FASHIONING THE DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY: WOMEN AND THE LANGUAGE OF FASHION IN THE WORKS OF ELIZABETH STODDARD, LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, AND ELIZABETH KECKLEY

Brooke Villafranca, B.A.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2010

APPROVED:

Ian Finseth, Major Professor
Stephanie Hawkins, Committee Member
Kelly Wisecup, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Women authors in mid to late nineteenth century American society were unafraid to shed the old domestic ideology and set new examples for women outside of racial and gender spheres. This essay focuses on the ways in which Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*, and Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* represent the function of fashion and attire in literature. Each author encourages readers to examine dress in a way that defies the typical domestic ideology of nineteenth century America. I want my readers to understand the role of fashion in literature as I progress through each work and ultimately show how each female author and protagonist set a new example for womanhood through their fashion choices.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“There was a New Woman, as I’ve heard tell, And she rode a bike with a horrible bell, She rode a bike in a masculine way, and she had a spill on the Queen’s highway” (Richardson 23). This rhyme cited in Punch’s Almanack for 1897, recounts the misadventures of a new woman who advocates bicycling and ‘rational dress’ – two ideas that were opposed by journalists and male critics of the late nineteenth century. Rational dress by women of the late nineteenth century included the split skirt which most critics attempted to conceal with a “petticoat—a more familiar and reassuring emblem of femininity” (Richardson 24). The term “New Woman” was coined in 1894, fictionalized by writers such as Sarah Grand and created “as a means of advancing sexual and social change” (Richardson 24). The new woman symbolized a break away from the separate-spheres mentality and women’s increasing challenge to their “subordinate social and political position” (Richardson 1). The doctrine of separate spheres, developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, deemed “that women and men were designed by God and nature to operate in quite different arenas—men in the public world of exploit, war, work, intellect, and politics; women in the world of nurturance and the affections centered on the home” (Matthews 5). Many women inherited their reformative ideas from Mary Wollstonecraft whose Vindications of the Rights of Woman (1792), had denounced “the sexual double standard and urged women’s right to education, employment, and full citizenship” (Richardson 1).

During the 1820s and 1830s, socialists inspired by Robert Owens sought to “extend the home and erase the boundary between the self-enclosing family unit and the wider community;
they saw marriage and the nuclear family as impediments to the development of genuinely cooperative communities” (Richardson 3). Women’s magazines proliferated by the 1850s and novels were also a medium of feminine protest (Richardson 4). In her work “The New Woman in Fiction and In Fact” Mrs. M Eastwood creates a binary logic, striving to present a clear-cut right and wrong new woman; she informs her readers that the new woman is non-threatening, because, after all fiction is not fact (Richardson 11). Richardson makes clear, however, that the goal of the late nineteenth century new woman was not to break with tradition; “many new women wanted to achieve social and political power by reinventing rather than rejecting their domestic role” (Richardson 9). Other writers of the late nineteenth century, however, such as Juliet Gardiner point out that “New Woman novels testified to the power of fiction as an alternative means of exploration and manifesto for change” (Richardson 24). New woman fiction, however, was often criticized as being “socially and sexually irresponsible…who regarded marriage as an experiment or had children outside of wedlock” (Richardson 24). The prototypical new woman was one who chose to work outside of the home and establish herself within society working in laundries or as a seamstress, but no longer subdued by the orders of her husband. In many newspapers and journal articles, writers satirized the role of the new woman by portraying her smoking, wearing rational dress and bicycling and through these visuals the new woman became known as a cultural stereotype (Richardson 13). As Patricia Marks suggests, “such caricatures of the New Woman embodied fears about the changing status of women…the New Woman was seen either as bespectacled, physically degenerate weakling, or as a strapping Amazon who could outwalk, outcycle and outshoot any man” (Richardson 13). This reinvention of womanhood is an idea that was pioneered, in my argument, by even earlier
writers such as Elizabeth Stoddard, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Keckley, through fashion during the years spanning 1860-1877.

It is important to understand that the term “new woman” did not have to yet exist in order for women authors to already be establishing it into their writings. Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley use fashion to introduce the idea of the new woman and even though the term had not officially been introduced into novels and other mediums of women’s desire for independence until the 1890s, the three authors I focus on began to show examples of the new woman through the clothing in which they designed their characters.

“I know that a large part of myself is in the dresses I choose to wear” (James 181). In this scene from Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer sheds an unexpected light on the function that clothing serves in nineteenth century literature. In mid-nineteenth century America, fashion represented a way for women to define themselves in society and show their own sense of style. Fashion continued to evolve as new and trendier styles of dress began to affect women during the nineteenth century. Many women previously followed the styles presented in fashion magazines, such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, which was founded in 1830 by Louis Antoine Godey and became an important arbiter of fashion and etiquette. *Godey’s Lady’s Book* gave women a broad range of advice ranging from how to gain and maintain a proper husband to how a hostess should dress when she has company over, because according to Godey, “Our desire is simply to advise and aid those who are not confident in their own good taste” (230). Godey describes fashion as “woman’s idol; or what the magazines and their dressmakers designate as fashion. We blindly follow fashion, without consulting its becomingness…” (231). For women of this period, fashion represented a way to fit in with society and not be deemed a social or political outcast. Isabelle Lehuu, in a study of the pictorial representations of women in...
nineteenth century America, has written that women participated in “intimate relationships, sharing secrets or chitchat about fashion” (Lehuu 81) and that Godey’s Lady’s Book made clear that “fashion was tailored to the ideology of domesticity and motherhood” (Lehuu 87). This is a notion that the three female writers I examine, Elizabeth Stoddard, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Keckley, vehemently oppose and fashion themselves against through their writings.

In the 1850s, there were three main sources of women’s clothing, differentiated primarily by socioeconomic factors. First, there was an emerging group of haute couture, or high fashion, dressmakers in major East Coast cities. These skilled dressmakers copied the latest European styles on an individual basis for wealthy customers. Second, dressmakers in many towns and cities reproduced, on a custom basis, the styles presented in fashion plates or women’s magazines such as Godey’s or Peterson’s, or they would work from the oral descriptions of their clients. Third, women who were not in the upper class frequently had to make their own clothes. Homemade dresses were difficult to produce because there were few available dress patterns. Also, there were inherent problems in trying to construct skirts gathered at the waist, which was a popular way of communicating femininity and placed emphasis on the body as appealing to the eyes of others. The manufacture of the sewing machine in the 1850s and the production of dress patterns by Ebenezer Butterick in the late 1860s and 1870s helped to make more fashionable clothes available to women who sewed. During 1860-1870, the first factory-made clothes were being produced. This started with military uniforms during the Civil War and was extended to cloaks and scarves for women soon thereafter (The Social Psychology of Clothing 11). For the three works I focus on, Elizabeth Stoddard’s The MORGESONS (1862), Louisa May Alcott’s Behind a Mask (1866), and Elizabeth Keckley’s Behind the Scenes (1868), these sources of
women’s clothing provided a background for fashion sense and influenced the ways in which women dressed during the years 1860-77.

The American Civil War furthered the long-standing cultural tendency to define women by their bodies, so there was a large emphasis placed on dress and the ways in which women dressed defined not only their class status but also their femininity and womanliness in American standards. The three women authors I focus on implement authorial self-fashioning through their literature. Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley used print as a substitute for the constraints placed on their bodies during the American Civil War, and it is through their writings that they show different strategies for breaking away from the traditional emphases placed on dress as a social and sexual constraint to become new women for their respective societies. Even though women struggled to be taken seriously as authors, Stoddard, Keckley, and Alcott each define what it means to be a new woman in the mid-nineteenth century by setting themselves in opposition to other writers and writing themselves into their own works. By doing so, the authors not only fashion their characters as examples of prototypical new women for society, but also fashion themselves as authors in a new light not common for women writers of this period.

While numerous critics, including Judith Fetterley, Jane Tompkins, Nina Baym, Catherine Clinton, Susan K. Harris, and Lora Romero have written about separate gendered-spheres and the implications of being a woman in nineteenth century America, none of these critics focus on dress as a catalyst for becoming a new woman during this period of turmoil and ever-changing definitions of fashion and true womanhood. The very fiction I focus on, “a large body of once popular but now neglected fiction, the many novels by American women authors about women, written between 1820 and 1870,” (Baym 1) tended to focus on the issues women writers faced during this time, simply because they were women writing outside of their
domestic sphere. This fiction was by far the most popular literature of its time, and on the strength of that popularity, “authorship in America was established as a woman’s profession and reading as a woman’s avocation” (Baym 1). Nonetheless, the experience of many female authors “seemed to be outside the interests and sympathies of the male critics whose judgments have largely determined the canon of classic American literature” (Baym 14). Authors such as Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley were hardly recognized among the major women writers of the period—including Emily Dickinson and Harriet Beecher Stowe—and until recently in fact, “only Dickinson was acknowledged to be of classic stature” (Baym 14). Baym writes, “The tremendous vogue of women’s fiction in the middle years of the nineteenth century…is used to characterize the horrible situation facing many would-be-serious writers in America” (14). While each of these women were writing in a time in which it seemed foreign for a woman to write in the same literary circle as a man, my argument takes these observations a step further and focuses on how women’s courage to dress themselves in ways that may have seemed foreign to others during the time presents a new step in women’s liberation and furthers the desire of women to dress differently and mold themselves into a society equal to men. While editors of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* demanded that women remain within their “separate gender-sphere,” I show how Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley attempt to bring together the separate spheres to create a whole new society for women, in which the protagonists and female authors themselves were allowed to dress in whatever literal and metaphorical fashions they desired and not forced to follow particular rules or trends of the period (Hale).

The American Civil War was instrumental in keeping these women writers’ fiction in line with literary circles, because it provided a way for them to write without being trapped by the rules and regulations of patriarchal society. In order to understand how Stoddard, Alcott, and
Keckley set themselves apart by metaphorically dressing in a different manner than other female authors of the time, it is important first to understand how women authors generally began to establish themselves in society as writers. In order to remain within their seemingly proper domestic sphere of the home and not cause trouble for themselves as would-be-writers, many women chose to write about their experiences during wartime through less flashy genres: journal narratives and private fiction. According to Sarah E. Gardner, “Southern white women who wished a wider reading audience than their immediate families turned their talents to fiction, using the Civil War as a catalyst for their novels; like journal keeping, novel writing was familiar ground for at least a small group of Southern women” (14). While these women took up domestic matters, such as the role of wife and mother by being supportive to their relatives during the war, the women authors I will focus on took up the pen to write about more political matters. They stepped out of the background created by males and other women authors of the time such as Fanny Fern and showed that women and men did not belong in separate spheres, but that women should be allowed to write at the same level as men, and with the same opportunities.

Women who chose to make writing a part of their public, as well as private lives, showed courage against criticism and persecution for their thoughts and beliefs, “burn[ing] up the corsets” of social expectations and norms of the nineteenth century and creating new examples for future women and female authors (Harde 167). For many women, “the Civil War brought changes of staggering proportion. Most were changes in degree: public arenas in which women had only token representation before the war were brimming with women during wartime…War was a great catalyst for change among men, and it brought about enormous transformations for female activities as well” (Clinton 80-1). Many women took up their feminine duties to support
the troops, such as Dorothea Dix, who was appointed Superintendent of Nurses for the Union Army in 1861, and who had such stipulations that her nurses must be “plain in appearance” which drew considerable criticism from pretty applicants and male patients. Dix and other women pioneers in medicine were aware of the prejudice many men harbored against unmarried women participating in immodest activities” (Clinton 81-2). Alcott, Stoddard, and Keckley, however, chose to participate in those “immodest activities,” by seemingly following the fashionable standards of the literary world, while also undressing themselves and conveying messages of sexual and political freedom through literature (Clinton 81-2).

