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Trapped in Bluebeard's Chamber: Rose Terry Cooke and Nineteenth-Century
"Desperate Housewives"

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Masters of Arts in English

by
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August 2005

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masochism, homosocial

ABSTRACT

Trapped in Bluebeard's Chamber: Rose Terry Cooke and Nineteenth-Century

“Desperate Housewives”

by
Bridget R. Garland

Often overlooked in the study of nineteenth-century American literature, the New England writer Rose Terry Cooke elicited great popular appeal during the peak of her career. The admiration Cooke received from her readers and fellow writers compels one to question Cooke's present-day obscurity. Cooke's fiction and poetry seem inconsistent with the attitudes she express in her non-fiction, particularly concerning religion and women's suffrage. She portrays women in miserable marriages, desperately looking for an escape. These “brides of Bluebeard” find different ways to cope with their predicament. While most never truly escape, many use (1) religious devotion, (2) masochism, and (3) homosocial relations as “coping mechanisms” in their plight. I identify each of these reactions to Bluebeard figures in Cooke's writing in order to understand the contradictions in her works, for, like Cooke, these brides were products of their culture, torn between duty to self and duty to others.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Often overlooked in the study of nineteenth-century American literature, the New England writer Rose Terry Cooke exhibited such skill and popular appeal during her career that she was one of only two women invited to appear in the first issue of the Atlantic Monthly in November of 1857.¹ Cooke's short story "Sally Parson's Duty" premiered alongside works by writers more familiar to readers today: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Reminiscent of a female version of the movie Dead Poet's Society, Harriet Prescott Spofford's description recounts how she and a "circle of girls" retreated across a river into the woods to read Cooke's story in the Atlantic's first issue: "With what pleasure . . . [we read] transcripts of genuine life, the interest interwoven with pure wit and humor, sweetness and tenderness . . . the purpose . . . always high. The use of words . . . often novel and striking" (Friends 143). The admiration Cooke received from her readers and fellow writers compels one to question Cooke's present-day obscurity.

Born in 1827 and a native of Connecticut, Cooke published her first poem "Trailing Arbutus" in 1851 in the New York Daily Tribune. Following this publication, she continued to write (at times very prolifically, especially when money was a concern) until her death in 1892. Her writings appeared in all the major periodicals, including Putnam's, Graham's, and Harper's. Throughout her life, the public greatly admired Cooke; it has been documented that her name held such appeal that at least three women claimed to be Cooke, one of whom Cooke met personally. Interestingly, her poem "The Two Villages" (1860) was reprinted frequently and was so popular that people carried it in their pockets—a modern day "Footprints in the Sand." She considered her celebrity as both surprising and flattering. As related in one letter to a friend, Cooke gushed over Whittier's comparison of her to Nathaniel Hawthorne; and two years before

her death, the readers of the Critic named her as a member of the “Twenty ‘Immortelles’”—the “truest representatives of what is best in cultivated American womanhood” (206).

Cooke did not, however, remain uniform in the quality of her writing. As already mentioned, Cooke often wrote out of financial need; as a result, she composed “pot-boilers” as Jean Downey describes them (65): sentimental, didactic pieces for religious and juvenile publications. Cooke’s marriage at the age of forty-six to Rollin Cooke, a banker sixteen years her junior, exacerbated her financial needs. After the collapse of her father-in-law’s business, Rose lost one-third of her assets, considerable considering an uncle’s inheritance she had received several years previously. Some critics, such as Paula Bennett, speculate that Cooke’s marriage forced such hardship upon Cooke that she became unhappy in her union with Rollin (“Rose Terry Cooke” 151); however, the available information concerning Cooke’s marriage suggests that Cooke’s marriage was a felicitous one. Additionally, Cooke humorously made it clear that her writing, often portrayals of marriages gone wrong, should not be read as autobiographical:

Because I write the anguish and suffering of an elderly widow with a drunken husband, am I therefore meek and of middle age, the slave of a rum-jug? I have heard of myself successively as figuring in the character of a strong-minded, self-denying Yankee girl,—a broken-hearted Georgia beauty,—a fairy princess,—a consumptive school mistress,—a young woman dying of perfidy of her lover,—a mysterious widow; and I daily expect to hear that a caterpillar which figured as hero in one of my tales was an allegory of myself and that a cat mentioned in “The New Tobias” is a travesty of my heart-experience.

(“The Memorial”190)

Whether or not Cooke’s “heart-experience[s]” are totally absent from her writing is speculative; however, most agree that Cooke’s work remained unpredictable throughout her career. At times, ill-health prevented her from writing; but at other times, Cooke turned to writing to fill the void caused by several unfortunate events in her personal life. In 1877, Cooke’s sister died and she suffered a long estrangement from her nieces, with whom she had been very close. As Downey

suggests, this “gradual loss of family” and the ensuing decrease of familial obligations, resulted in regular contributions by Cooke to periodicals at a time when submissions were “particularly favored” due to the increased popularity of magazines (77).²

Considering her popularity during her writing career, several critics have speculated as to why Cooke is not more widely read today; the opinions vary widely. Perhaps her forced inconsistency in quality contributed to her decline; but Elizabeth Ammons, the most recent editor of a Cooke collection, suggests Cooke typifies the nineteenth-century writer “twentieth-century literary criticism and history have been eager to dismiss as unimportant” (xx): a popular female writer with no “masterpiece” to leave behind, only short stories and poems reflecting “local color” and “female tradition”—“scribbling women” as Hawthorne labeled them. Perry Westbrook’s comment reflects this attitude:

The bulk of Rose Terry Cooke’s poetry and fiction—including her novel Steadfast—has long found its place deep in the trash bin of Victorian sentimentality. . . . But scattered through her collections she has left a handful of tales that rank with the best American local-color realism. (82)

Although Paula Bennett has recently anthologized some of Cooke’s poetry, this “local-color realism” referred to by Westbrook has indeed received the most attention in Cooke scholarship. Downey’s study even suggests that Cooke was the forerunner of this genre (138), leading the way for writers such Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. Downey points out that although Harriet Beecher Stowe has often been attributed with this distinction, her New England stories did not appear until after Cooke’s (138). Additionally, Downey argues that many of Stowe’s characters were “sensational” or “two dimensional,” yet Cooke’s characters added a third dimension: they were portraits of real people doing things real people do (139). Stowe has simply ridden the wave of fame created by Uncle Tom’s Cabin, while Cooke has been washed away by the tide of her successors.

Despite the fact that Cooke has indeed contributed, if not led the way, to such regional writing, many criticize her for the contradictory nature of her oeuvre, as demonstrated in Eileen Razzari Elrod's study "Truth is Stranger than Non-Fiction: Gender, Religion, and Contradiction in Rose Terry Cooke." Elrod claims Cooke's fiction seems to indicate her "anger over the disastrous effects for women of traditional religion," yet her nonfiction contradicts this conclusion, even to the point of being described as "regressive" thought (113). In her essay "Are Women to Blame?" Cooke expresses this "regressive" thought to which Elrod refers: "Let women give themselves to the cultivation of their womanly virtues; become patient, considerate, submissive, and gentle; cease to be exacting, extravagant, and jealous" (629). If a woman followed these objectives, Cooke surmises "marriage would cease to be a failure" (630). However, should this contradictory material be a basis for her being crumpled into the Victorian trash bin?

Most critics agree that Cooke did produce pieces that demand more consideration. As Evelyn Newlyn states, although the "unevenness of Cooke's work as a whole has certainly contributed to the diminishment of her reputation . . . [her] diversity is evidence of the conflicts present in Cooke's changing society, and that diversity illustrates her own difficulty in dealing with those conflicts" (49). The most recent examination of her writings focuses on her short stories and poetry and has been studied primarily by feminist critics and scholars in the field of Women's Studies (Keating 70). As Ammons explains, "Rose Terry Cooke was above all a teller of women's stories. Women's anger, dreams, fears, repressions, small pleasures, occasional triumphs, and countless defeats" (xi). More specifically, I would argue that Cooke was indeed a voice for often repressed New England women, notably the "desperate housewives" of Cooke's tyrannical New England farmers, described as "mere creature[s] of animal instincts . . . hard, cruel, sensual, vindictive" ("West Shetucket Railroad" 2). This patriarchal oppression that many nineteenth-century women suffered is reflected in her works, most poignantly illustrated through her use of the Bluebeard fairytale.

Although many authors have alluded to, or retold, the Bluebeard story, Cooke's poem "Blue-Beard's Closet" (1861) is a striking rendition of this story. Perhaps introduced to the tale as a young child fascinated by ghost stories, Cooke, in the last stanza of her poem, hauntingly reminds her readers of the spacious but, ironically, inescapable chamber in which nineteenth-century women were locked:

Out of the gateway,
Through the wide world,
Into the tempest
Beaten and hurled,
Vain is thy wandering,
Sure thy despair,
Flying or staying,
The chamber is there! (49-56)

Simply stated, Cooke's poem analogizes Bluebeard's wife as every woman, running from his bloody closet, only to find that there is no escape from this violent, patriarchal chamber.

During the nineteenth century, the traditional role of the married woman, according to Richard Altick, was that of a servile housekeeper: "supreme arbiter of household affairs . . . a devoted (and submissive) wife and mother of often too many children" (53). This servanthood, as Altick explains, was "sanctified by the Victorian conception of the female as a priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world" (53). Hence, this ideal Victorian woman—the "Angel in the House," a label taken from Coventry Patmore's poem by this title—lived, as Altick most fittingly describes, in a "capacious glass dome," essentially a pretty trophy for her husband to display (53). Cooke's poem implies that there is no escape from Bluebeard's closet, or the "capacious glass dome" of Victorian society. This harsh reality is perpetuated, as Ammons describes it, by Cooke's "fierce commitment to telling the truth as she saw it" (xxxv). Again, Elrod would argue that rather than exposing this oppression in her fiction,

Cooke embraces this ideology of True Womanhood in her nonfiction (113). But can and should the two be reconciled?

An avid reader and consequently an avid allusionist, Cooke creatively presented the Bluebeard tale in several of her works. Although the basic elements of the Bluebeard fairytale usually remain the same, Maria Tatar notes there have been and are many cultural variants of the Bluebeard story. According to Charles Perrault's version (the first published account of the myth), Bluebeard was a wealthy, aristocratic land owner, ostracized by females because of his hideous blue beard. In the effort to obtain a wife, Bluebeard asks one of his neighbors, the mother of two daughters, if he can marry one of the two girls. The women are repulsed by the idea, especially after learning that Bluebeard had been married several times before, with no explanation of the whereabouts of the previous wives. Eventually, Bluebeard persuades the youngest daughter to marry him, enticing her with his opulent home and lavish lifestyle. Soon after the wedding, Bluebeard must leave on a business trip, but before he goes, he gives his new bride the keys to the house, instructing her that she can explore all she desires, with the exception of "the small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor." If she disobeys, he promises "his anger will know no limits" (176).

Similar to protagonists in other fairytales, the young bride's curiosity gets the best of her, and she uses the key to enter the room. What she finds is shocking—all the dead bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. The bride tries to conceal her deed; but, as might be expected, Bluebeard returns and discovers the disobedience. In his anger, Bluebeard tells his new wife she should "prepare to die" as he lifts his knife to cut her throat. Fortunately for the wife, her brothers come to her rescue, saving her from Bluebeard and killing him in the process (Tatar 176-9). Even though Perrault's version of the tale ends happily for Bluebeard's bride, Cooke's version suggests that this happy ending is not always possible.

Although Cooke's poetry and fiction do not consistently question the happily ever after ending (for instance, the felicitous conclusion of her short story "Miss Lucinda"), Cooke indeed

portrays many women of New England in miserable marriages, desperately trying to find a way to escape: “These poor weak souls, made for love and gentleness and bright outlooks from the daily dulness of work, [bear] the brutality, stupidity, small craft, and boorish tyranny of husbands to whom they are tied beyond escape” (“West Shetucket Railroad” 2). These “brides of Bluebeard,” as I will label them, find different ways to cope with their predicament. While most never truly escape except through death, many use (1) religious devotion, (2) masochism, and (3) homosocial relations as “coping mechanisms” in their plight. I will identify each of these reactions to Bluebeard figures in Cooke’s writing in order to understand better the apparent contradictions in her works, for like Cooke, these brides were products of their culture, divided in a sense by duty to self and duty to others.

Notes

¹ All biographical information, unless otherwise noted, is from Jean Downey's unpublished dissertation "A Biographical and Critical Study of Rose Terry Cooke" and Harriet Prescott Spofford's two essays, "Rose Terry Cooke" in Our Famous Women (1883) and A Little Book of Friends (1916).

² From 1875 -1879, several new magazines were added to Cooke's list of publication outlets. Along with Putnam's, Harper's, and the Atlantic, Cooke also contributed to Lippincott's, Scribner's, and Sunday Afternoon (later Good Company). Listed in the Works Cited, Janet Gebhart Auten's article presents an interesting discussion of Cooke's involvement with the editors of several of these periodicals.

