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BREAKING THE CYCLE OF SILENCE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANYA SETON'S
HISTORICAL FICTION

By

Lindsey Marie Okoroafo (Jesnek)
B.A., Tiffin University, 2008
M.A., Indiana State University, 2010

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2017

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 20, 2017

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother

Cathie A. Daane

who has supported, encouraged, and loved me through all of my endeavors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my mother, Cathie A. Daane, for loving me unconditionally and for doing everything in her power to help me reach my goals. I would like to thank my wife, Katrina Uchem Okoroafo, for her waiting so long for me to finish this degree. I would like to thank my best friend, Charters Harrison, for her encouragement and for helping me believe in myself again. I would like to thank my precious dog, Pearl, for (literally) being by my side during all of those difficult late nights and exasperated moments. I would also like to thank all of my committee members. Thank you to Dr. Allen, my beloved director, for always being my advocate and for her tremendous efforts in helping me through this project. Thank you to Dr. Beth Willey and Dr. Ann C. Hall for devoting their time and expertise to make this project as successful as possible. Thank you to Dr. Jo Ann Griffin for her helpful feedback and for her willingness to teach the independent study course that ultimately introduced me to the topic of my dissertation: Anya Seton.

Finally, I would like to thank Anya Seton for her determination and resilience in resurrecting the stories of three forgotten women in history: Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones. Ms. Seton, I sincerely hope that this projects helps to break the cycle of silence that has so unjustly kept your work from receiving the scholarly attention it deserves.

ABSTRACT

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF SILENCE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANYA SETON'S
HISTORICAL FICTION

Lindsey M. Okoroafo (Jesnek)

May 12, 2017

This dissertation examines the feminist significance of Anya Seton's historical novels, *My Theodosia* (1941), *Katherine* (1954), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958). The two main goals of this project are to 1.) identify and explain the reasons why Seton's historical novels have not received the scholarly attention they are due, and 2.) to call attention to the ways in which *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* offer important feminist interventions to patriarchal social order. Ultimately, I argue that *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* deserve more scholarly attention because they are significant contributions to women's literature and to women's history.

In the introduction, I provide a brief biography of Anya Seton and provide an outline of what will be addressed in the subsequent four chapters. In Chapter One, I call attention to the dissonance between Seton's sustained popularity with readers and her relative absence in scholarship. Then, I provide short summaries of each historical novel to prepare my reader for the analyses I perform and the conclusions I come to in the succeeding chapters. Finally, I put forth the argument that a complex set of socio-cultural factors have contributed to the scholarly dismissal of Seton's work. In Chapter Two, I perform an analysis of the historical events and literary trends that were occurring prior to

and during the time Seton was writing *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* in the 1940s and 1950s. Throughout my analysis, I articulate how dominant ideologies about history, literature, genre, and gender have collectively rendered Seton's historical novels unworthy of serious scholarly attention.

In Chapter Three, I identify the ways in which *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* effectively interrupt the master narrative of the invulnerable male hero that has traditionally dominated the pages of most mainstream historical texts. In Chapter Four, I argue that Seton disrupts the widespread and disproportionate absence of women in mainstream historical texts by placing at the center of her novels three real-life historical female figures who are rarely given any attention in accounts of the past. I also argue that Seton's novels challenge the masculinist ideology of mainstream historical texts by portraying ways that the female protagonists in *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* either resist or reject traditional codes of feminine behavior. Finally, in the conclusion, I reiterate the main points of my chapters and emphasize the importance of breaking the cycle of silencing women's voices throughout history.

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INTRODUCTION

My first exposure to the work of Anya Seton was purely coincidental. While putting the finishing touches on a reading list for a doctoral independent study course on twentieth-century Gothic fiction, I thought it prudent to confirm that I had indeed included an appropriate array of the most widely read Gothic novels. Before consulting the university library databases, sheer curiosity prompted me to see what a simple Google search would reveal, and I stumbled across a book retailer's advertisement for *Dragonwyck*, a best-selling Gothic novel published in 1944 by an author whose name I had never heard mentioned—not once during my twelve years as a student of American literature. I quickly learned that while *Dragonwyck* was Anya Seton's only truly Gothic novel, she wrote nine other novels¹ that all involved extensive historical research. It also became clear that Seton's novels were not only popular at the time of their publication but have also *remained* popular with twenty-first century readers. Her name appeared so frequently on internet book club blogs, online recommended reading lists, and unpublished reader reviews that I was gripped with a sudden fear: had my tenure in higher education on literature somehow been *inept*? Shuddering at the thought, I immediately consulted university library holdings where I expected to find hundreds of scholarly journal articles about Anya Seton's oeuvre. However, a series of feverish

¹ Not including Seton's two young adult novels, *The Mistletoe and the Sword* (1955) and *Smoldering Fires* (1975), or Seton's short biography book for children entitled *Washington Irving* (1960).

searches on several of the most comprehensive databases yielded so few results that (after expelling a shamefully indulgent sigh of relief at what I initially took to be confirmation that my long sojourn of the study of American literature had not been remiss) I was struck by an onslaught of even more troubling questions. What explained the virtual absence of scholarship on such a prolific American writer? Is the popularity of Seton's books with the general American public an indication that her novels are just another form of mindless entertainment—and therefore, unworthy of serious study? Has the postmodern assertion that products of popular art *are* valuable and *should* be considered alongside classical pieces *truly* taken root in the contemporary study of literature? What criteria have been used to render Seton's work unworthy of professional critical analysis, and conversely, what particular characteristics have made Seton's work popular with readers for over seventy-five years?

All of these inquiries ultimately led me to consider several other deeply unsettling possibilities. Could Seton's dismissal by scholars and her exclusion from the American literary canon proper be the result of patriarchal power politics? How many other twentieth-century female authors have been discredited or ignored in mainstream scholarship? To what degree has my knowledge of literature been coerced by the reinforcement of male authority? Does my advancement as a scholar of literature require that I follow the scholarly lead to dismiss the fiction of Anya Seton? And, finally, an arresting dilemma emerged for me in the form of an echo from a poem written, most sardonically, by one of the many white male authors I had been taught to revere as a paragon of literary genius: "So how should I presume?" (from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.")

After thoroughly enjoying *Dragonwyck* and being pleased with its inclusion on the independent study reading list long after the course ended, the disconcerting questions which arose from the puzzling dissonance between Anya Seton's popularity with readers and her apparent unpopularity with literary scholars stayed with me—unanswered—until I felt that they could no longer be ignored. I read Seton's nine other novels² in order of their publication dates, and then had designs of reading her biography—only to find that none exists. I have since learned that Lucinda H. MacKethan, a Professor Emerita of North Carolina State University, is in the process of writing a biography of Anya Seton, but there is no date set for its release. Therefore, I was relieved to discover that Anya Seton does have a collection of papers that are maintained by the Greenwich Historical Society in Cos Cob (Old Greenwich), Connecticut. I booked a trip to the archives and thus embarked on my most intensive research endeavor to date. After reviewing hundreds of pages of personal journal entries, old newspaper clippings, and letter correspondences, a picture of Anya Seton's life and writing career began to emerge.

Anya Seton was born in New York City on January 23, 1904. Ann was her given name at birth, but she began to go by "Anya," a childhood nickname of sorts³, in both her professional and personal life shortly before the publication of her first novel, *My Theodosia*, in 1941. Both of Seton's parents were prominent authors and social leaders in their own right. Born in Sacramento, California, Seton's mother, Grace Gallatin Seton⁴,

² Again, with the exception of Seton's young adult novels, *The Mistletoe and the Sword* (1955) and *Smoldering Fires* (1975).

³ Seton acquired the nickname when she was around four years old. At the request of her father, a Sioux chief who was visiting one of the Seton family homes, provided Seton with a Native American name (ASP 1.1). The Sioux chief chose "anutika," which means "cloud-gray eyes" (Hellman 34). Ever since, the name "Anya" (a modified version of the Sioux word) became part of Seton's identity, despite the fact that Seton actually had hazel eyes.

