

Early American Antigones: Sibling Incest in Sentimental Novels

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The theme of brother-sister incest haunts the early American novel on its lower levels of literacy as well as on the higher—a nightmare from which our writers do not choose to awaken too soon, since it is one their readers are willing to pay to share.

—Leslie A. Fiedler

Incest Obsession in the Early Republic

Since the inception, American novels were preoccupied with incest. The “first American novel,” William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), which itself revolves around the forbidden love between a wealthy young man and his father’s illegitimate daughter, was to be followed by at least seven sentimental novels foregrounding “unwitting incest” before 1830 (Dalke 188).¹ Such recurrence of the incest motif in early American literature gives rise to a question: what did this violation of the primary taboo in kinship structure stand for to the project of the nation building? For, as various critics have noted, both in fictional as well as in political discourses of the early Republic, the family constituted the master trope of the nation. One of the most prominent examples of the rhetoric conflating the family and the nation is found in John Quincy Adams’s Fourth of July address in 1821:

The sympathies of men begin with the affections of domestic life. They are rooted in the natural relations of husband and wife, of parent and child, of brother and sister The sympathies of domestic life are not more sacred and obligatory, but closer and more powerful, than those of neighbor and friendship. The tie which binds us to our country, is not more holy in the sight of God, but is more deeply seated in our nature, more tender and endearing, than that looser link which merely connects us with our fellow mortal man. (qtd. in Niles 328)

In Adams's rhetoric, the family becomes the privileged site of sympathies with which the country supposedly has an isomorphic structure. The bonds between "the individual and his country" are naturalized when they are compared to "all the sympathies of domestic life and kindred blood," which are "combined with that instinctive and mysterious connexion between man and physical nature" (*ibid*). Shirley Samuels rightly argues that in this allegedly natural continuity, family bears the roles of "at once a model for government and the socializing unit that will make that government tenable" (16). In the Foucauldian model of power, the family becomes not only an analogue of the state, but also an institution safeguarding the nation's stability. The disorder within the family ceases to be an allegory of the danger of the nation; it actually brings forth the peril to the state. Therefore, Samuels further notes, sentimental literature, "which frequently show[s] the family as a model for the nation, also demonstrate[s] the way it has become an instrument of social control" (17).

The incestuous theme in sentimental novels, seen in this light, seems to act out the young nation's desire for the stability of a homogenous and exclusive community. Elizabeth Barnes argues that incest motif functions, rather than as a taboo, as an ultimate object of desire of the readers, becoming a trope of exclusive logic of the early Republic. In a sociopolitical discourse in which the family is synonymous to the state, incest becomes a "metaphor for a culture obsessed with loving familiar objects" (3). Incestuous attraction between family members connotes the desire for the likeness and homogeneity that "displac[es] a democratic model that values diversity" (4).

Criticisms that see sentimental novels employing incest motif as an instrument of social control over the homogenous state are convincing, especially when read side by side with the political rhetoric of the exclusive model of sympathies. The use of the titular word "sympathy" in *The Power of Sympathy*, for instance, seems to echo with Adams's exclusive logic of fellow feelings as the basis of homogenous society. What the novel calls "sympathy" is an almost instinctive attraction (or at least what the novel renders as such) between the members belonging to the same family unit; those who outside this community are bereft of the benefit that the fellow feeling would endow. Especially indicative of the problematic nature of the fraternal sympathy will be, as has often been pointed out, a scene in which the protagonist, Harrington junior, encounters a female slave in South Carolina. Inquiring into the cause of the scar on her back, Harrington is deeply moved by the slave's maternal

sacrifice, by which she offered herself for the punishment originally intended for her young son. Harrington confesses in his letter to his friend that he was “sensibly relieved” when he told the slave as follows: “may thy soul be ever disposed to SYMPATHYZE with thy children . . . then . . . all thy labors will become easy—all thy burdens light, and the yoke of slavery will never gall thy neck” (Brown 62). As Julia Stern argues, this scene dramatizes “cathartic revelation about the powers of the sympathetic imagination,” in which “white male citizens ostensibly opposed to the practice of slavery in fact depend on it for their own (paradoxical) self-definition as members of a morally democratic elite” (25, 26). Harrington, by underscoring sympathy as a blood-based connection between the black slave and her son, in fact excludes them from his own familial/social unit of fellow feelings, furtively endorsing the status quo. It is by no means coincidence that this episode is set side by side with a letter from a loyal friend of the Harringtons, Mrs. Holmes, to the young Harrington’s full-sister Myra, in which the fatal blood relation between Harrington and his fiancé Harriot is revealed. Immediately after Harrington capitalizes “SYMPATHY” in his letter, Mrs. Holmes uses the same word in a totally different meaning to explain the incestuous nature of the attraction between the young couple (Brown 62): “admire, O my friend! the operation of NATURE—and the power of SYMPATHY!” (63). Sympathy here, in contrast to the juxtaposed episode of Harrington’s encounter with the slave, does not mean compassion; it means “a (real or supposed) affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other” (*OED*). This use of “sympathy” is immediately shared by Harrington senior, when he explains his son’s love for his daughter: “how shall we pretend to investigate the great springs by which we are actuated, or account for the operation of SYMPATHY—my son, who has been at home about eight weeks, has accidentally seen her, and to complete THE TRIUMPH OF NATURE—has loved her” (Brown 77). The juxtaposition of the different uses of sympathy here—one bespeaks the fellow feeling and the other the magnetism between the siblings naturalized by the novel’s logic—seems to connote that sympathy as compassion in this novel functions only within the realm of the almost occult attraction between the family members.

