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# Performativity and Domestic Fiction in Antebellum America: The Power Dynamics of Class and Gender Performance

Blair Hedigan  
*Scripps College*

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**PERFORMATIVITY AND DOMESTIC FICTION IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA:  
THE POWER DYNAMICS OF CLASS AND GENDER PERFORMANCE**

by

**BLAIR E. HEDIGAN**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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**PROFESSOR KOENIGS  
PROFESSOR LIU**

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Prior to the 1980s, academics and historians alike routinely overlooked one specific genre of fiction within an American literary canon largely dominated by male writers: domestic fiction. Popularized in the era before the Civil War, domestic novels, like the home, were considered an exclusively feminine domain. As the first genre in American history written by women, for women, domestic fiction quickly became one of the most popular genres of the time; the most well-known example being Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel that relied heavily on themes of both the slave narrative and the domestic novel. The success of domestic fiction introduced women into the literary scene, despite the male writers that dismissed their works as frivolous and lesser. This thesis seeks to explore the emergence of domestic fiction as a surprisingly subversive genre during a time of extreme change in American history; specifically, this thesis analyzes the role of performativity within the genre, and the way in which it challenged the essentialist concept of gender in antebellum culture.

### **I. Domesticity and Gendered Spaces in Antebellum America**

In order to understand the importance of performativity within the domestic novel, it is imperative to specify the differences between the private space and the public space, as well as acknowledge the historically gendered status of the two spheres. Within antebellum America, the private space was the home, or any equivalent domestic area, while the public sphere consisted of all other political, social, and economic aspects of American culture. While men continued to expand their political and economic influences throughout public space, women's influence remained centered in the home; in fact, the association with women and the domestic was even greater in antebellum America than previous years. It is important to note that antebellum domesticity was an exclusively white, upper-middle class phenomenon, "ignoring working-class white women and black women of the slave and free classes" (Nelson 39). With this distinction

in mind, how exactly could these higher class white women contribute to the continued growth of America from within their homes? The answer was the concept of republican motherhood, or “the idea that women derived political agency in the new republic by rendering the home a site of authority through the bearing and rearing of future citizens” (Rust 281). Women were largely cut off from commercial pursuits, public speaking, and political participation, but instead influenced these various avenues through their limited power within the domestic sphere. It was thought that women could (and should) engage vicariously with the world around them by instilling specific morals and ideologies within their husbands and children, thus enabling these hosts to carry their teachings into the public sphere. That’s not to say these teachings were ineffective; the influence of women manifested as activism in the years before the Civil War divided the country in two:

Female benevolent activism took its organizational form in missionary, mutual aid, charitable, and sewing societies.... these organizations enlisted hundreds of thousands of post-Revolutionary and antebellum American women. Relatively small numbers of women made the more radical commitment to antislavery or to women’s rights, movements that posed a fundamental challenge to the nation’s social and political order (Kelley 246).

Examples of this activism are prevalent throughout popular sentimental and domestic novels of the time, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Several female activists appear throughout the novel; perhaps the most notable is Mrs. Bird, the wife of a senator who serves as his moral compass and influences the political decisions he makes outside of the home. These novels mirrored the idea that feminine influence can extend outside of the private sphere, but only through the male figures that pass in and out of the limited domestic space.

The question remains: if antebellum women were limited to the private sphere, how were they able to begin testing these limitations, and how did they push against the barriers excluding

them from the masculine-dominated public sphere? The pushback against private space began with a rejection of republican motherhood; despite distancing themselves from this concept, the majority of women remained limited to domestic circles:

Those who did not marry would be selecting from a restricted number of possibilities. There were the relatively few who were able to live independently. Many more would either remain with their parental families or attach themselves to the families of siblings. Whichever the familial locus, they would be expected to fulfill many of the same domestic obligations as women who were wives and mothers (Kelley 246).

Those lucky few independents mentioned in Kelley's text were governesses, teachers, and a small but gradually increasing number of writers. The rise of female authors gave women a previously nonexistent platform within the public sphere. For the first time within American culture, a significant number of women were expressing their opinions on a very public stage; many novels written by women had an explicit agenda, from Stowe's abolitionist views to Franny Fern's criticism of a culture that left women largely dependent upon men. Looking back, it's ironic that women had such a voice within the public sphere during an era that limited female influence to domestic spaces. However, it is critical to note that even with this precarious foothold into the public space, women were still restricted by cultural expectations. Reviews of popular literature by men revealed "the opinion that literature written by women should adhere to a more restricted code of propriety than other fiction and should target a more limited audience (the family, particularly women and children), not the masses..." (Naranjo-Huebl 124). Women writers popularized a genre known as domestic fiction to comply with these expectations. However, some authors utilized domestic fiction in a subversive manner; through the domestic novel, they outwardly complied with the limitations placed upon female writers by a patriarchal culture, even though the issues and themes they touched in their works far exceeded their restricted social and political sphere. Through these domestic novels, female authors shared their

views within the context of their relegated space. Even as these opinions entered the public sphere, men themselves did not feel threatened by the emergence of domestic fiction, as the feminine genre did not impinge upon the patriarchal gender politics within other genres of the time. Men's dismissive attitude toward women writers was perhaps best captured in a letter written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, wherein the well-known American author claims, "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed" (Frederick 231). Antebellum men saw women writers as lesser to their male counterparts, and as such did not view their literature with equal regard. By dismissing domestic fiction as a frivolous genre, men did not see the subversive nature of such texts, allowing women to discuss a wide range of issue within their novels. Ironically, domestic fiction became one of the most popular genres in antebellum culture, and novels addressing poverty, class and race issues, and gender inequality spread across the fledgling nation through the propagation of the genre.

Though female writers of the time became immensely popular within American culture, even becoming common household names, they remained limited by the strict gendered expectations placed upon them not just by society, but by the publication industry itself:

Nineteenth-century editors and publishers actively prevented women writers from writing as 'realistically' as they wanted to, forcing them to conform to society's image of femininity, and reviewers castigated those who did not conform. Women writers were required to use 'feminine' language and subject matter....Such proscriptions enforced the binary of gender among writers, ensuring that women writers would remain within the straitjacket of convention and inhibiting their realism. (Warren 5-6)

Despite these challenges, female authors were able to write novels that challenged societal and gendered norms, all without threatening the social structure of the public and the private spheres.