⁴ Sometimes referred to as Grace Gallatin Seton Thompson.

was a travel book writer who also held major leadership positions in the women's suffrage movement during the first three decades of the twentieth century. In addition to publishing five books and one collection of poems about her travels throughout the Western U.S. and three other continents, she served as Vice President and President of the Connecticut Women's Suffrage Association, was a two-time president of the National League of American Pen Women⁵, and served as the Chair of Letters for the National Council of Women of the United States from 1933-1938. Anya Seton's father, Ernest Thompson Seton, whose accomplishments are much more well-known than those of his equally prolific wife and daughter⁶, had a successful career as a naturalist artist and writer. His collection of short stories, *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898), was an immediate success at the time of its publication and is still widely read today. Ernest Thompson Seton is also renowned for being a co-founder of Boy Scouts of America in 1910⁷. Likely in response to the "boy's only" club established by her husband, Seton's mother organized the Girl Pioneers in 1910, a girl's naturalist group that was formally founded two years later as the Camp Fire Girls of America by Luther and Charlotte Gulick (M. White A16; "Biographical Note").

Marital tensions arose between Seton's parents due to issues of infidelity and differences in ideology resulting from her mother's involvement in the suffragist movement and her father's investment in a fundamentally patriarchal organization. In 1922, Ernest began an affair with his eventual second wife, Julia Moss Buttree, and a

⁵ 1926-1928 and 1930-1932

⁶ The relative fame and respect afforded to Seton's father (in comparison to Seton and her mother) is indicative of how gender politics in the field of history and literature have perpetuated male privilege.

⁷ After a falling out with his fellow co-founder James E. West in 1915, Ernest Thompson Seton resigned from his leadership position in Boy Scouts of America and re-established the Woodcraft League of America (which was the original scouting group that he ran prior to its brief five-year merger with Boy Scouts of America) as an independent organization.

year later, began openly living with her in a separate cottage on the same property as the larger Seton family home. Seton's parents formally separated in the late 1920s⁸ (Witt 134-135). However, their divorce was not final until 1935 when Anya was in her early thirties. Busy with her own writing and political career, Seton's mother never re-married. According to MacKethan, Grace Gallatin Thompson Seton "never sought to end her marriage," but she found freedom in "her husband's desertion" to become "what she had always aimed to be: one of the most authoritative women travel writers of her time" ("Grace" 187)—a lifetime goal that she undoubtedly achieved.

Anya Seton spent most of her childhood either in Old Greenwich (Cos Cob), Connecticut at several different family homes or traveling abroad. By the age of thirteen, Seton "had crossed the ocean with her parents eight times" (Hellman 34). Her early education was gleaned from a "combination of a French governess, and [her] father's theories of woodcraft, nature study, and Indian training" (ASP 1.1). A more formal education began when she attended the prestigious Spence School in New York City. She graduated on May 27, 1921, at the age of 17, with a diploma in English (ASP 1.1). After graduation, Seton's intention was to become a doctor. She spent an unpaid winter internship as an "informal student and assistant to another doctor," and her first job was as a "semi-office nurse to a very charming woman physician, who let me tag along on her rounds, and help as best I could," at L'Hotel-Dieu, a major hospital in Paris (ASP 1.1; Hellman 34). Seton wanted to attend medical school at Vassar College, but, in her own words, she says, "I got married at once instead, and that was that" (ASP 1.1). Seton married Hamilton Cottier (whom she called "Ham") in June of 1923. After their

⁸ They were married in 1896.

wedding, Seton moved to New Jersey where Ham taught classes at Princeton University, and she took several home study courses from Columbia University (ASP 1.1). On November 3, 1925, Seton gave birth to her first child, Pamela Cottier (Forcey)⁹, and on April 9, 1928, to her second child, Seton Cottier. Approximately five months after the birth of her son, Seton had her first extramarital affair. Interestingly, she documents the exact date that the affair occurred in her journal but does not give the name of the other person involved (ASP 4). Seton had a second extramarital affair with her eventual second husband. After less than seven years of marriage, she traded in one Hamilton husband for another. Her divorce from Hamilton Cottier was final on the 10th of February 1930, and exactly fifteen days later, Seton married Hamilton Mercer Chase (whom she called “Chan”).

From a young age, Seton was a fervent reader. In terms of her own literary tastes, she describes herself as “a fervent ‘Janeite’” because she committed herself to rereading Jane Austen’s six masterpieces “about every three years” (ASP 1.1). In a biographical questionnaire for the Publicity Department of Houghton Mifflin, Seton expresses an interest in Charles Dickens, argues that E.M. Forester “should be far better known in this country,” lists Katherine Mansfield, Anne Douglas Sedgwick, and Somerset Maugham as her favorite authors, and states that she admires the work of Willa Cather “immensely” (ASP 1.1). However, Seton says that she had “a resistance against writing for many years,” which she partially attributes to “having been raised in a writing family, where

⁹ I received a wholly unexpected phone call from Pamela Forcey following my visit to the Anya Seton Papers in May 2015. During that conversation, I learned that Seton’s eldest daughter (who prefers to be called “Pam”) resides in an assisted living home in Louisville, Colorado. Since our initial phone conversation, I have communicated with Pam about her mother on several occasions via email.

both parents were at it most of the time, and therefore the career seemed to be one definitely shorn of glamor” (ASP 1.1). Following the birth of her third child, Clemency “Zizi” Chase (Coggins) on June 12, 1934, Seton began writing for various magazines out of necessity because it was a way to earn extra money while remaining at home to care for her three children. Although her parents were both published authors, her early experience with writing was not seamless, as it “took a year of those rejection slips to land anything” (ASP 1.1). Her first publication was a short story entitled “The China Mascot” (1938) in the *McClure Syndicate*, a Wisconsin newspaper, for which she received five dollars (ASP 1.1). After spending over two years of preparatory research, Seton published her first novel, *My Theodosia*, in 1941.

After the success of *My Theodosia*, Seton went on to publish a novel about every 2-3 years throughout the 1940s and 1950s: *Dragonwyck* (1944), *The Turquoise* (1946), *The Hearth and Eagle* (1948), *Foxfire* (1951), *Katherine* (1954), *The Mistletoe and the Sword* (1955), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958). Both *Dragonwyck* and *Foxfire* were made into features on the silver screen. The film version of *Dragonwyck*, starring Gene Tierney, Vincent Price, and Glenn Langan, was released by Twentieth-Century Fox in 1946, and the film version of *Foxfire*, starring Jane Russell and Jeff Chandler, was released by Universal Pictures in 1955. In the 1960s, Seton published two novels, *Devil Water* (1962) and *Avalon* (1965). In 1968, Seton and Chan divorced after nearly 38 years of marriage. Her last two novels—*Green Darkness* and *Smoldering Fires*—were published in 1973 and 1975, respectively. The late 1970s marked the beginning of a series of tragedies for Seton: her grandchild, Chase Frederick Coggins, died in 1978 at only twenty years old, and the following year, after battling depression for a long time,

her son, Seton Cottier, died from an overdose of prescription drugs. In 1981, Seton suffered a stroke, and her health continued to decline until her death on November 8, 1990 in Old Greenwich, Connecticut. At the time of her passing, Seton had five living grandchildren: two by her first daughter Pam Forcey (Blythe and Peter Forcey), one by her deceased son Seton Cottier (Busey Seton Cottier), and two by her youngest daughter Clemency Coggins (Daniel and Christiana Coggins). Seton's two daughters are still living, but only Pam Forcey has been interested in participating in this project via phone interview and email communication.

It is both necessary and important to emphasize that the conclusions drawn throughout this study about the strictures which impacted Seton's fiction during the 1940s and 1950s should not be understood as universally applicable to all women writers during this particular historical moment. Seton's standpoint and social status as an American white woman born into a relatively wealthy, prestigious, and educated family must always be kept in mind. Yet, even in her comparatively privileged position¹⁰ as a female author in the mid-twentieth century, Seton was still subjected to gender-based coercive power dynamics which attempted to police what she wrote, how she wrote, and how her writing was received by those in positions of literary authority. Exposing the kind of sexism that Seton endured, in addition to women in comparatively less privileged positions, remains an equally crucial activity for feminist scholars not only because it demonstrates the truly pervasive nature of patriarchal oppression, but also because the failure to expose coercive gender politics would further promulgate the silent acceptance of patriarchal oppression. Several feminist scholars who are personally among those

¹⁰ More specifically, compared to poor or working-class women, women of color, immigrant women, homosexual women, and women without access to formal education.

groups of women who have historically been even further marginalized by a failure to acknowledge intersectional concerns of race and sexuality argue that there is collective value in all studies which are dedicated to deconstructing and challenging totalizing forms of power. Patricia Hill Collins, who is largely responsible for establishing Black Feminist Epistemology, suggests that the ultimate goal of feminism—the promotion of gender equality—is actually *undermined* by devoting all scholarly energy to privileging the oppression of one group of women over another. She argues that “quantifying and ranking human oppressions” invokes “the binary thinking of its Western origins” and resembles “positivism” (Collins 256). In other words, a sole focus on critical debates about the specific degrees of oppression between different groups of women has the potential of becoming an obstacle that ultimately *impedes* the overall critical goal of feminism. Collins places value on the voices of all oppressed groups and establishes the importance of communication between them: “Each group becomes better able to consider other groups’ standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups’ partial perspectives” (256). Adrienne Rich, whose lesbian sexuality (especially in the 1970s and 1980s) places her in a different social position than that of a heterosexual white woman, also argues that equal consideration of all oppressed groups is important. Like Collins, Rich calls for an open exchange between the different aims, standpoints, and lived experiences of different women and argues that the march toward the subversion of patriarchal authority and the empowerment of women should be a collective one (“Compulsory,” 36). From this perspective, then, Seton’s work should be read as an important contribution to the chorus of women’s voices that address their experiences of gender oppression.