CHAPTER 2

THE ANGEL IN BLUEBEARD'S CLOSET: THE PARADOX OF RELIGIOUS DEVOTION

Like many of her fellow nineteenth-century New Englanders, Rose Terry Cooke was devoted to her Christian faith, and this influence is readily apparent in most of her writing. As several critics have observed, throughout the pages of her canon, Cooke depicts the “Angel in the House,” the embodiment of the doctrine of the “cult of True Womanhood.” As Elrod points out, the “cardinal virtues” of this popular notion were “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (115), all of which describe most of Cooke’s New England housewives. However, Cooke was well aware of the effects the harsh Calvinist doctrine of so many New Englanders had on these women, namely the patriarchal oppression supposedly justified by their religious creeds. Elrod observes that Cooke “explored the ways traditional New England religion had affected women, repeatedly suggesting that Calvinism was harder on women than men, and denouncing the religious sanction of masculine tyranny, particularly within marriage and ecclesiastical contexts” (113).

This is not to say that Cooke supported the emergence of the women’s rights movement at this time; in her non-fiction, for instance, Cooke adamantly adhered to the “subordinate roles for women” (115). This apparent contradiction between her fiction and non-fiction, Elrod explains, demonstrates “one example of the power of traditional religion both to spark a biting, imaginative social and cultural critique, and, at the same time, to limit severely the religious writer’s imagination” (114). Apparently, Cooke could not break out of the mold her culture had shaped. The combination of her religious upbringing and her dependence on the income her writing provided possibly prevented Cooke from allowing her criticism of Calvinism’s patriarchal oppression to cross over into her non-fiction. Christian women who criticized or disagreed with the traditional role of housewife and mother appeared rebellious and chanced community condemnation. Consequently, I would argue that Cooke used her non-fiction to

prevent the rejection of her fiction, for as we have seen, Cooke's marriage resulted in her financial hardships and her dependence on her writing for income. In addition, Cooke only disagreed with Calvinism's harshness and the abuse that some men seemed to think it justified. Although it has been suggested by some critics that Cooke's marriage was unhappy, all biographical evidence reveals that the marriage was most likely a satisfying one, and she explained to her readers that her fiction should not be read as autobiographical.¹ In order for Cooke to expose Calvinism's cruelty and to remain the popular writer that she was, it was necessary for her to uphold her religious position in her non-fiction. Similarly, Sherry Linkon contends that Cooke's contradictions demonstrate "her efforts to negotiate her position in the literary world" (43).

Accordingly, Cooke presents her New England "Angels" as trapped in their marriages, locked in Bluebeard's closet. For many, their only escape is through death, but as I will explain in this chapter, these angels cope with their imprisonment through their religious devotion.² Although they may suffer greatly under patriarchal oppression, most find comfort in prayer and the realization that the reward for their suffering is eternal life in heaven, where, as the narrator in "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience" observes, "they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (130).

For most New Englanders, Calvinism or Congregationalism was simply a way of life, often unquestioned because of its rich heritage in the area. Men and women rarely opposed the commonplace, Biblical roles of patriarchal leadership and female subjection. Since the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, New Englanders, as Michael Gilmore explains, considered themselves as "the new chosen people" (21), and by 1642, over 25,000 Puritans left Europe for this "new Jerusalem." Many Puritans who "dreamed of perfection in this world" recognized the corruption of the Anglican Church and acknowledged "that such perfection was unattainable for the godly Christian who dwelt among fallible men."³ Therefore, they sought a "middle-way" (20). As Gilmore summarizes, the church policy of American

Puritanism paradoxically held that “the Puritan saint despised the sins of the world but not the world itself, and strove to live a godly life on earth” (19).

This daily striving meant a close adherence to Biblical doctrine and Calvinist thought, and although Calvinism promised that the Elect would be saved, it nevertheless had a sobering and terrifying effect on those who tried to obey the Scripture, as described in “Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience,” a story set in seventeenth-century America:

The religion of New England at the time was of a stern type: it demanded a spiritual asceticism of its followers, and virtually forbade them to enjoy the blessings of this life by keeping them in horrid and continual dread of “the pains of hell forever,” as their Catechism expresses it. It was their purpose to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling under the curse of the law. (94)

Therefore, for the women of New England, the admonition in the Bible that women should be careful “to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, [and] obedient to their own husbands” was closely observed (Nelson Study Bible, Titus 2.4-5). To do otherwise risked public censure.

Two hundred years later, at the time Cooke was living and writing in the area, the tenets of Calvinism had scarcely changed, and they remained a persistent force behind New England society. The cult of True Womanhood thrived, for as Elrod points out, pious women played an important part in preserving the Christian home amidst the changing dynamics of the century:

Religion had become the special responsibility of the wife, as religious activity shifted from the public location of the church to the private location of the home. The pious behavior of the domestic woman, through her influence on her husband and children, provided the staying force for Christian morality against the tide of greed, individualism, and competitiveness that characterized the second half of the nineteenth century. (116)

Unfortunately for these homemakers, the doctrine of perfection (often associated with Calvinism)⁴ became a destructive force when, as Joan Hedrick explains, the notion was contained within the home rather than used to support social reform (145). Often wives associated their domestic responsibilities with their piety, and when perfection was not achieved in the home, they felt this directly reflected their spiritual condition. However, in their attempt “to harmonize both the conflicting temperaments of family members and the accumulated stresses of the emerging industrial order” (Hedrick 146), these Victorian Angels often faced the totalitarian dispositions of overworked husbands, seemingly justified by Scripture in their reform of any fault they might find: “For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so *let the wives be to their own husbands in everything*” (Nelson Study Bible, Eph. 5.22-3).

As Ammons has observed, Cooke felt this tyrannical code of conduct was exacerbated by the New England landscape (xxiv). In the sketch “The West Shetucket Railway” (1872), Cooke describes the effect on the farmers and, in turn, their wives, of trying to cultivate a harsh terrain while maintaining the Puritan work ethic:

Born to an inheritance of hard labor, labor necessary to mere life; fighting with that most valorous instinct of human nature, the instinct of self-preservation, against a climate not only rigorous but fatally changeful, a soil bitter and barren . . . the New England farmer becomes in too many cases a mere creature of animal instincts akin to the beasts that perish—hard, cruel, sensual, vindictive. An habitual church-goer, perhaps; but none the less thoroughly irreligious. . . . And when you bring this same dreadful pressure to bear on women . . . made for love and gentleness and bright outlooks from the daily dulness of work, the brutality, stupidity, small craft, and boorish tyranny of husbands to whom *they are tied beyond escape*, what wonder is it that a third of all female lunatics in our asylums are farmers’ wives, and that domestic tragedies, even beyond the scope of a

sensitive novel, occur daily in these lonely houses, far beyond human help or hope? (2) (italics mine)

This connection Cooke makes between the New England landscape and domestic tyranny should not be questioned, for Cooke indeed, as the adage suggests, wrote about what she knew. At the age of six, Cooke's family, whom Spofford describes as descended from "undiluted Puritan blood" (Our Famous Women 175), moved to the city of Hartford, Connecticut, a town during the 1830s populated by less than 9500 people and containing twelve places of worship. Significantly, Cooke attended the Hartford Female Seminary, a school founded by Catherine Beecher in an attempt to undertake the education of her soon-to-be famous younger sister, Harriet (Hedrick 32-3). After her graduation from the academy at the age of sixteen, Cooke "united with the church, making a profession of religion which has ever since been as vital to her as the atmosphere she breathed" (187). Undoubtedly this conversion was influenced by her family, but her time at the Beecher seminary most likely also contributed to her religious commitment. As Hedrick explains, Catherine Beecher's system of administration incorporated religion as a vital part in encouraging friendships, enhancing self-esteem, and promoting psychological autonomy (39). Perhaps it was here that Cooke learned of the gentler side of Protestantism so often presented by the Beecher sisters. Using a peer system, Catherine required teachers and assistant pupils to choose a student to mentor and to encourage in the Christian faith. Under this method, the Hartford Female Seminary encouraged students to be both Christians and lay ministers, but, as Hedrick points out, "the most radical aspect of this system—which in effect takes Protestantism to its logical completion—was that it undermined male, clerical authority" (39).

This seeming usurpation, however, was perhaps not intentional. While the Beecher sisters supported the women's rights movement, they, like Cooke, were in no way radical feminists, descended from a long line of New England Puritan stock themselves. Catherine believed that women were the key to the salvation of a corrupt nation, but rather than keep these angels in the

house, she believed they should be allowed to venture out. Hedrick recalls that one of Catherine's goals for the seminary was to educate women in order to expand the institution in the West. In doing so, the country could "be saved from the inroads of vice, infidelity and error" (64). In addition, Catherine wrote, "Let the leading females of this country become refined, well educated, pious and active, and the salt is scattered through the land to purify and save."⁵ Interestingly, Hedrick observes that Catherine's description of the New "Christian" Woman replaces three of the four cardinal virtues in the cult of True Womanhood: "for purity she substituted refinement; for submission, education; and for domesticity, activity in the world" (64). Catherine demonstrates a Christian woman's ability to move out of the private world of domesticity while maintaining her religious devotion in the public realm.

Harriet also felt that women should move out of the domestic sphere, but she had misgivings about the radical views of "free love and free divorce" (373). The dissolution of her collaboration with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony with the publication of their journal Revolution was mutually satisfactory considering Stowe's conservative views.

Conversely, Cooke relates in her non-fiction that she felt women should remain in the domestic sphere, but within this space, they should have certain "rights." Echoing Mary Wollstonecraft's "The Rights of Women," Cooke's essay "The Real Rights of Women" (1889) is a reaction against the "unwarranted" and "unpleasant" "war-cry" of the women's rights activists (347). Cooke suggests that these women simply want the right to become men; instead she suggests they should be working towards certain rights pertaining to their proper position as wives and mothers. Cooke lists and explains her eight rights for women:

- (1) A woman has a right to respect, as a woman, as long as she respects herself.
- (2) Women have a right to care and consideration on the score of their physical organization.
- (3) A woman has a right to her own religious opinions and preference.

- (4) Every mother-woman has a right to share in the decisions of the father concerning their children's education.
- (5) A woman has the right to choose her own husband.
- (6) A woman should be allowed to choose her own physician.
- (7) Every woman has a right to a home, unless stringent circumstances prevent.
- (8) A woman has the right to the use and control of her own money, whether she inherits it or earns it. (347-54)

Cooke argues against the movement of women to areas outside of the home (politics and the workforce) and insists that if men would consider the above rights, women would not feel compelled to escape from their domestic responsibilities. As Elrod explains, Cooke's "belief in the primary importance of virtuous behavior rooted in religious piety leads her to dismiss the political activity of the organized women's movement as not merely inappropriate, but harmful" (118). Furthermore, this movement seemed to compromise Cooke's culturally ingrained notions of a Christian woman's moral and social expectations.

In her essay "Are Women to Blame?" (1889), Cooke claims that the failure of marital bliss is a two-way street. She argues that women are as much to blame as men for their unhappiness and that they should embrace the Scriptural admonitions given for their sex:

Let women give themselves to the cultivation of their womanly virtues; become patient, considerate, submissive, and gentle; cease to be exacting, extravagant, and jealous; let them consider that marriage is a condition that can be blessed or cursed according to their use of it . . . let them take counsel of the wisdom which is above—for no relation in life has more explicit direction given for its guidance in Holy Scripture—and act in this supreme and lasting position as Christian women should;—and marriage would cease to be a failure. (629-30)

Although the above essays are often used as evidence for the contradiction between Cooke's fiction and non-fiction, in many of Cooke's short stories some of the women who are

trapped in violent or oppressive marriages act in the manner that Cooke suggests in her essays. Yet they turn to religion in order to cope with their circumstances, so in some respects, rather than contradict herself, Cooke actually merges her fiction and non-fiction. In her non-fiction, she never excuses patriarchal oppression and even admonishes men to obey the Scriptures she cites in her essay “The Real Rights of Women”: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Nelson Study Bible, Eph.5.25); “[F]athers, do not provoke your children to wrath” (Nelson Study Bible, Eph.6.4); “Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Nelson Study Bible, Col.3.21). Seen in this light, her portrayal of Bluebeard characters in her fiction are actually men who are disobedient to Biblical instruction, and her fictional women are not to blame.