By popularizing the genres of domestic and sentimental fiction, women created a type of novel that was uniquely theirs. On the surface, domestic fiction served to romanticize the home in an attempt to free the average middle-class woman from the monotony of day-to-day life within the household. This created the concept of the domestic ideal, which “gave women a concrete goal they could work toward and enjoy the possession of, it gave them a way of thinking about their work that redeemed the particularities of daily existence and conferred on them a larger meaning” (Tompkins 168). Novels that emphasized the domestic ideal tended to push very little against the limitations of the private sphere, instead preferring to explore the ways in which women could productively and happily function within the existing space. Some of the more avid believers in the domestic ideal, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and her sister Catherine Esther Beecher, believed that they could one day transfer the politics of the private space into the public space, creating a new domestic utopia: “If worldly values could dominate the home, perhaps the direction of influence could be reversed so that home values dominated the world. Since they identified home values with basic human values, they saw this as a reformation of America into a society at last responsive to human needs, a fulfillment of the original settlers’ dreams” (Baym 48-49). While most women of the time maintained far lower expectations than these domestic matriarchs, they agreed on the importance of domestic values and the maintenance of stability within the private space.

However, as domestic fiction grew in popularity, an increasing number of women writers used it to subtly highlight the disparities between women, men, and the two gendered spheres. These authors in particular tended to focus on the disparities between economic stability and class mobility between the two spheres, as well as gendered differences enforced by the patriarchal society. These subversive novels “showed how women were forced to depend on



themselves. They asserted that women had to be prepared for both economic and emotional self-support, but promised that...the challenge could become an opportunity” (Baym 35).

Additionally, many domestic writers disagreed with the class system in America; specifically, they disliked the way in which a nation founded on opportunity quickly gained a wealth-based aristocracy, much like the old, wealthy families in Europe. While the class system in America was certainly more flexible than Europe’s, with the possibility of advancement for white males, women still remained static within the class structure, and could only advance with the assistance of male figures such as husbands or benefactors. It is worth noting that not all of these writers disagreed with the class system. However, “all agreed that the class system presently existing was based entirely on money...and most of them argued for a class system based on merit” (Baym 46). Upon realizing the disparity within antebellum culture, and how these stark differences so often fell along lines of gender, wealth, and class, female writers began to focus not only on highlighting the issues facing American society, but on offering subversive solutions to such issues; one such solution being the suggestion of performativity as a means of understanding class and gender within antebellum society.

Among the novels focused on social and political issues of the time – including a specific focus on performativity – are E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap* and Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask, or A Woman’s Power*. Both authors began their literary careers during the antebellum period and achieved great success and popularity. Southworth’s career as a writer began after her husband abandoned her and left her with two young children to support. Though her serialized stories met varying levels of popularity, none had the same level of success as *The Hidden Hand*. She published the novel within a six-month span during 1859; it ran as a serial in the *New York Ledger*, a popular paper that saw some 400,000 subscribers by the

mid-1850s. According to literary critic Nina Baym, “Since each copy of a magazine reached an average of two or more readers, the actual number of Americans who knew the *Ledger* would have constituted a significant fraction of the country's literate population. And to know the *Ledger* was to know Southworth” (Baym). Through Southworth’s protagonist Capitola, the public was exposed to “the first of a long line of tomboy heroines in American fiction” (Baym). Alcott, best known for her domestic novel *Little Women*, published *Behind a Mask* in 1866 as a serial in *The Flag of Our Union* under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard. Though *Behind a Mask* was undoubtedly a domestic novella, it veered from the usual domestic structure by embracing various aspects of the thriller genre. The story was meant to shock and excite, as Alcott desperately needed money to support her destitute family, and writing was not the first avenue she pursued in her attempt to provide for her three sisters: “She tried what was available, and what was not she tried to make available: teaching, working as a seamstress or as second girl, doing the wash at two dollars a week” (Stern). As such, Alcott wrote during this time period with a singular purpose: to titillate the reader, create a word-of-mouth sensation, and gain as much profit as possible.

*The Hidden Hand* follows the exploits of Capitola Black, a young woman with unusual agency. The novel begins by introducing Ira Warfield, a grizzled major who was recently appointed a Justice of the Peace. This new title finds him attending at the bedside of a dying woman, who shares her unusual story: she was once a midwife, captured by villainous figures and forced to deliver the twins of a masked woman. Though the baby boy dies, the girl lives, and the mother charges the sympathetic midwife with caring for the child. Warfield promises the dying woman to find the child, whom she has been separated from, and leaves for the city of New York in search of a young girl named Capitola. There he discovers that his new charge, left

to her own devices, has become a cross-dressing street urchin, pretending to be a young boy in order to support herself. Warfield adopts Capitola as his ward and introduces her to his aristocratic lifestyle. The novel continues to follow Capitola's various capers as she becomes the target of the outlaw Black Donald and his mysterious employer, the shadowy Gabriel Le Noir. Southworth later reveals that Capitola is the heiress to a fortune; as she is also Le Noir's niece, he hopes her death will secure that inheritance for himself. Thus begins a thrilling adventure of mystery, danger, romance, and a female protagonist who routinely outwits the male characters attempting to best her. The novel ends with both Capitola and her good friend Clara married to their respective sweethearts, and Capitola is reunited with her last living relation: her long-lost mother.

