Constructing the Past

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 11

2010

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Recommended Citation
Benner, Amelia (2010) "Reading Between the Lines; Or, The Literary Lives of the Davis Family," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol11/iss1/11

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# Reading Between the Lines; Or, The Literary Lives of the Davis Family

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**Reading Between the Lines; Or, The Literary Lives of the Davis Family**

*Amelia Benner*

It was October 1847, and it had been raining for two days in the small town of Shelbyville, Illinois. A lawyer named David Davis sat looking out at the gloom, waiting for the weather to clear so that he and his companions could begin their twenty-mile trek through the mud to Sullivan, the next stop on the circuit. Meanwhile he played whist and "was very lonesome," he confided in a letter to his wife, Sarah. At some point he started reading a novel called *The Polish Orphan.* It was, he told Sarah, "a very old book," but it was one that "interested [him] greatly" and helped pass the time.[1] It was also part of the genre that critics today call domestic or sentimental fiction, which is often viewed as having been written by and for women. But the fact that an educated man like David Davis read and enjoyed *The Polish Orphan* enough to mention it in a letter indicates that the gender distinctions that today's literary scholars explore were not always so concrete.

Most Illinois households of the 1840s and 1850s would have owned only a few books, usually the Bible and an almanac.[2] But the young lawyer and his wife weren't a typical frontier couple. Both had come to Bloomington, Illinois, from the East. Sarah was born into a prominent family in Lenox, Massachusetts; her father, William Perrin Walker, was an enormously-respected Judge of Probate in Berkshire County. Sarah had also been a student at Catharine Beecher's celebrated Hartford Female Seminary for at least a year during her girlhood.[3] David was an up-and-coming lawyer and politician from Maryland whose colleagues on the judicial circuit included the future president Abraham Lincoln. He had migrated to Illinois in 1835 and had spent the next few years building a professional reputation and a home so that Sarah would be able to join him. In 1838, Judge Walker finally consented to their marriage. David traveled east for the wedding, and the couple set up housekeeping in Bloomington in early 1839 after an arduous overland journey. In 1844 David would become a member of the Illinois House of Representatives but would return to the Eighth Judicial circuit as a judge in 1848. Lincoln would eventually name him to the United States Supreme Court. The culmination of Davis's

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[1] David Davis, Decatur, to Sarah Davis, Bloomington, 27 October 1847, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[2] Charles Beneulyn Johnson, *Illinois in the Fifties, or, A Decade of Development* (Champaign: Flanigan Pearson, 1918), 118.

[3] Willard L. King, *Lincoln's Manager: David Davis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 15.

career was his role as a U.S. Senator from 1877 to 1883.[4] Both Davises represented the well-educated, middle class establishment of the antebellum East, transplanted to the Illinois prairie.

While her husband was riding the circuit, Sarah looked forward to Mondays and Thursdays, when mail would arrive from the East. In those days, the recipient paid for postage: 25 cents per sheet.[5] Hundreds of the letters written by the Davis family and their close friends have survived into the twenty-first century, and they contain tantalizing insights into the "literary lives" of their authors. Through them, we can discover what kinds of books and periodicals the Davises read, as well as their reading habits. The letters are particularly insightful because they reveal not only which books the Davises *read*, but, perhaps more importantly, which books they enjoyed enough to recommend to each other.

The books that the Davises read provide an insight into their personal lives while also reflecting the cultural ideologies in which they believed. Although they lived on the Illinois frontier, David and Sarah Davis were clearly products of the literate, Eastern middle class. Although David Davis was a voracious reader, most of the books that appear in the letters are mentioned by women, in an interesting parallel to the "feminization" of literature that occurred during the first half of the 19th century. Meanwhile, many historians have pointed out that "middle-class values," such as the cult of domesticity and the idealization of childhood, became dominant in America in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Nearly all the works on the "Davis reading list," whether fiction or nonfiction, religious or secular, reinforce these values. By reading these books, we can gain insight into how the popular press transmitted the ideology of the age to its audience, and better understand the relationship between antebellum, middle-class readers and what they read. The books that the Davises read reflect the forces that were affecting the society in which they lived, and provide a glimpse of the "literary lives" of middle-class Americans in the mid-19th century.

***Scribbling Women; or, Domestic Fiction and the Davises***

In September 1853, Latricia Robinson penned a note to her neighbor Sarah Davis, asking to borrow *The Last Leaf from Sunny Side*, a book by the popular author Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. She mentions that she has acquired a copy of *The Shady Side*, a similar novel by a different writer, perhaps hinting

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 33.

that she may lend Sarah the book later.[6] Sarah's and Latricia's enthusiasm for these books is an indication of the explosive popularity of the novel during this era. Few works of fiction appeared in the United States prior to 1829, but during the years from 1830 to 1850, five times as many novels were published as in the previous sixty years combined.[7] Meanwhile, the publishing industry was undergoing a "feminization" as, for the first time, female writers wrote for an audience that was assumed to be predominantly female.[8] Antebellum popular fiction is often viewed as melodramatic, moralizing, and feminine, characterized by Nathaniel Hawthorne's infamous lament that "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women."[9]

What caused this explosion in the popularity of the novel, particularly among women? The answer may lie not in women's intellectual lives, but in their domestic duties. As time-saving devices like sewing machines and more-efficient cook stoves became available, women had more time to read for leisure. At the same time, the novels these women read reinforced their commitment to domesticity, quietly reinforcing their own deeply-held values. As numerous critics, including Helen Papashvily, have pointed out, in these novels

> the common woman was always glorified, her every thought, action, gesture, chance word, fraught with esoteric meaning and far-reaching influence; her daily routine…imbued with dramatic significance; her petty trials and small joys magnified to heroic proportions.[10]

Literate, middle-class American women found purpose and clarity in these near-hagiographies of self-sacrificing housewives and dutiful daughters. Although this glorification of the domestic woman may seem trite or even stifling to modern eyes, the women of this time, including Sarah Davis and her

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[6] Latricia Robinson, Bloomington, to Sarah Davis, Bloomington, 8 Sept. 1853, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[7] Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America, the Women Who Wrote It, the Women Who Read It, in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 2.

Ibid., 35.

[8] Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 11.

[9] Qtd. in Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1940), 104.

[10] Papashvily, xvi.

friend Latricia Robinson, derived meaning and enjoyment from this sort of novel.

The "cult of domesticity," as it is called by today's social historians, stressed the importance of women's role in the home. By devoting themselves to the well-being of their husbands and children, these women believed that they were shaping the moral destiny of the next generation and thus directing the fate of the still-young nation. In the 1830s, the middle-class world began to be divided into two spheres: the virtuous home and the polluted world outside the home. Wives, mothers, and daughters were the "angel in the house," taming men's coarser impulses and shielding them from the corruption of society and the workplace.[11] While not all women ascribed to this ideology—the fledgling women's rights was already making its presence known in the years preceding the Civil War—the moral superiority of women and their vital duties within the household was a preoccupation of the popular press during the antebellum period. One of the most prominent advocates of this point of view was Sarah Davis's former teacher, Catherine Beecher, who felt that American women were endowed with a great responsibility:

> The mother writes the character of the future man; the sister bends the fibres that hereafter are the forest tree; the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured.[12]

Beecher clearly ties the moral power of women to education, suggesting that women can only achieve their goals if they are first "made virtuous and intelligent." Thus, this lofty goal was reflected by women's popular fiction. Twentieth-century critics like Jane Tompkins have argued that domestic fiction was actually far more ambitious in its aims than it first might appear; in this interpretation, the home is not a refuge from the dangers of the outside world, but a model for what a Christianized, "civilized" world might look like under the influence of women.[13] When women like Sarah Davis and Latricia Robinson

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[11] Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), p. 32.

[12] Catherine Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon and Webb, 1841): p. 2.

[13] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 144.

read domestic novels, they were not seeking to reinforce their own limits within the home, but to explore how their uniquely feminine skills and virtues might be used to better the world beyond it.

