Chapter 2

“Unsheathe the Sword of a Strong, Unbending Will”

Sentimental Agency and the Doctrinal Work of Woman’s Fiction

In 1822, five years before essaying the historical novel genre with *Hope Leslie*, Catharine Maria Sedgwick published her first novel, *A New-England Tale; or, Sketches of New-England Character and Manners*. Sedgwick’s preface modestly set forth her purpose: only “to add something to the scanty stock of native American literature” and to present “some sketches of the character and manners of our own country.”¹ After it was published, Sedgwick wrote to her friend Susan Channing that she had “beg[un] that little story for a tract” but that she had “had no plans, and the story took a turn that seemed to render it quite unsuitable for a tract.”² The epigraph on the title page of the novel reflects this shift: the stanza from Burns’s “Epistle to a Young Friend” reads, “But how the subject theme may gang, / Let time and chance determine; / Perhaps it may turn out a sang, / Perhaps turn out a sermon.”³

In the early 1820s, Sedgwick produced both a “sang” and a “sermon” for publication. The “sang” was her 1822 religious tract *Mary Hollis*, published under the imprint of the New York Unitarian Book Society. Tracts were expected to be brief so that they could be printed and distributed inexpensively and to present their lessons “in the form of stories of a didactic character, in which the writers assumed the broad principles of Christian theology and ethics which are common to all followers of Christ, without meddling with sectarian prejudice or party views.”⁴ *Mary Hollis* followed this mandate: the story
of a poor widow whose intemperate husband died in a fit of drunkenness, Mary Hollis extols the heroine’s thriftiness and piety without attributing those virtues to any particular brand of Christianity. The tale’s central precept—that correct religion will produce benevolent behavior—is presented as generally “Christian” (lowercase c) or, even more broadly, as an example of true “morality.” The “sermon” that Sedgwick produced alongside Mary Hollis was A New-England Tale, a novel that, in contrast to its sister tract, meddled quite openly with “sectarian prejudice”—so much so that Sedgwick’s orthodox Congregationalist neighbors in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, perceived the novel as an open attack on their revered Calvinist theological tradition. When A New-England Tale appeared, Sedgwick’s brother Henry noted in a letter that “the orthodox do all they can to put it down . . . and the New Englanders feel miffed.”

Early readers of the novel recognized its specific doctrinal purpose: to explore Calvinist beliefs and the supposedly deleterious effects of those beliefs on the characters of those who held them. It was precisely the turn from advocating general moral precepts to “meddling with sectarian prejudice” that transformed Sedgwick’s text from “sang” to “sermon”—from tract to novel.

A New-England Tale inaugurated one of the nineteenth century’s most enduring and popular literary genres: the group of works that Nina Baym famously identified as “woman’s fiction,” in which “a young girl . . . is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world.” Baym unearthed over 130 works published between 1820 and 1870 that fit this broad pattern and traced the genre to its roots in the fairy tale, the comic hero narrative, and even the Miltonic story of the fortunate fall. But woman’s fiction, as it grew into a ubiquitous and beloved nineteenth-century literary genre, also adhered to the religious mission modeled by Sedgwick: it remained a vehicle for the transmission of particular Christian doctrines. Born out of the generic distinction between a tract that advocated an unspecified “Christian” morality and a novel so obviously sectarian in its theological intentions as to alienate Sedgwick from her orthodox Calvinist neighbors, woman’s fiction became a distinctly sectarian literary genre. Women authors adopted woman’s fiction’s conventions precisely because they offered a model of religious subject formation that was rigid enough to be recognizable as a paradigmatic Christian story but also flexible enough to further specific doctrinal ends. In doing so, these authors imagined into being diverse models of women’s religious agency that were both theologically specific and applicable to everyday life.

Woman’s fictions present Protestant religiosity as a set of lived religious practices and thus should be read as works of practical theology. They depict
their heroines’ religious lives as processes of becoming and offer a sophisticated view of the relationship between individual religious commitment, communal belonging, and social and political conditions. The religious practices modeled by heroines of woman’s fiction include an intellectual assent to propositions, an emotional attachment to a personalized God, and a cosmological interpretation of daily life. Details of character and plot are driven “by images and ideals of what constitutes goodness—in people, in relationships, and in conditions of life.”

For the heroine of a woman’s fiction, the highest good is Christian salvation, without which earthly happiness is only a brief delusion. But in the mid-nineteenth century, the mechanism of Christian salvation was still very much up for debate: Did God select a saved few from among his Creation, or was salvation open to all? The former doctrine was held by Calvinist denominations, including, most prominently, Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The latter was embraced by Arminian Christians, including both Episcopalians and members of the rapidly proliferating Methodist church. The debate between Calvinist and Arminian theologies took place not only in the columns of sectarian journals but in the pages of woman’s fiction, where it was elaborated through the mechanisms of plot and characterization rather than through abstruse argumentation.

Woman’s fiction’s theological ambitions have been difficult for critics to recognize because of the scholarly discourse surrounding the nineteenth-century sentimental—the larger cultural mode to which the literary genre of woman’s fiction belongs. Critics have recovered and studied sentimental literature since the 1970s and have recognized sentimental texts as offering “an important form of literary agency” because they explore the consequences of unequal power relations for (most often) white middle-class women’s lives. But critical accounts of sentimental literature have often mischaracterized the crucial ways in which questions of doctrine animated and informed nineteenth-century debates about women’s agency—an oversight that can be traced back to two foundational texts in the study of sentimental literature. While Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) characterized sentimental fiction as having little or no doctrinal content—indeed, accused it of bringing about “the loss of theology”—Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (1985) sought to rehabilitate the religious language of sentimental fiction without engaging very deeply with the particular doctrines held by sentimental writers. Instead, Tompkins characterized all sentimental fiction as vaguely “evangelical” and concerned primarily with the emotional rather than the intellectual aspects of religious adherence.

Douglas’s and Tompkins’s work gave rise to a wealth of criticism about sentimental literature that has enriched the study of women’s writing for the last
four decades. Many critics writing in the wake of the Douglas-Tompkins debate accepted its religious-historical terms at face value while turning their attention to the effects of sentimental culture, including the much-debated question of sentimentalism’s complicity with racist violence, consumer culture, and imperialist expansion. More recently, however, scholars have begun to interrogate the theological models that operated in Douglas’s and Tompkins’s work and to refine our understanding of the religious roots of sentimental literature. The goal of this scholarship (as of my own) is not to turn attention away from questions of materialism, embodiment, and territory, but instead to insist that the study of religious belief and practice cannot be productively separated from issues that seem more straightforwardly “political,” either in the nineteenth century or in our own. Indeed, the secular reading practice modeled throughout this book requires that we jettison the artificial separation between the religious and the political, which obscures the operations of political theology in the American “small-p protestant” context.

Much of the important and necessary recent work that has addressed the theological sources of sentimental literature has tended to classify the form as theologically monolithic, with Calvinism most often the system under discussion. One of the earliest scholars to treat sentimental theology was Mari-anne Noble, who tied the form’s “masochistic” tendencies to Calvinist doctrines of salutary suffering, arguing that “the mechanisms of sentimentalism . . . yok[e] the Calvinist idealization of affliction to the painful affect that is a central component of all sentimental literature.” While Noble’s concerns were primarily psychological, other scholars have engaged in the archaeological work of unearthing sentimentalism’s specifically Puritan foundations. In Jonathan Edwards: America’s Evangelical (2005), Philip Gura describes how the works of the influential Calvinist theologian were excerpted and widely circulated by the American Tract Society, so that Edwards’s Life of David Brainerd and “Personal Narrative” became staple texts of nineteenth-century sentimental Protestantism. Tracing this narrative even further back, Abram van Engen’s Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow-Feeling in Early New England (2015) locates the roots of sentimental discourse—long believed to be an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomenon—in Puritan communities in colonial North America and thus finds in it an underlying Calvinist theological impulse. In contrast to these moves Calvinward, Claudia Stokes’s important and influential The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion (2014) traces the rise of Arminianism in the nineteenth-century United States and asserts that “the theological contents of sentimental piety derive primarily from Methodism” and from the Arminian “free grace” theology embraced by John Wesley and promulgated by early Methodist missionaries.
Together, these works “challenge [the] notion of a monolithic and culturally bankrupt feminine faith” that has plagued too much criticism of women’s religious writing.\textsuperscript{17} They have done much to deepen our understanding of sentimentalism as both a literary and a religious phenomenon, showing, as Van Engen has noted, that women writers were not mere recipients of religious ideas but actively “shaped and changed religion” during and after the Second Great Awakening.\textsuperscript{18} But classifying all sentimental literature as reflecting one theological system or another obscures the sectarian diversity of sentimental texts—the ways in which sentimental authors, though claiming to rise above denominational squabbling, nevertheless took part in the doctrinal debates that continued to animate American Protestantism well into the nineteenth century. The diverse theologies on offer in sentimental fiction should interest us as twenty-first-century critics not only because they provide evidence of women’s intellectual engagement with religion—though that is important—but because, for women adherents, belief enabled agency in ways that were directly tied to theological questions.

Juxtaposing two major works of woman’s fiction—Susan Warner’s \textit{The Wide, Wide World} (1850) and Augusta Jane Evans’s \textit{Beulah} (1859)—reveals the doctrinal diversity on offer in sentimental literature. These two texts, similar in their basic plot outlines and in their invocation of the central concerns of woman’s fiction—the simultaneous celebration and sundering of family ties and the concern with how women’s choices are curtailed by legal, political, social, and biological factors—employ different theological models that result in widely divergent depictions of women’s religious agency. As Calvinist and Arminian works of woman’s fiction, respectively, \textit{The Wide, Wide World} and \textit{Beulah} explore, by means of both content and form, the same problems that occupied ordained ministers and professors of theology in the pages of the \textit{Christian Advocate}, the \textit{Princeton Review}, and the hundreds of other sectarian journals that circulated in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Reading \textit{Beulah} and \textit{The Wide, Wide World} in comparative theological perspective uncovers the implicit doctrinal assertions embedded in these two texts and reveals how the heroines of these and other woman’s fictions wield doctrinal agency: a mode of belief, behavior, and expression that informs a woman’s sense of self by imaginatively aligning the events of her life with a Christian narrative of salvation.