In *Behind a Mask*, Alcott presents the story of Jean Muir, an actress turned governess, who infiltrates the aristocratic Coventry family in Victorian England. Having recognized her inability to rise across social and economic classes, Muir pursues her only viable option of advancement: marriage to a wealthy, aristocratic man. With this ultimate end goal in mind, she enters the Coventry household as a governess and proceeds to win over each member of the family with various carefully-tailored performances. With the Coventrys eating out of her hand, Muir continues her masterful manipulation by setting the male members of the family against each other in a bid to win her heart. After having sufficiently divided the men of the family, she pursues its weakest link: the aging John Coventry. She secures his hand in marriage, and the wealth that accompanies such a union, just as the rest of the Coventry family becomes aware of her scheme. This knowledge comes too late, and the family can only sit by in horror as Muir reintroduces herself as Lady Coventry. The novella is appropriately subtitled 'A Woman's

Power,' as Alcott spends the novel exploring the ways in which feminine performance grants Muir the agency she needs to fulfill her plan and better her social and economic standing.

The critical conversation surrounding antebellum literature already provides a foundation for an analysis of gender politics within the private and public spheres. While these critical studies are imperative to understand gender dynamics of the time, most of the available arguments lack an analysis of performativity within antebellum culture. Though such analytical works focus closely on issues of gender, class, and race as expressed in antebellum fiction, they fail to address the ways in which female authors utilized performances of gender and class to explore both the limits and the potential of feminine power within the domestic space. Southworth and Alcott are two prime contributors in the antebellum discussion of performativity and its link to gendered power:

By freeing themselves of cultural restrictions, [female authors] were able to write more frankly, and consequently more 'realistically' about life and society. The phenomenon that enabled their realism can be defined as performativity: instead of reifying societal representations of gender, they presented themselves and their perspectives through their works in ways that challenged normative behavior. (Warren 6).

Both women not only challenged normative behavior, but actively tested the limits of feminine power both within currently-existing patriarchal power structures and outside of gendered norms. Specifically, the two women questioned the popular conception of gender, which gender theorists today classify as gender essentialism: the idea that men and women are innately different because each shares characteristics and traits specific to their gender. Though the main focus of their protagonists' performativity is to test gender boundaries, both addressed economic and class limitations as well; together these three methods of performativity worked to test the absolute limits of the domestic novel, and the power available to women in antebellum America.

## II. Southworth's Self-Made (Wo)Man and Alcott's Performative Aristocracy

It is important to note that, while the majority of scholarship analyzes performativity within the context of gender, it is also commonly referenced in the discussion of race and class. While both play interesting roles within *Behind a Mask* and *The Hidden Hand*, race relations take a backseat in comparison to the anxieties regarding class and economic stability. Gendered spheres limited women by confining them to domestic spaces while simultaneously limiting their ability to move upwards both socially and economically:

Society was based on money, and men had all the control – the power to make it, to disburse it, to keep it, and the terrifying power to lose it. Women had no access to the wealth-making occupations; their only financial rights pertained to inherited property, which they were permitted to will away as they wished. A woman hoping to control her ‘own’ money in her lifetime could do so legally only if she did not marry. Daughters were economically ruled by their fathers, wives by their husbands. Thus, inevitably, in every encounter with a man, economic considerations predominated for these women. (Baym 40)

While men could work hard and earn money to advance through the classes, women depended on marriage or rare occurrences – such as adoption by a rich benefactor – to achieve a better class status. Such a total dependence on male figures for economic stability caused understandable anxiety for women of the era. These anxieties were reflected within domestic bestsellers of the time, such as the wildly popular *Ruth Hall*, a novel exploring the plight of a widow who had been abandoned by her relatives and struggles to economically support both herself and her children. According to Schewe, these novels “redefine[d] domestic space as a site of class conflict, a stage on which American anxieties about feminine virtue and class mobility are acted out” (Schewe 580). Resulting economic anxieties from such class conflict are similarly apparent within Southworth and Alcott’s novels, and are best reflected through both

protagonists' performance of class as they strive to achieve their own versions of economic stability.

Southworth's heroine Capitola experiences firsthand the devastating effects of poverty due to a lack of male figures within her life. Raised from birth by a surrogate mother figure she calls Granny, Cap is left alone on the streets of Rag Alley when her guardian leaves the city to find work and never returns. Capitola is unable to find any work to support herself, lamenting, "I went around to all the houses Granny knew, but they didn't want a girl.... while all the ragged boys I knew could get little jobs to earn bread.... there seemed to be nothing but starvation or beggary for me" (Southworth 43-44). Due to the dismissive treatment of women in search of employment – beyond the few accepted feminine professions such as laundering or teaching – Capitola has no choice but to assume a male-presenting identity by cross-dressing. Her time of desperate joblessness teaches Capitola the value of economic freedom, and as such she is determined to make her own way amongst her fellow street urchins. At this moment in the novel, Capitola not only initiates a new performance of gender, she also adopts the performance of the 'self-made man.' The term, supposedly first used by politician Henry Clay in 1832, became an example of the opportunities available to hardworking men in America. Southworth, no doubt well-aware of the popularity of the self-made man ideal, took the opportunity to turn the concept on its head through Capitola. The term was gendered as masculine due to the limited working opportunities available to women outside of the domestic sphere. Southworth breaks this gendered definition by presenting Capitola's newfound economic freedom using imagery similar to that of the self-made man:

“Well, the first thing I did was to hire myself to him, at sixpence a day, and find myself, to shovel in his coal. That didn't take me but a day. So at night he paid me, and I slept in peace behind a stack of boxes. Next morning I was up before the sun, and down to the

office of the little penny paper, the ‘Morning Star.’ I bought two dozen of ‘em, and ran as fast as I could to the ferry-boats to sell to the early passengers. Well, sir, in an hour’s time I had sold out, and pocketed two shillings, and felt myself on the high road to fortune!” (Southworth, 46-47).

Capitola’s performance creates an abundance of economic opportunities while no longer limiting her to traditionally feminine roles. She is able to achieve economic independence, a feat nearly impossible for the average middle class women to achieve. However, once a rich benefactor by the name of Major Warfield takes her under his wing, she abandons her persona and instead embraces a new mode of performance: that of femininity.