*The Last Leaf from Sunny Side,* the book that Latricia wished to borrow, is a collection of posthumously-published stories that drew on the popularity of Phelps's most famous book, *The Sunny-Side, or, The Country Minister's Wife.* This book, which was published in 1851, made Phelps a "household name."[14] In September 1852, the *Christian Examiner* raved that the heroine of *The Sunny-Side* is "beautifully drawn:"

> The cheerer of her husband in despondency, the kind and wise guide of her children in the right way, with modesty prompting the wish to shrink from publicity, but high principle asking the indulgence of that wish, she appears the true pastor's wife, ready when occasion calls to be the friend and counselor of those around her, but finding her peculiar sphere of duty in her own home.[15]

The critic does not seem to find any division between the idealized pastor's wife portrayed in the book and real-life pastors' wives. Domestic writing was often more didactic than mimetic. As Jane Tompkins has pointed out, the "implantation of virtue was the primary goal of nearly everything nineteenth-century Americans read," from novels to magazine stories to textbooks.[16] The heroine of *The Sunny-Side* is not so much a portrait of a minister's wife as she is a pattern with which to trace portraits of ministers' wives.

*The Sunny-Side* tells the story of Emily, a modest and retiring young woman who marries a New England minister and takes on the dual challenges of managing a household and serving as female leader of a parish. At the same time, the heroine finds herself overwhelmed by her domestic duties and feels that she came into the marriage ill-prepared to be a housewife. This theme of uncertainty is common in novels of this kind, perhaps because it echoed the emotions of many young wives. As Sarah read about Emily's tribulations, she may have remembered the early days of her own marriage. Although she eventually settled into housekeeping upon arrival in Bloomington, her husband wrote to her father that, at first, "from me not having been properly

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[14] Tompkins, *p.* 123.

[15] "The Country Pastor," *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, vol. LIII (Sept. 1852), Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 270.

[16] Tompkins, 157.

educated—vexations would occur."[17] David goes on to say that the couple have now established a comfortable routine, but this passage suggests that Sarah was an efficient and orderly housekeeper who had trouble modifying her husband's bachelor habits. The memory of these "vexations," combined with a New England setting that recalled her childhood, may help explain Sarah's enjoyment of Phelps' novels. Despite the heroine's idealization, she faces the same challenges that confronted Sarah and many of her readers: the isolation of rural life, the deaths of children, and difficulty of running a household on a constrained budget.

Latricia Robinson also refers to *The Shady Side, or, Life in a Country Parsonage,* which was published in 1853, the same year that she read it—suggesting that the book intrigued her enough to find a copy immediately after it appeared for sale. Despite its similar title, it was not the work of *Sunny Side* author Elizabeth Phelps; its author, Martha Hubbell, was billed simply as "A Pastor's Wife." Modern critic Ann-Janine Morey has identified Hubbell's book, as well as Phelps's novel, as part of a body of "lamentation literature" that describes the hardships faced by ministers' families.[18] In her preface, Hubbell defends herself against charges that her book is similar to Phelps's *Sunny-Side,* claiming that she devised the idea for the story several years before that book was published and that the events described are true to life. However, the plot (not to mention the title) of *Shady Side* is markedly similar to *Sunny-Side,* and the fact that Latricia Robinson seems to link Phelps with *Shady Side* in her letter to Sarah Davis suggests that many women didn't know that "A Pastor's Wife" was not Elizabeth Phelps. Like Phelps's Emily, Mary, the heroine of *Shady Side,* marries a young rural minister, has difficulties setting up housekeeping, worries about her role as spiritual advisor to local women, and loses several children. But this is not so brazen a case of plagiarism as it may first seem; these same incidents appear in a vast number of similar domestic novels. This cannot be entirely attributed to the formulaic nature of such books; on the contrary, they were probably so similar because these everyday sorts of crises were faced by thousands of real American women. The familiarity of these books likely accounted for at least some of their popularity.

Despite its similarity to *The Sunny-Side*, Hubbell's book was also praised by reviewers, including a glowing recommendation in the *Christian Examiner*, which had lauded Phelps's novel only a few months earlier. According to the *Examiner*, *The Shady Side* is a work of "more power and

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[17] David Davis, Bloomington, to William Perrin Walker, Lenox, Mass., 19 Jan. 1840. David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[18] Ann-Janine Morey, *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 109.

genius" than Phelps's novels, and the reviewer praises especially the final scene, in which "the devoted minister's wife takes her leave of life with a parting exhortation to her children."[19] One can imagine the novel's readers not only identifying strongly with the heroine's trials, but also aspiring to end their lives with equal dignity. Books like *The Shady Side* provided women like Sarah Davis and Latricia Robinson with an example to follow as well as reassuring them that they were not the only ones who had ever suffered hardship.

Even novels of romance and adventure reinforced the moral, domestic message that was so prevalent in popular literature. In 1851, while on a family visit to Wisconsin, Sarah Davis wrote to her husband, "I cant [sic] tell you how much interested I was in reading the Vale of Cedar [sic]. It is very exciting—you will enjoy it very much."[20] The book to which Sarah refers is *The Vale of Cedars, or, The Martyr,* by Grace Aguilar. Aguilar was a Jewish Englishwoman who died in 1847, a few years before Sarah began reading her work. She wrote several popular novels and stories, as well as *The Women of Israel*, a lengthy work about the female figures of the Bible which Sarah Davis also read and enjoyed. Her writing was widely enjoyed by American women, if one judges by the frequency with which new editions of her books were published. A publisher's notice for Grace Aguilar's works quotes *Buck's Chronicle* as saying that her novel *The Vale of Cedars* is "one of the most touching stories ever issued from the press. There is life-like reality about it."[21] Decades after Aguilar's death, her books were still being reprinted and widely read; an 1870 issue of *The Ladies Repository* reports that new editions of Aguilar's books have been released, noting with approval that "the books are pure and good, and vastly preferable to most of the recent books of fiction"—high praise indeed in an age when unimpeachable morals were synonymous with literary quality.[22]

If her literary preferences are any indication, Sarah Davis was interested in history. This might explain her enjoyment of the *The Vale of Cedars,* which tells the story of Marie, a Jewish woman living in Spain during the Inquisition, and Arthur, her British admirer. However, amid the historical

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[19] "Shady and Sunny Side of the Ministry," *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, vol. LV (Nov. 1853), Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 349.

[20] Sarah Davis, Beloit, Wis., to David Davis, Bloomington, 29 Aug. 1851, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[21] "Grace Aguilar's Works," *Notes and Queries: Medium of Inter-Communication for Literary Men, Artists, Antiquaries, Genealogists, Etc.*, vol. 7 (Jan.-June 1859), 23 April 1859, 348.

[22] "Contemporary Literature," *The Ladies Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature and Religion*, vol. V (January-June 1870), 77.

detail and exciting, dramatic plot, Aguilar quietly underscores the importance of the domestic ideology. In 250 pages, Marie suffers marriage to a man she doesn't love, the death of her father, the death of the aforementioned unloved husband, abandonment by her friends after being revealed as a Jew, arrest by the Inquisition, and a long imprisonment, before finally being rescued—only to finally waste away and die in Arthur's arms. Throughout all, Marie is sustained by her faith and delivered by her "angel purity," the same purity that the domestic ideology ascribed to middle-class American women. While she faces down a corrupt Spanish cleric, the villain reflects that "never in his whole life of wickedness, had he experienced such a feeling as he did at that moment beneath a woman's holy gaze."[23]. Marie combines "truth, purity, holiness, *something scarcely of this nether world*, yet blended indescribably with all a woman's nature."[24] Judging by Sarah Davis's description of the book as "captivating" and "very exciting"—not to mention the fact that she recommended it to her husband—she seems to enjoyed it principally for its stirring plot, historical detail, and exotic setting. Books like *The Vale of Cedars* expanded the domestic sphere, allowing women like Sarah Davis the opportunity to imagine how their skills and strengths might be applied, in times of trial, to the dangerous world outside the home.