Many nineteenth century women’s texts begin and end with conventional plots—the woman remains within her domestic sphere and is not allowed to leave it through any means, or at least not leave it permanently. While Stoddard’s The Morgeson’s, Alcott’s Behind a Mask, and Keckley’s Behind the Scenes tend to follow the same pattern—by having their protagonists married and settled by the end of their works, with the exception of Keckley’s protagonist who remains a widow—they approach the conventional in a different way. They are able to leave their own domestic spheres by dressing their characters and themselves in a way that was not accepted by their current societies, thus challenging dominant gender norms through the language of fashion. By dressing their characters in such a way that their true natures are masked from the other characters, but at the same time, hinting at the idea of a different type of woman through the attire of the characters, these women authors were undermining the typical role of women in nineteenth century society, and also undressing themselves in a sense to show the true strength of women writers of this period. Most women of this period did follow the fashion of the time, but the representation of fashion in the literature of the period proves to be especially fruitful in pointing out the benefits of standing on one’s own against society. The three
protagonists in Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes*, and Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask* do not follow what was considered the appropriate dress standards of the time and by not following typical rules, they set new examples for women on proper dress and more importantly showed other women how to stand up against the political spheres that seemed to control them during the Civil War. The semiotics of dress represents self-fashioning; both authors and protagonists dress with intentions to achieve their social and political goals as new women for society.

Terminology derived from formal semiotics can help us explain more fully the ways in which attire functions in the literature. In his book *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes, radically extending Ferdinand Saussure’s postulation of “the existence of a general science of signs, or semiology” (9), explores the nature of sign systems in a wide range of social domains. In regards to the garment system, Barthes further divides Saussure’s theory into three subsystems: “clothes as written about, clothes as photographed, and clothes as worn,” two of which I will focus on in my argument, “clothes as written about” and “clothes as worn” (26-7). Barthes states, “In clothes as written about, that is to say described in a fashion magazine by means of articulated language, there is practically no ‘speech’: the garment which is described never corresponds to an individual handling of the rules of fashion, it is a systematized set of signs and rules: it is a language in its pure state” (26). Adopting Ferdinand’s distinction between language and speech, Barthes shows how “the language in the garment system is made by the oppositions in pieces, parts of garment, and ‘details,’ the variation of which entails a change in meaning and by the rules which govern the association of the pieces among themselves, either on the length of the body or in depth; speech, in the garment system, comprises all the phenomena of individual way of wearing” (27). For Barthes, “the language of fashion does not emanate from
the ‘speaking mass’ but from a group which makes the decisions and deliberately elaborates the code,” an idea that is substantiated, and critically examined, in the three works I will focus on throughout my argument (27).

In his later work *The Language of Fashion*, Roland Barthes writes that “the garment is always conceived, implicitly, as the particular signifier of a general signified that is exterior to it,” meaning the fashion that the protagonists wear in my chosen works, define them in a particular class in their respective societies (9). It is in the way they choose to dress themselves that they are setting themselves as examples of new womanhood for mid-nineteenth century society. “It is obvious,” Barthes continues, “that there is a constant movement between dressing and dress,” (9) which is evident in my chosen works through the goals of the female protagonists and respective authors to achieve social and political freedom through their choice of dress. The audiences that admire my female protagonists perceive the chosen dress to mean domesticity, while my female authors attempt to convey female independence through fashion choices. It is through this fashionable disguise that Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley manipulate formal semiotics as a lens for understanding clothing’s function in literature.

Attire in these works is redefined by the women and the ways in which they choose to represent themselves in society—whether under the guise of a costume or by passing into a separate racial sphere—under the lens of semiotics. I will argue that the three female protagonists—Cassandra Morgeson, Jean Muir, and Elizabeth Keckley—each use the language of fashion to advance their gender and class statuses in their respective societies. Cassandra Morgeson manipulates fashion of her period to maneuver through her provincial society and define herself as a new woman unafraid to rise above her gender role through economic and social advancements. Jean Muir manipulates fashion under the mask of a domestic aid, but is
essentially playing a role to advance her social and class status in society as an African-American woman passing through a white household. Elizabeth Keckley makes the furthest advancement into new womanhood by using her fashion sense to obtain control over a powerful white woman at the end of the Civil War and gains her racial and social freedom through fashion. Together, these three protagonists unlock new horizons of possibility for the function of attire in literature, an idea that future women authors expand into the twentieth century.

While other nineteenth century women authors, such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Catherine Sedgwick, have written about dress and fashion in relation to new womanhood, they do not focus specifically on the Civil War era as a period in which fashion styles began to change and develop, so that women could escape their old gender and political spheres. Other women authors have focused specifically on the times before and after the Civil War in which women began to cross dress and define what it meant to be a new woman. While I do acknowledge that these other instances represent new womanhood, I show readers how my argument stands apart from what these other authors have stated before me, by defining how the women authors I am using—Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley—wrote about fashion in relation to new womanhood during the Civil War. My argument also stands apart from other critics, because even though some critics, such as Christine McDermott and Steve Criniti focus on dress in relation to Alcott and Keckley’s works, they do not mention Stoddard’s use of fashion to represent new womanhood.

For my argument I focus on three different women who choose to set themselves apart and not dress the same, either physically or metaphorically, as everyone else, but choose to follow different rules. Cassandra Morgeson of Stoddard’s The Morgesons (1862), Mrs. Lincoln of Keckley’s famous autobiography Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years
in the White House (1868), and Jean Muir of Alcott’s Behind a Mask (1866) all set themselves in a position against the typical standards of fashion and etiquette for women of the Civil War period. While the editor of Godey’s Lady’s Book, Sarah Joseph Hale, preached separate gendered-spheres for women of the period, I argue that each of the female protagonists in the above mentioned works position themselves as new trendsetters by not following the typical patterns for women of the period. While they are not able to completely redefine womanhood for the mid-nineteenth century, it is in the language of fashion that these women create a foundation of new womanhood for other women to expand on in later centuries.

I move both chronologically and thematically through my chapters, beginning with Stoddard (1862), Alcott (1866), and ending with Keckley (1868). I have chosen to format my chapters in this way, because moving chronologically through historical events helps me show the progression of new womanhood through fashion over the course of the Civil War and into its immediate aftermath. I begin with Stoddard to show readers the complex effects of fashion on an upper class white woman who learns how to maneuver through her provincial society using her fashion choices and as a result begins to define new womanhood for the mid-nineteenth century by moving away from her old gender sphere. I move on to Alcott in an attempt to show readers how she furthers the progression of new womanhood by exploring the darker side of humanity—dressing herself and her protagonist in ways that were considered foreign to the current society. Alcott writes during a time in history when slaves were being emancipated and her main character, Jean Muir, in my argument, although she seems to be a white woman with “blonde locks of hair and pale skin,” is actually an African- American woman passing in white society under the guise of a costume (Alcott 6). Alcott, in much the same way, was able to pass through her literary society as a female writer and set new standards for women authors because of her
progressive works that redefined women’s literature in a racial and gender sense and Alcott’s own courage as an author and woman. Keckley openly writes as a former African-American slave and even goes so far as to strike up a close friendship with a white woman by dressing her for the presidential society, indirectly giving herself power over the white woman. This transference of control, I argue, directly undermines the power structure in which African-Americans were supposed to be subservient to whites during the American Civil War. Each woman author and their respective female protagonists fashioned themselves for society with similar goals of redefining womanhood for the nineteenth century. I tie together each of my assertions through different aspects—public versus private sphere, costume, and race—examining the ways in which these women define themselves through fashion and dress, ultimately molding the protagonists and authors into new women for their respective societies.
Chapter Notes


4. See Nina Baym’s *Women’s Fiction: a Guide to Novels by and about Women in America*

5. See Sara Joseph-Hale’s *The Lecturess, or, Woman’s Sphere*

6. See Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ portrayal toward women’s dress in her text, *What to Wear* (1873), which “explored the social, moral, ethical, economic, and gender issues surrounding women’s clothing” (167) and Catherine Sedgwick’s scornful discussion in *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home* (1841) critiques norms of dress (“taste”) for older English women” (190).

8. See Christine McDermott’s “Behind A Mask of Beauty: Alcott’s Beast in Disguise” and Steve Criniti’s “Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years a Fairy Godmother: Dressmaking as Self-Making in Elizabeth Keckley’s Autobiography”.
CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH STODDARD’S THE MORGESONS AND THE LANGUAGE OF FASHION

The language of fashion suffuses in Elizabeth Stoddard’s The Morgesons (1862). In this novel, fashion seems to focus on what was considered proper dress for women by such historical arbiters as Antoine Godey. Through her literature, however, Stoddard chose to fashion herself improperly by writing against typical domestic ideas and was therefore deemed an outcast by the literary community. While numerous critics have touched on the idea of new womanhood as a leading theme in the novel, none have pointed out the specific attire that Stoddard’s characters wear to define the prototypical new woman. The key to this difference is that dress is so central to Stoddard’s novel; in particular, fashion enables the main character to separate herself from other females in the work. Stoddard’s overall design of her novel stresses the importance of living a life for the self and her main character follows that example. It is with economic power from her seemingly successful family that Cassandra is able to dress herself in high couture fashion, and present herself to other females in her city in a way that guarantees acceptance and subsequent growth as a new woman for her mid-nineteenth century society, because she is able to hide herself behind the clothes. Stoddard fashioned herself in a new way, so as to make an impact on the literary community, in the same way that her protagonist, Cassandra, makes an impact on womanhood for nineteenth century society by dressing for herself and not paying attention to the influence of those around her. Stoddard’s work shows readers the importance of fashioning ourselves in unique ways so as to develop as individuals and not conform to the rules of society. Stoddard sets up this contrasting relationship between not being completely outcast by society and enabling self-exploration to show readers the strategies women used to escape political and gender constraints of the mid-nineteenth century.
At the beginning of the novel, Stoddard introduces her main character Cassandra as a young girl growing up in mid-nineteenth century Surrey in England. Her family is relatively upper class and while her father works outside of the home, her mother chooses to stay home and fulfill her domestic duties as a woman. Cassandra grows up following her mother’s example and fulfilling her own duties as a child; including serving tea to the older women at parties and entertaining friends at her home. As Cassandra gets older, however, she learns how to use fashion to set herself up in a different way from the Surrey girls in her society and wishes to be more like girls from a different town. When she becomes too rebellious, her mother decides to send Cassandra to live with her grandfather in a town called Bartmouth. It is in this new city that Cassandra is able to spread her wings and fashion herself out of the typical domestic sphere common for women in mid-nineteenth century. Stoddard elaborates further on Cassandra’s growth as she escapes her old economic and gender sphere, and by the end of the novel, even though she is married and seems to fulfill her domestic duty as a woman, Cassandra manages to become the leader of her own household, no longer defined by patriarchal society. I will argue that fashion is what initially sets Cassandra up in opposition to the tradition of separate spheres, and will show how she is able to break away from her old economic and gender role to progressively overturn the common understanding of domestic ideology in mid-nineteenth century America. Cassandra is able to work within dominant fashion standards and to turn them subtly to her advantage, because she chooses to dress similarly to others in her society while also growing as a woman through her unique fashion sense. While Stoddard does not completely transform the old idea of domestic and gender spheres that existed in the mid-nineteenth century, she sets an example in Cassandra for other women to follow and expand on in later years.
In *The Morgesons*, Elizabeth Stoddard and her main character, Cassandra, epitomize this example of the new American woman. While other women in the novel choose to remain within the “conceptual border of the home,” Cassandra longs to break away from the separate sphere that women were placed in and set an example for new types of women (Kaplan 183). In her chapter on separate spheres, Amy Kaplan deconstructs the old idea of separate spheres by defining it in terms of domestic versus foreign in relation to geography and the historical expansion of America from the 1830s to the 1850s. While Kaplan focuses on domesticity versus nationality in relation to geography, I illustrate the idea of “foreign” as that which is outside the realm of the domestic space and once considered improper for women of the mid-nineteenth century to even consider a possibility. The idea of women working outside the home was a “foreign” concept prior to the Civil War and many women were simply expected to marry well and raise children. As a result of the Civil War, however, women began to break away from the constraints of separate-spheres ideology and integrate themselves more into the society with men, a concept that was also exemplified through the fashion of the years spanning 1860-1877. In the same way that America was expanding its control over foreign U.S. territories, American women were expanding their control over their own minds, a previously foreign concept, by choosing to dress differently than was previously accepted by mid-nineteenth century society. Stoddard’s main character chooses to dress in new, stylish ways that opposed past American fashion, and in turn, frees herself from the social and sexual politics of her time through literature.