In the chapters that follow, I will call attention to the ways that women's voices continue to be silenced by patriarchal gender politics through the example of Anya Seton. I argue that one of the fundamental ways that we must inform present and future feminist aims is by studying women writers of the past who have been victims of this cycle of silence. In Chapter One, I will introduce the disparity between Seton's popularity with readers and her neglect by scholars, provide plot summaries of the three Seton novels on which I will focus, and establish the theoretical framework that informs my reading of Seton's novels in subsequent chapters. Chapter Two will identify and discuss the specific instruments of patriarchal power that have led to the dismissal of Seton's work by literary scholars. In Chapter Three, I will discuss how Seton's portrayal of several well-known men of history in *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* pose a challenge to male historiography by refusing to reinscribe them as the invulnerable paragons of masculine superiority that dominant narratives of history tend to depict. Finally, Chapter Four will demonstrate how Seton's portrayal of the real-life heroines in *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* challenges male historiography by focusing on the life stories of women who have largely been left out of dominant historical narratives¹¹, countering the negative stories that have been told about them, and making visible the

¹¹ Throughout this project, I am defining "mainstream historical texts," (and the synonyms that I use, including "mainstream historical narratives," "dominant historical narratives," and "dominant historical texts") based on Derrick Alridge's discussion of master narratives in his article entitled, "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr." (2006). Throughout my discussion of Seton's work, mainstream historical narratives should be understood as widely circulated texts that focus on providing historical information to the general public and may be delivered through several major generic forms like history textbooks, biographies, or historical novels. Mainstream historical texts tend to reinforce dominant ideology by offering "simplistic, one-dimensional, and truncated portraits that deny [readers] a realistic and multifaceted" understanding of history (Alridge 663). Mainstream historical texts often present "heroic, uncritical, and celebratory master narratives of history" (Alridge 664). Mainstream historical texts also habitually focus on famous historical figures, like the "Founding Fathers," and present them "in isolation from other individuals and events in their historical context," while leaving out "the more controversial aspects of their lives and beliefs" (Alridge 662).

significant ways in which they have positively contributed to history. By positioning Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones at the center of her novels, rather than limiting their life stories to their interactions with well-known men of history, Seton establishes them as independently important historical figures.

CHAPTER ONE

MISSING FROM SCHOLARSHIP: ANYA SETON'S HISTORICAL FICTION

“Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”

—Adrienne Rich¹²

Anya Seton is a prolific American writer whose name is relatively unknown today. Even Anya Seton's reputation with established literary scholars typically elicits little more than a vague recollection that she wrote several “historical romances¹³” during the twentieth century. Consequently, especially for those within the academy, it may come as a surprise to learn that Seton wrote a staggering total of ten historical novels between 1941 and 1973, several of which were best-sellers and two of which were made into successful Hollywood films. All of her historical novels have been translated into several languages (*Contemporary Authors* 662). Seton also wrote two books for young adults that draw on historical research, *The Mistletoe and the Sword* (1955) and *Smoldering Fires* (1975), as well as a short biography book for children entitled *Washington Irving* (1960). Seton conducted years of intensive historical research in preparation for writing each novel. Records of her exhaustive efforts to achieve historical

¹² (Rich, “When We” 18).

¹³ A discussion of genre as it relates to Seton's work will be addressed in Chapter Two.

accuracy make up the bulk of her collected papers which are maintained by the Greenwich Historical Society in Cos Cob (Old Greenwich), Connecticut.

Seton's popularity with mid-twentieth century readers is, in fact, well-documented. According to a report in *The English Journal*¹⁴, *Dragonwyck* ranked in the top 15 best-selling fiction books of 1944 and was inducted into the Dollar Book Club ("The Best Sellers of 1944" 177). *The Turquoise* ranked fifth on the 1946 Mid-January through Mid-February list of best-sellers in *The English Journal*, well above *The Fountainhead*, which was ranked 12th ("The Best-Selling Fiction" 228). *The Turquoise* was also inducted into the *People's Book Club* (ASP 1.1). *Green Darkness* (1972) spent six months on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Moser). According to an entry in *Contemporary Authors*, all of Seton's novels "have been praised for their historical authenticity and readability" (662). In an article in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, *The Winthrop Woman* is described as "a chronicle that stirs the senses and excites the imagination by its immediacy and intensity. In Elizabeth Fones[,] Miss Seton has found a heroine worthy to stand beside the best in her gallery of interesting women" (*Contemporary Authors* 662). In the February 15, 1958 edition of the *Saturday Review*, Edmund Fuller says of *The Winthrop Woman*:

This is all an amazing story, too little known before. Anya Seton has not distorted or trifled with it, or sought to embellish it. She has clothed the name of Elizabeth, and those about her, with flesh and blood to make them real to us. The novel is noteworthy for its insights into the Puritan "Bible Commonwealth." Miss Seton knows the courage, conviction, and endurance that went into it, and nowhere does she mock or minimize. (20)

¹⁴ Results were compiled from the statistical results recorded in the January 1945 edition of *Retail Bookseller*.

In *New York Herald Tribune Books*, Seton's focus on historical accuracy is also applauded in a review of *Devil Water* (1962): "Miss Seton's approach to historical fiction is brisk and strictly utilitarian, with no great fussing over subtlety or psychology. . . Her sole purpose is to tell a rousing good tale plainly and simply and this she does admirably" (*Contemporary Authors* 662). Nearly all published book reviews in the twentieth century praise Seton for the historical accuracy of her novels and recognize the tremendous commitment to historical research that each of her historical novels required. However, aside from review articles and a handful of published author interviews, the general popularity of Seton's historical novels did not lead to the publication of any significant scholarly studies of her work during her lifetime.

Even today's largest and most comprehensive databases and repositories of literary criticism and scholarship reveal a shocking absence of critical sources devoted to Seton. Several different search queries in JSTOR¹⁵, one of the most comprehensive scholarly journal databases to date, result in nothing more than a few very brief reviews and several citations on publication reports and book sales registers. In fact, a query for journal articles with the exact terms "Anya Seton" in the title produced a single result: "'Katherine' by Anya Seton for High School Seniors" by R. Paul Hildebrand, which was published in 1971 by *The English Journal*. When the same search query was submitted to EBSCO's Academic Search Complete and ProQuest's MLA International Bibliography, no results were retrieved¹⁶.

¹⁵ Short for "Journal Storage"

¹⁶ As of March 2016

Even searches conducted on WorldCat, the world's largest library catalog, produced very few scholarly results¹⁷. Under the established search query of "Seton, Anya, Criticism and Interpretation," WorldCat only produces one result: Jack Scully's 1984 Master of Art's thesis for the University of Vermont, entitled "'Fictionalized Biographies': A Study of the Literary Merit of Anya Seton's Historical Novels." Scully's thesis essentially compares three of Seton's historical novels, *Katherine*, *The Winthrop Woman*, and *Devil Water*, to a set of standards that is largely based upon Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels and the standards that John Hersey establishes as the criteria for the "literary merit" of historical fiction with the publication of his article "The Novel of Contemporary History" in 1949 (Scully iii, 24-25). Scully uses the following four criteria to evaluate Seton's novels: "True Conviction," "Strong Characterization," "Timeless Theme," and "Superior Style" (Scully 25-27), and concludes that, overall, *Katherine*, *The Winthrop Woman*, and *Devil Water* meet the established criteria, rendering them worthy of literary merit (Scully 111). Interestingly, Scully's decision to pursue a thesis on Seton is likely due to the fact that he grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, and his mother was Seton's personal literary assistant; as a teenager, Scully himself edited some of Seton's work. Thus, the likelihood that Scully would have pursued a study of Seton's historical novels had he not found himself in such unique circumstances is rather slim. To date¹⁸, Scully's unpublished thesis is the most comprehensive study of Seton's work.