A similar appeal lay in histories and biographies. In 1862, while staying in St. Louis, Sarah wrote, "Mr. Parsons gave me to read the life of Sir Philip Sidney – published in '58. I do not know the Author [sic] but the book has all the fascination of a romance."[25] Sarah could not identify the author because the book was published anonymously by a woman named—coincidentally—Sarah Henry Davis. *The Life and Times of Sir Philip Sidney* is a biography of the Elizabethan courtier and writer who died fighting the Spanish in the Netherlands. Sarah Henry Davis's admiration of her subject is evident; she describes Sidney as "a hero born to greatness…with a heart spontaneously generous, earnest and true…[with] the personal endowments of manly beauty, of stately presence, and of gentle speech."[26] The author seems aware that her praise seems effusive. She insists that, like ancient Egyptian sculptors, she and her fellow historians "copy with literal chisel from biography and history, without improving even a fancy to relieve the monotony of truth."[27] But Sarah

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[23] Grace Aguilar, *The Vale of Cedars: Or, the Martyr* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1870), 177.

[24] Ibid., 18.

[25] Sarah Davis to Fanny Walker, 3 January 1862, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[26] Davis, Sarah Henry. *The Life and Times of Sir Philip Sidney* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1858), 2.

[27] Ibid., 18-19.

Henry Davis uses the same ornate language that adorned novels like *The Vale of Cedars,* and it is unsurprising that her readers felt the story had "all the fascination of a romance." In an age that was uneasy with moral complexity, readers like Sarah Davis expected their heroes and heroines to embody virtue.

A similarly virtuous heroine can be found in *The Polish Orphan*, the book that David Davis read while waiting out the rain in Shelbyville. The novel was written by Susan Morgan in 1838 (only nine years before Davis picked it up) and the fact that he refers to it as a "very old book" suggests that he was accustomed to reading new books straight from the publisher—another sign, perhaps, of the Davises' appetite for literature. Morgan was already well-known as the author of *The Swiss Heiress, or, The Bride of Destiny*, a book which Edgar Allen Poe scathingly recommended in *The Southern Literary Messenger,* "should be read by all who have nothing better to do. We are patient, and having gone through the whole book with the most dogged determination, are now enabled to pronounce it one of the most solemn of farces."[28] *The Polish Orphan* contains many of the same melodramatic devices that Poe found so objectionable in *The Swiss Heiress*: frequent deathbed scenes (two within ten pages of each other, at one point), dark secrets, and family turmoil. And, like most other novels published during the era, it contains a moralizing message as well. Its heroine is Grace, the eponymous Polish Orphan, who is "a lovely assemblage of virtues"[29] and spends the entire novel ministering to and warming the hearts of various agnostic, selfish, and misguidedly-fashionable people up and down the Eastern seaboard. Grace's foil is the ambitious and vain Adela, who is not satisfied with being distinguished as a wife and mother but "covet[s] some other renown."[30] According to the ethos of the domestic novel, Adela must pay for her unwomanly ambitions with her life. And pay she does; as Adela lies on her deathbed, the narrator intones:

> It cannot be too often repeated or too deeply impressed upon the mind, that holiness is the only true preparation for heaven, that a career of folly and vanity is as distinctly different from the Christian walk, as a career of crime.[31]

Such blatant moralizing is hardly to the modern taste. But Morgan's audience seems to have enjoyed it, as did David Davis. In an age when critics and readers

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[28] Edgar Allen Poe, *Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. Gary Richard Thompson (Library of America, 1984), 861.

[29] Susan Rigby Dallam Morgan, *The Polish Orphan*, *or*, *Vicissitudes: A Tale* (Baltimore: Armstrong and Berry, 1838), 84. Reel M-12, no. 1918 in the microfilm collection *American Fiction 1774-1850: Based on the Bibliography by Lyle H. Wright.* New Haven: Research Publications Inc.

[30] Ibid., 61.

[31] Ibid., 82.

often made no distinction between the aims of religious works and novels,[32] a strong dose of Christian instruction was considered vital to a work of fiction.

Sarah Davis was deeply moved by "The Palsied Heart," published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* around 1848. In a letter to David she writes:

> I have just been reading part of a story entitled the palsied heart [sic]. It is the story of an affectionate wife whose heart was changed by her husband refusing his forgiveness for some trifling thing & his repelling all her entreaties and caresses. He loved her but thought it best not to forgive too readily. She had been his for 9 years & borne him three children when this takes place. The other half comes in next week's paper. I contrasted my husband with hers and how strong the contrast. Mine always ready to praise & to overlook the faults of his wife.[33]

The story does not end well. Helen, the heroine, is never forgiven by her husband, a politician whose work keeps him in the capital, far from home. She dies of grief, and afterward her husband reads the last letter she wrote him, in which she tells him of her unflagging love and devotion. Predictably, the husband repents and resolves never to remarry, crying "No, Helen, cruel and unfeeling as I was, I loved thee, and I will love thee, thee alone, till we meet in heaven!"[34] It is not surprising that Sarah Davis found this story so affecting. Like the unfortunate Helen, she married for love but was subsequently separated from her husband for long periods of time because of the demands of his political duties. But Sarah could read "The Palsied Heart" with gratitude that she was a real woman with a caring husband and not the hapless victim of sentimental fiction.

The letters contain an interesting reference to the most beloved and notorious best-seller of the day: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sarah was an acquaintance of the Beecher family, having attended Catherine Beecher's school, and some historians have suggested that Sarah and Harriet met during this time and even corresponded for a short period. But David Davis, who had grown up in Maryland, in the shadow of slavery, was known to

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[32] Tompkins, 149.

[33] Sarah Davis, Lenox, to David Davis, Bloomington, 21 June 1848, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[34] "The Palsied Heart," reprinted from *The Southern Literary Messenger*, *The Ladies Garland: Devoted to Literature, Amusement, and Instruction.* Pub. Mary L'Hommedieu Gardiner. Vol. VI (1842). Philadelphia: J. Van Court: 138-149.

consider the novel inaccurate and unfair.[35] In an 1852 letter to her husband, Sarah mentions the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is*. Two books were published under this title, both claiming that Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exaggerated the evils of slavery and that bondage was beneficial to African-Americans. Sarah writes: "Lyman [David Davis's step-brother] brought us up "Uncle Tom's Cabin as it is". It does not compare with the other Uncle Tom – tho [sic] quite readable after you get started."[36] Given her apparent enjoyment of Stowe's book, did Sarah read *Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is* in order to understand her husband's point of view, or was she interested in the story for its own merits? The fact that she does not mention the ideological underpinnings of the novel and her faint praise of it as "readable" suggest the latter. But it is equally possible that her reticence on the subject stems from unwillingness to bring up such a weighty subject in a letter that is essentially newsy and breezy in content.

But not all of the novels mentioned by the Davises and their friends were domestic. An interesting exception is *Jacob Faithful*, by the colorful British novelist Frederick Marryat. A passing reference to the book is found in a letter by Davis's law partnerWells Colton. In an 1845 letter to Davis, just after the birth of Davis's son Mercer, Colton writes:

> I am truly gratified to learn that Sarah has passed her confinement so easily—and if you are at all disappointed in the sex of the young stranger I can only say as old Tom in Jacob Faithful—"better luck next time."[37]

*Jacob Faithful*, like many of Marryat's novels, tells the story of a young boy who leaves the monotony of home for a life of adventure as a sailor. In contrast to the prim parlors of domestic novels, filled with young wives and dutiful daughters, Marryat's shipboard world is one of men. Although they still espouse Victorian morals, with especially strong Christian sentiments, Marryat's stories contain more broad humor and are and slightly more ribald than those of his friend Charles Dickens.[38] But the two men seem to have shared a fondness for vibrant characters and absurd situations; for example, in *Jacob Faithful*, the title character's drunken mother dies by spontaneous

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[35] King, 99.

[36] Sarah Davis, Bloomington, to David Davis, 10 Nov. 1852, Davis Family Papers.

[37] Wells Colton, St. Louis, to David Davis, Bloomington, 11 Nov. 1845, Davis Family Papers.