Closely examining the different theological arguments that inform \textit{The Wide, Wide World} and \textit{Beulah} can deepen our understanding of how woman’s fiction and the sentimental novel more generally enabled women to imagine and enact their own agency. To recognize sentimental agency, however, we must disentangle agency from power. Critics searching for signs of “sentimental
power” have assumed that all power is positive and exercised willfully by conscious actors with particular ideological goals in sight. They have thus sought evidence of sentimental power most often in scenes and acts of resistance—moments when characters subvert or throw off the authority of father, husband, or minister. These critical treatments of sentimental fiction are influenced by the “progressive-secular imaginary” discussed in the introduction to this book: the set of philosophically liberal feminist assumptions that places individual autonomy at the center of discussions about human action and equates agency with self-will, independence, resistance, or subversion. Influenced by such ideas, feminist critics—even those who have displayed a sensitivity to the role of religion in women’s lives—have found it nearly impossible to imagine forms of female agency that operate by inhabiting norms of religious obedience and piety rather than by subverting them. And yet in the self-consciously pious, theologically inflected genre of woman’s fiction, women’s religious agency is more likely to be enacted in scenes of submission, renunciation, and self-mastery than in acts of subversion.

While twenty-first-century critics may find models of religiously motivated agency foreign or unappealing, recognizing them as agency is nonetheless crucial to a correct understanding of nineteenth-century women’s writing. When viewed through a distorted critical lens, the forms of agency engaged in by the heroines of woman’s fiction—agency that often takes the form of passivity or submission—can seem corrupt or damaged. Woman’s fiction—and sentimentalism more generally—then becomes dismissible for critics seeking evidence of women’s (or of the United States’) increasing self-determination. Bringing questions of doctrine and theology to bear on sentimental fiction reveals that there is, in fact, no single model of sentimental power—or, for that matter, of sentimental agency. Different sentimental texts envision the relationship between women’s agency and divine agency in different ways—ways that are deeply informed by the novels’ theological commitments. The doctrinal structures that undergird woman’s fiction must become part of our ongoing discussion of nineteenth-century women’s writing if we as critics and readers are to understand the true nature of religious agency in our subjects’ time and our own.

**Doctrinal Diversity and Religious Agency in Woman’s Fiction**

As paradigmatic examples of woman’s fiction, the plot outlines of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah* are roughly simi-
lar: the heroines are separated from their families, thrown into lives of hardship and toil from which they are rescued by kind but demanding benefactors, removed from these chosen families, and then subjected to various challenges to their faith before being reunited with their benefactors in marriage. The model for these and other woman’s fictions is the journey taken by Christian, the hero of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to the Next*; it is *The Pilgrim’s Progress* that provides the pattern tale for woman’s fiction’s “over-plot.” The bookends of the heroine’s life—her expulsion from her family at the outset of the novel and her marriage into a new family at the end—correspond to the beginning and end points of Christian’s earthly journey: his flight from the City of Destruction and his safe arrival in the land of Beulah. In works of woman’s fiction, events in the heroine’s life are linked—explicitly or implicitly, depending on the author’s preferences—to stops on Christian’s journey: his entrance through the Wicket Gate and the loss of his burden of sin; his encounters with the Evangelist and the Interpreter; his sojourn at House Beautiful, followed by his battle with Apollyon and the terrors of the Valley of the Shadow of Death; and the temptations of Vanity Fair and the martyrdom of Faithful. The model of Christian development that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* offered to nineteenth-century readers provided the perfect vehicle for woman’s fiction’s devotional and sectarian ends: widely read, recognized, and loved, the *Progress* was ecumenical enough to serve as a paradigmatic Protestant Christian narrative. At the same time, it was flexible enough to be adapted to divergent sectarian purposes: through the careful selection and explication of plot elements, an author of woman’s fiction could imagine a female Christian whose journey toward salvation reflected either a Calvinist or an Arminian cosmology.

Here some capsule definitions may prove helpful. Calvinism and Arminianism are both Protestant theological systems: they insist on God’s grace rather than good works or priestly intercession as the true means of human salvation, and they share many basic theological premises. The two systems diverge most sharply in their understanding of who among humankind will be saved and for whom Christ died. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination posits that God has chosen, or predestined, particular human souls to salvation or damnation. Those he has saved are the “elect”: Christ died specifically for them (the doctrine of “limited atonement”), and their election is unconditional and irresistible—they cannot choose to be saved or reject their salvation. Arminian theology, by contrast, rejects the doctrines of predestination, irresistible grace, and unconditional election, positing instead that Christ died for all humankind (atonement is unlimited), that grace is offered to all, and that while humans cannot effect their own salvation through good works, they
have the option to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation. Another crucial difference between the two systems is that Calvinism posits the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints—that those who are among the elect cannot lose that status—but Arminianism asserts that salvation accepted can later be lost: believers can “fall from grace.”

While the New England theologians and the Congregationalist and Presbyterian clergy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries subscribed almost uniformly to the Calvinist doctrines affirmed at the 1618–1619 Synod of Dort, a nascent Arminianism arose in mid-eighteenth-century New England “as a major, quasi-denominational force in New England Congregationalism under the guidance of particular clergymen,” inciting what would eventually become the Unitarian movement. But the most numerous and influential branch of American Arminianism was that propagated by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. After the American Revolution, Methodism became the fastest-growing sect in the United States: whereas in 1775 only 2 percent of American Christians were Methodist, by 1850 the number had jumped to 34 percent.

Like other woman’s fictions, both The Wide, Wide World and Beulah adhere to the pattern tale of the Progress, but the arrangement and interpretation of particular elements reflect each novel’s theological assumptions about the course of human salvational history. As a work of Calvinist woman’s fiction, The Wide, Wide World makes clear that Ellen Montgomery is predestined to salvation; she spends the entirety of the novel seeking—and finding—evidence of her mother’s prophecy that she is among the elect. In the Arminian woman’s fiction Beulah, Beulah Benton begins her eponymous novel with a simple and childlike faith, gifted to her by her devout parents, but early struggles and intellectual searching cause her to fall from grace, and she spends the remainder of the novel seeking the spiritual assurances that will make it possible for her to reclaim God’s freely offered gift of salvation. These and other plot differences—Ellen Montgomery’s predestination, Beulah Benton’s backsliding—mark the novels as reflecting Calvinist and Arminian doctrines, respectively.

Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World is well known to critics of nineteenth-century fiction; it is the story of Ellen Montgomery, a girl of about ten years old who is separated from her ailing, compassionate mother and sent to live with her father’s cold and unloving sister in upstate New York. While suffering under her aunt’s imperious (and areligious) rule, Ellen is befriended by the kind and pious Alice and John Humphreys, who eventually take her to live with them and who educate her until Alice dies of consumption. When Ellen’s mother and father die before returning to claim her, Ellen must leave the Hum-
phreys household and join her mother’s relatives in Scotland, the Lindsays, who object to her piety but love her jealously and tyrannically. Through acts of prayer and Christian submission, Ellen manages to maintain her faith while also obeying the Lindsays’ wishes until John Humphreys, now a minister, comes to Scotland to rescue and marry her.

Such is the temporal plot of *The Wide, Wide World*. Because the novel is a work of Calvinist woman’s fiction, its spiritual plot is the story of Ellen Montgomery finding assurance of her predestined salvation. Events in the novel are arranged in such a way as to reveal to Ellen and to the reader that she is among Christ’s elect. When Ellen’s mother breaks the news that she and her daughter will soon be parted, she assures Ellen that “‘God sends no trouble upon his children but in love; and though we cannot see how, he will no doubt make all this work for our good’” (12). Mrs. Montgomery’s assertion that there is “no doubt” about the salutary effects of divinely ordained suffering reflects her belief that Ellen is among the elect and therefore cannot come to eternal grief; it is God’s will that Ellen should be saved, and Ellen must arrange her actions and emotions in accordance with that eternal fate. In keeping with this special status, Ellen is soon provided with an opportunity to claim her promised salvation. Separated from her mother, entrusted to the care of two unsympathetic women who will take her by boat to her aunt Fortune’s home, Ellen wanders off and befriends a strange man, who comforts her in her sorrows and speaks of Christ’s love for her. “‘Are you one of his children, Ellen?’” the stranger asks. Ellen replies that she is not (because she loves her mother more than she loves Christ), but the stranger explains that God has taken Mrs. Montgomery away precisely so that Ellen will place her whole confidence in him. Despite Ellen’s protestations, the stranger is convinced that Ellen is one of God’s children: “‘He took your burden of sin upon himself, and suffered that terrible punishment—all to save you, and such as you. And now he asks his children to leave off sinning and come back to him who has bought them with his own blood’” (72). When Ellen promises to “try” to follow Christ, the stranger again insists that God has assured her salvation: “‘You can do nothing well without help, but you are sure the help will come; and from this good day you will seek to know and to do the will of God’” (74). The seemingly contradictory logic of the stranger’s words to Ellen—you can do nothing to save yourself, and yet you are saved—reflects the novel’s Calvinist cosmology: Ellen must seek to do God’s will, but this will only be possible if she is already among God’s elect.

The stranger on the boat is an embodiment of Bunyan’s allegorical Evangelist, the character in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* who first points Christian toward
the Wicket Gate that will set him on the road to the Celestial City. Ellen will remember her meeting with the stranger as the moment she decided to “become a Christian”; in her first letter to her mother, Ellen describes the man on the boat, writing, “Oh, mamma, how he talked to me. He read in the Bible to me, and explained it, and he tried to make me a Christian . . . and I resolved I would” (111). She also brings him up during her first meeting with Alice Humphreys: “He talked to me a great deal; he wanted me to be a Christian; he wanted me to make up my mind to begin that day to be one; and ma’am, I did” (151). The stranger even appears in Ellen’s dreams, wearing someone else’s face, to ask if she has been “pious” (269). While these references to “becoming a Christian” suggest that Ellen’s salvation is a matter of choice, in fact it is a foregone conclusion; it is only because Ellen is a child, at the beginning of her Christian journey, that she cannot see this for herself.

