

## ABSTRACT

'A Phrase Seldom Heard': Defining the Self-Made Woman in American Literature, 1850-1900

My dissertation examines how nineteenth-century women authors engaged with the notion of "self-making" as a means of upending conventional understandings of women's role in American society and culture. The authors this study examines (Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah J. Hale, Sarah Knowles Bolton, Mary Field Williams Gibson, Elizabeth Keckley, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps) show both how the prevalent ideal of "True Womanhood" actually failed many women of the era and how the rise of the twentieth century's "New Woman" can be contextualized within a coherent narrative of women's striving for inclusion within the compass of American national identity. I argue that we can see this striving for inclusion in the authors' adaptations of the (masculine) discourse of self-making. These authors wrote into being a new ideal type, the "self-made woman," who fostered the rise of the New Woman largely by disrupting the dominance of the True Woman ideal.

The True Woman was defined by her adherence to four pillars of identity: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The New Woman—an independent, college-educated girl devoted to sexual freedom, suffrage, and progressive reform—is her predecessor's polar opposite. How did the latter come to supersede the former as a cultural ideal? To answer this, I locate the self-made women of this era's literature and show how, informed by the self-made man's qualities of industry, learnedness, moral sense, and social responsibility, they retain many of the True Woman's positive traits and virtues while rejecting the premise that the "best" way to be a woman in America was to be submissive to, dependent upon, and constantly in service of, patriarchal family structures and values. The self-made woman, I argue, enabled the ungendering of the traits of the self-made man in order to demonstrate the possibility that women, too, could experience the promises of America.