Like many female protagonists of domestic novels, Capitola has her fair share of anxieties regarding her own economic stability. After Warfield takes her in and promises to provide for her, she relinquishes any remaining opportunities to support herself by her own means. She begins to question her ability to adequately perform as the Major’s ward, and struggles to separate her masculine performance from Rag Alley with her current feminine, aristocratic identity:

“Can this be really *I* myself, and not another? *I*, the little houseless wanderer through the streets and alleys of New York? *I*, the little newsgirl in boy’s clothes? *I*, the wretched little vagrant that was brought up before the Recorder, and was about to be sent to the House of Refuge for juvenile delinquents? Can this be *I*, Capitola, the little outcast of the city, now changed into Miss Black, the young lady, perhaps the heir of a fine old country seat!” (Southworth 108).

Capitola feels vast amounts of pressure to continue performing in a manner agreeable to Warfield, all to maintain a stable economic foothold. Unlike other domestic protagonists, however, Capitola’s history of economic self-sufficiency grants her an especially unique perspective of the unfair system. Though she of course values the economic freedom her role as the Duke’s ward grants her, she grows to realize that her own individual freedom may be more

important to her than the confinement of absolute dependency; she informs the Major without a hint of jest, that should he continue to mistreat her whenever his temper rises, she will not only leave him, but create legal issues for him as well: “I vow I’ll go back to Rag Alley, for a very little more! Freedom and peace are even sweeter than wealth and honors....I’d have you up before the nearest magistrate, to show by what right you detained me!” (Southworth 124).

Though Capitola never follows through with this promise, her previous revelation that gender performativity can provide her with work, and thus economic independence, makes it very difficult for Warfield to manipulate her through the threat of economic destabilization. By removing the only bargaining chip able to ensure her ‘proper’ behavior, Capitola is free to spend the rest of the novel exploring overgrown forests, beating shady men in duels, and generally participating in activities no average woman of the aristocracy would ever do.

While Southworth explores the performative nature of class politics through Capitola’s induction into the aristocracy, Alcott delves even deeper into the performative nature of class politics in *Behind a Mask*; whereas Capitola’s aristocratic performance is due to her upbringing outside of the high-class lifestyle, Alcott’s Coventrys are born into their wealth and perform to uphold their class position, suggesting that class depends more on performance than economic prosperity. Before I explore this concept further, I would instead like to focus on Jean’s performance as a governess, and the way in which it influences class politics within the Coventry family. By selecting the role of governess as the means to infiltrate the Coventrys, Muir interrupts the delicate class dynamics within the family due to the duality of her role: “The governess is located at the border of shifting class boundaries in a number of ways. She is not quite equal to the family she serves but not quite a servant either.... even an honest governess (as opposed to the con-woman of Alcott's story) is required—in order to perform her job—to play



two discrepant roles, that of authority and that of inferior” (Schewe 579-580). Just by entering an upper-class domestic space, Muir challenges the distinctive class roles as defined by Victorian society. By performing two completely separate roles – the authority figure and the inferior servant – Muir immediately comes across as a figure of mystery; how can the family determine what her true self is, if Muir is constantly juggling between two very different performances? The constant shift in performance and the corresponding air of mystery lends itself well to Muir’s continued deception, as described later in this thesis.

However, Muir’s role as governess actually reveals that she is not the only individual in the Coventry house playing a specific role. Her interactions with the family of gentry reveal that they, too, perform on a daily basis. Take, for example, Muir’s young charge Bella, whom she is meant to teach:

It is the governess who teaches the young lady of the family, not only French, singing, drawing, and other accomplishments a woman of the upper class is supposed to possess, but also manners, speech, and demeanor—the markings of the upper class that are supposed to be innate. The very fact that these markers must be taught, and taught by someone who is considered socially inferior, demonstrates the performative nature of upper-class identity. (Schewe 581)

Though Schewe is right to highlight that these markers of aristocracy are meant to come naturally, none of them do; hence, in instructing Bella in the ways of the gentry, Muir reveals that members of the upper class simply perform their social rank; in theory, anyone could perform alongside them and earn their rank among the aristocracy. Alcott uses this conundrum of performativity to make a very radical statement regarding class hierarchy in both Europe and America:

If, as ‘Behind a Mask’ suggests, the upper class may be considered a conspiracy that maintains both the social machinery necessary to construct its social markers and the illusion that these markers are not constructed, the governess’s role as a cog in the

machinery that reproduces upper-class social markers gives her privileged access to both personal and class secrets. The governess chooses to keep her information secret—to maintain the illusion of the family or the class as a whole—because her livelihood depends upon the illusion just as much as the livelihood of the family that employs her. (Schewe 581)

This almost appears to be foreshadowing on Alcott's part: of course Muir would not reveal this particular secret of the Coventry family, as her goal is to join the family through marriage. Muir, at least, is not the only individual hiding her true self, and her knowledge of the Coventry's performance of class actually makes them easier to manipulate once she begins to set her plan in motion. Muir's knowledge of performativity, and her control over her own performance, grants her unique agency when compared to other female protagonists during this era; by specifically focusing on Muir's masterful performances, Alcott suggests that women can reclaim some of their lost agency by recognizing the function of performativity in antebellum society.

### **III. Capitola and the Rejection of Normative Gender Roles**

While class performativity and its exploration of economic anxieties is certainly an important focal point in both Southworth and Alcott's works, exploration of gender performativity fill a more noticeable role within the two novels. Both authors were familiar with the strict societal and cultural gender expectations of the time, and their two unconventional protagonists reveal both Southworth and Alcott chafed against these restrictions. However, the authors could not outwardly defy such cultural expectations, even within the socially acceptable realm of domestic fiction. Instead, both women pushed the boundaries of acceptable gender roles by portraying "...their perception of the self as a social product, firmly and irrevocably embedded in a social construct that could destroy it but that also shaped it, constrained it, encouraged it, and ultimately fulfilled it" (Baym 36). Both Southworth and Alcott utilize gender performativity within their works as a specific means to an end: just how much power did the

feminine body have, and in what way could that feminine body access the power of the male body? Their concern regarding gendered power dynamics matches the sentiments of other domestic writers of the era: “It is no exaggeration to say that domestic fiction is preoccupied, even obsessed, with the nature of power. Because they lived in a society that celebrated free enterprise and democratic government but were excluded from participating in either, the two questions these female novelists never fail to ask are: what is power, and where is it located?” (Tompkins 160-161). Though Southworth and Alcott explore very different avenues in pursuit of answers to these questions, both rely on their protagonists’ individual performances of gender to offer potential methods of resistance against existing power structures within America’s gendered society. Only within the safety of domestic fiction could these writers challenge normative gendered behavior in a manner that presented little threat to the watchful patriarchal eye.