Ellen recognizes her election only after her mother’s death—fittingly, as a result of encountering The Pilgrim’s Progress for the first time. Finding Ellen sunk in grief over the loss of her mother, John Humphreys begins reading to her from Bunyan’s work, dwelling on the moment of Christian’s conversion, when he “loses his burden at the cross.” Ellen is particularly struck by the mark placed on Christian’s forehead by the ministering angels—the sign that, as John explains, signifies “the mark of God’s children . . . the change that makes them different from others, and different from their old selves. . . . None can be a Christian without it.” When he instructs her to search the Bible for the “signs and descriptions by which Christians may know themselves,” Ellen spends hours pondering the Bible her mother gave her before their parting at the beginning of the novel (351–52). There she finds the verses her mother inscribed on the flyleaf: “I love them that love me, and they that seek me early shall find me” and “I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee.”24 “That has come true!” Ellen exclaims, and “That has come true too! . . . And mamma believed it would” (352). Praying fervently over the child from whom she would soon be parted, Mrs. Montgomery had hoped and believed her child was among the elect, that she bore the invisible “mark” of God’s children. After her mother’s death, Ellen comes to realize that Mrs. Montgomery’s faith in her daughter’s election was correct: “That has come true!” The story of The Wide, Wide World is the story of Ellen Montgomery “choosing” to become a Christian while eventually coming to recognize that she never had a choice at all, that her soul was promised salvation from before her birth. Her only true choice was to surrender, in the words of a hymn the stranger reads to her on the boat, her “body, soul, and will” to God (75).

There has been some disagreement among critics of The Wide, Wide World as to whether it is more appropriately classified as Calvinist or Arminian. In
Woman’s Fiction Baym refers to the novel as a “Calvinist evangelical fiction” in which “basic morality and Christian faith . . . are distinct discourses.”25 Sharon Kim considers The Wide, Wide World to be a work of “Puritan realism” and identifies correlative typology as the narrative device that most clearly indicates Warner’s debt to Calvinist orthodoxy.26 Claudia Stokes, by contrast, classifies The Wide, Wide World as theologically Arminian, since in each of her novels “Warner repeatedly stresses that the Christian life is the result of effortful habits, will power, and self-control, and not the effortless divine gift of election.”27 But being among the elect does not release Ellen from the effort of being kind and dutiful or of striving for spiritual perfection. Instead, it makes those responsibilities more imperative, because Ellen’s good behavior will provide both evidence of her election and an example of God’s grace to those around her. In other words, Ellen’s predestined status does not rob her of agency but becomes the condition through which she understands her agency: evidence of election gives Ellen’s spiritual striving a specific cosmic meaning.28

Augusta Jane Evans’s Beulah offers a very different model of the Christian’s journey: in this Arminian woman’s fiction, salvation is not assured, and the heroine struggles to suppress her own doubts and to accept God’s offer of free grace. Set in a fictionalized Mobile, Alabama, Beulah begins with the eponymous heroine living in an orphan asylum with her sister, Lilly. When Lilly is adopted by a wealthy family and then dies of scarlet fever, Beulah is taken in by Lilly’s doctor, Guy Hartwell. They form an arrangement whereby Hartwell will provide Beulah’s lodging and education until she is old enough to work as a teacher, when she will repay him for his expense. As she builds a career for herself, Beulah experiences a crisis of faith brought on by her voracious reading in works of philosophy and psychology; when she appeals to the religiously skeptical Hartwell for help, he recommends that she give up teaching and become his wife. Beulah refuses this offer as well, choosing instead to pursue a career as a writer and to continue her philosophical investigations. After many years of loneliness, hard work, and dogged study, Beulah finally reclaims her faith and agrees to marry Hartwell, setting herself the task of quieting his skepticism and converting him to Christianity.

Beulah Benton’s process of Christian development is not a story of claiming salvation already granted but of seeking—and possibly losing—a salvation perpetually on offer but also perpetually under threat. As a novel that assumes an Arminian soteriological narrative, Beulah operates according to the three most important theological innovations of Wesleyan Arminianism: “free will, falling from grace, and sanctification.”29 Arminian Methodists subscribed to a theology of “prevenient grace,” which asserted that while God’s grace is “given to each person, empowering that individual to choose between eternal life and
eternal damnation,” the gift of grace is “resistible”: humans may choose to reject God’s gift of salvation through the exercise of their own free will. Nineteenth-century Methodists and other Arminians thus took very seriously the apostle Paul’s injunction, in Philippians 2:12, to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Since “conversion was a vocation, not a one-time event [and] it was possible for believers to turn from God and lose their salvation,” Methodist adherents were encouraged to guard against backsliding by striving for Christian perfection or “entire sanctification” through acts of “self-denial, prayer, scriptural study, and fasting.”

Backsliding is precisely the religious experience that the young Beulah Benton undergoes after the death of her parents and sister. Like Ellen Montgomery, Beulah is born to a mother who imparts her sincere Christian faith to her daughter. But the strangers Beulah meets after her parents’ deaths are not kind, and these early experiences of cruelty, capped by her sister Lilly’s death, set her on a path of religious questioning. Her doubts are only amplified when she gains access to the library of her benefactor, Guy Hartwell, which is full of contemporary scientific and philosophical texts. (Poe’s poem “Eureka” is “the portal through which she enter[s] the vast Pantheon of Speculation” [121].) People with whom Beulah discusses her doubts confess similar confusion: her skeptical friend Cornelia Graham is busily trying to fashion a creed out of Emerson’s “dim and contradictory” writings—particularly his “Law of Compensation” (230)—and an older mentor, though kindly, warns Beulah that “‘I am too unsettled myself to presume to direct others’” (245). Those who are willing to advise Beulah about her faith tell her to go back rather than forward—to suppress both intellect and independence and return to the simple and childlike faith of her youth. When Guy Hartwell warns her not to “read [his] books promiscuously” lest they shake the faith she had “when a little girl,” Beulah demands to know whether she should “be satisfied with a creed which I could not bear to have investigated” (129). When her friend Clara Sanders finds Beulah doubting God’s plan for salvation (“Why curse a race in order to necessitate a Saviour?” Beulah wonders, echoing precisely those doubts about the atonement that were expressed by Child, Sedgwick, and their Unitarian contemporaries), Clara begs Beulah to give up her dangerous books: “‘Throw them into the fire, and come back to trust in Christ’” (208). All of the well-meaning advice from those around Beulah is expressed in binary terms that she refuses to accept: she must be child or adult, brainless or heartless, “panthei[st] or utter skeptic”—all choices that for Beulah are no choices at all (264). Beulah instead struggles to “work out [her] own salvation with fear and trembling.”
The character who finally breaks this stalemate, Reginald Lindsay, appears only in the novel’s last hundred pages. Narratively, Reginald Lindsay occupies the place held by the stranger on the boat in *The Wide, Wide World* and the Evangelist in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*: he quiets Beulah’s skepticism and puts her on a Christian path. But he does so not by scolding or shaming her, assuring her that she is already saved, or insisting that she stop studying and return to a simplistic faith; instead he appeals to her mind, explaining why the revelations found in the Bible are the only reasonable solution to the contradictions of philosophy. He gifts her a copy of William Hamilton’s *Philosophy of the Conditioned*, which recommends “a ‘learned ignorance’” as “the consummation of knowledge” (367). It is this “learned ignorance” that finally enables Beulah’s return to grace: she admits her own human frailty and throws herself on God’s mercy: “‘My God, save me! Give me light: of myself I can know nothing!’” (371). Having finally resolved her doubts and returned to the Christian fold, Beulah can now turn her attention to converting Guy Hartwell.

If we think of agency as a synonym for power or self-determination, it is tempting to claim that Beulah Benton has agency and Ellen Montgomery does not or that one has more agency than the other. But that, I am suggesting, is the wrong way to read woman’s fiction—and the wrong way to apprehend women’s religious agency more generally. As (fictional) Protestant women whose lives are modeled on a narrative of Christian salvation, Ellen Montgomery and Beulah Benton exercise agency within the terms of their particular belief systems, not in spite of or against them. Ellen Montgomery exercises religious agency by acting in accordance with her predestined election, and Beulah Benton does so by grasping a grace freely offered. Each woman’s actions are shaped by her belief in an all-powerful being whose will determines the possible channels through which agency may flow.

**Generic Modification as Practical Theology in *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah***

While a text’s doctrinal work does not necessarily reflect the religious views of its author, Evans and Warner were, in fact, members of Protestant denominations that stood at opposite ends of the Calvinist-Arminian theological divide: Warner was Presbyterian (one of the two major Calvinist denominations in the nineteenth-century United States) and Evans was Methodist (which was Arminian in its approach to salvation). Warner, daughter of a once wealthy New York lawyer and businessman who was eventually bankrupted, began her
writing career in 1848 as a way of bolstering her father’s meager income. Henry Whiting Warner had bought a pew at the fashionable Mercer Street Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1836, and his daughters frequently attended with him. But it was not until after their father’s financial and social downfall that Susan and her younger sister, Anna, decided to join the congregation as well. In her biography of Susan, Anna reported that her sister was inclined toward the doctrinal and intellectual aspects of her new faith; while Anna was relieved that the ceremony by which they were accepted into the church required them to be “put through no strict formula” in describing their conversion experience, Susan remarked afterward “that she could not see how we were admitted, having so little to say.”

While the Mercer Street Church adhered to New School Presbyterianism—considered less theologically rigorous than Old School Presbyterianism—both sides professed Calvinist principles, and both saw themselves as guardians of an American intellectual inheritance grounded in a proud Puritan history.

