strides Ellen makes in her studies with John suggests Warner's view that women should be formally educated in high-level subjects. The report of Ellen's progress also illustrates Ellen's enjoyment of studying and her desire for academic challenge.

Despite Warner's acknowledgement of women's pleasure from learning, the purpose of Ellen's formal education is more strongly linked to preparation for domestic duties than to satisfying her curiosity. Like Willard, Lyon, and Hale, Warner expresses that education should prepare women to be wives and mothers. Warner emphasizes the domestic lessons Ellen learns from her mother, depicted as an ideal woman, to show their importance. Warner also demonstrates the importance of young women having older female mentors by having Ellen discover a new teacher after her mother dies. Ellen's neighbor Alice teaches Ellen housekeeping skills such as sewing, and she encourages Ellen to study the Bible. As a pious woman who is a knowledgeable and capable housekeeper, Alice serves as a model to Ellen, and the audience, of an ideal woman.

With Alice as a model, Ellen becomes a teacher to others. Alice runs a Sunday school and entrusts Ellen with "four little ones put under *her* care," giving Ellen the opportunity to practice teaching and guiding young children (181). Through the example of Ellen teaching young children around her, Warner demonstrates how Ellen's domestic and religious educations have prepared her to be a model republican mother, a skill she practices even before marriage. Ellen also attempts to spread Christianity to adults in her life, including her aunt's hired hand, Mr. Van Brunt. She asks Van Brunt if he is in "the fold of

Christ's people" (216). When he admits he is not, Ellen cries and tells him "I wish you were," consequently moving him to tears as well (216). This scene emphasizes that the role of women was not only to instruct children on morality but also to influence other members of the community, even men, as the moral center of the nation.

In addition to linking Ellen's domestic education to her future domestic role, Warner also illustrates the relationship between academic education and her future duties. Warner emphasizes the advanced subjects Ellen learns from John to show that Ellen also needs to learn these things to be a good companion for an intellectual husband. After John and Ellen marry, he states that she will be the "steward in all that concerns the interior arrangement of the household" (582). In this perfect version of a woman's role, John does not task Ellen with literally keeping house but instead with managing the staff and household economy. In Warner's idealized relationship between husband and wife, the husband has directly shaped the wife into a model woman, suggesting that a woman needs male mentors who have been formally educated in addition to female ones. The relationship also implies that, while a woman's role is to run the home, a man's role is to guide his wife. Warner emphasizes that Ellen's advanced education has prepared her for life as a middle-class wife and mother who can manage the home, support her husband, and successfully guide her children. Despite Warner's belief that women's intellectual curiosity should be satisfied through education, Warner's narrow view of the roles of women and the purposes of educating them kept her from exploring the implications of women's intelligence and academic interests in the public sphere.

Like *The Wide, Wide World*, Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present* tells the story of a young woman who faces trials as she attempts to become an ideal republican wife and mother. Fern (the penname

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

of Sarah Payson Willis) published this novel in 1854 and based it on her own experiences as a widowed mother and writer. Unlike Warner, Fern purposefully uses features of domestic fiction to critique this genre and its representation of women. *Ruth Hall* tells the story of the titular Ruth, a young woman who, at the start of the novel, achieves the ideal of a happy marriage with an honorable husband, and the couple soon has children. When Ruth's husband dies, however, she is left to take care of her children with no financial support from her family or her in-laws. Through Ruth's experiences, Fern suggests that real circumstances, such as poverty and widowhood, make achieving the domestic ideal glorified in novels unattainable for many women. Fern's choice of the subtitle *A Domestic Tale of the Present* emphasizes that this story reflects the lives of real women of her time. Fern's novel is notable because it grounds the plot in reality, not the ideal presented in other domestic fiction. Through her novel, Fern advocates that education can prepare women to have careers and support themselves and their families independently.

Ruth Hall differs from *The Wide, Wide World* and other domestic fiction in that it often strays from the world of the home to portray and critique women's formal education directly. The novel begins with Ruth attending an all-girls boarding school, which represents women's schools such as those headed by Willard and Lyon. Fern's view of the faults of schools for women is summed up in the narrator's observation that Ruth's classmates wondered "why she took so much pains to bother her head with those stupid books when...all the world knew that it was quite unnecessary for a pretty woman to be clever" (Fern 7). Because schools taught young girls that the purpose of education was to prepare them for marriage, the majority saw no need to take it seriously and abandoned trying to develop their personal academic interests.

Fern depicts the other girls at the school as using their education merely to mark time until marriage rather than valuing education for its own sake. Ruth is shocked to see her classmates "bend over their books" when the teacher walked by them but "jump up, on her departure...and slip out the side-door to meet expectant lovers" (5). Fern paints the teacher as clueless and the students as uninterested in academics. Because educators marketed school as a way to prepare women to find husbands, suitors consequently engage the girls more than academics. Even Ruth, a serious student, experiences a shift of view as she ages and starts to receive admiration from men. The narrator reflects that Ruth, upon gaining suitors, "found her power," and "History astronomy, mathematics, the languages, were pastime now" (6). While Ruth continues to enjoy learning, she realizes she has the power to attract men and make a good marriage and therefore does not need education to gain a job. Fern also suggests that Ruth is naïve, because she cannot conceive of a world in which her education would practically serve her. Ruth's apathy toward her education is reinforced through her father's assertion that continuing her education was too costly, so she should "either get married or teach school" despite her enjoyment of school and the fact that she had not yet graduated (7). Most female writers and educators regarded marriage or teaching as the only options for educated women. Fern reflects this view in Ruth's father to show that it strongly influenced young women and limited their visions of their futures.

