

MELODY GRAULICH

IO

## Opening Windows toward the Sea

Harmony and Reconciliation in  
American Women's Sea Literature

*Like Lillian Nayder, Melody Graulich argues that sea literature has for too long been defined as both a male and a masculine genre. Even those recent critics, she claims, who bring a sensitivity to gender to their analysis of sea fiction still envision it as a body of literature centered exclusively on men. Graulich, in contrast, recovers a women-authored tradition of maritime fiction. In her examination of American literary texts produced from the mid- to late nineteenth century, Graulich identifies a distinctly female vision of the sea, which she terms a "synthesizing image of harmony." This vision, she suggests, focuses on the reconciling of opposites and on the balancing of alternatives. The form of this literature is appropriately tidal, and its setting is often the shore, the locus for male/female interconnection. Hers is a fitting work to conclude a volume that stresses the integration of land-based and maritime history and culture, and that argues for the transcendence of the symbolic, oppositional figures of "iron men" and "wooden women."*

the sea is another story  
the sea is not a question of power

—Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck"

The waves are full of whispers wild and sweet;  
They call to me

—Celia Thaxter, "Off Shore"

### Opening the Window

IN 1877 IN *The Story of Avis*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps opened her heroine's window toward the sea: "The window toward the sea was open and the rhythm of the tide beat a strange duet with [Avis's friend's] gentle, happy breathing on the pillow at her side. It seemed to her a great song

without words, full of uncaptured meanings, deep with unuttered impulse. She would have liked to fit expression to it."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the late nineteenth century, many women writers captured the meanings of the great song without words, the sea's duet with the breathing of their loved ones. Like Kate Chopin's famous heroine, Edna Pontellier, the literary daughter of Phelps's *Avis*, these writers found that "the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul."<sup>2</sup> Like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Mara Lincoln of The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862), the book which Jewett said most influenced her own work, these writers "looked pensively into the water" to discover that "every incident of life came up out of its depths to meet" them.<sup>3</sup>

Stowe calls the sea a "great, reflecting mirror" (319), and *Mara* is forced to look to the sea—to nature rather than to culture—to find herself. Reading Plutarch's *Lives* with the minister who is educating her, she asks, "[are] there . . . any lives of women?" The good man replies, "No, my dear, . . . in the old times, women did not get their lives written, though I don't doubt many of them were much better worth writing than the men's" (152). Reading today literary criticism on the tradition of American sea literature, one could still ask *Mara's* question.

W. H. Auden, for instance, tells us that at sea, "I precedes we," that fictional seamen seek to be "free from both the evils and responsibilities of communal life," to escape "necessity" in the "search for possibility," to test themselves by striving against the "primitive potential power" of nature.<sup>4</sup> Seeking absolute freedom, the seaman may end up alienated, feeling like a "stranger, . . . alone, above, apart."<sup>5</sup> Another critic says the sea represents "the restless, aggressive, ambitious, enterprising impulse—the impulse to know, to own, to domineer," adding that "Americans believed that the sea was too harsh and anti-social an environment for women."<sup>6</sup> This historical commonplace bespeaks literary historical assumptions, assumptions also evident in the critical insistence that sea literature focuses on metaphysical questions with "universal significance," questions about the meaning of human existence, the nature of good and evil, the moral and psychological freedom life allows, the possibility for heroism in the world, and what is Truth.<sup>7</sup> There are critics whose emphasis on community in the sea novel questions the male gender stereotypes implicit in the previous quotes, but even they present the sea as male territory.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Plutarch's assumptions about history and heroism led him to overlook women's lives, so have assumptions about what defines sea literature led us to overlook the fact that American women have repeatedly

used the sea's mirroring image to reflect upon women's lives, that their voices echo each other. Echoing a writer from across the sea, Virginia Woolf, I see this essay as a voyage out, in which I begin defining a tradition of women's sea literature by exploring the sea as a significant recurring symbol in nineteenth-century women's writing. I look at the work of Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Sarah Orne Jewett, Emily Dickinson, Celia Thaxter, Rebecca Harding Davis, Phelps, and Chopin.

### Predestination and Free Will

In many ways, women's sea literature does contrast with the male tradition. Focusing on the seashore, on islands, on reefs, women writers also ponder questions about identity when gazing seaward, but their vision is qualified, framed by an awareness of their ties to others. To Avis, as to Whitman, the "sea whispered me," but it did so in harmony with the breathing of her friend. Their "universal" questions are social, not meta-physical; they do not challenge the universe but explore the construction and meaning of human relationships. They question binary oppositions and try to break down boundaries. Acknowledging necessity but seeking to harmonize it with vision and possibility, they offer a transformative interpretation of the sea, as did the anonymous nineteenth-century quilt-maker who designed the "Storm at Sea" quilt. A brief look at her design can make the women's view of the sea's synthesizing force a "heap plainer," as Eliza Calvert Hall would say. Hall, an Appalachian mountain writer, does not use sea imagery, but her narrator from *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (1907) offers insights into quilt patterns, which in turn help us see the patterns in women's sea literature.

How much piecin' a quilt's like livin' a life! And as for sermons, why, they ain't no better sermon to me than a patchwork quilt. . . . Many a time I've set and listened to Parson Page preachin' about predestination and free will, and I've said to myself, ". . . if I could jest git up there in the pulpit with one of my quilts, I could make it a heap plainer than parson's makin' it with all his big words."

You see, you start out with jest so much caliker; you don't go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you'll have a piece left over every time you cut out a dress, and you jest take whatever happens to come. And that's like predestination. But when it comes to the cuttin' out, why you're free to choose your own pattern. You can give the same kind of pieces to two persons and one'll make a "nine-patch" and the other one'll make a "wild-goose-chase," and there'll

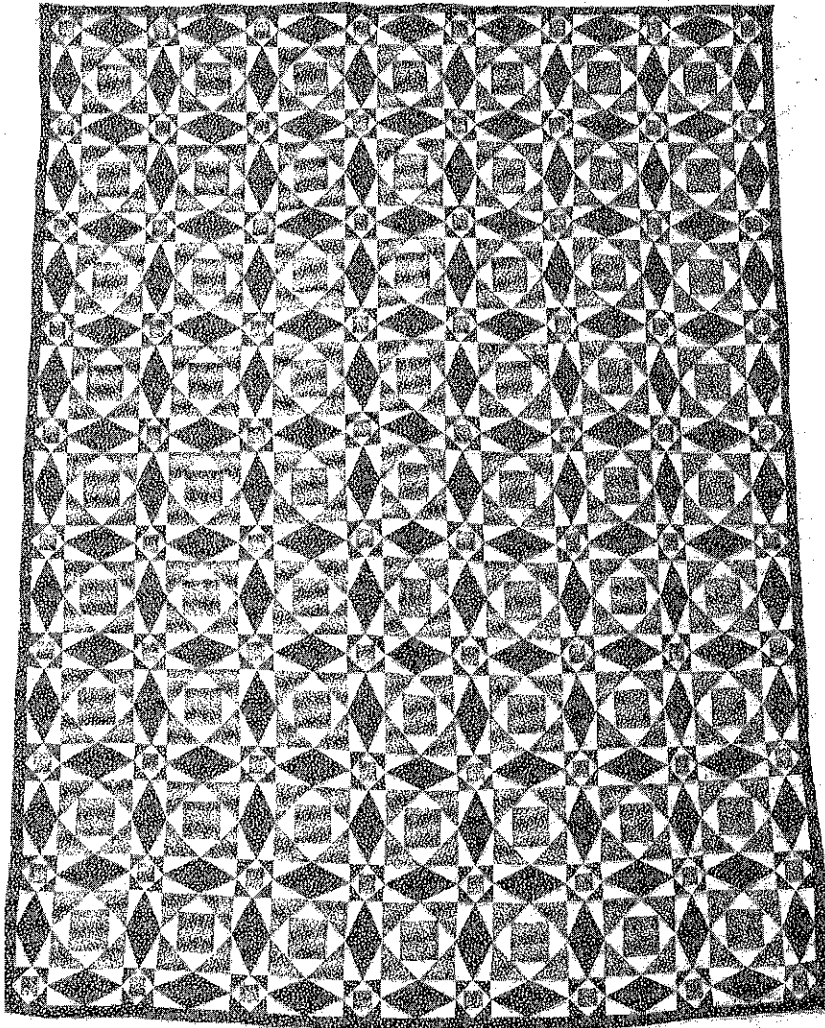
be two quilts made out o' the same kind of pieces and jest as different as they can be. And that is jest the way with livin'. The Lord sends us the pieces but we can cut 'em out and put 'em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the caliker.<sup>9</sup>