¹⁷ As of March 2016

¹⁸ As of September 2016

A WorldCat subject search of “Anya Seton” produces only 15 results¹⁹, one of which is Scully’s thesis. The other results include five brief encyclopedia entries, one obituary entry, a link to the Grace Gallatin Seton-Thompson²⁰ papers, an image of Seton’s autograph on a copy of Enid Bagnold’s 1954 book entitled *The Girl’s Journey: The Happy Foreigner and the Squire*, a generic entry in volume 19 of the 1999 publication of *American National Biography*, links to the collected papers of three people who had letter correspondence with Seton (Abraham Burack, Ralph G. Morrissey, and Portia Willis Fitzgerald), the Twentieth Century Fox 2008 DVD re-release of the 1946 film *Dragonwyck*, and the same article by R. Paul Hildebrand that had been retrieved by JSTOR. A basic Google search of “Anya Seton”²¹ reveals general biographical information, a few informal book reviews, blogs posts, and purchasing information. A more specific search query of “Anya Seton, Gender”²² in Google’s search engine did produce one scholarly result: an essay by Kathleen M. Therrien, which was published in *Teaching Tainted Lit: Popular American Fiction in Today’s Classroom* (2015). Therein, Therrien calls attention to the lack of scholarly work on Seton and the unfortunate dismissal of popular texts in general; she then performs a close reading of *Dragonwyck* in which she explores how “continually shifting alliances of cultural forces exercise power” (53). Therrien’s article, aside from book reviews, appears to be the only scholarship devoted to Seton within the past thirty years.

However, Seton’s novels have actually *maintained* their popularity with readers since the time of their publication. The BBC’s *The Big Read* program in 2003 included

¹⁹ Conducted in March 2016

²⁰ Anya Seton’s mother

²¹ Conducted in March of 2016

²² Conducted in March of 2016

Katherine on the list of top 100 novels of all time (Wright 14). In 2009, the *Texas Talking Book News* lauded Anya Seton as “one of the best historical novelists ever to take up pen” and goes on to promote three of her novels, *Katherine*, *The Winthrop Woman*, and *Green Darkness* (“Books Worth Revisiting”). In 2012, *Katherine* was ranked second in the top-ten recommended books list of *Geography Magazine* (Sheldrick 61). *Katherine* also ranked in the top ten of the reader-generated list of recommended books in the December 2013 issue of the *New Oxford Review* (“Readers Recommend” 10). *The Winthrop Woman* is featured as a recommended audio book collection in the February 15, 2015 publication of *Library Journal* (“Seton, Anya: *The Winthrop Woman*” 58). The most compelling evidence of Seton’s popularity with twenty-first readers is the recent decision made by Mariner Books (a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) to re-release all ten of her historical novels²³. Mariner’s first re-release of *Katherine*, *Green Darkness*, *Avalon*, and *Dragonwyck* on October 1, 2013 was followed by six more: *The Winthrop Woman* on April 22, 2014; *Devil Water* on September 2, 2014; *My Theodosia* on October 21, 2014; *The Hearth and Eagle* on June 2, 2015; *Foxfire* on October 6, 2015; and *The Turquoise* on June 28, 2016.

At first glance, both the popularity of Seton’s novels and the incredible productivity of her writing career make her absence on the syllabi of American literature courses and the scant attention paid to her work by scholarly journals appear to be rather perplexing contradictions. The incongruence between the opinions of general readers and those of respected literary scholars is, however, not arbitrary; clearly, it is not result of the

²³ Seton’s young adult novels, *The Mistletoe and the Sword* (1955) and *Smoldering Fires* (1975), were not included in Mariner’s re-release.

gradual decline in an author's popularity which often accompanies the passage of time, nor is it attributable to a straightforward matter of conflicting opinions. The dissonance between the devotion of Seton's readership and the lack of scholarly attention paid to her work can only be explained through a careful examination of the factors which have shaped both the reception and reputation of her work.

This study will identify and examine the central forces which have led to Seton's virtual absence in literary scholarship, and go on to demonstrate how three of Seton's historical novels work to disrupt common perceptions of popular literature and historical fiction, challenge the patriarchal master narratives of history, and promote the often unacknowledged ways that women have shaped history. I contend that a complex set of factors have acted in concert to invalidate the feminist significance of Seton's work. The uncritical dismissal of Seton's historical novels as frivolous entertainment, and thus, unworthy of serious scholarly exegesis is, I will argue, rooted in a much larger phenomenon that concerns the status of women in history, the selection of canonical literature, the historical expectations of male and female writers, and the reputation of certain genres. It is through these avenues that power—specifically power between men and women in the social and literary world—is negotiated. The preservation of male authority over the production, legitimation, and dissemination of knowledge has been achieved by habitually leaving women's life stories and women's voices out of dominant historical and literary narratives. This phenomenon has enabled the gender norms communicated through these dominant narratives to pose as a series of inherent (and, therefore, incontestable) truths. The cyclical nature of this process of silencing women's voices is evidenced by the fact that Seton's historical novels, which attempt to resurrect

the untold stories of several women from the past, continue to be ignored even by contemporary scholars²⁴.

I have narrowed my examination of Seton's historical novels to a focus on *My Theodosia* (1941), *Katherine* (1954), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958) for several reasons. First, and most importantly, all three (as their titles suggest) are narrative reconstructions about the lives of three real women of the past. In addition, they remain popular with twenty-first century readers, evidenced by their inclusion in the re-releases by Mariner Books. Also, since a crucial part of my project is to analyze how the historical moment influenced Seton's writing career (which spans from 1941-1975²⁵), I felt that it was important to confine my study to two decades (the 1940s and 1950s). Although several changes took place that particularly affected women during this period, the dawn of a new, more aggressive approach to minority civil rights can arguably be marked at the beginning of the 1960s. This narrows my study of Seton's repertoire of historical fiction to work produced in two consecutive decades that are the most culturally translatable to each other²⁶. Additionally, I felt that it was important to select texts from Seton's two most productive decades; she published four novels during the 1940s, three novels during the 1950s, two novels during the 1960s, and one novel during the 1970s²⁷.

²⁴ The consistency of this phenomenon is only further emphasized by the fact that Seton's ten historical novels concern women who lived over a combined total of eight different centuries.

²⁵ This date range differs from the one given on the first page of this chapter because, in this case, I am including the two novels that Seton wrote for young adults and her children's book about Washington Irving.

²⁶ To be clear, I am not suggesting that women's experiences in the 1940s and women's experiences in the 1950s are identical. Rather, since the publication of Seton's historical fiction spans the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, I have chosen, in consideration of the textual options available during the length of Seton's writing career, three texts from the two decades that are the most comparable in terms of the social milieu of American life.

²⁷ This list also does not include Seton's young adult novels, *The Mistletoe and the Sword* (1955) and *Smoldering Fires* (1975).

My analysis of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* in subsequent chapters will be most accessible if the reader has at least a general familiarity with the plot of each novel. Therefore, especially since all three are rather lengthy (each is over 400 pages), it is necessary to first provide the reader with a brief summary of each novel. *My Theodosia*, which was published in 1941, begins with Theodosia Burr (who is referred to as simply “Theo” in most of the novel) awakening in the summer of 1800 on the morning of her 17th birthday. Theo’s father, Aaron Burr, is in the process of campaigning for the next presidential election and expects to succeed President John Adams. Now that Theo is of marriageable age, Burr selfishly uses the opportunity to select a prospective husband for her who will assist in furthering Burr’s political career. Theo, however, endeavors to delay marriage as long as possible because she wants to prolong the relative freedom and independence that matrimony will terminate. Burr holds a grand birthday party for Theo that doubles as an opportunity to encourage the union of Theo and Joseph Alston, a wealthy business man from South Carolina. Alston becomes enamored with Theo, but she finds him to be immensely boring and unattractive.

When the party ends, Burr invites Alston to stay at Richmond Hill in an attempt to change Theo’s opinion of Alston. Alston’s extended stay, however, does not inspire in Theo any romantic feelings. She dejectedly tolerates Alston’s company and is horrified when he asks her to marry him. She vehemently declines Alston’s offer, insisting that she has no intention of marrying, and makes a passionate protest against the match to her father. Unfortunately, Burr remains wholly unmoved by his daughter’s objections to the

marriage, so Theo remains trapped in a fate that has been decided for her. During an outing to the theater, Theo intentionally rids herself of Alston by sending him on an unnecessary errand so that she can meet privately with the man who had captivated her attention during the performance: Meriwether Lewis. Lewis is mutually infatuated with Theo, but Burr harshly puts an end to their amorous exchange. Shortly thereafter, Theo and Alston are married.