After Ruth finishes school and marries, her mother-in-law, Mrs. Hall, berates her for attending school instead of learning housekeeping. Mrs. Hall tells Ruth, "It is a great pity you were not brought up properly...I learned all that a girl should learn, before I married" (12). To Mrs. Hall, "all a girl should learn" amounts to the details of running a home. Fern proposes that such an attitude hinders young women's intellectual interests

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

since her mother-in-law's advice causes Ruth a "growing sense of her utter good-for-nothingness" (13). Despite her education and intelligence, Ruth comes to value herself solely based on her domestic abilities. Through Ruth's academic experience and her relationship with her mother-in-law, Fern exposes the limiting effects of tying a woman's purpose and the purpose of her education to her abilities to be a wife and mother.

Although Ruth and her husband experience domestic happiness, when her husband dies, he leaves Ruth and her children in debt. Neither Ruth's family nor her in-laws are willing to offer her financial support, and she is unable to find a job that will also allow her to attend her children. Even though Ruth was educated in the manner influential figures like Hale, Willard, and Lyon recommend, she becomes destitute. Fern uses Ruth's situation to reflect how the domestic ideal was unreachable to many women because even formally educated women could not always realistically rely on a husband to take care of them or their children.

While female educators and writers conceived of women's education as a means to prepare teachers, Fern exposes that women could not realistically rely on this profession due to flaws in the education system and a lack of jobs. Ruth interviews to be a teacher, but she does not get the job. Fern emphasizes that twenty-four women who hoped for a "reprieve from starvation" applied for the position, but only one was hired (129). Willard, Lyon, and Hale believed that the teaching profession should appeal only to young unmarried women who did not need the pay. Their idealistic conception of teaching ignored the challenges of actually getting a job. In contrast, Fern understood that impoverished married, widowed, and single women who needed to support themselves and others would be interested in this field. Fern emphasizes that there were not enough teaching positions, one of the few jobs open to educated women, to

meet all of their needs. Through Ruth's experience, Fern criticizes the notion that teaching is a duty rather than a profession. She exposes how promoting teaching solely as a moral responsibility disregards and harms women who need the job to survive.

Ruth struggles to provide food and housing for her children until she decides to try to become a writer. This profession relates to her educational background as Ruth remembers a newspaper editor publishing her writing while she was at school (145). Ruth, using the penname Floy, becomes a popular columnist due to her talent and intelligence. As a result, she is able to secure better conditions for herself and her children. While Ruth's social standing as an unmarried widow and the lack of familial support show her to be unable to achieve the ideals of republican motherhood, Fern suggests that Ruth's education prepares her to be a mother in a practical sense: she is able to find work to provide for her children, thereby offering a new model of motherhood. Additionally, writing allows Ruth to serve as a guide and nurturer to her audience. One reader writes to her to say that he is "a better son, a better brother, a better husband, and a better father" from reading her work (235). Through this letter, Fern indirectly equates the role of writer to that of republican mother who influences the morality of others. This scene is similar to the one in *The Wide, Wide World* where Ellen influences Van Brunt to become a Christian, allowing Warner to highlight Ellen's moral guidance of those around her. Unlike Warner, whose protagonist only influences others in her domestic sphere, Fern shows that the position of writer allows a woman more influence and power than one who merely stays in her home.

In addition to exploring how Ruth's profession helps her be an effective mother, Fern also expresses that writing gives Ruth fulfillment. The narrator observes the following: "All sort of rumors became rife about 'Floy,' some maintaining her to be a

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WRITING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

man, because she had...the independence to express herself boldly on subjects which to the timid and clique-serving were tabooed" (170). Here, the narrator observes that Ruth's job is valuable not only because it makes her money, but also because it allows her to express herself, address social issues, and connect with an audience. Critic Ann Wood in "'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote" notes that "Time after time, [Fern] expressed not only the financial, but the emotional needs and frustrations that drove her and her sisters to the pen, and she characteristically emphasized that craving for self-expression so carefully veiled by women" (17). Nevertheless, Ruth's readers think she is a man because she engages social issues, revealing the preconceptions of the audience about what women should write. While Fern shows that Ruth will never achieve the status of a male writer, through portraying the financial benefits of Ruth's career and her enjoyment of her work, Fern suggests writing both as a practical goal for women and as a means of artistic self-expression. Fern, however, is realistic and knows that few women become writers purely out of personal enjoyment. At the end of the novel, when Ruth's young daughter expresses interest in writing, she tells her daughter, "No happy woman ever writes" (225). Through this statement, Fern proposes that, because not all women can achieve the ideal life of managing the domestic sphere and being supported by a husband, writing—and the education needed to become a writer—is a solution for women who must support themselves.

From Discourse to Action

While the belief that a woman should be educated to be an ideal republican wife and mother was prevalent during this period, the writing of the selected educators, reformers, and novelists suggests that women held views that diverged from this belief in minor and major ways. Emma Willard believed that

women should be educated solely to be mothers and teachers, but she also believed women's natures enabled them to spread her vision of education and morality abroad. Though Mary Lyon held a limited view of how women should use education, she designed her school to be just as rigorous as a men's institution. Sarah Josepha Hale's writing emphasizes that a woman's place was in the classroom and then the home; however, Hale used her own education to become an influential writer and educational reformer. Margaret Fuller directly challenged notions about women's roles and called for social and educational equality with men. Finally, Susan Warner and Fanny Fern used their novels to inspire and instruct young women to become ideal wives and mothers. Warner acknowledged and encouraged women's innate intellectual curiosity. Fern encouraged women to take education seriously as they might have to use it to support themselves through work. While antebellum women held narrow views of the purposes of their education, the beliefs and events of this period provided the ideal conditions for them to become educated and to participate in the discourse about women's roles. The experiences and opinions of women of this period, recorded in nonfiction and fiction, paved the way for future generations of women to believe their educations could lead to unlimited opportunities.

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