Cooke’s short story “The Ring Fetter” (1859) provides a compelling example of this reoccurring motif. Although Cooke never included this story in any of her collections, Ammons comments that she chose to include this story in her own compilation (“How Celia Changed her Mind” 1986) because in her opinion it is one of Cooke’s most interesting: interesting, perhaps, because Cooke relates the bitter imprisonment of an inexperienced heiress tricked into marriage by an abusive con man. Cooke describes throughout the story the brutality Abner Dimock inflicts upon Hitty Hyde, whom he convinces of her role as angel “sent on earth to console and reform a poor sinner like him” (40). But, unfortunately for Hitty, this angel becomes locked in Bluebeard’s chamber with no way of escape:

So long as a cent remained of the Hyde estate, what was it to him if she pined away? She could not leave him; she was utterly in his power; she was his,—like his boots, his guns, his dog; and till he should tire of her and fling her into some *lonely chamber* to waste and die, she was bound to serve him; he was safe. (46)
(italics mine)

And to a “lonely chamber” he does fling her. On the run for counterfeiting, Abner cannot afford to carry along a sick Hitty, so he leaves her to be “doctored” (55). Eventually, Hitty awakes “to

find herself in a chamber whose plastered walls were crumbling away with dampness and festooned with cobwebs” (55). It is within this chamber that Hitty turns to her faith for comfort, praying for death to alleviate her suffering, although this is not the first time Hitty has needed to rely on her faith. Before her entrapment in the physical chamber, Hitty tolerated her husband’s tyranny by often remembering her duties as a Christian wife and mother:

[She] idealized the villain to a hero . . . predestined to be the prey and the accusing angel of such men, prayed for and adored her husband . . . with an all-shielding devotion, laboring and beseeching and waiting for its regeneration, upheld above the depths of suffering and regret by the immortal power of a love so fervent. (43)

Interestingly, Hitty’s feelings reflect a passage from Coventry Patmore’s poem The Angel in the House (1891):

While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress’d,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers (Canto IX, Book I, “The Sahara”)

Despite his cruelty, Hitty blames herself for Abner’s tyranny and the failed marriage: “Still, Hitty, out of her meek, self-distrusting spirit, never blamed Abner Dimock . . . rather, with the divine unselfishness that such women manifest, did she blame herself for having linked his handsome and athletic prime with her faded age” (43).

She is rewarded for her devotion with a child, a comforting gift in whom she finds relief from her loneliness, but, tragically, Abner’s murder of the child pushes Hitty over the edge. When her prayers to die go unanswered—“for prayers to die are the last prayers ever answered”

(55)–Hitty takes matters into her own hands. With the “boldness of desperation” pushing her, Hitty tries to flee from Abner (56). When an outraged Abner catches her in the act, he forges a chain to Hitty’s wedding ring. Echoing the refrain from “Bluebeard’s Closet”–“Flying or staying, / The chamber is there!”–Abner declares, ““You can’t get away from me!”” She is his, “soul and body” in “this world and the next” (56). After he places a padlock on the chain and throws away the key, Hitty declares, ““I will carry it to God!”” and jumps into the bleak river with the assurance that she, like other “silent and despairing . . . woman” (50), will receive her “golden garland of reward in the heavens above” (50). As Susan Allen Toth suggests, for a writer who did not believe in divorce, Cooke “present[s] a rabidly emotional case for it” and her ending “solves the dilemma” (23), or at least provides an alternative escape.

Unlike many of Cooke’s Bluebeard characters, Abner Dimock is not a church member or a religious man. Throughout the story, the narrator describes him as a “villain,” a “devil,” a “savage brute,” and even “inhuman.” As Elrod observes, he “makes no pretense at religiosity, but nonetheless effectively exploits his wife’s sense of religious duty” (121). However, his exploitation of her duty backfires because of the comfort she knows she will find in the afterlife.

Other patriarchal tyrants in Cooke’s works claim to be religious, but in the case of Deacon Flint in “Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience”(1880), his is a “faithless faith” (94). Unbeknownst to Sarepty Gold, the woman he intends to make the second Mrs. Flint, Deacon Flint’s reputation precedes him. As Samuel Pratt, Mrs. Gold’s son-in-law, exclaims, ““Why Amasy Flint is town-talk for nearness an’ meanness. He pretends to be pious as a basket o’ chips, but I hain’t no vital faith in that kind o’ pious. I b’lieve in my soul he’s a darned old hypocrite”” (101). Veiled by his outward piety (and ironically clothed in a suit of blue), Deacon Flint convinces Mrs. Gold that to marry him is in her best interest, but once they are joined in matrimony, her fate as the second bride of Bluebeard is sealed. Just as with his first wife and using religion as an excuse, the deacon deprives Mrs. Flint of quality food, overworks her, and isolates her from the community. Polly Morse, once the deacon’s housekeeper and therefore totally aware of his temperament, recognizes

the pattern being developed: “‘Don’t I know what killed the fust woman? ‘Twa’n’t no fever, ef they did call it so. ‘Twas livin’ with him—want o’ food, an’ fire, an’ lovin’-kindness’” (118).

Like Hitty Hyde, Mrs. Flint remains with Deacon Flint because of her deep sense of religious devotion—“I do suppose I haven’t no right to leave my husband” (116)—but when her health begins to fail, she reluctantly moves out of the house. When the community finds out that she has left her husband, she is ostracized because of her lack of obedience to the Scripture, with few ever questioning Deacon Flint’s treatment of her. All the time, however, Mrs. Flint intends to return to her husband if only he would not begrudge her a “livin’” (104).

Carol Holly points out that, although many critics have noted Cooke’s “penetrating analysis of the abuse of patriarchal power” throughout the narrative, in order to understand completely the story, the reader should take into consideration Cooke’s opinions about the woman’s duties in marriage (64). Holly cites from the previously mentioned essay “Are Women to Blame?” and additionally from the essay “Is Housekeeping a Failure?” (1889). Holly surmises that, like Cooke herself, Mrs. Flint believes “marriage is so clearly an institution established by God that it should be violated only in the case of adultery, and the marital relationship itself is so sacred that, no less than men, women must shoulder much of the of the responsibility for its success” (65). In addition, Holly argues that Cooke’s story reflects her belief that women should be held accountable for making the mistake of entering a bad marriage in the first place (65). Although I agree that Cooke believes it is the responsibility of a woman to consider carefully her decision to marry, I would argue that Cooke’s main objective in the story is to demonstrate Mrs. Flint’s integrity in the face of community censure and show the reward she reaps despite her mistake.

Although Mrs. Flint is wronged by Deacon Flint and the community, she agrees to return to him and to beg the forgiveness of the church. She remains devoted to her beliefs and proves to be a genuine follower of her religion—a religion the narrator claims is responsible for “honesty, decency, and respect for law” (94); she is rewarded by being freed from her suffering to go

where “the Consoler dries all mortal tears” (130). In her death, she escapes from her “imprisonment” in Bluebeard’s chamber and exposes Deacon Flint as a murderer and the community as his willing accomplices. As Deacon Flint’s niece, Mabel Eldridge, declares, ““But you’ve killed her as good as if you took an axe to her. You can take that hum [sic] to sleep on”” (130).

In Cooke’s first published short story, “The Mormon’s Wife” (1855), it would seem that one of Cooke’s heroines, Adeline Frazier, makes an “unwise” decision when she marries the “irreligious” John Henderson. However, this bad choice, I believe, is only a secondary concern to Cooke’s main intentions in writing the story. Most importantly, as Downey points out, with the publication of this story, Cooke demonstrated the skills necessary to excel in the trade:

Rose Terry’s first contribution to a major publication . . . showed her sense of timing, or more probably her ability to satisfy the requests of magazine editors for current topics. The crusade in the states against Mormonism was at its height in the 1850’s and for months before and after the publication of “The Mormon’s Wife” in Putnam’s, that magazine ran articles protesting the admission of Utah into the Union. Polygamy was the basis for denying Utah membership in the United States and polygamy was the warp and weft of Rose Terry’s first story.

(24)

Indeed, Cooke’s portrayal of Mormonism in the story critiques the practice of polygamy and demonstrates how the religion entraps and kills Adeline. Although John Henderson at first does not seem to fit the Bluebeard mold (he’s attractive, kind, and seems genuinely to love Adeline), by the end of the story his character illustrates how most brides of Bluebeard often do not know of his intentions.

Adopted by a local minister, Parson Field, Adeline is described as being devoted to her religion, “fervid in her feelings” (642) and “a professor of religion for some years” (643), and it concerns her that the man she loves does not feel the same toward her. Despite the Scriptural

admonitions and her father's advice to "Be not unequally yoked," Adeline marries John because she truly loves him. After the death of their first child, John moves the family to Utah, and there he becomes a follower of the Mormon religion. All this time, Adeline remains secure in her faith and hopes that any religion John embraces is better than none. Unfortunately for Adeline, John is convinced "according to the advice and best Judgement of the Saints" to marry again—giving Adeline her first glimpse into Bluebeard's chamber (648). Adeline becomes one of the many wives this Bluebeard locks away in his closet, for as Adeline recounts after John marries Elizabeth Colton, "Then my soul fled out of my lips, in one cry—I was dead—my heart turned to a stone . . . I was a dead corpse, with another spirit in it—not his wife—she was dead and gone to heaven on a bright cloud'" (648). For the remainder of her life (which quickly passes following the marriage), Adeline stays in her room, and, just as the Bluebeard fairytale states, the other brides (John marries a third) are instructed never to enter the room. Even on her death bed, however, Adeline is comforted by her religion, knowing, as in the above quotation, that her soul will live in heaven. She remains faithful to pray for John and begs her adopted father to do the same: "Uncle Field! you must pray for John! you must! I cannot die and leave him in his sins, his delusion . . . Pray! pray! Dear Uncle; don't be discouraged—do not fear . . . The Lord is just, and I will pray in heaven'" (649).

Similarly, Lowly Wheeler, the first wife of Freedom Wheeler in "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence" (1877), stays committed to her faith despite Freedom's "masterful" ways (63). As she reminds Aunt Huldy, Freedom's outspoken aunt, "you know Scriptor says wives must be subject to husbands" (65), and "subject" she remains, for as the narrator describes her, she possesses "a type of feminine character that can endure to the edge of death, and endure silently, and that character was eminently hers" (65). Even as this Bluebeard's wrath intensified because of Lowly's inability to produce a second son to continue on the family tradition (there had always been a Shearjashub and a Freedom in the family), Lowly labored on "faithfully and silently" (70), comforted like Hitty Hyde by her baby, Lovey. But also identical

to Hitty Hyde, she often prayed to die in order to relieve her suffering, confident of what the afterlife held—freedom. Her prayers are finally answered, for as the narrator describes her last minutes of life, “‘Free’ was all she said. Her arms closed about [her baby] with a quick shudder and stringent grasp; her lips parted wide. Lowly and her baby were both ‘free’” (73). Lowly, albeit through death, finally makes her escape.

Lowly Wheeler’s devotion to her marriage is remarkable considering that Freedom Wheeler is perhaps Cooke’s best illustration of a harsh, New England patriarch. Josephine Donovan points out that in a letter to William Dean Howells, Mark Twain commented that “Freedom Wheeler’s Controversy with Providence” was a “ten strike” and that he wished “she would write twelve old time New England tales a year” (“Women’s Masterpieces” 32). Indeed, the reader does become engaged as Cooke paints a realistic portrait of the impossible expectations New England farmers demanded of their wives. Newlyn observes that “Freedom not only requires his wife to work like an indentured servant, but expects her to breed as regularly as a rabbit and, furthermore, to produce only healthy sons” (52). In addition, John Greenleaf Whittier commented that Freedom Wheeler, as well as Deacon and Mrs. Flint, were “especially true to life” (Newlyn 53).⁶ Twain’s and Whittier’s comments also reinforce the opinion that Cooke’s work is deserving of more attention.

Cooke’s portrayal of Lowly’s devotion in the face of Freedom’s tyranny was “true to life” and once again demonstrates the merging of Cooke’s fiction and non-fiction. Although many critics suggest that Lowly’s faith, like so many of Cooke’s other female protagonists, only serves to confine her, I would argue that this religion, as Cooke believed herself, is one of the few things that comforts Lowly or allows her to cope in Bluebeard’s chamber, for as Marina Warner points out, “In the blue chamber, Bluebeard’s wife finds herself face to face with the circumstances of her own future death” (130). Lowly’s beliefs provide her with the reassurance that her suffering, like that of Hitty and Mrs. Flint and Adeline, is only temporary; she will eventually make her earthly escape and be richly rewarded when she meets her creator.

Notes

¹ See Cooke's quotation in the Introduction on page 5.

² Interestingly, Patrick Morrow's discussion of Bluebeard and Jane Campion's movie The Piano describes the depiction of women as angels. Morrow explains that women living during the time of New Zealand's colonization were "virtually ignored, as if they had no voices" (147). He points out that Campion represents this silencing in a performance of Bluebeard during the movie: "[T]he script describing the entrance of the angels, singing, states, 'Their voices are so small as barely to be heard'. . . .[U]sing the angels to represent the innocent (women), Campion shows how women's voices were unheard, how all women were, in a sense, mute" (147). Thus, Bluebeard's murdering of his wives is representative of the patriarchal silencing of women.