While most feminist critics, including Nina Baym, Mary Kelley, and Susan Coultrap-McQuinn, do not mention Stoddard as one of the more well-known women writers of the mid-nineteenth century, she fits into their time frame perfectly (Seibel 19). Stoddard shared the view
with other female writers that “marriage and domestic competence were essential to women’s power” (Seibel 20). Even though Stoddard seems to lower herself to the existing traditions, “by using certain elements and subverting others, and by openly defying the conventional standard while at other times adhering to it,” it is through her writing that Stoddard defies conventional standards of women’s writing by writing about a woman who attempts to set herself apart from the world around her through dress, which remains different in her public and private life (Seibel 21). In her unconventional style, Stoddard shows new types of women and in turn defines herself in the literary world as an independent female writer. At times throughout *The Morgesons*, Stoddard seems to adhere to the conventional standards of domestic women’s writing, while also conveying a message of independence and new womanhood through her main character’s attitude toward fashion and beauty.

In nineteenth-century America, the domestic novel was exemplified by the works of famous authors such as Susan Warner, but Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* challenges the typical domestic novel by undermining the Christian doctrine and domestic ideology that was present in novels written by women (Zagarell 284). While her contemporaries, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner “view their fiction as a combination of didacticism and entertainment, telling their readers what to think and feel, soliciting readers’ identification with their narratives by featuring accessible characters and familiar situations,” Stoddard viewed her novels as ‘art’ (Zagarell 284). She was determined to inscribe truth in her novels, with little direct appeal to emotions, leaving the work of ascertaining the truths her art suggested to her readers (Zagarell 284). By not following in the footsteps of her contemporaries, Stoddard emphasized life and the self throughout her works to show the public literary community that a woman could do more than “read the bible and sew more,” which is the standard that other women in her novel, besides
Cassandra, choose to follow (Stoddard 64). For Stoddard, the emphasis on the self also helped her, along with Alcott and Keckley, to set herself in a new context of women writers for the mid-nineteenth century. They went against typical domestic fiction in order to create new roles for women—indepentic women not afraid to stand alone against contemporary society through the fashion and dress of the period.

Even though most feminist critics including Sybil R. Weir, Susan K. Harris, and Sandra A. Zagarell do not agree with Stoddard,\(^8\) that her characterization of the novel contrasts with the typical domestic fiction of the period, because her protagonist marries at the end and “assumes the head of the household,” Cassandra still manages to set herself apart from the domestic ideology by dressing differently than others in the novel and therefore purposely excluding herself from other females in the work, particularly her mother and sister (Seibel 19). For Cassandra, her sense of individualism is “initially associated with the sea and her father’s side of the family because she admires her great-grandfather Locke Morgeson, whom she imagines as a bearer of ‘the spirit of progress’ because she is told he ‘had the rudiments of a Founder’” (Stoddard 9). She imagines that he was “born under the influence of the sea, while the rest of the tribe inherited the character of the landscape,” and yet Cassy also senses in her mother an “indescribable air of individuality” that she cannot seem to understand or identify (Stoddard 17).

Much of *The Morgesons* is concerned with Cassy’s attempt to articulate this ‘indescribable’ individuality in relation not only to her mother, but to herself and the other female figures in her life (Penner 2). Stoddard sets Cassandra’s mother and her sister, Veronica, in opposition to Cassandra’s ideas of individualism. By setting Cassandra in conflict with these two women she is supposed to admire, Stoddard is deconstructing the idea of womanhood during the mid-nineteenth century and demonstrating for us the desire to fashion oneself differently and not be
bound by the sexual and social constraints of society. Stoddard was able to move beyond the realm of domestic fiction in her portrayal of Cassandra, and defy the controlling politics of her own society to become an independent, stylish woman of the mid-nineteenth century.

Cassandra’s mother and sister represent typical domestic women of the period in Stoddard’s work. Both of these women are concerned with trivial ideas of the home and believe the important things in life, which for Cassandra means maintaining her independence as a woman, include reading the Bible and sewing so as not to upset the patriarchal society of which they are a part. Stoddard places Cassandra in opposition to her mother and sister’s ideals of womanhood, which makes Cassandra a new example of woman and sets up a contrast between women of the same period: “In contrast to the merely strong-headed heroine of the typical domestic novel, though, Cassandra is aware of the hostile feelings she elicits in others, and, at the same time, is unwilling to amend her behavior” (Seibel 24). Stoddard sets herself apart from other well-known women writers of her time by creating a different type of character, Cassandra, whom the other females in the novel, particularly the girls at her school, do not see on the same level as them. It is not until Cassandra decides to wear a dress, because it is the the fashion that the reader begins to see Cassandra in a new light, a woman conforming to society in subtle ways. Stoddard connects Cassandra, the independent young woman, with Cassandra, the domestic woman, through fashion and dress of the time. The dress she wears in front of others symbolizes Cassandra’s need to conform in order to be accepted by others in society, because without adhering to her current situation, at least for a short time, she would be completely rejected by others and never given the chance to explore her own self as a new type of woman. Cassandra is able to dress herself in such a way as to not draw too much attention, while still conveying a new
idea for women of the period; do not be afraid to stand alone against society in order to grow as a woman.

Stoddard’s novel begins by portraying Cassandra as a smart, independent young woman, who chooses to dress differently than other females in the novel in both the public and private spheres of her life. In her early years, Cassandra reflects: “Wherever I was, or whatever I did, no feeling of beauty ever stole into my mind” (Stoddard 14). Later on, however, as Cassandra becomes more self-aware of her appearance and wishes to look pretty for the world around her, she begins to imitate the other girls in society, who chose to follow the typical domestic rules for women and not go against society’s standards. Cassandra does maintain characteristics of her old self, however; in Bible class she mentions, “I dressed my hair after the fashion of the Bartmouth girls, with the small pride of wanting to make myself look different from the Surrey girls” (Stoddard 54). Even though she is conforming in some ways, her personality is shining through. Cassandra is already expressing a need to be different and chooses to articulate this desire through her dress and unique sense of fashion. While attire represented a way for women to display their femininity during the mid-nineteenth century, Stoddard portrays Cassandra in this way to set a new example of womanhood, a woman not afraid to move away from society’s standards and be her own person, while still maintaining her sense of womanliness and femininity. Conformity was an important standard that American women were expected to follow during the mid-nineteenth century. While having many friends was also considered important for women of this time, the ability to stand alone is what sets Cassandra apart from other females in the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Cassandra expresses her feelings when dealing with her classmates: “I did not care to visit, for in consequence of being turned out of school, which was considered an indelible disgrace and long remembered, my schoolmates
regarded me in the light of a Pariah, and put on insufferably superior airs when they saw me” (14). In the beginning of the work, the ability to fit in does not bother Cassandra very much; it is not until later that she becomes conscious of her appearance and wishes to be like the other girls in society. It is in this observation that readers are able to notice Cassandra’s growth as a woman; she maintains the need to be accepted while still attempting to stand on her own as a person; a sign of maturation into new womanhood.

As she comes of age in the novel, Cassandra begins to admire the fashion of the period and the reader notices its subtle effects on her as a woman. She learns what it means to fashion oneself for acceptance in society, a strong pressure upon women of the mid-nineteenth century. She remains under the guise of this costume, so that she can achieve domestic goals set forth by women before her. She is required to follow in their footsteps and not wander away from the domestic sphere, but remain within the control of patriarchal society. In one section, she is dressing in the presence of her mother and Cassandra notes:

She soon arrayed me in my red calico dress, spotted with yellow stars. I was proud of its buckram undersleeves, though they scratched my arms, and admired its wings, which extended over the protesting buckram. “It’s three o’clock; the company will come soon. Be careful of your dress. You must stand with me at the table to hand the cups of tea.”

She left me standing in a chair, so that I might see my pantalettes in the high-hung glass, and the effect of my balloon-like sleeves. (Stoddard 16)

Stoddard’s attention to detail is important in this scene because it defines the fashion deemed acceptable for women of the time. Stoddard mentions the “buckram undersleeves” as scratching Cassandra’s arms and the social and sexual constraints of her male-dominated society are placed on her even when she is a young child (16). While Cassandra does not seem to notice these
constraints yet, because she is actually proud of them and admires them, her mother notices the symbolic meaning of attire. She makes sure that Cassandra knows her proper domestic duty as a woman, and does not encourage any type of improper behavior. It is important for Cassandra to “be careful of [her] dress” so as not to undermine her femininity (Stoddard 16). Cassandra’s need to be admired by people outside of her immediate family becomes evident in this scene and over a period of time she becomes conscious of how she dresses in the public and private spheres of her life. Even though she wishes to be admired and stand out from others, Cassandra also learns to master the rules of womanhood in order to rise above them, by helping her mother serve the tea to other ladies, a behavior that would have been expected from young girls in the mid-nineteenth century. She grows up following the lead of her mother, while also attempting to step away from typical rules and standards governed by her society. Stoddard makes these ploys for new womanhood in subtle ways by not openly having Cassandra object to society’s standards. She simply chooses to dress slightly different from others, while still following society’s rules, so that she does not stand out in an overt way. Stoddard’s ability to have Cassandra conform, but also master the rules of new womanhood in a hidden way, so that Cassandra can eventually rise above her old gender and class status to set a new example for womanhood, is what makes Stoddard’s novel so illustrious to readers. She is able to convey her message of independence from social and sexual politics through the guise of a young girl in mid-nineteenth century society.

In other scenes, Cassandra masterfully chooses to follow the rules of womanhood by “showing less” and carrying on with the women in trivial gossip in order to learn strategies for advancing herself (Stoddard 17). Cassandra states:
Most of them wore lace caps, trimmed with white satin ribbon. They were larger, more rotund, and older than mother, whose appearance struck me by contrast…Her dress was a gray pongee, simply made and short; I could see her round-toed morocco shows, tied with black ribbon. She usually took out her shoestrings, not liking the trouble of tying them. A ruffle of fine lace fell around her throat, and the sleeves of her short-waisted dress were puffed at the shoulders…My observation was next drawn to Veronica, who, entirely at home, walked up and down the room in a blue cambric dress. (Stoddard 17)

In this scene Cassandra is analyzing the semiotics of dress for women in her society. She begins to notice a contrast between the person she always knew as her mother, through face and expression, and her mother’s attire as defiant of Mrs. Morgeson as a woman. She notices that her mother is conforming to the ideal behaviors of women during this period in the way she has fashioned herself for this public engagement with other women. Cassandra’s desire to be different is not as obvious in this scene because she unconsciously follows the advice of her elder nanny, by remaining “slightly abashed” from the party (Stoddard 17). Stoddard’s way of describing Mrs. Morgeson’s dress in this scene represents the conformity of women to society’s rules. Mrs. Morgeson’s hands are described as ‘idle’ so as not to call too much attention to herself, while Veronica, is “entirely at home” among these societal women (17). Unlike Veronica, Cassandra does not feel at home in this domestic scene, because she has the desire to break away from these duties that women were subjected to; Cassandra’s observation of these two women is what triggers her need to be different from other females in her society. Even though she once admired her mother’s air of individuality, she also seems to reject her mother later, by not conforming to her standards of what it means to be a woman by “reading the Bible and sewing more” or the fashioned standards of society (Stoddard 64). Stoddard once again
focuses on the details of the women’s fashion in this scene as a way to convey her message of ideal womanhood.

Through her seeming emphasis on proper behavior and clothing for women in mid-nineteenth century America, Stoddard is both deconstructing and denaturalizing the idea of femininity. The version of Mrs. Morgeson, Cassandra observes remains “colorless” as if she has no shine of her own personality and is forced to remain within a black/white spectrum of society, not drawing too much attention to herself by dressing in flashy colors while in the public sphere of society (Stoddard 17). Stoddard chose to dress herself plainly and did not wish to openly defy public standards in the literary world, because she would have been deemed unfit for society as a woman writer. This scene exemplifies Stoddard’s strategy for redefining the domestic ideology, to remain hidden while at the same time conveying a new idea for what it means to be a woman in society through Cassandra and her desire to dress differently.

Stoddard uses Cassandra’s father to emphasize the affects of dress on class status. Cassandra’s father influences her fashion sense and while encouraging her to dress better than others, still stifles her unique sense of fashion in the same way as her mother. According to Cassandra,

He liked, when we went there were fine shops, to buy and bring home handsome shawls, bonnets, and dresses, wholly unsuited in general to the style and taste of each of us, but much handsomer than were needful for Surrey. They answered, however, as patterns for the plainer materials of our neighbors. (Stoddard 23)

It is significant that her father, a patriarchal symbol, encourages Cassandra to transgress the gender boundaries of proper attire, but still controls her fashion sense through his economic means. In mid-nineteenth century society, Cassandra’s family would have been considered
seemingly well off financially and she chose to profit on that economic success by dressing herself better than “was needful for Surrey” (Stoddard 23). The benefit for her father is that he maintains respect from others in society, because “he is unable to see anything beyond the material” of his seemingly successful economic ventures (Stoddard 23). Cassandra is able to hide herself beneath the clothes that are considered better but not extravagant, and convey Stoddard’s message of new womanhood, because she does not seem to overstep society’s bounds. It is through his economic means and that over his daughter that Cassandra’s father maintains his own place in mid-nineteenth century Surrey as a high ranking individual and show that he is still in control as the patriarch of his family, while he is unknowingly giving Cassandra strategies for how to overcome her own economic and class status as a woman in society through fashion.

