

Introduction

Women's Serial Writing

Repetitious: an adjective that derogates serial fiction so categorically that it is hard to imagine repetition as an aesthetic value. Yet valuing repetition, especially in characters and plots, means recognizing the reliability and durability of repeated issues and ideas that return so often that they become cumulative and illuminating. Nineteenth-century serial writing is about transforming a few plots into a series of other possibilities, particularly for women. Repetition, I contend, enables serial novelists to recur to the ongoing vulnerabilities of women in their expansive narratives. These new lives generate different possibilities for women, especially those who have come to either a personal or social impasse. Repeated through these serials are such psychological and material opportunities – whether they emerge from suffering, imprisonment, brain fever or moral insanity, or hapless and ungovernable personalities, what was understood as “madcap” or “saucy.” My book examines, and recuperates, a number of authors – E.D.E.N. Southworth, Ann Stephens, Mary Jane Holmes, and Laura Jean Libbey (and briefly Mrs. Alex McVeigh Miller and Pauline Hopkins in the conclusion) – in order to deliver and explore how their major repetitions engaged them throughout their careers. Some of these concerns were complex beyond belief, and the novels that address them contain multiple, entangled plot lines, various character types, and conflicting closures. As this study demonstrates, women's serial novels temporarily resolve these complex repetitions of torturous plots and vexed personal lives. Thus, I study writers' entire corpus over a career while showing how repetitions are not so much about plots and characters as they are about the interaction and conglomeration of serial plots, especially about the plot of “secret marriage” or bad family relations and the dangers they produce for women.

Repetition paid.¹ Serial novelists earned a great deal of money by writing about the pains of domestic life and its immediate challenges. To

grasp these writers' desire to speak to a large audience about such matters – to earn more and to persuade many – one need look only to Southworth's years of writing for the *National Era* and then the *New York Ledger* (after 1855); or to Stephens's editing of a number of magazines – from *Portland Magazine* (1837) to *Mrs. Stephens's Illustrated New Monthly* (1856) to the *Ladies Companion* (1839) – and then her Beadle novels (her first in 1860); or to Holmes's serials in the story newspaper *New York Weekly* that were precursors of her popular fiction; or to the proliferation of Libbey's fast-paced narratives that also repeat themselves about the transition from character to modern personality. Here you might say popularity meant remuneration. At one time or another in their careers, all of the writers were considered by critics and the populace alike to be *the* most popular or *the* most prolific or *the* wealthiest of her time (and many were compared with Stowe's popularity and prestige).

In the following chapters I analyze the cultural logic of these four careers, especially attending to individual plots that are often so convoluted that their meanings can be missed unless they are read within the grain of the entirety of an author's production. In reading all of an author's serials together, I explain how a more ambitious sense of narrative emerges beyond what an individual novel or a few serials reveal. To see how and why seriality works, readers need to grasp how serial novelists reveal their indebtedness to the serial formula itself. For Southworth (roughly fifty-two novels), Stephens (twenty-six novels), Libbey (some seventy novels), and Holmes (thirty-nine novels), the accumulation of novels – including the constant iteration of character types and the plot structures – allows us to see the systematic nature of these repeated elements of US culture. These plots and characters may be combined in different ways, but their accretion yields a surpassing vision: the need to establish a code of conduct that will help to reorder personal and family relations in a new vision of Americanized pain and recovery – what ails American women and how they might recover. And beyond the complex, even messy dimensions of their writings, some of the issues were controversial – like the implications of immediate brain surgery that Libbey debated – just as some were more mediated, like Holmes's advocacy for female work.