A modern reader may not understand the full significance of Southworth and Alcott’s stance on performativity; in a post-Judith Butler culture, gender performativity has become a widely accepted stance on gender and sexuality. In antebellum America, however, the idea of gender performativity had yet to be solidified as an acceptable gender theory. Instead, antebellum society embraced a theory known today as gender essentialism, which “suggests that the intellectual, social, emotional, and psychological characteristics of a human individual are related to the person’s body” (Dragseth 2). In simpler terms, gender essentialists believe that both male and female genders have fixed attributes each gender shares. Essentialism has shaped sexist gender stereotypes that persist today, such as the belief that men as a gender function mainly on logic, and women on emotion. Southworth’s *Warfield* provides a good example of essentialist theory: “‘*Girl*, is she, sir? – then demmy, sir! whether a girl in *boy’s* clothes, or *men’s*

clothes, or *soldier's* clothes, or *sailor's* clothes, or *any* clothes, or NO clothes, sir! treat her with the delicacy due to *womanhood*, sir!” (Southworth 39). Warfield’s outburst highlights the lack of performativity within gender essentialism, specifically regarding women; no matter the various roles a woman may fill, essentialists believe she cannot escape the assigned characteristics of her gender. With gender essentialism taking such precedence in antebellum culture, Southworth and Alcott’s works become even more subversive; the concept of gender as performance was a radical idea for the time, and both women defied popular opinion by pursuing the idea of performativity as a valid expression of gender.

Southworth chooses to address questions of gendered power dynamics through her spirited protagonist Capitola, and explores fluctuations of power and limitations through Cap’s varied portrayal of gendered bodies. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Southworth first introduces young Capitola not as a noblewoman fallen into poverty through a series of misfortunes, but instead as a cross-dressing urchin performing odd jobs on the streets of New York. Capitola’s masculine performance lasts only a few pages, as she is soon discovered by a policeman and arrested for misconduct. At her trial, she explains the economic hardships that drove her to adopt a masculine performance; she claims the idea to cross-dress came to her in a sudden moment of inspiration, wherein she “*made up [her] mind to be a boy!*” (Southworth 46). In this moment of subversion, Southworth presents gender as a choice, not a pre-determined classification, and gives Capitola full agency over her gender expression. Southworth’s heroine expands further upon her decision at the insistence of a scandalized court recorder: “Yes sir, for it was so easy! I wondered how I came to be so stupid as not to have thought of it before! I just ran across to the old shop, and offered to swap my suit of girl’s clothes....I went into that little back parlor a *girl*, and I came out a *boy*, with a suit of pants and jacket, with my hair cut short

and a cap on my head!” (Southworth 46). Capitola’s account of her transformation from feminine body to masculine body highlights the performative nature of the switch. Though nothing changes save for her clothing and her mannerisms, those around her now view Capitola as a young man, as evidenced by her sudden ability to take on jobs previously denied due to her perceived gender. Gender theorist Judith Butler best explains this particular situation:

That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate. (Butler 521)

With Capitola now embodying the expected visual cues of masculinity, she is a masculine figure in society’s gaze, regardless of her previous gender identity. Even she is surprised by the relative ease of her transformation: “...the only thing that made me feel sorry, was to see what a fool I had been, not to turn to a boy before, when it was so easy!” (Southworth 47). Capitola’s emphasis of the transformative nature of gender contrasts sharply with Warfield’s essentialist views several pages prior; by presenting Capitola’s take on gender directly after Warfield’s own definition, Southworth provides an incredibly progressive argument against gender essentialism.

Though domestic fiction allows Southworth to explore the possibility of utilizing performativity to bypass the limitations of feminine gender expectations, there remained restrictions on how far she could push the boundaries of social acceptability. Her assertion that gender is merely a performance, capable of changing on a whim in order to suit the needs of the individual, was an extremely radical statement for the time, and would have surely caused a significant stir if not neutralized in some way. Aware of the controversy of Capitola’s fluid view on gender, Southworth takes care to excuse Cap’s actions as absolute necessity: “Well, being always exposed, sleeping out-doors, I was often in danger from bad boys and bad men”

(Southworth 45). Even the most conservative of readers could not criticize Capitola's actions in the face of Southworth's clever reasoning; the only way for Cap to preserve her feminine virtue, Southworth claims, is for her to violate gender norms. The audience is clearly meant to forgive Cap's breach of normative behavior – even Warfield, who argues for the case of gender essentialism only a few pages prior, unquestionably accepts Capitola's logic – which grants Southworth a reprieve from an otherwise unacceptable situation. Even without this particular excuse to protect both Capitola and Southworth herself, the author had yet another method for deterring questions of acceptability:

[Capitola] is too powerful, and thus too anxiety-producing, a feminine figure to present realistically. Broad humor and self-conscious symbolism combine in the presentation of her character to offset any claim by this anomalous woman to serious attention. Yet, despite this fantastic representation, the tremendous popularity of the story...attests to the attractiveness of this vision of perfect feminine freedom. As long as she was not presented seriously but remained safely in the realm of comic fantasy, Capitola fascinated her contemporaries." (Dobson 235)

By downplaying Capitola's actions as those of a prankster, Southworth successfully diffuses any concerns regarding the message Capitola may be sending to female readers. However, Dobson is right to suggest that the popularity of the novel suggests that even with the many excuses for Cap's fluid gender identity, Southworth captivated countless female readers by portraying a method through which they could experience masculine power.

