

2019

The New Horizons of Ideal Womanhood in Antebellum America: Christine Elliot and Linda Brent

Elizabeth (Katy) Lewis

Recommended Citation

Lewis, Elizabeth (Katy), "The New Horizons of Ideal Womanhood in Antebellum America: Christine Elliot and Linda Brent" (2019). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1355.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1355

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**THE NEW HORIZONS OF IDEAL WOMANHOOD IN
ANTEBELLUM AMERICA:
CHRISTINE ELLIOT AND LINDA BRENT**

by
ELIZABETH (KATY) LEWIS

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR THOMAS KOENIGS
PROFESSOR MARK GOLUB**

APRIL 26, 2019

Introduction.....	1
Publicity, Privacy, and Femininity.....	7
A Woman Made Anew as a Mother	28
Conclusion	44
Works Cited	46

Introduction

In antebellum America, women's roles were clearly defined: keep yourself to the domestic sphere, keep everything private, and keep yourself busy so that you are not a burden on society. Women were not expected to engage in life outside of their small perimeters of the home, or the farm. (Kelley) There was a specific binary at play: the public sphere was male, and the private sphere was female. Women were excluded from public life, as "both the public and official spheres are male; [there] contains no domestic or private woman's sphere, it having apparently been decided in advance that women play no role in public life." (Baym 6) The domestic *and* private women's spheres were thought of as wholly separate and unofficial. To exist as a good woman meant to keep to one's private, domestic sphere, and in doing so, keep a spotless public image. Due to this strict standard of decorum, as women were starting to move into the public sphere in the nineteenth century, their very femininity was being questioned. By breaking out of the private sphere and working as "educators, as writers, as editors, and as reformers," these women signaling disrespect for adjacent qualities of private femininity, like delicacy, sensitivity, and fragility; meaning that they then became un-woman. (Kelley 2) As Mary Kelley writes in *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic*, there are "risks in claiming that mantle" of "becoming a learned woman" in "post-Revolutionary and antebellum America. (Kelley 1) Becoming a "learned woman" who does not confine herself rigidly to the private, domestic sphere, means becoming one of "both the feminine and neuter gender." (Kelley 1) This is partly because educating oneself means that these women are engaging in understanding ways to live in the world, outside of the home, and able to think for themselves without relying

on a father, brother, or husband to explain and advocate for them. Kelley demonstrates that education is the first step in learning how to advocate for oneself, and she writes *Learning to Stand and Speak* to explore how the rise of women's education was intertwined with "the movement of women into public life" and its consequential shift in gender relations in antebellum America. (Kelley 1)

At this cultural moment in which gender roles are being reimagined, Laura Curtis Bullard writes *Christine: Or Woman's Trials and Triumphs*. Published in 1856, this revolutionary novel is a further push into what Kelley's pipeline of education to social reform describes: one woman defies the established script of her gender and pushes herself successfully out of the private, domestic sphere by lecturing publicly on women's rights. Curtis Bullard takes further steps into the ideas about education and gender relations, piercing the question of: can a woman still be considered within the realm of proper femininity if she has such a public persona? Christine, the titular character of *Christine*, is boosted up through a finishing school that her aunt founded, but she doesn't just stop at becoming an educator, writer, editor, or a reformer, as Kelley would say. (Kelley 2) She reaches a newly revolutionary position entirely: she becomes a *public lecturer* on women's rights. This fact of the publicity of the job is what is so shocking about it, and what makes *Christine* such a revolutionary novel. She rejects the idea that the private is the feminine, as well as the only way that women have been allowed to be feminine: writing about domesticity. As Mary Kelley writes in *Private Woman, Public Stage* about the literary domestic, or, women who write domestic fiction, "No special talent is claimed. The woman cannot be a creator of culture because she has no choice of being; her destiny is not hers to shape or control...her mind is made over by a life of

domesticity....the domestic absorbed the literary and private woman of the home intruded upon the pages of a public literature.” (Kelley 221) As Kelley demonstrates, women were only really accepted in the publishing when they were writing on public lives.

Furthermore, they couldn't purely pursue writing or lecturing as a vocation, because that would mean not running the home and taking care of the children. So, they did what they could: they fused the two together. *Christine* is so subversive because its heroine completely rejects this middle ground; it isn't a story about a woman who lectures about how virtuous it is that women stay home and keep their families alive, but rather, one about a revolutionary who lectures on all the other aspects of being a woman and being recognized *publicly* in society as contributing citizens. She does this by asking for representation under taxation, voting rights, and equal pay – all demands that engage in the public sphere, not just the matters of the domestic space. (Curtis Bullard 173-174)

If it's such a revolutionary novel, then why don't we hear much about it anymore? Laura Curtis Bullard does not show up as an important antebellum woman writer in any anthologies. As Noelle Baker writes, Curtis Bullard's "recent recovery from near extinction evidences the ways in which scandals and political crises can also produce literary and historical oblivion." (Baker 192) Curtis Bullard was involved in a scandal and was accused of participating in an affair. After this alleged affair, her reputation as "in shambles" Baker 192) As a public woman herself, "a successful novelist, journalist, editor, and woman's suffrage worker after the Civil War," Curtis Bullard is subject to harsh criticism in the public eye – to a degree that it even affects whether or not her novels are read. We can see how strict standards for women that she writes about in *Christine* applied to her real life as well; she knew all about the difficulties of being a

woman who has a very public image, one that is more connected to the work she produces than a man's might be. Once her public image was disgraced, it affected all areas of her life, and anything that she had produced was distrusted.

Christine and Curtis Bullard have only recently reappeared in the literary landscape as a useful text to study the finer points gender relations and the woman's sphere in antebellum America. As Denise M. Kohn, the current leading scholar on Laura Curtis Bullard, writes, "The story, or what has been the lack of story, of Curtis Bullard exemplifies the way in which American women writers have been lost and marginalized." (Kohn 79) Curtis Bullard was certainly lost along the way due to her ruined reputation, something that she had little control over, and it's an affront that we aren't studying more of her work today. With *Christine*, she presents such an effective, pathbreaking main character who manages to also stay within the realms of devout Christianity and therefore commendable morals. This thesis hopes to rectify the undeserving gap in scholarship on *Christine*. The novel is unique in the sense that it directly answers the questions of the moment that Kelley identifies about women's ungendering in publicity and is well worth examining in the context of how it pushed women's rights into the national consciousness.

This analysis of *Christine's* heroine will also lend a new and innovative lens onto a much more widely discussed woman-authored narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs. This text follows a young, black, enslaved girl by the name of Linda Brent, who, in order to protect herself from a leering master, must seek defense in the form of bonding herself with another white man romantically. Although this breaks codes of chastity and virginity as the benchmarks of virtuous femininity, Linda argues

that she can reject those standards and still consider herself a virtuous woman by becoming a loyal mother. Furthermore, her femininity was only being held stable by the capacity of sexual abuse against her; she takes back her femininity by deciding who can know her intimately. Her gender was otherwise unsettled by the types of labor that she was forced to do. While white women were being “ungendered” for showing themselves in the public sphere, black women were being ungendered by their forced labor. The standards of domesticity, purity and obedience, were the ones for white women; while black (and often enslaved) women, who were held to the same standards, spent most of their energy keeping themselves alive. As Hortense J. Spillers asserts in “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” black women were also ungendered by the types of work that they were conscripted to do, such as working in the field. They were differentiated from white women in that way and made the same as their male counterparts. Slaveowners achieved this gender blurring by forcing black women to do the same work as black men, mostly in field labor. The black enslaved woman, unlike the white women, didn't have a domestic space to move *from*; she was denied this private sphere under the bondage of slavery. The only marker that differentiated black women from black men was sexual violence – slaveowners would rape the enslaved black women on their plantation in order to produce more slaves. (Spillers) Black women, only marked as women by the constant possibility of sexual violence against them, are “not only the target of rape -- in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind -- but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males.” (Spillers 68) Spillers demonstrates how enslaved women were also ungendered through the other

types of violence that were inflicted upon them: they were dominated in specifically male ways – like Spillers’ example, whipping. The violence that the overseers inflicted on both men and women in the field ungended the women.

