

ONE

THE PERSISTENT SPINSTER

THIS BOOK DESCRIBES the circumstances that surrounded the puzzling life and death of an American icon. Who was she? Variouslly called “spinster,” “old maid,” or “bachelorette,” and once, in the 1950s, named “reluctant virgin” by a counseling priest,¹ she was a woman who had become culturally important as a direct result of her marital status, or, more precisely, its lack.

That once-ubiquitous figure has all but vanished from our collective imagination. But like the dog whose failure to bark in the night proved so critical to Sherlock Holmes in the case of the *Silver Blaze*,² the fact that her disappearance has been both unnoticed and unaccounted for is, in itself, revealing. It represents an instance of what might be called a significant absence. Just as explaining the dog’s unusual quiescence pointed to one perpetrator and away from other possibilities in Holmes’ case, the investigation of what might, in another genre, be titled “the case of the persistent spinster” provides a key to a broader historical enigma, calling attention to a series of rapid transformations in attitudes toward women and the meaning of womanhood during the course of this century that culminated in an explosion of feminist insurgency during the late 1960s.

As is generally the case in the classic detective story, explaining how the spinster met her end involves recounting her history as well as the events

leading up to her disappearance. Therefore, in the following pages I reveal the fruits of my investigation into the life and times of this interesting character. That story, like other fictional tales, details the elements of the protagonist's character and the circumstances involved in her demise, accounting for the details of both her victories and her defeats over the course of the last hundred years or so.

But there is more. The spinster is akin to the protagonists dreamed up by mystery writers in another way as well. She never actually walked the earth. Despite that circumstance, however, she wielded considerable influence over the lives of very real people. For that very reason, the reconstruction of the spinster's story—the consistencies and alterations in her appearance, the utterances of her friends and enemies, the threats she was reputed to present to established interests, and the forces that occasioned her unremarked, if somewhat belated, exit from the scene—is valuable as much for the insights it offers into twentieth-century debates about women in general as for its revelations about women who remained unmarried.

Spinster portraiture was accomplished by the efforts of several generations of rebels as well as traditionalists; inscribed and tested through the agency of the mass media; and codified and revised according to audience reactions. In consequence, the subject's lineaments were always in flux, altering alongside transformations in the surrounding cultural landscape. Despite the changes in iconography, however, the never-marrying woman occupied a prominent cultural niche, and her longevity as a subject of popular attention reflects a continuing preoccupation with the model. In the chapters that follow, I look at the reasons for the continuing appeal of spinster imagery and argue that the revision and eventual disappearance of this iconographic figure was connected to a larger set of transformations in twentieth-century myths and concerns.

My interest in the cultural history of women who remained single had its genesis in an earlier project—an analysis of the organizational connections of several groups of nineteenth-century women reformers. As I looked at the career patterns of a group of notable New York women activists of the period, I found that fewer than three-quarters of their number had ever married.³ I also discovered, in looking at both comments of the time and histories of the period, that the accomplishments of the spinsters among that group had been at least partially contingent on freedom from marital entanglement. Yet, thinking about these celebrities of the early part of the

century, I realized that, at least in childhood, my own attitude toward unmarried professional women had been far less than admiring. Born in 1940, just before the United States entered the war against the Axis powers, I came of age in a period noted for its celebration of domestic life. Perhaps in consequence, I remember pitying unmarried women for what I believed they lacked, rather than admiring them for what they might have achieved. I not only looked askance at women who stayed single; I feared the prospect of becoming one of their number. My apprehensions, as I remember them now, centered on what I was told and came to imagine as the deficiencies of that state and what I read into their lives and personalities. Some of the teachers in my elementary school and one of my aunts were spinsters. My schoolmates and I thought of those women in terms of their inadequacies, abnormalities, and peculiarities; we never even contemplated the possibility that they might be regarded as successful. Their accomplishments were invisible; their limitations obvious, at least to us. As to my aunt, her story, framed by her as a kind of Victorian tragedy and by my mother (in Freudian terms) as a neurotic flight from femininity, emphasized personal abnormality. Although she had attracted several suitors and even a proposal or two, she was described as either too sensitive to marry (her account) or unable to contemplate a “normal” relationship with a man (my mother’s version). She had become a librarian, which all parties agreed was undoubtedly a consequence, rather than a cause, of these propensities.