I begin by invoking Shelley Streeby's excellent work on Stephens's Native American fiction – *Malaeska* (1860), *Ahmo's Plot* (1863), *Mahaska* (1863) – as a very effective example of reading serial novels with each other across the author's career: Streeby concentrates on one comprehensive frame within Stephens's work, "Indian/white miscegenation" (2002, 228). Yet that frame could be even larger and, I think, truer to Stephens's

Introduction: Women's Serial Writing

3

characteristic interests, since she, like these other writers, transformed and subsumed race issues – especially in slavery – under a larger plot about family violence. In reading these novelists' fictions as career-long efforts rather than analyzing, however adeptly, one or two paradigmatic examples, I show how successive installments (interruptions of the plot) have to be read in tandem with the author's successive novels, which in turns reveals the interrelations among the novels in a writer's oeuvre. Thus, two forms of seriality emerge: the serial composition of a novel *and* the serial construction of a career. One key reason for reading serials collectively is that serial writers were indebted to the relation of one serial novel to the next to sustain their celebrity and to increase audience. These individual installments allow readers to attend to slow accumulation of pain and suffering, an accretion finally blocked by quick, striking, and intense moments of resolution – a child found, a new adoption, a religious commitment, unhappy and rightful deaths, or new marriages, for rarely is one marriage enough at the end of a serial novel. No single lens – not money or geography, not literary cohort or publishing rituals, nor publisher – means as much as coming to terms with the output of a whole career because of the desire to repeat, and therefore to acknowledge, major crises of an author's time, a set of urgencies to which she is keyed. In this regard, Streeby is right to assemble these novels together in terms of Native American life, but the next stage is to combine this subset of Stephens's writing with her larger vision of an intense US psychological pain. She offers this sense of suffering in multiple forms, more so than one fiction or a small cluster reveals. The following chapters show the results when one serial is read against the other books in that author's oeuvre. In doing so, I argue what it means for any one author to create a series of dozens of novels that speak to each other and have major social change at their heart.

Deciphering the collective plots of these novels means seeing how repeated scenes of, say, moral insanity (a single moral failing) in Southworth or maternal violence and male hostility in Stephens lead to the unfolding of a more complicated trauma about US culture – not in one novel but in two dozen or even more variations. The myriad extensions of these plots create a world of possible serial family connections – of adults adopting other adults as their “children” (in Stephens's *Curse of Gold*, *The Reigning Belle* (1872), *The Old Homestead*) or unrelated people merging together as a new “family” (*Mary Derwent*, *Doubly False*, among many others). And these changes in plot and characters spell out key moments of repeated anxieties. From Southworth to Stephens, from Holmes to Libbey, these resolutions may occur after amnesia (Southworth), or after a

long and often elaborate escape from painful marriage (Holmes) or even after a quick brain surgery (Libbey), and underscore the tumultuous and fractured relations of families, which often stand for society itself, and eventually of characters alien to themselves (as they are often in Stephens and Libbey).

Catastrophes and calamities of all sorts occur – insanity, fever, amnesia, anxieties over having one's heritage as “white trash” or a “white nigger” unveiled (as I discuss in the Holmes chapter) lead to new closures to these challenges. Serials introduce potential and actual disasters of all kinds, including the premeditation of infanticide (Southworth's *Em* or Stephens's *The Gold Brick*) or uxoricide (the killing of a wife, in Stephens's *Bellehood and Bondage*), while various characters live through them and create new selves (in Libbey's *Pretty Madcap Dorothy* or Holmes's *Ethelyn's Mistake*). Often, these characters acknowledge their own desires for intimacy even in the face of eventual potential psychic wounds in what Nancy Bentley calls the “invisible injury” (2009, 232). In this way, brain fever or moral insanity or “white trash” heredity – all as versions of this anxious culture – appeared everywhere. The fears of suffering increased during the Civil War, but disavowing such fears was also rampant. The complexities of drama and trauma fueled US culture with a greater range of feelings (243).

In this new value for repetition lies one of the chief rewards of reading such serial novels collectively. Serial writers, as Nan Enstad observes, began to “standardize their own output” (36) by relying on the desire for repetition (there are, after all, only so many possible catastrophes in serials), with formulas that worked and plots that diversified the idea of American culture. They tried to make this standardization intriguing in engaging sensationalism as a means of highlighting the serial's currency and usefulness (such as in Holmes's famous *Lena Rivers*, where the new republican political values are brought to the fore). There were no permanent closures to these confrontations or challenges, but rather open and temporary moments of relief or escape from domesticity altogether.