Burr immediately begins borrowing money from Alston and enlists his help in writing letters of political support to important contacts in the South. To please his father-in-law, Alston travels throughout the southern states to campaign for Burr's presidency, and largely due to Alston's efforts, Burr is able to secure the vice presidency in the 1801 election. When the election ends, Alston takes Theo to the Oaks, his plantation in South Carolina. Theo detests the plantation, the oppressive heat, Alston's family members, and her new husband. She grows increasingly apathetic and hopeless, and her discontent becomes even more poignant when she learns that she is pregnant. After a difficult labor in the spring of 1802, Theo gives birth to a son whom she names Aaron Burr Alston, to the great annoyance of her husband. Shortly after the baby is born, Burr convinces Alston to begin his own political career in the south. While Burr and Alston are away on political engagements, Theo stays at Burr's lodgings in Washington, D.C. On an early morning walk in the city, Theo unexpectedly encounters Meriwether Lewis, who is now serving as private secretary to President Jefferson. Although nearly three years have passed since they first met, they find that they still have intense feelings for each other. When Burr has to travel to Georgetown for a political dinner, Theo boldly invites Lewis to meet her at a house near Rock Creek where adulterous couples often

meet. There, they profess their love for each other and kiss, but they do not consummate their relationship. When they part, after finding no feasible way to be together, Lewis embarks on his famous expedition of the Louisiana purchase.

Burr's political reputation begins to suffer through the influence of his political rival, Alexander Hamilton. Their longtime feud finally inspires them to challenge each other to a duel, and despite Burr's claims of a fair fight, he is charged with murdering Hamilton. Burr flees to Philadelphia to escape being hanged in New York. Despite the outstanding warrants for his arrest and increasing pressure from his creditors for unpaid debts, Burr begins soliciting sponsors for his newest scheme to gain money and power. Burr's so-called "Plan X" is to build up a vigilante militia to take over Mexico and become its Emperor. The execution of "Plan X," however, is interrupted in March of 1807 when Burr is captured and jailed in Richmond by law enforcement on charges of murder and treason. Against Alston's forbiddance, Theo travels to Richmond to witness her father's trial. Once again, Burr relies on Theo's help in gaining him wealthy and powerful sympathizers in Richmond. Theo expertly wins over Burr's defense lawyer and effectively convinces Lewis, who has just returned from his expedition, not to testify against Burr. It is chiefly due to Theo's cunning and charm that Burr is ultimately found not guilty of all charges in Virginia. Burr, however, is still wanted for murder in New York and New Jersey, so he decides to go abroad to England and France to escape persecution and seek supporters for "Plan X." Under an assumed name, Burr embarks on a four-year exile overseas.

In the fall of 1809, Theo receives a letter from Lewis that informs her of his intent to travel to the Oaks to see her because he has a portent that he will die soon, but he never

comes. From a newspaper that Alston brings home, Theo learns that Lewis has been murdered by bandits in Nashville, Tennessee. Three years later, Theo's son dies of Malaria at the age of ten, which renders Theo incapacitated with illness and despair. Meanwhile, Burr cannot secure any legitimate benefactors for "Plan X" and eventually wears out his welcome in England, Sweden, Germany, and Paris. Upon receiving a desperate letter from Theo begging him to come home, Burr finally manages to obtain passage from London to Boston in March of 1812. He sails to New York where he sets up a small law practice, but he cannot yet risk traveling to see Theo on account of his outstanding arrest warrants. Theo's physical and mental health continue to deteriorate just as Alston's political career begins to flourish. Alston's appointment as Governor of South Carolina elicits little reaction from Theo. In January of 1813, Burr's concern over his daughter's health prompts him to arrange for Theo to be escorted by her waiting woman and a friend of Burr's to New York on a small vessel called the *Patriot*. Not long after their departure, the ship is caught in a horrific storm. The novel concludes with the sinking of the *Patriot* and the drowning of all passengers aboard.

The second historical novel that I will examine is *Katherine*, which was published in 1954. Seton divides *Katherine* into six parts, each of which covers a specific span of time in the life of Katherine Swynford. Part I covers 1366-1367 and begins with Katherine leaving the small convent in Sheppey where she has been housed for five years under royal order because her father died while serving as a knight in King Edward III's army. Upon receiving a summons from Queen Philippa, which was prompted by the fact that Katherine has reached the marriageable age of 15, Katherine journeys to London so that the Queen can determine her future. While she awaits an audience with the Queen,

Katherine catches the eye of Sir Hugh Swynford, a knight serving in the royal military forces of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. Immediately infatuated with Katherine, Swynford steadfastly pursues her. Katherine, in contrast, is repulsed by Hugh's manners and appearance, and instead, finds herself mesmerized by the Duke of Lancaster. Without Katherine's knowledge, Hugh proceeds in securing permission to marry Katherine from the Queen, the Duke, and Katherine's sister Philippa so that, in accordance with fourteenth-century cultural mores, Katherine has no choice but to accept Hugh's betrothal ring.

Katherine and Hugh are married in May of 1366. In a brief and unexpected appearance at the Swynford wedding, the Duke of Lancaster kisses Katherine in a playful gesture that ultimately sparks their mutual attraction for each other. Shortly after the wedded couple returns to Hugh's estate called Kettlethorpe manor, the Duke summons Hugh to serve in the royal army on a mission to avenge the unseating of King Pedro in Castile. Katherine is horrified to learn that she is pregnant by the husband she despises, but she rejoices at Hugh's departure. While he is away, Katherine gives birth to a daughter whom she names Blanchette in honor of Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster. Much to Katherine's dismay, Hugh returns home from Castile shortly after Blanchette is born.

Part II skips ahead two years to 1369 when England declares war on France after nine years of uneasy peace. Due to a disagreement, the Duke does not call Hugh back into royal military service, so Katherine is disappointed that she must endure Hugh's company at Kettlethorpe for an extended period of time. Katherine becomes pregnant again and gives birth to her son Thomas. The plague spreads throughout England and

infiltrates Bolingbroke Castle where it claims the life of the Duchess Blanche. Katherine travels to the Duke's Savoy Castle in London to attend Blanche's burial, and during her stay, the Duke sends a messenger to discreetly escort Katherine to the Duke's private Avalon Chamber. Once he is alone with Katherine, the Duke kisses her and attempts to seduce her to engage in intercourse. Although Katherine is equally attracted to the Duke, she refuses to commit adultery. They profess their romantic feelings for each other, but since Katherine is married and the Duke must commence with the proper mourning period for Blanche, their union is rather impossible. The Duke sends Katherine home with a letter which renews Hugh's service in the English army.

Part III covers the year of 1371 and begins with the Duke's taking over the rule of Aquitaine due to his brother's²⁸ ill health. Desiring even more power, the Duke decides to ask Costanza, Queen of Castile, for her hand in marriage to elevate his position to King of Castile. Hugh is injured in the war and bedridden in Bordeaux where the Duke now chiefly resides. The Duke sends word that Katherine must come to Bordeaux to treat her ailing husband, though his real motive is to see Katherine before he marries. Shortly after Katherine arrives in Bordeaux, the Duke disguises himself as an ordinary pilgrim and slips out of the castle undetected to speak with Katherine alone. He professes his love for her on his knees and begs her to sleep with him. Katherine reciprocates the Duke's love but is not willing to break her vow to remain faithful to Hugh. Deeply hurt, the Duke returns to his castle and commences with wedding plans, and Katherine returns to Hugh's bedside.

²⁸ King Edward III's eldest son, Edward of Woodstock, also known as "The Black Prince."

Hugh's health slowly improves until he is paid a visit by Nirac, one of the Duke's most trusted attendants. Unbeknownst to the Duke or Katherine, Nirac slips poison into Hugh's cup of medicine. Once Hugh unwittingly consumes the medicine, he suffers a swift and violent death. When the Duke learns of Hugh's death, he postpones his wedding to Costanza and immediately makes arrangements to travel in secret with Katherine to a castle in Les Landes to consummate their love for several days. They also make a covert two-week journey to the Pyrenees mountains where the Duke pledges his love to Katherine in an empty mountain chapel and gives her the royal betrothal ring, though he does not intend to marry her. When they return to Bordeaux, the Duke marries Costanza, appoints Katherine to be the royal governess to the two young ducal daughters Philippa and Elizabeth, and makes arrangements for Katherine's two children to join her at his Kenilworth and Leicester estates. Not surprisingly, Katherine soon learns that she is pregnant with the Duke's child.