I was hardly alone in holding these attitudes. Historian Linda Gordon, for example, has said that “nearly every woman” of the postwar generation felt the “terror of being a spinster.”⁴ Nancy Peterson, author of a book on single women, describes similarly negative attitudes among her circle of college friends in the early 1960s:

We thought we knew what the alternative to marriage was. We thought we saw it in the familiar yet threatening facade of spinsterhood, exemplified in the glimpses we had of the lives of our unmarried college instructors, whom we often admired personally and certainly respected professionally, but whose dinner invitations to gracious but modest apartments, whose trips to professional conferences here and there, whose summer vacations spent in the Rockies with each other or with aged relatives only projected an image which chilled us.

Peterson's memory of her single women teachers in grade school was far less affectionate. After detailing some of their notable eccentricities, she concluded, "No, we knew what staying single meant, and we didn't want any part of it."⁵

I certainly viewed that estate as a consequence of and precursor to personal and psychological disaster. I thus avoided all choices that might lead to such a fate. In my mind that included: attending a woman's college, giving up opportunities to meet men by studying too assiduously, pursuing a demanding career such as medicine, or entering a profession with a reputation for giving shelter to large numbers of unmarried women, such as librarianship. Keeping one's intellectual and professional reach from imperiling one's marital prospects was not, however, enough. Until I learned differently, I felt impelled to emulate, however amateurishly, the kind of femininity that I believed made marriage possible.

Those constructions from my childhood resonated very poorly with what I learned in the course of my research. Contemporaries certainly did not regard the women I had been studying as failures. Far from it, women such as organizer Susan B. Anthony, settlement house founder Lillian Wald, and poet Alice Cary had been celebrities in their own time. That led me to wonder about the causes and consequences of the changing imagery of spinsterhood. At the same time I also realized, with some surprise, just how rare present-day invocations of spinsterhood had become. While some actual spinsters may still exist, they no longer occupy significant cultural space in the United States. So, even though an occasional old maid turns up in those somewhat mannered, and one suspects self-consciously anachronistic, fictions, such as the repressed and timid secretary who figures tangentially in the plot of P. D. James's *Innocence House*, they are not consequential. And although there has been an attempt in the radical lesbian community to reclaim the spinster as a heroic figure, that can be accomplished only by ignoring one of the features that once defined her—her habitual sexual abstinence.⁶

Yet the spinster has little relevance or significance for young people nowadays. The figure that variously inspired, amused, and haunted audiences in the past has become both improbable and unbelievable in the eyes of the current generation. I came to appreciate this fact shortly after I began work on this book when I asked some of my students in an American Studies class to try to decode the rhetorical aims of a group of turn-of-the-century autobiographical statements. The group reporting on Anna Howard Shaw

(the first woman minister ordained by the Methodist Protestant Church, a noted lecturer, and a prime mover in the struggle for women's suffrage)⁷ said, without any hesitancy, that Shaw wanted to make clear she was a lesbian. When I asked them how they arrived at that conclusion, they said it was obvious because she never mentioned any heterosexual relationships and never married. I pointed out that that the reading included no material that even hinted at a homosexual orientation; Shaw made no mention of any romantic friendships with other women in the portion of the autobiography they were discussing. Instead, in these chapters, Shaw stressed her strong will, desire for independence, and early assumption of responsibility. Therefore, I suggested, rather than signaling an erotic preference for women, she might have wanted to explain why she never married and, I added, she might have been celibate. The students reacted dubiously to such a possibility even when I reminded them of the still-current requirement of Catholic nuns. They agreed it was possible that someone might *try* to abstain from erotic activity, but they had questions about the capacity of "normal" women to endure continuing sexual abstinence.

My sense that there has been a dramatic change in sexual sensibilities was reinforced by a discussion that I had with one of my cousins about my own ninety-year-old maiden aunt. In the course of that conversation, I said that, given my present interests, I would dearly love to ask my aunt about her sex life. But, I added, I could not bring myself to do so because the assumption that she had none was so much a part of our relationship that I could not even begin to interrogate her about erotic inclinations. Overhearing this conversation, my cousin's sixteen-year-old daughter reacted with vociferous disbelief to the very possibility that any woman might live a whole lifetime and yet be sexually inexperienced.