Granted that incest in *The Power of Sympathy*, at least partly, embodies the fellow feelings exclusively directed toward those who share familial affinities, there are several moments in the novel that would complicate the

understanding of incest as a manifestation of national desire for homogenous community based on a regulatory family model. For the daughters, incestuous desire for their siblings forges an act of confusing the symbolic, or language as signification system, upon which the sociopolitical unity of family/state is founded. One such instance occurs in a subplot that revolves around, again, an “incestuous connexion” between a woman named Ophelia and her brother-in-law, Martin. Unlike the case of sibling incest between Harrington and Harriot, Ophelia’s incestuous connection with her sister’s husband is not based on a blood relation; what is disturbing for the community is the fact that she gives birth to a child, who is “at once the son and nephew of Martin”(38). The ambiguity of her son’s position in kinship structure arouses the wrath of “parental authority” (43). Ophelia’s father’s accusation, a “severe use of paternal power,” eventually leads her into madness, a “kind of happy insensibility,” in which she is freed from the symbolic order of kinship (38, 42). The confusion of the symbolic order by incest culminates in the words of Harriot. In contrast to the son, who tries to relinquish his love for his half-sister, the daughter keeps fostering her insatiable desire for her former lover. Her voice is startlingly charged with eroticism: “O! I sink, I die, when I find in my *Harrington* a brother—I am penetrated with inexpressible grief—I experience uncommon sensations—I start with horror at the idea of incest—of ruin—of perdition” (86; italics original). In her fragmented utterance, Harriot confesses that she still “indulge[s]” in “the recollection of his caresses.” The illegitimate daughter, disinherited by *le nom de père*, resists the symbolic that forces her to call her lover a brother: “I curse the idea of a brother—my hand refuses to trace the word. . . . Amidst the struggle of passion, how could I pronounce the word—how could I call you by the title of brother.” At the same time, she cannot find an adequate title that represents her biological sibling for her: “Come, O Harrington! Be a friend, a protector, a brother—be him, on whom I could never yet call by the tender, the endearing title of parent. I will reverence him in whom all the charities of life are united—I will be dutiful and affectionate to you, and you shall be unto me as a father”(87). By the incestuous attachment to her brother, Harriot’s signification system is now in promiscuous confusion, wherein she conflates her brother and father, Harrington senior and junior: for her, the patronymic “Harrington” that excluded her from the social unit becomes an interchangeable signifier for both her brother and her father.

Such equivocality of the terms of kinship seen both in Ophelia’s and in Harriot’s cases reminds us of Judith Butler’s reading of the entangled kinship

in Sophocles' incestuous family in *Antigone*. The eponymous heroine of the play, a daughter and sister of Oedipus born out of his incestuous relationship to his mother Jocasta, is sentenced to death for defying King Creon's edict against a burial for her brother Polyneices. In Butler's reading, the foundation of kinship is doubly destabilized in the play by Antigone's elusive kinship relation to her father/brother Oedipus, as well as by her incestuous love for her brother Polyneices. Antigone introduces a disruptive confusion into the symbolic, or the system of signification, by the plural affiliations of a term, "brother" (for her, it possibly means not only Polyneices, but also Oedipus), which cannot be configured according to the structural norms of kinship. Butler here takes up a question originally posed by George Steiner: "What would happen if psychoanalysis were to have taken Antigone rather than Oedipus as its point of departure?" (*Antigone* 57). For Butler, Antigonean revision of the universalist assumption of kinship inherent in psychoanalysis "might put into question the assumption that the incest taboo legitimates and normalizes kinship based in biological reproduction and the heterosexualization of the family" (66). Certainly, Antigone is "not quite a queer heroine," because she "does not achieve another sexuality, one that is not heterosexuality" (72, 76). But by her refusal to give "heterosexual closure" for the drama, in which she chooses death over marriage and motherhood, or the heteronormativity that would have saved her life through re-installing her identity in kinship structure, Antigone allows the possibility of envisaging what Butler calls "radical kinship": a modality of kinship different from blood-bound affiliations, such as "voluntary single parenting, or gay parenting, or parenting arrangements with more than two adults involved" (71, 74).

The heroines of sentimental narratives of sibling incest are, like Antigone, not quite queer; they do not, at least openly, manifest sexualities that are not heterosexuality. Yet, the sister's incestuous desire for her brother first acted upon by Harriot, which destabilizes the universalist model of the regulatory family, opens up an affective space for her nineteenth-century sisters to envision what Butler calls "radical kinship," a kinship that are unbounded by blood affiliations. In the communities conceived by the incestuous heroines, the domain of sympathy, or the exclusive fellow feeling for those who have familial affinities, expands drastically toward an enlarged kinship network. Central to their "radical kinship" is a figure of the dead mother, who is rendered largely invisible in the incest plot both of sentimental literature and of Butler's radical rendition of *Antigone*. Through their incestuous desire for their siblings, which

paradoxically enables them to refuse contributing biological reproduction by preempting any other heterosexual-object choice, I would argue, both Lucy Temple in the Susanna Rowson's eponymous novel and Ellen Montgomery in *The Wide, Wide World* succeed in deconstructing motherhood and creating a non-genital organization of desire.