³ According to Gilmore, this corruption refers to the Anglican Church's acceptance of unrepentant sinners into "full membership and entitled to the sacraments of baptism and the Supper" (20).

⁴ Joan Hedrick explains that perfectionism (or "Oberlinism") was popularized by Charles Grandison Finney, president of Oberlin College. Finney taught that perfection was attainable on earth, contrary to the Calvinist doctrine of original sin. However, the two are closely associated because of Calvinism's "intense introspection" (145).

⁵ MS letter, Catherine Beecher to Mary Dutton, 8 February 1830, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library. Qtd. in Hedrick 64.

⁶ Such skill inspired Whittier to suggest to Cooke, "Why don't thee undertake a longer story, not altogether confined to the uncultured farmhand dialect and character—but a story of New England life in its varied aspects?" MS letter, 10 March 1881, Connecticut Historical Society, published by Jean Downey in Quaker History. Eight years later, Cooke proved she heeded Whittier's advice with the publication in 1889 of her novel Steadfast, although it was not the success that either would have expected.

CHAPTER 3

SILENT SUFFERING: THE MASOCHISTIC TENDENCIES OF BLUEBEARD'S BRIDES

Rose Terry Cooke stands accused by critics as an example of the prevailing tendency of many nineteenth-century female writers to sentimentalize their fiction, often using the suffering or death of some saintly woman or child in order to elicit an emotional response from the reader.¹ The epitome of these effusive efforts in nineteenth-century literature is, perhaps, Eva St. Clair in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. Stowe uses Eva's death as an example of Christian martyrdom's power to bring about change, similar to her intentions in the title character's death. As Jane Tompkins remarks, "In Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), death is the equivalent not of defeat but of victory; it brings an access of power, not loss of it; it is not only the crowning achievement of life, it is life, and Stowe's presentation of little Eva is designed to dramatize this fact" (507). Eva dies because it is only in her being taken from him that her father, Augustine St. Clair, will accept salvation. Stowe's narrator illuminates Eva's function:

Has there ever been a child like Eva? Yes, there have been; but their names are always on grave stones. . . . It is as if heaven had an especial band of angels, whose office it was to sojourn for a season here, and endear to them the wayward human heart, that they might bear it upward with them in their homeward flight.
(227-8)

Certainly there are examples throughout Cooke's canon that seem to mirror Little Eva's sacrifice, some of which have already been discussed: Lowly Wheeler's last embrace of her child before both pass away; Mrs. Flint's death-bed reminiscences of her daughter's family; or Ada Henderson's final words pleading for her husband's salvation. But unlike Stowe's portrayal of Eva, Cooke's sentimental indulgences also serve to dramatize the unchangeable situation that traps particular characters.

While Ann Douglas argues that such plays for sympathy only perpetuate the “heresy” of sentimentality, I would assert that Cooke’s writing offers a different perspective (11)². Bound by the ties of marriage and locked behind the door of patriarchal oppression, Cooke’s New England housewives demonstrate the use of death as an escape from their situation rather than just a sacrifice on someone else’s behalf. Consequently, upon close examination of the religious narrative of these Puritan housewives, it appears as if the expectation of their death not only comforts them with the promise of eternal life in heaven, but also serves to remind them that they are making the ultimate sacrifice their Calvinistic heritage greatly esteems. As brides of Bluebeard, while in his chamber, their suffering and oppression is alleviated with the knowledge that such affliction molds them into the ideal Christian woman. As Ammons remarks, this willing acceptance of their victimization is a “disturbing theme in Cooke.” But Ammons must also admit that these women “comply because they have been shaped by the culture” (xxvi).

Once again it would seem that in her fiction Cooke criticizes the male-dominated society that conditions these women to behave in such a manner, but her non-fiction suggests that Cooke herself adhered to the values that prompted these attitudes. As she comments in her essay “The Real Rights of Women,” “Marriage is the great disciplinary institution of the sexes” (351). She explains that while marriage is the ideal situation for Christian women, if the union seems disagreeable, they must learn to accept it as “a great and stern lesson, which may educate them for the eternal future” (351). But this distinction between her prose and fiction, broadened by Cooke’s expression of such ideas in her poetry, should only be read as Cooke’s attempt to secure her position as a popular writer. To prevent censure of her fiction, Cooke adheres to the values of the cult of True Womanhood in her non-fiction and criticizes those women who sound a “war-cry” for women’s rights, in her opinion, the wrong approach for Christian women to take (347). Instead, Cooke uses her fiction and poetry to express her objections to oppressive marriages in a more acceptable manner. This is not to say Cooke believed all marriages were bad, but she argues

that men's abuse of their hierarchal position in the union is unacceptable, even if women submissively accept such treatment.

The compliance of these abused women suggests not only a passivity toward their suffering but also masochistic tendencies. This is also true of many of Cooke's other female characters. Whether happily married or cloistered spinsters, Cooke's New England women reflect the popular notion of True Womanhood combined with the doctrine of perfectionism. Placing these women inside a bad marriage only demonstrates further the extent of suffering for their faith they are willing to accept. While Ammons suggests these wives are *not* passive or masochistic, I would argue that these wives reveal the Calvinist attitude toward the disciplining of the body and, hence, they obediently and, at times, gladly, shoulder the mistreatment they daily receive.

While Marianne Noble points out that not all Calvinists are masochists,³ she explains that Calvinism is indeed steeped in masochistic practices, promoting such behaviors as bodily deprivation and stressing the association between divine love and physical suffering. Often, many of its female members "seize[d] upon the masochistic aspects of their religion" as a way to examine and to give voice to their hidden feelings of culpability and passion (Noble 49). Two such aspects of Calvinism that encouraged this behavior are the ideology of coverture and female fantasies of martyrdom. Coverture emphasized a female's "bodilessness"—the covering up or minimizing of her body to emphasis a woman's subordination to the patriarchy (49). Restraining the body through physical deprivation and emotional self-control repressed her carnal desires and alleviated any guilt associated with such feelings. In addition, dreams of martyrdom replaced fleshly desire with religious aspirations, as many sought to pattern their lives after Calvinism's highest examples of female piety. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one such example, traditionally believed to have suffered tremendous psychological anguish during her son's crucifixion. Frequently, however, the stories of these saints propagated "suffering and death as ideal forms of female usefulness" (49).

Consequently, both coverture and martyrdom legitimized patriarchal tyranny in New England homes. According to Ellen Rosenman, masochism “provides a way of negotiating the constraints imposed by gender ideology and of evading some of the consequences of transgressing them” (22). As these Calvinist women aspired toward sainthood and true womanhood, they viewed any suffering or affliction as the necessary disciplining of the “unspiritual” flesh, as explained in the Apostle Paul’s teachings: “Therefore I take *pleasure* in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong” (Nelson Study Bible, 2 Cor. 12.10) (italics mine). Suffering for Christ’s sake, as well as female martyrdom, fills Christianity’s history, but, as Noble observes, Calvinism’s emphasis on the individual’s isolation during such sacrifice exacerbated the violence many suffered (49). According to John Calvin’s teachings, each individual is held responsible for his or her own conversion, and communion with God is direct, not indirect through intercession by the saints, as in Catholicism. Feeling that intimacy with others hindered their relationship with “Christ alone,” many wives silently suffered under their tyrannical husbands.

Perhaps to alleviate any doubts about their husbands’ behavior, these women, as evidenced in several Puritan diaries, oftentimes synonymized their relationship with their husband with a human-divine relationship (Noble 54). This common practice can be attributed to the Puritan idea of “covenant.” Although a central tenet in all Christian religions, the concept of covenant (or a solemn promise between two individuals or parties) was emphasized in American Puritanism and used to illustrate the similarity between God’s relationship with His elect and a husband’s relationship with his wife.

Indoctrinated with such terminology, Calvinist women, typologically speaking, frequently equated husbands with God, whether or not a husband remotely deserved such an attribution, an example of which occurs in Cooke’s story “Too Late” (1875). As the narrator states, “His wife was a neat, quiet, subdued woman, who held her house and her husband in as much reverence as a Feejee holds his idols” (214). In this story, Cooke’s metaphor suggests a wife’s veneration of her

husband is much like the Fiji natives' attitude toward their gods, a group stereotyped in the nineteenth-century for their stubborn resistance to Christian missions. As we will see, this attitude is passed down to her daughter as well.

There are additional examples in Cooke's canon, such as her story "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," which exhibit such "silent suffering" under "Godly" authority. The narrator describes Deacon Flint's first wife as a "silent and sickly women" who endures the tyranny inflicted upon her by this supposedly Christ-like man (96). Feeling it her "duty" to maintain her home in accordance with Deacon Flint's demanding expectations, she "d[oes] not complain" but goes about her daily chores until finally, like so many other brides of Bluebeard, she dies. Immediately following this description, the narrator explains that Mrs. Flint's silent obedience is not unique to the area, as "It is a common record among our barren hills, which count by thousands their unknown and unsung martyrs" (96). This account conforms to the idea that Calvinism often encouraged female fantasies of martyrdom and furthermore establishes that New England females were particularly susceptible to such behavior. Even the second Mrs. Flint stands as an example because she agrees to marry Deacon Flint only because she does not want to be a burden to her daughter or son-in-law. Sacrificing her own happiness, she remains silent regarding her apprehensions about marrying the deacon and quietly bears the affliction associated with her marriage to him. Considered by some to be a "pillar in Bassett church," Deacon Flint uses his Biblically-mandated authority accorded through the covenant of marriage to control both women. But as the narrator points out, "even the Devil can quote Scripture" (104), and his actions once again result in the death of a wife.

It is only out of "sheer desperation" that the second Mrs. Flint decides to flee from her affliction (118). Giving in to her "carnal" desires, she moves out of the deacon's house because she "cleave[s]" to her grandchildren and does not want to die (116). But this attitude is quickly checked by the Bassett community, which never questions Deacon Flint's authority and insists that Mrs. Flint make a confession of wrong-doing and pray for forgiveness: "In spite of the facts

and all their witnesses, the sentiment of Bassett went with the deacon. Conjugal subjection was the fashion, or rather the principle and custom, of the day, and was to be upheld” (120).

Reminded that it is her duty to submit, Mrs. Flint willingly agrees to return to her “chamber,” but before she has the opportunity, “a more ‘Solemn Vocation’ than life” beckons her (129).

Although she must face death, Mrs. Flint gladly obeys, taking pleasure and comfort—the “fair peace of death”—in knowing that her suffering was never in vain (130).

Many references to Mrs. Flint suggest that she was in many ways “weaker” in character than her daughter or even the first Mrs. Flint. The first wife never attempts to escape from the deacon’s tyranny, and her daughter, appropriately named Mindwell, possessed a “strength of character” her mother did not exhibit—total self-control (93). Mrs. Flint even admits she found it difficult to “really submit” to divine Providence after the death of her first husband—“her nateral [sic] man rebelled” (93).

This idea is not confined only to Cooke’s fiction. In a poem written several years earlier, Cooke’s “Midnight” (1861) suggests that the speaker possesses a weakness of character that hinders the endurance of pain and suffering:

“But I am tired of storms and pain;
Sweet angel, let me in!
And send some strong heart back again,
To suffer and to sin.” (25-28)

Interestingly, although the speaker lacks perseverance, she suggests that others are more capable than she to endure pain, as if this is an expectation of all Christians. The angel’s reply only reaffirms that this is a Christian’s duty:

The angel answered—stern and slow—
“How darest thou be dead,
While God seeks dust to make the street
Where happier men may tread?”

“Go back, and eat earth’s bitter herbs,
Go, hear its dead-bells toll;
Lie speechless underneath their feet,
Who tread across thy soul. (29-36)

Not only does the angel demand that the speaker return to life, but he also requires that she suffer more. In so doing, she will learn the “patience of the Lord” (37).

Like Mrs. Flint and other oppressed females in Cooke’s stories, the speaker tries to use death as an escape from her suffering, in this case by committing suicide; however, the angel suggests that taking her own life will prevent her from entering heaven: “Thy murdered cry may cleave the ground, / But not unbar His gate” (39-40). This implies that for those Christians who do not happily endure (or at least patiently persevere), the reward of eternal life in heaven will be revoked. Most of Cooke’s housewives endure their suffering patiently. With the exception of Hitty in “The Ring Fetter,” they all wait on God to answer their prayers to die rather than take matters into their own hands.