I recounted my young cousin's comments shortly afterward to a slightly younger colleague (for some reason now lost to me) and he, in turn, told me of his own shocked reaction to the discovery that an unmarried aunt—who, he said, "I just assumed was sexually inactive"—had actually had a long-term affair with a married man. This countertale suggested that while both of us had accepted a link between remaining single and sexual inactivity, members of a younger generation see no such likelihood. Young women of my past may have recoiled from what was assumed to be a specter of lifelong sexual abstinence; today they reject the very possibility of its existence.

After these encounters, I came to appreciate how culturally irrelevant the idea of spinsterhood has become. At the same time, I began to suspect that—given the dramatic changes women have effected in recent years—this instance of cultural amnesia, losing the memory of a formerly significant feature of social life, must reflect a deep shift in meaning.⁸ And, as I pursued the question, I concluded that most traces of the once-powerful representations of single women have been so thoroughly effaced that no one seems to have even noted when or why they vanished. The never-marrying celibate has been so completely erased from popular representation that even the terminology that once identified her has either disappeared or lost its symbolic impact.

If her former importance, as I contend in this book, is to be viewed as one element in a triangulated set of feminine archetypes (mother, whore, and asexual celibate), the spinster's disappearance signals underlying shifts in the meaning assigned the icon. The emergence of new ideas about women in relation to family, sexuality, and work have produced new mythologies and stereotypes to support those views. Therefore, while real women sometimes appear in this narrative, it is their fictionalized rather than their actual selves that are germane to the story I have to tell.

The spinster is hardly unique in the annals of our cultural history. Other women (and men, as well) have occupied similarly significant positions. Pocahontas and Cinderella, for example, are perennial favorites among purveyors of popular culture and one could easily compile a whole catalogue of cultural types, including the “mammy” and the “stepmother,” that have been used as stock characters to round out the plots and fill the gaps in cultural productions. Neither, as Robert Tilton persuasively argued in his book about the changing portrayal of Pocahontas over the past three centuries, are the representations of such figures constant. The almost mythic individuals that come to inhabit a culture's imagination across successive generations, or what has been called the “longue duree,” are recurrent precisely because they “express multiple and at times contradictory agendas.”⁹

Cultural icons are like the standardized representations of religious figures that were prominent in medieval times, conventionally rendered representations of stock images. They are not just cultural incidentals; rather, they provide what social theoretician Erving Goffman called “frames,” those “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals to define, categorize, and explain experience. By “rendering what would otherwise be a mean-

ingless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful,” they function as templates for determining “what is going on here,” for “making sense,” and for “organizing experience.”¹⁰ Like other cultural reference points such as standard metaphors and stereotypes, they are frequently employed because their lineaments are understood to be well defined. They are, as historian Alan Trachtenberg cogently observed, “of prime historical interest” because, as “vehicles of self-knowledge” and “concepts upon which people act,” they are “forces in their own right.” Along with material and political factors, they affect both perceptions and behavior.¹¹

However, as with the ever-popular but dramatically changing vampire chronicled by Nina Auerbach in *Our Vampires Ourselves*, both fictional and fictionalized icons also mirror changes in the society that produces them and, consequently, their representational elements are likely to change dramatically over time. Conversely, when the larger-than-life personages, such as the raccoon-skin-hatted Davy Crockett, can no longer be reshaped in accordance with the ideological requirements of the time, they become expendable. Cultural icons are jettisoned only when they can no longer be redesigned and reclothed in conformity with contemporary needs, preoccupations, and tastes.

Of course, there were flesh and blood women who were called spinsters and who thought of themselves in those terms, but I think that embodiment was not, perhaps, of as much historical moment as the existence of the idea. It was the cultural inscriptions that defined the female bachelor; the fantasized nature of such a person, more than the actual behavior of any real persons had direct consequences for women’s life chances. In the discussion that follows, I will concentrate on the changing perceptions of spinsterhood—the factors that facilitated the transformation of spinsters into exemplars of female accomplishment, the circumstances in which they came to lose that role, and the consequences of that transition.