[38] Spilka, Mark, "Victorian Keys to the Early Hemingway: Captain Marryat," NOVEL: A
Forum on Fiction 17, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 118.

combustion, as does Krook in Dickens's 1852 *Bleak House*. It appears that Wells Colton enjoyed Marryat's edgier style, judging from his offhand reference in the letter, but was David Davis familiar with *Jacob Faithful* as well? The use of the quotation is inconclusive, especially since Colton points out its origin, but it is possible that Davis, an admirer of Dickens, read Marryat too.

Like *Jacob Faithful*, most of the novels the Davises enjoyed have long since been forgotten by scholars and casual readers alike. But some of the popular books of the day have survived to become literary classics, among them the work of Dickens. His first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, was published in America in 1836 to widespread acclaim,[39] and his subsequent books proved just as popular. But his reputation in the United States declined slightly when he criticized the nation in his *American Notes*. In 1843, Rachel Colton wrote to her brother Wells:

> You ask me if I have seen [*American Notes*]. I have & I think [Dickens] has neither done himself or Americans justice. You seem to have but a poor opinion of him. I have read many of his works & think, to say the least seen the "Pickwick Club"—the first, I think of his books—Sam Weller in that—if I may be a judge—is one of the best characters Dickens ever portrayed or any other writer in similar style that I have ever read.

Later, Rachel adds, "Twenty years hence, [Dickens] & his books will all be forgotten I imagine, but for the time they are very amusing."[40]

Historians have often debated whether audiences of this era made a distinction between popular works (such as Morgan's *Polish Orphan*) and more "literary" selections (such as the novels of Hawthorne). Nina Baym points out that critics sometimes tried to steer American readers toward more "serious" novels, writing that "if there was any democratic hope that a great writer could be greatly popular, Dickens encouraged it; if there was any inclination among writers and critics to believe that the public could not appreciate literary greatness, Dickens undermined it."[41] Her fellow critic Ann Douglas argues that domestic novels appealed to the popular taste because they featured heroines similar to their readers, while the writers recognized today as "literary"—including Melville and Hawthorne—focused on men, distancing themselves from the contemporary, female readership.[42] But Rachel Colton's perception of Dickens's literary value reveals that not all readers recognized what modern

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[39] Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: R.R. Bowher, 1947), 81.

[40] Rachel Colton to Wells Colton, March 12, 1843.

[41] *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 137.

[42] Douglas, p. 6.

critics consider his "genius." Rachel seems to suggest that because Dickens is "very amusing," he is not "literary." Clearly, the line between "serious" and "popular" novels already existed in this era, though consensus on what defines these two categories has shifted with the passage of time.

David Davis himself was an admirer of Dickens. A short profile of Davis, reprinted in 1880 by the *Evening Register* of New Haven, Conn., and originally published by the *New York Sun*, reveals that the then-Senator's favorite novel is *David Copperfield*, "though he has a great fondness for Thackeray and Walter Scott."[43] David Davis might have enjoyed *David Copperfield*, published in 1850, for more than just its complex plot and quirky characters. He might have identified with the novel's protagonist, an intelligent, sensitive child who is forced to become self-reliant at an early age after his widowed mother remarries. Davis himself had a similar experience. His biographer Willard King wrote, "In the language of modern psychiatry, David Davis might be called a 'rejected child.' Tossed from one place to another, like a bird in a badminton game, he was deprived of normal family affection in his formative years."[44] His mother, Ann Mercer Davis, had married at the age of 15 and was widowed scarcely three years later. She gave birth to David eight months after his father's death. She remarried when her son was five, but David's new stepfather paid little attention to him, eventually sending him to live with an uncle.[45] The hero of *David Copperfield* grows up in nearly the same way. He is born to a young widow after the death of his father, and his mother's remarriage forces him to leave home. Just as David Copperfield subsequently finds happiness in the home of an aunt, the young David Davis was welcomed by his uncle, Henry Lyon Davis.[46] Did David Davis see his own troubled childhood reflected in the pages of *David Copperfield*? It is difficult to know for sure, but it is tempting to think so.

***Christian Homes and Firesides; or, Reading about Religion with the Davises***

Domesticity was closely tied to Christianity; the virtues that middle-class American women like Sarah Davis were intended to transmit to their families were Protestant virtues. Between 1830 and 1870, an emphasis on "domestic piety" began to develop, and female writers began to supersede the clergy as moral authorities as the transmission and practice of religion became

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[43] "Pen Picture of David Davis," from *New York Sun*, reprinted in *Evening Register*, New Haven, Conn., 16 March 1880.

[44] King, 9.

[45] Ibid., 2-6.

[46] Ibid.

centered in the home.[47] As critic Ann Douglas has pointed out, the moralizing works of female novelists like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps displaced some of the ethical and religious authority that previously belonged to clergymen.[48] However, mainstream religious books written by men, like Scripture commentaries and biographies of church figures, continued to be popular, and several of these works appear on the "Davis reading list."

The letters themselves are full of references to religious services and social events, and offer intriguing glimpses into the spiritual lives of the residents of the established East and the frontier of Illinois. Early in their lives in Illinois, David Davis writes to Fanny Walker that "Sarah and I rode to camp meeting in a lumber wagon last Sunday. The congregation was very large but not boisterous. The Methodists control the church hereabouts."[49] Later, Sarah's mother Lucy, visiting her daughter in Bloomington, writes home: "Here are three Houses [sic] of public worship—And preaching every Sabbath at two of them—the Presbyterian and Methodist—that I meet some as good society here as in Berkshire County."[50] One Thanksgiving while Sarah was visiting the East, David Davis attended an Episcopal service in Bloomington by himself. "Not more than a dozen gentlemen were at church, the number of ladies was greater," he reports. "The Episcopal Church does not increase in size. The mode of worship it adopts does not seem to suit this Country [sic], which remark, I have no doubt, my mother would feel horrified at hearing me make."[51] Interestingly, the weakness of East Coast denominations like the Episcopalians illustrates a common tension of Illinois frontier life. Transplanted "Yankees" in Illinois often saw themselves as ambassadors of Eastern cultural values, in opposition to Catholic and Southern influences.[52] Moreover, although nondenominational organizations were growing in popularity, Protestant denominations were more clearly defined by differences in theology during the

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[47] Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986): p. xv.

[48] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), pp. 7-8.

[49] David Davis, Bloomington, to Fanny Walker, Lenox, 8 Sept. 1839, Samuel Chapman Armstrong Collection, Williams College, Williamstown, Mass.

[50] Lucy Walker, Lenox, to her children, 21 July 1840, Julius Rockwell Papers, Lenox Library, Lenox, Mass.

[51] David Davis, Springfield, to Sarah Davis, Bloomington, 1 Dec. 1850, Davis Family Papers.

[52] James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998): 260.

first half of the nineteenth century than they would become in later decades. [53] In Bloomington, however, these distinctions seem to have been glossed over at times due to a scarcity of ministers.

The Davis correspondents often quote the Bible in their letters, usually in an offhand fashion that indicates that they expected their reader to know instantly the origin of these words. This is especially true in times of grief and loss. After the death of the Davises' daughter Lucy, Wells Colton's mother Love wrote to Sarah, "'Of such is the kingdom of Heaven' was the gracious declaration of Our Divine Redeemer of 'little children' such as He was once and again taken from your embraces."[54] The letters of condolence that Sarah and David received are full of quotations from the Gospels, interwoven with other expressions of comfort. The letters contain more obscure religious quotations as well. In an 1839 letter to Fanny Walker, Sarah writes, "I learnt by the letter from the girls that you had gone to Canaan's fair and happy land."[55] This passage is a double play on words; Sarah is referring both to Canaan, Connecticut, and the Canaan of the Bible. But she may also be quoting a line from the hymn "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," which was written in 1787 and set to music in 1835. If this supposition is true, then we know not only some of what the Davises read, but also what they sang.