Cooke’s poem “The Suttee” (1861) provides another example of such stoicism. Bennett comments that “The Suttee” comes “perilously close to embracing the Indian funeral practice of sati (‘widow-burning’) as a means of ascension to God” (“Rose Terry Cooke” 152). However, I would assert that the poem implies that such sacrifice is not only acceptable but also esteemed as a form of female martyrdom. The speaker of the poem, unlike Cooke’s brides of Bluebeard, feels that being left a widow is a “living death” (13), so she embraces the custom of being burned with her husband’s dead body. Although she fears her “flesh [may] refuse to stay” when faced with such pain (15), she is resolute in her decision to place herself upon the funeral pyre. She does not deny that she has fears but instead controls them with her determination:

Slowly these eager tongues aspire;
I shudder, though they set me free.
Go, coward senses, to the fire–

But the wing'd soul, oh God! To Thee! (21-4)

Cooke's portrayal of this speaker's courageous martyrdom reflects the attitude many women of this period sought to imitate. In spite of the physical anguish, fulfilling their culturally prescribed destiny as an angel in the house overshadowed any self-concerns.

While Cooke's religious devotion was much like the women she portrays in her fiction, she did not condone such masochistic practices. Cooke felt that these women were forced into such drastic behavior by strict, Calvinist teachings and the patriarchal abuse of Scriptural admonishments. Although at times Cooke's opinions concerning Calvinism and women's rights seem ambiguous, she seems to indicate in her essay "The Real Rights of Women" that women should not be forced to suffer while performing their domestic duties. Still maintaining that a woman's place is in the home, but arguing against New England's patriarchal treatment of women, Cooke asserts that, by nature, women are less capable of physical endurance and should not be expected to do what a man is supposed to do:

[E]very man knows women are "the weaker sex" by reason of their physical constitution: therefore I say women have a right to care and consideration on this account. But do they get it? Where is the man, among the working class especially, who will not let his wife, his mother, his daughter, or his sister overwork herself for his support or aggrandizement? The records of our lunatic asylums fully bear out this statement: one-third of their female patients come from farms, where they rise early and go to rest late, working incessantly through winter and summer, no matter what is their physical condition; bearing and rearing children through it all . . . a woman can be had for the asking, and worked like a slave without wages. . . . A few kind words, a little appreciation, even a frank acknowledgment of the work she has done, are like reviving balm to weak and weary women . . . (349)

Cooke's opinion supports the idealized characteristics of True Womanhood. As Noble explains, "In accordance with the [seventeenth- and eighteenth-century] work ethic, the 'true

woman' was to work, but many forms of real work ran counter to the new ideals of tranquil femininity" (42). These New England women were therefore torn between trying to obey their husbands and trying to maintain some semblance of the angel in the house. With such demanding expectations, it is no wonder that many turned to masochism in order to comfort themselves.

Although not a victim of patriarchal oppression, the protagonist Hannah Blair in Cooke's short story "Too Late" (1875) demonstrates the tendency of many New England women to practice physical self-discipline in order to control a carnal appetite. As Donovan comments, this sketch is one of Cooke's "most powerful critiques of the Calvinist discipline of the body" ("Breaking" 236). Reared by a "repressed" mother (216), Hannah learns by example how to control the desires that she feels might lead her down the path of destruction. Although she tries not to love him, thinking that her feelings are "nothing less than a direct Satanic impulse," Hannah eventually agrees to marry Charley Mayhew (218). But even after she consents to the arrangement, Hannah uses her daily chores as a means of self-discipline, believing that her passion for Charley must always be controlled:

Her daily duties were done with such exactness and patience, her lover's demands so coolly set aside till those duties were attended to, her face kept so calm even when the blood thrilled to her finger-tips at the sound of his voice, that, long as her mother had known her, she looked with wonder, and admired afar off the self-control she never could have exhibited. (219)

On the day of their wedding, however, Hannah receives an anonymous letter detailing accounts of Charley Mayhew's indiscretions. Reminiscent of Stowe's character Mary Scudder in The Minister's Wooing (1859), Hannah is devastated by the realization that she can never marry someone of such character. Much like Mary's refusal to marry James Marvyn because he is not a Christian, Hannah cancels the wedding and once again turns to self-discipline to control her feelings. For several years following the revelation, Hannah turns to the "silent" world of masochism to help her cope with her feelings of bereavement and disappointment, for as the

narrator relates, “it is women who must endure; for them are those secret agonies no enthusiasm gilds, no hope assuages, no sympathy consoles” (227). Hannah resigns herself to this position, conditioned to believe it is her duty as a Christian woman to control her emotional longings.

Eventually, Hannah learns through self-discipline to control her feelings as they move “from torture . . . into pain; then to bitterness, stoicism, contempt,—at last into a certain treadmill of indifference” (227). This indifference makes it possible for Hannah to marry another man, although she does so not for love but for practicality’s sake. She discovers “pleasure” in being the “model” housewife of all the area (229), but this prestigious status requires even more self-discipline, another affirmation of Hannah’s masochistic tendencies. As Donovan points out, “The image of a body being tortured through the imposition of a discipline could not be more graphic; it is a painful figuration of the conquering or colonizing of the local body by a translocal ideological discipline—in this case, Calvinism” (235-6). Essentially, Hannah’s marriage only facilitates her masochistic habits, for as Madame de Frontignac explains to Mary Scudder in Stowe’s novel, marrying a man she does not love devastates a woman both emotionally and physically:

“But think, *chere enfant*, —think what it is to marry one man, while you love another! . . . You will have to ask him to go away from this place; you can never see him; for this love will never die till you die; —that you may be sure of. . . . or must you struggle always, and grow whiter and whiter, and fall away into heaven . . . People will say you have the liver-complaint, or the consumption, or something. Nobody ever knows what we women die of.” (303-04)

Fortunately for Mary, James returns home a converted man and prevents her from marrying Dr. Hopkins, a man she does not love. Hannah, however, continues to fight her passionate feelings, outwardly displaying her inner turmoil. As Donna Campbell observes, “Hannah’s need to control and enter her external circumstances . . . exceeds the boundaries of the usual, since she tries to edit out of her life the one thing that cannot be eliminated: emotion” (34). She insists that the

same discipline she feels compelled to administer on herself must be enforced in her home. As the narrator states, “the first principle of her rule was silent obedience” (230); if her daughter did not comply, her punishment was repetition of “theological torture—the Assembly’s Catechism,—from end to end” (231). According to Ammons, “As a mother-daughter story, this sketch in culturally produced self-mutilation, which spills over into child-abuse, examines the suffering that women inflict on themselves and each other, including their daughters, when they buy into life-denying patriarchal values” (xxxiv).

The ending of the story demonstrates Cooke’s criticism of Hannah’s behavior specifically and Calvinism’s encouragement of such behavior generally. Despite all her years of self-control, Hannah breaks down in front of her daughter when she discovers that Charley Mayhew died “a lonely, drunken pauper” (232). She comes to the realization that all her efforts have been in vain, that had she married Charley she could have saved him from his demise. When her daughter suggests that she should not feel responsible for Charley’s death or guilty for her mistake, her only response is “‘Dolly, it is too late!’” While a bit sentimental, this closing proves Cooke’s intentions to demonstrate the detrimental consequences of religiously-motivated masochism. As Katherine Kleitz concludes, Hannah’s life “alternates between two forces which dominate her emotions. . . . The dual nature of Hannah’s outward life is simple, but inwardly the forces of passion and repression devastatingly co-exist” (136).

Hannah’s utterance, “Too late” recalls another one of Cooke’s characters that illustrates the masochistic tendencies of Calvinist women; in the uncollected story “Martha Wyatt’s Life” (1856), the ending of the story reveals that Martha’s life of repressed passion was all in vain because the narrator discovers that what Martha assumes to be unrequited love is actually mutual affection. This discovery, however, comes “too late,” for Martha’s years of physical deprivation result in her death (769). Throughout the narrative, the letters relates how Martha disciplines herself in order to control her passionate feelings toward Adam Brooke. She feels as if Adam has some mysterious power over her that compels her to love him. She muses, “Perhaps it was that

shadow of the primeval curse that gives every man a power over some woman not to be defined or analyzed—the divine and natural power of subjection” (764). Martha’s use of “divine” and “natural” affirms the practice of equating patriarchal figures with God and suggests that she views herself in the position of servant or of slave. Martha discovers that, at times, Adam exhibits a despotic nature, but this does not deter her feelings. Repressing these sentiments causes her much anguish, but she rationalizes this with “excitement” (765), revealing herself as a masochist. She continues to suffer physically as well as emotionally, but she points out that in all of her anguish she remained “submissive,” emphasizing the role mandated for many Calvinist women (766).

Although Martha is an example of masochism practiced outside the bonds of marriage, Ada Frazier in “The Mormon’s Wife” provides an illustration of one of Cooke’s masochistic brides trapped inside a marriage to Bluebeard. As previously related, John Henderson, Ada’s husband, joins the Mormon Church and decides to participate in the religion’s practice of polygamy. Ada’s love for John makes this practice exceptionally hard on her, pushing her to the edge of death. As soon as John announces his intentions to marry someone else, Ada begins to suffer emotionally, and this distress eventually lends itself to her physical anguish. Suffering silently behind the closed doors of her bedroom chamber, Ada begins to comfort herself with her physical torment. She feels relieved when she finds her “lips full of blood one morning” and attributes this as “a promise of the life to come” (648). Like Hannah Blair, she disciplines herself to the point of feeling indifferent and, in so doing, permits John to bring his other wives inside the house. This action in itself, however, affirms Ada’s masochistic behavior. Following the other wives’ move into the house, Ada’s suffering increases and her death quickly approaches.

Ada never attempts to dissolve her marriage legally, although by every Biblical and secular law she is entitled to such an action. Instead, she remains in her marriage like a “true woman” should and takes pleasure in knowing that her suffering will be rewarded. Similarly, Lowly Wheeler in “Freedom Wheeler’s Controversy with Providence” never attempts to flee her marriage but “endure[s] silently” her husband’s frequent abuse (65). She, too, grows indifferent

towards her husband and takes pleasure in knowing that she will some day be rewarded for her suffering. As the narrator explains, “[Lowly] did not care now: A dumb and sudden endurance possessed her. She prayed that . . . she and Lovey and the baby might die; but she did her work just as faithfully and silently as ever” (70).

Lowly and Ada are both silent sufferers, as are Cooke’s other repressed female protagonists, including Martha Wyatt, Hannah Blair, and Mrs. Flint. They all reveal the proclivity of many New England wives to endure their patriarchal oppression alone. Cooke criticizes Calvinism’s doctrine of isolation by demonstrating through these characters the damage of such behavior, as well as the detrimental outcome in passively accepting mental and physical suffering. These brides of Bluebeard readily accept death as an escape from their lonely chambers. While these deaths may stand as evidence for Cooke’s sentimental inclinations, Cooke, like Stowe, makes a powerful statement against the injustices suffered by many.

Notes

¹ As listed in the Works Cited, see Evelyn Newlyn's essay "Rose Terry Cooke and the Children of the Sphinx"; Susan Allen Toth's article "Rose Terry Cooke"; Perry Westbrook's study Acres of Flint; and Marjorie Stone's essay "Bleeding Passports."

² Ann Douglas expresses a strong opinion concerning sentimentality. The "heresy" to which Douglas refers is the use of sentimentalism in an effort to "manipulat[e] nostalgia." She adds, "Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated. It is a form of dragging one's heels. It always borders on dishonesty" (12). While she agrees that nineteenth-century women were "oppressed, and damaged," she asserts that their sentimental writing was not salutary; it only served to stigmatize their oppression as weakness (11).

³ For clarification purposes, I would like to point out that Noble defines masochists as "people who associate domination and suffering with pleasure" (49).

⁴ Coppélia Kahn makes the same argument about patriarchal authority during the Renaissance:

As the head of the household, the father took over many of the priest's functions, leading his extended family of dependents in daily prayers, questioning them as to the state of their souls, giving or withholding his blessings on their undertakings. Although Protestant divines argued for the spiritual equality of women, deplored the double standard, and exalted the married state for both sexes, at the same time they zealously advocated the subjection of wives to their husbands on the scriptural grounds that the husband "beareth the image of God." (38)

CHAPTER 4

“AN OLD MAIDS’ THANKSGIVIN’”: HOMOSOCIAL RELATIONS AMONG BLUEBEARD’S BRIDES

Similar to Rose Terry Cooke’s own life, her short story “How Celia Changed Her Mind” (1892) depicts the life of a New England woman who marries late in life.¹ Unlike Cooke, however, Celia Barnes, the local seamstress, outlives her husband and cheerfully commemorates his passing by inviting all of Bassett community’s unmarried, older women to her “Old Maids’ Thanksgivin’” (150). After her marriage to Deacon Everts, Celia regrets ever suggesting that there is nothing worse than an “old maid” and decides to embrace her former lifestyle, declaring her new, yearly gathering a “burnt-offering,” a reminder of the Apostle Paul’s advice, “I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am [unmarried]” (Nelson Study Bible, 1 Cor. 7.8). Like so many of Cooke’s other female protagonists, Celia married a Bluebeard. Deacon Everts treats Celia much as Deacon Flint treats his wife in “Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience.” Both men begrudge their wives food, criticize their housekeeping, and expect them to obey without question. But as the narrator admits, Celia’s situation was not unlike many other New England marriages:

[A]dmittid into the free-masonry of married women, she discovered how few among them were more than household drudges, the servants of their families, worked to the verge of exhaustion, and neither thanked nor rewarded for their pains. She saw here a woman whose children were careless of, and ungrateful to her, and her husband coldly indifferent; there was one on whom the man she had married wreaked all his fiendish temper in daily small injuries, little vexatious acts, petty tyrannies, a “street-angel, house devil” of a man, of all sorts the most hateful. (145-6)

Unfortunately for Celia, her husband's tyranny only grows worse when he tires of Celia's "undisciplined" nature, very different from his *dead*, first wife's behavior. He detests her to such an extent that he tries to cut her out of his will, leaving thousands of dollars to foreign missions instead. But Celia has the last laugh, for after his death, she is able to collect from the life insurance policy listing his wife (although at the time it was issued, his first wife) as the benefactor. Ironically, the inheritance she receives provides the means for Celia to host her annual gathering.