Like Aunt Jane, the women sea watchers recognize the interrelationship of freedom and predestination. Self-expression takes place within a network of human ties: others give you the pieces. Free will and autonomy are created by piecing together, by discovering one's own pattern within givens or restrictions, a pattern that may well have been handed down from a mother or an aunt. With that reconciling view comes a definition of individuality *and* an acknowledgment of alternative patterns and points of view, a balance between self and other.<sup>10</sup>

While Parson Page, like dozens of ministers in nineteenth-century women's texts, uses his "big words" to impose his distanced abstractions on his audience, Aunt Jane provides a concrete example to ground her conceptualizing. Following her example, I turn to the "Storm at Sea" quilt design. Before reading on, discover your own patterns in the design.

Some people see waves; others see squares. Some see four-pointed stars; others, eight-pointed stars. Some tilt at windmills; some eyes run in circles. If you look long enough, you perhaps feel dizzy. Although you are probably taken in by the quilt's optical illusions, each side of every piece is perfectly straight. Look again and see if you can find the repeating geometric block, made up of squares and triangles, forty-five and ninety-degree angles. How does the quilt designer transcend, transform, predictable geometry and straight lines to create the quilt's dynamic energy?

Aunt Jane suggests that quilts speak more directly than sermons, that they can be "read." This storm at sea speaks of harmony and turbulence, reconciling opposites, accepting the mysterious and sometimes contradictory patterns of nature and human existence. We experience the calm and order of the tides in its straight lines, its regular pattern, and its repetitive geometry, while the illusive waves imply the energy and passion of storm. The quilt designer expresses both thematically, through the merger of the two faces of the sea, and formally, through the use of illusion, the idea of synthesis. A larger picture grows fantastically out of the ordinary bits of fabric; we see something more than the sum of the parts. The world of facts, of necessity, of geometry, is merged with the world of intuition, of possibility, of vision. Through its transformations, the design calls our attention to perception, to the inevitability of alternative visions.



"Storm at Sea" quilt, made by Melody Graulich (1992) from a traditional nineteenth-century design. Composed entirely of straight-edged pieces, the quilt in its overlapping design suggests the reconciling, harmonizing vision of women sea writers.

Sharing the desire of Aunt Jane and the anonymous quilt designer to reconcile vision and necessity, women sea writers use sea imagery—often stormy—to explore conflicting needs and desires, emotions, loyalties, and commitments.<sup>11</sup> Their works contain patterns of free will and predestination, self and other, which often overlap, as the waves overlap the shore.

Women's seashore literature explores the tidal boundaries of female identity and of the female body. The frequent oceanic mergers with the sea—with *la mère*—in both men's and women's literature recall infants' fusion with their mothers, with no recognition of boundaries between self and other. While men develop gender identity by separating from their primary caregivers, their mothers, women come to understand themselves as women by identifying with and against their mothers. For men like Ishmael on his masthead, the sea raises threats to the attainment of an individuated self. Women also must develop an ego that recognizes its own needs and desires, but boundaries are blurred.<sup>12</sup> Women perpetually negotiate what I will call a "self," recognizing the need to be differentiated but also seeking connection. And so a woman's evolving sense of self—and of her sexuality, a repeated theme in seashore literature—is tidal. The "continual crossing of self and other" is mirrored in the seashore and tides, a landscape of crossings.<sup>13</sup>

In this essay I focus on women characters who struggle to achieve a "reconciled self," a self that recognizes the tidal flow of identity, acknowledges both freedom and predestination, and achieves transformation. Like female identity, the form of women's seashore literature is tidal; apparently conflicting themes and alternate ways of seeing ebb and flow—and eventually cross. The sea washes into women's texts at moments when the heroine, author, or text is poised between alternatives, at moments of decision. Women's sea literature commonly reflects the most complex question for nineteenth-century women writers: how to reconcile autonomy with responsibility to others.<sup>14</sup> Seen from the room with a sea view, freedom is qualified by an awareness of bonds to others and their rewards and costs. Although they may, like Dickinson, imagine that they "dwell in possibility," women dwell on the shore, unable to leave behind the communal, everyday world or its responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> The seashore, where the land and the sea are brought into relationship, becomes an apt symbolic landscape for tales of emotional conflict and reconciliation, for scenes of synthesis or transformation, for authors and characters—and even literary historians—seeking to harmonize apparent opposites.

The seashore reminds women of the need—the necessity—of reconciling forces that seem to be in opposition, of finding compromises. Of course, tidal identities and broken-down binary boundaries are more complex than my summary has made them sound. But we can only make such discoveries by walking along the seashore with Stowe and the others.<sup>16</sup>

### Stowe's Maternal Lessons

Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island* initially seems to accept the conventional, even stereotypical, gender differences in sea literature by contrasting the "natures" of two children whose lives are intimately connected to the sea. Mara speculates on what causes the differences between her life and Moses': "He was handsome, clever, and had a thousand other things to do and to think of—he was a boy, in short, and going to be a glorious man and sail all over the world, while she could only hem handkerchiefs and knit stockings, and sit at home and wait for him to come back" (149). While this passage suggests differences in the social construction of gender, in nurture, Stowe more commonly insists that Moses and Mara have different natures.<sup>17</sup> Self-absorbed Moses goes off adventuring, challenging all limits; willful and domineering, he does not question putting *I* before *we*. Mara rambles along the seashore or "sit[s] at the open window that looked forth toward the ocean" and devotes herself to others (360). Both children are born of the sea, orphaned by shipwrecks, and sea imagery defines selfhood for both: Mara is "a pearl washed ashore by a mighty, uprooting tempest" "whose poor little roots first struck deep in the salt, bitter waters" (25, 8), while stormy metaphors describe Moses' "solitary freedom in his lonely seafaring life," his reluctance to be "anchored in society" (188). With his "love of contradiction and opposition," Moses tries to grow through separation, while Mara, like her creator, defines self and freedom in relation to their opposites (189). Self and other are interdependent; freedom and fate must somehow be harmonized.

Even as it supports easy gender dichotomies, Stowe's text brings polarities into question. Facing Mara's death, Moses guiltily realizes, "You always lived for me and I lived for myself" (389). Mara's reply absolves him of responsibility by appealing simultaneously to nature and nurture:

Moses, I always knew I loved most. It was my nature; God gave it to me, and it was a gift for which I give him thanks—not a merit. I knew you had a larger, wider nature than mine,—a wider sphere to live in, and that you could not live in your heart as I did. Mine was all thought and feeling, and the narrow little duties of this little home. Yours went all round the world. (390)

Yet Mara manages to change Moses' nature, to "soothe" the "storm" in his breast (392). By the book's end he becomes "tired of wandering," "want[s] a home of [his] own," questions the value of "go[ing] on alone" (400–401). Stowe has transformed man's "nature" by uniting it with woman's.

Stowe further explores transformation in the story's ending. Moses marries another seashore woman, Sally Kittridge, Mara's closest friend, with whom she had shared many nighttime talks as they listen to the "weird murmur of the sea" (333). Impulsive and willful like Moses, Sally manages to "do as she pleased," yet she too will be transformed by Mara's death (330). The changes in both characters are revealed as they sit in a seaside grotto, an image of maternity where many crucial moments, many rebirths, take place: as the "tide rose up and shut them in," the two "sat and talked, leaning on each other" (401). The novel closes, not with the common apocalypse of male texts, but with this seashore image of mutual interdependence, with reconciliation.