Stoddard’s main character, Cassandra, is similar to Stoddard herself as a woman in the mid-nineteenth century. As a child, Elizabeth “was never accepted as a legitimate member of the local aristocracy; as an adult, she took pleasure in satirizing the stuffiness of her native town” (ix). Writing represented a way for Stoddard to seek vengeance on the stuffiness of her town and she even situated Cassandra in a similar setting that she herself grew up in as a young woman; Stoddard was the oldest surviving child of a tailor’s daughter and a shipbuilder father who’s financial business risk “left the family in a position of precarious gentility that sharpened his daughter’s natural quickness for perceiving fine social distinctions and slights” (ix). When Stoddard married her husband, Richard, she was described as a young woman who “loved money had it and spent it,” which is similar to Cassandra in many ways, because she portrays a woman who strives on money and the power it provides her throughout Stoddard’s work (xi).
Cassandra uses clothing to mesmerize the other characters in the novel and at one point in the narrative when Mr. Somers is staring at her in an intense manner, Cassandra states: “The recognition of some impulse had mastered him. I must prevent Helen and Mr. Somers perceiving this! I shuffled the cards noisily, rustled my dress, looked right and left for my handkerchief to break the spell” (Stoddard 91). Cassandra uses her attire to captivate as well as distract people from her true character. Even though Cassandra acts like she does not understand the affairs of society, because she is enthralled with beauty and appearance, similar to a typical woman of the time, Stoddard created the character of Cassandra as a catalyst to advance the motives of women to gain their independence in a patriarchal society. Cassandra hides behind the mask of beautiful clothes, as a way to provide evidence of her societal ignorance at the dinner party she attends:

I wore a dark blue silk for the party, with a cinnamon-colored satin stripe through it…My short sleeves were puffed velvet, and a lace tucker was drawn with a blue ribbon across the corsage. As I adjusted my dress, a triumphant sense of beauty possessed me; Cleopatra could not have been more convinced of her charms than I was of mine. “It is a pleasant thing,” I thought, “that a woman’s mind may come and go by the gate Beautiful.” (Stoddard 90)

Similarly to other women, in particular Aunt Mercy “who wears a mask before her father,” Cassandra wears a different mask between the public and private spheres of her life (Stoddard 28). It is after she is sent away to live with her grandfather that Cassandra begins to have this revelation of dressing differently as a way to exercise her power amidst social constraints. In this way, fashion represents a portal to the female mind. She begins to see how other females in her society dress and becomes dissatisfied with her own attire:
“Aunt Mercy, these things are horrid, all of them.” Look at this shawl, and I unrolled a square silk fabric, the color of a sick orange. “Where did this come from?” “Saints upon earth!” she exclaimed, “Your father bought it at the best store in New York. It was costly.” “Now tell me, why do the pantalettes of those girls look so graceful? They do not twirl round the ankle like a rope, as mine do.” (Stoddard 37)

Most people do not believe that Cassandra could have grown into such a beauty and while at a party she states:

I turned and saw Charlotte Alden, of Bartmouth, the girl who had given me the fall on the tilt. She could not control an expression of surprise at the sight of the well-dressed woman before her. It was my dress that astonished her. Where could I have obtained such style? (Stoddard 142)

In this scene, Stoddard is conveying the sense of power that Cassandra has gained over other women in the novel, who chose to conform to patriarchal society’s rules and regulations. Dress creates a competition between women and defines Cassandra as the new woman because she is able to escape her old class status through fashion. In the public sphere of her life, Cassandra must dress a certain way, so that she will be more visually appealing to men of her stature, which leads to the goal of finding a husband and raising children.

On the other hand, Cassandra’s mother acts as a counterpart to her sense of individualism. When Cassandra writes her mother a letter Mrs. Morgeson replies by remaining concerned with the trivial things and at the same time increases Cassandra’s need for reform:

“My child, have courage. One of these days you will feel a tender pity, when you think of your mother’s girlhood. You are learning how she lived at your age. I trembled at the prosperity of your opening life, and believed it best for you to have a period of contrast. I
thought you would, by and by, understand me better than I do myself; for you are not like me Cassy, you are more like your father. You shall never go back to Bartmouth, unless you wish it. Dear Cassy, do you pray any? I send you some new petticoats and a shawl.”

(Stoddard 46)

In this scene, Stoddard is attempting to shed light on disconnects that Cassandra first noticed among the societal women and her mother when she was a young girl in the parlor. Cassandra’s mother wishes for her to have a period of contrast, so that she can finally understand why her mother chose to conform to society’s standards. Louise Penner suggests,

That Mrs. Morgeson should feel that the transcendence of the ‘confines of her own life’ should be happening to her without knowing where it could possibly take her, without sensing a specific ‘will’ towards any particular object, speaks to the almost complete loss of her sense of self and her own desires,” which creates for Cassandra a sympathetic identification with her mother. (4)

Unlike her mother, who conformed to society’s standards as a young woman by dressing as her own father instructed and did not have the courage to rebel from society, Cassandra chooses to move away from her stifling society and create a new life for herself as a new type of woman.

Alice Morgeson also represents another counterpart to Cassandra throughout Stoddard’s work. While Alice was introduced as an independent woman who was able to survive on her own without a husband, after she lost her husband, Charles, in an accident, even she succumbs to the domestic societal rules. When Alice is about to leave her home after her husband’s death she mentions to Cassandra her plans for the future:

She would not stay; the atmosphere distressed her so, she went back to Boston to wait for your father. I could neither prevail on her to eat, drink, or rest. ‘What will you do,
Alice? ‘Take care of the children and manage the mills.’ ‘Manage the mills?’ ‘I can. No wonder you look astonished,’ she said, with a sigh. ‘I am changed. When perhaps I should feel that I have done with life, I am eager to begin it. I have lamented over myself lately.’ (Stoddard 125)

Stoddard has Alice taking care of the children for her future duties, because she is now conforming to society and illuminating for Cassandra once again the need to be different and break away from gender norms. Other characters in the novel see Cassandra as a different sort of woman, one who does not choose to conform to society’s standards. At one point in the novel, Cassandra’s mother is speaking to her father about Cassandra and she argues, “You think Cassandra has no ways of her own! She can make us change ours; do you know that?” (Stoddard 142). At this point in the novel, Stoddard is defining Cassandra’s growth as a woman in society. Even though she developed as a woman by following her mother’s influence and concentrating on her appearance in society, Cassandra is showing the nineteenth century society that appearance is not definitive of womanliness. Later, when Cassandra is speaking to Mr. Somers about Veronica she mentions, “A woman of genius is but a heavenly lunatic, or an anomaly sphere between the sexes; do you agree?” (Stoddard 242). It is in this moment in the text that Stoddard has Cassandra openly defy her domestic identity as a woman by defining herself between the sexes. She does not subvert herself to the common duties of womanhood but is able to display her intelligence in front of the male members of society. Stoddard shows readers that women of the nineteenth century had the talent and intellectual ability to rise above their class and gender spheres and create new women for the century. The image that Charlotte sees in front of her at the party is a grown woman, who does not match the young, independent Cassandra she once knew as a girl. Stoddard herself also developed herself in society as a writer exuding
growth and potential that other writers of the period did not acknowledge of Stoddard until she became famous.

Through her language of fashion, Stoddard creates a woman unafraid to defy society’s standards and dress herself in new, unique ways. She does not follow the typical fashion rules and while she remains under the guise of a costume throughout much of the work, as a seemingly domestic woman, Stoddard and her main character were actually conveying a deeper message: one of new womanhood. By the end of the work, even though it seems that Cassandra has succumbed to domestic rules of society by marrying and assuming the head of her household, she actually sets a new example of a true womanhood as the leader of her household; she is not dominated by a man or old gender expectations for women. Stoddard’s ability to distinguish Cassandra from the other women in her life, by fashioning her as a new model, is what pushes Stoddard into the realm of true womanhood. She is able to defy typical standards of society without being censored in any way, because most people of the time thought dress was a feminine matter and an essential element of domestic writing by women. Beginning with her observation of dress for mid-nineteenth century women, Stoddard moves forward and sets her main protagonist apart from other women in class and gender status, therefore setting an example of a new woman for mid-nineteenth century.
Chapter Notes


Like Stoddard, Alcott uses the language of fashion to encode her feminist message of new womanhood throughout *Behind a Mask* (1866). Alcott uses subversive messages in her writing to address the social and sexual constraints that restricted women and in my argument she sets her main character, Jean Muir, up as a new woman for mid-nineteenth century society not only in the ways she fashions Jean’s attire, but in how she illuminates another race and gender through the guise of a costume in her literature. Laura Romero comments on the ability of women like Alcott “to encode ‘subversive’ feminist messages in texts that merely appear conventional” (113) and in my argument, Alcott encodes these messages through dress in the way she disguises her main character behind the mask of domesticity to reveal a new woman for the nineteenth century. Jean Muir is introduced in the novel as a woman with a mysterious past, because all the Coventry family seems to know about her from her previous employer before she arrives is that she is “a quiet, accomplished, amiable girl, who needed a home” (Alcott 4). She assumes the role of governess to the youngest child of the house and seems to be hiding some sort of a secret behind her veil of womanliness, which will become more evident later on as I explore the use of costume and theatricality central to the theme of the novel. The term charming is historically associated with a “fascinating quality or attractiveness” (OED). Charm is a quality that would have been imperative for actresses to have and maintain in order to succeed in a desired role for their audiences.

The reader learns that Jean Muir was an actress and she plays her desired role, while disguising herself in the costume of a domestic servant throughout the novel. By the end, she
achieves her goal of marrying the successful patriarch of the family and is able to overcome her old class and gender status. I argue that the mask Jean Muir hides behind throughout the novel is not simply one of a domestic woman, but a black woman attempting to pass through society as a white woman to ultimately achieve her goal of self-made womanhood for the nineteenth century. Alcott uses theatrical devices and suggestive racial language to define her main character as a new woman for the nineteenth century.

Alcott’s use of costume and theatrical devices proves especially helpful in concealing the truth about her protagonist from the other characters. Anne Hollander’s *Seeing through Clothes* emphasizes “the use of costumes to represent different aspects of character representation which has remained the same through the centuries” (Hollander 237). Alcott makes use of the costume that hides her protagonist and plays on the fact that “Images in art may be made up of anything, whereas theatrical events require human beings; and human beings have the need to be dressed—not just covered but invested in appropriately according to the circumstances” (Hollander 237). Alcott’s character, Jean Muir, elucidates this fact with her costume and ability to mesmerize other characters in the work, particularly Gerald and Edward Coventry, through her hidden portrayal of a younger woman. In one scene, Jean uses the influence of silence to further her power over the family, “Jean said nothing, but silently appealed to eye and ear by the pretty picture she made of herself” (Alcott 71). She is singing to the family at this point and slowly “charming” them with her spells of intrigue and innocence. Even though most critics have touched on the fact that Jean represents a new woman, specifically, the “femme fatale,” or the female villain in the work, I argue that Jean actually represents a new race of woman unafraid to fashion herself differently than others in order to gain a higher respect from the world around her.
and show the world a new independent woman—in much the same way that Alcott was attempting to gain respect as a female author in the literary society around her.  