Augusta Jane Evans’s motivations for writing were similar to Susan Warner’s, though she began at a younger age. Evans was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1835, and her father’s financial troubles and the family’s frequent relocations led her to begin composing her first novel, *Inez: A Tale of the Alamo* (1855), in her teens. An anti-Catholic narrative full of theological argument, *Inez* was overlooked by critics and the public alike, but Evans’s second novel, *Beulah*, which adhered more closely to the established formula of woman’s fiction, found both a wide audience and critical approbation, though there were those who objected to its ostentatious intellectualism. Evans was a lifelong Methodist, a strong proponent of free grace who was given to dismissing religious and political enemies with epithets such as “Puritanic locusts.” But her personal papers show that, like her character Beulah Benton, she struggled to reconcile her religious faith with the intellectual, scientific, and philosophical advances of the mid-nineteenth century.

Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Evans’s *Beulah* reflect these distinct religious and regional backgrounds and contribute to contemporary theological debates about predestination and free will that filled the religious press in the 1850s. Vociferous debates about the relative merits of Calvinism and Arminianism—and of the particular doctrines of predestination and free grace—filled the pages of sectarian journals, and these debates were not always conducted calmly or in a spirit of generosity. An 1856 essay in the Presbyterian *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* described Methodist preachers as “uneducated and fanatical men” and labeled their Arminian theology “pure rant” that was “disgusting to men of sense, and shocking to men of right feeling.” In April of that same year, the *Methodist Quarterly Review* published a
reply insisting that “no man, with even a tolerable knowledge of the history of theology, could have honestly written” such a spurious attack on Arminianism. Similarly, in September 1850 the Puritan Recorder, commenting on recent changes to the structure of authority in the English Methodist church, complained of “the grosser abuses” of the Arminian system of theology. A month later a commentator in the Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal replied that, though the Puritan Recorder article had been short, a “greater mass of false propositions and dogmatic assumptions, could not well be crowded into so small a compass.” When the Presbyterian minister William B. Sprague warned his daughter, in a series of letters later published as a conduct manual, to avoid “the din and clashing of religious combatants,” it was this kind of debate to which he alluded.

But nineteenth-century theology was not merely a site for arcane philosophical wrangling and public sniping; it was also assumed to have imminent practical consequences for individuals’ lives. Unlike many European theological traditions, “an understanding of theology as practical governed the discipline in America from the outset,” and by the mid-nineteenth century, “theologians in America emphasized the close connection between the practical and the moral,” with “the ethical side of theology [becoming] increasingly prominent.” Ideas about God’s plan for salvation were not to be judged solely on their logical merits but on the effects they produced on readers and hearers; a theological system that accurately reflected the truth of God’s nature and of his salvational scheme would produce evidence of conversion and sanctification in those who heard and believed it.

Because practical theology was such a crucial component of the American theological tradition, debates between Calvinist and Arminian divines nearly always made reference to the effects that particular doctrines had on believers. The perennial complaint about Calvinists was that the doctrine of predestination produced either hopeless, dispirited melancholics unable to find assurance of their election or, conversely, self-righteous bigots convinced of their salvation and indifferent to the suffering of the non-elect. These are the Calvinist caricatures that appear in Sedgwick’s A New-England Tale, the inaugural work of woman’s fiction that so angered the author’s Stockbridge neighbors. Calvinists, in turn, thought Methodists and other Arminians were hopelessly arrogant: they appropriated to themselves, through their belief in free grace, a salvational power that only God could wield. Because of Methodism’s association with revivalism and its insistence that salvation, once claimed, could be lost, Arminians were also accused of being spiritually shallow, prone to religious “enthusiasms” that would pass away as quickly as they came.
These debates were ongoing in the sectarian press of the 1850s. In 1856, the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, edited by the Reverend Charles Hodge, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and one of the era’s most respected Calvinist divines, published a long dissection of Arminian views. Wrapping up his critique of Arminian doctrines of free grace, the author concluded by complaining of the Methodists’ “system of revivals and periodical excitements [which] brings within their churches multitudes who profess to be the subjects of divine grace, who are deluded by mere emotional excitement, and who relapse into their former state.” These “enthusiasms,” far from being incidental or merely a reflection of flawed human nature, were for Hodge the fault of a fundamentally mistaken theology: “It cannot be otherwise. What is false in their system of doctrine and theory of religion, must produce the bitter fruits of evil, just in proportion as it is prominently presented and acted out.” In its reply to the *Princeton Review* essay, an article in the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, the foremost Wesleyan journal in the nineteenth-century United States, insisted that not only had the *Princeton Review* author misrepresented Arminianism but that Calvinism “in its distinguishing features, is a very mischievous corruption of Christianity” that “destroys at once the moral attributes of God and the free agency of man.” Both arguments rested on the assertion that the opposing theology was not only logically incoherent but pernicious in its practical effects, leading potential Christians away from rather than toward salvation.

While avoiding the argumentative intricacies (and the accompanying nastiness) of such explicit theological debate, woman’s fiction nevertheless provided a medium for the elaboration and dissemination of practical theology. The aim of practical theology was to impart “knowledge that led to a good beyond itself, specifically to the end of blessedness and union with God.” Correct doctrine, nineteenth-century Protestants believed, would produce right living. Woman’s fiction, which depicted in detail a young person’s transformation from unredeemed child to saved and sanctified adult, offered an extended demonstration of how particular doctrines might produce the outcome of “blessedness and union.” It did so not only—or even primarily—through dialogue and explication but through the mechanism of plot. The selection and placement of standard story elements, including adoption and marriage, reflected particular cosmological understandings of the Christian life righteously lived.

Woman’s fiction’s status as a mode of practical theology elaborated through literary form can be traced through the genre’s most fundamental trope: adoption. The heroine’s adoption and her response to it reflect a novel’s theological assumptions about the nature of salvation and to whom it is distributed.
In the Calvinist cosmos of *The Wide, Wide World*, earthly adoption corresponds typologically to divine election: Ellen’s extralegal adoption by the Humphreys siblings parallels her status as a predestined member of the family of God. While Ellen perceives herself as having “chosen” to join the Humphreys family, in fact this choice is made for her by other characters in the novel, as she is selected by Alice, then given to John, and then reclaimed by John after her sojourn in England in a series of “elections” over which she has little control. Furthermore, Ellen’s adoption by the Humphreyses is final and irrevocable, as John and Alice’s affective claim to her is as “irresistible” as the Calvinist convert’s unconditional election. When her uncle, who is her legal guardian but a spiritual stranger, insists that Ellen change her last name from Montgomery to Lindsay, Ellen silently reminds herself that she still belongs to God and the Humphreyses: whatever her name, she “‘can’t be adopted twice’” (490).

In *Beulah*, by contrast, earthly adoption is not the type of God’s heavenly election; instead, it is evidence of laziness and dependency, a failure to exercise one’s God-given free will. When Guy Hartwell retrieves Beulah Benton from the orphan asylum, she agrees to live with him on one condition: “‘I am not going to be adopted’” (106). He repeats his offer to adopt her on several occasions: when she graduates high school and takes a teaching job, when she begins a successful career as a writer, and when she rents a home with a friend and lives independently. When Clara Sanders—the novel’s Calvinist mouthpiece—advises Beulah to accept Hartwell’s repeated offers of adoption, Beulah demands to know whether Clara would be “‘willing to change places with me, and indolently wait for others to maintain you?’” Clara replies, “‘Gladly, if I had been selected as you were’” (115). Beulah’s repeated refusals to be (s)elected by Hartwell index *Beulah*’s commitment to an Arminian worldview, according to which the individual believer chooses his or her spiritual fate rather than submitting to a predestined election. Evans makes the connection between adoption and spiritual failure explicit when Beulah asserts that her friend Eugene’s “‘adoption was his ruin’” (296): Beulah tells Eugene that “‘in lieu of his gold and influence,’” Eugene’s adopted father “‘has your will, your conscience. How can you bear to be a mere tool in his hands?’” (187). Instead of “working out his own salvation,” as Beulah does, Eugene allows himself to be adopted by the worldly Graham family, an indulgence that leads to alcoholism, a loveless marriage, and a near-fatal accident.

In framing Eugene’s downfall as a failure of will, *Beulah* raises another crucial distinction between Calvinist and Arminian woman’s fictions: their treatment of the question of free will. In depicting women’s spiritual development and the forms of religious agency available to Christian women, woman’s fictions reflect divergent theological understandings of human—and particularly
female—will. These distinctions were as old as the Reformation but remained central to antebellum sectarian debates.

The Calvinist understanding of free will was thoroughly explicated by the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards; his detailed treatment of predestinarian theology appeared in 1754 and depicted an ordered universe in which events are predetermined by God in a long sequence of cause and effect stretching backward to the moment of creation. Edwards insisted that predestination and free will were compatible concepts because individuals are at liberty to act according to their wills, but at the same time, as the “moral cause” of human existence and human history, God determines what all of their choices will be. According to Edwards, human beings are “at liberty to act from their own inclinations. What they cannot control, and what does not enter into the equation of their freedom, is how their inclination got to be the way it is and why they apprehend as they do.” Edwards’s nineteenth-century New England successors wrestled with the details of his system but agreed that “God was both the moral governor of responsible creatures and the sovereign efficient cause of every event.”

Edwards’s treatise on the will was a rebuttal to an anonymous and influential book, published in 1732 in London, called *An Essay on the Freedom of Will in God and in Creatures*, which laid out in some detail the basis of an Arminian view of human will. The author of the Essay insisted that human will, so far from being predetermined by God, was self-determining and could choose arbitrarily, even perversely, simply for the pleasure of willing. Any interference from God in determining human will would nullify the very concept of free will and make human existence meaningless: “free will” implied “a Power to chuse or to refuse, to chuse one thing or the contrary among several things which are proposed, without any inward or outward restraint, force or constraining byass or influence.” John Wesley, writing in 1798, explained how human will might be exercised in contradiction to divine will: “The Arminians hold, that, altho’ there may be some moments wherein the Grace of God acts irresistibly, yet in general, any man may resist, and that to his eternal ruin, the Grace whereby it was the Will of God, he should have been eternally saved.” In the Arminian formulation, human will is not predetermined by God’s will; indeed, it is so independent that it can defy the desires of an all-powerful God.