With Christine and Linda, we have two types of the supposed ungending of women: in *Christine*, public lecturing and the self-propulsion of one young woman into the public, male sphere, and the ungending through objectification and dehumanization of Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861. We’ll see both young women reject the accusations that they are being de-feminized by engaging in the work or survival modes that they are utilizing. We’ll see both characters assert that femininity can encompass their transgressions, that femininity is more resilient, and that women’s rightful place is in reality, in both spheres of the public *and* the private, both the virgin *and* the mother. In pairing two different narratives that revolutionize different aspects of femininity, in a way they never have before, we can see common threads of sisterhood and emphasis on the bonds between women. While Christine deals with the social and ethical difficulties that are placed upon her for moving between the public and private sphere in an urban and rural setting, Linda deals more with internalized anguish based on the notions of purity as virginity that have been instilled in her. This is a place of divergence for the two texts –enslavement, othering, virginity, and motherhood are at the center of Jacobs’ text, whereas Christine uses virginity as a legitimizing authority for its protagonist and focuses more on how publicity is thought to threaten ideal femininity. Christine, by succeeding as a women’s rights lecturer and actually ending up in a heavenly marriage after years of strife, proves that a woman can enter the public sphere and affect the lives of her fellow citizen, while maintain a sense of virtue, even outside

the public sphere. Linda, by choosing the loss of her virginity as a safeguard against her licentious master, shows women that one can find virtue and essential goodness in being a mother, and that the valorization as virginity as the highest standard for femininity is not sustainable, and therefore should be replaced with a respect for mothers. Both of these inversions of the previous feminine ideal rework the entire realm of possibility for women's potential by reimagining who fits under the title *good woman*.

Publicity, Privacy, and Femininity

Christine: or Woman's Trials and Triumphs starts with an introduction to our heroine, a young girl in the country, Christine Elliot. She is constantly compared to her more beautiful, graceful, and cheerful older sister, Bessie. Christine herself is very much thought of as the black sheep of the family, as she isn't as physically industrious as the rest of them: her father, Farmer Elliot, her clean-a-holic mother, and her perfect butter churner of a sister. *Christine* starts in a notably domestic space, with her mother taking charge of all the cleaning and cooking, staying fearfully obedient of her husband, and raising Bessie and Christine to do the same. Curtis Bullard starts the reader off in this space in order to refute it as the ideal space that a woman should strive to have. She needs to start with the domestic sphere in order to show how Christine, who represents so many women, feels uncomfortable in it, but where she is forced to stay until she creates an alternative. The Elliot home is representative one that might feature in a tale by a literary domestic, a tale of "secret writers and secret histories of the heart," which "inevitably reveal the secret tale of the denial and control of the heart, of the fundamental denial and control of woman's being." (Kelley 222) Kelley describes the typical women's fiction of the time, which was characterized by the valorization of the women as a divine goddess

of the domestic space. She writes that the “literary domestic” came to life because women didn’t have the time to separate their writing and their homemaking, so they often had to do the two together, and generally wrote about their homemaking and child-nurturing, as that was what was seen as virtuous activity for the woman. *Christine* breaks this mold – the narrative starts in the domestic space, but quickly moves out into other feminine spaces, and finally pushes Christine into fight for women’s rights in the public sphere.

At home, to escape these domestic chores, Christine prefers to lose herself in books, to dream of far-off places where she might go one day and be *understood*, which is what her heart yearns for most. Bessie is her closest confidant, and even she does not understand Christine’s inner turmoil and anguish at feeling singled out by the almighty creator himself. During one of her sad moments, Christine exclaims, “I know it’s wicked, but oh, Bessie! I do have such thoughts. I ask myself what I am here for, where I do no good, and only grow bad; and I ask if it was a good God who placed me here.” (Curtis Bullard 5) Christine feels that she doesn’t have a rightful place in her family, on the farm, or really, on Earth as it is. This is why she spends so much time with her head buried in books, and not in doing housework as her mother wishes: she is missing that core of self that tells you why you’re here, what you’re meant to do in life, and, especially importantly for Christine, whether your connection to God is valid or not.

Enter her aunt, the fashionable but stern Mrs. Julia Frothingham, recently widowed and the founder of a finishing school that’s lauded for the polished young women that it churns out. One thing leads to another, and Mrs. Frothingham reluctantly agrees to take Christine on as a pity project of sorts, a challenge of her own ability to

transform a clueless, graceless country bumpkin into a worthy Frothingham graduate. Christine is enthusiastic about the move, but not wholly for the reasons that Mrs. Frothingham might imagine. Christine is looking for something deeper than dancing and sewing lessons or tutorials in etiquette. She hopes that the combination of a new, fresh urban setting and a school full of girls who love reading as much as she does (she assumes) will allow her to finally reveal her inner truths and anguishes about life, without being scorned for *feeling too much*, as her nuclear family often laments. Moving with Mrs. Frothingham to the city makes Christine feel that she has “a new consciousness of her own powers, an assurance of her own strength, which banished, for a time at least, the painful doubts that she had felt of her ability to make known to others the thoughts that struggled for utterance. *‘I am understood at last!’* was her inward cry; ‘thank God for that.’” (Curtis Bullard 96, emphasis mine) Christine is so very concerned with being validated, with being “understood at last,” and she transfers these expectations onto the girls that she’ll meet at Mrs. Frothingham’s school. Christine, in the farmhouse, never felt that she could speak out without being mocked by her family; but now, in the city, she has the “ability to make known to others the thoughts that struggled for utterance” her whole life.

This is the beginning of Christine’s self-assurance, which will give her the confidence to go out and do such an intimidating job, one that launches her into the public sphere, in a way that makes the gender police in her life – her aunt and her father – incredibly, dangerously uncomfortable. This also shows the power of “utterance”: to speak is to be heard, and to be heard is to be understood. Christine specifically turns to the power of speech to be understood, instead of, for example, the written word.

Although, growing up on the Elliot farm, she read books to escape the menial domestic life, she wasn't connecting with other human beings in real time, which is, for her, an integral component of understanding. To launch oneself into a degree of publicity, to speak to an audience, of even just one person, provides an irreplaceable avenue for intimacy and response that cannot be achieved through writing down one's inner feelings and posting them or sending them. Curtis Bullard, through Christine, reveals an interesting inversion: the public act of speech can actually be intimate. Intimacy doesn't have to be confined to the private sphere, but rather, a woman can be intimate while speaking out publicly.

Christine is wooed into women's rights by Mrs. Warner, a smart, beautiful woman who would lecture on women's rights herself, if it weren't for her household full of kids, and the domestic duties that such a position entail. Christine, during this time, meets and falls in love with the town heartthrob, Philip Armstrong, and they become engaged to be married. Christine has everything that a proper woman, one who's graduated from Mrs. Frothingham's finishing school, would want: a handsome, rich fiancé, knowledge of how to dance and sew, and new friends to boot. It's exactly at this peak of promised happiness that Curtis Bullard tears it all down for her. Christine witnesses the demise of a classmate of hers that Philip has seduced – and driven to suicide by abandoning her. After hearing from Philip that he's going to marry Christine, after his promise to Grace that he loved *her*, she does what any disgraced woman with a desire for dignity would do: she drowns herself in the nearest pond. When Christine hears of this, her very Christian, purist ideals can't allow it. Grace's death is a huge strike against Philip; Christine tells him, "Every step to [our] altar would be through her

blood!” (Curtis Bullard 151) Christine becomes nearly fatally ill, and pushes the remorseful Philip away again and again, until he finally moves to Europe. She is “sacrificing [Philip] to a morbid scruple” as Philip himself screams, at their parting. (151) This is a major turning point for Christine and *Christine*, as it is the first time of several that we see her pushing away the comforts of the traditional female script in order to pursue her now-sacred duty: lecturing on women’s rights so that women may have more rights under the law. It’s important that Grace, who is an epitome of the stiffly traditional figure of virtuous femininity, is the catalyst for Christine’s turn away from the more-traveled path into the new, dangerous one of pursuing women’s rights. Grace, by committing suicide and effectively punishing herself for sullyng her virginal purity with Philip, is still a figure whom Christine holds as a role model. Christine doesn’t want to do away with the idea that virginity and commitment to purity are the paragons of femininity, she wants to *expand* that category of respectable femininity to *include* rights to publicity and complete, participatory citizenship. Christine, obviously, is a feminist: her commitment is first and foremost to the sisterhood, and this important moment embodies that.