For these reasons, the best place to search for the causes of the initial rise, the complex evolution, and the eventual banishment of positive images of spinsters from popular imagination is in the realms they inhabited—the magazines, books, and movies that propagated those images.

In the United States, definitions and disputes about what it means to be a woman and how to be a woman have been inscribed in, conveyed through, and countered in the mass media for at least a century. Therefore, in my search for clues as to the reasons for the spinster’s prominence and

the occasion of her demise, I looked for the old maid's most public face in media that had achieved widespread distribution. In particular, I looked at three kinds of material: the *Ladies' Home Journal*, a magazine that began publication in December 1883 and was the most widely read of the women's magazines for some decades;¹² mass-market books that aimed at explicating the psychology of women; and high-grossing movies made in the United States after 1930.

These sources, all of which successfully targeted mass audiences, constituted central forums for the popular representation of and discussion of gender issues. The *Ladies' Home Journal*, one of the earliest, most successful, and longest-lived of the women's magazines, provides an abundance of images of spinsterhood through the 1930s. In the 1920s and 1930s, the doctrines of the emerging psychological establishment facilitated the development of a new set of understandings of spinsterhood, promulgating a sexual understanding of that condition. In the following decade, Hollywood films, the preeminent media from the Depression onward, presented increasingly negative depictions of spinsters even though higher and higher proportions of women were marrying and doing so at a younger age. Taken together, these sources document an intriguing trajectory of concerns about women.

The *Ladies' Home Journal* is a rich vein of information about mainstream views on women for the years between 1884 (when its second issue appeared) and the beginning of World War I. Both its content and its pronouncements were of some consequence to the public; by century's end it had become one of the most influential of the publications designed to reach women. Describing the early trajectory of the magazine in her book, *Magazines for the Millions*, Helen Damon-Moore notes that even though an audience for women's magazines was already well established, the *Journal's* publisher broke new ground in the mass-circulation market. He used paid advertisements to subsidize the price of the magazine, offering premiums for new subscriptions and included an attractive compilation of short stories, features, and domestic departments. In consequence, its circulation reached 25,000 at the end of one year, doubled during the next six months, and reached 400,000 in 1886.¹³

The materials produced by "experts" in the fields of sexology and psychoanalysis and disseminated in the popular press also proved of some value in this inquiry. After World War I, popularized versions of psychoanalytic theory reached a wide public not only through best-selling books such

as Farnham and Lundberg's *Modern Woman*¹⁴ or Van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage*,¹⁵ but also through school texts and countless numbers of magazine and newspaper articles.

Finally, to complete the trajectory of images, I consider the presentations of spinsterhood in movies, especially in those films made after the rise of the studio system and the development of a national distribution system in the 1930s. A number of spinsters appeared in Hollywood films in this period and, almost inevitably, the movie plot explored both the causes and the consequences of their single status. Those tales, which integrated and reflected on the pronouncements of psychologists and psychoanalysts, are significant for their discussions about gender and the cultural construction of "normal femininity."

The clues both to the spinster's persistence and eventual disappearance linger in popular culture, which is both vehicle and medium of standardized imagery. In the twentieth century the apparatus of mass culture has become a center for popular representations. As such it contains what one sociologist described as the "texts that mediate [people's] . . . sense of themselves and their social world[.]" and therefore investigation of such texts allows for "analysis of the arrangements through which a social order is reconstituted."¹⁶

I am not suggesting that consumers of mass culture such as magazine readers or moviegoers were or are cultural dopes, nor do I think that the mere presentation of gender prescriptions in magazines and movies is sufficient to produce emulative behavior. Rather, I would argue, the standardized representations of women in popular culture, whether authoritative or mundane, both affected and reflected views on the character and nature of womanhood. As literary critic Jen Ang said, the pleasure taken in the fictions produced in mass media does not necessarily "imply that we are also bound to take up their positions and solutions in our relations to our loved ones and friends, our work, our political ideals, and so on."¹⁷ "Texts," as opposed to "scripts"—cultural products that succeed in the mass market—"mediate" practice.¹⁸ In this way popular culture both accepts dominant assumptions and struggles over their meaning. It is possible then to locate not only dominant ideas (as opposed to practices) but also areas of general cultural uneasiness in widely disseminated and consumed cultural products. This is certainly the case for the spinster.