Celia's attitude before her marriage demonstrates the bigotry that existed against "old maids" in New England. Celia exclaims to her friend Mrs. Stearns, "If there's anything on the face of the earth I do hate, it's an old maid!" (131). Celia feels, as did many others at the time, that without a "Mrs." before a woman's name, she has no position in the community: "A woman that's married is somebody; she's got a place in the world; she ain't everybody's tag; folks don't say, 'Oh, it's nobody but that old maid Celye Varnes;' it's Mis' Price,'. . . I don't know how 't is elsewheres, but here in Bassett you might as well be a dog as an old maid" (131).

Nancy F. Cott's observations confirm Celia's notion that an "old maid" had no "station" in life during this time in history. A woman in the late eighteenth century and even on into the nineteenth century was defined by her "personal relationships as daughter, sister, loved one, wife, and mother, not in terms of her discrete individual status or aims" (165). As proof of this lack of self-identity, Cott cites an 1837 example of the character code that was current at the time:

As a sister, she soothes the troubled heart, chastens and tempers the wild daring of the hurt mind restless with disappointed pride or fired with ambition. As a mistress, she inspires the nobler sentiment of purer love, and the sober purpose of conquering himself for virtue's sake. As a wife, she consoles him in grief, animates him with hope in despair, restrains him in prosperity, cheers him in poverty and trouble, swells the pulsations of his throbbing breast that beats for honorable distinction, and rewards his toils with the undivided homage of a

grateful heart. In the important and endearing character of mother, she watches and directs the various impulses of unfledged genius, instills into the tender and susceptible mind the quickening seeds of virtue, fits us to brave dangers in time of peril, and concentrates to truth and virtue the best affections of our nature.²

Without connections to others, “old maids” were exactly as Celia describes them, without “a place.”

In her fiction, Cooke, like many other nineteenth-century woman writers, championed spinsters by suggesting that in many ways their lives were better than their married counterparts.³ As Susan Toth observes, Cooke’s writing demands more critical attention, for this positive portrayal of old maids is highly unusual in American literature:

From Hawthorne’s Hepzibah Pyncheon to Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, the single woman has been the object of bemused or tragic speculation by male authors. Even in modern literature, from Henry James’s ghost-hunting governess to Faulkner’s Joanna Burden, the old maid has appeared mainly as a complex subject for psychoanalysis. While Cooke’s spinster heroines may not always inspire emulation, they are vital and interesting characters, frequently happier and more successful than many of Cooke’s married women. (21)⁴

In Cooke’s story “Polly Mariner, Tailoress” (1881), despite the advice of others, Polly, the woman under whom Celia apprentices, decides that the single life has its advantages: “‘I’ve made up my mind about it, ‘n’ it’ll take a sight to change it. I a’n’t one o’ them complyin’ and good-natured critturs that’ll give up . . . till they can’t call their souls their own . . . I want to do what I’m a mind to, ‘n’ I can’t be yoked up to other folk’s wants anyway’” (240). Only on her death bed does Polly have a moment of regret, but after being reminded by her friend of why she made her decision—“you’ve hed [sic] your way”—she dies with a contented smile on her face (262).

In “Celia,” Mrs. Stearns explains to Celia that she greatly respects “maiden ladies” and, although Celia might feel this lifestyle is conducive to loneliness, so too is the life of a married woman:

[M]arried life had its own loneliness when your husband was shut up in his study, or gone off on a long drive to see some sick parishioner or conduct a neighborhood prayer-meeting, or even when he was the other side of the fireplace absorbed in a religious paper . . . while the silent wife sat unnoticed at her mending or knitting.
(132)

In addition, Mrs. Stearns comments that Celia is fortunate because she does not have the many cares and responsibilities that accompany rearing a family; at least she is free to live her life in the way she desires. Although Mrs. Stearns speaks from experience, Celia disregards her opinion and quickly discovers that the “place” she had longed for is surprisingly a closet of tyranny and oppression—Bluebeard’s chamber. Once her eyes are open through her disastrous union, Celia begins “to look woefully back to the freedom and peace of her maiden days” (145). Unlike Cooke’s other brides of Bluebeard, Celia’s escape comes from the death of her husband rather than her own, and she finally finds happiness through the gathering of her friends after his demise.

It would seem as if Cooke’s fiction and non-fiction contradict each other with such poignant portrayals of women living happily and successfully outside of the domestic sphere. In her non-fiction, as we have seen, Cooke praises women who embrace “the cult of True Womanhood,” but in her fiction, Cooke’s readers find that some of her most triumphant characters are women like Celia and Polly—those who find fulfillment apart from the patriarchal institution of a New England marriage. In “The Ring Fetter,” the narrator’s sarcastic tone in reference to “old maids” conveys the message that Cooke felt somewhat pressured as a writer to avoid any positive portrayals of New England spinsters:

Here, by every law of custom, ought my weary pen to fall flat and refuse its office; for it is here that the fate of every heroine culminates. For what are women born to be married? Old maids are excrescences in the social system,—disagreeable utilities,—persons who have failed to fulfil their destiny,—and of whom it should have been said, rather than of ghosts, they are always in the wrong. But life, with pertinacious facts, is too apt to transcend custom and the usage of novel-writers; and though the one brings a woman's legal existence to an end when she merges her independence in that of a man, and the other curtails her historic existence at the same point, because the novelist's catechism hath for its preface this creed,—“The chief end of woman is to get married” (41-2)

Perhaps what Cooke establishes in her fiction is a new ideology conducive to both the women's suffrage movement and her own conservative religion. Just as Ammons suggests of Sarah Orne Jewett, a predecessor of Cooke's local-color writing, Cooke may be creating a “women's religion”—a new “feminized” Christianity that elicits kindness, intuition, hospitality, and sisterhood (87). When Celia invites Bassett community's “old maids” to her home, she essentially becomes a minister of this women's religion—a shepherdess gathering in her flock, leading them in the sacrament of a burnt-offering.

Cooke's “sisterhood” demonstrates the need of many women of this period to form homosocial relationships in order to survive in the patriarchal society in which they lived. Men and women were ostracized from each other because of religiously-prescribed gender roles, leading, in many cases, to an emotional detachment between the sexes. This detachment, in turn, left a void often filled by others of the same sex because of the connection established by similar life experiences. As Carol Smith-Rosenberg argues, the biological consequences of being a female—pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and menopause, and so forth—“bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy” (9). More importantly, this intimacy fostered a female world,

“a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks” (9).

While Smith-Rosenberg’s study applies to most nineteenth-century women, Cott suggests that this bond was intensified in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England due to the area’s abundant Christian heritage. Women were believed to be better suited for religious devotion because of their “tender Heart[s]” and were encouraged to spend much of their time in attending religious meetings and visitations (137). This encouragement, however, only served to establish more concretely men’s subordination of women. As Harriet Martineau, a British feminist, observed in 1837, New England women’s intense pre-occupation with religious duty prevented them from channeling their mental, ethical, and physical abilities in other directions.⁵ Cott, however, suggests that they used their religious commitment as a means “to define self and seek community” (138). Therefore, not only did New England women form bonds because of biological similarities but also because of the “like-minded community” religion provided.

As a woman regionalist writer and a member of a patriarchal society herself, Cooke uses her own experiences in New England’s female world to communicate specifically to her “sister” readers. Growing up in Connecticut and playing the parts of daughter, sister, aunt, maiden, and, eventually, wife, provided her a broad palette for the world she paints. As Auten observes, Cooke “confines the rural otherness of her characters to traces of country colloquialism in dialogue and presents her regional pictures from a female point of view” (70). Auten gives Cooke’s story “Ann Potter’s Lesson” (1858) as an example, citing a quotation from the narrator’s female first-person perspective: “Father died when we were both small, and didn’t leave us much means beside the farm . . . It’s hard work enough for a man to get clothes and victuals off a farm in West Connecticut; it’s up-hill work always; . . . but a woman ain’t of no use, except to tell folks what to do” (317). Most of Cooke’s female readers would have instantly felt some connection with this narrator, whether having experienced the same hardship themselves or having witnessed similar situations within their network of family and friends.

Studies differ on whether or not these relationships were physical (specifically, genital contact) or just emotional. Yet, Smith-Rosenberg cautions that this should not be a major focus. For the most part, these relationships were socially acceptable, and she suggests that more attention should be given to the function these relationships served. These friendships, based on evidence from diaries and letters, provided women, first, with emotional support: “Within this secure and empathetic world women could share sorrows, anxieties, and joys, confident other women had experienced similar emotions” (14). Secondly, women found physical support in a sphere filled with endless domestic responsibilities, especially during times of illness, mourning, or hardship. Although some of the language found in journals and correspondence seems quite intense, almost erotic, the message that stands out is that, whether oppressed in a tyrannical marriage or faced with the prejudice against maidenhood, these women, all closeted within some type of patriarchal chamber, found comfort in these bonds, as described in one typical letter between friends:

I have not said to you in so many or so few words that I was happy with you during those few so incredibly short weeks but surely you do not need words to tell you what you must know. Those two or three days so dark without, so bright with firelight and contentment within I shall always remember as proof that, for a time, at least—I fancy for quite a long time—we might be sufficient for each other. We know that we can amuse each other for many idle hours together and now we know that we can also work together. And that means much, don't you think so? ⁶

Cooke illustrates in several of her sketches the importance of such friendships by showing the consequences when such relationships are absent. In “The Ring Fetter,” both Hitty and her mother are isolated from other women and, in turn, both die. Although Hitty's mother, Adelaide Howard Hyde, loved her husband, when displaced from her Southern home, she felt ostracized not only by the location of her new home but by the incompatibility she felt toward the other women of the area. As in “The Foreigner,” one of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories, a woman is

ostracized by the community because of her “otherness.” Unfortunately, unlike “The Foreigner,” no one reaches out to Adelaide, like Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett do to Mrs. Tolland. Adelaide eventually fades away, like the flowers “dropped from the frames and died in the garden” (35). Geographical separation often caused such loneliness and depression, and oftentimes daughters were sent back to relatives in order to be assimilated within the family’s network.

Unfortunately, Adelaide’s daughter never receives this opportunity. Adelaide’s death leaves Hitty alone, without the companionship of other women. After years of home schooling and subsequently obligated to care for her dying father, Hitty feels no connection to society like most girls her age. Even after her father dies, Hitty remains isolated from the community, and, as a result, the naivete gained from her hermitage is to blame for her susceptibility to her criminal husband’s courtship. Abner continues to keep her isolated, and eventually Hitty suffers the same fate as her mother, though Hitty is driven to commit suicide.

Similarly, “The Mormon’s Wife” demonstrates the tremendous value of female bonding. As with Adelaide, Ada is torn away from her social network of family and friends and placed in the middle of an area totally devoid of any of her religious beliefs. Her husband even subjects her to the practice of polygamy, inviting women into their home and into their relationship, which totally goes against Ada’s faith. As a result, Ada’s health quickly deteriorates, and she escapes her oppression through death.

Ada’s geographical separation, as well as the lack of religious support, ultimately contribute to her husband’s entrapment of her; however, unlike Ada’s husband, who she actually loves until he begins to practice Mormonism, Deacon Flint in “Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience” never, at any point in the marriage, treats his wife with love or respect. Rather, he isolates her from her family and friends and, while she is sick, tries to take the place of what would typically be a female caregiver. The only reprieve she receives from her years of “real privation” that causes her health to fail and makes her “nervous and irritable” comes when Deacon Flint’s cousin Mabel moves into the house (114). Mabel’s “heart fairly ached with compassion” when she

witnesses Deacon Flint's treatment of Mrs. Flint, and Mabel becomes a "great comfort and help" while she remains in the house (115).