Christine sets out, first lecturing in her town, to much praise from her audience and much embarrassment from her aunt, who has not been reformed or inspired by Christine’s new mission in the least. She is quite successful and is the talk of the town. She even defends her position against the respected religious man of her hometown, Elder Wiggins, a farmer-minister. He’s appalled, and Mrs. Frothingham and Farmer Elliot can barely handle it; they think that she’s gone mad, and worse, that she’s embarrassing the family name. So, naturally, they conspire to do what needs to be done:

they trick her into entering an insane asylum, where she believes her father is being held sick, and lock her in, under the name of Miss Caroline Frothingham – in the doctor’s eyes, she’s still Mrs. Frothingham’s niece, but *not* the now-famous Christine Elliot, another niece from somewhere else. She is confined for over a year, called crazy and delusional for insisting that she *is* Christine Elliot. Mrs. Frothingham only offers to take her out under one condition: that she stop her public lecturing. Christine, valiantly, refuses this proposal, saying that she’ll never give it up. She endures her time in the asylum, eventually becoming emaciated and depressed (although Curtis Bullard, prudently, doesn’t use that exact word) and starting to feel okay with just withering away there until she ceases to exist.

Enter the rugged, well-meaning Elder Wiggins. None of Christine’s friends have responded to her frantic letters, because the asylum staff haven’t actually sent any of them, and the only contact that Christine has had thus far with the outside world has been through her aunt. Her sister and friends have no idea where she is, and her mother knows, but is too terrified of her father to do anything. This is where Elder Wiggins’ role becomes essential; he listens to her ludicrous story, and, thankfully, believes her. He hatches a plot, involving her friends Helen and Mrs. Warner, to get Mrs. Frothingham to admit that she deceived Christine into stepping into the asylum in order to catch her there, while her doctor hides behind a curtain, so that he hears it all and finally believes Christine’s “wild” story.

After Christine gets out, she goes back to lecturing. She actually starts a Women’s Rights Convention, at which she is much admired. She marries Philip, after he comes back to America, staying faithful to her. He calls her to his literal deathbed, with a dying

wish that she marry him. She agrees, nursing him, miraculously, back to health. After he's well, they re-pledge their love for each other and the book ends with a loving scene of them side-by-side, while Christine tears up at her nearly unfathomable happiness with Philip. As Denise M. Kohn says, "the marriage at the end...is important because it suggests that marriage and Christine's advocacy for woman's rights are not incompatible, as was the general belief of the period." (Kohn 75)

Christine herself invites success by conforming to certain conventions of virtuous womanhood, including devout Christianity, virginity, and sincerity. This sincerity is part of what entralls her audience: they feel as if she is speaking directly from the heart. It is precisely these standards of being a "good" woman that set her on the path to becoming a rebellious one: her purity goads her into pushing away a handsome, rich lover who committed an error, her devout Christianity allows her to argue with ministers, and her sincerity is the catalyst for seeing the world as an ideal – meaning that there is work to do, no matter who turns her out. Even when she is thrown in an insane asylum, because it is "insane" to ask for rights, she sticks by her doctrine. She replaces the cult of womanhood with a new religion, which is women's rights and the ability for women to operate publicly. She remains a virgin throughout the entire book and holds her commitment to women's rights even above the only person she's ever been in love with. In this way, she upholds virginity (and therefore bodily and religious purity) over love. She is punished for her commitment to her scruple, forced into an insane asylum by her own aunt, under the name of Miss Caroline Frothingham, and doesn't break even then. When Christine asks her aunt if she's prepared to keep her there indefinitely, Mrs. Frothingham replies, "of course we [are], my dear Christine...as to having a Woman's

Rights lecturer in our family, that your father and I decided we would not submit to, and until you promised to give it up, we had no alternative but to keep you here or in some similar place.” (Curtis Bullard 251) By forcing Christine into the asylum, Mrs. Frothingham signals to the reader that fighting for women’s rights is insane. She characterizes Christine’s status as a women’s rights lecturer as a harmful condition for the family that Mrs. Frothingham is doing everyone a service by stopping. This is because Mrs. Frothingham views Christine’s unabashed launch into the public eye as a violation of the feminine contract to stay in the domestic sphere and leave the lecturing and public decision-making to their male counterparts. Mrs. Frothingham frames her imprisonment of Christine in the asylum as a *must* – that there was “no alternative” and that the most important aspects are of imprisonment and punishment, because even “some similar place” would do. To Mrs. Frothingham, what matters most is keeping the “deranged” member of the family out of the public eye, the one who will not submit to her elders’ wills and conventions of femininity as held by these elders.

She never agrees to her aunt’s condition that she will only get Christine out if she agrees never to speak on woman’s rights ever again; she shows her commitment through adversity anguish, and pain, which is something that is commonly asked of religious heroes. In the asylum, she also undergoes a rebirth of sorts: while she is in there, Christine Elliot, as we know her, doesn’t exist. She’s dead to the world and to her family and closest friends, and she even starts to let “Miss Caroline Frothingham” take over for a little bit, after being in there for a year. She comes back as a new Christine, with a renewed commitment to women’s rights; it’s no wonder her name has the word *Christ* in it.

The influences on Christine during her journey out of countryside simplicity, into urban sophistication, and then onto revolutionary women's rights leadership are telling about the conditions of womanhood that Christine grapples with. Mrs. Frothingham and Mrs. Warner each represent different sides of womanhood – Mrs. Frothingham is concerned with public image and keeping the status quo, while Mrs. Warner has revolutionary ideas about women's rights, but is tied down by mothering her children and taking care of her home. Christine is described as a blank slate, impressionable and eager, when she moves to the city, and both Mrs. Frothingham and Mrs. Warner see her a chance to project and further their *own* desires and aims. Mrs. Warner can be held especially accountable for this, as she seems to suggest throughout the novel that she would have become the women's rights lecturer if she hadn't had children, and that Christine must carry on the mission for her. Mrs. Frothingham, albeit reluctantly, introduces Christine to Mrs. Warner at her first dance. She's obviously a smart woman, and instantly engages Christine in conversation, beguiling her and promising a further friendship. But Mrs. Frothingham, ever the policewoman, warns Christine, that despite Mrs. Warner's beauty and committed motherhood, "she is a perfect enthusiast, a dreamer — always engaged in some foolish scheme or other, to bring about some fancied blessing to the world." (Curtis Bullard 106-107) Mrs. Warner's ideas of women's rights are perfectly appalling to someone like Mrs. Frothingham, who literally has a *school* to teach young women how to be good women, a fashionable and exclusive finishing school, at that. Mrs. Frothingham is committed to upholding conventional ideas of virtuous womanhood and setting the yearly trends for doing so. She sees Mrs. Warner's dreams as hindrances to her quotidian, but virtuous duties: caring for her children, obeying her

husband, and generally keeping herself out of everyone's way. Mrs. Warner's crime is that she's "always riding some hobby to the disgust of her own family, and making herself a laughing-stock for all the town. She has some talent, but no common sense; there is nothing practical about her..." (Curtis Bullard 107) Mrs. Frothingham, in her critique of Mrs. Warner, gives us another characteristic of virtuous womanhood here: practicality. Anything that takes away from being a practical woman, and sensible woman, a sane woman, is not virtuous and therefore should be scorned. The "hobby" that Mrs. Frothingham laments is pursuing women's rights, something that women would pursue for *themselves* and not for the benefit of their children or husband. Moreover, Mrs. Warner ignores how her family must be embarrassed by her so-called position of "laughing-stock for all the town." What Mrs. Frothingham is identifying here is that a good woman must always be away of what respected society thinks of her – and conform to those standards. Mrs. Warner embarrasses herself precisely by not caring about her public image, which is something that, as a woman, she must craft very delicately. Because women, in the traditional view, are only supposed to inhabit the private sphere, their public images matter all the more – Mrs. Warner's ignorance of her position as "laughing-stock," supposedly, is a strike against her sensibilities as a proper woman.