Lucy Temple's Radical De-sexualization of Family

Lucy Temple was published posthumously in 1828, two years after Rowson's death, under the title of *Charlotte's Daughter: or Three Orphans*. As the original title indicates, the novel was written as a sequel to *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth* (1791), the massive bestseller that chronicles Charlotte Temple's seduction by John Montraville and her eventual death after childbirth. The adopted title *Lucy Temple* is somewhat misleading, for the name of the heroine, Charlotte and Montraville's daughter, is not Lucy Temple; she inherits neither her matronym, Temple, nor her patronym, Montraville. Her name in the novel is Lucy Blakeney, and "she had never been called by any other name" (*Lucy* 138). Lucy adopts the name of Blakeney from her grandfather's close friend Captain Blakeney. Having no heir or heiress, Blakeney bequeaths his favorite child twenty thousand pounds as well as his family name, on condition that she has her husband change his family name to Blakeney upon her marriage. In this narrative, not only Lucy's, but also her half-brother John Franklin's disinheritance of their original family names becomes the key to the incest plot. For, John Franklin in fact is the eldest son of John Montraville, who adopted his wife's family name out of the shame of his past seduction that led Charlotte Temple to death. The erased patronyms make Lucy and John illegible to each other as a sibling, and the brother and the sister become engaged. After the discovery of their blood relation, John goes to India and dies in a war, while Lucy starts a female seminary.

While its heroine does not take on her mother's family name, *Lucy* as a novel inherits the melancholy of its mother text *Charlotte*: the novel is haunted by the absent presence of the dead mother, upon whose abject body the cornerstone of the early Republic was laid. As various historians have noted, with the advent of industrialization, the postrevolutionary period witnessed a shift in feminine ideals from helpmeet to mother. As Linda Kerber argues in her groundbreaking essay, "The Republican Mother," the praise of motherhood bore a political purpose. Disfranchised as they were, mothers would assume a vital

role in bolstering the “stability of the nation” through bearing and raising a patriotic child (202). As motherhood began to function as an ideological fulcrum of women’s social power, however, the actual bodies of mothers became increasingly disembodied. Significantly, the celebration of motherhood was accompanied by the constant drop of the marital fertility rate: whereas in 1800, the average number of children for a married couple was slightly over seven, in 1825, it decreased to under six, then down to 5.42 in 1850 and 4.24 in 1880 (D’Emilio and Freeman 58). Behind the decline of the fertility rate is the proliferation of contraception devices. Through the 1830s to the 1870s, use of a variety of contraceptive methods including coitus interruptus, condoms, and vaginal douching, was widely advised by marriage guides and itinerant lecturers as what would save women from high mortality rate from childbirth. Yet the most recommended among the various methods for family limitation both by marital advice literature and health reformers was “simply abstaining from sexual relations” (59).

Asexualization of the body was intertwined with a cultural discourse of what Barbara Welter calls the cult of True Womanhood, a feminine ideal consisting of four virtues of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152). As the title of a popular poem by Frances Osgood, “The Triumph of the Spiritual Over the Sensual,” exemplified, purity or female chastity, dovetailed with piety, became a moral imperative for women. Yet, as Welter further argues, apotheosis of sexual purity “set up a dilemma which was hard to resolve” (158). While motherhood was rendered essential for women’s happiness as well as for their social influence, its precondition, sexual intercourse, endangered one of the virtues upon which the feminine ideal was based. Yet, women were “told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it.” Celebration of motherhood thus led nineteenth-century women to a conundrum: how should they deal with their simultaneously sexed and de-sexualized bodies? While motherhood enabled them a social engagement by way of both biological and cultural reproduction of patriotic children, it simultaneously could connote their biological and social death. Obsessed with the death of fallen women in childbirth, sentimental literature does, on one level, seem to license Samuels’s portrayal of it as an “instrument of social control”; it repeatedly inculcates female readers with the ideal of abstract motherhood severed from materiality of the body with both negative (in seduction novels) and positive (in domestic literature) examples.

Such abstraction of the maternal body by cultural discourses, to use Julia

Kristeva's terminology, helps formulate the maternal body as the abject, which is a precondition of the symbolic order. The abject threatens to break down the symbolic order by loss of the boundaries between subject and object. According to Kristeva, abjection is "my safeguard[]," "[t]he primer[] of my culture," wherein one establishes him/herself as a subject and enters into the symbolic by separating him/herself from the abject (2). Needless to say, in Kristeva's theory, what best exemplifies the abject is the maternal body, from which a child must separate itself in order to gain a sense of selfhood. By the function of abjection, the body of mother becomes "untouchable, impossible, absent" (6). Celebration of motherhood casts off the maternal body from the symbolic, or the social order, as the abject conjoining it with the abhorrent imageries of both literal and metaphorical death. Yet, if abjection is the "violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost," the maternal body as abject, or the residue of the symbolic, haunts the subject again when mourning fails and transgresses into melancholia. The heroines charged with incestuous desire, who are, at the same time, barred from mourning of the mother's death, face the maternal body as abject in their melancholy.