Unlike later sea writers like Dickinson and Chopin, Stowe's sexual sea imagery focuses on the maternal, and she presents reconciliation as the sea's maternal lesson. Like other women's sea novels, *The Pearl of Orr's Island* conflates the sea, the mother, and the self. Both children lose their mothers in sea tragedies: after witnessing her husband's shipwreck, Mara's mother dies birthing her daughter, while Moses is discovered clutched in the arms of his drowned mother, who had been lashed to a spar during a storm. While initially the "call which [Moses] most passionately and often repeated was for his mother," soon she vanishes from her son's heart as her ship vanished beneath the sea (54). Stowe initiates his growth into manhood with his separation from his mother.

Mara's story is quite different. Everyone wishes she would "grow up into her mother's place" (22), and several passages suggest her longing to reunite with her mother: she was "always homesick to go back where [she came] from" (26–27). Mara does not find the sea's voice "lonesome," but "like[s] to hear it" (288). The following passage explains why:

There are souls sent into this world who seem to have always mysterious affinities for the invisible and the unknown. . . . The Germans call this yearning of spirit home-sickness. . . . As Mara looked pensively into the water, it seemed to her that every incident of life came up out of its depths to meet her. Her own face reflected in a wavering image, something shaped itself to her gaze in the likeness of the pale lady of her childhood, who seemed to look up at her from the waters with dark, mysterious eyes of tender longing. (296)

Nature here is a reflection of the presence of the "invisible and unknown," of God. Reflected simultaneously in the sea and in her mother, Mara realizes her true self and goes "home" when she dies, merging her spirit

with that of God, who "has always been to [her] not so much like a father as like a deep and tender mother" (322).<sup>18</sup>

Moses too must accept transformation through maternal imagery. He must take into himself female values, and he cannot grow into a man until he spiritually reunites with his mother. Moses reads the letter that reveals his mother's story in the tidal vaginal grotto, the scene of rebirth. Initially he misinterprets the significance of his mother's past, seeing himself as the "heir of wealth and power," which leads to a definition of self Stowe clearly resists: "If I could have my own way now, —if I could have just what I wanted, and do just as I pleased exactly, I might make a pretty good thing of it" (268). Through Mara's intervention, in her role as feminized Christ, he realizes his need for the love and forgiveness associated with mothers, with Stowe's feminized God.

Moses also receives this lesson from a man, the nurturing Captain Kittridge, who calls gender dichotomies into question. In yet another scene in the grotto, where Moses feels himself separate, "alone," the good captain comforts him about Mara's death by describing how she sang hymns for him, "her voice . . . jest as sweet as the sea of a warm evening" (381, 385).

I tell ye what 't is, Moses, fellers think it a might pretty thing to be a-steppin' high, and a sayin' they don't believe the Bible, and all that ar, so long as the world goes well. This 'ere old Bible—why it's jest like yer mother,—ye rove and ramble, and cut up through the world without her a spell, and mebbe think the old woman ain't so fashionable as some; but when sickness and sorrow comes, why there ain't nothin' else to go back to. Is there, now? (386)

Stowe expects both Mara and Moses to go back to their mothers, both women and men to grow into adulthood through acknowledging their interdependence with and faith in others. Her "Pearl," her novel born of the sea, simultaneously acknowledges gender differences and seeks to transform them.

### The Reconciled Self

Like Stowe, Alcott and Jewett use the sea in stories about growth and development, suggesting that as girls cross into womanhood, they recognize needs and desires as overlapping rather than simply conflicting. Both authors allow their heroines glimpses of the sea at major turning points in

their lives. Alcott sets only one scene in *Little Women* (1867) at the seashore, but it is a crucial one: in it Beth tells Jo about her upcoming death. Imagining bird metaphors for each of her sisters, Beth suggests that she and Jo are sea birds. Jo is "the gull, . . . strong and wild, fond of the storm and the wind, flying far out to sea, and happy all alone," while the sandpipers remind Beth of herself: "quite at home . . . not so wild and handsome [as the gulls] . . . but happy, confiding little things . . . busy, quaker-colored creatures, always near the shore and always chirping that contented little song of theirs."<sup>19</sup> These images will comfortably fit most readers' memories of the novel. We remember Jo for her "wildness," for her nonconformity, her independence, her rebellion, Beth for being "at home," domestic, dependent, submissive. Jo soars; Beth walks along the sand. They are opposites.

And yet Alcott's scene on the seashore asks us to reject easy oppositions, to see how Jo and Beth overlap, to recognize that each young woman has complex needs and desires. Independent Jo is far from happy all alone: "I can't let you go," she cries, holding her sister more tightly; "I'll keep you in spite of everything" (412). "Piously submissive" Beth has envied her sister's freedom and wanted more from her own life: "I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there," she says (412, 413). In this passage Alcott suggests that separation and connection, self and other, freedom and restriction, are tidal themes. The scene stresses reconciliation.

Although Jo is not reconciled to Beth's death, Beth does convince her that they can never truly be separated. Through incorporating Beth into herself, Jo expands her understanding of what she wants from her own life. Many contemporary feminists have bemoaned that after Beth's death Jo seems to change from gull to sandpiper, that she learns too well her mother's lessons about the "sweetness of self-denial and self-control" (98).<sup>20</sup> I share those feelings, but I believe that the novel also demands that I recognize an alternative pattern, as Aunt Jane does. Indeed, Jane might be Alcott's model reader, for while Alcott certainly acknowledges the predestinations that limit our lives, she suggests that Jo gains a fuller understanding of the limits and consequences of the kind of freedom she has sometimes sought. "I'd rather do everything for myself," she initially says, "and be perfectly independent" (332). Later she realizes that "the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely and cold to me now" (540). Perhaps *Little Women's* popularity stems from its balanced articulation of women's psychological dilemmas: the themes of free will and predestination, self

and other, ebb and flow throughout the text. The novel should be read not as a sermon but as a quilt, with swirling, overlapping patterns.

Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" (1886) also presents readers with overlapping, rather than alternative, ways of seeing a crucial choice. Sylvie must decide whether to give away the secret, and the life, of the white heron to earn the ornithologist's love; the bird, of course, is the symbol of her very selfhood. Jewett gives Sylvie, who has never seen the sea, a glimpse of it, a transcendent, epiphanic moment, to help her make her choice. She has just climbed the giant pine, described as a mast:

Sylvia's face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground, when the last thorny bough was past, and she stood trembling and tired, but wholly triumphant, high in the tree-top. Yes, there was the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it, and toward the glorious east flew two hawks with slow-moving pinions . . . and Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds. . . . truly it was a vast and awesome world.<sup>21</sup>

Until this transformative moment, Sylvie has been embedded in the woodland shadows; here she envisions a future where boundaries between earth, sky, and sea can be crossed.<sup>22</sup> Sharing a sight of the sea with the hawks, and in the next few paragraphs with the heron itself, Sylvie recognizes possibility and freedom, and her vision elliptically suggests a blurred boundary between her own dreams and her grandmother's desire to have lived her son's wandering life: "I'd ha' seen the world myself if it had been so I could" (231). Worlds open to her. Although the rewards and costs of Sylvie's decision not to tell initially seem binary and quite clear-cut—she recognizes her first loyalty is to bird, to life, to self, and loses the young man as a consequence—Jewett's technique is in fact tidal: the reader experiences a surge of pleasure as Sylvie stands her ground and refuses to tell, but Jewett immediately backs away and forces us to question her loss in the story's last paragraph by asking, "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,—who can tell?" (239). And in suggesting, however subtly, that Sylvie might live a life that merges her uncle's and her grandmother's, Jewett presents her own vision of reconciliation.

Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), with its repeated imagery of land and sea, of crossings and circles, is about vision, about recognizing connections and synthesizing alternatives, about mothering, about how selfhood is achieved through ties to others. A memorable passage occurs when the narrator sits down in Mrs. Blackett's rocker to look out her

window at her sea view. The narrator has earlier linked the elder woman's vision to the sea: she sees in her eyes "a look of anticipation and joy, a far-off look that sought the horizon; one often sees it in seafaring families" (48). Looking out the window gives the narrator a kind of double vision: when she sees the "quiet outlook upon field and sea and sky" she also gets a glimpse into the other woman's heart and life, a moment that allows the two women "to under[stand] each other without speaking" (54). Always seeking images of centering, the narrator realizes, "Here was . . . the heart of the old house on Green Island" (54).

Despite living on "so apparently neighborless and remote an island," Mrs. Blackett "was one of those who do not live to themselves"; she is indeed one center of Jewett's work (41). Later the narrator visits another island, Shell-Heap Island, the former home of the hermit Mrs. Todd always calls "Poor Joanna," who only "wanted . . . to get away from folks; . . . to be free" (65). While Mrs. Blackett's eyes reveal her "pleasant hopefulness," Joanna's reveal her illness: "'Tis like bad eyesight, the mind of such a person: if your eyes don't see right there may be a remedy, but there's no kind of glasses to remedy the mind," says Mrs. Todd, the healer who regrets her failure with her friend (77–78). Yet the narrator visits Shell-Heap Island because she also wants to share Joanna's viewpoint, looking out over the sea "as Joanna must have watched it many a day" and thinking, "In the life of each of us . . . there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day" (82). The pastoral Green Island and the lonely Shell-Heap Island, Mrs. Blackett and Joanna, present opposing views, yet the narrator manages to see—and take in—both views, to imagine both viewpoints. Jewett's interest in seeing through others' eyes is not surprising, given her description of Stowe's influence on her work in her 1893 introduction to *Deephaven*:

It was, happily, in the writer's childhood that Mrs. Stowe had written of those who dwell along the wooded seacoast and by the decaying, shipless harbors of Maine. The first chapters of *The Pearl of Orr's Island* gave the younger author of *Deephaven* to see with new eyes, and to follow eagerly the old shore paths from one gray, weather-beaten house to another where Genius pointed her the way.<sup>23</sup>

This image of influence implies Jewett's understanding of female identity, for she suggests that as the two women crossed paths the older author helped the younger to find her own vision; Mrs. Todd and the narrator

walk the same paths and share a similar relationship in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Influence and independence are not opposed. In fact, the richest vision comes when the two are synthesized, as Jewett shows in her collection's opening chapters, where the narrator realizes that by reconciling her needs for community and solitude she can see herself and those around her with new eyes.

"Mrs. Todd" is as much about the narrator and her needs as about the landlady. Like many another sea-gazing woman, the narrator encounters the sea through her window, one of those "small-paned high windows . . . like knowing eyes that watched the harbor and the far sea-line beyond" (1). But the narrator does not see the sea or even feel the "sea-breezes [that] blew into the low end-window"; instead, she smells "strange and pungent odors" in those sea breezes, odors that reveal the presence of her landlady walking among the herbs in her garden (3). This synthesizing image, originating in the sea, evokes Mrs. Todd's power to bring together, to unite, disparate forces and people, to "remedy . . . the common ills of humanity," lessons she appears to have learned from her mother (4). Like the "Storm at Sea" quilt, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has overlapping centers, and the second chapter's final image of Mrs. Todd standing in the center of her braided rug emphasizes simultaneously her role in her community and her independent—and sometimes lonely—sense of self.

In her relationship with Mrs. Todd, the narrator comes to recognize the tidal nature of human needs. Serving as her landlady's clerk, she can find no time for her writing. She knows that her decision to write at the empty schoolhouse will have consequences for everyone, but her interior voice wins: it was "not until the voice of conscience sounded louder in my ears than the sea on the nearest pebble beach that I said unkind words of withdrawal to Mrs. Todd" (7). Yet "Mrs. Todd and I were not separated or estranged by the change in our business relations" (7). By voicing a need for a relationship with Mrs. Todd based on an acknowledgment of their mutual individual needs and of their affection for each other, the narrator earns a "deeper intimacy," leading to the wonderful moment when "the cool air came up from the sea . . . and [Mrs. Todd] stood outside the window . . . and told . . . all that lay deepest in her heart" (7). The balance and mutuality that the narrator and Mrs. Todd achieve is beautifully conveyed by the collection's last line: "We went home together up the hill, and . . . we held each other's hands all the way" (226). As Mrs. Blackett's and Joanna's lives and viewpoints are balanced and ultimately joined, so too are the narrator's and Mrs. Todd's. Indeed, I will press my metaphor a

bit further and call the structure of *Firs* tidal; our attention flows back and forth between the two main characters, the narrator and Mrs. Todd, and finally focuses on the space where they meet, on the crossing between them, on their evolving relationship.

Yet most of the sea crossings in the collection have to do with a third important character, Mrs. Blackett, whose life is defined by a simultaneous need for affiliation *and* for her own island apart. Through her portrayal of Mrs. Blackett and the mothering relationship, Jewett makes clearest her understanding that female personality ebbs and flows between needs for connection and for independence and solitude. While crossing the sea to Green Island, Mrs. Todd glimpses her mother on shore and affectionately suggests how her identity relates to her mother's: "There, you never get over bein' a child long's you have a mother to go to" (35). But later in the same chapter, Mrs. Blackett recognizes her daughter's need to have her own life: "You wanted more scope, didn't you Almiry?" (52). Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett have separate selves and needs, but their hearts reach out to each other across the water.

"The Foreigner" culminates Jewett's exploration of the fluid boundaries between mothers and daughters. Near the end of the narrator's stay in Dunnet Landing, a northeaster blows in, and, like the sea "stirred to its dark depths," Mrs. Todd frets; she begins to worry about the "danger offshore among the outer islands." Her fears for Mrs. Blackett lead her to tell the narrator a story about Mrs. Tolland, a "stranger" in Dunnet Landing, circling around and around, like the cat in her lap, until she reaches her story's center.

The heart of her story she has told few others. "'Twas such a gale as this the night Mis' Tolland died," she says, and yet Mrs. Todd's memory is stirred less by the storm than by her thoughts of her mother (183). As Mrs. Todd sat up with the dying woman, "the window open toward the sea," the two of them saw a ghostly face in the room, "a woman's dark face lookin' right at us" (184). It was Mrs. Tolland's mother come in from the storm to welcome her daughter to the world beyond, to assure her, as Mrs. Todd interprets, that she "ain't never goin' to feel strange an' lonesome no more" (186). Of course, these words echo Mrs. Blackett's. Mrs. Tolland and her mother go "away together," and Mrs. Todd concludes with a characteristic image of synthesis: "There's somethin' of us that must still live on; we've got to join both worlds together an' live in one but for the other" (186). Having shared her mysterious experience with the narrator, her story elliptically expressing her feelings of love for and accep-



tance by her mother, Mrs. Todd finds that the “storm’s all over” (187). Like the “Storm at Sea” quilt, “The Foreigner” explores how storm and calm overlap, as do sea and land, mothers and daughters, and even narrative techniques. In this wonderful story, we can certainly see Jewett’s debt to Stowe, for Mrs. Tolland’s mother, with her accepting arms, recalls Mara’s definition of God as a mother and the image of her mother looking up out of the sea.

Like Mrs. Todd’s story, Dickinson’s “Wild Nights! Wild Nights!” (about 1861) originates in a stormy night and explores a speaker’s ability to reconcile storm and calm, predestination and free will.

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

Futile—the Winds—

To a Heart in port—

Done with the Compass—

Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden—

Ah, the Sea!

Might I but moor—Tonight—

In Thee!<sup>24</sup>

The passion of the first stanza, with its nights so wild they must be repeated, with its excited “i’s” and “e’s” and eager, repeated rhyme, is balanced by the peaceful second stanza, with the heart sheltered in port, its navigations accomplished, and its calm low “o’s” and “ar’s” and relaxed off-rhyme. The third stanza, with both “o’s” and “ah’s” and “I’s” and “e’s” as well as its lovely final image of merger, brings storm and calm, passion and peace, self and other, into harmony. Even innocence and sensuality can be harmonized, as the speaker can row in Eden but dissolve in a satisfying, orgasmic “Ah” in the sea. Like the “Storm at Sea” quilt, “Wild Nights” reveals coexisting patterns. It hints at predestination with its conditional verbs: instead of being with the lover with whom she would like to share the “luxury” of “wild nights,” the speaker is alone. Yet the poem focuses on imaginative free will, on transcendence: the seashore is a poetic landscape where Dickinson, like many of her seaside sisters, can indeed “dwell in possibility.”