For the Calvinist or Arminian believer of the nineteenth century, these distinctions had immense practical implications for human agency. To understand the nature of human free will and its relation to God’s will is to recognize the opportunities and limits of one’s own agency within a particular cosmological framing of human and divine relation. If God’s will is fixed
and one’s salvational status is predetermined, the human task is one of reconciliation and submission—“to know and to do the will of God,” as the stranger says to Ellen on the boat. Attempting to defy God’s fixed will can cause only frustration and self-harm. But if salvation is not predetermined but offered to all, the task of human beings is to accept God’s gift of grace—to ask, as Beulah Benton does, for God to “‘save me!’” In their depictions of Ellen’s and Beulah’s wills, *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* reflect this very real and consequential distinction and offer divergent models of Protestant religious agency for women in particular. For *The Wide, Wide World*’s Ellen Montgomery, human will is something to be surrendered—her responsibility as a willing subject is to conform her will to divine will. For *Beulah*’s Beulah Benton, human will is something to be exercised—it is the means to salvation rather than a stumbling block to perfect submission.

Throughout the Calvinist fiction *The Wide, Wide World*, women’s wills are represented entirely in the negative. Since human will is something to be surrendered, displays of self-will are always punished, while conformity to divine will (as interpreted by godly parents and clergymen) is praised and rewarded. The discipline of conforming to divine will is modeled first by Ellen’s mother, then by Alice Humphreys, and then by Mrs. Vawse, until it is finally internalized by Ellen herself. Ellen’s mother, mourning the impending separation from her daughter, falls to her knees and prays, “‘Not my will, but thine be done’” (30), the same words that Alice uses when informing Ellen that she (Alice) is terminally ill. When Ellen receives no news from her absent father and mother, John advises that she try “‘to love [God] more, and to be patient under his will’” (344); when Aunt Fortune’s illness keeps Ellen from visiting the Humphreyses, John likewise insists that “‘the good Husbandman knows what his plants want . . . so there come clouds and rains, and “stormy wind fulfilling his will”’” (368). John’s invocation of the “good Husbandman” recalls Mrs. Montgomery’s God, who “‘sends no trouble upon his children but in love.’” Similarly, when Alice dies, John comforts himself and Ellen with the assurance that “‘dear Alice is well—she is well,—and if we are made to suffer, we know and we love the hand that has done it’” (443–44). Late in the novel, Ellen makes a single statement that succinctly encapsulates the novel’s Calvinist conception of human will. Asked by the Lindsays to take an action that would violate her conscience, Ellen protests that “‘I can’t do that . . . and I don’t want to’” (563). It is Edwardsean free will theology in a nutshell: since human beings cannot alter God’s will, they should train themselves not to want to.

In the Arminian woman’s fiction *Beulah*, by contrast, human will is represented not as an unruly obstacle to be wrestled with and surrendered but as a positive force that enables the Christian’s eventual salvation. The first thing
the reader learns about Beulah Benton is that she has a “warm, hopeful heart,” defended by “the sword of a strong, unfaltering will” (14). Beulah’s earliest object lessons are not the ones that Ellen learns—that submitting to the will of others will lead to happiness and peace; instead, Beulah’s first lessons teach her that surrendering one’s will results in moral and even physical death. When the wealthy Graysons adopt her sister, Lilly, from the orphan asylum but refuse to take Beulah (because, the narrator flatly reveals, she is too ugly), Beulah resolves “to bear with fortitude what she could not avert” and convinces Lilly to go with her new parents (19). But Lilly dies within weeks of this separation, and Beulah decides never again to bend her will to others, with the result that when Guy Hartwell takes her into his home, they become embroiled in a decades-long battle of wills. When Hartwell questions Beulah about her origins during their first meeting, her reply to him is, “‘No more. You have not the right to question, nor I the will to answer’” (36). Beulah refuses Hartwell’s offers to adopt and then to marry her because she recognizes that they are contingent on her complete submission and the suppression of her will: “‘He wants to rule me with a rod of iron,’” she infers, “‘because I am indebted to him for an education and support for several years’” (174). When Beulah’s romantic rival Clara Sanders realizes that Hartwell will never love her, it is “that marvelous bit of mechanism, the human will,” that enables her to press on despite this “fierce ordeal, and numbing despair” (205, 206). In Beulah a woman’s will exists for her protection and self-determination, not as something to be surrendered and suppressed. The repeated lesson offered by Beulah is that a woman is better off consulting her own will than conforming to the wills of those around her, however much they love her.

These two treatments of the female will in The Wide, Wide World and Beulah are not binary; it is not simply that Beulah has a strong will and Ellen a weak one. Both Ellen and Beulah are strong willed, and both are reproved by others for exerting their wills to ends that their advisers see as improper. The difference between the heroines lies in the uses to which Ellen’s and Beulah’s wills may be properly put under the doctrinal terms of each novel. For Ellen Montgomery, the Christian journey is one of obedience, of conforming her will to God’s and to those of her guardians; she follows Christ because her mother wished her to, because all of the kindest people in her life wish it as well, and because, she will eventually come to learn, she was predestined to do so. For Beulah Benton, by contrast, the Christian journey is a struggle to work out her own salvation, to move beyond the dependence to which others would subject her, and to form a robust, mature system of belief to replace the unquestioning faith of her childhood. Beulah can experience her faith as
authentic only if it comes as the result of her own intellectual and spiritual effort and uncoerced choice.

In these sectarian woman’s fictions, the question of whether and when to exert or control one’s will informs every moment of the heroine’s life, as it will inform her eventual death. To foreshadow this offstage event, each novel presents the death of one of the heroine’s close friends, a sister-mentor who, for better or worse, models mature female existence for the heroine. In *The Wide, Wide World*, the sister-mentor is Alice Humphreys, Ellen’s adopted sibling and John’s biological one. Alice (who corresponds to the character of Faithful in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*) dies from that standard disease of woman’s fiction: consumption, a wasting away that leaves plenty of time for moral instruction but also for the scenes of loving female care that characterize all works in the genre. Alice’s sanctified death affirms a submissive model of human will as she models a calm resignation to her approaching death. Prompted by her unconditional obedience to God, Alice professes herself perfectly happy with her fate and surrenders peacefully to death. Describing John’s final embrace of his sister, the narrator details how Alice’s arms “fell languidly down; the will and the power that had sustained them were gone. Alice was gone” (441). Alice’s will, like Ellen’s, exists only in the negative—this act of surrender is the only moment in the novel in which Alice is described as having any will at all.

Compare this beatific death to the harrowing scene in Evans’s *Beulah* when Cornelia Graham, friend to Beulah and adopted sister to Eugene, expires from the same wasting illness that takes Alice Humphreys. In this Arminian fiction, Cornelia has the “power to chuse” not to believe, and she exercises that power to the last. When Beulah attempts to comfort her by reminding her that “‘they say Jesus of Nazareth slept, and woke again; if so, you will,’” Cornelia replies, “‘They say! They say! Yes, but I never believed them before, and I don’t want to believe them now. I will not believe it’” (318). In an Arminian universe, Cornelia can resist God’s gift of grace through the exercise of her free will, and this is the choice she makes. Though Cornelia does not believe, she nevertheless counsels her friend to seek salvation: “‘Don’t live as I have, believing nothing. . . . It is because I believe in nothing, that I am so clouded now’” (319). In *Beulah*, belief and unbelief are choices that are made possible through an exertion of will, not its surrender. Because she has chosen not to believe, Cornelia’s death is not a gentle letting go but a painful “exit,” and she receives no final assurance of salvation, no last vision of loved ones gone before. Unlike Alice Humphreys’s peaceful death, Cornelia dies with a “long shudder” and “a deep, heavy sigh” (320).
The differing theologies of the will that guide the plots of *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* also result in divergent attitudes toward authority—particularly ecclesiastical authority. *The Wide, Wide World* contains no fewer than three benevolent minister figures: Mr. Humphreys, John Humphreys, and George Marshman—the stranger on the boat, whose identity and vocation are revealed to Ellen and the reader only after Alice’s death. Since Ellen’s task is to conform her will to God’s, she needs Christian guidance in doing so, and Warner provides her with a plethora of paragons of Christian renunciation, both ordained and unordained. These include her mother, Alice Humphreys, Mrs. Vawse, and the three ministers, as well as negative examples in the godless Aunt Fortune and the flighty Sophia Marshman. *Beulah*, by contrast, includes only one named ministerial figure, the tyrannical Mr. Mortimer, who nearly crushes his young wife’s spirit through his demands for total submission. Reginald Lindsay, the man who helps Beulah reclaim her faith, is a politician rather than a pastor; the character who bears the name of American Methodism’s first bishop—Dr. Asbury—is a medical doctor and an agnostic one at that.51 *Beulah*’s dearth of pastoral guides reflects the novel’s Arminian stance that individuals must “work out their own salvation” rather than submitting to the wills of others.