As Julia Stern argues, *Lucy's* mother text *Charlotte Temple* vacillates between mourning, the sublimation of a fallen woman's death upon whose carcass a cornerstone of the Republican Motherhood is laid, and melancholy, a resistance to the violent abstraction of Charlotte's death by such mourning. Citing the scene in which Charlotte daydreams her own mother's "poor bosom bleeding at every vein" in madness after the birth of her bastard daughter Lucy (*Charlotte* 122), Stern writes: "The image of maternal dismemberment [Charlotte] summons expresses her rage over being cast off. . . . [T]he mourning process inaugurated by the narrative frame is incomplete, unsuccessful, pathological, disturbed. Working-through has broken down, become fixed at the level of obsession; melancholia expresses an internalized rage against women's place in patriarchy" (58). If the celebration of motherhood functions as abjection, in which corporeality of female body is rendered abject for the sake of the establishment of the symbolic Republican Mother, Charlotte's vision of her mother's bleeding bosom re-introduces physicality of the maternal body in the text through melancholia as a failed mourning.

For her daughter Lucy, the possibility of the mourning over the mother's death is precluded double-fold from the moment of her birth. For one thing, she missed the moment of mourning of the death of her mother, whose "melancholy story" is kept secret by those who wish to keep Lucy intact from her mother's

fate as a fallen woman (*Lucy* 195). Furthermore, Lucy, at her birth, is disowned by her mother, who “was not conscious of being a mother, not took the least notice of her child except to ask whose it was, and why it was not carried to its parents” (*Charlotte* 122). In other words, for Lucy, the abject maternal body from which the child supposedly severs itself to establish subjecthood is rendered already “untouchable, impossible, absent” even without the process of mourning (Kristeva 6). If melancholia as failed mourning, as Freud theorizes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” makes a subject incorporate the lost object in itself and identify with it, what Lucy internalizes is the very absence of the maternal body.²

The void of the maternal body Lucy internalizes, however, enables her to fulfill what Stern calls “female wrath” against patriarchal culture (58): Lucy, by her choice of celibacy, refuses to serve the regulatory norm of heterosexual family that requires abstract motherhood for reproduction of a patriotic child at the cost of the materiality of the female body. As Marion Rust points out, what is radical about *Lucy* lies in the heroine’s very gesture of “envisioning a female community in which romantic love and sexual reproduction play little or no part—in which neither heterosexuality nor motherhood is essential to finding one’s voice or living a satisfying life” (281). Lucy’s incestuous attachment to her half-brother leads her to celibate public service after the discovery of their relationship. She finds “herself set apart for the holy cause of humanity,” “founding a little seminary for the education of female children” (*Lucy* 240). In other words, with her loyalty to her brother/lover, the novel has its heroine circumvent the heterosexual closure traditional in sentimental literature.

The vacuum of the mother’s sexed body Lucy internalizes via the work of melancholia, along with her incestuous love for her brother, makes Lucy willingly fail to contribute to the work of biological reproduction. Yet, her resistance is carried out without infringing on feminine ideals of the era. For, on one level, Lucy’s seminary does contribute to the cultural reproduction of motherhood. One of the focuses of education at her academy is “the most useful kinds of needlework” (240), a domestic skill quintessential for True Womanhood (Welter 165). However, it is important to note that, in addition to domestic skills and other basic instructions for girls’ education, Lucy’s seminary has a “High School, to which a few only were promoted who gave evidence of that degree of talent and probity which would fit them for extended usefulness” (*Lucy* 240). The elite education for female students bears economic fruits. Surprisingly, in an age wherein a significant number of students

graduated from female academies entered into domesticity, among the graduates of Lucy's seminary, "several of the pupils are now married," but "others are giving instruction in different parts of the country" (262). One such student, whose education "has raised her to a high station in life," gives the school a "handsome donation towards rendering the establishment permanent." In this sense, Lucy's seminary is true to its etymology, *seminarium*, "plant nursery," or figuratively, "breeding ground," from which genderless plants grows and disseminates autonomously.

Yet, it should be noted that Lucy's spinsterhood and her utopian female community are enabled, at least initially, by Blakeney's money she inherited along with his family name. One of the major factors for the low percentage of spinsters in the early nineteenth century is the economic structure, in which job opportunities for unmarried women were significantly limited. Unlike many middle-class women who had "few economic options to marriage and motherhood because they were not prepared to enter the emerging capitalist economy of the nineteenth century" (Theriot 30), Lucy has a large sum of money at her hands: twenty thousand pounds plus its yearly interest accumulated from the age of ten to twenty-one, as well as her own grandfather's patrimony. Blakeney's will stipulates that she cannot inherit the original sum of twenty thousand pounds, if she marries and assumes her husband's family name: in that case, she will only retain the interest accumulated during her minority. This provision is, as Desirée Henderson argues, "intended to preserve the Blakeney name through a male line of descendants, using Lucy's capacity to marry and reproduce to reestablish patrilineage" (15). However, Blakeney's testament does not specify the condition of Lucy's spinsterhood, probably because it was unimaginable in the patriarchal culture even for Blakeney, who is the "intimate friend" of Lucy's grandfather and died a "bachelor" to bequeath his property to the offspring of his beloved friend (*Lucy* 138). Blakeney's failure to envision Lucy's spinsterhood enables her to assume his money without becoming a reproductive instrument of the name of the father.