Alcott’s main character, Jean Muir, dresses differently within the public and private spheres, by hiding beneath the guise of a costume in the public sphere and she reveals her real self in the private sphere. She reveals herself as “a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least” when she is in the comfort of her private sphere, and does not reveal her true motives for remaining behind a mask to the other characters until the end of the work when she has achieved her goals of marrying the rich old patriarch of the household (Alcott 11). For Alcott, this new idea of the femme fatale represents not only a new woman for society, but a new way for Alcott herself to be recognized in the literary world since she was able to deceive publishers and other authors by writing under the guise of a topic that seemed domestic and feminine—women’s fashion. Alcott uses clothing as a mask by characterizing Jean Muir as the typical domestic woman who is expected to take care of children and raise them under the proper standards of the time—Alcott even creates her protagonist to be the governess of the young female child and the other characters believe that Jean is the typical “angel of the house;” a common theme in other domestic novels of the period. The other characters in *Behind a Mask* believe that Jean is innocent and Alcott notes,

Nothing could be more unobtrusive and retiring than her manners. She was devoted to Bella, who soon adored her, and was only happy when in her society. She ministered in many ways to Mrs. Coventry’s comfort, and that lady declared there never was such a nurse…The very servants liked her; and instead of being, what most governesses are, a forlorn creature hovering between superiors and inferiors, Jean Muir was the life of the house, and the friend of all but two. Lucia disliked her, and Coventry distrusted her;
neither could exactly say why, and neither owned the feeling, even to themselves. (Alcott 25)

Although Jean seems “unobtrusive and retiring in her manners,” she is actually plotting a deeper secret and not wanting to expose herself to the other characters (Alcott 25). Isabell Klaiber writes, “In her meek, virtuous and seemingly innocent conduct, Jean Muir reminds the reader of Charlotte Bronte’s then well-known Jane Eyre, who implicitly set the standards of the family’s hopes for a governess character” (216-17). Jean must act the part in order to gain control over her employers to advance herself as a new woman. The governess role she plays defines her in a subservient role to the Coventry family, but in my argument, Jean is actually the one who manipulates her way into the family until she ultimately achieves her goal of new womanhood by becoming the head of the Coventry family hierarchy. In much the same way, Alcott herself hid under a costume of tranquility by writing with the aim to please her authorial counterparts.

Jean is able to charm the other characters through her looks and the clothing that she wears plays a significant role in allowing her to be successful when she acts as governess and caregiver to the family. For Jean, “in terms of social and literary conventions, the qualities of piety and purity were displayed through action and behavior” (Carby 26). Jean was required to act as a domestic woman, and remain “within the discourse of the cult of true womanhood, wifehood and motherhood were glorified as the purpose of a woman’s being; the home was the sphere of all a woman’s actions”—an idea that was glorified prior to and somewhat during the Civil War by both women and men (Carby 26). Neither Alcott, nor her main character, choose to remain within this domestic sphere, and they both use dress to manipulate their respective womanly causes in society. As Fetterley contends, “her story articulates a radical critique of the cultural constructs of ‘femininity’ and ‘little womanhood,’ exposing them as roles women must
play, masks they must put on in order to survive. Jean must play the role of ‘Beauty,’ but acts with the calculation of a predator, in order to get the title and wealth she seeks” (Butterworth 30). In order to gain recognition as a woman author, hiding behind a mask of subservient literature, by seemingly writing a domestic novel concerned with trivial female gossip, Alcott was able to advance her cause for new womanhood and independence as a female author.

Jean Muir uses dress to manipulate the other characters in the work under the guise of a costume. For women of this period, Dress is a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as its medium…The way clothes look depends not on how they are designed or made but on how they are perceived…The style is what combines the clothes and the body into the accepted contemporary look…not of ideal perfection, but of natural reality. (Hollander Seeing through Clothes 311)

Alcott structures her novel in such a way as to define a contrast between appearance and reality. In Behind a Mask, Jean Muir is recognized as beautiful because of her costume. The other characters in the work, particularly her male counterparts, seem to idealize Jean as their piece of visual art and fall in love with a hidden woman. She is deceiving them by “dressing” as a young woman, when she is defined by Alcott as an older woman in the novel. The disillusionment with “natural reality” causes the male characters to be especially captivated with Jean in the beginning of the work (Hollander 311). As Alcott puts it,

Of course, everyone looked at her then, and all felt a touch of pity at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black dress, with no ornament but a little silver cross at her throat. Small, thin, and colorless she was, with yellow hair, gray eyes, and sharply cut, irregular, but very expressive features…But something in the lines of her mouth betrayed strength
and the clear, low voice had a curious mixture of command and entreaty in its varying tone…as she sat there with her delicate hands lying in her lap, her head bent, and a bitter look on her thin face, she was more interesting than many a blithe and blooming girl.

(Alcott 6)

Jean’s costume, although it seems simple and un-alarming at first glance to the characters in the beginning actually covers a hidden secret beneath its innocent manner.

Alcott attempts to show readers how clothing works together with behavior to create the mask that her characters are hiding behind so as not to reveal themselves to others in the novel. Alcott follows the historical development of theatrical devices that were present during the time in which she was writing to show “that the first purpose of dressing for theatrical events is to catch the eye with something unusual” (Hollander 239). In order to have Jean accepted by the Coventry family, however, Alcott needed to create a character that would be in common with the audience…their clothes had to have some connection with the dress of the spectator. However fantastic, they had to connect with the public’s sense of itself in its own clothes. Costume design was continuously wedded to current conceptions of appropriate and attractive dress, and current habits of mind about personal expression through dress. (Hollander 245)

Even though she sets her character up to stand out from the rest of the family, Alcott knew that in order for her work to be accepted by literary critics and readers of the time, she also had to create a character that the literary world would be able to relate to as a woman in the late nineteenth century—a woman who seems innocent and charming, but still appealing to the world around her in a domestic sense. Alcott portrays Jean Muir as a governess, who is responsible for the well-being of the innocent child in the work and expected to teach her the
proper womanly chores of the day, while also portraying something out of the ordinary—the
femme fatale—which made readers more interested in her works and also set Alcott herself
apart from other female writers of the time. Alcott also remains under the guise of a costume, in
the way she portrays her protagonist, while not openly defying her own society’s rules and
standards for writing as a woman.

Jean’s clothing mesmerizes the other characters and this furthers my suggestion that
Alcott uses theatrical devices to further her message of new womanhood in the work. Anne
Hollander states:

The particular mode in which a theatrical event pretends to be a representation of real life
determines how its characters may seem properly—that is, realistically—clothed. Of
primary importance is how its representational method relates to language. When the
characters utter no sounds, their clothes obviously speak more loudly. (Hollander 238)

The other characters in the work, particularly Gerald and Edward Coventry believe that Jean is a
meek domestic servant, because of the way she dresses and displays herself in front of them.
She succeeds as an actress; because her audience is fooled into believing what Jean is conveying
to them through dress is her real character. In certain scenes, Alcott creates a character who
attempts to reveal her true self to the others in order to further her agenda of gaining power over
them, because no one believes that she could be guilty of any crimes. Jean is physically acting in
a scene within a scene, but the other characters are already entranced by Jean and unable to see
the difference. Alcott writes,

Bending over the sleeper was a woman robed with barbaric splendor…Fillets of gold
bound her hair, and jewels shone on her neck and arms. She was looking over her
shoulder toward the entrance of the tent, with a steady yet stealthy look, so effective that
for a moment the spectators held their breath, as if they also heard a passing footstep.

(Alcott 50)

Alcott furthers her use of theatrical devices by setting Jean behind the makeup of her mask, which

For women, strongly stylized coiffures and masklike makeup also required a new kind of visual imagination about the physical self...cosmetics were traditionally used to improve on nature: makeup was supposed to intend to deceive, to make pink cheeks pinker, lips redder than they naturally were. (Hollander 335)

Alcott exemplifies this fact by first having John Coventry fall in love with Jean, who remains hidden beneath her makeup and costume, but then she deceives him at the end of the work. Jean is able to remain hidden behind her mask of makeup and costume in most scenes and in one scene John’s begins to notice beauty, which also has something to do with her class status, “Miss Muir, in the charmingly prim and puritanical dress of a Roundhead damsel, was arranging some shrubs, but turned suddenly and dropped the green branch she held, as her eye met the glittering figure advancing toward her” (Alcott 52). In this instance, Gerald Coventry is asked to participate in a figurative play that Bella and Jean are acting out. When Jean sees that Gerald is “too elegant for a fugitive” she begins to take a part his attire, emphasizing how costume can make anyone seem different than they are in real life (Alcott 52). Even though Gerald Coventry acts like he does not care about her class status, when both he and John Coventry start to believe that Jean is the daughter of Lady Grace Howard, a noblewoman of an earlier time, Coventry’s “interest in his sister’s governess much increased by this fact; for, like all wellborn Englishmen, he valued rank and gentle blood even more than he cared to own” (Alcott 48). The attention paid to class status seems to further the need for a mask over Jean
since, in my argument, the main character was an African American woman.

Even though it seems that she is going along with society’s rules in her creation of a domestic governess character—Alcott was also doing something more that most women writers would not have attempted during this period—she was taking a stand against the social and sexual politics of the time by setting up her character not only under the guise of a physical costume, but a racial costume as well. Alcott’s sense was that “costume that conceals, stylizes, or dehumanizes the body still cannot eradicate that essential physical accord between actor and audience” (Hollander 237). Jean’s costume is what draws the male characters toward her shining personality and even though she seems innocent, they are also captivated by the charming yet somewhat unusual girl, who has entered their lives.

When she is placed in different situations—the public and private spheres—Jean dresses differently and this forms a travesty within the ranges of female gender categories. Klaiber cites, “Miss Muir appropriates alternately—sometimes even at the same time—mutually exclusive versions of womanhood” (218). She is not afraid to deceive the family and is, in my argument, attempting to prove herself to society as an independent woman, which is reflected in Alcott’s style of writing. When Jean is alone in her room, she removes the costume exclaiming, ‘Not bad! It will be a good field for me to work in, and the harder the task the better I shall like it…Come, the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves.’ Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. The metamorphosis was wonderful, but the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment. (Alcott 11-12)
Alone in the private space of her own room, Jean is not afraid to reveal her true person, because no one is there to judge her or force her to be someone an actress in their play of life. When she is within the public sphere of the Coventry family, however, Jean must act as someone different in order to be accepted within the family and society as a whole. In my argument, Jean acts differently so that she can hide her true race from the family and escape the old persecution that had “darkened all her life” (Alcott 12).

Alcott uses suggestive language to keep her main character’s race ambiguous throughout the novel. Alcott was writing during the Civil War, publishing her work in 1866—after approximately 4 million African Americans had been freed by the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation—and by the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. As a result, many slaves could have traveled to other countries with their former masters or alone as new citizens of society. Alcott defines her character as hiding “behind a mask” of some sort, which is exemplified in the fact that her race is not fully examined or proven throughout the novel. Jean never openly states her race to the Coventry’s and is only assumed to be a white woman, because of the costume and make up she is wearing in front of her audience, particularly when Mrs. Coventry asks her if she is Scottish descent and she replies “Yes” to her future employer (Alcott 5).

In her introduction to The Politics of Passing: Passing and the Fictions of Identity, Elaine Ginsberg analyzes the categories of “passing” in nineteenth century America. Ginsberg writes, “the unknown thousands who passed out of slavery moved from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege, a movement that interrogated and thus threatened the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and legitimated by law” (1-2). For Jean, passing was a duty that she had to fulfill in order to be
accepted by society. In the same way, Alcott herself was able to “pass” through the literary society by dressing herself as a typical female author, while writing against the social and gender politics of the time by setting her female protagonist against the typical domestic woman through her literary devices and writing style. Ginsberg describes the uneasiness of many light-skinned African Americans in nineteenth century America, “Enabled by a physical appearance emphasizing ‘white’ features, this metaphysical passing necessarily involved geographical movement as well; the individual had to leave an environment where his or her ‘true identity’—that is, parentage, legal status, and the like—was known to find a place where it was unknown” (3). Jean, as an African American woman, passes through society in order to achieve her own status as an independent woman and is no longer defined by society as a slave or servant to others. It is in her ability to pass and act with such success that Jean is able to gain control over the Coventry family—slowly establishing herself within a white family, which is exemplified when she marries Sir John at the end of the work—undermining the white/black power structure of the current society during the Civil War.