While Mrs. Frothingham disdains Mrs. Warner's unawareness of her supposed status of town joke, Christine could not be more thrilled by the older woman and her wit. Mrs. Warner sees in Christine everything she could want from a daughter that she doesn't have. She sees Christine as herself, younger, and not bogged down by kids and a husband. Christine's youth, virginity, lack of intentions to "marry up," sincerity, and

unadulterated willingness to learn make her the perfect young woman in Mrs. Warner's eyes. Christine, on the other hand, idolizes Mrs. Warner;

“Whether it was cutting and making coats and pantaloons for her boys, shirts and vests for her husband, preparing food for the family, dainties for the sick, or writing an article on her one grand subject for the press, she was equally at home and equally successful. Besides all this she was a frequent and welcome guest in the dwellings of the poor, assisting them when in distress, using all her influence to get work for them, and lending a sympathizing ear to their troubles. (Curtis Bullard 122)

Contrary to what Mrs. Frothingham might say, Mrs. Warner could not be more perfect of a woman. She demonstrates all that is needed to achieve the status of the Virgin Mary herself, minus only one thing, the literal virginity. She's “equally at home and equally successful” and truly charitable. She's a domestic goddess, but also a modern woman who can write well, an industrious woman who makes her young boys' clothes; she must be the most *practical* woman in the book, to be able to juggle it all. The only flaw that Mrs. Frothingham finds in her, which is her dreaminess, her “one grand subject” – women's rights – is the cherry on top of the cake for Christine. “How false are the charges...that her enemies bring against this noble woman, that she neglects her family duties for her hobby, woman's rights.” (Curtis Bullard 121-122) Mrs. Frothingham, and the rest of the women in the town, assume that Mrs. Warner's “hobby” of advocating for equality for woman must detract from her long list of duties, which makes her a neglectful mother. Being a neglectful mother makes her a bad woman because it means that she is ignoring her true purpose, to give all of herself to her children and absent husband, not to other grown women. Her “hobby” of women's rights, by virtue being *women's rights*, means that it does not serve anyone but herself and other women – that kind of thinking is off-limits for a good woman. She's not allowed to expend energy that

could be devoted to her children or otherwise perfecting her domestic space on improving her *own* condition. Curtis Bullard shows the reader here why Christine was labeled as dangerous and crazy when she began lecturing; it was dangerous for her to take her power and use it for herself, instead of in service to others, like children, the poor, her father, like she *should* be.

In contrast to Mrs. Warner, Mrs. Frothingham presents herself as the picture of womanly control – she’s an ideal success story of sorts; an ideal widow, and also Christine’s first symbol of feminine capacity for upward class mobility. She’s described as chillingly beautiful, with all the ingredients that one would need to create an elegant and respectable woman, whose “beauty, which was undeniable,” is a mask for a lack of some essential spark of personality: “yet Christine saw, at once, that hers was the beauty of the outward alone, that soul was wanting there.” (Curtis Bullard 26-27) Mrs. Frothingham structures what it means to be a woman who has jumped class lines – in a way that only a woman can. Christine’s first opinion of Mrs. Frothingham says just as much about Christine as it does about how her aunt carefully crafts her appearance and outward nature. It only makes sense that she would – it’s what got her to the top of her social ladder. She made the jump from “a young and artless country girl” to Mrs. Frothingham by “[captivating] the heart of the dashing man of the world, who had withstood the charms and graces of myriad belles.” (Curtis Bullard 27) Mrs. Frothingham is set apart from the other “myriad belles,” by way of the honest beauty she must have had as a young country girl. She might even have been elevated above the other belles, in the eyes of Mr. Frothingham, by the quality of her artlessness. As we’ll see later, with Philip Armstrong, men are oh-so-wearied by all the women who are too obvious about

their intentions to marry well. In her youth is when Mrs. Frothingham realizes that her beauty can become a tool for her, an instrument to utilize in elbowing her way to respect and prominence. After her husband tragically passes away, she is left to fend for herself in a den of lionesses who are happy to see her without protection, but she knows just what to fall back on: her lauded beauty. “She knew that she was beautiful, and saw, also, that beauty was power; and, ere long, with well-disguised delight, as a leader of fashion, she saw her mother-in-law and sisters following, where she led the way. She was triumphant; what did she care that they hated her in their hearts?” (Curtis Bullard 28)

This telling of Mrs. Frothingham’s backstory accomplishes multiple things for Bullard: firstly, it sets up the idea that other, lesser women will always be jealous of a beautiful woman, and this incites perpetual competition between the members of this sex. It also establishes that a respectable woman is always protected by a man somehow – even though Mrs. Frothingham is now widowed, there was *once* a man who was committed to her, and this is enough. She still carries his family name, and she is still daughter-in-law to his father. The last is that it establishes a duplicity in women: firstly, Mrs. Frothingham exults in “well-disguised delight,” and secondly, doesn’t care that her female relatives “hate her in their hearts.” Even within a family, there is an acute sense of competition between women. There is also a constant deceit, as the women never reveal to each other how they truly feel. This duplicity and meanness are even more distasteful when they are put in contrast with Christine’s pure, clear character. Christine’s deepest desire it to be understood, clearly and truly, which means trying to present a less filtered and curated public self than Mrs. Frothingham does. Curtis Bullard shows through Mrs. Frothingham, who is definitely an outwardly proper model of womanhood, that maybe this picture of

perfect femininity does not reflect loving, sisterly bonds, but rather, sinister competition between women.

Mrs. Frothingham believes very strictly in the idea that women should remain in their proper place in the private sphere – her life’s work as the headmistress of a traditional yet fashionable finishing school and her nimble manipulation of the social ladder say as much. There’s an irony that Curtis Bullard is putting forth here, through Mrs. Frothingham: the traditional pressure on women is to always keep to their private, domestic spheres, where they belong, but what a woman does in her private sphere always has an effect on how she is perceived publicly. The irony here is that Mrs. Frothingham is *supposed* to care most about how she conducts herself privately, but rather, she only really cares about what her public image is. Any member of her family and their reputation has the power to destroy her own reputation, so she *must* police and discipline Christine before she does anything too damaging, like give a public lecture. Mrs. Frothingham is the policewoman of gender norms in Christine’s story, and the imposition of her rules on Christine is even more destructive than that of Farmer Elliot’s, because, as readers, we might expect an older woman to be more sympathetic to Christine’s aspirations towards women’s rights. Curtis Bullard, by sending Christine to Mrs. Frothingham’s school, does agree with Mary Kelley in the sense that education is the platform for women to step into the public sphere, but Curtis Bullard demonstrates that it’s just the *first* stepping stone. Christine comes into her own at the finishing school, but it’s necessary for her to reject its curriculum of strict purity and obedience, as well as its matron, who represents duplicity, calculated coldness, and a lack of real individual character, in order for her to push off into her mission for women’s rights.

The last influence that Christine has on her orientation from country girl to urban expert is the group of other female students at Mrs. Frothingham's. Christine also gets her education with the younger girls when she gets there. The other girls serve as models for Christine, telling her what she's *supposed* to hope for how she's supposed to act. This is a revelation for Christine, because most of what she's known about other young women has been through the books that she reads at home. This is her real-life indoctrination into the cult of young womanhood: she learns what rules of Mrs. Frothingham's she can and can't break, how to flirt with boys, and most importantly, what she's meant to ask for in life. This isn't as fruitful for Christine's yearning to be *understood*, because these girls aren't so interested in understanding *her*, the slightly strange girl from the country. She's very quickly schooled on what it is girls at an upper-class finishing school should *really* want by her one close friend, Annie:

“Ah, my dear, how old-fashioned you are! You haven't an idea of what a marriage is now, or of what the ambition of these girls is. It isn't to cultivate their minds or hearts; it isn't to make whole-souled, true women of themselves; it is their end and aim to marry well, that is, rich — to be Mrs. somebody; and, then the one object is to have the finest house, the finest carriage, the most servants, richest dress — in short, to be the most fashionable, a leader of the ton. Isn't that a high destiny for a being with a soul?” (Curtis Bullard 91)

Annie, Christine's first real friend at the finishing school, is shocked to hear about what Christine's so troubled about. Annie gives her own account of what it is these girls are supposed to be learning at Mrs. Frothingham's finishing school: to refine oneself into a doll intriguing yet agreeable enough to become “Mrs. Somebody.” Annie even says that it's not a girl's aim to become a “true woman,” that rather, it is to attain the *man* of her dreams. In this way, success as a woman is displaced onto a man, and the status of the man that a woman can attain; a young woman must aim for a suitor with the “finest

house, the finest carriage, the most servants, the richest dress.” These are all tangible, materialistic endeavors, ones that could not be farther from Christine’s deepest yearning to have someone else validate her innermost feelings. In Annie’s account, a woman’s inner thoughts and inner truth don’t matter, only her external status, to become the “most fashionable, a leader of the ton.” Christine’s fears about losing her sincerity, her virginity, what she views as her true womanhood, to a man are supposed to be assuaged by Annie’s outburst, but instead, they just stoke her doubtfulness. How could Christine ever be understood and loved if this is what women have to strive for? We can see how Christine’s disappointment in her hope that the girls at the finishing school might finally understand her leaves her feeling empty. This emptiness and disconnectedness set Christine up to be the woman who will become a women’s rights lecturer. In lecturing, Christine’s articulation of how she thinks the world should value women isn’t stifled by these superficial expectations, but rather, pushes women forth as thinking, self-sufficient creatures who can hold their own, and who don’t have to find attachment to their success in life to finding the richest suitor.