Lucy bypasses another possibility of becoming a reproducer of the patrilineage. When engaged to Lucy, John Franklin refuses to take on the Blakeney name because "he had already laid aside his own family name [Montraville], and assumed that of his grandfather" (196). What is absent in John's consciousness is his mother, Julia Franklin's name, which clearly suggests that the maternal body becomes an invisible vessel for the blood and

the name of the father.³ John, “with entire satisfaction,” makes the terms of settling “half Lucy’s paternal inheritance on herself, and receiving the accumulated interest of eleven years of twenty thousand pounds as a fortune to be disposed of according as his judgment should direct” (219). This settlement suggests that if it were not for their blood relationship that hinders their marriage, Lucy was to reproduce John’s grandfather’s name and to follow the path of a “*femme covert*,” or a woman rendered invisible by property laws, “whose rights are both absorbed by her husband and subject to her husband’s will” (Davidson 194). Lucy is saved from both possibilities, while John’s father Montraville, an impotent patriarch without the name of father, died from “having ruptured a blood vessel,” as if cursed with Charlotte’s female wrath (*Lucy* 231).

Ultimately, then, it is the incestuous nature of her attachment to John that prevents Lucy from becoming a mother, or an abstracted vessel of the blood and the paternal name both of the Franklins and of the Blakeney: first, she disqualifies herself as a reproducer of the Franklin name because of her blood relation with John, and then, admissibly abstains from reproducing the Blakeney name by her devotion to the public service that is adequately explained by her attachment to her brother. Her seminary becomes a community both economically and culturally productive without biological reproduction, or a form of “radical kinship” in Butler’s phrase, which deconstructs the notion of the regulatory family based on a heterosexual coupling. In this sense, *Lucy* is a story about an enabling resistance to the patriarchal system from within: Lucy inherits Charlotte’s maternal wrath toward the symbolic that renders her material body abject, successfully enacting it by desexualizing her own body and thereby refusing to contribute to the reproduction of the name of father, without causing friction with society.

Ellen Montgomery’s Eroticization of Christianity

While the plot of sibling incest helps Lucy sublimate her mother’s abject body by desexualizing the family in *Lucy Temple*, in *The Wide, Wide World*, the heroine’s incestuous desire for the brother enables her to re-eroticize the abject maternal body and reunite with it. Published in 1850, *The Wide, Wide World* went through fourteen editions in two years, becoming the best-selling American novel with the single exception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As has often been pointed out, one of the reasons that the novel becomes the “[u]r-text of the

nineteenth century United States” is that it embodies the Evangelical ethic of the time: “duty, humility, and submission to circumstance” as well as “the imperative of self-sacrifice” (Tompkins, “afterword” 585). Indeed, the novel, on a surface level, chronicles the way in which the heroine, Ellen Montgomery grows into True Womanhood, wherein she abjures her corporeality along with her uncontrollable feelings, ultimately finding a future husband with whom she will form a model family. To achieve True Womanhood, one of the passions she has to overcome is the love for her mother: “Ellen had plenty of faults, but amidst them all love to her mother was the strongest feeling her heart knew” (Warner 13). At the opening of the novel, Ellen is separated from her ill-stricken mother, starting a new life in a country farm with her father’s half-sister, Fortune Emerson. Emotionally alienated from her severe aunt, Ellen finds consolation in her relationship with a daughter of a country clergyman, Alice Humphreys, who becomes Ellen’s adopted sister after Ellen finds her mother’s death. While Alice, a prototypical True Woman, repeatedly inculcates Ellen with the Christian distrust of the body and of passions, it is Alice’s brother, John Humphreys, who also becomes Ellen’s “brother” after she was adopted into the Humphrey household upon Alice’s death, that endows her with the final touch of the education. In the Humphrey household, Ellen ultimately submits herself to the chastening hand of patriarchy with Christian pleasure, under the ever-censoring gaze of her “brother,” John, who himself is a minister. The novel closes with a scene in which Ellen, now living with her dead mother’s Scottish family, reunites with her adopted brother, who suggests his intention of marrying her in the future.

Critics, when talking about sexuality in *The Wide, Wide World*, tend to underscore Ellen’s growth into disembodied heterosexuality with John’s guidance, which is intermeshed with the notion of Christian love. For instance, Marianne Noble argues that the novel provides a textbook example of the masochistic erotics of domination rampant in sentimental literature as a corollary of the twin discourses of True Womanhood and Calvinism. With the Calvinistic notion of providence, wherein affliction is translated into God’s love, individuals were disciplined to relinquish earthly comforts in order to acquire heavenly support. This Calvinist association of pain with divine love paradoxically gives vent to female desire confined within the discourses of True Womanhood and its ideals of non-corporeal woman. The theologically sanctioned masochistic pleasure makes available to a woman a way of covertly restoring a presence of female body that the ideology of True Womanhood

expunges. Noble's reading of *The Wide, Wide World* as an "ongoing effort to find a language of female sexual pleasure within the constraints of a culture hostile to that expression" is no doubt quite convincing in thinking about the quasi-incestuous relationship between Ellen and John, who she repeatedly calls brother (125). Yet, while it is doubtless that the eroticization of (both physical and metaphysical) violence is one of the manifestations of the novel's exploration of socially sanctioned female sexuality, Noble's argument downplays other possibilities of erotics in the novel by her reading of the hetero-normative plot;⁴ the novel, by using the convenient shield True Womanhood showcases the exchange of physical pleasure between women.