Once Mabel leaves, however, Mrs. Flint's situation grows worse when she begins to suffer from consumption. Deacon Flint refuses to send for a nurse and does not allow her daughter to visit. As the narrator relates, "He was able to do for his wife, he said, and nobody could interfere" (116). He cares for her by reading the Bible twice a day and serving her lumpy, burnt gruel, suggesting that those who are ill "ought not pamper the flesh" (117). However, his real motivation to care for her stems out of economic considerations (a nurse would be too expensive), and all his miserly efforts fail. Mrs. Flint, in order to save her own life, moves out of the house, after which she receives the care and attention of her daughter, Mindwell, and her neighbor, Polly.

The mother-daughter bond served as a pattern for all homosocial relationships at this time. Unusual, however, is that throughout "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," the mother-daughter relationship stands out as somewhat dysfunctional: unlike most mother-daughter bonds, Mrs. Flint and Mindwell's relationship lacks the intimacy other mothers and daughter often shared during this period. Mothers and daughters shared a "mutual emotional dependency" as they occupied the domestic sphere together (Smith-Rosenberg 15), and, interestingly, there is no evidence to indicate that the relationship they shared ever mimicked the hostility that often emerges in present-day mother-daughter relationships, as daughters "struggle for autonomy and self-identity" (17). A daughter's only aspirations were to become just like her mother, and they bonded closely as mothers "apprenticed" their daughters in the daily tasks of managing a home. When the daughter left the home, the relationship continued to thrive, but the daughter also began to develop other female connections, thus continuing the network of support. Indeed, this relationship stood as a model for all other female intimacies:

Daughters were born into a female world. Their mother's life expectations and sympathetic network of friends and relations were among the first realities in the

life of a developing child. As long as the mother's domestic role remained relatively stable and few viable alternatives competed with it, daughters tended to accept their mother's world and turn automatically to other women for support and intimacy. It was within this closed and intimate female world that the young girl grew toward womanhood. (17)

Mrs. Flint and Mindwell stand as examples of the consequences that can occur when this bond suffers. As Holly points out, Cooke's story differs from other regionalist sketches portraying female relationships⁷ because "the private understandings between women in many of these fictions—the private discourse of intimacy they share and the collaborative, potentially subversive knowledge they acquire—never surfaces in the widow Gold's [Mrs. Flint] conversation with her daughter." Had their relationship been more open and intimate, Mrs. Flint would not have married in the first place, thereby avoiding the "confinement of her new marriage" (68). Holly suggests that the intimacy these two women should have shared is "submerged under layers of weakness and fear, misunderstanding and restraint" (68).

This relationship may again demonstrate Cooke's belief in Calvinism's failure. Mindwell's deep commitment to her faith prevents her from expressing her concerns that her mother's marriage to the Deacon is a mistake. She feels she must practice self-control and suppress any feelings of dependency on her mother, fearing the consequences of such "earthly" attachments. However, Mrs. Flint interprets her daughter's lack of protest as acquiescence and ambivalence and proceeds to accept the deacon's proposal. As the narrator explains, the marriage would have been prevented if Mindwell could have felt the freedom to express her feelings: "If she had fallen on her mother's neck and wept, and begged her to stay, with repeated kisses and warm embrace, Mrs. Gold never would have become Mrs. Flint" (100). Nor would she have become Bluebeard's next victim.

Cooke's own relationship with her mother serves as an example of the intimacy mothers and daughters shared. As Spofford notes, "Between Rose and her mother . . . there existed the

most close and tender relation in a tie of unusual intimacy” (Famous Women 185). Cooke also used her mother’s initials as a pseudonym when she first began to publish verse, another indication, Spofford believes, of their intimacy. In addition, for the rest of her life Cooke found the death of her mother hard to accept, often waking up with the feeling that her mother was still alive, simply sleeping in another room.

In “Freedom Wheeler’s Controversy with Providence,” Cooke shows the comfort a daughter can bring to her mother. Although Lowly suffers tremendously under her husband’s tyrannical hand, the birth of her daughter allows her to cope during her oppression: “Lowly got up very slowly from little Phoebe’s birth; and Freedom grumbled loud and long over the expense of keeping Hepsy a month in the kitchen. But his wife did not care now; a dumb and sudden endurance possessed her” (70). The deep love she feels for little Phoebe offers her an escape, at least temporarily, from the pressures of her life. She continues to meet Freedom’s work demands, but after a long day of performing household duties, Lowly comforts herself by stealing away into her daughter’s room, lying with her “hot cheek against the cool, soft face of her darling, and the little hand deep in her bosom, for an hour of rest and sad peace” (70). This bittersweet scene serves as a powerful example of Cooke’s ability to speak to her sister readers.

Significantly, Lowly only feels this comfort from her daughter, not her son. This distinction demonstrates the separation of the sexes even at such a young age. Whereas the narrator describes Lowly after the birth of her daughter as being filled with “the eternal-floods of mother-love,” Lowly’s love for her son seems rather insignificant in comparison. In fact, many references to her son suggest he is more of a burden than a joy. This “big naughty boy” only adds to Lowly’s list of daily chores, and his father is the only one who can discipline him (66). When he grows a little older, this young Bluebeard-in-training begins to mimic his father’s treatment of his mother.

Lowly, however, is not alone in the lack of respect her son displays. He also disrespects his father’s aunts, Aunt Huldah and Aunt Hannah. When Freedom marries Lowly, these women

gladly accept her into their home and their female world. They care for and comfort Lowly during her many childbirths and stand up for Lowly when her husband makes unreasonable demands. Although they themselves have never suffered in a marriage, they understand, as Lowly's son's behavior towards them demonstrates, the oppression many women faced living in such a male-dominated society.

Another important factor in promoting homosocial relations among women was education. Cooke draws from her experiences as a female student to provide the background for her story, "Martha Wyatt's Life." Similar to "The Mormon's Wife," in that much of the story is told through letters, this sketch recounts the life of a somewhat isolated girl who writes to her only intimate friend, Emily, about the heartache of unrequited love. Strange, however, is the fact that at the time of the first letter, her friend had been dead for three years. Although the story focuses primarily on Martha's relationship with Adam Brooke, the introduction to the story and the beginning of the first letter give insight into the intense bonds often formed by women during their years of formal education. While economics often determined the length of time, most families afforded their daughters an opportunity for education, and many middle-class daughters, such as Cooke, spent a year or more at a boarding school.

The time Cooke spent at the Hartford Seminary, for instance, promoted intimate friendships in an attempt to foster religious devotion. The peer-mentor system Catherine Beecher established there encouraged women to become ministers themselves, perhaps in part the inspiration for Cooke's "woman's religion." Besides sharing their faith, these girls helped each other recover from homesickness and counseled each other about the "crises" experienced during adolescence, often caused by some young suitor. In "Martha Wyatt's Life," this is exactly what Martha conveys to Emily in her letters. Although the narrator says she met Martha at Shelton Academy, the narrator admits that Martha never formed any close connections with other students because her family did not fit in—"neither rich, poor, nor odd"—and they were of no interest to anyone—essentially nobodies (763). Martha's ostracization causes her to cling to the one close friendship she did have, even after the friend dies. At one time the friendship apparently was very

intimate, for Martha holds nothing back about her feelings concerning Adam. She begins the letter, “Dear Emily, I promised, you know, long, long since, to tell you if ever I was in love” (763). She continues throughout her letters to relate her most longing desires for Adam, as well as the anguish she feels over his seeming indifference. The freedom she feels in being able to express her emotions to Emily helps her to cope while riding such an emotional roller coaster. While it could be suggested that Martha communicates her feelings freely in the knowledge that her friend is dead, I believe Martha’s letters to Emily simply typify the openness women felt about sharing their feelings with other women. Many of the letters Smith-Rosenberg gives in her study are passionately charged, revealing many intimacies that Martha does not even come close to conveying.

While Martha’s letters depict a woman’s love for a man, Cooke’s writing also provides examples of the love between two women. The short story “My Visitation” (1858) opens with a revealing epigram from Tennyson’s poem The Princess (1847):

“Is not this she of whom,
When first she came, all flushed you said to me,
.....
Now could you share your thoughts; now should men see
Two women faster welded in one love
Than pairs of wedlock?” (6.232-33, 235-37)⁸

When these lines are read in the context of the poem, the reader discovers that someone is admonishing one woman to forgive the other woman (once an intimate friend), despite the fact they have been pitted against each other because of war. This same situation occurs in Cooke’s story, except that the estrangement the women experience comes not because of war but because of a mysterious betrayal the “anguished” narrator of the story refuses to reveal. Just like the women in Tennyson’s poem, friends of the same age, companions who “walked,” “talked,” and spent “whole nights long” together (Tennyson 6.237-8), Cooke’s women, at least from the first-

person narrator's point of view, became very intimate friends during the course of their relationship.

Ralph Poole has questioned the reliability of the narrator, citing the opening passage of the story as evidence (239):

If this story is incoherent—arranged rather for the writer's thought than for the reader's eye—it is because the brain which dictated it reeled with the sharp assaults of memory, that living anguish that abides while earth passes away into silence; and because the hand that wrote it trembled with electric thrills from a past that can not die, forever fresh in the soul it tested and tortured—powerful after the flight of years as in its first agony, to fill the dim eye with tears, and throb the languid pulses with fresh fever and passion. (Cooke, "My Visitation" 14)

This observation about the speaker's credibility should not be dismissed, but I would contend that Cooke intended this passage as proof of the intense emotions the woman feels for Eleanor rather than an indictment against the narrator. Yes, the narrator is disturbed, but the reader must question why. There would seem to be no other reason but that the two women did indeed share some type of emotionally intense bond.

Indeed, the woman who tells the story insists that her love for Eleanor Wyse was stronger than any love she could ever experience for a man: "I had but the lesser part of a heart to give any man. I loved a woman too well to love or to marry. . . . had I done so, the utter want of respect or trust I fe[lt] for him would have silenced the love forever" (22). The passionate feelings the speaker expresses about Eleanor, very similar to the ardor displayed in many collections of female correspondences, provide evidence of the intense bonds nineteenth-century women formed. Ammons suggests, however, that this story contradicts Smith-Rosenberg's conclusion that such homosocial relationships could flourish alongside heterosexual relationships.

Throughout the story, the narrator seems to convey the attitude that such longings are not socially acceptable, and she must put aside her feelings for Eleanor: "Cooke's heroine must renounce her feelings for Eleanor; she must come to see her beloved as a monster and her own

passionate love for her as deranged” (Ammons xxix). While there is no direct evidence that the relationship between the two girls is physical (homosexual), the pressure the woman feels to push aside her love for Eleanor could suggest that Cooke is implying the relationship was more than just homosocial, for while these relationships would have been acceptable, as Smith-Rosenberg suggests, lesbianism would not have been tolerated. The narrator explains that she and Eleanor, although first introduced as cousins in her home, became closer after attending boarding school together. Estelle B. Freedman explains that this type of relationship would have been suspect, as instructors, informed by physicians that masturbation by women was unacceptable, began to notice “smashing” or same-sex crushes in the schools (200). Freedman adds that evidence proves that their suspicions were correct, for a 1920 survey of over 2,200 women revealed that most women born after 1850 “reported masturbating to orgasm, while one out of five college-educated women had some lesbian experience” (200). By suggesting the relationship is more than just emotional, Cooke allows the reader to understand that the gulf between the sexes that New England’s patriarchal society facilitates causes women to turn to each other in more passionate demonstrations of affection.

Cooke also uses her poetry to express her opinion about the lack of emotional and physical attachment between the sexes. Her poem “In the Hammock” (1866) depicts a young girl swinging in a hammock, reflecting on how little pleasure she receives from any of her suitors, so little so that she might as well have been a nun:

Ay de mi! To be a nun!
Juana takes the veil to-day,
She hears mass behind a grate,
While for me ten lovers wait
At the door till mass is done.

Swing me, Tita! Seven are tall,
Two are crooked, rich, and old,

But the other—he's too small;

.....

Yes, I know my cheek is pale

And my eyes shine—I've been swinging. (11-18, 29-30)

Bennett suggests that Cooke uses hammock-swinging as a symbol for the speaker's "zest" for physical enjoyment, including masturbation ("Pomegranate-Flowers" 201). The speaker, as with many women of the time, must find an alternate route in order to feel satisfied, and many may have directed themselves toward the often repressed desire for auto- and homoeroticism. Bennett explains that "without such atavism, women were . . . sexually and imaginatively speaking, without freedom or joy. . . . sex could only be a duty to them" ("Pomegranate-Flower" 200).

While feeling "fleshly" pleasure may seem to fly in the face of the religious beliefs Cooke presents in her non-fiction—which often encourages women to be content in their role as the virtuous and passionless "angel in the house"—there are too many examples offered in Cooke's fiction of female protagonists miserable without such attention. Many women in her writing suffer at the hands of men; however, what they find at the hands of women is kindness, comfort, and pleasure. What Celia discovers, and what, unfortunately, Adelaide, Hitty, Ada, and Mrs. Flint never find, is the empowering bond of female relationships. Ideally, Cooke would have wanted all women to find contentment and happiness in marriage, but realizing this was often impossible in such a patriarchal society, Cooke uses her fiction and poetry to speak to her sister readers, suggesting that there are other ways to find fulfillment and pleasure.