Sarah Davis read and enjoyed Grace Aguilar's *Women of Israel,* a book that some critics considered dangerous due to its author's Jewish faith. In an 1851 review of *The Women of Israel*, *The Southern Literary Messenger* warned its readers that "the work is in reality an argument for Judaism, and in many parts almost openly trenches on the question of the divinity or non-divinity of our Saviour." Although admitting that Aguilar is "a lady of irreproachable character" and "an authoress of wide-extended popularity," the unnamed reviewer's greatest concern is that the book will, like Aguilar's previous works, find its way "to numberless Christian homes and firesides":

> Under the impression that they are gathering at once religious information and entertainment, young girls will read that Miss Aguilar 'rejects wholly and utterly all belief in the Nazarene doctrine,' and find her specious arguments drawn

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[53] Douglas, p. 7.

[54] Love Colton, Beloit, to Sarah and David Davis, Bloomington, 25 Sept. 1850, Davis Family Papers.

[55] Sarah and David Davis, Bloomington, to Fanny Walker, Lenox, 3 Feb. 1839, Samuel Chapman Armstrong Collection, Williams College, Williamstown, Mass.

> from isolated sentences of the gospel and quotations from Jewish doctors, gradually stealing upon their minds.[56]

The *Messenger* reviewer lays bare the question underlying most contemporary reviews of Aguilar's work: Will a book written by a Jewish woman somehow undermine our own faith? The *Ladies Repository* says no, assuring its readers of Aguilar's purity and goodness; the *Messenger* says yes.

One of the "Christian homes and firesides" to which Aguilar's books found their way was that of Sarah Davis, who seems unconcerned about the possibility that she might inadvertently be converted to Judaism by reading Aguilar's work. This might be explained by Sarah's previous exposure to Aguilar's works. As noted above, Sarah first read Aguilar's novel *The Vale of Cedars*, pronouncing it "very captivating" and adding that she is now "looking over another of her books—Her Women of Israel. I am much pleased with the character of Sarah, (Abraham's wife)."[57] Aside from their shared name, Sarah Davis might also have been drawn to the Biblical Sarah because Aguilar uses her to discuss the role of a young wife. A bride, Aguilar wrote, "almost more than any other time in her young existence" requires "the protecting care and fostering tenderness of man in the first year of her wedded life. She has left the home of her youth, the fond parents who had lavished on her such love and care…and for guidance and support, under her God, [she] looks with justice to her husband alone."[58] The idea that a new bride requires care and support as she adjusts to her role seems to have been a common one; in a letter to Sarah's father shortly before their marriage, David Davis wrote, "I know and feel the responsibility of taking a beloved daughter away from her friends & parents, the home of her youth, and the friends of her childhood. Be assured that a sense of that responsibility is ever present with me."[59] In reading Aguilar's histories, Sarah Davis may have seen echoes of her own experiences. She may also have been interested in Biblical support for the domestic ethos to which she ascribed.

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[56] "Notices of New Works," *The Southern Literary Messenger: Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts*, vol. XVII (March 1851), 188-189.

[57] Sarah Davis, Beloit, to David Davis, Pekin, 8 Sept. 1851, Davis Family Papers.

[58] Grace Aguilar, *The Women of Israel: Or, Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1886), 152.

[59] David Davis, Bloomington, to William Perrin Walker, Lenox, 2 June 1838, Davis Family Papers.

Although a religious work, *Women of Israel* falls squarely into the category of domestic literature. Even her Israelite subjects are used to illustrate Victorian middle-class virtues, simultaneously reinforcing the idea of a "separate sphere" for women while glorifying their roles within that sphere: "In the sight of God, in their *spiritual* privileges, in their peculiar gifts and endowments, the power of performing their duties in their own sphere, in their *responsibility*, [women] are on a perfect equality with men," she writes in her study of Eve.[60] Aguilar uses the same story, however, to encourage women to "thank God that his love has granted us that lowly station where our own natural qualities may best be proved, and our weaknesses and our failings have less power to work us harm."[61] The seemingly-competing ideas that women could be equal to men even while relegated to an environment where they would not be in danger due to their perceived weaknesses, illustrates the uneasiness about women's roles that domestic literature sought to allay. The fall from Eden, in Aguilar's opinion, was responsible for restraining women's path "to a more lowly and domestic, though not a less hallowed sphere…"[62] For women like Sarah Davis, Aguilar's interpretation of the Scriptures provided an affirmation of their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

Sarah Davis may have been willing to read religious works by authors of other faiths, but not everyone was so open-minded. In 1851, Sarah wrote to her husband about an interesting incident that had been sparked by a book. David's uncle, Thomas Walker, was a resident of nearby Downs, Illinois, and was having difficulty adjusting to life on the Illinois frontier. He came to dinner one evening, and Sarah asked if he had read *A Memoir of the Live of James Milnor, D.D*. Milnor was a founder of the evangelizing American Tract Society, which had also published the new memoir. "Upon his answering in the negative," Sarah tells David, "I told him we had a volume at his service if he wished for it. He politely thanked me, but did not say he would like the book. Is he not stiff in his notions?"[63] Her husband replies, "[Walker] is High Church hence Dr Milnor's life don't [sic] suit him. He is in all a singular man. There never was any body of stiffer notions or stronger prejudices."[64] Even in a frontier society that made little distinction between the theology of the Protestant denominations, there were still those who sought to draw boundary lines.

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[60] Aguilar, *Women of Israel*, 34.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 3.

[63] Sarah Davis, Bloomington, to David Davis, 17 Oct. 1851, Davis Family Papers.

[64] David Davis, Danville, to Sarah Davis, Bloomington, Oct. 20, 1851, Davis Family Papers.

Sarah also read and enjoyed the Congregationalist scholar Thomas Upham's *Life of Faith.* She wrote to her sister Fanny, "I have been and am reading a work on Faith by Thomas Upham. I think you would like it if you have never read it. It is called "The Life of Faith."[65] The full title of the book neatly summarizes Upham's nearly-500 pages: *The Life of Faith; In Three Parts; Embracing Some of the Scriptural Principles or Doctrines of Faith, the Power or Effects of Faith in the Regulation of Man's Inward Nature, and the Relation of Faith to the Divine Guidance.* It was first published in 1845, nearly 16 years before Sarah read it. "Every page bears the impress of not only a pure but deep thinker," raved an early reviewer in *The Young American's Magazine of Self Improvement*, "while the style—free from all cant, of course—and the interesting matter in which it is written, make it an attractive volume to every reader of good taste and sound judgment."[66] The *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany* predicted that Upham's book would

> free the public mind from many false notions; will serve as a check to the extravagance too often witnessed in times of revival, and make religion a more simple and rational matter, commending itself to the better judgment of the head as well as to the warmer affections of the heart.[67]

*The Christian Examiner* also offered an explanation of Upham's beliefs, which were the subject of much contemporary debate. Although he was a Congregationalist, he allied himself with the predominantly-female "holiness movement" that was sweeping Methodism. Like the movement's leader, Phoebe Palmer, Upham taught the Wesleyan doctrine of perfectionism, which states that humans can live lives free of sin through the process of sanctification.[68] Sarah seems to have been interested enough in the idea to read Upham's hefty work on the subject, even a decade-and-a-half later, when the debate had died down somewhat. Her taste in religious literature suggests that she found intellectual as well as emotional comfort in her faith, influenced by "the better judgment of the head," as the *Examiner* put it, as well as the "warmer affections of the heart."

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[65] Sarah Davis, Bloomington, to Fanny Walker Williams, 18 April 1861, Davis Family Papers.

[66] "The Book World," *The Young American's Magazine of Self Improvement* (Boston: Charles H. Peirce, 1847), 133.

[67] "Perfectionism—Upham's Life of Faith," *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, Volume XL, Fourth Series, Volume V (Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1846), 405.

[68] Ibid., 395-400.