Part IV skips ahead five years and covers 1376-1377. Katherine gives birth to two illegitimate sons, John and Henry Beaufort. The people of England grow tired of the Duke's unsuccessful military campaigns, and he falls out of favor with the Commons, a representative body of English citizens. The Duke is also accused of being a changeling—born not of noble blood—which, though not true, has been the Duke's deepest fear since boyhood. After a long period of separation, the Duke sends for Katherine to join him in London to attend the requiem mass for Duchess Blanche. However, Katherine and the Duke spend little time together because John is preoccupied with his deteriorating political reputation. An angry mob of Londoners gathers with the intent to hunt down and murder the Duke. When Katherine overhears the mob's intent

from several villagers, she sends one of the Duke's retinue to warn him, and the Duke's life is spared.

The Duke becomes wholly preoccupied with punishing the people of London for their lack of loyalty, so Katherine makes preparations to return with all of her children to Kettlethorpe. Just before Katherine departs, however, she receives an official summons from Princess Joan at Kennington Palace²⁹. When Katherine answers the summons, Princess Joan begs her to go to the Duke and deter him from waging a civil war in England. Though she is angry with the Duke, Katherine follows Joan's request. Katherine successfully prevents John of Gaunt from sending out the royal army against his own people. Their reunion reignites their love (and results in another pregnancy), but it also inspires the Duke to deal more leniently with the people of London. The English commoners' anger further abates when the Duke's young nephew, Richard II, is crowned following the death of the torpid King Edward III.

In Part V, which covers 1381, Katherine has a fourth child by the Duke. Civil unrest begins to grow again with the teachings of the Lollard preacher John Ball and the citizen's dislike of poll taxes, unsuccessful wars, and an unfair feudal system. Riotous mobs grow in number to upwards of 10,000 men who storm London and set fire to the Savoy Palace. During the chaos, the dying ducal bishop reveals to Katherine that her late husband Hugh was murdered by one of the Duke's attendants. Horrified, Katherine's eldest child, Blanchette, flees the castle after accusing her mother of being an adulteress and a murderer. Katherine narrowly escapes the crumbling castle with a head injury. Blanchette's stinging accusations inspire Katherine to send word to the Duke of her intent

²⁹ Not to be confused with Kensington Palace, which was built nearly four centuries later.

to end their sinful relationship, and she departs on a spiritual pilgrimage to Walsingham. The Duke is deeply hurt and angry when he receives Katherine's letter, so he vows never to see Katherine again and returns to living with the Queen Costanza. When Katherine finally reaches the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, she does not receive the kind of spiritual guidance she had anticipated. Entirely hopeless, Katherine tries to commit suicide by jumping into the river, but a nearby friar stops her and recommends consulting Julian of Norwich for spiritual guidance. Through the teachings of Julian of Norwich, Katherine makes peace with her sins. She returns to Kettlethorpe and sends for her children to join her there.

Part VI covers 1387-1396. After the Duke grants Katherine's request for him to send her children to Kettlethorpe, all communication between them stops. Katherine spends six years back at Kettlethorpe with her children, and her reputation with the townspeople slowly improves. When a local man eventually proposes to Katherine, she agrees on account of his kindness, even though she has no romantic feelings for him. Before they marry, however, Katherine unexpectedly runs into one of the Duke's former attendants during a trip into town. When the former ducal attendant informs her that the Duke has erected a statue of Saint Catherine as a silent homage to their love, Katherine's feelings for the Duke are reignited, and she breaks off her engagement. Despite their long separation, the Duke's feelings for Katherine have endured as well, for after the death of Queen Costanza, the Duke asks Katherine to marry him, and she accepts. Katherine leaves Kettlethorpe for the last time to live with the Duke at Windsor. After their legal union, their children are legitimized by the courts. The novel ends with an unexpected and joyful reunion between Katherine and her eldest child, Blanchette.

The third historical novel that I will include in my analysis of Seton's work is *The Winthrop Woman*, which tells the life story of Elizabeth Fones³⁰, the niece and—through her marriage to Henry Winthrop—also the daughter-in-law of John Winthrop, the first Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony. The novel is divided into three parts, each of which is designated to a specific time span and geographic location. Part I takes place in England from 1617 to 1631 and summarizes the major events in Elizabeth's life from age seven to twenty-one. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Elizabeth consistently rebels against her family's rigid Puritan beliefs, which are predominantly enforced by her pious uncle John Winthrop. She defies many of the expectations that strict Puritanism requires of women by making several bold attempts to forge a more self-directed existence. At 18, Elizabeth rejects the marriage proposal of the man that her father selects for her, and instead, pursues a romantic relationship with her cousin Henry (Harry) Winthrop. Though she is chastised for her disobedience by both her father and her uncle, Elizabeth remains undeterred and manages to secure their blessings on her marriage to Harry by becoming pregnant with his child. Almost immediately after their marriage, John Winthrop, Sr. orders Harry to accompany him to New England without Elizabeth. Four days prior to reaching New England, however, Harry drowns in a drunken swimming excursion. As a widow, Elizabeth gives birth to her first and only child by Harry back in England. Directly after Harry's death, John Winthrop, Sr. begins an overseas letter campaign to force Elizabeth to marry a man of his selection. Elizabeth, who is repulsed by the man her uncle selects, adamantly rejects to the proposed match and journeys with the rest of the Winthrop family to New England as a widowed mother.

³⁰ Fones was born in Suffolk, England in 1610.

Part II of *The Winthrop Woman* covers 1631 to 1640 and primarily takes place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Shortly after Elizabeth arrives in New England, her uncle re-doubles his efforts to force Elizabeth to marry another man named Robert Feake. Elizabeth agrees to the match because she finds that Feake is rather submissive and affords Elizabeth more of the autonomy that she desires. Elizabeth and Feake marry in December of 1631 and move to Watertown where they farm a plot of land. Elizabeth gives birth to another daughter, Elizabeth (Lisbet) Feake in 1633, and a son, John Feake, in 1638. Robert Feake begins showing signs of mental illness, and his strange moods and nightmares continue to increase in frequency. Unfounded rumors that the Feakes are involved in witchcraft through the teachings of their Native American servant force them to move to Connecticut in 1639.

Part III takes place in Connecticut and New Netherland and chronicles Elizabeth's life from 1640 to 1655. After leaving Watertown, the Feakes purchase land from local Native Americans and settle in Greenwich. In 1642, Elizabeth gives birth to another son, Robert, and about two years later, she delivers a daughter who dies in infancy. Robert Feake, Sr.'s mental condition grows progressively worse, and he eventually slips into a permanent state of delusion that prompts him to leave Greenwich and abandon Elizabeth and their four children. He is detained for mental instability in Stamford, and shortly thereafter, grants Elizabeth and a family friend, William Hallet, co-ownership over all of the Feake family land holdings and assets. After her husband's abandonment, Elizabeth begins a clandestine affair with Hallet and brazenly applies for a divorce decree in New Amsterdam. Although the Dutch governor grants Elizabeth a divorce from Feake on account of his mental condition, her request for a marriage license to wed Hallet is

denied. Elizabeth and Hallet resolve to conduct their own marital ceremony with an exchange of wedding bands.

Shortly after the birth of their son, William (Willy) Hallet, the legitimacy of Elizabeth's divorce from Feake and subsequent union with Hallet is questioned by Dutch officials and the couple is accused of committing adultery. They flee to New England in an attempt to escape persecution. However, as soon as a new Dutch governor is elected, Elizabeth sagaciously befriends the governor's wife, and through the influence of his wife's affinity for Elizabeth, the new governor gives his consent for the Hallets to be legally married and reinstated as Dutch citizens. After returning to Greenwich, the Hallet home is invaded by a band of Native Americans seeking revenge against local colonists for the senseless murders of several tribesmen. It is through Elizabeth's connection with her former Native American servant that the Hallets' lives are spared, but their homestead is still ransacked and burned to the ground. The Hallets relocate in New York where Elizabeth purchases land in Flushing and Newtown, Long Island. The novel ends with Elizabeth embarking on a nostalgic trip to Monakewaygo³¹, a small neck of land that she used to own in Greenwich. While walking alone, Elizabeth is struck by an overwhelming peace and an inclination that her death is imminent.