Even with Southworth's success in downplaying Capitola's refusal to follow gender norms, she continues to have Capitola fight back against normative gendered behavior as the novel progresses. Cap's time masquerading as a newsboy grants her the opportunity to perform masculine behaviors, and these learned traits never truly leave her personality, even when she reverts back to a feminine identity: "Cap's masculine socialization – her education on the streets as a newsboy – allows her to develop the saving characteristics of self-reliance, irreverence, and

active, rather than passive, courage” (Dobson 233). The traits Dobson highlights – self-reliance, irreverence, active courage – are all heavily masculine-coded, and are rarely seen in female protagonists of the era. Capitola, however, displays all these traits and more, as seen in her continued resistance against her benefactor Warfield’s hyper-masculine behavior: “‘Why then,’ said Capitola, speaking in a low, deep, and measured tone, and keeping her gaze fixed upon [Warfield’s] astonished face, ‘the – first – time – I – should – find – you – asleep – I – would – take – a – razer – and....*Shave your beard off smick, smack, smooove!*’” (Southworth 188). Not only does Cap respond to Warfield’s challenge in a decidedly masculine-coded manner – as seen in her low, deep voice and unwavering gaze – she even threatens to remove Warfield’s most visible symbol of masculinity: his beard. Capitola’s many confrontations with her benefactor are only a few examples of her unusual verbal power: “Cap employs language most assertively in situations that a nineteenth-century woman would not: the church, the court, and the duel. In these public spaces, Cap breaks from traditional feminine discourse by using language to demand attention, laugh boisterously, assert her point, and question others” (Pond 142). Though Capitola once more embraces a feminine identity, she retains the knowledge learned during her masculine performance, and utilizes those traits when necessary to further her own cause.

Not only does Capitola retain masculine traits from her performance as a male body, she also continues to insert herself back into her previous masculine role. Though Southworth cannot risk making the same grand statement created by Capitola’s cross-dressing, she continues to reference Cap’s comfort with a masculine role throughout the novel. A particularly notable scene appears halfway through the novel, as Capitola makes her way to the Hidden House. She exclaims, “‘Good gracious...one would think this were the enchanted forest containing the castle of the sleeping beauty, and I was the knight destined to deliver her!’” (Southworth 270). Capitola

has no qualms placing herself within a conventionally masculine role; by comparing herself to a traditionally male knight figure, Capitola further rejects gender norms and instead embraces the roles she feels comfortable performing, regardless of social conventions. By placing Cap in the ‘masculine’ role of the fairytale narrative, Southworth subtly continues her previous pushback against cultural gender restrictions. She once more situates Capitola within a masculine role several pages later, when the protagonist meets the unquestionably feminine Clara: “The pure, grave, and gentle expression of Clara’s countenance, touched the heart of Capitola. The bright, frank, honest face of Cap recommended her to Clara. The very opposite traits of their equally truthful characters attracted them to each other” (Southworth 282). Southworth specifically highlights the way in which the two young women foil each other; while Clara embodies typical feminine traits, Capitola instead associates with traditionally masculine-assigned characteristics. To return to Butler, “...Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 519). Capitola refuses to be constricted to a singular gender performance, as seen by her constant swapping between feminine and masculine roles and traits. Instead, she masters specific mannerisms and characteristics attributed with each gender, which allows her to remain fluid in her gender identity by balancing both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine traits.

Despite Cap’s eagerness to embrace a masculine identity, there is no denying an overall reversal to a more stereotypical feminine state. Only pages after Cap is caught cross-dressing, she changes back into feminine apparel; this change of clothing results in a moment of perfect femininity: “Capitola was indeed transfigured. Her bright black hair, parted in the middle, fell in ringlets each side her blushing cheeks; her dark gray eyes were cast down in modesty at the very



same instant that her ripe red lips were puckered up with mischief. She was well and properly attired in a gray silk dress, crimson merino shawl, and a black velvet bonnet” (Southworth 50). Though Cap does maintain distinctive masculine traits, and continues to place herself within conventionally masculine roles, she never fully embraces a masculine identity as she did at the beginning of the novel; instead, she remains as a feminine body for the duration of the story. Despite her less-than-traditional origins, Capitola’s tale ends with a conventional marriage that may disappoint some readers: “As Cap becomes safely inscribed within marriage at the end of the novel, she may after all only represent a tradition that deflects rather than subverts the gender norms” (Pond 141). This statement does not fully acknowledge Southworth’s subversive stance on gender; one must remember that, while Capitola undoubtedly performs as a masculine body in the beginning of the novel, so too does she perform as a feminine body. By allowing Capitola to experience performances of both masculine and feminine identities, Southworth suggests the era’s dichotomy creates unnecessary separation between men and women within American culture; if a woman possesses traditionally masculine attributes and continues to embody feminine traits, the stark separation between genders is not only unnecessary, but harmful to the expression of both gender identities. Through Capitola, Southworth encourages women to be “active shapers of their own lives rather than passive participants in a system which infantilizes them” (Hudock).

#### **IV. Jean Muir and the Power of Gendered Performances**

Though Alcott, like Southworth, explores gender performativity in her novella *Behind a Mask*, her approach focuses specifically on the power of feminine performance and its potential as a manipulative tool. Alcott’s protagonist Jean Muir is unquestionably a conventionally feminine character, and never once explores a traditionally masculine identity. Within

antebellum society, the role of governess was reserved exclusively for women; in keeping with this role, Muir only utilizes feminine performances, unlike Capitola's exploration of multiple gendered identities. However, Muir remains an example of how domestic fiction writers utilized performativity to explore the limits of gender roles and feminine power. At the opening of the novel, Muir infiltrates the house of the Coventry family under the guise of a governess. From the moment she crosses the threshold, Muir begins her premeditated performance: "Through Muir, Alcott brings performance and deceit into the supposedly safe haven of the family home and hides a disreputable past under the supposedly transparent exterior of the sentimental true woman..." (Schewe 579). Muir clearly recognizes the performative nature of gender, as she enters the Coventry house ready to act out specific gendered roles; in fact, it is her knowledge of performativity that enables Muir's performance. Take Muir's role as a governess: her own student predicts that the new governess will be "a quiet, accomplished, amiable girl, who need[s] a home" (Alcott 4). Muir performs this role flawlessly; she is meek and humble, demonstrates her skill as a singer and pianist, and charms the entire family when she 'accidentally' reveals her (completely false) backstory in which she mourns her dead mother. Muir's hyper-feminine performance bewitches the oblivious Coventrys and marks the commencement of Muir's infiltration. She continues her seduction of the Coventrys by establishing a connection with each family member, whether through collecting flowers or befriending prize horses. Muir is a master of reading the situation and using performance to manipulate it in her favor; by recognizing the performativity of gender, she gains power over those around her and the ability to control their own performances.