Alcott is able to undermine the typical relationship between black and white people during the Civil War by setting Jean up against the white Coventry family and having her succeed at gaining power over them. In one scene, Jean walks up to the Coventry home and admires her future endeavor,

A stately old place, rich in oaks, well-kept shrubberies, gay gardens, sunny terraces, carved gables, spacious rooms, liveried servants, and every luxury benefitting the ancestral home of a rich and honorable race. Miss Muir’s eyes brightened as she looked, her step grew firmer, her carriage prouder, and a smile broke over her face; the smile of one well pleased at the prospect of the success of some cherished hope. (Alcott 13)
For Jean, the idea of fooling the other characters in order to gain her independence and power over this once “proud race” is what makes her such a successful villainous female character. She is not afraid to stand up against the other characters of her society, and create a new role for herself as woman. Alcott uses this suggestive language to encode her message of new womanhood through class and racial passing. When she is speaking with Gerald, Jean states,

   I know I have no right to speak in this way. I restrain myself as long as I can, but when I can bear no more, my true self breaks loose, and I defy everything. I am tired of being a cold, calm machine; it is impossible with an ardent nature like mine…I’ve neither beauty, money, nor rank, yet every foolish boy mistakes my frank interest for something warmer, and makes me miserable. It is my misfortune. Think of me what you will, but beware of me in time, for against my will I may do you harm. (Alcott 45)

Gerald Coventry, however, is so captivated by her that he refuses to believe she would do anything to harm his family or himself. At the same time, Jean’s innocence is furthered throughout the work, because no one suspects her of being a villain. Even at times when her mask seems to lower, the other characters refuse to believe that she could be anyone, other than who she introduces herself to them as,

   Miss Muir came in…All in white, with no ornament but her fair hair…she looked a different woman from the meek, nun like creature one usually saw about the house. Her face was as altered as her dress, for now a soft color glowed in her cheeks, her eyes smiled shyly, and her lips no longer wore the firm look of one who forcibly repressed every emotion. A fresh, gentle, and charming woman she seemed and Coventry found the dull room suddenly brightened by her presence. (Alcott 39)
Jean’s ability to fool the other character into believing that she is an innocent woman furthers the subversion of gender politics throughout the work. Alcott creates a character that is so skilled in fooling others that no one believes she could ever have ulterior motives, a belief that most people had about women during the late nineteenth century—the typical angel of the house motif present within the domestic novel. Alcott uses the term “charming” when discussing her main character, which furthers the suggestive racial language present in the novel to show she is an African-American woman attempting to pass through a white household. The term “charming” was historically associated with the exotic former slaves that whites controlled during the Civil War and Alcott is undermining the typical character of the female protagonist, which was usually a white woman, to achieve her goal of new womanhood.

Through the guise of *Behind a Mask*, Alcott subverts the white/black power structure that people had known throughout the Civil War. Alcott gives Jean power over the other characters in the work through her ability to charm the other characters. Hazel Carby writes, “Overt sexuality, emerged in images of the black woman where ‘charm’ revealed its relation to the dark forces of evil and magic; the effect of black female sexuality on the white male was represented in an entirely different form from that of the figurative power of white female sexuality” (27). In my argument, if Jean Muir was in fact an African-American woman passing through society as a white woman, her charms would have been associated with magic and evil, because she was a black woman. It seemed almost impossible for society to accept a former slave who was able to position herself in society in such a way as to fool others and gain power over them. In one scene, Jean is speaking to Gerald and her charm is beginning to affect him, which furthers her overall influence over the males and the family as whole power structure,
‘…Of you Gerald?’ And the fine eyes glanced up at him, full of a brilliancy that looked like the light of love. ‘You make a slave of me already. How do you do it? I never obeyed a woman before. Jean, I think you are a witch. Scotland is the home of weird, uncanny creatures, who take lovely shapes for the bedevilment of poor weak souls. Are you one of those fair deceivers?’…‘I am a witch, and one day my disguise will drop away and you will see me as I am, old, ugly, bad and lost. Beware of me in time. I’ve warned you. Now love me at your peril.’ (Alcott 86)

Alcott furthers her suggestion of an African-American woman gaining dominance over her white employers, because she has Jean Muir admitting her true motives to Gerald. It is because of Alcott’s use of theatrical devices however, particularly costume, that Gerald does not believe Jean’s admittance and is completely dominated by her, in both the gender sense and economic sense, at the end of the novel.

Justin Edwards in his chapter from *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* states, “While the separation of physical appearance from an ‘authentic’ racial identity might stifle the panic associated with racial mixture, it does not eradicate the potential for misreading the race that is physically inscribed on the body” (xxxii). This is evident in the novel because none of the other characters realized Jean Muir’s true motives until the end of the work. Even though her race still remains ambiguous, I suggest that she was hiding herself in order to gain the power and she succeeds in her motives by the end of the work. She marries Sir John and becomes the female head of the household, no longer worrying about being found out by the end of the work. Even when the other characters discover her true motives by the end of the work, it is too late for them to overpower her. Jean Muir has completely subverted the black/white dynamic that was common in the Civil War by swindling Sir John Coventry into marriage. Ned

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Coventry figures out that Jean was dismissed by her former employer because he found out she was an actress, and was therefore not being true with her feelings for him. Jean is discovered through letters that she wrote to an old friend, and mentions, “Another failure. Sydney was more wily than I thought. All was going well, when one day my old fault beset me, I took too much wine, and I carelessly owned that I had been an actress. He was shocked, and retreated” (Alcott 97). As further discoveries are made, Jean revealed to her friend Hortense that she duped Sir John into believing she was the daughter of Lady Howard, because Sir John “did not know of the death of her little daughter,” so she says that she is the daughter and “that boy pitied me with an honest warmth and never waited to learn my birth” (Alcott 100). The men are so charmed by this seemingly meek young woman; they do not care to find out the truth about her. Jean Muir and Louisa May Alcott succeed as new women because they are able to represent themselves in a way that is not suspected to be duplicitous by their respective contemporaries.

Jean’s suggestive racial and metaphorical costume hides her true form and she manipulates the other characters into believing her calculating ruse. For Louisa May Alcott, the metaphorical costume also protected her true motives from being discovered by the male dominated literary world as an up and coming female author. Even though her father “embraced an ethos of dressing simply,” she does in fact, in my argument, ‘dress simply’ for the publishers and other writers of the time, by not seeming to step away from her typical role as “a female author, writing about feminine ideas and following the conventional domestic plot by having her protagonist adopt the role of governess and marry the rich old man at the end of the work,” but at the same time, Alcott is making a statement against typical domestic roles and showing herself as an independent woman through the character of a woman not afraid to stand against society,
which most of her critics accepted because it was seen as a fictional piece (Keck 26). Klaiber argues,

   The unconventional performances of characters such as Jean Muir may, therefore, be considered a form of travesty within the ranges of female gender categories…Her transgressive performances make it clear that the supposedly natural repertoire of types of womanhood cannot account for her behavior, as Lucia’s exclamation, ‘Impssible! A woman could not do it!’ proves. (Alcott 98; Klaiber 218)

Klaiber’s point furthers the idea in my argument that it would have been impossible during the Civil War for other authors to consider Louisa May Alcott any type of threat as a writer. She seemed to be following conventional domestic plots by not seemingly stepping out of her gender role in any way. Alcott, however, is in fact undermining the typical domestic novel through the guise of her main character.

   Everyone in this work hides behind some sort of mask and if Jean had revealed early in the work that she was in fact an African-American woman, I do not think Alcott would have been as successful as a woman writer, because white Americans during the Civil War were afraid of being dominated by African-Americans. Alcott creates the sense of rebellion in her argument for new womanhood, and defines the ultimate rebellion with her suggestive racial language to show that her main character achieved the ultimate goal of gaining power over white society. Alcott sets her main character up to be the ultimate deceiver, which not only fits in with the stereotype of female slaves during the Civil War, who were considered deceivers and creators of magic and charm with the ultimate goals of eluding their contemporaries, but also fits in with the idea of a new woman, because she furthers the role of fashion as defining of women in nineteenth century literature.
Society has a strong impact on the literary makeup of Louisa May Alcott and her main character in *Behind a Mask*. In order to succeed as a female author, Alcott was required to wear a mask so that she could secure her economic future and success as a woman author toward the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly to Jean, Alcott “saw loss of authenticity as the inevitable fate of women in the patriarchal household,” which furthered the need for Alcott to set herself apart from other female authors after the Civil War (Romero 120). This authorial self-fashioning represents Alcott’s main character Jean, because she succeeds as a powerful woman for the late nineteenth century. Alcott uses costume and other fashion to portray a different type of woman that did not fit in with the domestic style of most women of the time. Alcott’s ability to dress her character in a way that is different from other women and succeed at undermining the power structure not only between women and men, but between black and white characters as well, is what helps her succeed as a female author for the late nineteenth century.

Alcott’s ability to manipulate the semiotics of dress and provide a new outlook on women’s attire in literature sets her apart from other female authors of the late nineteenth century. She undermines the typical structure of the domestic novel by writing about fashion, which seemed feminine and trivial to her male counterparts, but was in fact representative of her need to define herself as a new type of woman author. Even though Alcott was encouraged to “dress simply” by her male contemporaries, she chose to step beyond those social and sexual boundaries set forth by the authorial patriarchs of the late nineteenth century and examine the seemingly domestic scene in a new way to represent her own interests for new womanhood and female independence. Alcott’s talent for setting up a new woman who remained hidden behind a mask throughout most of her literature, and then having her expose her true self by the end of the work, helps Alcott succeed as a new type of woman author. She does not settle for hiding behind
a mask in her own life and chose to push the limits of female authorship by defying society’s standards and choosing to write in a different way from other women writers of the late nineteenth century. While many women writers were writing about sexual politics in order to gain independence, Alcott took these steps further by using women’s fashion to create a new idea of what it means to be a woman for the late nineteenth century.
Chapter Notes

9 See Judith Fetterley’s “Impersonating Little Women: The Radicalism of Alcott’s ‘Behind a Mask’”, 1-4. See Betsy Hearne’s *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale*. See Mary Elliott’s “Outperforming Femininity: Public Conduct and Private Enterprise in Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*.

CHAPTER IV

ELIZABETH KECKLEY’S *BEHIND THE SCENES*
AND THE SLAVE AS ‘DRESS MAKER’

In his article in the *American Transcendental Quarterly*, Steve Criniti reads Elizabeth Keckley’s autobiography, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years A Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, in relation to Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick*, and concludes that “perhaps the clothes do not make the man, but they can certainly hide who he is underneath” (311). Consequentially, Criniti’s assertion unites Elizabeth Keckley as dressmaker and Mary Todd Lincoln as dress wearer. While Criniti, however, focuses on the use of clothing to portray Keckley as the hero and constructor of her own American dream, I focus on how Keckley uses clothing to manipulate her racial and womanly status with Mary Todd Lincoln, and in much the same way as Stoddard and Alcott, to advance her own political efficacy as a woman writer. The semiotics of fashion defines each woman’s social status, aiding each one in transcending her respective place in society. Elizabeth Keckley acts as dressmaker and obtains power in society as a trendy seamstress for the First Ladies of the United States. The dress wearer, Mary Todd Lincoln, represents the typical idea of a domestic woman who is more concerned with her reputation in her society than her own growth as a woman in the late nineteenth century. I examine how clothing fashions each of these women into examples of new women of their time period, while also defining how the clothing Keckley fashions for Mrs. Lincoln exposes domestic ideology as a political constraint against womanhood.

Elizabeth Keckley was a slave from the beginning of her life through her early thirties. From an early age, however, Keckley learned how to use clothing to maneuver through her old slave society and become a self-made new woman for the late nineteenth century. After earning
enough money to purchase her freedom from slavery, Elizabeth Keckley worked as a seamstress to many First Ladies during the late nineteenth century. She worked closely with Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of Abraham Lincoln, and modeled herself as a dressmaker to one of the most well-known women in the country. As she became closer to Mary Todd Lincoln, she also became more aware of the intimacies of the White House, which included Mary Todd Lincoln’s extravagant shopping addiction. Elizabeth Keckley worked so closely with Mary Todd that she even participated in the infamous Old Clothes Scandal in 1867, in which Mary Todd Lincoln attempted to sell off most of her expensive clothes and jewels in order to save herself from public ridicule and exposure as a destitute former First Lady of the United States.