Hence, rather than see repetitiousness as a flaw, I have focused particularly on the powerful functions of repetitions: what they mean in their aggregate, how they determine a serial author's career, and how these repetitions resolve in order to assure women's renewed places in US culture. The precariousness that these repetitions insist on also intensifies the heroine's response: in Stephens, a mother leaves her baby on a riverbed (*The Reigning Belle*) or, in another extreme act, a mother throws her baby out of the window (*Mary Derwent*). Such violence yields a crucial, searing narrative paradigm, but it

Introduction: Women's Serial Writing

5

also suggests often larger, more imminent anxieties and threats to the culture. What these repetitions make plain is that violence is always coming closer and closer into the home.

Some of this plot maneuvering is American Gothic, serial style, in which episodes of female pain are repeated over and over again with only modest variation. One of Stephens's better-known novels, *Fashion and Famine* (1854), includes perhaps the most gothic resolution of all: the death of innocent grandfather Old Mr. Warren, accused of killing the heinous William Leicester, "a hideous, vile monster, who crawled over everything good in his way, crushing it as he went" (360), husband of Ada Leicester and tormenter of a granddaughter Julia Warren. Julia is imprisoned with her grandfather – who dies before his execution – because she is being forced to testify about his putative murder of Leicester. Even earlier, her mother, Ada, had "abandoned and impoverished" Julia, but the mother eventually finds a sad but honorable reconciliation with her daughter and her dying father. That is, Ada overcomes her own misery but through dangerous (modern) means: "Pain!" "No one need know pain while the drug stores are open!" Eventually, she is welcomed back into Julia's company, and she earns the sympathy of an ex-prisoner, a woman, who "had suffered and could still feel for the sufferings of others" (361). This ex-prisoner, an addict of opium and morphine, laudanum, and brandy, overcomes her condition by virtue of "care and home" and even appears at Julia's wedding in the last chapter. Such a relatively quick resolution to an ex-prisoner's pain underscores how serials create solutions that rarely have such fast relief in real life.

At every opportunity, my study focuses on how serial novels are transformative fictions – transforming women characters' lives beyond social norms and suffering under these occasions. These plots and character types intertwine in many different ways over the course of these novelists' individual careers, but they particularly reveal these writers' rage over disordered lives and the social circumstances that create them. Their characters experience dislocation in the face of a multitude of disasters, and they suffer anything from moral insanity to brain fever, from family shock to women's escape and flight, especially from their family relations and, particularly for Holmes, from marriage. The serial novels are typically dedicated to reconstituting families and new generations. Only then can these fractured, even chaotic lives be fixed.

Yet there are also significant limits to these transformations: there are plenty of women who cannot survive and flourish in the culture because of their inability to be transformed. Libbey links the pain of these excluded

women to that of the brain trauma itself, like Nadine in *Pretty Madcap Dorothy*, who has no ability or disposition to acclimatize to the new modern culture. In Holmes's *Edith Lyle's Secret* (1876), one sister of a dead first wife consumes a mix of brandy and morphine – called the “Imperial remedy” – to deaden her grief. In the same novel, another character drinks himself into stupors, and in a third instance, to counteract a serious danger, another heroine uses face powder (perhaps laced with arsenic) to cover her facial deteriorations; the powder is supposed to be taken to relieve seclusion and grief but then becomes a soul-destroying habit (Chapter 21). In these, as in so many other serials, the inability to transform reinforces the status quo.

Repetition and Resolution

I am arguing that reading serials collectively gives us a vision of what there was beyond this pain and trouble. Beyond these challenges, as serial writers suggested, was a collective promise of consolation. That relief from the social sources of pain came to readers from the function of romance reading that Janice Radway identifies as the “fantasy resolution” (14). It is the yearning for that resolution that compels readers to consume serials through “repetitive consumption” (23). These repetitions included the commodity of the serial itself and the serials' content. Radway questions whether readers returned to romances in “a perpetual desire to repeat the experience” (118). Does returning to these serials mean experiencing their repetition as a pleasurable recognition? These romance writers were eager to maintain audiences who shared reading experiences from novel to novel and returned for repeated experiences. Like romances, as Radway argues, nineteenth-century serials succeeded in what she calls the “endless imitations of the first success” (23) – as in *Malaeska*, Radway's example.