Through Muir, Alcott shows less concern about testing the limits of socially acceptable gender roles for both women and men, instead focusing on ways in which the individual (in this

case, the domestic woman) can utilize performativity to control those around her and gain power over specific groups of people. While Muir's knowledge of which performances are most effective for specific members of the family is certainly impressive, even more impressive is her ability to manipulate those around her to join in on her performance. Though Alcott does not explicitly state her thoughts on performativity, the fact that every member of the Coventry family joins the performance reveals her assumption that every individual performs for those around them: "...the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 520). In this case, even acts of authenticity are just that: acts. There is no true authentic self, because the self is always a performance for others. The novel's title refers to this interpretation of the self: the individual is always behind a mask, since he or she is always putting on a performance. Muir, however, proves to be an exception to this rule. While her own mask is impenetrable, she is easily able to see past the Coventrys' performances, and uses this knowledge to manipulate them into performances that benefit her own needs. Additionally, by keeping a firm command of her own performance, Muir is able to play several personas at any given time without giving away the true motives hiding behind her mask of performance: "The governess's brilliant manipulations of the family are exercised as weapons of survival which are always distinct from her own subjectivity. She never loses self-awareness--of her feelings or purposes and never confuses herself with the personae of her performances" (Elliot). Muir never confuses her performances, or her audience. She is an actor first and foremost, and never forgets that fact, even when allowing herself a rare intermission in her charade: "Come, the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves" (Alcott 11). Alcott presents Muir as the only character

specifically aware that all social interactions are merely performances, and as such she is the only character able to recognize the performances around her and manipulate them in order to serve her whims.

While Muir's performance spans the entirety of the novel, there are certain moments in which her grasp of the performative nature of gender is particularly masterful. One pertinent example is her seduction of self-proclaimed skeptic Gerald: "Alcott portrays Jean Muir as a stage director who subtly manipulates the other characters into doing what she desires. Muir seduces Gerald, not by making him accept as truth the role of the sentimental true woman that she plays for the rest of the family, but rather by drawing him into various romantic conventions that force him to play the part she assigns him" (Schewe 583). The romantic conventions Schewe refers to here are the effects of the tableaux scenes Muir and Gerald participate in. The two perform as a pair of lovers, hiding from soldiers within each other's embrace. Muir's acting abilities enable her to capture her subject's expression of terror so perfectly that Gerald finds himself overcome with the desire to play an entirely new role:

It lasted but a moment, yet in that moment [Gerald] experienced another new sensation. Many women had smiled on him, but he had remained heat-whole, cool, and careless, quite unconscious of the power which a woman possesses and knows how to use, for the weal or woe of man. Now, as he knelt there with a soft arm about him, a slender waist yielding to his touch, and a maiden heart throbbing against his cheek, for the first time in his life he felt the indescribable spell of womanhood, and looked the ardent lover to perfection. (Alcott 53)

In this particular scene, Muir's manipulation of Gerald is unquestionable. She knows she cannot convince him of her motives, as he harbors suspicions regarding her motivation since before she first walked into his family's house. Instead, she bypasses his defenses by noting his unspoken desire for romance and using it to her advantage. Schewe summarizes, "By creating a love scene, Muir penetrates Gerald's defenses and forces him to play a role of her own design. Ultimately,

Muir seduces Gerald, not by convincing him that she is genuine, but by letting him join in her performance. Gerald is seduced by the generic conventions of romance into playing a part over which he has no control” (Schewe 585). Gerald, of course, remains clueless as to his complete lack of power in the performance. The smitten aristocrat believes he and Muir are acting out the romance together, as equals. Instead, Gerald remains in the dark as Muir continually manipulates him in order to get closer to her ultimate goal: marriage to a rich member of the family in order to secure her own economic stability.

Muir is able to manipulate those around her at such a deep level that she actually alters the domestic space of the Coventry house. While family gatherings normally take place in the parlor, as Muir lures more and more family members into taking part in her performance, she shifts the family from a public space to a much more intimate setting: “Moving the house's social center from an area normally designated front region (a parlor) to an area normally designated back region (the young lady's personal study), Alcott transfers all of the performativity of choreographed social interactions into the space in which family members may normally let down their masks” (Schewe 586). At this point in the novel, Muir exhibits total control over the family members that have fallen for her performance. Young Bella and Lady Coventry seek her out for her company; Ned and Sir John for her captivating tales, and Gerald for her songs. Muir knows just how to ensnare each member of the family in order to direct them to their proper places within her performance. By moving the family members into a private space, she lures them to an area of the house they are likely to symbolically remove any masks they may be hiding behind; she is the only individual that remains invulnerable to the safe atmosphere of the room, though she acts the part of vulnerability within the intimate space. Within the study, Muir holds all the power, as she is the only member of the Coventry family that can see the

performance unfolding within the household. Her fellow performers remain blissfully unaware of her plans, as she “hides a disreputable past under the supposedly transparent exterior of the sentimental true woman...” (Schewe 579). Their inability to recognize Muir’s role as director of their performances allows her to execute her plan to seduce John without any members of the family interrupting her scheme.