Although the term "spinster" has a long pedigree, spinsters did not come to play an important role in the public imagination until the eighteenth

century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), it literally means a person who spins, probably reflecting a task that once belonged to unmarried women.¹⁹ By the seventeenth century, however, the term had become “the proper legal designation” for women “still unmarried,” no matter what their age or eventual marital intentions. Thus, one commonly finds the formula, “a spinster of this parish,” in funeral as well as wedding announcements of old.

It was not until the eighteenth century that the term “spinster” became synonymous with the equally ancient, but considerably less-neutral appellation, “old maid.” The “old maid” was not only an “unmarried” woman, but also one “beyond the usual age for marriage,” and the term, the authoritative *OED* makes clear, was used in such a way as to connote the sometimes foolish “habits characteristic of such a condition.”²⁰ Such aged maidens were, in fact, common figures in fiction produced for the American literary market, and they came in for a fair amount of derision. It is not my purpose to speculate on the reasons for such ridicule, but it might have stemmed from the conjunction of the two words “old” and “maid,” calling up simultaneous images of the “trappings and infirmities” of advanced age and the presumably innocent status of maidenhood and its employments.

In any case, thereafter spinsters seem to have acted as defining images for gender construction for a substantial period of time. Most notably, for a century after the Civil War, the “old maid” figured for each generation as the embodiment of the woman who was “not” married but still respectable and, in that context, as an alternative form of womanhood. This positioning was not, of course, limited to the United States. In her history of single women in Victorian Britain, Martha Vicinus argues that a triangle of mythic possibilities existed for women. In this period, she says, “a woman . . . was either the ideal mother/wife or a celibate spinster or a promiscuous prostitute.” Such was also the case on this side of the Atlantic.²¹

In the United States, as in Britain, proscriptive and prescriptive constructions in the popular media identified the never-marrying woman as the modal category of “un”married propriety. Even though she had never entered the expected estate for adult women—that of marriage. In the logic of the time, she was, by definition, a “maiden”; that is, she was presumed to have remained sexually inactive and, accordingly, in possession of her maidenhead. In an age when premarital sexual activity was the *sine qua non* of female delinquency, celibacy was both a marker and a (presumed) conse-

quence of decency. And, if single women who were celibate were respectable, *mutatus mutandi*, single women who were respectable were assumed to be sexually inactive (needless to say, so long as disconfirming evidence didn't turn up).

Conversely, this understanding fed an assumption that underlay commentary from the twentieth as well as the nineteenth century, namely, that "real" spinsters were chaste and celibate and thus, by definition, that the spinster was respectable. Of course, that was a big assumption. Although we know a fair amount about the proportions of women who remained single in each generation, we know actually very little about their erotic lives.²² There is a dearth of evidence about female sexual practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and historians who have investigated women's sexuality during this period disagree both about the character of women's desire and the nature of their erotic activities.²³

It is also true that real spinsters came from a broad range of educational, geographic, ethnic, and class backgrounds and were likely quite varied in skin tones. My own aunt, for example, came from a family that was far from elite. My grandparents, Russian Jews who came to the United States in 1910 when my aunt was four years old never did much more than eke out a living, he as a peddler and she as a seamstress. Or again, Sarah and Elizabeth Delaney, the rather more successful African-American women whose best-selling 1993 autobiography, *Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First One Hundred Years*, was turned into a successful play, describe themselves as preferring to remain single. Yet as the following chapters make clear, in popular iconography, the unmarried woman was almost always represented as well educated, white, and of privileged background. This rendering not only set the spinster apart from the mass; her mere appearance facilitated a set of implicit comparisons to women who were habitually designated as "inferiors." In fact, I would argue, it was precisely because the spinster was always portrayed as a woman of the "superior" sort that her one deviation from the ideal—the fact that she was unattached—came to define her as a key figure in an evolving series of debates about womanhood.