## The Unreconciled Self

Try as they might to dwell in possibility, many shore dwellers find themselves stuck in the predestined pattern of self or other. In “Land-locked” (1874), for instance, Celia Thaxter’s speaker yearns for the sea-shore denied to her, for the voice of the sea, for Dickinson’s imaginative empowerment. Raised on the Isles of Shoals off New Hampshire’s coast and nicknamed The Sandpiper by her friend Jewett, Thaxter was devoted to her mother, an island dweller like Mrs. Blackett. Jewett’s treatment of the relationship between Mrs. Todd and her mother may echo Thaxter’s life, and “The Foreigner” may have been inspired by Thaxter’s story about encountering her mother’s ghost.<sup>25</sup> But Thaxter married a man who insisted upon living on the mainland. Crossings defined her life, but she presents herself as torn between rather than reconciling dichotomous loyalties and needs. The title “Land-locked” conveys her feelings of imprisonment when she is separated from the sea—and perhaps her feelings about her marriage. “Longing for level line of solemn sea,” she addresses herself to the river.<sup>26</sup> Bounded by land but able to “run . . . softly to the sea,” it personifies her “yearning heart, that never can be still.” Unable to follow the river, she dreams of the light and scent and voice of the sea, but it is human “voices on the gale / afar off calling low” that define her: “my name they speak!” Separated from the sea, from her mother, Thaxter yearns to be addressed, to be named as herself. “Land-locked,” she is lost in the grid of predestination. The poem’s final lines acknowledge her need for a reconciling vision as she reaches not for the sea but for the landscape of crossings: “I but crave / The sad, caressing murmur of the wave / That breaks in tender music on the shore.”<sup>27</sup>

Thaxter’s poem never explicitly mentions marriage, but the speaker’s presentation of an unreconciled self—her sense of imprisonment, her uncertainty about identity, her frustration, and her thematic focus on dichotomies—links her poem to a number of sea texts that suggest that marriage and childbearing created a sense of division in nineteenth-century women. Indeed, Dickinson’s speaker may have been able to hold onto her reconciled self only because her expression of sexuality is imaginary, Stowe because hers is maternal, and Jewett because hers focuses on bonds between women. Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Earthen Pitchers* (1873–74), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* (1877), Jewett’s *The Country Doctor* (1884), and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) carry on a conversa-



tion about the balancing acts that nineteenth-century women faced: how to marry—and have children—without giving up self; how to develop voice, vocation, and sexuality when social constructions of gender denied them to most women; how simultaneously to validate and to escape the roles of their mothers, how to connect and to separate. In each work the sea has a strong voice and speaks to these questions, but while the authors articulate the tidal nature of their character's conflicts, the seashore's synthesizing landscape provides no answer. Their heroines cannot reconcile their opposing needs and emotions; they ebb or flow. As Aunt Jane might say, given the same pieces, the authors found different patterns in them, but no one could claim for her heroine an overlapping resolution or Jane's synthesizing vision. Having already devoted so much attention to Jewett, I will focus on the other three novels.

*Earthen Pitchers* is a classic nineteenth-century woman's story: Audrey, a singer, discovers she must give up art for marriage. Davis sets two critical scenes at the seashore which reveal but fail to harmonize Audrey's needs for self-expression and for love. "Wander[ing alone] down the beach . . . over-looking the sea," Audrey experiences an epiphanic realization of self, vocation, and voice.<sup>28</sup> The sea speaks to her in a "voice she could almost hear," then chooses her to express its message, singing "a lofty hymn, in which there was one word lacking left for her to supply. . . . The longing, the hope . . . for which no man has ever found words, oppressed and choked her. . . . She would find words for this unknown hope" (494).

Davis's sea imagery recalls the synthesizing vision of other writers: self-expression grows from an understanding of the fluid harmony between self and other, requiring a balance of listening and speaking, being responsive and then responding. Perhaps the "unknown hope" is for a reconciled self, one that acts upon individual needs yet remains responsive to those of others. In a passage that conflates her voice with the sea's, Audrey does find words: "Strains of simple, powerful harmony were heard, unknown before her; whether she sang them or not she did not know" (494). The passage's final image evokes the sea's maternal embrace and suggests that Audrey's art is born from her merger with the sea: "She went down and threw herself into the sea, floated out to deep water; the waves light and buoyant caressing her with fine supporting touches. To Audrey it had the solemnity of a baptism" (494). Most readers will recognize how this scene of rebirth foreshadows Edna Pontillier's sea swims, but they may not know Phelps's *Corona*, or *An Old Maid's Paradise* (1879), whose swims lead her to exclaim, "I am alive! alive!"<sup>29</sup>

Like Dickinson, Phelps, and Chopin, Davis uses sea imagery to convey her heroine's passionate nature; in Audrey's relationship to the sea, she expresses both her art and her sexuality. Sea imagery conveys desire, for self-expression *and* for other. Having just experienced buoyant support and merger in nature, Audrey comes up out of the water imagining a similar relationship in her social life: in her "work," Audrey imagines that "the man she loved . . . would surely bid her God speed" (494). But her fantasy that she could harmonize work and love does not come to pass; her husband "cares little for music" (721). Davis explores her conflicts and her loss in a climactic seashore scene. Having accepted that her "birthright is to love," Audrey also accepts that "the sea [is only] water" (720, 721). But "when evening begins to gather, and the sunset colors the sky and the pools in the marshes behind them, blood-red, and the sea washes into their feet, dark and heavy, with subdued cries and moans, as though all the love and unappeased longing of the world had gone down into it, and sought to find speech in it, Audrey takes up her child" and sings to it. "For one brief moment the tossing waves, the sand dunes, the marshes put on their dear old familiar faces. Old meanings, old voices came close to her," and she felt she must answer (721). For one brief moment, Davis allows Audrey to harmonize her love for her child and her need for self-expression. "But . . . the voice was cracked. . . . whatever power she might have had was quite wasted and gone. She would never hear again the voice that had called to her" (721). Audrey experiences a doubled silence—she can neither speak nor hear—which ironically mocks her earlier vision of harmony. Unable to hold onto the vision of the reconciled self, she can see only one pattern in her life—predestination. She accepts what her society defines as her "birthright" and turns to her child to justify her existence.<sup>30</sup>

Davis wrote "with an ardor that was human, and a passion that was art," said Phelps, in a tribute that identified the themes they shared.<sup>31</sup> Like Audrey, Phelps's *Avis* would like to "fit expression" to the sea's "great song" (19); like Audrey, she comes to her realization of her vocation as an artist wandering by the sea; like *Earthen Pitchers*, *The Story of Avis* is filled with imagery of self-division, of "Civil Wars." Throughout her novel Phelps uses sea imagery to explore *Avis*'s conflicts, her growth as an artist, her relationship to her mother, and her passion and sexuality. I will focus on only one key passage, which takes place during a winter storm and chronicles a moment of conflict and rebirth like others I have discussed. In it *Avis* shifts her loyalties from her mother, symbolized by a "gorge within the cliff, . . . a vein of deep purple lava," to her lover, symbolically con-

nected to the phallic lighthouse, which may preserve ships but attracts birds to their deaths (42).<sup>32</sup>

Avis's mother was the victim of a civil war. She wanted to be an actress but, she explains to Avis, "I married your papa: that is why I never acted" (24). Having had a "glimpse into her mother's heart," Avis grows up realizing that she must not marry, must not cultivate "self-oblivion"; one way of denying her mother's death-in-life and their separation is to complete her mother's life.<sup>33</sup> Phelps's description of the gorge, which "told the story of a terrible organic divorce," explains the self-division she sees as inevitable when women marry (42). "The two sides of that gorge are thrust apart by flood or fire. They were originally of one flesh. It was a perfect primeval marriage. The heart of the rock was simply broken" (46). In it Avis sees "an awful organic tragedy, differing from human tragedy only in being symbolic of it"; it reminds her of "the motherhood of earth" (46). This final phrase, linked to the "organic tragedy," implies Avis's guilty recognition that while marriage might be a social construction, maternity is not, that her birth exacerbated the conflict that led to her mother's self-denial.