*Behind a Mask* ends with Muir succeeding in her ultimate goal: marrying the aging but rich Sir John in order to secure her economic standing, and thereby secure her future. Though the Coventrys finally learn of Muir’s duplicity, this revelation comes too late, and Muir embraces her final performance as the newly-christened Lady Coventry. Gerald takes the news hardest out of all the family members; despite his reservations, and his inherent mistrust of Muir, he too was seduced and tricked by her performance. Muir, reveling in her victory, asks the stricken Gerald, “Is not the last scene better than the first?” (Alcott 104). With just a single line, she confirms that every action taken within the Coventry household was part of a larger performance, and that her marriage to Sir John is in fact the culmination of her deception. Despite their newfound knowledge of Muir’s manipulative nature, the Coventrys have no choice but to continue the charade Muir started when she entered their domestic space: “When Muir marries Sir John at the end of the story she makes conspirators of the whole family who, for the sake of their own good name, now willingly hide her questionable past and present her as always already a virtuous woman and a member of the upper class” (Schewe 582). Not only does Muir exhibit complete control of the Coventrys’ domestic space, she functions as “a figure who, in her disruptive potential, challenges the normative role of a “domestic” little woman by pointing out that all women's roles are assumed” (Dawson). In any other genre, suggesting a complete lack of authenticity and instead emphasizing the prevalent use of performance and the power it grants

would have created a stir within the community. Alcott, however, avoids such a confrontation by situating her novel within a Victorian setting. As the story appears removed from American culture, Alcott's proposal of performative identities remains acceptable, despite the obvious parallels between the Coventrys and the gentry of America.

## **V. Performativity and Domestic Fiction in Antebellum America: A Conclusion**

While quite a few women writers challenged class and gender norms in antebellum America, both Southworth and Alcott were particularly successful in deconstructing the nature of class and gender through the lens of performativity. Southworth chose to approach class performativity through her protagonist, Capitola. By assuming the role of a newsboy, Capitola reenacts the ideal of the 'self-made man' popularized at the time, subverting the notion that the term only belonged to men. Through Capitola, Southworth proves that, if given the opportunity, women could adopt and succeed within the masculine fantasy of class mobility through economic success. After she becomes Warfield's ward, Capitola experiences the economic anxieties many women, including Southworth herself, experienced in an era that required women to depend on men for monetary stability. However, Capitola refuses to allow Warfield to use these anxieties to control her. Her brief span of economic self-sufficiency grants her confidence in her own independence; even without Warfield's economic assistance, Capitola knows she can resume her self-made man performance and reclaim a self-sufficient lifestyle. While Southworth focuses on performativity as a means for economic independence, Alcott utilizes both Jean Muir and the Coventry family to explore the performative nature of class. Though *Behind a Mask* takes place in Victorian England, Alcott clearly writes about her own experiences within American society; the Coventry family functions as a representation of American aristocracy, and Muir a representation of the American women's struggle to access class mobility. Muir plans

to infiltrate the Coventrys, with the goal to marry into the wealthy family. Her performance of choice is that of the governess, creating tension within the house; the duality of the governess – that of both authority figure and inferior employee – challenges the distinctive class roles defined by antebellum society. Additionally, by playing the role of governess, Muir reveals the performative nature of the various members of the Coventry family; if a figure such as a governess must teach aristocratic characteristics to her charges, then high society itself becomes a series of acts, and each Coventry maintains their aristocratic status by succeeding in these performances. By portraying the aristocracy as a performance, Alcott suggests class divisions to be a sham acted out by individuals in power, a notion not only radical for her time, but for modern society as well.

In addition to the idea of class as a function of performativity, both Southworth and Alcott expressed their misgivings with the accepted theory of gender essentialism by exploring the effectiveness of gender performativity in both their novels. Southworth's *Capitola* experiments with assuming a variety of roles, among them the role of newsboy, duelist, fairytale prince, heiress, and wife. Though many of these roles are gendered, and one even requires her to cross-dress in masculine clothing, Southworth never restricts *Capitola* to one specific gendered performance; instead she jumps from role to role with ease, remaining fluid in her presentation of various gendered traits and characteristics. While the novel does end with *Cap* assuming a feminine role – that of Herbert Greyson's wife – *Capitola* works to highlight the unnecessary dichotomy between feminine and masculine expression in antebellum culture; through *Cap*'s fluidity, Southworth suggests that performativity allows the individual to play the roles he or she is most comfortable assuming, instead of remaining confined by the gendered expectations of society. Alcott, too, engages with questions of performativity, though her own character never



assumes the masculine roles Capitola so fearlessly adopts. Instead, Muir plays with various representations of feminine stereotypes, including that of the governess, the abandoned lover, and the fallen heiress. The Coventry family falls prey to her act, granting Muir control over the family members' own performances, which she manipulates masterfully to suit her needs. With each family member acting in a manner fitting for Muir's plan, the reader sees a shift in power within the house. While the family once met in the most public area of the house – the parlor – now they meet in a private study, over which Muir has complete control; within the private space of the study, the family becomes especially vulnerable to Muir's manipulation, as they do not expect any deception within the safety of the domestic space. Thanks to her masterful directing of the Coventrys, Muir's plan comes to fruition, and at the end of the novel she assumes her final performance as Lady Coventry. Power, Alcott suggests, does not come from specific gendered roles, but instead from the successful performance of these roles. Both Southworth and Alcott present performativity as a method by which disadvantaged groups, such as women, can reclaim agency from the groups in power.

Though domestic fiction as a genre was long thought to be without academic merit, analysis of the genre in recent years proves otherwise. Female authors in antebellum America wrote during a time of extreme change, when the nation teetered on the brink of the Civil War. For the first time in the nation's history, women had a platform through which to speak, and through their literature they advocated for a variety of controversial issues, from abolition to women's rights. While E.D.E.N. Southworth and Louisa May Alcott were only two of the many women writers who made their voices heard both before and after the war, they are perhaps two of the best examples of a push for change within domestic fiction. Suggesting class and gender could be performed was an extremely radical position to take in the antebellum era; gender

performativity itself did not gain momentum as a theory until over a hundred years later, when Judith Butler published her groundbreaking essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” In this way, Southworth, Alcott, and other women writers in antebellum American were far ahead of their time in terms of their views on class and gender, and paved the way for the continuation of women’s literature as a vehicle for social change.

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