Several other Davis correspondents also studied religious books. In a letter to her sister, Davis family friend Martha Colton reports that her fiancé, the Rev. Aaron Lucius Chapin, has sent her J.H. Merle D'Aubigne's *History of the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century in Germany, Switzerland, &c.* The massive, three-volume work—called *D'Aubigne's Reformation* for short—was very popular during the 1840s and 1850s. In his account of Illinois life in the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Beneulyn Johnson identifies D'Aubigne's history as one of a handful of religious works that were commonly found in frontier homes.[69] Martha, in somewhat of an understatement, calls D'Aubigne's book "a large work" and notes that she has just finished reading Barnes's commentaries on Paul's letters to the Romans. "I wish I had his other commentaries for I like them," she adds.[70] While Martha, a future pastor's wife, may have had a particular interest in religious works, the popularity of D'Aubigne's history of the Reformation indicates that books of this nature had mainstream appeal.

Religious devotionals and gift books, often published during the holidays, were also popular. In a Christmas letter to her mother in 1846, Sarah Davis writes, "I had a pretty worsted basket given me for a Christmas present—and my husband brought me the "Christian Keepsake" for a New Year's gift."[71] *The Christian Keepsake and Missionary Annual* claimed to be nonsectarian and nondenominational; the preface to the 1848 issue states that the volume contains, "for the consideration of the reader, some of the more important of those great fundamental truths and doctrines in which all Protestant Christians agree:"

> These truths have been presented in the various forms of prose and poetry, graceful narrative and urgent exhortation; they have been rendered attractive to the eye, by numerous and highly-finished embellishments…they are believed to be, in short, in every respect worthy of forming a volume which taste and piety will be glad either to give or receive as a CHRISTIAN KEEPSAKE.[72]

Gift books like these presented Biblical teachings and allegories in the style of popular fiction. They also contained accounts of overseas adventures by

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[69] Johnson, 117.

[70] Martha Colton to Elizabeth Colton, Feb. 20, 1843, A.L. Chapin Papers, Beloit College, Bleoit, Wis.

[71] Sarah Davis, Bloomington, to Lucy Adams Walker, Lenox, 28 Dec. 1846, Davis Family Papers.

[72] *The Christian Keepsake and Missionary Annual*, W. Marshall and Co., 1848.

missionaries, providing a dose of escapism and excitement along with religious teachings. These works were seen as a way to impart religious doctrine to women and children through a medium that was more memorable and more enjoyable than dry Scripture commentaries or rigid works on theology; as historian Colleen McDannell puts it, "Moral instruction still was accomplished but in a more 'pleasant' manner."[73] The line between edification and entertainment was frequently blurred in the mid-19th century.

***Best Sellers; or, the Davises as Literary Consumers***

The "literary lives" of the Davises and their friends can be judged not only by the content of the books they read, but also by the popularity of those books. Many of the authors mentioned in the letters were very well-known, and some of the books the Davises read can even be considered best sellers. In an era when sales numbers are often missing, inflated, or otherwise misleading, defining a "best seller" is difficult. For example, the works of Dickens and Sir Walter Scott were widely pirated by competing publishing houses, with some cheap copies sold for as little as 25 cents.[74] But by determining how many separate printings a title went through, literary historians can identify books that were particularly popular with antebellum readers.

While only a few of the books mentioned in the Davis letters appear on these best-seller lists, at least two of them seem to have already been deemed "classics" by the time the Davises and their friends read them. Martha Colton mentions borrowing Scott's *Guy Mannering* from a library in January 1843.[75] According to historian Frank Mott, this book was first published in America in 1815, and shortly became a best seller.[76] "Nearly everyone who could spell out a page" read Scott's novels in the 1810s and 1820s, Mott wrote, and it seems that his works were still being read avidly decades later. [77] Similarly, in 1851, Sarah writes to David that their son George is "deep in the mysteries of Robinson Crusoe:" "He just broke out with the exclamation that 'this was a curious man,'" Sarah notes dryly. "Many children have been of the same opinion." [78] *Robinson Crusoe* was first published in 1775, and was also a

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[73] McDannell, pp. 99-101.

[74] Lyle H. Wright, "A Statistical Study of American Fiction, 1774-1850," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 2 (April 1939), 309.

[75] Martha Colton, Beloit, to Elizabeth Colton, Union, S.C., 19 Jan. 1843, A.L. Chapin Papers, Beloit College, Beloit, Wis.

[76] Mott, 306.

[77] Ibid., 65.

[78] Sarah Davis to David Davis, 8 Nov., 1851, Davis Family Papers.

best seller in America according to Mott's calculations.[79] Most of Dickens's books also appear on Mott's list, as well as Grace Aguilar's *Home Influence*. According to Mott's definition, a "best seller" is a book whose sales numbers are roughly one percent of the nation's population during the decade in which it was published.[80] Most of the books that the Davises read appear to have been at least mildly popular, though not always the most popular book in a given year.

One of the most widely-read novels of the era, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World,* is mentioned in a letter written to Sarah Davis by her niece Cornelia Livingston Rockwell. Cornelia, who was then in school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, wrote to her aunt:

> Miss Dillingham gives premiums for the one that has the most perfect lessons at the end of the term. I got it last Term and have got it this term. It is both volumes of the Wide, Wide World which I suppose you have heard of. It is a very delightful book indeed, and almost every person that has read it is very much delighted with it.[81]

Published in 1851, *The Wide, Wide World* was, according to some historians, the first American best-seller; as critic Nina Baym puts it, "the volume and speed of its sales altered the expectations of all publishers and authors thereafter."[82] Warner wrote the book in order to support her family after her father lost a small fortune in the financial panic of 1837. Its enormous success inspired hundreds of other women to try their hands at writing novels, and is credited with launching the domestic fiction genre.[83] It is unsurprising that Cornelia Rockwell's teacher gave the novel to a young student. Warner's heroine, Ellen, embodies nearly all the virtues that were valued in women: piety, dutifulness, and domesticity. Even more pertinent, however, is the fact that the book focuses on Ellen's adolescence and development and can be read as a female Bildungsroman. Girls like Cornelia could read the book and, perhaps for the first time, imagine themselves as the heroine — an opportunity that probably helped drive the book's popularity and inspired many imitators.

In an age when "books were few" in the young state of Illinois, Sarah and David Davis eagerly awaited

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[79] Mott, 306.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Cornelia Rockwell to Sarah Davis, March 27, 1852, Julius Rockwell papers, Lenox Library, Lenox, Mass.

[82] *Woman's Fiction*, 140.

[83] Ibid., 141-142

a new volume.[84] In January 1842, Sarah wrote to her sister Fanny Walker that she had acquired "some new books" and had "derived much pleasure" from a collection of travel writings by the author and educator Catharine Sedgwick, whom Sarah knew from her girlhood in Lenox, Massachusetts.[85] This event was significant enough that David Davis had mentioned it in a letter to Sarah's father several weeks earlier. "We are reading Miss Sedgwick's letters," he notes. "Bought them in St Louis—2 volumes—& paid three dollars—a high price—we think & we should not have given it had it not have been for the author."[86] Despite his grumbling tone, it is clear that the couple valued literature enough to order books from St. Louis at a significant expense.

Sedgwick was already a very popular writer; her novel *The Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man*, written in 1836, is cited by literary historian Lyle Wright as one of the top sellers of the antebellum period.[87] In an 1841 review of her *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*, the book the Davises purchased, *The North American Review* praises her "genius" and the "philanthropic tone of her writings."[88] But the reviewer feels that Sedgwick has failed her numerous fans with the publication of *Letters*:

> It makes no pretensions to be any thing more than a record of personal observations in the course of a common tour, and even this story it tells in a manner not absolutely lively; and, though the companionship of a person of good sense and kind feelings over such ground cannot be absolutely wearisome to the reader, it is scarcely enough to carry him contentedly through two volumes.[89]

Despite the lengthy personal anecdotes that the *North American* reviewer so detested, Sarah Davis enjoyed the book. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, unlike most of Sedgwick's audience, she personally knew the author and could vividly imagine Sedgwick regally making her way across Old World. Sarah might also have found the exoticism of the material interesting; the cathedrals and

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[84] Johnson., 117.