Despite her resolve, Avis too becomes the victim of a civil war. Phelps explores overlapping patterns between mother and daughter imagistically through Avis's stormy experience in the gorge. She has walked out along a reef to the lighthouse, where her suitor, Ostrander, sees her "against the ice-covered rock like a creature sprung from it, sculptured, primeval, born of the storm" (43). Passages like this one serve two functions: they emphasize Avis's ties to her mother, who experienced her own storms, and they suggest Avis's passionate nature, her sexuality. The imagery expresses conflicting desires for connection: Avis is torn between her desire to express what her mother could not and her physical desires for a man.

These desires will continue to ebb and flow throughout the novel, but this scene, like others I have examined, does mark a turning point. Avis slips off the reef and hangs in a cleft between the purple rocks and the reef. She and Ostrander link hands and he pulls her up out of the sea in a remarkable scene of rebirth. Although Avis will resist marrying him for some time, he has, in effect, separated her from her mother and from her dedication to self. For the moment, the storm ends: "The surf upon the beach had died; only a slight sob came from the Harbor, like that of a creature in whom a great struggle had worn to a peaceful close" (61).

Yet Avis's great struggle, her civil war, is not over. Like Audrey, she will turn to her child, to her role as a mother, to justify her life; the two

authors' stormy seas reflect their struggles to find a transcending pattern in the predestined pieces. Like Stowe, Phelps vacillates between nature and nurture explanations, between attacking marriage as it is socially constructed, as a "profession to a woman" (71), and questioning whether women themselves cannot synthesize opposing desires: "Success—for a woman—means absolute surrender, in whatever direction. Whether she paints a picture or loves a man, there is no division of labor possible in her economy" (69). Through sea imagery, Phelps explores tensions she cannot resolve.<sup>34</sup>

Many critics have seen Kate Chopin as "daring and reckless" in her portrayal of marriage and sexuality, like her heroine Edna, who "wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (28). Yet Chopin swims familiar seas, in company with others, and she suggests that the divisions Edna sets up between herself and other women reflect her self-divisions. *The Awakening* begins with an image of motherless Edna's isolation and of her divided self: "Even as a child [Edna] had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (15). Chopin constructs her text around a series of dichotomies Edna cannot reconcile: the two ineffective models, Mme. Ratignolle, the "mother-woman" who "esteemed it a holy privilege to efface [herself] as [an] individual," and Mlle. Reisz, the "defiant" and "disagreeable" artist with her "disposition to trample on the rights of others" (10, 26); the dreaming and waking lives; "blind contentment" and "life's delirium" (56); "days when she was very happy . . . [and] days when she was unhappy" (58); and a host of others, all related to the book's largest tension, between duties to self and to others.

As in earlier texts, "the voice of the sea" speaks of the woman's conflicts:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace. (15)

This passage, which begins Edna's "awakening," blurs together several of her conflicting desires: her sexual desire, connected to learning to swim, "the very passions themselves . . . aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body" (27); her paradoxical desire to find herself by seeking the "unlimited in which to

lose herself" (29); her desire for communication; her desire to be alone, to define herself apart from society and from personal relationships; and her desire to achieve a tender, emotional connection, an embrace, buoyed up and supported as Audrey was.

The repetition of this passage in the book's closing, as Edna swims out to her death, suggests that these conflicts are never resolved. Unlike Audrey and Avis, Edna has earlier refused the idea that a mother must give up self for her children, but the ending clearly does not resolve her dilemmas. Contained in the ending are, in fact, conflicting messages. Perhaps "naked" Edna, "a new-born creature opening its eyes," experiences rebirth, a kind of liberation from cultural clothing that restricts her (113). Or perhaps her death echoes messages from Stowe or Alcott, suggesting that particularly for a woman total dedication to self ultimately leads to loss of self. Chopin does not offer synthesis but paradox—rebirth in death. Like *Little Women*, *The Awakening* should be read as a quilt, but here the patterns do not overlap but compete.

The paradox is further played out in maternal sea imagery. Another early passage is echoed in the novel's final scene, where Edna thinks "of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child" (114), a meadow that "seemed as big as the ocean" (17). The motherless little girl had walked through it as "if swimming," "unguided" (17, 18). In Chopin's sexual imagery, in the sea's "close embrace," Edna is reunited with her mother, ironically with the mother who abandoned her by dying, and thus she recapitulates her mother's life. Leaving behind the landscape of crossings, leaving "the shore . . . far behind her," Edna dissolves all boundaries; rather than escaping her ties to others to achieve a separate self, she returns to an egoless union. The ending of *The Awakening* can be read as an ironic retelling of *The Pearl of Orr's Island* or "The Foreigner," for Chopin offers no Christian vision to transform Edna's death.

By 1899, when Chopin published *The Awakening*, American women writers had for many years considered what the seashore had to tell them about their lives. They listened to the sea, and they listened to each other. They created an enduring tradition. Although our seaside tour closes with the nineteenth century, the women's seashore tradition continues into our century. In 1900, when Mary Ellen Chase, aged 13, went to visit her favorite writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, she knew that she, too, would write books about the coast.<sup>35</sup> And so she did, along with Edith Wharton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, Virginia Woolf, Rachel Carson, May Sarton, Paule Marshall, Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldúa, Gloria Naylor, and Ur-

sula Le Guin, to name only a few of the writers whose works can be read through the woman's window on the sea.

## Harmony

In 1949 in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir borrowed assumptions from male writers that find women lacking. She explained that no woman wrote *Moby Dick* or *Ulysses*—both sea works—because "women do not contest the human situation, because they have hardly begun to assume it. This explains why their works for the most part lack metaphysical resonances and also anger; . . . they do not ask [the world] questions, they do not expose its contradictions."<sup>36</sup> In 1972, with a different set of assumptions and hopes, Adrienne Rich's speaker went "Diving into the Wreck" to find a mirroring mermaid; she carried "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear."<sup>37</sup> With the benefit of years of opened windows, of feminist recovery, I have a wider seaview. I have tried to reveal the questions, to explore the contradictions and the reconciliations, to put together a shelf of books in which our names do appear.

When I began work on this essay some years ago, I focused on differences in female and male culture and literary traditions. Yet as I have thought more fully on those apparent differences, I have realized that female and male writers use sea settings and symbolism to reflect upon and struggle with many of the same concerns: free will and fate, self and other, alienation and connection, isolation and community, freedom and responsibility. Looking at similar themes from different vantage points—sisterhood and brotherhood—female and male sea writers highlight and emphasize different pieces of a shared puzzle.

In writing this essay, I have learned from the women seashore wanderers to call dichotomies into question, to question the use of binary oppositions as paradigms for understanding, to look for intersections. Binary thinking is the tool of the critic, who often who exaggerates and polarizes gender differences. As the writers I have discussed tell us, crossings are necessary and lead to richer and fuller understanding. For years we have borrowed de Beauvoir's model: we have explored women's literature in relation to the "established" or "dominant" tradition. Now that so many of us have rediscovered Rich's book of myths, it is time to reverse the pattern and wonder what we will discover in male writers when we look at them through the woman's window on the sea.<sup>38</sup> As Stowe suggests, Moses "changes" in relation to Mara. Focusing on stories of conflict

and conquest, critics have generally overlooked Whitman as a sea writer, for instance. Poems like "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"—with its seashore setting, its singing bird, its maternal imagery, and its exploration of the loss of others—or "Song of Myself"—with its unthreatened imagery of self-discovery through merger and multiple unions—resonate within the women's tradition. I hope that someone will carry my seaside speculations along on a new voyage of crossings.