Still, the designation "spinster" had concrete as well as ideological referents. The demographic record indicates that from the time of the American Revolution until the 1920s, approximately eight of one hundred American women remained single for life. More consequentially, between the Civil War and World War I, in some regions of the United States, there were

especially large cohorts of women who never married.²⁴ The causal factors that sustained low marriage rates for women are not clear. However, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was an “excess” of marriageable women, especially in the Northeast. This sexual imbalance has been linked to a variety of factors, including high male death rates in the Civil War, the migration westward of men from unproductive farmland in the East, and a propensity toward delayed marriage among the native born.²⁵

In addition, however, there is good evidence that some nineteenth-century women actively chose to remain unwed, rejecting what many recognized as the burdens imposed by a lifetime commitment to a man, the concomitant risks of childbearing and the rigors of motherhood.²⁶ Lee Chambers-Schiller argues that as women emerged as an intellectual and literary force in the first half of the nineteenth century, independence was increasingly adduced as an inherent attribute of the situation of unmarried women. In an analysis of the diaries, letters, memoirs, and other writings of a group of notable women, Chambers-Schiller found substantial evidence for the emergence of what she refers to as a “cult of single blessedness” among the generations of 1780 to 1840. Based on this evidence, she contends that in the half century after the Revolution, increasing numbers of women “upheld the single life as both a socially and personally valuable state” and, through the choice against marriage, “articulated the values of female independence.”

This new attitude stood in contrast to those of previous generations. Seventeenth-century New Englanders, she says, “deemed singlehood a sinful state, an evil to be exorcised from community life because solitary women menaced the social order.” Single women were a problem because they imperiled family life, not because of their personal shortcomings. It was not until the eighteenth century, she argues, that writers began to emphasize the “peculiar personality defects and particular character foibles” of unmarried women. But, even then, the descriptions of spinsters rendered them infantile rather than bizarre. Writers of the period, she says, emphasized their “unsurpassed curiosity, childlike credulity, absurd affectations and spiteful natures,” as well as their “intolerable peevishness, envy of the young, aversion to the old, . . . insatiable avidity of conquest, and hopeless aspirations after matrimony.”

A new idea emerged for the generations of women born between 1780 and 1840, according to Chambers-Schiller. For increasing numbers of these women, remaining single was a way to reject “the self-abnegation inherent in domesticity” in order to engage in the “cultivation of the self.” In the words

and ideas of republicanism, Chambers-Schiller argues, women found the metaphors for a cultural reassessment of singlehood as a form of independence and a critique of marriage and domesticity.²⁷ The increasing number of publications by such women is testimony to the power of these ideas.

My investigation began where Chambers-Schiller's ended, at the *fin de siècle*. In these years, as a result of access to higher education, spinsterhood was increasingly associated with feminine independence. Only the unmarried woman was deemed able to pursue a career and live alone. In fact, in this period, unmarried women may well have been the prime beneficiaries of expanding opportunities for women. At the birth of the Republic, women had few civil rights and only limited avenues of independent action. During the course of the next century they achieved recognition as legal persons, gained control over their own property, entered into arenas formerly closed to them, and even though they lacked the franchise, emerged as a force in public life. But the women best positioned to enjoy the fruits of these changes were those least encumbered by domestic responsibilities and, perhaps for that reason, it was the unmarried woman who stood in the public mind as the prime exemplar of feminine freedom.

As Chambers-Schiller has documented, women who eschewed marriage pronounced themselves free during the heady years after American independence. Yet even in the wake of the victories of the early movement for woman's rights, intellectual independence did not guarantee economic self-sufficiency. Not until the turn of the century could single women live alone. With access to higher education and to professional careers, they came into their own both literally and figuratively. In fact, social and vocational opportunities for unmarried college women expanded so rapidly that by the turn of the twentieth century the spinster came to be seen, in the mass media at least, as one of the happiest as well as most self-sufficient of her sex.

The spinster's post-World War I successor was not so lucky. Still regarded as successful in worldly terms, she was increasingly represented as sexually repressed and emotionally bereft. But this was not the nadir of her existence. During and after World War II, despite her rapidly decreasing representation in the population, the never-marrying, celibate woman was presented to mass audiences as an exemplar of feminine failure. This book looks at how those transformations were accomplished and what they implied.