After a year at the finishing school, Christine meets the most sought-after bachelor of the town, Philip Armstrong. He’s the first one to show her the power that she can have over other people. Philip indicates to the audience how we should imagine meeting Christine at a party or dance. “She was so different from any woman he had ever met, so frank, and free from coquetry, so earnest to know and do the right, so free from any of the petty aims of her sex, that he wondered how he had ever gained her heart.” (Curtis Bullard 131) Bullard, through Philip, elevates Christine here to a special, intellectual pedestal. While Jacobs argues for a certain sense of a universal basis for

virtuous womanhood, taking into account the circumstances, Bullard is showing that a woman needs to be free from the “normal” ideas of a woman’s goals. Christine is unworried about marriage and validation from her male counterparts, which is one of the “petty aims” that Philip laments in all the other women that he’s wooed. This is why her sense of being a country bumpkin is necessary for Bullard: it’s important that she isn’t a woman who’s had all the intellectual resources available to her, but rather, that this sense of purpose comes from an innate desire to be understood, and not to be *made* equal men, but to have women be *seen* as equal to men in ability. Christine would argue that women are already equal to men, but society has not quite caught up yet. Philip is instrumental in Christine’s character development, not because it shows her that she can love or be understood by another singular person, but rather, that she can be cherished.

Philip is also instrumental because he shows the reader that Christine, while pursuing women’s rights, is still someone who engage in all the things that “normal” women do. Philip goes on and on about Christine’s intellect, which is more attractive to him than the beauty of the other girls that he’s wooed. Her intelligence makes her all the more attractive, in a way that Philip feels that he’s never encountered before, and he’s enthralled by it.

“She was not beautiful, she never could be, except to loving hearts, who could read the beauty of her soul in her deep eye and in her changing countenance; but there was a charm about her...which insensibly attracted all who came within the sphere of her influence; a charm which was all the more powerful that she herself was quite unconscious of possessing it.” (Curtis Bullard 135)

It's important that she’s not a beautiful girl – that her beauty doesn’t cloud others’ judgment of her. There is a sense in *Christine* that being a beautiful girl leads one to not need to develop cunning quite as quickly. Mrs. Frothingham is an example: she has

an undeniable beauty, which helps her get her husband and therefore a higher station in society, but the point at which he dies, and she must support herself financially, is the point at which she starts the finishing school. Once her beauty will not serve her, she must do something for herself. Bessie, Christine's older sister, is yet another example. She's very accepted in her farm town, for being so graceful, beautiful, and due to these characteristics, so pleasing to keep in one's company. Christine is bumbling, awkward, and terrible at making small talk. Bessie's natural beauty, and clear healthy complexion give her a confidence that she's had since she was a child. Furthermore, James Cameron, who seems like the local heartthrob, is smitten with her. This gives Bessie an unshakable confidence, which means that she doesn't need to change her environment in order to feel fulfilled or *understood*, as Christine yearns to be. Moreover, the idea that Christine is totally unaware of her beauty makes her all the more virtuous and attractive. She is not a vain, vapid woman, which leaves more room for her intellect, and more importantly, her purity and sincerity, which make her a good Christian woman and also an appealing lecturer. This simple purity and refusal of vanity give Christine an authority here that outward beauty might not be able to.

Although very much influenced by Mrs. Warner, the pivotal moment for Christine's decision to become a lecturer is when she goes home to face her family. Even the moment when Mrs. Frothingham reprimands her thoroughly and throws her out of the school is not the transformational moment for Christine. It's when she has to face the people who are dearest to her, after the disaster with Philip's sin, that broke up their perfect union. There's another important note here: because Christine breaks off the engagement, and she lives by the codes of conventional womanhood, she remains a

virgin. This suggests an even higher authority for her, a moral and religious authority. She is above Grace, the poor girl that Philip seduces and abandons, which drives her to suicide by drowning – yet another conventional way for a wronged woman to die. Christine’s virginity as she embarks on this heroic journey of lecturing proves her even more as the rightful champion of women.

“Whatever a woman can do, and do well, we say let public opinion open the door for her to do, and let her be paid for her labor as much as a man would be, for the same amount. Let her try to do whatever she thinks she can do — if she fails, it will be no more than hundreds of men have done before her. And let her vote. She is under laws — let her have a voice in saying what they shall be. She is taxed — let her have the benefit of the principle which our fathers fought and bled to establish, no taxation without representation.” (Curtis Bullard 173-174)

Christine’s logic is laid out beautifully here. It’s important to note that she is saying this to Elder Wiggins, the farmer-minister. Elder Wiggins is respected and welcomed by everyone in the town, so he is naturally one that Christine’s parents turn to snap her out of her reverie. This makes it all the more important that he is the one to save her from the insane asylum. What’s so compelling about Christine’s argument is that she empathizes not what women *can* do, because she knows that their capacity equals that of a man’s, but rather, what she has been allowed to do by society. She also reminds Elder Wiggins that women are affected by the laws that the men make. Christine emphasizes that women are within the realm of reality, not just confined to their domestic space.

Now, to the speeches themselves, during which “all were carried out of themselves, and forgot their prejudices — all save the thrilling words of the speaker; but when she ceased to speak...the spell was broken, and each returning to consciousness again, wondered that he had been so carried away.” (Curtis Bullard 166-167) Christine’s speeches are likened to magic, whose spell her audience is under, which is only broken

when “her voice no longer fell on the ear” of the beguiled listener. This adds to the idea that Christine isn’t an everywoman, she’s a siren whose song of women’s rights entrances her audience for the duration of her singing. One important thing to note is this: we never really get the meat of Christine’s lectures, but rather, how the audience is enthralled by them. At first blush, it might seem odd that Curtis Bullard, in a text about convincing readers to listen more to the fight for women’s rights, doesn’t include any of the actual arguments that Christine speaks aloud to her various audiences. What Curtis Bullard suggests, by only narrating the audiences’ reactions and Christine’s feeling pre-lecture, is even more compelling than anything that she could have written in. Once she writes in what text of Christine’s speeches, there’s more of an opportunity to criticize or disagree with the content. It’s more powerful if the reader has to imagine it because they will fill that text with whatever persuades them most. Furthermore, one of Curtis Bullard’s goals with *Christine* is to show how women can be still be feminine with being public, and the descriptions her Christine as casting a spell on her audience as she spoke, making them forget everything else but her and her words, is very feminine. She beguiles her audience, is unforgettable, and, most importantly, retains her feminine charm.

Lastly, we have the ending of the text itself. *Christine*, somewhat unexpectedly, ends in the traditional comedic way: Christine gets married to the human love of her life: Philip. “The marriage at the end...is important because it suggests that marriage and Christine’s advocacy for woman's rights are not incompatible, as was the general belief of the period.” (Kohn 75) As Kohn is succinctly asserting here, even though Curtis Bullard is ending with a nod to tradition, the revolutionary idea that she is suggesting is that a woman doesn’t have to pursue women’s rights as a *secondary* pursuit; it can be the

highest priority in her life, even over that of a husband. Kohn also argues that Curtis Bullard's ending is "more radical than [Louise May Alcott's] *Work*," in which "her heroine Christie is free to assume a role as a woman's rights speaker only after the death of her husband." This reiterates the nineteenth-century beliefs that "advocacy and marriage are incompatible for women." (Kohn 75) I would argue that it was an ingenious move by Curtis Bullard to *end* her own women's rights novel with a marriage, and to have Christine reject Philip based on her unwavering morals and commitment to sisterhood. Alcott's novel, from Kohn's description, didn't push the envelope as far as *Christine* did, because its heroine permitted herself to commit to the difficult struggle for women's rights only after her primary priority was removed -- by death, in her poor husband's case. Christine doesn't wait. She goes where her heart calls her. That being said, Curtis Bullard needed Christine to be well-received in order for her point to be made and incorporating in this crowd-pleasing and conventional *enough* ending is her way of fitting the text into the mainstream so that its message can actually be heard. It's a hopeful ending: Christine fought for what she believed in, even though she had to overcome much adversity while doing it, and in the end, still wound up happy, in a domestic paradise. In the very last scene of the novel, as Christine and Philip are sitting together, her eyes start to well up. When Philip asks if she's dreaming, she replies, "I could build none pleasanter than the reality — I am very happy. 'Over rough ways God hath led me/To the path of perfect peace.'" (Curtis Bullard 378) Even though Christine has been through many trials, she triumphed in the end, by staying true to herself and her doctrine. Her "perfect peace" could only have been achieved by choosing to pursue women's rights, and she even married her true love in the end.