[85] Sarah Davis, Bloomington, to Fanny Walker, Stockbridge, Mass., 10 Jan. 1842, Samuel Chapman Armstrong Collection, Williams College, Williamstown, Mass.

[86] David Davis, Bloomington, to William Perrin Walker, Lenox, 22 Dec. 1841, Davis Family Papers.

[87] Lyle Wright, "A Statistical Survey of American Fiction 1774-1850," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 2 (April 1939), 318.

[88] "Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home," *The North American Review* 53,Boston: James Munroe and Co., 529.

[89] Ibid., 529.

galleries of the Europe must have seemed part of a different world as she sat reading in her farmhouse on the Illinois frontier. It is tempting, however, to interpret her husband's comment that he would not have paid so much "had it not have been for the author" as a sign that he agreed with the book's negative reviews.

Sarah's education at Catherine Beecher's school probably affected her later reading habits. Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* is not mentioned in the letters, but it was phenomenally popular throughout the country, and Sarah Davis is almost certain to have been familiar with it. In the book, Beecher advises that

> mothers and teachers should carefully guard the young from those highly-wrought fictions, which lead the imagination astray; and especially from that class of licentious works, made interesting by genius and taste, which have flooded this Country [sic], and which are often found on the parlor table, even of moral and Christian people.[90]

Sarah Davis seems to have heeded her teacher's advice; although many of the novels the Davises read were melodramatic, they all contained moral messages that Beecher would have found unobjectionable. Beecher singles out Bulwer-Lytton—whose works "seduce the unwary"[91]—and Lord Byron—whose poetry she refers to as "misanthropic wailing"[92]—as particularly harmful, and neither of these writers are mentioned in the letters. She advises that sensational novels are especially harmful to young people, "except those of dull and phlegmatic temperament, until the solid parts of education are secured, and a taste for more elevated reading acquired. If these stimulating condiments in literature are freely used in youth, in a majority of cases all relish for more solid reading will be destroyed."[93]

Sarah Davis seems to have agreed with Beecher in regard to her own children's reading habits. In the letters, George is mentioned reading classics like *Robinson Crusoe*, as well as the popular children's periodical *Robert Merry's Museum.* This magazine contained edifying poems and stories for young people, and was edited by Louisa May Alcott at the time when George Davis

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[90] Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, *for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School (*Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1841), 234.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Beecher, 192.

[93] Ibid., 257-58.

read it.[94] Sarah Davis's niece Sarah Walker is at one point described as being "quite absorbed" in the works of the English writer Amelia Opie, although it is not mentioned whether Sarah was reading Opie's short stories or her poems.[95] By the time of her death in 1854, Opie was no longer considered among the first rank of female writers, having been eclipsed by women like Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Bronte.[96] But her work was still popular, and with titles like "A Wife's Duty" and "Illustrations of Lying, In All its Branches," her stories were seen as appropriately enriching for children.[97]

Beecher also offers her opinion on novel-reading, acknowledging that opinion on what constitutes a novel is divided. She concludes that "works of imagination, which embrace fictitious narrative" are safe to read, as "settled by Divine examples in the parables and allegories of Scripture." However, she underscores her point by advising that "no fictitious writings, which tend to throw the allurements of taste and genius around vice and crime, should ever be tolerated; and all that tend to give false views of life and duty, should also be banished."[98] She also suggests that editors, ministers, and teachers take the responsibility of determining what works are in the public taste, and which should be avoided.[99] While we have no way of knowing how closely Sarah Davis followed her former teacher's advice on choosing reading material, it is clear from the books she mentions in the letters that she enjoyed the moralizing literature of the day.

***You Are What You Read; or, Art Imitates Life and Life Imitates Art***

How much were the Davises' ideas and opinions affected by what they read? This question is difficult to answer for sure, but there are intriguing parallels between the works they mention in the letters and the real-life circumstances of their lives. In such cases, it is also difficult to know whether

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[94] Pat Pflieger, "A Visit to Merry's Museum; or, Social Values in a Nineteenth-Century American Periodical for Children," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota.
http://www.merrycoz.org/papers/diss/MM00.HTM

[95] Sarah Davis, Bloomington, to David Davis, Albany, N.Y., 11 Feb. 1861, Davis Family Papers.

[96] "Literary Miscellanies: Death of Miss Opie," The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art. Ed. W.H. Bidwell. (Jan.-April 1854.) New York: W.H. Bidwell: 286-287.

[97] Amelia Opie, *The Works of Mrs. Amelia Opie, Complete in Three Volumes*, vol. 3
(Philadelphia: Crissy and Markley, 1848).

[98] Beecher, 256.

[99] Ibid., 257.

art is imitating life or life is imitating art. The death of children, for example, was so common in this era that it is no surprise to find examples both in fiction and in reality. But in comparing written responses to children's deaths—both in the Davis letters and in the novels they read—one finds similar language used to express similar sentiments. The authors of these books were no doubt incorporating contemporary values into their stories, but these fictional accounts also shaped their readers' responses to similar tragedies in their own lives. Thus the connections between art and life were not linear, but circular.

One of the most frequent topics in the Davis correspondence is the birth, or impending birth, of children. Pregnancy and birth were delicate topics in Victorian literature, and references to these topics were often couched in euphemistic language. During the 1840s and 1850s, pregnancy was often classified as an illness or disease, and although women might discuss it between themselves, was generally considered a private matter. Despite the advice of doctors, many middle- and upper-class women continued to wear corsets even in the last stages of pregnancy in a (probably futile) attempt to conceal their conditions and conform to the fashions of the day.[100] These efforts at concealment also extended to language and literary conventions. A common phrase for pregnancy in novels and short stories was "that state in which women wish to be who love their lords."[101] This formula, however, seems to have made the jump from fiction to reality. In 1848, David Davis writes to his wife, who is visiting relatives in the East, that her friend Latricia is "not in the way in which Ladies [sic] wish to be who love their husbands."[102] It is hard to know whether David subconsciously picked up this phrase from his novel-reading or whether it had become a common phrase in speech as well as literature, but it is an example of the way in which the conventions of fiction crept into everyday life and vice versa. There are numerous other euphemisms used for pregnancy in the letters: "increasing," "embonpoint," and "enceinte," as well as less-colorful phrases like "Lucy will be sick in August."[103] A particularly clever example comes from the pen of Sarah's brother Richard, who writes of his sister-in-law that "Harriet requires more room to move about in than she did some time ago."[104]

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[100] Hoffert, Sylvia D., Private Matters: American Attitudes toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800-1860 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989): pp. 15-36.

[101] Brown, 122.

[102] David Davis to Sarah Davis, 2 July 1848, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[103] Sarah Davis to David Davis, 1 June 1848, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[104] Richard Walker to Sarah Davis, 22 Dec. 1848, ibid.

But the Davis letters also reveal that it was not always necessary to gloss over the facts of life with coy phrases. In 1848, David Davis tells Sarah about a $20,000 estate that is willed to a dead man's widow unless "she is now pregnant and gives birth to a living child."[105] David also uses the word "pregnant" in a later letter to his wife, to describe the condition of a servant girl in a household he stayed in on the circuit. In the same letter, he also refers to a "trial for bastardy" at which he is presiding.[106] These words had probably never appeared in any novel that the Davises ever read, and their use here suggests that the polite language of fiction did not always extend to real life. The word "pregnant" is never used in reference to any woman among the Davises' family or friends or a social equal, suggesting that its use had negative connotations. However, the fact that David was willing to use the word in a letter to his wife, despite its questionable taste, indicates that he did not attempt to "shelter" Sarah or maintain social niceties in these situations. Issues of class were closely linked to childbirth in the nineteenth century. Many doctors believed that middle- and upper-class women suffered more in pregnancy and birth due to their "refined" natures, and lower-class women usually did not attempt to conceal their pregnancies from their neighbors in the same way that their wealthier sisters did.[107] David Davis's use of the word "pregnant" in reference to a lower-class woman but not to his own acquaintances is a telling illustration of these attitudes.