Jewett provides us with a synthesizing image of harmony to help me envision a more balanced and overlapping sea tradition. At the end of her visit to Green Island, the narrator has what she calls a "great pleasure." She listens to Mrs. Todd's brother William sing "Home, Sweet Home" with his mother: "they sang together, she missing only the higher notes, where he seemed to lend his voice to hers for the moment and carry on her very note and air" (53).

## Notes

### Introduction

1. Frederick William Wallace, *Wooden Ships and Iron Men: The Story of the Square-Rigged Merchant Marine of British North America* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924).
2. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century," in Colin Howell and Richard J. Twomey, eds., *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (Fredericton, N.B.: Acadiensis Press, 1991), 15–19; Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers," in *ibid.*, 37–52. See also Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 595–601, on the transplanting of English gender ideology to North America.
3. Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); esp. chap. 6. For recent surveys of American and British maritime history, see K. Jack Bauer, *A Maritime History of the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); and Ronald Hope, *A New History of British Shipping* (London: John Murray, 1990).
4. Thorsten Rinman and Rigmor Brodefors, *The Commercial History of Shipping* (Gothenburg: Rinman & Linden, 1983), 32.
5. The numbers of seafaring men have also been difficult to establish, given the highly mobile and casual character of so much maritime work during the period considered in this collection. For a start, see Ira Dye, "Early American Merchant Seafarers," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120 (1976): 331–60; and V. C. Burton, "Counting Seafarers: The Published Records of the Registrar of Merchant Seamen, 1849–1913," *Mariner's Mirror* 71 (3): 305–20.
6. Among the more useful discussions of this shift are Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) esp. chaps. 5 and 6; and Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), chap. 1. Joan W. Scott provides a most helpful perspective in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75. See also Dianne Dugaw's essay in this volume.
7. Linda Kerber has provided a concise review of the relevant American historiography in "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9–39. For the British developments, see, among others, Catherine Hall, "The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology," in S. Burman, ed., *Fit Work for Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 15–32; Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in*

novel suggests that "the world would be better if women were like well-made ships: beautiful to look at and under the control of an appreciative captain" (xxii).

43. Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea*, 19.

44. Conrad, "Nigger of the Narcissus," 93.

45. The classic discussion of polyandry and the power it grants to women is found in Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. That polyandry can, indeed, function to maintain the patriarchal order is demonstrated by Sidney Ruth Schuler in her study of marriage customs in Nepal. Schuler points out that polyandry, like preferential primogeniture, is a "traditional means by which families avoid division of land and limit legitimate reproduction, in order to produce a single set of male heirs" (6). Although Western travelers often associated polyandry with the "freedom" of women in their societies, it does not necessarily improve their status within a patriarchal community (3-4). See *The Other Side of Polyandry: Property, Stratification, and Nonmarriage in the Nepal Himalayas* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987). For other discussions of polyandry, see Laura L. Betzig, *Despotism and Differential Reproduction: A Darwinian View of History* (New York: Aldine, 1986); and Nancy E. Levine, *The Dynamics of Polyandry: Kinship, Domesticity, and Population on the Tibetan Border* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

46. Conrad, "Youth," in *Great Short Works of Joseph Conrad*, 189.

47. Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 101.

48. Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 178.

49. According to Martin Green, for example, the adventure tales of Defoe, Kipling, and Conrad focus on "the colonial enterprise," while the domestic narratives of Austen and Eliot concern themselves with "home life, marriage, and sex." See *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 63.

50. Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 11.

## 10. Melody Graulich, Opening Windows toward the Sea

1. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Avis*, ed. Carol Farley Kessler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 19. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

2. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton, 1976), 15. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

3. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 296. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

4. W. H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (New York: Random House, 1950), 16, 14, 20.

5. The phrase comes from Edmund Tyrone's long soliloquy about his life at sea in Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 153.

6. Richard C. Vitzthum, *Land and Sea: The Lyric Poetry of Philip Freneau* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 5, 15.

7. "Universal significance" is Thomas Philbrick's phrase from *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

Press, 1961), 264, but many others share Philbrick's view. Auden, for instance, says, "The sea is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life," he adds, "is always trivial" (14).

8. In *Literary Democracy* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), Larzar Ziff argues that "Melville's sailors go to sea principally to find the community denied them on land" (264). In *Sea-Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), Bert Bender suggests sea fiction is largely about the development of bonds between men, a theme D. H. Lawrence had emphasized much earlier in *Studies in Classic American Literature*.

9. Eliza Calvert Hall, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, ed. Melody Graulich (Albany, N.Y.: New College and University Press, 1992), 34.

10. The quilt design is a useful way of conceptualizing women's lyric style. As many critics have suggested, women writers tend to minimize plot and explore what Jewett called "recognitions," small moments of illumination that the reader must piece together to discover a larger meaning, to create epiphanies or suggestions rather than superimposing abstract meanings on experience. Moments of isolation and separation can be transcended by piecing together the small, everyday meanings of life. See, for instance, Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? or, Why Women Can't Write," in Susan K. Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1972), 3-20.

11. Although I don't have the space to devote here, I hope in future pieces to develop further the parallels between nineteenth-century material culture, women's art, and literature. The seashore inspired many quilt designs, often capturing the movement of waves; the best known is probably the "Mariner's Compass." For a visual overview of sea quilts and their relationship to women's lives, see the film *Hearts and Hands*, by Pat Ferraro, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber. Other women's arts used materials gathered by the sea; Mrs. Martin from Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, has a frame made from seashells. Like Hawthorne's Pearl, Stowe's Mara Lincoln gathers shells and seaweed to make jewelry.

Further studies might also look at women painters like Anna Mary Richards Brewster, who at age 14 sold her painting of the waves, *The Wild Horses of the Sea* (c. 1884), and painted seascapes throughout her life. Her work provides interesting contrasts and parallels to Winslow Homer's. See Charlotte Rubenstein, *American Women Artists* (New York: Avon Books, 1982).

12. In "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (winter 1982): 347-61, Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that female personality is "fluidly defined," "cyclical as well as progressive." "The self is defined through social relationships; issues of fusion and merger of the self with others are significant, and ego and body boundaries remain flexible" (352). Gardiner is adapting the work of sociologist Nancy Chodorow to literary study; see *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). These theories of identity formation are based on middle-class, post-industrial white women's lives. While I believe that much of what I say about sea imagery in women's literature crosses racial and class boundaries in the twentieth century, my focus in this study is on nineteenth-century white women.

Diane Freedman's *An Alchemy of Genres: Cross-Genre Writing by American Women*

*Poets* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992) has influenced my thinking about boundaries in women's literature.

13. Gardiner, "Female Identity," 355.

14. To cite one example, Louisa May Alcott succinctly reveals this conflict when, in an early novel, *Moods*, she claims, "The duty we owe to self is greater than the duty we owe to others," an assertion she promptly undercuts in *Little Women*.

15. Emily Dickinson, "I dwell in Possibility," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952), 327. The opening stanza reads:

I dwell in Possibility  
A fairer House than Prose—  
More numerous of Windows—  
Superior—for Doors—

16. Before I move into discussions of specific texts, I would like to point out that critics before me have discussed in individual works on writers like Stowe or Jewett some of the themes I encounter, but so far as I know, no one has yet explored a tradition of sea literature among these writers or connected their themes in a systematic fashion to sea imagery. I acknowledge my debts to earlier critics of nineteenth-century women's literature, notably Elizabeth Ammons, Josephine Donovan, Lisa MacFarlane, Marjorie Pryse, Sarah Sherman, Jane Tompkins, and Barbara White.