The rhetorical strategies of repetition that Radway highlights might be extended back to serials, in which particular desires arise to centralize readers' anxieties and pleasures. Following Radway, I will show how serial fiction draws on and delivers the need for continuing reassurance about Americanization and the general standardization of US culture. And the novels unfold when the conventional social rules are overturned, with pain transformed into promise. These desires were for certainty and security. In *The Reigning Belle*, for example, one secret wife abandons her baby, while the baby herself grows up to become a beautiful woman who replaces her mother as the city's belle and is serially adopted and marries well. The mother eventually reconciles with her secret husband and her lost

Repetition and Resolution

7

daughter, but the daughter has already moved beyond her biological family with two adoptions and a brilliant marriage. Abandoning a baby is one sort of pain, yet this kind of suffering is not the only lesson of serials. Consolation, solace, comfort: serial novelists invested meaning in these gestures of sympathy so that they could illustrate the power of emotions to overcome the challenges at prey upon the characters (see Bentley 2009, 113).

For all the consolation closures promise, a promise to which their readers are utterly devoted, there is something tenuous – however repetitively offered – in these closures. The temporary nature of resolutions is underscored by the way the same scenarios of suffering and pain recur in novel after novel. Characters model how to accept these indefinite resolutions as temporary relief. Indeed, many of these narrative closures were constructed to end a novel but not to solve a social problem. Thus, they elicit and enshrine a value for the merely temporary, a passing satisfaction that quiets the need for consolation, but never heals the chronic wound or repairs the social ill that caused it. And that temporary fix ensures the need to read another novel. The value of the temporary can also be seen in the ways that serial novels work by call-and-response to readers, in the search for even a momentary recovery and moral succor and vibrancy.

My argument emerges in three stages over the next six chapters: First, I read these serial novelists' writing collectively in chapters devoted to their serial works over their careers. In the first and second chapters I turn to how Southworth and Stephens respectively deal with plot repetition and then, in the third chapter, how women's imprisonment is a particular mode of suffering. In Chapters 4 and 5, for Libbey and Holmes, new kinds of intimacies are at play, even as racial intimacy plots reveal new serial catastrophes. In the conclusion I show how the value of repetition works in the careers of Alex McVeigh Miller, who adopts serial formulas to prove a point about catalepsy, and Pauline Hopkins, whose serial fiction from *Colored American Magazine* is continued in her attack on racial violence in "Topsy Templeton" in the *New Era Magazine* (1916).

In the first chapter I turn to E.D.E.N. Southworth and her interest in the state of women's emotional lives played out in the impossibly tangled plots that serial writers devise for a culture that lacks a systematic or even popular way of codifying psychology. Southworth's career, perhaps above all, is the one that suggests how much inner lives lead to misery and how dedicated she was to opening up this subject. One salient feature of her novels is how she focused on revealing – over and over – how many times women's miseries were fostering some sort of psychological malady. For

Southworth, moral insanity was the mental incapacity on one particular issue, while the rest of the brain worked perfectly. She readily devised ways to relieve her characters of these moral burdens. I end the chapter by considering *Fair Play* (1868), a fiction as serious about women's possible gender equality as any other Southworth novel.

I turn next to Ann Stephens, who treats the mysteries behind women's capacity for violence – often against despicable men – and whose novels feature women who end up hospitalized, imprisoned, in flight, or dead. As frighteningly as Stephens portrays life for women in prison, it is less terrifying than life outside. I analyze her fiction in two ways: in one chapter, an overview of what her novels accomplished (Chapter 2), and then a separate chapter (Chapter 3) on how Southworth's and Stephens's imprisoned women gave the authors a chance to consider what women wanted in their calls for cultural redress, what Stephens would consider fair play. So in two separate chapters I focus primarily on Stephens's opposition of the noble heroine versus evil men and violent mothers (especially when mothers use their daughters for revenge, such as in *Mary Derwent*, a novel that is as crucial to grasping Stephens's own sense of fairness as *Fair Play* is for Southworth). Inevitably, the heroine becomes a noble woman – as do many of Stephens's heroines who transcend their domestic status and who, through their sacrifices, become finer moral beings.