Initially, I undertook the task of unraveling the spinster's demise as a way of explicating the forces that made her culturally irrelevant. What I

came to appreciate, however, was that for several generations of women, she represented an “alternative” feminine path and, as such, participated in the expansion and contraction of gendered possibilities. Perhaps in consequence, she occupied a prominent place in American imagery long after the sexual climate that elevated and sustained her had been utterly transformed. In fact, I argue, for a number of generations of Americans, the old maid was both sign and symbol of a certain order of womanhood that served as a cultural resource, a representative type who could be invoked to interpret and explain or guide and rebuke. Therefore, the character of spinster portraiture reveals as much about attitudes toward women in general as it does about views of “old maids,” and changes in spinster imagery are indicative of alterations in concerns about women.

It seems most appropriate to use fiction for the analysis of a fiction, and for that reason I center the spinster’s tale on three short stories that appeared in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1890, 1913, and 1933. These pieces caught my attention as I scrolled through microfilm copies of the magazine for selected years; when I began to put this manuscript together they came to seem more and more crucial to the history I was describing.²⁸ However, I found it impossible to write about them; no mere summary could do them justice. Therefore, I decided to reprint them in all their glorious totality, and they appear in chapters two, four, and six. In the first, “Rebekah Spofford’s Theory,” written in 1890, *Journal* regular Emma Hewitt followed a plucky and determined college graduate who temporarily devoted herself to saving the family farm but never wavered from her double commitment to career and spinsterhood. Rebekah’s 1913 successor in “The Woman Who Threw Herself Away” was far less determined. In this Christmas fable, freelance author Margarita Spalding Gerry induced an attractive young college professor, Miss Metcalf, and her equally attractive and even younger undergraduate acolyte, Helen Standish, to rethink their intention of remaining single. Taking them on a visit to the home of a former college servant, she provided them with a timely reminder of the blessings of maternity. In the last of the stories, written twenty years later, Mary Carolyn (whose last name is mentioned only twice in passing by author Lois Montross) contemplated giving up marriage for a career for a brief time. But an encounter with the perversions of academia was sufficient to bring her first to her senses and then to marriage.

All three stories seem very peculiar to me and I am not alone in this view. After the first reader of this manuscript, historian Nancy Tomes, had

gone through them, we had a short debate about which was the most bizarre and found that we could make a good case for giving the award to each one. It is, I would contend, their very oddity that kept me thinking about them and commends them as historically useful documents. They are certainly not, as I am sure the readers of this book will agree, literary masterpieces. But as they were published in the *Journal*, they must have met both the magazine's standards for content and presentation. The very representations that appear odd to the modern reader must have seemed reasonable to the editorial staff and, presumably, its audience. For these reasons, even though they were unique creations, they also drew on general anxieties and concerns and purveyed what were, at least for the times, accepted truths. Therefore, although I neither present these tales as a random sample of fictions produced at the time nor claim them as "typical" in any way, it seems obvious that the portraits of spinsterhood they offer were accepted variants of the genre.

The fact that the heroines of these stories were all college women is not accidental. For quite a long period of time, education was considered as much a prerequisite for women intent on professional careers as spinsterhood was its consequence. Indeed, Barbara Solomon suggests that in the United States before World War I, many of the women who went to college aiming at a career were reacting to, or resolved upon, spinsterhood.²⁹ The assumption of an interrelationship among higher education, careers for women, and marriage refusal was most pronounced at the turn of the century, but the possibility that advanced degrees might suffice to draw a woman away from marriage persisted as an undercurrent for several generations of writers. As a result, popular culture often cut the garments of spinsterhood to fit the figure of the "college girl" and then paraded her as modeling virtue, vice, or something in between.

Even though female collegians were still relatively uncommon in the United States at the turn of the century,³⁰ they attracted considerable attention. The flower of American womanhood, they were frequent subjects of debate in both scholarly and popular domains. College education, the desire for a professional career, and a propensity to avoid marriage were implicitly linked in many of the pieces published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* during its first half century. The assumption that the three were associated was most pronounced at the turn of the century, but the possibility that advanced degrees might suffice to draw a woman away from the path toward marriage

persisted as an undercurrent for several generations of writers, even as they urged women to prepare for domestic life.