17. Here is a representative passage:

All that there was developed of him, at present, was a fund of energy, self-esteem, hope, courage, and daring, the love of action, life and adventure; his life was in the outward and present, not in the inward and reflective; he was a true ten-year-old boy, in its healthiest and most animal perfection. What she was, the small pearl with the golden hair, with her frail and high-strung organization, her sensitive nerves, her half-spiritual fibres, her ponderings, and marvels, and dreams, her power of love, and yearning for self-devotion, our readers may, perhaps, have seen. (148)

18. Through Mara's death, Stowe once more breaks gender dichotomies and offers a transformative vision. In a dream, Mara's grandfather walks along the seashore to find his lost "pearl" and sees "Him a-coming—Jesus of Nazareth, just as he walked by the sea of Galilee" (397). With his "long hair . . . hanging down on his shoulders," Christ takes up the pearl and puts it on his forehead, where "it shone out like a star, and shone into [the old man's] heart" (397). As Christ and Mara merged into one "melt" into the skies, so do they merge into the old man's heart, leaving him "so happy, and so calm!" (397).

19. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 413. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

20. See, for instance, Judith Fetterley, "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 369–83.

21. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, ed. Mary Ellen Chase, intro. Marjorie Pryse (New York: Norton, 1981), 236. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

22. For a contemporary treatment of this same theme, see Faith Ringgold's children's book, *Tar Beach*, where the adolescent heroine imagines herself flying over the

George Washington Bridge. Based on one of Ringgold's quilts and firmly placed in African American experience, *Tar Beach* suggests that some of the themes I've explored here cross racial boundaries, as do other twentieth-century seashore novels by black women, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. For further evidence of such racial crossings, see the opening poem in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and the discussion of it in Freedman, *Alchemy of Genres*.

23. Sarah Orne Jewett, *Deephaven and Other Stories*, ed. Richard Cary (New Haven: College & University Press, 1966), 32. As this passage implies, *Deephaven*, a novel about two young women's growth in a seaside town, can be read as yet another sea novel of transformation and synthesis.

24. Emily Dickinson, "Wild Nights! Wild Nights!" in *Complete Poems*, 114.

25. See Sarah Way Sherman, *Sarah Orne Jewett, an American Persephone* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1989), 58.

26. Thaxter, *Poems by Celia Thaxter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1874), 9–10.

27. Although I don't have the space to explore them here, Thaxter's prose works, *Among the Isles of Shoals* (1873) and *An Island Garden* (1894), can be read through my window on women's sea literature, suggesting further genre crossings.

28. Rebecca Harding Davis, *Earthen Pitchers*, *Scribners Monthly* (1873–74): 352. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

29. Phelps quoted in Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 68.

30. For an insightful exploration of how this story reveals Davis's personal conflicts, see Tillie Olsen's "A Biographical Interpretation," in Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories*, ed. Tillie Olsen (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1985).

31. Phelps quoted in Olsen, "A Biographical Interpretation," 174. Olsen also suggests that Davis "inspired" *The Story of Avis*.

32. As we've already seen in Jo and Beth, Thaxter, and Sylvie, sea birds wing their way through women's sea texts, themselves images of transcendence and merger of earth/sea and sky; both *The Story of Avis* and *The Awakening* are filled with symbolic birds.

33. *The Story of Avis* is autobiographical in many ways; in it Phelps conflates her mother's life with her own, a merger not surprising given that the daughter took her mother's name upon her mother's death. The first Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was, of course, also a writer, and *Avis* can be read as a rewriting of her short story, "The Angel Over the Right Shoulder" (1852), which ends with the mother's hope that she can give her daughter a life "all mended by her own experience." Believing that she has lost her own artistic genius by the end of the novel, *Avis*, too, looks to her daughter to live the life she could not.

34. A few years later, Jewett would respond to *The Story of Avis* with *A Country Doctor*, whose heroine, Nan Prince, has her own mother problems and seaside experiences; when confronted with a choice between career and marriage, she chooses career, a choice Jewett makes easier by suggesting that Nan is genetically unstable and therefore should never bear children. Unlike her mother, Nan is a far less stormy—and less sexual—character than *Avis*, and her conflicts are minimized. Unlike *Avis*, Nan simply chooses not to struggle; she is a conscientious objector to the civil war. For

Jewett's criticisms of *The Story of Avis* and comments that suggest that she might have seen *A Country Doctor* as a response to Phelps's text, see Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature*, 47. For Phelps's imagistic critique of the lack of sexuality and passion in Jewett's work, see *ibid.*, 48.

35. Mary Ellen Chase, introduction to *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*.

36. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: New English Library, 1969), 443.

37. Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (New York: Norton, 1973), 23.

38. Of course, feminist critics have done this in other contexts. Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* is only one example.

## Index

- abolitionists, and African American manhood, 152, 159
- African Americans (*see also* race; sailors, African American): in antebellum American cities, 139–40; and benevolent associations, 159; and economic mobility, 141, 148–49, 158–59; and manhood, 152–53; in maritime employment, 60–61, 67, 138–68; motivations to sail, 152, 158–59, 166; and racial equality, 152–53, 165; and schools, 149
- African sailors. *See* merchant marine, British: contract labor in, racial divisions in, recruitment of colonial labor in
- aftercabin (*see also* captains, merchant and whaling; officers, merchant and whaling; ships, sail and steam), 89, 200–201; compared to forecabin, 132, 135; description of, 130–31
- age, of sailors, 73; in antebellum U.S. (table), 161; as component of maritime culture, 125–28; and Rhode Island laws of settlement, 65–66
- Alcott, Louisa May, 206, 212, 214, 224
- American Seamen's Friend Society, 134
- Anzaldua, Gloria, 224
- Aptheker, Herbert, 141
- Arab sailors. *See* merchant marine, British: contract labor in, racial divisions in, recruitment of colonial labor in
- Asian Articles. *See* merchant marine, British: contract labor in
- Asian sailors. *See* merchant marine, British: contract labor in, racial divisions in, recruitment of colonial labor in
- Awakening, The* (Chopin), 219, 223–24
- ballads of female warriors and sailors, 11, 15, 19, 34–40
- Baltimore, and African American sailors, 139, 160, 164, 168
- Beggar's Opera, The* (Gay), 17
- Bible, the, 95, 105, 128, 132
- Billy Budd* (Melville), 148
- Bolster, W. Jeffrey, 60
- Bonny, Anne, 1–21, 48, 237n. 71; narrative of, 28–33; portraits of, 2, 6
- Boston, and African American sailors, 140, 164, 166, 168
- British sailors. *See* sailors, Black, on British ships; sailors, white British
- broadside, "The Female Sailor," 36
- Bullen, Frank T., 147, 190
- Byron, Lord George Gordon, 22
- cabin boys, 95, 131, 147, 149, 173, 182
- Cape Horn, 121
- captains, merchant and whaling (*see also* discipline, shipboard; women at sea: as captains' wives); blacks as, 148–49, 153, 159; Conrad's depiction of, 194–96, 199–201; and crews, 61, 109, 113; and racial prejudice, 148; and shipowners, 75–78, 120, 132–34; shipboard accommodations of, 130–31; and shore community, 60, 62; Stowe's depiction of, 212; and wives at sea, 89, 93, 95, 109, 113–15, 132–34
- captains, pirate, 9–10, 13, 14
- Caribbean, as site of piracy, 5, 18, 22
- Carnes, Mark, 130
- Carse, Robert, 119
- Carson, Rachel, 224
- chanteyns, sea, 135
- Chase, Mary Ellen, 224
- Chinese sailors. *See* merchant marine, British: contract labor in, racial divisions in, recruitment of colonial labor in
- Chopin, Kate, 205, 206, 219, 221, 223–24
- Civil War, U.S., 47, 119
- class (*see also* femininity; labor, maritime; masculinity): Conrad's depiction of, 190–92, 194–95, 198, 200–202; and gender, x, 11–15, 35, 37–54, 57–59, 120–22, 125–26, 130, 135, 172–74, 180–88, 191; intersections with gender and race, 152–53, 165–68, 169, 172–74, 179–84; and race, 60–61, 144–53; racializing of, 169–88; relations within maritime industries, 72–78, 114, 129–30, 147, 169, 170–83, 190–91, 199–201; social construction of, vii, 11–15, 46, 147, 172