In novels, authors often preferred to gloss over pregnancy and birth altogether. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps skips three years in her heroine's life in *Sunny-Side*, erasing the need for her to explain the arrival of two children. Martha Hubbell is slightly more daring in *The Shady Side*. She introduces the birth of Mary's first child thusly: "There [was] within the parsonage walls a new human life; and with it opened a new fount of love, pure and perennial in two glad hearts."[108] Unless there was a compelling need to mention the birth of a child—such as the death of the mother—novelists usually "wrote around" the problem in vague terms.[109] David Davis, on the other hand, is significantly less flowery as he writes to his mother-in-law: "Sarah gave birth to a son on Friday Evening [sic] about ½ past 6 ocl [sic]…Her labour [sic] was not protracted & she was confined about a week earlier than she expected."[110] But not everyone was so blunt; following the arrival of Sarah's son, Rachel Colton makes reference to

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[105] David Davis to Sarah Davis, 24 June 1848, ibid.
[106] David Davis to Sarah Davis, 1 May 1851, ibid.
[107] Hoffert, pp. 67-68.
[108] Hubbell, p. 117.
[109] Hoffert, p. 63.
[110] David Davis to Lucy Adam Walker, 5 June 1842, Davis Family Papers.

the baby's birth by writing, "I was delighted to hear by Mr. Davis' kind letter that your troubles are over."[111] David Davis's message to Sarah's mother is, understandably, more straightforward than the language that Rachel, a family friend, uses in her letter.

In the Victorian age, the corollary to pregnancy and birth was often death, whether of the mother, the child, or both. The ascendency of the "cult of motherhood," which placed more emphasis on the active rearing of children than in the past, meant that the sorrow for the death of a child was made even more acute.[112] The passing of children is a sad preoccupation both in the Davis letters and in the books that they read, and the language that accompanies these events is often similar. Of all the Davis correspondents, the writer whose language most closely matches the ornate, emotional style favored by contemporary fiction writers is Love Colton. Following the death of the Davises' young son Mercer, she urges the couple to learn from their grief:

> Now my Dear [sic] friends, permit me to lead your thoughts from that darling object, to reflections which this dispensation suggests, and to the improvement of it, as the chastening rod of your Heavenly Father…To the dear little object of your care, your duties are ended but your responsibilities, as connected with him, do not cease with his life. His death (dear lamented babe) yes his death, as the "rod and reproof" of your Father in Heaven, in what you are now called upon to improve so that it may subserve your own spiritual warfare.[113]

In addition, Love Colton suggests that the death of Mercer will make the idea of the afterlife more concrete for Sarah and David: "Does not the unseen world," she writes, "appear more real, and nearer to you since you have one so dear to you there?"[114] The belief that God would take a child in order to teach its parents to trust Him more fully would probably make most modern Americans very uncomfortable. But it was a common sentiment in the mid-nineteenth century, judging by the frequency with which it appears in fiction.

After Mary, the heroine of Hubbell's *Shady Side*, begins to feel resentful of her hardships, the narrator reports that the "heavenly Father sees

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[111]Rachel Colton, Milwaukee, Wis., to Sarah Davis, Bloomington, 20 Nov. 1845, ibid.

[112] Hoffert, p. 169.

[113] Love Colton, Milwaukee, Wis., to Sarah and David Davis, Bloomington, 16 Sept. 1846, David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill.

[114] Ibid.

that a new stroke is needed; and though his heart of infinite compassion yearns over his suffering children, he will not, falsely indulgent, spare the utmost virtue of the rod."[115] And so Mary's angelic daughter Abby must die. In her grief, Mary reflects that the little girl's "angel-presence was with them oft…There is a new tie between their hearts and heaven…Their human sympathies became a sanctified medium of spiritual blessings."[116] The language and sentiment used by Hubbell and Love Colton are almost interchangeable, especially the reference to a child's death as "the rod" used by God to discipline its wayward parents and the notion of a "new tie" between the grieving family and heaven. Love Colton, an older woman who appears to have been very sincere in her religious belief, was probably expressing her own feelings instead of unwittingly echoing a novel she had probably never read. But the similarity of the language suggests that these sentiments were commonly held, and that when these scenes appear in novels they are, at least in some measure, reflecting real emotions instead of seeking to proscribe the behavior of grieving parents.

This attitude was becoming increasingly popular in domestic novels. As historian Sylvia Hoffert writes, popular authors

> offered to those who mourned the death of a child a new strategy, one that suggested that the presence of infants in the household and their subsequent demise helped to redeem other members of the family and ensure their permanent reunion in paradise.[117]

Did the Davises subscribe to this belief? After the death of their daughter Lucy, Sarah wrote to her mother-in-law, "Our dear child passed away so gently—and looked so like an angel in her cradle that I could not have the heart to wish her back in this world of trial."[118] The angelic, innocent appearance of dead children was a common theme in both novels and in real life, linking the departed soul to a brighter future in heaven.

***The Moral of the Story; or, What We Know About the Davises as Readers***

By looking at the books that the Davis family and their friends mention in their letters to each other, we can draw a few conclusions about their reading habits and role as literary consumers. The fact that they took the time and effort to tell each other what they were reading indicates that they

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[115] Hubbell, 221.
[116] Ibid., 225.
[117] Hoffert, p. 170.
[118] Sarah Davis to Lucy Adam Davis, 5 Sept. 1850, Davis Family Papers.

probably discussed literature together when they met in person. Latricia Robinson's request that Sarah Davis bring her *The Last Leaf from Sunny Side* suggests that books were lent and shared among friends in Bloomington even before a library was formally established. We are also given hints about when and where reading for pleasure took place. Martha Colton mentions "spending my long quiet evenings" reading,[119] while David Davis picked up *The Polish Orphan* in order to wile away a rainy day. We know from the letters that the Davis family frequently bought books. Sarah's brother George wrote to his daughter in 1857 that he would "endeavor to get you some pleasing books," as she was "just at an age to enjoy pretty stories."[120] Earlier, in 1839, David Davis wrote to Fanny Walker in an effort to convince her to visit them in Illinois. "I wont [sic] promise you much employment other than you will get from our society," he wrote, "plenty of books to read, & nothing to do."[121] As simplistic as it may sound, it is easy to forget that in an era before television, the Internet, or instantaneous coast-to-coast communication, books were the centerpiece of popular culture for the literate middle class.

Reading the books that the Davises read provides insight into the personal, emotional lives of one American family and their loved ones. The strong parallels between the lives of David Davis and the protagonist of *David Copperfield*, as well as Davis's statement late in life that the book was his favorite, implies that he found resonance in Dickens's story. Similarly, Sarah Davis's interest in the fate of the neglected politician's wife in "The Palsied Heart" suggests that she was grateful for the strength of her own marriage in the face of separation and trial. Novels like *The Sunny Side* and *The Shady Side* depicted the everyday tragedies that affected American women—the deaths of children, marital struggles, and the difficulty of managing a household—and in doing so provided their readers with methods of coping with these hardships themselves. Although readers like the Davises could also find comfort and assurance in overtly religious works, novels allowed them to conceptualize themselves as the heroes and heroines of their own lives.

But the books that the Davises mention in their letters to each other are also a microcosm of middle-class Americans' intellectual, religious, and private lives in the decades before the Civil War. Steeped in the domestic, Protestant ideology of the age, they demonstrate how these ideas were transmitted to the reading public. They also reflect the growing "feminization" of literature as, for the first time, both writers and readers were assumed to be

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[119] Martha Colton, Beloit, to Elizabeth Colton Curtis, Union, S.C., 20 Feb. 1843, A.L. Chapin Papers.

[120] George Walker to Fanny Walker, 12 Aug. 1857, Samuel Chapman Armstrong Collection.

[121] David Davis to Fanny Walker, 8 Sept. 1839, ibid.

predominantly female. The works that the Davises read represent the larger forces at work in American society as notions of home, family, and the roles of women shifted and changed.