In Chapter 4, Mary Jane Holmes's efforts to persuade readers that their pain emerges from “family pride” illustrate her major conviction that white citizens had about their heredity. Rather than hold to this constraint, she posits “work” as the solution to the ills wrought by the prejudice of class and family pride, and especially the marriages built on that prejudice (but that nevertheless provide enduring value for women's lives). Consider the rousing image from “Alice and Adelaide” of male empathy for the poor young heroine Alice Warren who is leaving the rich hero's home, incredibly sad because she must avoid “dependence” on the hero and his sister. The hero offers her marriage, and they all remain happily in his mansion, despite the vexed frustrations of the previous woman he had courted. Manipulatively, that rival had been silent about how her deceitful father had gambled away the fortune of Alice's father. Alice's rival Adelaide loses the suitor because of her deception.

The force of Holmes's narrative of female loyalty like Alice's cannot be overestimated, but perhaps just as forceful is Holmes's view of the distorting relations created by fathers. That is, in many of her thirty-nine novels,

Repetition and Resolution

9



Figure I.1 From Mary Jane Holmes's 1885 *Christmas Stories*

women's loyalty and fathers' power are antagonistic: for example, Holmes's most influential novel, *Lena Rivers*, details the failure of a father's power, and the disorder that ensues from his misuse of it, when he refuses to acknowledge his first secret marriage to 'Lena's mother and then to his fatherhood of 'Lena herself. Holmes's fiction so often seems to set as its fundamental motive the correcting of the moral chaos that results from such scheming about family pride itself. The temporary escape is from marriage and to an embrace of work.

In Chapter 5, I detail how Laura Jean Libbey offers a new imagining of women moving from specific Victorian characters to modern, though not exactly New Women. In two distinct chapters, I address this transitional modernism in Libbey's work, through her depictions of "brain surgery" and her resolve to efface women's pain by easing traumas through the curative effects of these operations and instantaneous recoveries. By having recourse to such operations that could right the wrong her women characters suffered, Libbey suggests that women's pain was excisable, in that their organs of thinking could be repaired, their injuries safeguarded in the nature of things. And that vision perhaps helps to account for her success

and her work as a precursor to protomodern novelists like Gertrude Atherton and Fannie Hurst in the twentieth century.

Then, in Chapter 6, I analyze Southworth's, Stephens's, and Libbey's ambiguity about racial intimacy. Characters struggle with the new realities of interracial US culture, what Libbey designates as the result of so much "gypsy" blood. Libbey was especially prolific in her striving to be cosmopolitan and especially exciting in exploring how women can dodge their traditional fates, particularly in *Parted by Fate* (ca. 1890 [1893]). Her popularity emerged from what may be seen as her transitional style: mixing popular genres representing women's trauma – her racial heredity – with newer modes of effacing that pain, like her celebration of brain surgery. This effort to suggest that there were guaranteed ways to change a brain and thus change a woman's condition, present and future, may help to account for her vast popularity.

These serial writers use repetitions, repeated plots, and extended narratives, along with a variety of moral traumas, in order to crystallize the problems of American women's lives. In its recourse to serial adoptions – where women may live under the legal protection/adoption in serial families – or having new identities exchanged in place of older ones, the serial novel became a much more culturally and socially inflected form. The appeal of such reading, then, was not just the answer to women's desire for pleasure in seeing traumas and pain overcome, but the resolution of so many traumas for women through newly reinvented identities. I conclude by suggesting how the next stage of serial studies might look.

Reading serial fiction collectively – over the course of a single novelist's career and across multiple novelists' oeuvres – makes the cultural significance of serial novels intelligible. Repetitions with and among novels verified the relevance of key topics like women's status and offered readers some version of empathy and temporary resolution – before they turned to the next serial. The growing sense of "Americanization" and the move to standardize culture are linked with the popularity of seriality: serial repetition could ensure the morals of American citizenship, while reading could standardize (and validate) women's emotions – for good and for ill. How these emotions are justified in terms of American pain is the major story of this book.

Serial novels thus serve as models of representing women's lives in transition from their traumas to their transformations. Their formula of installments crystallized how these transformations could happen, with a fantasy of sorts about how change could occur. The serial closures – as