Warner’s and Evans’s divergent attitudes toward the proper role of human will in the Christian life are reflected in both their fictional creations and their personal documents. Like Ellen Montgomery, Susan Warner had a strong will: this is evident in her untiring work to support her family after her father’s financial ruin. She and her sister Anna famously rose at four a.m. each day to write by candlelight before turning to the domestic duties of keeping their father’s house. This self-discipline reflected the proper use of her will: she was to perform the God-given task of supporting and encouraging others through hard work and devotion to duty. But Susan also struggled with what she called “self-will”: a compulsive turning of the mind to things over which it had no control. In a letter that Anna quotes at length in her biography of her sister, Susan excoriated herself thus: “Not long ago my self-will took fast hold of a matter with which it had, lawfully, no manner of concern; inasmuch as it was no more in my power to control it than it was to make one hair white or black. What had self-will to do? But you know mine: it took hold of this matter with so firm a clasp that it has needed a long time to unloose it. . . . You know well enough what my self-will is, to be well convinced that it needs checking.” So long as Susan’s strong will was submitted to godly purposes, it was a blessing; it was only self-will—the stubborn pursuit of ends other than God’s—that was to be avoided.52
Augusta Jane Evans showed similar determination in her struggles toward self-mastery, but her primary spiritual goal was discovery rather than submission. In a series of letters to her friend Walter Clopton Harriss, a Methodist minister, Evans described her struggles with spiritual doubt: “My mind was darkened. Questions of vital import, touching on my soul, were folded away in inscrutable mystery. To my anxious cry of ‘why are these things?’ there came but a mocking echo, that fell back, with a dead crushing weight upon my sickened heart.” Evans’s own spiritual struggles would provide the model for Beulah Benton’s, and while the author assured Harriss that eventually “a green and sunny path led me back to my Father and my God,” she also admitted that “whether I shall stay there, is now the question.” Later letters show that for Evans, falling from grace remained a real and ever-present possibility, since her Arminian belief system included no provision for the perseverance of the saints. She wrote to Harriss that “even when my soul is serenely, happily basking in the light of an eternal God, and his equally eternal word, a grim guant [sic] spectre stands by me, as my shadow, and makes me doubt the reasonable certainty and absolute proof of the faith that consoles me.” Rather than detailing a process of submission or the conquering of “self-will,” Evans described an active and perpetual battle that had to be “continually fought over and over” against forces that threatened to rob her of her salvation.53

In the overplot of woman’s fiction, the spiritual telos is an eternity with God, and the earthly telos is marriage. This final denouement is the heroine’s reward for right behavior and the safe haven where she will spend her remaining days on earth. Read against the pattern tale of The Pilgrim’s Progress, these marriages correspond to the land of Beulah, where Christian and Hopeful rest before making their final passage across the river of death and into the Celestial City. In her original study of the genre, Baym argued that “both the shape of fiction and the shape of reality conspired to suggest marriage as the appropriate ending” to a work of woman’s fiction, given that the resolution of romantic complications “is the basic ending of all fiction” and that “marriage and domesticity were still the reality for the overwhelming majority of women” during the antebellum period.54 Claudia Stokes has explored the theological functions that have been served by the marriage plot at least since the book of Revelation: the “novelistic convention of the marriage plot is in and of itself inherently millenial,” Stokes writes, because “it provides reassurances of ongoing improvement and renewal, and it does so by enabling the reproduction of homes and families.”55 In the theologically informed genre of woman’s fiction, which envisions female agency exercised according to particular doctrinal patterns, the heroine’s choice of mate indexes both her growing
self-knowledge—she will choose a reliable and sober partner over an attractive dandy—and the novel’s doctrinal work. In *The Wide, Wide World* Ellen is predestined to marry John Humphreys as surely as she is to go to heaven; at their first meeting, Alice pronounces him “‘your brother as well as mine,’” to which John responds that Alice is “‘giving [them] away to each other at a great rate’” and then demands from Ellen “‘a brother’s right,’” a kiss on the lips (274). Their informal betrothal in the text’s final published chapter is similarly preordained: John tells Ellen that “‘if we live we shall spend our lives here together. . . . And what God orders let us quietly submit to’” (565). Though she similarly marries her lifelong mentor, Beulah Benton’s engagement is the result of determined choice rather than calm acquiescence; after decades of refusing Guy Hartwell’s advances, Beulah accepts his proposals only after she has reclaimed her faith and rejected another worthy suitor. “‘Give me your hand, Beulah? . . . Is it mine?’” Hartwell asks, to which she replies, “‘Yes, sir, if you want it’” (413). Humphreys and Hartwell enact in their offers of marriage the soteriological schemes of the novels’ respective gods.

Feminist readings of woman’s fiction often categorize the heroine’s marriage as a capitulation, since for women in the antebellum United States marriage almost always entailed the erasure of their legal personhood and an attendant loss of economic power and bodily sovereignty. Even while acknowledging this change in temporal status, however, we can still recognize how these matrimonial endings, read in theological terms, offer their protagonists a greater scope of spiritual action. Both *The Wide, Wide World* and *Beulah* offer small glimpses into their heroines’ marriages (though in the case of Warner’s novel, this glimpse was withheld from nineteenth-century readers), and these final scenes indicate how the texts envision the duties of a Christian wife. Marriage, in these novels, is not the happily ever after of the fairy tale or the terrifying imprisonment of the gothic romance but the space that unites belief and action—the arena in which the heroine will live out the consequences of her Christian faith and pursue her ongoing spiritual development.

In keeping with *The Wide, Wide World*’s Calvinist cosmology, Ellen Montgomery’s postmarriage scene underscores her irresistible and irrevocable election by the holy Humphreys family. Ellen belongs to John Humphreys as she always has, just as she belongs to God as she always has. When the newly wedded Ellen arrives in “one of our pleasantest, though not one of our largest cities,” she finds all the same possessions that had stood in the Humphreyses’ previous home in the country, “and as near as possible in the same arrangement” (571). The Humphreyses’ servant, Margery, transported along with the family’s belongings, affirms Ellen’s predestined status as a member of the Humphreys household: “‘We’ll keep you now, won’t we? And you’re not
changed—no . . . you are just the very same! the very same! I see you are Miss Ellen in everything. . . . But will we keep you now?” The only thing that has changed about Ellen is her name: “‘Not Miss Ellen, Margery,’” John points out (573). Mr. Humphreys also pronounces Ellen “‘the same child you used to be’” and consents to future visits from Mr. Lindsay only because “‘we have you fast now’” (580, 581). These scenes of homecoming enact a temporal repetition that emphasizes the predestined nature of both Ellen’s worldly destiny—Alice “gave her” to John when she was only a child—and her spiritual one.

Ellen’s nuptial task is to continue subduing her self-will and to be a helpmeet to John, who will watch carefully over her ongoing spiritual development. When she remarks that the beautiful things John has bought her will encourage laziness and luxury, he assures her that “‘if you show any symptoms of such a character it will rouse me to a most vigorous opposition.’” Ellen, carefully trained to seek John’s approval in all things, finds the thought comforting: “‘I am glad of that. . . . I may enjoy myself in perfect security that you will see the beginning of mischief and put a stop to it’” (576). Her only earthly labor is to manage the household, and even that she will do under John’s supervision: though he “‘shall never ask you how you spend’” the money he sets aside for domestic matters, he nevertheless promises to correct her “‘if I see you going very far out of the way in anything’” (582). Though twenty-first-century readers may find this surveillance unnerving (Marianne Noble notes the marriage’s similarity to a sadomasochistic relationship), Ellen experiences it as freeing: describing the “puzzles” she gets into while reading, she notes that “‘I often launch out upon a sea where I dare not trust my own navigation, and am fain to lower sail and come humbly back to the shore; but now I will take the pilot along . . . and sail every whither’” (577). In her Calvinist universe in which self-will can only lead to self-harm, Ellen accepts John’s guidance as a boon—a means of avoiding fruitless spiritual struggle. Like a cat curling up in a box, Ellen finds comfort in the smallness of her surroundings. This particular adaptation to circumstance may frustrate modern readers, but given the blockbuster sales of *The Wide, Wide World*, millions of nineteenth-century Americans apparently found it a compelling fictional model of female religious agency.

It is decidedly not the model of female agency set forth in Evans’s *Beulah*. Beulah Benton’s marriage to Guy Hartwell is not a refuge, a retreat, or a place of grateful rest; instead, it is a new field of endeavor in which Beulah can fulfill the “‘divine decree that all should work’” (310). Instead of recreating the past or positing earthly marriage as a foretaste of heavenly bliss, *Beulah* ends by prescribing its heroine’s continuing temporal and spiritual task: “To save her husband from his unbelief is the labor of future years” (417–18). In a rare
moment of direct address that echoes Evans’s model, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, the narrator asserts, “Reader, marriage is not the end of life; it is but the beginning of a new course of duties” (417). And the novel ends not with static certainty but with an uncertain hope: “May God aid the wife in her holy work of love” (420). *Beulah* concludes with its heroine’s long verbal testimony about her own struggles with religious skepticism and her eventual conversion. Praising the advances of science, she nevertheless challenges Hartwell—and the reader—to explain “how matter creates mind,” the great question that all her philosophical study has left unanswered. Having worked out her own salvation, Beulah now sets herself the task of effecting Hartwell’s.

The fact that much of the context and subtext of *Beulah* and *The Wide, Wide World* is theological does not mean that these novels’ concerns were private and restricted to domestic subjects. By involving themselves in theological debates, Warner and Evans engaged in a public discourse about human agency in general and female agency in particular—a discourse that took place both in sectarian journals and in the more popular literary space of sentimental fiction. As June Howard notes, sentimentality always engages with “the development of modern subjectivities in their intricate imbrication with belief systems and social structures.” By exploring particular Protestant beliefs through the medium of fiction, Evans and Warner took part in a larger debate about the role of women in the public sphere. In keeping with this larger social question of women’s public agency, part of Ellen Montgomery’s and Beulah Benton’s tasks (as well as the task of their readers) is to reconcile their theological beliefs with their legal and political status as citizens and subjects who cannot elect their own leaders or claim equal protection under the law. As with their spiritual maturation, their political educations are shaped by the theological systems to which they subscribe, and the novels’ reflections on women’s political lives and duties are inextricable from their theological commitments.

Ellen Montgomery’s spiritual and temporal training under the Humphreyses includes lessons in recognizing and conforming to legitimate temporal authority as well as irresistible spiritual authority: in addition to the Bible that Ellen’s mother gives her and the copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* she receives from John, Ellen also receives a copy of Mason Weems’s *Life of Washington*, which she absorbs with at least as much attention as she devotes to the other two. When Ellen arrives in Scotland, the name of Washington comes to stand in for the name of John Humphreys: though she “disliked to speak the loved names [of Alice and John] in the hearing of ears to which she knew they would be unlovely” (509), Ellen has no trouble invoking the name of Washington at every turn. When her uncle Lindsay asks whether she is “‘one of those that
make a saint of George Washington,’” Ellen replies that “‘he was a great deal better than some saints’” (506). When Mr. Lindsay brings up the “murder” of John André, Ellen insists that this act must have been right because if it were not, “‘Washington would not have done it.’” When Mr. Lindsay accuses Ellen of circular reasoning, she explains herself by insisting that “‘when a person always does right, if he happen to do something that I don’t know enough to understand, I have good reason to think it is right, even though I cannot understand it’” (515). This is the same reasoning that Alice had earlier applied to John: when Ellen wonders whether John was right in whipping an obstinate horse, Alice replies that “‘it is sometimes necessary to do such things. . . . You and I know John, do we not?’” (377). John, like Washington, cannot be guilty of a wrong act—like the Calvinist God that Alice and Ellen worship, John’s justice is unquestionable, though his behavior sometimes seems unfathomable. John is both God and Washington to Ellen: he embodies both spiritual and temporal authority, such that Ellen need no longer consult her own will.