The supposed non-corporeality of True Women paradoxically enables the pleasures of physical contacts within female community: while there is surprisingly little physical contact between Ellen and John, or any other heterosexual couples for that matter, the novel abounds in passionate kissing and caressing between women. Without exception, Ellen and Alice exchange ardent kisses whenever they meet. Their meeting is described almost as if they were forbidden lovers: "I am so glad you are come, dear Alice!" said Ellen again. 'I wish I could have you always.' And the long, very close pressure of her two arms about her friend said as much. There was a long pause. The cheek of Alice rested on Ellen's head which nested against her; both were busily thinking, but neither spoke; and the cricket chirped and the flames crackled without being listened to" (Warner 238). The manifestations of physical and spiritual intimacy between women are not restricted between Alice and Ellen. Ellen's grandmother "hugged her closed her bosom, kissing her forehead and cheeks and lips, and declaring that she was a 'great deal sweeter than any sugar plums'" (245). Alice explains to Ellen the homoerotic relationship between their Swiss-born French teacher, Mrs. Vawse, and her mistress, "to whom she became exceedingly attached": "so great was Mrs. Vawse's love to her, that she left country and family to follow her here" (172). As best exemplified by the business-like marriage between Fortune Emerson and her neighbor Van Brunt, which is repeatedly referred to as a "bargain," Protestant ethics forbids heterosexual couples to manifest their physical intimacy in this novel (425); on the other hand, the ideal of non-corporeality of True Womanhood enables exchange of sensual pleasure between women.

Such "intense and sometimes sensual female love" is, according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "both a possible and an acceptable emotional option" in nineteenth-century American culture (34). While both high death rate in

childbirth and the discourse of True Womanhood made asexualization of women's body a plausible survival strategy in heterosexual couples, romantic friendship between women was rendered "socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage" as that which compensated for both emotional and physical alienation from their husbands. One of the reasons why physical intimacies between women were culturally validated, or even idealized is, perhaps, as Valerie Rohy argues, that in patriarchal culture before the emergence of discourse of sexuality, "lesbian sexuality is construed as 'impossible'" (2). Physical intimacies between women, even when exposed to the public gaze, are rendered nonsexual because lesbian sexuality was supposedly nonexistent. Exchange of sensual pleasure between women, in other words, formed a "kind of vanishing point in both discourse and desire" (4): critical neglect of the prolific representations of kissing and caressing between women in the readings of *The Wide, Wide World*, ironically, seems to prove how sensual exchange between women can easily pass itself as non-corporeal even in the modern critical discourse.

Yet, even though Warner inscribes homoerotically charged rapports between women, hiding them under the cloak of non-corporeal True Womanhood, the novel does not immediately license the love between women. The heterosexual imperative is always there to threaten women's homoerotic relationship. The prototypical representation of intimacy between women is doubtlessly the relationship between Ellen and her mother, who gently caress each other "for two or three hours, without speaking" (Warner 18). In the Montgomery family in which the father has virtually no emotional tie with either his wife or daughter, the father is no competition for Ellen over her mother's love. Warner emphatically describes the emotional detachment between the husband and wife, contrasting it with the strong tie between the mother and the daughter in the Montgomery household. On hearing that her father's relocation to Europe, Ellen says, "Well, mamma, that is bad; but he has been away a great deal before, and I am sure we were always very happy" (11). While the kissing and caressing between mother and daughter arouses in the mother passion so strong that the doctor has "a notion she has been secretly taking hold a bottle of wine, or reading some furious kind of a novel" (19), Montgomery is totally excluded from their both emotional and sensual tie. He is described as unconscious of "his wife's distress" over her separation with the daughter and "utter[ly] incapabl[e] to sympathize with" her (60).

Nevertheless, in the opening part of the novel, Ellen voices the nagging

question that haunts the female loving community throughout the novel. In a scene in which the daughter tries to endure parting with her beloved mother, she asks a question central to her development, as if she were “willing to apply the severest test to this hard doctrine”: “Mamma, . . . do *you* love him *better than you do me?*” (38; italics original). The daughter’s competitor over the mother’s love, “him,” refers not to the father, but to God.⁵ To Ellen’s question, her mother solemnly answers, “I do, my daughter,” which makes Ellen “[i]nk her head again upon her bosom . . . with a gush of tears” (39). In the realm of *The Wide, Wide World*, Christianity is figured as a quasi-heterosexual relationship between a woman and anthropomorphized God, and Ellen has to learn to love “him” if she is to retain female loving community. Over and over again, Ellen faces with this problem—whether she can love “him” deeper than she loves other women, her mother and her surrogate mother, Alice: “Mamma said I could not love him at all if I did not love him best; and, oh sir . . . I do love mamma a great deal better” (70); “But how can I tell whether I do love him really? sometimes I think I do, and then again sometimes I am afraid I don’t at all” (242). Ellen is to vacillate between female figures and God, who demands “My daughter, give me thy heart” (70).⁶