In her account of the “Old Clothes Scandal,” Keckley admits,

Keyes and Brady’s room full of dresses-for-sale was often very populated; yet no one actually wanted to purchase the dresses. It appears that those in the room were really only there to view the pieces as having cultural value, but not worth an actual dime. When Keckley and Lincoln take the dresses on the road to try to sell to individual dealers, Keckley speaks of the hard bargains these dealers would drive: ‘the dealers wanted the goods for little or nothing’ (211). What is more, even prior to the scandal while Lincoln was wearing the dresses herself, she was often criticized for their being too low-cut or overly extravagant (5). Yes, it was Lincoln’s taste which compelled her to order low-cut and overly extravagant dresses, but as her modiste Keckley would have had some input into this matter of style. (Criniti 322)

While most critics do not agree with Keckley’s revelation of the private intimacies of the White House through her memoir, it is in her exposure of domestic ideology through clothing that Keckley succeeds in becoming a new woman for the late nineteenth century. By fashioning the
secret of Todd’s addiction to trendy clothing as an enslavement to traditional domesticity, Keckley exposes the domestic ideology that stunts Todd’s ‘growth as a woman’ and is herself enabled by this published (public) act of exposure to be re-fashioned as a ‘new woman’ because she is an African-American woman fashioning a white woman and therefore juxtaposing the relationship of black/white womanhood for the late nineteenth century. While she does not completely transform the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century, her work is still the most progressive of the three I am focusing on. Keckley, unlike Stoddard and Alcott before her, does not have to hide under the guise of a costume or behind any sort of mask to reveal her argument for womanhood; she is able to manipulate a seemingly powerful white woman because of Todd’s reliance on Keckley’s more intuitive sense of fashion. As a result, Keckley not only exposes the secrets of one of the most powerful women in American history, but also exposes nineteenth century America’s restrictive domestic ideology beneath the ostensibly liberating costume of fancy jewels and clothing. Keckley deconstructs the old idea and thus gains power as a new woman of the nineteenth century.

As a woman author of the late nineteenth century, more specifically a former slave, Elizabeth Keckley was unknown to many critics of the period. In the foreword to Keckley’s memoir, Anna Cooper describes Keckley’s struggle to gain recognition as a writer, “One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman…” (vii). Keckley was not highly acknowledged as a writer, because she was an African-American woman writing in a society dominated by whites. Even though Keckley’s role as writer was viewed as foreign to most, Cooper goes on to say how “The ‘other side’ has not been represented by one who ‘lives there.’ And not many can more sensibly
realize and more accurately tell the weight and the fret of the ‘long dull pain’ than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America” (vii). In much of the first section of her work, Keckley ironically describes herself as the voiceless black woman by recounting her experiences as a slave, but through the text, readers see the unconscious self-fashioning taking place within Keckley both as a woman and writer. Elizabeth Keckley’s language of fashion resonates through the text as a typical domestic venture, but eventually becomes the difference that sets her apart from other women of the time, mainly Mary Todd Lincoln, her racial and social counterpart. While many critics focus on Keckley’s novel as a post-slave narrative, and while I believe this was an important part of her life and influence on her work, I would like to move beyond that assertion, and focus more on the involvement and portrait of fashion in her narrative, which helps her effectiveness as a woman writer.

Keckley places a strong emphasis on fashion from childhood through adulthood and much like Cassandra Morgeson, Keckley, as a woman, begins to portray defiance toward patriarchal control even as a child. In a scene from the beginning of the novel, Keckley is about to be whipped as a young teenager for being defiant to her white master and he forces her to remove her dress,

‘Whip me, Mr. Bingham! What for?’ ‘No matter,’ he replied, ‘I am going to whip you, so take down your dress this instant.’ Recollect, I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me to take down my dress. I drew myself up proudly, firmly, and said: ‘No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger.’ (Keckley 33)

Keckley is not afraid to defy her white master even though he owns her, body and soul, via the governing principles of pre-Civil War slavery. The emphasis she places on her dress, however,
proves significant because it represents Keckley’s attempts to protect not only herself as a woman, but also to protect her racial dignity in the domestic space controlled by white society. She is able to keep her dress on and therefore protect herself from physical domination by patriarchal society.

Even though Keckley seems to defy the domestic idea of womanhood, because she does not bow down to male control by remaining in her role as an African-American slave, she also seemingly adheres to it at other points in her work to further her influence and subversive message of new womanhood through fashion. At one point, she has to prepare for a wedding and does not know whether her frock is clean or dirty, so she asks her mother, “I wish you would send me a pretty frock this summer” (42). As a young girl, Keckley learns to manipulate fashion as a guide for remaining within the domestic sphere, which benefits her later and helps her gain control over white power in late nineteenth century America. It is in Keckley’s ability to both defy the domestic space through fashion as an African-American woman, as well as seemingly adhere to her gendered and racial role, while underhandedly deconstructing it, that she sets herself apart as a new woman author. This becomes of consequence when she compares herself indirectly to Mary Todd Lincoln, because Keckley can ‘go between’ both traditional domestic woman and progressive ‘new woman,’ when she compares herself to Todd (a woman who could not overcome the pressures of traditional domesticity), Keckley (the supposedly powerless, ‘voiceless black woman’) is in her narrative the ‘new woman’.

While Elizabeth Keckley chooses to remain “behind the scenes” and not openly draw attention to herself as a successful new woman, her counterpart, Mary Todd Lincoln chooses to flaunt her fashion and sense of style for the public sphere, making herself a shining example of socially acceptable womanhood. The former first lady, Mrs. Lincoln, uses her economic means
to fashion herself in expensive clothing, but is eventually deemed an outcast by her society for attempting to sell her clothes and therefore escape her old sense of self. In my argument, what became known as the *Old Clothes Scandal* represents Mary Todd Lincoln’s desperate attempt to publicly save herself from humiliation, and her epiphany that her old jewels and clothing—symbols of traditional domestic womanhood—“must be thrown aside” and new fashionable clothes—representative of the new woman—must be put on (Keckley 267). Mary Todd Lincoln, as a result, fails in her attempts at becoming a new woman, because she conforms to traditions of womanhood. Keckley, on the other hand, transcends tradition because she uses fashion as a tool to gain power over domesticity, setting herself apart as a woman author. Keckley sets herself behind the scenes as a slave to her white masters, but still maintains her true identity as a woman, because she recognizes the power of clothes in fashioning femininity and she uses her clothing to assert her identity as a woman in the public and private spheres of her life. Keckley is the one who actually triumphs and creates a true example of womanhood by stepping away from acceptable social and gender norms of the period through fashion and similarly to Stoddard and Alcott, styles herself as a new woman author for the late nineteenth century.

The guise of fashion gives Keckley the chance to define herself in the literary world as a former female slave, and unconsciously subverts the usual power structure of white dominance that was particularly evident during the Civil War. In her attempts to escape common gender and social norms of the period through clothing, Keckley defines herself in a new way, an open way, by undressing America’s old domestic ideology. In her book *Uncommom Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing*, Laura Laffrado cites “‘costume’ makes but little difference—that her dress is indeed a costume, a disguise—attempts to define dress as only superficially related to gender…that is, a woman performing her duty is womanly no matter
how she is ‘costumed’” (112). Elizabeth Keckley remains feminine and within the definition of woman by working as a seamstress, even though she attempts to define herself as an independently successful woman in a male dominated space through literature.

While she did not seem to have much power as a seamstress, she uses fashion to exert control over her superiors; Lynn Alexander suggests,

It was the seamstress’ seeming lack of power that made her an affective symbol in Victorian protest writing. She appeared so lacking in power that she presented no threat to the status quo, nor would granting her protection have been seen as threatening. The isolation of her occupation increased her image of helplessness…But because of the instant recognition and strong reaction she inspired [as a result of her writing], the seamstress became a powerful symbol. (37)

Elizabeth Keckley as a woman author in the mid nineteenth century would have needed to find some sort of symbol with which to convey her message of new womanhood to her writers. Lynn Alexander mentions,

The seamstress figure allowed social critics to portray workers in ways less offensive to middle-class readers. Sewing was allied with images of domestic economy, with traditional female roles of wife and mother, with the home rather than the factory…politics were generally considered to be outside a woman’s sphere, and the image of a woman employed in such a domestic activity as sewing made any link with Chartist politics seem ludicrous. (30)

Through the guise of a seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley underhandedly defines herself as a new woman in both the literary world and late nineteenth century political society. It is in Keckley’s ability to deconstruct womanhood through clothing that readers are able to understand a different
angle of womanhood, someone not afraid to shed gender and racial constraints placed on her by society. In contrast to her contemporaries, Elizabeth Stoddard and Louisa May Alcott, who wrote about womanhood within their own race, while also peering through the lens of another race, Keckley chose to openly write about her racial experiences during the Civil War as an African-American seamstress.

Keckley is able to define herself in the domestic space as a new woman unafraid to wield the power to create new fashion trends for women and not follow the rules of her racial or gender role during the Civil War. The late nineteenth century domestic space provided a location for “reconfiguration of the sex-gender system” (Laffrado 132). While her contemporaries, mainly Stoddard and Alcott, used costumes to hide the racial flaws or true selves of their characters’ and therefore themselves, Keckley uses the power she has through her skill in refashioning clothing to gain leverage against white dominance of the period. She focuses on Mary Todd Lincoln, a woman who was known by many as the wife of a President and considered a fashion icon of her time. Keckley however, is able to deconstruct modes of acceptable femininity in late nineteenth century society, by exposing Mary Todd Lincoln’s inability to overcome the cult of domesticity because of her obsessive desire for fashion. By creating the very clothes that Mrs. Lincoln wears in public and in the private aspect of her life, Keckley is subtly gaining power over her superior aspects because she controls the fashionable clothes that control Mary Todd’s insatiable consumption of fashion. Steve Criniti suggests, “Clothing serves a social function. Not only does our clothing choice communicate to onlookers how we wish to be viewed and responded to, but it also, according to Eva Marie Stadler, works as ‘an encroachment of social norms upon the body’s surface’” (Criniti 316). Keckley uses clothing to reinforce the social norms that women in late nineteenth century were forced to abide by or otherwise be deemed social outcasts. In the
same way that Cassandra Morgeson used her economic means to disguise her true self in front of society’s elite, Mary Todd Lincoln uses clothing to suit her own purposes and be accepted by society as a successful, respectful woman. Keckley’s ability to fashion Todd’s acceptable public image through the clothes Keckley made for her, reveals Keckley’s understanding of the double edge of fashion: to be controlled by it, such as Mary Todd, or to control it for your own ends, such as Keckley. Thus Keckley’s ‘progressive’ use of fashion makes her the author of the ‘new woman’ aesthetic.

Keckley reveals Mary Todd Lincoln’s reliance upon the guise of a costume to show society the real definition of the self-made woman and how fashion can hide, as well as expose, our private selves that we attempt to conceal from others. From Keckley’s autobiography we learn that “Mrs. Lincoln from her girlhood up had an ambition to be the wife of a president…and one who played her part quite well” despite rumors of her “ignorance and vulgarity” (Keckley 89, 229). In the same way that Jean Muir of Alcott’s work was acting in order to advance her place in society, Mary Todd Lincoln remains beneath a costume to achieve her own goals and become a new woman for society, but she ultimately fails as a result of the Old Clothes Scandal, which reveals her dependence upon fashion and Elizabeth Keckley, who controls the trend and utilizes it for her own ends, arises as the successful new woman of her own autobiography. Mary Todd Lincoln is able to deceive everyone in society into believing that she is a successful woman who came from a low background and made something of herself in society, but Keckley exposes the truth behind Mary Todd Lincoln—that her clothing is Mrs. Lincoln’s source of confidence and power in white domestic society—and therefore expands her own power as an African-American author, because she is exposing the constraint of the domestic ideology on white womanhood. Even though she is attempting to save both Mrs. Lincoln and herself from
public scrutiny, Elizabeth Keckley actually does the complete opposite and condemns Mrs. Lincoln through the language of fashion.

Many critics including Lori Merish, Katherine Adams, and Frances Smith Foster agree that Elizabeth Keckley acts as a sort of fairy godmother to Mary Todd Lincoln, by helping to make all of her dreams come true,14 and in doing so, Keckley was exerting a “power unique among freed slaves in nineteenth-century America” (Criniti 318). She is able to subvert the racially binary power structure that supported white dominance, while also subverting the public and private spheres of Mary Todd Lincoln’s life. Keckley is not only able to provide the substance behind the body’s appearance, but she is also interested in constructing the substance and the appearance of the person, her creation, Mary Todd Lincoln. Criniti points out, “Keckley’s position as seer of both the truth and, even more importantly, the construction of that truth affords her a larger measure of control” (318). Keckley portrays this control through the fashion that she dresses Mary Todd Lincoln in, fashion she herself created for her superior to wear as a way to fashion herself in front of society as the First Lady.