_The Wide, Wide World_, then, would seem to envision both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world as representative republics in which women’s consent to structures of power can be assumed because those powers are self-evidently benevolent. As I have discussed, Ellen’s act of “choosing” John is predetermined by John himself and, presumably, by God. Similarly, Ellen’s Americanness, so repugnant to the Lindsays, is also out of her control: when Mr. Lindsay commands Ellen to “‘forget that [she was] American,’” Ellen’s silent rejoinder that “‘there are some things he cannot command. . . . Forget, indeed!’” represents one of the only times in the novel when she does not rebuke herself for pride or rebelliousness (510). Ellen’s Americanness, like her Calvinist election and her adoption by the Humphreys family, is irrevocable—“irresistible,” in Calvinist parlance; it is not a matter of her own will or choosing, and she could not change it if she wished to.

_Beulah_ sets forth an alternative model of male-female relations in which the narrator and protagonist urge the women of the United States not to submit themselves to godly men but to accept independence and intellectual pursuits as their God-given duty. When Beulah gives the commencement address at the public school where she has been educated, she takes as her theme “female heroism” and sets out to demonstrate “that female intellect was capable of the most exalted attainments, and that the elements of her character would enable woman to cope successfully with difficulties of every class” (140). Beulah concludes her address by encouraging her classmates to make themselves “true women of America” not by submitting to superior men but by proving themselves “angel guardians of the sacred hearthstone, ministering spirits where suffering and want demand succor,” and women “qualified to assist
in a council of statesmen, if dire necessity ever require it” (140). American-ness, for “true women” at least, is not a state into which one is born but a distinction to which one aspires.

Evans saw herself as the torchbearer for a new brand of southern literature that would challenge the intellectual and political hegemony of the Boston and New York elite; the Arminian free-will doctrines that Beulah embraces would undergird a new era of southern supremacy based on states’ rights and individual (white) self-determination. Evans signals her ambitions in her choice to name her eponymous heroine Beulah. While critics have rightly pointed out that the Hebrew word Beulah means “married woman” and that the name thus foreshadows the romantic denouement of the novel,59 the biblical passage in which the word Beulah figures does not refer to an actual woman but to the land of Israel. Predicting a future time of glory for the Hebrew people, the prophet Isaiah asserts, “Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzi- bah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.”60 In associating her southern heroine with an idealized vision of an agriculturally productive Israel, Evans intimates that the South, not the North, is that region of the country truly chosen and blessed by God. The association of the southern heroine with bridal imagery also invokes the tradition of the church as the bridegroom of Christ, making southern Arminian churches, rather than New England Calvinists, the true inheritors of the American Christian mission.

Sentimental Power and Sentimental Agency, or The Douglas-Tompkins “Debate”

Despite their surface similarities and their shared overplot, Beulah and The Wide, Wide World describe fictional universes that are shaped by sharply distinct theological premises; their depictions of female moral and spiritual development directly reflect those differing cosmologies. Protestant doctrine, far from being “epiphenomenal” to woman’s fiction, is in fact subphenomenal: it underlies and shades all other aspects of a text.61 Most importantly, it shapes a text’s understanding and portrayal of female agency: the Calvinist Ellen Montgomery’s way of being and acting in the world is entirely different from the Arminian Beulah Benton’s. This insight is crucial to studies of women’s writing because critical treatments of woman’s fiction in particular and sentimentalism more generally have long been concerned with the question of how sentimental texts enable or undermine female agency. Unfortunately, these
studies have been driven by reductive debates about whether sentimental power is “good” or “bad”—debates that remain grounded in inaccurate and anachronistic understandings of nineteenth-century American religion.

Discussions of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction have long proceeded under the terms originally laid down by the critics Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins—terms that were essentially religious-historical, though few later critics approached them as such. Douglas’s 1977 tome *The Feminization of American Culture* offered an exhaustive critique of nineteenth-century sentimental writing that supported an openly declensionist argument about American religious history. According to Douglas, nineteenth-century women writers and attention-seeking liberal ministers eviscerated a formerly robust and appropriately masculine Calvinist theological tradition; in doing so, they produced the ostensibly anti-intellectual and “feminized” mass culture of the twentieth century.62 In response to this argument, Tompkins’s 1985 monograph *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* acknowledged sentimentalism’s religious underpinnings but rejected the theological declensionism of Douglas’s book. Tompkins, reading for cultural effects rather than intellectual history, described how the evangelical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening gave rise to a phenomenon she called “sentimental power”: a belief that “those who know how, in the privacy of their closets, to struggle for possession of their souls will one day possess the world through the power given to them by God.”63

While Douglas told a story of loss and Tompkins one of triumph, the two critics agreed on the undeniable cultural influence of nineteenth-century women’s religious writing. Sentimental writers, both posited, fundamentally altered the course of American intellectual and cultural history by writing openly religious fiction about saintly little girls and long-suffering wives. The two critics also agreed on the seemingly self-evident source of this power: evangelical Christianity. But the problem with characterizing sentimental fiction as evangelical is that the term *evangelical* collapses a wide field of nineteenth-century Protestant beliefs under a single heading while at the same time imposing twentieth-century political and religious assumptions onto a nineteenth-century religious context. As such, it obscures the very real doctrinal distinctions between different Protestant sects—distinctions that affect how individual authors envisioned possibilities for women’s religious agency. Teasing out these distinctions helps to explain why the terms of the Douglas-Tompkins “debate” remain so frustratingly binding.64

The term *evangelical* became a prominent feature of Western European religious identity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was adopted by groups of Christians to signify their allegiance to the nascent Protestant
reformation. Denominations, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church, used the word to mark their dissent from Catholic tradition, their rejection of papal authority, and their embrace of the “good tidings” (Greek: evangelium) of salvation by grace rather than by the intercession of priest or saints. The term maintained this relatively straightforward meaning until the nineteenth century, when early religious historians, including Robert Baird and Philip Schaff, began using it to distinguish sects whose doctrines and practices they approved of from those they considered apostate. Baird’s Religion in America (1844), for instance, placed Christian sects as doctrinally, ecclesiastically, and liturgically diverse as Presbyterians and Quakers under the heading of “evangelical” while including among the “non-evangelical” both self-identified Christians (Unitarians and Universalists) and non-Christians including atheists and Jews. Around the same time, evangelical acquired other meanings: in addition to describing identities and beliefs, it came to denote participation in a set of activities particularly important to newly converted American Protestants. To be evangelical was, increasingly, to evangelize: to support Christian reform activities at home and proselytizing missions abroad. It was also, often, to participate in the popular revivals that periodically swept the country. Because these revivals attracted persons of all genders, races, and social classes, and because attendees notoriously experienced ecstatic transports and “inflamed passions,” evangelicalism increasingly came to be associated with embodied excess and uncontrolled—perhaps uncontrollable—religious emotion. This set of connotations followed the term into the next century: from the 1930s to the 1970s the term evangelical was applied most often to the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, which did not exist before the twentieth century and which emphasized an embodied, mystical, and personal connection to God and Jesus Christ. To confuse matters further, in the 1960s and 1970s the term acquired additional political valences as “one conservative party in almost all the most notable denominations [took] the adjective ‘evangelical’ to apply to itself.” By the late twentieth century, then, when nineteenth-century women’s writing was being recovered by feminist scholars, the term evangelical had come to indicate a small but vocal group of Christian adherents known primarily for their commitment to emotional and embodied revivalism, to proselytizing activity, and to conservative political causes. This definition was the one adopted by Ann Douglas: Feminization defines “non-evangelical” sects as those that “appreciated distinction and tradition,” that “stood for a settled ministry [and] for intellectual elitism,” and that either rejected revivals altogether or “wished to see them cautiously conducted in orderly fashion by ministers within their own congregations.” The “evangeli-
cals,” for Douglas, were everyone else—those who abjured tradition and intellectualism, embraced revivalist “excesses,” and wrote sentimental fiction. Sensational Designs adopted a similarly anachronistic construction of “evangelical” Christianity as its operative religious-historical term: while asserting that the meaning of a sentimental text “depends upon its audience’s beliefs not just in a gross general way, but intricately and precisely,” the term Tompkins used to describe sentimental religiosity, “evangelical,” was both gross and general. The religious-historical assumptions that undergirded the Douglas-Tompkins debate were thus never up for debate at all. Both The Feminization of American Culture and Sensational Designs used a twentieth-century model of evangelical religion to frame their claims about the nineteenth century: that Christian evangelicalism was the religious ground of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, that evangelical religiosity was marked by emotional excess rather than theological precision, and that this excessive evangelical emotion was filtered into the culture through the medium of women’s crying bodies.