In all three novels, Seton's portrayal of each of her real-life female protagonists demonstrates the ways in which social constraints throughout history have consistently limited the acceptable behaviors of and the opportunities available to women, while affording men more freedom and more access to power. While all of Seton's real-life protagonists are pressured to conform to gender-specific codes of conduct that

³¹ Often referred to now as "Elizabeth's neck."

traditionally place them in subordinate positions of power in relation to men, they also find ways to negotiate more access to power and to garner greater degrees of autonomy.

In addition to demonstrating both blatant and subtle ways that Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones resist patriarchal power, Seton's novels also interrupt gender normative conceptualizations of well-known men throughout history by including in their portrayals the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that mainstream historical accounts have consistently excluded in order to create and uphold the illusion of absolute masculine competency. By providing a counter-narrative to dominant historical narratives which have repeatedly portrayed famous men as invulnerable, godlike figures, Seton challenges long-held assumptions about the singularity of masculine influence on the past. In recreating the lives of women who have been routinely left out of dominant historical narratives, Seton calls attention to the way that women, too, have shaped human history, and by complicating the kind of unblemished persona that has been habitually used in the historical portrayal of influential men, Seton unmask the façade of perfection that has been used as a mechanism to uphold male social dominance.

My analysis of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* primarily employs feminist New Historicism. This particular form of literary analysis has, to varying degrees, been utilized by many feminist theorists and literary scholars, but it has often been presented through the discourses of several other related theoretical models, including New Historicism, cultural materialism/cultural studies, and feminism. While my application of feminist New Historicism is certainly informed by several of the fundamental assumptions that contribute to all three of the aforementioned schools of thought, the numerous and varied definitions attached to each and the many

disagreements about the ideological relationships between them make it necessary to first address some of the common debates that have surrounded New Historicism, cultural materialism, and feminism before discussing the specific hermeneutics of feminist New Historicism.

One point of contention concerns the varied perceptions of the relationship between feminism and cultural materialism. Some feminists have been hesitant to endorse cultural materialism because of its ties to Marxism, a social theory which has often left out a consideration of the material conditions of women's lives. While this is a valid and important critique, the primary assumption that feminist New Historicism has in common with contemporary perceptions of feminism and cultural materialism is the premise that knowledge is culturally constructed. The Foucauldian impulse to consider all knowledge mediated by discourse and imbued with power is integral to understanding the important role that Seton's novels play in challenging the authority traditionally afforded to dominant historical narratives. *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* essentially call attention to the fact that male historiography has largely neglected to include the many ways in which women have shaped the trajectory of history.

Other theoretical debates that are related to some of the primary concerns of feminist New Historicism depend on how one views the relationship between New Historicism and cultural materialism. Most literary scholars are comfortable with acknowledging that these two schools of thought are remarkably similar in that they both take into consideration how particular cultural conditions influence the creation and reception of a text. However, vehement disagreements have erupted over their perceived differences. Each school of thought has been defined in a variety of ways, which has led

some scholars to privilege one over the other, even in some cases, it appears, for no reason other than squabbles over of national attachment—cultural materialism having developed out of the work of British theorists and New Historicism having developed from the work of American theorists. Those who believe that the differences between New Historicism and cultural materialism make them totally incompatible often reproach others for conflating the two schools of thought. Jonathan Dollimore, for example, accuses Carol Neely’s attempt to acknowledge the similarities between cultural materialism and New Historicism with her neologism “cult-historicists” as a reduction of “the British work to a fashionable modifier of its more substantial American manifestation” (Dollimore 472). My intention is not to conflate cultural materialism and New Historicism in my reading of Seton’s novels, nor to deny that my application of feminist New Historicism does employ an evaluation of the material conditions of American women writers of the 1940s and 1950s in order to elucidate how the gender politics which existed during this specific historical moment affected Seton’s writing of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*. My interpretation of Seton’s novels, however, is best labeled New Historicist because of the degree to which I will focus on the complexities surrounding the creation and dissemination of historical knowledge and because the Greenblattian progenitors of New Historicism have traditionally allowed for a narrower and more sustained focus on literature than those who engage in cultural materialism.

Finally, the theoretical debates that have been launched about the compatibility between feminism and New Historicism are, quite obviously, important to address. Even the most cursory review of scholarship about the development of New Historicism and

feminism reveal evidence of an oftentimes contentious relationship. Wai-Chee Dimock, for example, calls the relationship “a peculiar one” that can incite “unusually acrimonious polemics” (601). She attributes this conflict to the belief that each methodology sees itself as being either marginalized or entirely overlooked by the other (Dimock 601). Feminists have argued that New Historicism, while it is aware of several post-modern concepts that feminism holds dear (i.e. there are no universal truths, experience is contingent upon social positioning, knowledge is constructed and mediated by power), has not maintained an adequate (or rather, necessary) awareness of issues related to gender and sexuality. One of the reasons for this theoretical tension, suggests Alison Conway, is that “the politics of New Historicism” have been “difficult to pin down” (26). Much of this difficulty arises from the fact that scholars from a variety of academic specializations³² employ any number of tenets that have been associated with New Historicism in their work, which has naturally given birth to several distinctive—and sometimes conflicting—understandings of not only New Historicism itself, but also of its relationship to feminist theory.

Teasing out the alleged conflicts between feminist theory and New Historicism might best be accomplished by considering the implications of posing the following guiding question: “What makes New Historicism *feminist*?” Inherent in this question is the assumption that *feminist* New Historicism, as a method of critically interpreting literature, *requires* further articulation, legitimation, and authorization. Several feminist literary critics (Wai-Chee Dimock, Alison Conway, and Judith Newton, to name a few) have identified the ways in which understandings of the trajectory, primary goal, and use-

³² Including philosophy, history, literature, art history, cultural studies, women’s and gender studies, and linguistics.

value of New Historicism in scholarly circles, by and large, have not only failed to incorporate a feminist point of view, but that feminism's role in New Historicism has been either misunderstood or entirely ignored.

According to Newton, most discussions of the origins of New Historicism either minimize feminism's contributions or fail to mention them at all (Newton 90-91). For her, the solution to this problem is to "writ[e] feminist work into the history of 'new historicism,'" by which she means to redefine New Historicism in a way that makes feminist theory visible (Newton 93). Like Newton, I contend that specifically "feminist articulations" of the beliefs and practices associated with New Historicism "can produce histories that are different in ways which should prompt all of us to think beyond some current understandings of 'history' and social change, and understandings which often inform less feminist versions of 'new historicism'" (Newton 93). For Newton, "feminist articulations" of the critical assumptions that are widely associated with New Historicism, including "post-modern assumptions about 'objectivity,' the construction of the subject, and the cultural power of representation" are "*significantly different* from what have become the more dominant, more fashionable" precepts of New Historicism (my emphasis, Newton 99). Essentially, Newton is contesting the fact that the majority of New Historicist scholarship—"the more dominant, more fashionable" scholarship—continues to represent the past in ways that make women relatively invisible or fail to recognize gender as a primary organizing principle of social power. However, simply making women visible in history or tacking on an acknowledgement of gender does not perform the kind of revolutionary work that can be done through feminist New Historicism.

Ellen Pollak's article, "Feminism and The New Historicism: A Tale of Difference or the Same Old Story?" was one of the first to specifically address the possibility of a *feminist* New Historicism in 1988. In her article, Pollak first calls attention to the failure of Historicism and Formalism to include work by and about women, which has been a common feminist critique (281). She then argues that simply including the study of women "within existing epistemological and institutional structures" will not ultimately rectify the problem of "women's cultural exclusion" (Pollak 281). She sees New Historicism as offering space for the voices of women who have been left out of the history, but suggests that feminist New Historicism goes further by problematizing how literary and cultural value has traditionally been assigned to texts.

Later in the same year that Pollak's article was published, Judith Newton published "History as Usual?: Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" which is a much more intensive study of the relationship between feminism and New Historicism. Newton's article provides a clearer articulation of what feminist New Historicism is by calling attention to the ways that it differs from a traditional New Historicist lens:

But the important difference still lies in the degree to which gender relations, gender struggle, women, and women's activities and power are seen as being within "history," are seen as having significant or causative relation to the political and economic realms traditionally associated with men. This difference [. . .] makes for other differences in what "history" looks like, makes for differences in what is included as "history" in the first place, and makes for differences in what constitutes an historical period. It makes for differences, finally, in the degree to which dominant representations and hegemonic ideologies are imagined as monolithic and anonymous or as composed of many voices. It makes for differences in the degree to which hegemonic ideology and power are seen as stable and impervious to change and the degree to which they are imagined to be internally divided, unstable, and in constant need of construction and revision, creating conditions which make social change and the agency of the weak possible. (Newton 103-104)

Feminist New Historicism, then, is a theoretical approach that, when applied to literature, focuses specifically on identifying and examining gendered cultural codes, gender-specific forms and limitations of power, and the gender-b(i)ased authority of dominant social institutions and ideologies that are in circulation during specific historical moments.