A Woman Made Anew as a Mother

While *Christine* focuses on a woman who builds her credibility on her virginity and commitment to Christian purity, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* introduces us to a young woman whose circumstances are far more agonizing and dehumanizing than Christine's. Now that we've read *Christine*, we can use that wisdom to shine a light on other ways that *Incidents* was radical. We'll see how the valorization of virginity as the purest feminine ideal leads to such anguish for women who don't have the luxury to hold themselves to the same standard, and that the loss of virginity that motherhood requires is not the *opposite* of virtue, but rather an extension of it.

The narrative follows a young black girl named Linda Brent, born into enslavement, but with a free grandmother, Aunt Marthy. Linda, for the first decade of her life, lives relatively comfortably, with a mistress who is very fond of her, never disciplines her, and lets her have a childhood. But, unfortunately, this kind-hearted mistress dies, leaving Linda with Dr. Flint and his second wife, Mrs. Flint. Dr. Flint takes a vested interest in her – a sexual one. He does not allow anyone else to have power over her, so no discipline, but as she grows older, he takes every chance to whisper terrible things in her ear about her status in his mind as an object that can be toyed about at his every whim and fancy. He even goes so far as to build her a cabin in the woods, far from her support system of her grandmother and other relatives, with which he threatens to imprison her and sexually assault her. Linda is presented with a junction in her life: she must find a way to defy Dr. Flint, but is conflicted because she has been instilled with strict standards by her grandmother, of virginity and purity. She chooses to have an affair with a newcomer in town, Mr. Sands, a white man, with whom she has two children. This

does the trick: it makes Dr. Flint furious, but he doesn't attempt to violate her. He tries to punish her in other ways, including sending Linda to his son's plantation, a place famous for breaking in haughty slaves through field work. Linda doesn't have a shortage of foes: she must push back against Dr. Flint *and* the cult of (white) womanhood that places sexual purity on a pedestal; she does this by stating that death is a better fate than slavery, replacing the conventional female ideal that one should rather die than lose their purity. After not getting his way, Dr. Flint begins to threaten her children, too, and Linda decides that she must either hide herself or run away in order to prevent harm from coming to them, because she knows that the object of Dr. Flint's violent objective is *her*. She hides in her grandmother's attic crawl space for *seven years*, growing weaker and more atrophied, and all the while, not telling her kids, either. Eventually, she takes them and escapes to New York, where they are free.

Hazel V. Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, takes on the project of cataloguing and analyzing how African-American women began to make their voices heard through novel writing in the 1850s onward. Her third chapter, entitled, "Hear My Voice, Ye Careless Daughters," focuses on how free *and* enslaved black women, before emancipation, explored the question of womanhood in an environment that worked diligently to exclude them from that very category. Carby focuses mainly on Jacob's narrative in this chapter, beginning by staging an intervention on John Blassingame's claim that Jacobs's narrative is too orderly, and too melodramatic: the fact that everything is wrapped up so "nicely" in the end makes the narrative less legitimate for him. Carby argues that Linda doesn't have to be the conventional heroine that Blassingame boxes her into, while also pointing out that

he hasn't considered that a formerly enslaved woman's voice, like Jacobs's has yet to be heard. Prior to Jacobs's narrative, we had only really accessed a black male interiority through written texts. There has been a lack of a "gender-specific form of analysis," as Carby writes. (Carby 46) Carby emphasizes that Jacobs's audience is *specifically* women, the white women of the North.

Carby shows that another convention of womanhood that Linda breaks down is the idea that a woman or a mother is rendered meaningless without a "hearthstone" or a home to call her own. Under the conditions of slavery, this is an incredibly difficult task for a woman to achieve: to acquire a house of her own, have a husband, and then conceive children in the "right" way. Linda creates meaning through motherhood without having a home to call her own. Linda, as Carby argues, demonstrates that traditional conventions of womanhood – purity above all else and the necessity of the domestic sphere – are wholly inapplicable to her. Her argument speaks to a gape in the previously existing body of analysis around Jacob's and other black women's work that left out gender- and female-specific analysis of the lives of slaves before emancipation. Her in-depth analysis of the characters in *Incidents* and how they impress on the reader's ideas of *gender* are highly impactful. She shows us why it's imperative that we pay attention to how these women's writing not only exhibit their voice and independence, but how they push to reinvent the idea of the woman.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself is an autobiographical narrative. The author, Harriet Jacobs, emphasizes the gendered way in which it is not only painful to be a slave, but specifically, to be a slave woman. Linda Brent, Jacobs's pseudonym in the narrative, shows the reader how slavery disrupts her commitments to

honorable womanhood and motherhood. She begs the reader to forgive her for her sins in having a sexual affair before marriage and laments to the reader that the circumstances are what drove her to break her so tightly held ideal of virginity. Jacobs highlights her extremely limited choices that she has in finding ways to protect herself under the dangers and constraints of slavery. This near *absence* of choice is made apparent as her master, Dr. Flint, increasingly threatens sexual violence as Linda grows older. Even though she “chose” her affair with Mr. Sands, Linda protests that it isn’t true freedom, and not every choice made, though intentional, is a *freely* made choice. This develops her argument that there is not any innate or inherent difference between free (and usually white) women and enslaved/black women; it is only their circumstances that are vastly different, and these circumstances are what drive enslaved women to commit certain acts that may be considered unwomanly. Jacobs states in the narrative that, “she [feels] that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others.” (Jacobs 62)

While Jacobs does argue that enslaved women should not be held to the same standards as free women, she still does subscribe to their ideals of purity and value. Linda knows that in the eyes of those around her, her essential goodness is still defined by whether or not she adheres to the commonly held Christian standard of virginity. We don’t get as many of Linda’s own thoughts on whether or not she believes that sexual purity must underpin moral purity. There is an intelligent layering here: Jacobs knows that readers will be more receptive to Linda if she is set up as a chaste, morally sound character, while in the narrative, Linda also knows that her good reputation among her relatives and the town rests upon her chastity and dedication to fending off Dr. Flint and preserving her virginity. Jacobs does well to foreground so much of the beginning of the novel on

Linda's exhaustion of so much time and effort preserving her virginity; as this is a narrative meant to persuade, and more specifically, persuade a white, female, Northern audience, adhering to their established standards of ideal womanhood make Linda a character that they will be more willing to assimilate into their schemas of black, enslaved women. Linda isn't an odd, one-off, or exceptional black woman, black mother, enslaved woman, but rather, Jacobs wants to show her as just a mother and a woman, and that motherhood and womanhood give her the strength to accomplish incredible feats. In order to further Jacobs's goals, her white audience needs to be able to accept Linda and align her with their already-existing beliefs of what a virtuous, worthy woman would care about and prioritize in her life. For this white audience, chastity and virginity are purity, and *purity* is the feminine ideal. This is why Aunt Marthy is so integral in the narrative, as the person who helps define Linda's ideals of womanhood – and what leads Linda to be so adamant about preserving her virginity in the face of Dr. Flint's excessive advances.

Lydia Maria Child, a white female author, abolitionist, and the editor of Jacobs's narrative, writes an introduction in which she convinces the white Northern audience that even the "indelicate" parts of the narrative are worth reading. She tells her reader,

"I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experience of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and other indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn." (Jacobs 5-6)

Child seeks to accomplish a few things with this passage in her introduction. She wants to warn the reader, who she assumes will be female, that there are some unpleasant experiences which are narrated by Jacobs, ones of threatened sexual violence as well as

sexual deviance. The “peculiar phase of Slavery” refers to these sexual deviances, and the norm that Child is coming up against says that women cannot write about such things, even if they are true, and have been experienced by the author. The “veil” keeps women in their place by not allowing them to come out with the truth, and Child wants to remedy this by putting her reputation on the line and attaching her name to Jacobs’s narrative. It tells us, in the current moment, about what women weren’t allowed to write about in antebellum America, what they had to keep private and secret.

The strong faithfulness and adherence to the same ideals of femininity that white women have lends Jacobs credibility with this narrative. Aunt Marthy’s character works heavily to legitimize Jacobs as a “safe” author to read from, because it keeps her writing in the existing framework of what young women are allowed to be exposed to. Jacobs maintains that the ideals of virginity and purity are worthy ones to strive towards, while arguing that the inexpressibly degrading circumstances are what push enslaved women to deviate from them. She also pushes against virginity being the only standard for womanhood – because mothers can be ideal women without being virgins. In fact, Jacobs suggests that becoming a mother – and therefore losing your virginity – might actually be a way to reach perfection in femininity, by caring for other human beings, by giving oneself over completely to this care. In this way, by focusing more on circumstances rather than on redefining womanhood itself, Jacobs upholds the status quo, doing so in order to make herself more easily heard.