In 1850, Hawthorne remarked that one of the failures of New England's female writers is that they never created a practical representative for the women's rights movement. Forty-two years later and in the same year she dies, as if the culmination of her writing career, Cooke responds to this criticism by offering Celia as a spokesperson. Celia's message—by relying on each other, such as she encourages in her old maids' Thanksgivin', women can cope with whatever situation they might find themselves in.

Notes

¹ Rose Terry did not marry Rollin Cooke until she was forty-six years old; he was sixteen years her junior. Although it was not unusual in New England for women to marry late, Rose's family disagreed with her decision to marry Rollin, considering him an unequal match for her.

² From The Discussion: or the Character, Education, Prerogatives, and Moral Influence of Woman (Boston, 1837, 90). Qtd. in Cott 164-5.

³ Examples include Louisa in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story, "A New England Nun"; Aunt Roxy and Aunt Roey in Stowe's novel, Pearl of Orr's Island; and Miss Harriet Pyne in Sarah Orne Jewett's sketch, "Martha's Lady."

⁴ See Barbara A. Johns's essay "Some Reflections on the Spinster in New England Literature" (in Regionalism and the Female Imagination, Ed. Emily Toth, 1985) for more information regarding the portrayal of old maids in American literature.

⁵ From Martineau's Society in America (New York: Saunders and Otley, 1837). Qtd. in Cott 137.

⁶ MS letter, Mary Hallock Foote to Helena, Mary Hallock Foote Papers, Manuscript Division, Stanford University. Qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg 6.

⁷ Holly lists the following as examples: Freeman's "Christmas Jenny" and "A Church Mouse," Jewett's "Aunt Cynthy Dallett" and "The Circus at Denby," Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island, and even Cooke's "Miss Bealuh's Bonnet."

⁸ Reference provided in Ammons, "Explanatory Notes," 261.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

After brushing off the dust from a poem long buried in the library stacks at Cornell University, Cheryl Walker posed an important question promoting Rose Terry Cooke and “Blue-Beard’s Closet”: “What kind of woman in Victorian America could feel free to play with the sensuality of violence” as Cooke did? (15). Like so many of her works, Cooke’s poem has been neglected by critics of nineteenth-century literature, yet it speaks volumes about the writer who composed it. While I have argued that the contradictions between Cooke’s fiction and essays suggest she was a woman shaped by her culture but troubled by its treatment of women, what I have failed to address thus far is what Walker asks us to ponder. Walker asserts that Cooke “was an intellectual . . . whose work is here and there fascinating for the dark vision it presents of women’s lives and woman’s psyche. She had a sharp eye and an indomitable will” (14); however, Cooke also stands as an example of the typical “angel in the house.” So why does this angel disguise herself as the devilish speaker of this poem? Perhaps if Edgar Allan Poe’s name appeared as the author of this poem, its audience would not be surprised, for Poe’s readers would expect such a dark, villainous voice. Cooke, though, as a female regionalist writer with a devout Christian heritage, would not seem a likely candidate to whom authorship could be plausibly assigned. Surprisingly, Cooke demonstrates the ability to delve inside the mind of a villainous oppressor of women, much like Poe himself might. “Blue-Beard’s Closet” is possibly the best example of such skill, but as Walker points out, other poems validate this opinion:

In “Blue-Beard’s Closet” the poetic voice is itself a little salacious, a little mad. And, in fact, there are other poems—weird, haunting poems where the poetic feet dance a spike-shod tarantela [sic] on the reader’s sensibility—that confirm Rose Terry Cooke’s willingness to play the villain’s role as well as the victim’s. (15)

Why such a willingness to do what other conservative female writers dared not do? Cooke was searching for answers, and, in turn, she planned to present the truth about New England

society in spite of what the revelation exposed. For as Ammons remarks, “[I]t is for her honesty . . . that Rose Terry Cooke stands out: her fierce commitment to telling the truth as she saw it” (xxxv). Unfortunately, the truth she conveys in “Blue-beard’s Closet” offers no hope for the desperate housewives who are confined by New England Bluebeards: “Flying or staying, / The chamber is there!” (55-6). It seems as if, during the moments she allows herself to become Bluebeard, Cooke questions how and why such men behave the way they do. And what she finds is disturbing, especially for the victims. To use a modern-day analogy, Cooke becomes a “criminal profiler” as she tries to uncover what motivates these Bluebeards.

Unlike many other female Christian writers of the century—Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example—Cooke shows she is capable of putting aside the strict sanctions of her religious beliefs in order to speak the truth concerning the patriarchal oppression her religion facilitated. Stowe, by all accounts, agreed with Cooke that the faith which both women espoused could be conducive to the oppressive subordination of women. Stowe, though, found it difficult to compromise her faith for the sake of her writing. As a result, she often used evasive sentimentality (for which she is so often criticized), to avoid confronting the issue. Stowe’s novel The Pearl of Orr’s Island offers an example of her failure to speak out against the oppression often suffered by women in marriage. Stowe sentences her female protagonist, Mara, to death rather than allowing her to live an independent life outside the confines of marriage, such as Celia in Cooke’s “How Celia Changed Her Mind.”

While many of Cooke’s females also escape oppressive marriages through death, Cooke does not use death as a compromise. Stowe felt that Mara’s death avoided an unhappy marriage but did not risk the criticism of presenting a woman content outside the domestic sphere. Cooke, on the other hand, used death to speak out against tyrannical marriages. To avoid the disapproval Stowe feared, Cooke cleverly uses the conservative cover of her non-fictional voice as a buffer for her uncompromising fictional truth: women have become victims in New England’s male-dominated society.

In her profiling of oppressors, we discover that Cooke's Bluebeard, like so many of the husbands she depicts in her fiction, asserts the authority he has as a husband to control his wife's actions. He admonishes her to fulfill her role as the "angel in the house"—shop, work, pray, and even take pleasure in doing so—but she should never forget that his chamber awaits:

Get thee to market,
to wedding and prayer;
Labor or revel,
The chamber is there! (5-8)

Like Deacon Flint, whose seeming "piousness" convinces his church to side against Mrs. Flint, Cooke's Bluebeard wears a facade. He tries to hide his chamber from others beneath his displays of respectability and hospitality, and if anyone becomes suspicious, he tries to distract them with something "finer":

In comes a stranger –
"Thy pictures how fine,
Titian or Guido,
Whose is the sign?"
Looks he behind them?
Ah! Have a care!
"Here is a finer."
The chamber is there! (9-16)

In Deacon Flint's case, he averts suspicion by using his knowledge of scripture as an outward display of his piety, but, as the narrator observes, "even the Devil can quote scripture to serve his turn" (104).

Even when Deacon Flint's mistreatment of Mrs. Flint is discovered, Mrs. Flint still dies. Likewise, in Cooke's poem, once this devil-in-disguise is unmasked and his chamber is revealed, there is still nothing that can be done to help the victim:

Once it was open
As shore to the sea;
White were the turrets,
Goodly to see;
.....
Now it is darkness;
The chamber is there!

Silence and horror
Brood on the walls;
Through every crevice
A little voice calls:
“Quicken, mad footsteps,
On pavement and stair;
Look not behind thee
The chamber is there!”

.....
Vain is thy wandering,
Sure thy despair,
Flying or staying,
The chamber is there!

Cooke concludes, then, that for the victim, there truly is no escape from Bluebeard’s chamber. For nineteenth-century women, whether they try to flee, as does Hitty in “The Ring Fetter,” or whether they stay to endure stoically, as does Lowly in “Freedom Wheeler,” they will always be trapped within Bluebeard’s closet. In addition, with no hope that society will condemn such treatment, Bluebeard’s victims must find ways to cope with this oppressive reality.

Cooke's desire to probe the problematic social issue of women's victimization not only produces a profile of the villain but also calls for an investigation into the life of the victim. In the poem "Captive," Cooke once again addresses the oppression of women at the hands of New England Bluebeards, but in this case, the reader hears the voice of the female rather than the oppressor. By examining the feelings of the victim, which Cooke may or may not have been herself, she provides more insight into Bluebeard as well. In this poem, the speaker states that her captor treats her as some beautiful bird caged for display: "You shut me in a gilded cage, / You deck the bars with tropic flowers" (5-6). In so doing, he has stolen her freedom, and she can no longer enjoy her life and what lies beyond the bars:

The Summer comes, the Summer dies,
Red leaves whirl idly from the tree,
But no more cleaving of the skies,
No southward sunshine waits for me! (1-4)

She continues by expressing her feeling of confinement and its maddening effect:

I beat my wings against the wire,
I pant my trammelled [sic] heart away;
The fever of one mad desire
Burns and consumes me all the day. (13-6)

While the caged bird metaphor has often been used by nineteenth-century writers, it convincingly conveys to the reader the victim's feelings of entrapment. It seems unnatural for a creature with wings to be prevented from using them, and the instinct to fly troubles her incessantly, almost to the point of insanity. In fact, as we have seen, Cooke suggests in her sketch "The West Shetucket Railroad" that many of the women found in Northeastern asylums are there as a result of their marriage.

Other lines from "Captive" offer a sarcastic indictment of the captor's motivation behind the entrapment:

What passion fierce, what service true,

Could ever such a wrong requite?
What gift, or clasp, or kiss from you
Were worth an hour of soaring flight? (9-12)

Like Perrault's Bluebeard, the speaker's captor selfishly desires to add such a beauty to his possessions. He tries to woo and then to appease her with gifts and displays of affection, but the speaker implies that nothing can ever replace her need for freedom. Although there is no direct evidence that the Bluebeard of this poem is tyrannical, such as Deacon Flint or Freedom Wheeler, he still entraps his wife and prevents her from enjoying life. Any love he may have for her does not matter as long as he is unwilling to let her "fly." Similarly, John in "The Mormon's Wife" truly loves his wife, but once he cages her in a polygamous marriage, his love for her is irrelevant. She prays to die as a way to escape her imprisonment, just as the speaker of Cooke's poem: "I die for one free flight above, / One rapture of the wilderness!" (19-20).

As we have seen in both her fiction and poetry, Cooke's victims desire to fly away, but while waiting for their escape, they must "fight the fever of one mad desire." These women fight it because, while heavenly angels might be able to fly, the "angel in the house" has had her wings clipped. These women of New England were held in bondage by abusive husbands, fathers, and deacons seemingly justified in their actions by the patriarchal tenets of Calvinism. These women often felt that such suffering was a necessary and inevitable occurrence because, as Ammons contends, all the circumstances of their lives conditioned them to believe so: "Exhausting physical labor, repeated childbearing, endless indoctrination in the superiority of male intellect and spiritual authority—[all] conspire[d] to beat them down" (xxvi). What Cooke desires to do in her fiction is set them free.

So, then, in answer to Walker's thought-provoking question about the "sensuality of violence," Cooke was a Victorian woman much different from others. She appeared content in her domestic sphere, but she was willing to take up the cause for others not as fortunate, for those she felt were victimized by the many Bluebeards of New England. Cooke may have "play[ed] with the sensuality of violence" in order to present her case, but what she produces as a result

should not be neglected. A few perceptive critics and readers have paid attention to her skill, and Donovan even groups Cooke with authors whose works she considers “masterpieces”—something she defines as possessing “a transcending appeal,” a work that “deals with issues of vital interest to all human beings” (28). Cooke’s canon does convey timeless truths, for, as a regionalist writer, she gives present-day readers a true-to-life presentation of American history not found in many textbooks. More importantly, as an artist of local-color, Cooke paints a realistic picture of the pain and suffering of many of New England’s oppressed females.

Perhaps Cooke’s contributions to American literature were more than just sentimental “scribbling” after all. As she did so many years ago, Cooke demonstrates an ability to stand alongside her contemporaries as an author of enormous skill and valuable insight. Unfortunately, she has now been pushed to the margins by others deemed more palatable and worthy. What one discovers, however, when Cooke is given a second look, is a talented writer of both poetry and fiction and a woman willing, in spite of the threat of Bluebeard’s chamber, to do whatever it takes to speak her mind.

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 Huntly”

Memberships: North American Victorian Studies Association
 South Atlantic Modern Language Association
 Modern Language Association
 Tennessee Philological Association
 Sigma Tau Delta, International English Honor Society

Honors, Activities,
Service: Judge, “Celebrating Diversity” Essay Contest, Oak Grove Elementary,
 2004
 All-American Scholar Collegiate Award Winner, 1996
 Selected for Who’s Who Among American Colleges and Universities,
 1996
 Selected for Dean’s List, 1992-1996