In order to maintain her social status in late nineteenth century society, Mary Todd Lincoln would have had to follow certain rules and norms of society. Laura Laffrado states, In nineteenth century U.S. culture, the dominant appearance and behavioral scripts promoted for women were narrow, limited, and nearly impossible to avoid. The women who best met these standards were fictions of the patriarchal gaze: fantasy illustrations or living women significantly modified by indoctrination, dependence, and repression. For women, cultural approbation of one’s behavior was constructed as crucial. In private life, women who entered the historical record and women who did not were various and
varied. In public models created by the machines of representation, little variety existed.

(Laffrado 8)

As a woman and dressmaker, Keckley provides the variety that late nineteenth century society needed to step away from old traditions and create new ones for women to follow and achieve in society. Even though Mary Todd Lincoln attempts to follow these traditions and fit in with society as a successful woman, Keckley deconstructs this persona of her and fashions Mary Todd Lincoln as a violation of womanhood, because of her obsession with outward appearance and how she was perceived by others. During this century,

Public women who violated behavioral structures even in small ways received swift, gendered censure. Mary Todd Lincoln, widow of Abraham Lincoln, attempted to sell her fashionable clothes to raise money and was publicly labeled ‘an intensely vulgar woman, dreadful, avaricious, and wanting in all the true instincts and delicacy which belong to worthy women.’ (Laffrado 9)

Keckley, through her creation of Mary Todd’s clothes, is empowered to write the public image of Mary Todd. She was unafraid to write against the domestic ideology and to fashion a seemingly powerful woman who publicly destroyed her own femininity and womanliness by attempting to sell the clothing that defined her in society, a move that was frowned upon in late nineteenth century society. Keckley addresses this within her work,

Mrs. Lincoln, by her own acts, forced herself into notoriety. She stepped beyond the formal lines which hedge about a private life, and invited public criticism. The people have judged her harshly, and the woman was ever more traduced in the public prints of the country. The people knew nothing of the secret history of her transactions; therefore they judged her by what was thrown to the surface…Mrs. Lincoln may have been
imprudent, but since her intentions were good, she should be judged more kindly than she has been. But the world does not know what her intentions were; they have only been made acquainted with her acts without knowing what feeling guided her actions…The veil of mystery must be drawn aside; the origin of a fact must be brought to light with the naked fact itself. (Keckley xiv)

In this scene, Keckley totally undresses Mrs. Lincoln while at the same time attempts to justify Mrs. Lincoln’s behavior. She represents a woman who was torn down by the social demands of being a fashionable and trendy woman and the wife of a former President in mid-nineteenth century society. Without the guise of a costume, it seems that Mary Todd Lincoln fails in her attempts to define herself in society; Elizabeth Keckley succeeds through her ability to create fashion and write about her experiences during the Civil War. One of the most influential media tools of the period was *Putnam’s Magazine* which deemed Keckley’s work, “the latest, and decidedly weakest production of the sensational press, which ought never to have been written or published, and could not be read by any sensible person with pleasure or profit” (Sorisio 19). The public wrath of society spurred by Keckley’s work represents the hidden personas of socially unacceptable women that nineteenth century society attempted to conceal for their own benefits. Carolyn Sorisio describes Keckley’s ability to “unmask the genteel performer” in white nineteenth century society,¹⁵ and in my argument, Keckley also deconstructs womanhood and conveys a message of new womanhood represented through an African-American author. Keckley portrays the prototypical new woman for late nineteenth century society, not only through her racial and gender disruptions, but also through the challenge she gives to white middle class’s attempt at self-fashioning—to be oneself and not succumb to society’s demands for socially acceptable women.
In the same way that the women in Stoddard and Alcott exposed the “performance” of their female characters, Keckley is exposing Mary Todd Lincoln’s performance of a genteel woman, even though she is hiding behind the costume of fashionable clothing in late nineteenth century society. By deconstructing womanhood one of the most powerful women in society through her writing, Keckley was able to expose late nineteenth century white people beneath the expensive clothing and in the same way invade the privacy of the domestic space in order to set a new example of womanhood for late nineteenth century society. She uses the private letters between her and Mrs. Lincoln in an attempt to protect the both of them from public ridicule, but she ends up deconstructing the ideal of womanhood for the time period, because she makes the letters public and thus exposes the non-genteel Mary Todd Lincoln for all of society. Sorisio mentions,

…”Keckley’s offense was of the same grade as opening other people’s letters and listening at keyholes, it revealed…a deep-rooted fear of many middle-class Americans that any vulgar book could suddenly rip the fragile mask of the manner from the genteel performer and expose the would-be social climber in all his or her own underlying vulgarity. (20)

It is through her exposure of the “genteel performer” that Elizabeth Keckley blurs the line between the public literary world and the private domestic space. She invades both through her ability to write as a former slave, while also taking apart the idea of domestic womanhood in mid-nineteenth century America through her written account of Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley’s work was more accepted in society because she did not seem to be writing the traditional slave narrative, but remained within the domestic sphere—writing about fashion and womanhood. At one point, Elizabeth mentions,
Mrs. Lincoln was extremely anxious that her husband should be re-elected President of the United States. In endeavoring to make a display becoming her exalted position, she had to incur many expenses. Mr. Lincoln’s salary was inadequate to meet them, and she was forced to run in debt, hoping that good fortune would favor her, and enable her to extricate herself from an embarrassing situation. She bought the most expensive goods on credit, and in the summer of 1864 enormous unpaid bills stared her in the face. (147)

In order for Mrs. Lincoln to make a name for herself in the public sphere, she had to make sacrifices. She chooses to “make a display” of herself in order to actualize the Lincolns’ as deserving of the highest position in the social hierarchy: President and First Lady. Mrs. Lincoln’s economic means allow her to wear clothes that cover reality and appearance. She hides beneath the clothes of a rich successful white woman, but is ironically discovered by an African American woman; the one who is supposed to be below Mrs. Lincoln in class status and social hierarchy actually rises above her and succeeds in society as a new woman. Keckley’s discovery of the real Mrs. Lincoln beneath her clothing is what transforms the binary positioning of black/white womanhood for late nineteenth century America.

Even though she is a seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley does not have any reservations about her position in society. Even though she is supposed to be the lower woman in the white/black power dynamic, Keckley actually outshines Mrs. Lincoln as a woman by not hiding her true self from public society. She does not choose to hide beneath a costume, but openly dresses herself and writes as an African-American woman author. At one point in the memoir, Mrs. Lincoln fears that Mr. Lincoln will not be re-elected as President and states to Elizabeth,

‘To me, to him, there is more a stake in this election than he dreams of.’ ‘What do you mean, Mrs. Lincoln? I do not comprehend.’ ‘Simply this: I have contracted large debts…”
‘They consist chiefly of store bills…He glances at my rich dresses, and is happy in the belief that a few hundred dollars that I obtain from him supply all my wants. I must dress in costly materials. The people scrutinize every article that I wear with critical curiosity.’

Mrs. Lincoln is so afraid of tarnishing her public image that she is willing to do anything she can to advance her place in society and maintain her political image. Mrs. Lincoln is supposed to represent a model for women of mid-nineteenth century and many are fooled by her jewels and fancy attire, but not Elizabeth Keckley.

As a seamstress, Keckley exerts complete control over Mrs. Lincoln not only in her dress, but in ways her dress is perceived by society, because of her role as modiste to Mary Todd Lincoln. Steve Criniti states,

Seamstresses are an important vehicle in the creation of culture and a key component of the communication that takes place between wearer and onlooker, between individual and society…Work as a seamstress in the nineteenth century was typically frowned upon as low, menial work executed by women who failed to perform their ‘proper’ domestic roles as wives and mothers. (Criniti 316)

Mary Todd Lincoln seems to fail at the domestic role she is supposed to excel at as a wife and mother, because she is overly concerned with her public image as she “struggles to keep up appearances” in nineteenth century society (Keckley 267). Even though Keckley was a seamstress, she excels in both the domestic sphere and the public sphere of society through her ability to write about fashion and the implications of fashion on the wearer while still maintaining her true identity as a woman and former slave. According to Steve Criniti,
She clothes Lincoln in fabric and in words. The implication here is that just as Keckley can magically transform the gauche little wilderness girl into Cinderella, she can turn the clock hand to midnight, undress her, and send her back to her life of low repute. Both literally and figuratively, Keckley controls the communication inherent in Mary Todd Lincoln’s ‘choice’ of dress and image. It is perhaps too strong to call upon the image of a puppet master here; nonetheless, the image of the First Lady and the resulting communicative act were indeed very much in Keckley’s hands. (320)

Elizabeth Keckley not only acts as Lincoln’s dressmaker, but she identifies herself even more as Lincoln’s modiste; a position which gives her more strength in the dichotomy of black/white womanhood. As she gained more leverage in the dichotomy, Keckley eventually gained complete control over Mary Todd, because she was Mary Todd’s confidante. By exposing the performance of Mary Todd Lincoln and removing her costume, Keckley creates an example of new woman for late nineteenth century. She not only writes as an African-American woman, but epitomizes her place as a new woman in late nineteenth century, by fashioning the image of the most powerful woman in America: the First Lady of the United States. As the modiste Keckley would have been required to “be in tune with the larger theories and movements of fashion” present during the mid nineteenth century” (Criniti 319). She is not afraid to take chances with fashion, which in turn reflect on her wearers and in this way she is setting the ultimate example for womanhood in this time. As both character and writer of her own autobiography, Keckley is able to advance her position as a new woman in the late nineteenth century.

As a former slave and dressmaker to one of the most respected women in America during the late nineteenth century, Keckley represents the pinnacle of the prototypical new woman. She is an African-American woman who chose to write in a society dominated by white authors, and
she even took her role as author and ‘dress-maker’ a step further by recording accounts of her own experiences living with the President and his wife during the Civil War; at a time when most African-Americans were being freed from slavery and allowed to work on their own, she chose to exercise complete control of her own life and destiny as a woman author. Even though it seems that Elizabeth Keckley may have failed in her attempts to be successful as a woman author, because in the end of the work, she alludes to the public wrath and scrutiny she received for recording such intimate conversations between herself and the former First Lady of the United States, I believe that she actually succeeds as a woman author, because her work is published and she is given then chance to share her thoughts with the world. Keckley recognizes the powerful implication between public image and fashion. Because she manufactures the tools of the performers, she is able to deconstruct the ‘natural’ existence of social classes, race, and gender.
Chapter Notes

11. See Jennifer Fleischner’s *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women’s Slave Narratives* and *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave*.


13. See Eva Marie Stadler’s “Addressing Social Boundaries: Dressing the Female Body in Early Realist Fiction.” *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*.


15. See Caroline Sorisio’s “Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* and the Politics of Public Wrath”
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the three works discussed here, fashion represents a way for women to set themselves apart from their conventional societies. While fashion may have seemed central to the constrictive domestic ideology of nineteenth-century America, it proves to be a tactical strategy that women could use to advance their own interests and to create a new idea of womanhood. I have chosen Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley, because each use fashion in a different sense through costume, race, or writing to achieve their goals of new womanhood for their characters and themselves. Each writer demonstrates in her work an individual interpretation of what it means to dress differently, a concept that is still important to present American society.

During the Civil War, women’s fashion was often defined by arbiters such as Antoine Godey, but the women I focus on use literature to convey messages of new womanhood and oppose being defined by a man or role model of fashion. While each author seemingly fails in her attempts to completely transform domestic ideology, it is through their progressive writings that each author takes new womanhood a step further, thus expanding on the definition of self-fashioning. While each of these women’s ultimate goals were complicated in some way—gender role, costume, or the racial hierarchy that was present during the Civil War—the authors each continued in their struggle for new womanhood and through the combination of these authors’ works, we as readers see the success of this struggle.

Overall, there is not only a racial and gender progression of new womanhood, but an ideological one. These women authors provide a new way of looking at the domestic ideology of the mid-nineteenth century and through the lens of semiotics we are able to define women’s fashion in a new light. To respect fashion is to realize its power and be open to the ways it can
manifest itself in daily life. Stoddard, Alcott, and Keckley all use fashion to celebrate new womanhood for mid-nineteenth century society. They are not afraid to dress differently from other authors of their period and define new womanhood for later centuries. Their works were expanded upon in later centuries, by such authors as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Catherine Sedgwick, but it is from the women authors I chose to focus on that we learn what it means to fashion ourselves differently and thus continue to define womanhood through the late-nineteenth and twentieth century.
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