Jacobs begins by giving us a clear vision of virtuous womanhood, and more specifically, virtuous black womanhood, all maintained under the chains of slavery. Linda’s grandmother is a formidable woman who holds status as a virtuous woman not

just in little Linda's eyes, but also in the eyes of the entire town community. She was "generally known" as being a good woman: "'Aunt Marthy,' as she was called, was generally known, and everybody who knew her respected her intelligence and good character. Her long and faithful service in the family was also well known..." (Jacobs 14)

On the day that Mr. Flint tries to sell Linda's grandmother, after she had been promised freedom upon the death of her own mistress, everyone who attends the auction block is horrified by it. Jacobs starts to show here how noble womanhood is constructed: Aunt Marthy has provided a "long and faithful service," showing her loyalty, and is smart and has good morals. Slaves are still expected to have a good system of values, which is something that Linda's grandmother demonstrates, and is something that garners her respect. Her age also places her in the category of good woman: if she has lived to fifty years old, under the service of one family, then she must be faithful. Her virtuosity is made even more apparent by the crowd's shock at her standing at the auction. "Many voices called out, 'Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell *you*, aunt Marthy? Don't stand there! That is no place for *you*.'" (Jacobs 14) This sets up the dichotomy that Jacobs draws with good woman and bad woman. "*You*," they call to her, distinguishing her from all the other slaves at the auction, who, by contrast, the audience of the auction assumes are more deserving of the punishment of being sold off somewhere far away. That symbolic space of punishment is no place for such a good servant as Aunt Marthy. How she is seen and respected by the town gives her credibility, and therefore power, which she can instrumentalize to help her children and grandchildren. For Linda, her grandmother is a pillar of virtue and righteousness, and by being a dependable maternal figure, she is also a pillar of *female* righteousness.

Jacobs isn't only concerned with Aunt Marthy's black virtuous womanhood. While she seems to have persevered under slavery, and stayed a good woman while doing it, other people see Aunt Marthy as good *because* of her service and loyalty, not necessarily because of any sexual purity. Her essential goodness has not been beaten down by circumstance. But Jacobs is still concerned with that other area of ideal femininity -- sexual purity. She warns that it isn't just enslaved women of color who are subject to being demeaned by their circumstances. The sexual abuse and assault that enslaved women must bear at the hands of their white, male masters doesn't just sully them. It has corrupting effects on those masters' white wives and daughters, too. The young wife must be indoctrinated into this world of sexual sin, she "soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows." (Jacobs 39) The young, virtuous woman who has married the Southern slaveholder is expecting those vows to be respected and finds them essentially laughed at by their new husbands. The women born into the Southern family have long been accustomed to this darkness:

"Nor do the master's daughters always escape...The white daughters early hear their parents quarreling about some female slave. Their curiosity is excited, and they soon learn the cause. They are attended by the young slave girls whom their father has corrupted; and they hear such talk as should never meet youthful ears, or any other ears." (Jacobs 57)

Jacobs takes the putrefying effect of the circumstance of slavery one step farther here. Enslaved women are subject to the dehumanization of being treated as objects, for labor and lust. This has a double effect on the daughters of the slaveholders, whose eyes and ears aren't exactly covered from hearing about the abuse. The young daughters' "curiosity is excited" by the discontentment in the house, and children soak up everything

that is happening around them; they are surrounded by their father's sexual crimes. Their whole world begins to become permeated with it, and the purity that is championed among women begins to slip into darkness. Jacobs shows here that it isn't just physical virginity that matters; moral integrity, in this sense, is the first to be poisoned by the girls' fathers' sexual sins. The sin of the father is communicated to the daughter, who is daily attended to by the enslaved women that the father so abuses. *This* is where the white daughters' moral depravity starts: "they know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority on all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves." (Jacobs 57) The young white women, seeing their fathers exercise terrible authority, follow in his footsteps. Jacobs gives us the account of a white woman who forces a male slave and then gives him free papers, so he escapes punishment, all to the mortification and anger of her father. Instead of faulting the daughters mentioned, Jacobs draws the direct link back to their fathers' immorality; the circumstance of slavery, and of white men exercising their complete control over enslaved women, taints even the purity and chaste femininity of their white daughters. This is important to the wider project of Jacobs's narrative and my own wider argument about it because it shows that *any woman* can fall prey to their circumstances – even the women who "have it all," the plantation family daughters, who have everything they could want and need, and are brought up with the strictest Christian faith, can still be poisoned by their fathers' sins. Jacobs also uses this to set up the case she will make for herself when she chooses a lover outside of Dr. Flint's reach: these daughters, by seeking their own lovers, were making choices in spite of their fathers, who also "own" them. Before a daughter is *given away* in marriage, where another man will own her, her father

owns her. Although this ownership isn't as total as owning a slave, a daughter's freedom is much more limited than her brother's.

Although we are not completely sure of what Linda's *own* ideas concerning the "value" of her virginity are, we do know the complex ways in which she has to balance her knowledge of her grandmother's disapproval of "wayward" enslaved women and the growing advances that Dr. Flint is making towards her. These wayward women are, as Linda's grandmother believes, women who have sold themselves out and have consorted with the master, either because they are succumbing to pressures, or because they believe that they might be treated better. She is a devout Christian and hold purity above all and believes that these women are only sullyng themselves. That's why Linda never tells her grandmother about Dr. Flint's disgusting advances; Linda is very careful to stay on her grandmother's good side, in addition to wanting to keep her own grandmother out of danger, on account of Aunt Martha's bravery. She'd go right over to Dr. Flint and give him a piece of her mind. So, she is forced to bear the abuse alone, some of which included Dr. Flint reducing her to an object: "When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong." (Jacobs 20) Flint is telling Linda here that even her own body is not hers. She is "nothing but" the label placed upon her. It's no wonder, while Linda grew up listening to these insults about how she doesn't even own her body, that she holds her reputation so closely: it might be all that she feels she has. Hortense J. Spillers calls this "*theft of the body* -- a willful and violent (an unimaginable from this distance) severing of captive body from its motive will, its active desire." (Spillers 67) Dr. Flint's threats drive her to

do things with her *body* that she would not have done otherwise. Linda's "captive body" is separated from her "motive will," her will for freedom, safety, and autonomy. Dr. Flint steals her first love from her, by not allowing him to come any closer to her, and therefore limits her claims to her own body and her ability to love freely, further brutalizing her.

What Linda chooses to do is have an affair with Mr. Sands, the next-door neighbor. She has two children with Mr. Sands, both of whom she raises on the Flint plantation. Linda's decision to have the affair with Mr. Sands was by no means an easy choice for her. Under the constraints of slavery, and under the constant threat of sexual violence, Linda has limited choices. She chooses Mr. Sands because he doesn't force her; this is a *semblance* of freedom that Linda is reaching for under circumstances that keep her in bondage. "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is *something akin to freedom* in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment." (Jacobs 61, emphasis mine) Any of Mr. Sands' control over Linda would be gained "by kindness and attachment," not by force and coercion, as Dr. Flint's control over her is. Linda is showing us that although she chose to have the affair, she doesn't have complete free will in the situation of in her life. She doesn't have complete freedom here, but a parody of it, because all of her decisions are influenced by her enslavement and her concern for her safety. As Carby says of Linda, her "act of sexual defiance was described as one of 'deliberate calculation': the slave actively chose one fate as opposed to another." (Carby 58) Linda had a limited number of "fates" to choose from; this was a symptom of her subjection.

Carby offers another perspective on Linda's choice, saying, "from her experience she knew that Dr. Flint sold his offspring from slave women and hoped that if her children were fathered by Sands he could buy them and secure their future." (Carby 58) Not only does Linda know that her own body is being stolen from her, but she also knows that when she does give birth, that her offspring will be stolen from her as well. By not allowing her to love, Dr. Flint further secures his power over her body. He does this by adding a layer: not only does he have control over her body on a physical level, but he can control who she invests her time and emotions in. The only way that Linda can subvert this is by showing him that she has her own agency, her own control over her body, so she transforms it.