Seemingly, the female-to-female love is destined to be defeated by the heteronormative relationship figured in the relationship between a woman and God. The female-loving community in this novel, however, is enabled by this very façade of heterosexual coupling between a True Woman and anthropomorphized God. As long as a woman can outwardly swear that she loves him as a non-corporeal existence more than anybody else, including her husband to whom she supposedly has only limited sexual intimacy, she can retain free access to other women’s bodies. Significantly, it is the moment of the death of her beloved female figures, her mother and Alice, when Ellen learns to assume this heterosexual façade. In both cases, Ellen refuses to mourn their death: she sinks into melancholia as a failed mourning. The death of her mother’s news gives her “[a] kind of stupor,” wherein “tears did not come; the violent strain of every nerve and feeling seemed to have left her benumbed. . . . Her interest in everything seemed to be gone” (347); at Alice’s funeral, “she didn’t cry—not at all,” refusing to finish the mourning ritual of putting flowers on Alice’s casket (446).

It is by the work of melancholy, a refusal of mourning, that Ellen internalizes the lost female figures and unites with them, including their object of love, “him.” Butler, in *The Psychic Power of Life*, argues that gender is

achieved through the work of melancholia over the separation from the same-sex parent, the loss of whom homosexual taboo prior to incest taboo prohibits the subject to mourn. By refusing to mourn the loss of the mother, the daughter internalizes her and identifies with her: in other words, she *becomes* her. In that process, “heterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation” with the mother (*Psychic* 139): the daughter not only incorporates the mother’s gender identity, but also the aim and the object of her desire. Thus, Butler argues, “the ‘truest’ lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the ‘truest’ gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man” (146-47). Ellen, in the process of melancholic identification with her mother and Alice, incorporates their object of desire, too: firstly, after the death of the mother, she learns to love “him.” After her mother’s death, Ellen says to herself, reading the Bible that her mother bought her: “I didn’t love Jesus at all, but I am sure I do now.” Through the melancholic identification with the mother and incorporation of the object of the mother’s desire, the love between mother and daughter is consummated: “There seemed to be a link of communion between her mother and her that was wanting before” (353).

In much the same way, after Alice’s death, Ellen learns to love John, the object of Alice’s incestuous love. Alice and John’s strong tie is repeatedly highlighted, from which Ellen initially is excluded. Alice, a paragon of True Woman, exceptionally expresses strong passion about her brother. When she talks about her anguish over the separation with John, her “lip trembled and her eye was swimming as she said so” (188). On John’s return, “Alice did not look like herself; her usually calm sweet face was quivering and sparkling now.” Ellen is gnawed with jealousy: “[p]oor Ellen herself had never looked duller in her life; and when Alice said gaily, ‘This is my brother, Ellen,’—her confusion of thoughts and feelings resolved themselves into a flood of tears” (274). “[D]etermined not to see them till she couldn’t help” the siblings’ passionate embrace, Ellen “could not have told, then or afterwards,” “what she was thinking of.” On her deathbed, Alice confesses to John that she is afraid she has “one tie too strong to this world”: “I cannot bear—as I ought—to have you away from me” (406). With her last favor—“Kiss me, dear John”—John kisses her “again and again,” and when Alice dies with “a half smile on the sweet face, of most entire peace and satisfaction,” he “kissed, once again, the sweet lips” (440, 441). After Alice’s death, Ellen is adopted to the Humphreys to “take Alice’s place” (454). Ellen not only takes place of Alice by becoming exactly like her, but also incorporates Alice’s incestuous attachment to her brother.

Ellen's love for God and John, which she internalizes by melancholic identification with her mother and Alice, enables her to envision a Christian community as an extended family transcending blood relationship. By imaginary heterosexual union with God through identification with her mother and Alice, Ellen, to use her maternal grandmother's words, "wish[es] to claim kindred with all the world" (529). As Jana Argersinger rightly argues, Ellen converts those who are not included in the familial community of bourgeois American society, a Dutch farmer Van Brunt and a country vixen Nancy Vawse, by her kiss: "Warner evokes the ritual Christian greeting by which brethren symbolically unite with each other and God through a holy kiss, a long-standing practice probably instituted by apostles Paul and Peter" (259).

Although the closure of the novel seems to license the reading of Ellen's growth into heterosexuality, the novel suggests that the quasi-incestuous couple, Ellen and John, is not exactly sexually gratified. In the novel's original ending, Ellen's marriage to her adopted brother is only suggested. But the novel has a final chapter that describes Ellen's return to the United States and her matrimony with John, which was not published until 1978. Ellen is welcomed in the re-furnished Humphreys household, and finds two paintings hung between her own room and John's study. One is "the Madonna and child, in a little antique heavily carved oval frame," and the other is "a fine copy of Correggio's recumbent Magdalen" (578). John's educational intention of juxtaposing the two is clearly articulated: "you may compare them—this [Madonna] is moral beauty, that is merely physical" (578). Obviously, Magdalen and Madonna respectively represent the corporeality of female body and the idealized maternal body. Ellen, at first objecting to hanging the two together, finally concedes, saying with a smile, "Well, let them hang . . . I would not have them moved now. I am glad this is just over where my flowers will be" (580). Ellen's statement sounds rather strange, for flowers are a traditional symbol of "the beauty that fades"—the corporeality of the female body. After the next morning of the nuptial night, "the first she had ever had with him in her life," Ellen goes up to "*her room*" (581; italics original). John finds her there "looking very thoughtful." Inquired what she is doing, Ellen answers, "Thinking—hard . . . This room *only* wants to have my flower-stand filled to be absolute perfection. Only that. They will do for it what nothing but flowers can" (581; italics original). Ellen's answer is elusive, and the narrator does not delve into what exactly Ellen has been thinking; yet, with the reference to the "flower-stand," which is said to be set under the two paintings, it is surmised that Ellen's