Douglas’s and Tompkins’s formulations of sentimental power offered a necessary corrective to generations of literary criticism and religious history that had first aligned the entire intellectual life of the antebellum United States with Calvinist theological discourse and then (because women could neither attend universities nor become ordained ministers) assumed that women’s influence on nineteenth-century intellectual culture was negligible. But Douglas and Tompkins did not respond by looking for signs of women writers’ intellectual engagement with theological questions; instead, they located women’s cultural and religious agency in their feeling bodies rather than in their thinking minds. The ahistorical importation of the term evangelical thus helped to undergird a frustrating and persistent critical and historiographic binary: the assumption that women experience religion emotionally while men experience it intellectually. This binary can be traced through the persistent use of the ostensibly oppositional terms evangelical and Calvinist. In Feminization, Douglas accused sentimental authors of using their “evangelical” writing to introduce “formerly denounced heresy” into a society previously grounded in a virile Calvinist orthodoxy. Tompkins implicitly maintained the dichotomy: when discussing works by Herman Melville and Charles Brockden Brown, Sensational Designs identifies these authors and their writing as “Calvinist”; when analyzing Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852)—the blockbusters of the “other American Renaissance”—it labels these works “evangelical.” In both The Feminization of American Culture and Sensational Designs, male authors have thinking, Calvinist minds while female authors have feeling, evangelical bodies. The
stubborn persistence of this critical binary has often made it difficult to recognize the theological investments of women’s writing, including those I trace in this book.73

Recent scholarship on women’s writing generally and sentimentalism in particular has begun to redress the religious-historical problems that attended the Douglas-Tompkins debate. This work includes Abram Van Engen’s excavations of sympathy in Puritan (Old and New) England; Dawn Coleman’s discussions of homiletic form in the writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe (and of the crucial influence of Protestant preaching on antebellum literature more generally); Susanna Compton Underland’s scholarship on the intersection of secularism and domesticity from the early national period to the Civil War; Kevin Pelletier’s discovery that apocalyptic eschatology fueled nineteenth-century sentimentalism among authors and activists both black and white; Tracy Fessenden’s work on the intersections of secularism, feminism, and imperialism in the nineteenth century and today; Molly Robey’s research on women writers’ literary depictions of the Holy Land; Ashley Barnes’s work on sacramental reading in novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps; Randi Tanglen’s studies of the intersections of race, class, and religion among women authors across a range of denominations; Claudia Stokes’s extensive exposition of the theology of sentimentalism in *The Altar at Home* and her subsequent work on religion and disability in *The Lamplighter*; and the essential essays collected in Mary McCartin Wearn’s *Nineteenth-Century American Women Write Religion: Lived Theologies and Literature*. These and other works of literary history and criticism have offered detailed examinations of women’s religious writing that take into account both the enormous sectarian diversity of the antebellum United States and the myriad ways that women experience religion: intellectually and emotionally, individually and communally, publicly and privately.74

More work needs to be done, however, if we are to understand the nature of women’s religious agency in the nineteenth century and in our own time. It is crucial to accurately apprehend the religious-historical and theological commitments of woman’s fiction and of sentimental writing more generally because these novels’ depictions of female agency are inseparable from their conceptions of divine power. Critics of sentimental fiction have often read sentimental religiosity as a cunning strategy for accruing worldly power; as Tracy Fessenden has noted, the religiosity on display in sentimental fiction has frequently been approached not for its own sake but as “simply the cultural camouflage under which female power moves into public discourse.”75 This critical preoccupation with power—usually conceived solely as a question of a text’s “politics”—limits discussions of sentimental fiction to analyses of
whether these power plays worked and, if they did, whether their cultural consequences were positive or negative according to the critic’s own lights. Hence the reductiveness of the Douglas-Tompkins debate: women’s power bad vs. women’s power good, with religion considered primarily as a metonym for power.

The models of religious agency offered by woman’s fiction and the sentimental novel have been difficult to apprehend because they do not always conform to the “progressive-secular imaginary”—the Western feminist narrative that assumes that women’s flourishing requires their emancipation from religious adherence. This narrative rests on a foundation of presentist and secularist arrogance, “a deep self-assurance . . . that the life forms [secularization] offers are the best way out for . . . unenlightened souls, mired as they are in the spectral hopes that gods and prophets hold out to them.” Under these terms, in which religion can function only as a delusion from which the subjects of critical discourse must be freed, it is difficult for scholars to recognize and acknowledge forms of agency enabled by religious belief and practice.

The progressive-secular imaginary thus hampers serious critique of nineteenth-century women writers: religious women authors of the nineteenth century take on the anthropological role of Other in the writings of some twenty-first-century critics, their religion representing a primitive residue of nineteenth-century culture to be left behind on the journey toward feminist enlightenment. But as the anthropologist and legal theorist Leti Volpp notes, when “culture and feminism are believed to be opponents in a zero-sum game, women will be presumed to be emancipated when they have abandoned their cultures.” Since the authors of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, now long since dead, can no longer abandon their religious cultures but have left evidence of them in their novels, critics have too often done the abandoning for them, writing around the question of religion or assuming that it exists only to mask other concerns—gender, race, class—more interesting to latter-day scholars.

Paradoxically, the persistence of the progressive-secular imaginary has made it easiest to identify female power in sentimental texts that embrace religious beliefs that seem especially foreign to a secularized critical stance, like the strict Calvinism of Susan Warner. Often the perceived strangeness of the texts’ religiosity makes it easier to dismiss that religiosity as a cultural accretion. If women like Susan Warner and her protagonist Ellen Montgomery are able to wield agency and develop subjectivity (as critics of the sentimental novel insist, quite correctly, that they do) even while embracing a religion that ostensibly demonizes individual self-determination, that religion must not be effective and can be dismissed as an historical artifact with little bearing on the
“real” problem of power. Baffled by the possibility that female agency might be exercised through religious adherence rather than in spite of it, critics have sought ways to write around women’s religion rather than about it. Thus, even those critical formulations of sentimental power that have claimed to treat the religiosity of nineteenth-century women’s literature with respect have often furthered secularized critical narratives that dismiss religion from serious discussion.

Novels like Evans’s *Beulah* fit uneasily into this secularized understanding of women’s social and political power because the model of religious agency that they offer aligns with liberal assumptions about autonomy and self-determination while simultaneously rejecting an attendant narrative of personal or communal secularization. *Beulah* short-circuits the progressive-secular narrative that celebrates the supposedly inevitable—but contested and ideologically naturalized—conjunction between secularization and women’s intellectual and social liberation. Beulah Benton’s quest for scientific and philosophical knowledge leads her toward rather than away from religious devotion, and her religious beliefs, in turn, bolster rather than undermine her feminist agency. She finds in her Arminian Christianity a warrant for statements like this one, which she makes to her friend Clara:

You are opening your lips to repeat that senseless simile of [male] oaks and [female] vines; I don’t want to hear it; there are no creeping tendencies about me. You can wind, and lean, and hang on somebody else if you like; but I feel more like one of those old pine trees yonder. I can stand up. Very slim, if you will, but straight and high. Stand by myself; battle with wind and rain and tempest roar; be swayed and bent, perhaps, in the storm, but stand unaided, nevertheless. I feel humbled when I hear a woman bemoaning the weakness of her sex, instead of showing that she has a soul and mind of her own inferior to none. (116)

Because the progressive-secular imaginary assumes that feminist enlightenment and religious adherence are incompatible, critics of nineteenth-century woman’s fiction have found no place in their narratives for a text like *Beulah* that combines fierce religiosity with feminist sentiment. Evans has been overlooked, in part, because her religious feminism is unrecognizable according to a progressive-secular narrative that assumes that women can achieve agency only by rejecting religion.

To take women’s religious adherence seriously is not the same as uncritically celebrating it. We should not simply replace one critical monolith with another: women’s power good with women’s religious agency good. Evans was unapologetically proslavery and pro-secession; she maintained friendships with
prominent southern politicians and military leaders, including P. G. T. Beauregard and J. L. M. Curry, and during the Civil War her novel *Macaria, or Altars of Sacrifice* became a best-selling work of Southern apologetics. In *Beulah*, Beulah Benton’s ostentatious performances of theological and philosophical learning are intended, in part, to display her intellectual immunity to the “superstitious” beliefs and behaviors of the novel’s black characters, particularly Guy Hartwell’s enslaved housekeeper, Harriet, whose folk wisdom Beulah repeatedly rejects. Evans’s Arminian Christianity is a crucial component of her white feminism, and ignoring it means missing an opportunity to explore how white women’s religious agency has often functioned to bolster white supremacy.

Recognizing entanglements between theology and politics in the nineteenth century can, in turn, make us better and more astute observers of our own time. It is easy to see in Beulah Benton the precursor of wealthy suburbanites who attend televised megachurches and vote for conservative political candidates. If Beulah Benton’s God is the God of white slaveowners, women—and indeed, everyone—would be better off without him. But the skepticism and secularization celebrated by proponents of the progressive-secular imaginary also forms a key component of what Sara Farris calls “femonationalism.” Femonalism is the political-military-religious alliance that justifies Western imperialism by insisting that the true aim of the United States’ global military conquests is the liberation of women—particularly Muslim women—from their self-evidently oppressive religions.78

Under femonalism, religious and nonreligious ideologies conspire to become complementary tools of patriarchy and empire. Femonalism objectifies nonwhite women (both within and outside the United States) by refusing to recognize their religious beliefs and practices as evidence of agency and as crucial and consequential aspects of their identities. This refusal can be justified in the name of either religion (usually a Protestant Christianity ostensibly cleansed of its patriarchal elements) or skepticism (there is a reason that the New Atheists almost uniformly embrace a rabid anti-Muslim ideology).79 Combating femonalism requires, at minimum, that we acknowledge women as conscious agents capable of making their own choices about their religious and political lives. We must take women’s religious agency seriously, in other words, precisely because that agency is multivalent and has sometimes unpredictable effects.

Attending to the wide array of religious positions on display in women’s writing helps to complicate critical narratives that presume that for women to exercise agency, they must resist repressive religion in favor of an ostensibly liberating skepticism. What woman’s fiction, in all its doctrinal diversity,
CHAPTER 2

demonstrates is that women authors engaged deeply with nineteenth-century theological questions—that they approached religion both intellectually and emotionally rather than eschewing one approach in favor of another. Just as importantly, recognizing the theological arguments at work in woman’s fiction helps us to see that women’s agency is not an either-or proposition, even and perhaps especially when that agency grows out of religious principles. If critics are to continue to assert the important role of nineteenth-century women authors in literary history and to understand the complex models of agency at work in their texts, we must adjust our approach to these texts to include all possible avenues to female agency, religious and nonreligious.