Linda's solution, in actuality, doesn't go as smoothly as she might have hoped. For Linda, the fear of her grandmother's and friends' judgment brings much more anguish than any ideas of lost purity or sullied character. In contrast to the white daughters who have their morals clouded and spoiled while they are growing up, Linda has been raised by a grandmother that instilled into her the need to hold onto her purity as an ideal of her virtuous womanhood. Although her grandmother is the main person who is instilling these ideals into her, that's not to say that she is the only one who abides by them. It's not just the fact of what Linda did, it's only when the truth *gets out* that it is made to matter. It's not the deed itself, but everyone else's knowledge of it – and the knowledge has different power for the different people in her life. Linda says, right after telling Dr. Flint that she is pregnant: "But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched." (Jacobs 62) Her relatives, her grandmother, Dr. Flint, Mrs. Flint – they all have a stake in Linda's virginity. As such, Linda holds power in how

she reveals this information, and the reveal itself is more important than the event. Motherhood is what gives her power: “I will never go there. In a few months I will be a mother.” (Jacobs 62) She first wielded the revelation of her deed to her tormentor, in order to repel him, to keep him away, to stake her own claim to autonomy over her body in the face of slavery. “He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement, and left the house without a word. I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him.” We see it here as she does: although it might have been the most beneficial choice, it was still from an extremely limited pool of choices. She is still encircled by the yoke of slavery. There are layers to her choice here: Dr. Flint is fond of pointing out that by owning Linda, he owns her physical *body*, which he tells her he can do with whatever he pleases. By taking away her intangible virginity, while at the same time, transforming her body, Linda has won a distance from Flint at more than one level. She takes back her body by making it a space that Dr. Flint would not dare to enter. Linda defends herself against Dr. Flint by using his own framework of ownership and possession over her. He believes that he owns her, and sees her as an object, an article of property, instead of as a human woman. Working within this framework, Linda must find a way to protect herself in a way that will be effective because it is meaningful to Dr. Flint, who holds her in bonds, and who is planning to hurt and abuse her even further, all while isolating her from her support system by sequestering her away in the cabin. When Linda tells him that she is pregnant, what she is really saying is that she is pregnant with another *man's* child. She knows that this rebellion against Flint will work because this is the type of authority that he subscribes to: that another man will protect her because she is pregnant with his child, and that this other man's anger and protection are things to fear. On top of this, Linda

will not reveal the baby's father's identity to Dr. Flint, although he has implied that he has figured out that it's a white man. This affords her even more protection, because, according to Dr. Flint's worldview, other white men are really the only entity to whom he would have to bow to. We see here how Linda cleverly maneuvers within the limited choices that are afforded to her. She doesn't believe Dr. Flint's assertions on how she is his property and she must obey his every will, whim, and command, but knows that she must find a way to smite him within these rules, which he enforces by the kind of force that she cannot escape.

As Linda grows older, Mr. Flint's advances toward her become more gross and shameless, and there comes a point when Linda cannot resist by avoiding him. Linda's grandmother has hammered into her that, even though they don't have much, they have their moral, womanly values. When Linda begins her affair with Mr. Sands, to ward off Mr. Flint, she laments that her relatives will think badly of her: "Humble as were their circumstances, they had pride in my good characters. Now, how could I look them in the face? My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave." (Jacobs 62) Linda's whole "self-respect" had been bound up in her chastity, and losing her virginity was akin to losing *all* of her virtue as a human, and as a human woman. She holds her virtue above her circumstance, seeing one as something that she can control; we see this when she says that she "resolved to be virtuous" though still a slave. Her inner morals are placed above her status to the outside world. We also see, when Linda is appealing to her grandmother to forgive her for losing her virginity, that she believes that if she tells her grandmother about the circumstances that she has been under, that her virtue will not seem as tainted. "I thought if she could know the real state

of the case, and all I had been bearing for years, she would perhaps judge me less harshly.” (Jacobs 64) The mean circumstances, when revealed to Aunt Marthy, change her judgment of her granddaughter, because she knows that even a good character like Linda’s isn’t impervious to them. Her strong moral, held tightly within her, is not unshakable, which is tragic, because we know that it is slavery that disrupts Linda and her purity in a way that she doesn’t have a choice in.

Yet, Linda shows us just how virtuous she is as a mother. This is how she pushes back against the idea that only virgins are virtuous women. If every woman stayed a virgin, there would be no one left to read these stories -- so, eventually, even virtuous virgins must become mothers, even though they might be shamed for it. Linda’s perseverance through her ordeals shows us the mothers *are* still virtuous women, and that they are still paragons of femininity, precisely because of their motherhood. She argues that the ideal of womanhood should include motherhood more; a mother must sacrifice so much for her children, which is almost saintly. Linda herself waits seven years in small crawl-space in order to avoid capture by Dr. Flint as well as stay close to her children. She eventually escapes and saves her children. It’s an intensely uncomfortable ordeal, “but [she] had [her] consolations. Through [her] peeping-hole [she] could watch the children, and when they were near enough, [she] could hear their talk.” (Jacobs 130) Linda is given strength through her children, a strength that she might not have been given if she weren’t a mother. Hearing her children talk and just being near them gives her endurance.

Jacobs, in illuminating the ways in which slavery continually beats down on the people that it holds in its chains, shows us how tightly held beliefs are made tortuous for

their virtuous hosts. Linda did as best she could under the circumstances, which most readers of the narrative can hardly even fathom. The more virtuous Linda strived to be, the more Mr. Flint hated her for it, and the more forceful he was with her. The corrupting force of complete power and authority poisons Linda's master, and threatens her own pure womanhood. It goes back to the Virgin Mary ideal: no woman can, realistically, be a virgin *and* a mother, like the Virgin Mary. It creates this unrealistic binary that no woman could ever hope to achieve. Therefore, they are either tired out old women, or promiscuous young ones. Jacobs presents a new standard for ideal womanhood, which includes mothers, who are not previously included in the ideals of chastity and virginity. Jacobs works within the framework that she is given in order to stake her claim: she was most virtuous when she was taking control of her own life, as well as protecting the lives of her children. Because motherhood and virginity are often set against each other, Jacobs feels that she must choose between hanging onto her virginity for religious reasons, or taking control of her body to defend against an abusive, corrupt older man who has authority over her. Aunt Marthy serves as an important stepping stone for Linda here: she's an example of how one might survive under slavery while avoiding sexual abuse, and still be a strong mother. But Linda nuances the assertions that Aunt Marthy makes on the world and the women in it; she takes Aunt Marthy's generosity, love, and strength, and uses it in her own struggle to give herself purpose and autonomy, which she ultimately achieves through her children.

Conclusion

There's a beautiful piece of analysis that Carby provides us of the relationship between Linda, her grandmother, and Mrs. Flint, who Linda's grandmother breast-fed as a baby. Mrs. Flint epitomizes the ways in which white women needed to exclude black women from their cult of true womanhood in order to remain superior. Carby shows us how Jacobs was hoping for a potential sisterhood and that only "foster" sisterhood can be attained between black and white girls. She says that the barriers to establishing this sisterhood is *racial*, not gendered, and that slavery inevitably hinders the potential female bond. Due to the fact that a white, female, Northern audience couldn't fathom half the horrors that are happening to black enslaved women in the South, Carby says that Jacobs *must* narrate experiences that are "alien to that of the readership" in order to prove her point. (Carby 51-52) Carby's reading of Jacobs brings out the strands of sisterhood and community that Jacobs's characters desire; Christine's fight for women's rights draws heavily on improving life for the community of women. Christine endures many hardships while pursuing her goal of having a more equality and women having rights such as representation under the tax law, voting rights, and more freedom in the public sphere. Linda argues that a woman should always be judged by her character under her circumstances; some of us are born very unluckily, with extremely pressing circumstances that can make it difficult to uphold a righteous femininity in the form of virginity, but that motherhood can a new ideal to strive for.

But both Christine and Linda emphasize this: sisterhood. Christine wants to unionize women to fight for their rights in the public sphere, and Linda argues for a universal womanhood that should not be denied to any woman, regardless of the choices that they have had to make to protect themselves from malicious forces. In each story, it's

not only men who must believe in and cherish the women in their lives, but the women themselves who must band together to lift each other up: and the new ideals of true womanhood that Christine and Linda argue for invite this sisterhood – and hope.

Works Cited

- Baker, Noelle A., editor. "Not 'A Person of One Idea': The Aging Radical (1884–1897)." *Stanton in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2016, pp. 192–203. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q23z4.12.
- Baym, Nina. *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860*. Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Bullard, Laura Curtis, and Denise M. Kohn. *Christine: Or Woman's Trials and Triumphs*. University of Nebraska Press, 2011.
- Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Oxford University Press, 1988. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=272562>
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Edited by Nell Irvin Painter, Penguin Books, 2000.
- Kelley, Mary, et al. *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic*. Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2008. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=965133&site=ehost-live&scope=site
- Kelley, Mary. *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Kohn, Denise M. "Laura Jane Curtis Bullard (1831–1912)." *Legacy*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2004, pp. 74–84. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25679484.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65–81., doi:10.2307/464747.