thought is wandering around the contrast between Magdalene and Madonna, and she concludes that she needs flowers, the symbol of female corporeality. Her wedding night does not seem to satisfy her sensuality, and she ponders on the meanings of the paintings. It is important to note that the picture of Magdalene is specified as “Correggio’s.” Among Correggio’s Magdalenes, the only one that has its “head rest[ing] upon the hand” as Ellen describes is titled “Reading Magdalene,” in which Magdalene reads a book, lying on the ground with her bosom half exposed (578). Contrary to John’s warning to Ellen, “Read no novels,” the unpublished ending of *The Wide, Wide World* seems to seduce its female reader to the recovery of sensual pleasure not through heterosexuality and genitality, but through the act of reading of sentimental literature.

* * *

As Leslie Fiedler states, the “theme of brother-sister incest haunts the early American novel on its lower levels of literacy as well as on the higher—a nightmare from which our writers do not choose to awaken too soon” (98); for the leitmotiv of sibling incest provided the young nation with the “very symbol of justified revolution” against the parental authority (112). The revolution incestuous sisters in sentimental novels foment is, I have argued in this paper, the one that introduces confusion in the family structure based on a heterosexual coupling. The confusion brought by Harriot, Lucy, and Ellen does not immediately disrupt the patriarchal structure, in which female body as the abject is rendered invisible through the symbolical construction of motherhood. Through describing their resistance within, however, these three novels revolving around sibling incest add momentum to envisioning a form of community in which the maternal body ceases to be a mere vessel of biological reproduction. In this sense these novels represent what Jane Tompkins calls the “blue print for survival” for women in patriarchal society (xvii): “Instead of rejecting the culture’s value system outright, they appropriated it for their own use, subjecting the beliefs and customs that had molded them to a series of transformations that allowed them both to fulfill and transcend their appointed roles” (161). Seemingly, heroines of sentimental literature do not, unlike Fiedler’s genealogy of heroes of American novels demonstrates, “turn from society to nature or nightmare out of a desperate need to avoid the facts of wooing, marriage, and child-bearing” (Fiedler 25). Still, American Antigones, or,

not-quite-queer-heroines of sentimental literature secretly dream new forms of kinship in which the conundrum of the maternal body will be resolved—a dream from which we “do not choose to awaken too soon.”

Notes

¹ Anne Dalke’s list includes Brown’s another novel, *Ira and Isabella* (1807), Susanna Rowson’s *Mentonia* (1794), *The Trials of the Human Heart* (1795), and the sequel of her 1791 massive best-seller *Charlotte Temple, Charlotte’s Daughter* (1828), as well as Sally Wood’s *Julia and the Illuminated Baron* (1800) and the anonymous works such as *Margaretta* (1807) and *The History of Albert and Eliza* (1812).

² Freud, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” argues that in case of mourning, the libidinal cathexis on the lost object is eventually displaced onto a new object; in melancholia, the libido is withdrawn into the ego itself. The ego of the melancholic subject incorporates the object into its very structure, taking on the object’s character and thereby identifying with it. In effect, the lost object becomes a part of the ego through the process of internalization, and the ego becomes its own object of desire: “The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up. This substitution of identification for object-love is an important mechanism in the narcissistic affections” (249).

³ The real Lucy Temple, Charlotte’s mother, subtly expresses her doubt for the patriarchal system in which the mother becomes an instrument of both biological and symbolic reproduction, saying a “predilection for [her] family names” should be succumbed for the situation in which “the name of a female must at some time or other in all probability be changed” (*Lucy* 223).

⁴ Needless to say, it is not to argue that Noble herself is aligned with the hetero-normative discourse: on the contrary, Noble reads the hetero-normative narrative in *The Wide, Wide World* in order to assess the degree to which the novelist was embedded in the dominant discourse. For her, then, to assert that the novel describes non-hetero-normative sexualities is to naïvely underestimate the constraint of social norms, with which the novelists struggle to find a narrow leeway for expressing female desire.

⁵ In an 1892 edition of the text reprinted with illustrations in 1987 by Feminist Press, the male personal pronoun representing God is, unlike the original edition of 1850 that capitalizes it as “Him,” left uncapitalized throughout the novel, thereby startlingly humanizing God.

⁶ Originally, this phrase comes from Proverbs 23:26: “My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways.” Marshman’s adoption of this phrase to the “daughter” is interesting when we consider the succeeding verses: “For a whore is a

deep ditch; and a strange woman is a narrow pit./ She also lieth in wait as for a prey, and increaseth the transgressors among men.”

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