Until the 1940s, when the *Journal* began to limit its focus more definitively to women already married and their accompanying domestic requirements, the image of college “girls” graced the pages of the magazine with some frequency.³¹ Editorials discussed them, features elicited their opinions, fashion pieces celebrated their style, and stories described their particular dilemmas.

Although the plots of the stories reprinted here are unique, they share a series of common elements. As college women, the heroines inhabit a realm of preparation. In addition, all three stories place young women in unsettling situations that both provide valuable life lessons and aid them in fixing on their future course. In that situation, each story requires that its heroine contemplate and select either marriage or career—which are presented as mutually exclusive life alternatives. Suggestively, however, neither love nor romance is described as a significant element in the decision to marry or remain single. In fact, these characters are portrayed as either uninterested in marriage or willing to give up the idea of wedlock for something better.³² These pieces inevitably included reflexive comparisons between the married and unmarried states in which the former is depicted, at best, as the lesser of two evils.

The writers who delivered these stories were obviously well regarded, but they were not authorial stars, and their contributions would have, in all likelihood, run the gauntlet of editorial review with its attendant requirements. Not the production of well-known authors who commanded large sums for work not yet written, the young women who inhabited these tales may have been individual creations who embodied their creators’ peculiarities, but they must also have passed some tests of resonance and been deemed appropriate for the magazine. Moreover, as all three stories were written by women who had been married at least once, they were equally unlikely to reflect the spinster’s viewpoint.

Designed to entertain, the three stories reveal much about contemporary perceptions of the attractions, dilemmas, and possibilities available to women within collegiate precincts. As one historian points out, the *Journal* was self-consciously prescriptive.³³ But the magazine did not create cultural standards; rather, it functioned as a conduit for the repetition and reinforcement of ideas and axioms that reflected mainstream beliefs. Therefore, while

it is certainly not the case that its advice was always accepted by or even acceptable to its readers, the *Journal's* contents certainly reflected and were resonant with widely held views of the time. Indeed, it is precisely because of their thematic unity that these stories can be read as indicating constant elements as well as shifts in attitudes toward women, particularly well-educated women. What the authors made of such predilections is especially telling.

No account of popular culture in the twentieth century would be complete without a discussion of film. So I conclude the spinster's tale by examining her representation in a number of successful cinematic productions, most notably, *Nou, Voyager* (1942) and *Summertime* (1955). It is my contention that the spinster portrayals that are so central to these movies reflected a transition in attitudes about dangers to the social fabric that simultaneously limited women's options and facilitated the emergence of a movement for their liberation.

Cinema stories not only reflected popular perceptions of women; they were also central to the process of (en)gendering ideas and concerns about the family. As a medium that consistently reached a wider national audience than any that had preceded it, films both echoed existing stereotypes and created new ways of seeing. For Graeme Turner, movies inform us not only about the "systems" but also about the "processes" of culture both as "product *and* social practice."³⁴ Like other "works of imagination," they are what Elizabeth Cowrie pungently described as "part of our negotiation of 'sour reality.'"³⁵ "The ideological interchange between film and culture," Robert Kolker notes, operates through a complex system and therefore

[t]he images and narratives of women that filmmakers create must be shared by both sexes in order to exist. If audiences did not assent to the images, they would not go to see them; if they were not seen, they would no longer be made. That they were made and continue to be made . . . indicates either that the producers 'cliche'—"we give the public what it wants"—is true, or that the "public" accepts whatever it is given and in that acceptance is molded into a state of assent.³⁶

Perhaps for this reason, the analysis of Hollywood films has proved especially attractive to theoreticians of gender.³⁷

As you will see, both the *Journal* and Hollywood used spinster imagery as a way of addressing the basic desires, character, and potential of American womanhood. However, the spinsterhood plotlines devised by mass media authors changed over time, suggesting alterations in what was thought best for the most excellent of the nation's young women. Most significantly, changes in the way this subject was approached describe not only transitions in attitudes toward the single life and its practitioners but also about the constituent elements of "normal" femininity, reflecting a trajectory in attitudes about what is characteristic or "natural" for women in general and educated women in particular.