The application of feminist New Historicism to literature subscribes to the foundational beliefs of New Historicism, but rather than viewing a New Historicist lens as an end in itself, feminist New Historicism uses a New Historicist lens as a *means* to an end. It employs the New Historicist activity of “establishing the conditions for a radical rethinking of how literary or aesthetic value is determined,” while simultaneously engaging in “precisely the kind of questioning of the traditional literary canon that feminist criticism has long urged” (Pollak 282). Dimock comes to a similar conclusion that the “supposed disagreement” and “presumed distinction” between New Historicism and feminist theory “in fact impoverishes both” (602). Instead, Dimock argues, scholars need to re-envision the relationship between feminist criticism and New Historicism as a “serviceable juncture from which and against which both critical enterprises might be evaluated, held up for mutual reflection, and perhaps for mutual realignment” (602). In order to specifically identify the ways that a text uses feminist strategies to interrupt gender hegemony, the complex web of gender hegemonic influences must be examined alongside the text. The most productive feminist New Historicist work should not seek to diminish or dismiss the impact of the cultural or theoretical ideals that were intricately woven into the fabric of particular historical moments but should endeavor to re-visit, re-imagine, and, in doing so, revolutionize those small, manageable parts of the literary

world that will always have something more to tell us about our history, our history as women, our history as women writers, our history of women reading women writers, and, perhaps most rare of all, the history of women whose stories have never been told.

Seton's work in the 1940s and 1950s on women who have been regularly left out of dominant historical narratives essentially anticipates the beginning of second-wave feminism's movement to revive the voices of women from the past. While twenty-first century feminist scholars have continued to study the history of women and women's writing that has previously been ignored, they have arguably not maintained the kind of enthusiasm evidenced by the sheer amount of work produced in the 1970s and 1980s (Garrity 803). Adrienne Rich's call to action in 1972 resounds with the kind of fervor and immediacy that should be applied to the textual recovery movement today: "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" ("When We" 18-19). The virtual non-existence of critical discussions of Seton's historical novels in twenty-first century scholarship serves as both a glaring indication of how much work is yet to be done in recovering the voices of women throughout history, but also a testament to the fact that the mechanisms which have been silencing women's voices for centuries are still operative today.

CHAPTER TWO

SITUATING ANYA SETON'S HISTORICAL FICTION IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

"We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."

—Adrienne Rich³³

The scholarly dismissal of Anya Seton's historical novels, *My Theodosia* (1941), *Katherine* (1954), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958), stems from four levels of systemic normative policing. At a macro level, women's fiction, in general, has been subjected to silencing and devaluing mechanisms for centuries, which has resulted in the habitual privileging of male-authored texts³⁴. At the generic level, beginning in the early twentieth-century, historical fiction³⁵ and the sub-genre of historical romance have been considered less serious forms of literature in the academy, especially because they have been popular with women readers. At the authorial level, historical fiction written by women during the early and mid-twentieth century has been given *even less* scholarly attention than male-authored historical fiction of the same time period. Finally, Anya Seton's historical fiction, in particular, has been dismissed by the academy due to the historically-specific cultural and literary climate of 1940s and 1950s America.

³³ (Rich, "When We," 19)

³⁴ See Enszer (2016), Anderson (2016), and Barnes and Munsch (2015) for current studies that demonstrate that sexism is still a prevalent issue in the contemporary publishing industry.

³⁵ Only in the last 30 years has historical fiction been re-envisioned as a genre worthy of scholarly study (Nagy 7).

The dominant ideologies and sources of authority at all four of these levels occur simultaneously, work interactively, and function collectively; it is through their combined influence that the historical fiction of Anya Seton has been continually dismissed by scholars for seventy-five years. Only by exposing the dismissive forces working at the macro, generic, authorial, and individual levels does the long-concealed feminist significance of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* become visible.

At the macro-level of systematic normative policing, the voices that have historically defined the American literary tradition have been overwhelmingly male, and the production of knowledge has traditionally been considered a male discursive space. This privileging of male voices has perpetuated the association between “Masculinity and authorship,” and ultimately, the notion that men are the “culturally acceptable authority” in the field of literature (Frye 4). Within this culturally constructed framework, women’s voices are always already part of a discursive system which routinely places them in a subordinate position. In addition to the fact that twentieth-century scholarship has been chiefly devoted to the study of fiction written by men, one of the most coercive phenomena that has assisted in maintaining patriarchal control over the field of American literature is through the systemic exclusion of women’s writing from the “official” literary canon. Establishing a male-dominated literary canon has served as a cultural endorsement of the patriarchal ideologies which inform most canonical texts, as well as a symbolic rejection of dissenting voices. Historically, the American literary canon has “privilege[d] conservative and phallogocentric values in its choice of favoured texts” and “deliberately expel[led] the subversive and the challenging” (Makinen 1). By enforcing a literary hierarchy in which “women’s experience is defined as inferior to, less

important than, or ‘narrower’ than men’s experience,” the majority of narratives written by women are “automatically denigrated” (Russ, *How to Suppress* 48). The conceptual construction of the literary canon has been achieved through a series of coercive acts, such as limiting college reading lists, gate-keeping leadership positions in university departments, leveraging editorial control over which authors are included in the most prestigious scholarly journals, and advancing only faculty who pursue research and curriculums which uphold masculine authority.

The promulgation of the canon’s incontestability has made the task of challenging its composition even more difficult. Coercive gender politics have been deployed to maintain patriarchal control over the cultural scripts embedded in women’s fiction by establishing which topics, plotlines, settings, characters, and narrative voices are “acceptable” for women to pursue in writing. Gender-specific expectations in literature have been primarily enforced through the process of naturalization; in other words, those who have historically been in positions of authority in the literary field have portrayed characteristics in content and form as *naturally* feminine and *naturally* masculine. Efforts to obscure the ways in which canonicity is pragmatically vetted and policed by those who have traditionally held positions of authority within the field of literature have been effective in creating the illusion that canonical literature is *inherently* better than non-canonical literature (and, by proxy, the assumption that male authors are *inherently* superior to female authors). In addition, the kind of authority granted to male writers has also been historically different than the kind of authority granted to female writers. According to Gaye Tuchman, the Victorian novelistic tradition, which undoubtedly had a great influence on twentieth-century literature, established the expectation that authors

must garner authority in writing in very gender-specific ways. She asserts that the “authority of the woman [author] is based on her feelings, her intuitions, her connection with the earth and nature, in short, on her reproductive body,” whereas the authority of male authors appears to be “based on his will, his reason, his name[,] which both identifies him with the patriarchal good and distinguishes him from other men, in short, his productive mind” (Tuchman 25). At the turn of the twentieth century, whereas male protagonists were allowed (and, indeed, expected) to embark on limitless adventures, the fates of female protagonists were particularly restricted. According to Johanna Russ, only three basic plotlines were considered acceptable for the pre-1960 female protagonist: falling in love, dying, or going mad (Russ, “What Can” 85). If women wanted their work to be published, they were *expected* to adhere to specifically “feminine” plotlines; from a normative perspective, plots that followed a strong, autonomous, and goal-oriented female protagonist were rather incomprehensible. According to Frye, “The paradigmatic plots based in the qualities of strength, autonomy, and aspiration seem reserved for male protagonists; the paradigmatic plots based in specifically female experience seem to confine women in domesticity and apparent passivity” (1). Autonomous female characters are, therefore, “an apparent contradiction in cultural terms,” which makes them “lose novelistic plausibility as women” (Frye 5). For many women writers, these literary expectations are internalized simply through observing the work of other women that has been “allowed” into print.

At the authorial level, the institutional enforcement of masculinist ideology has been so ingrained in literary culture that women writers themselves often unconsciously perpetuate patriarchal power. Such deeply entrenched literary expectations “cut deep into

the psyche of the woman writer” (Rich, “When We” 19). Women are essentially haunted by the “specter” of “male judgement” during the writing process (Rich, “When We” 20). For women like Seton, who were writing prior to the rise of Elaine Showalter’s gynocriticism in the late 1970s, the feminist textual recovery moment of the 1980s, and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in the 1990s, the pressure to conform to normative “feminine” literary scripts was more intense. In *Writing Women’s Literary History*, Margaret Ezell calls attention to likelihood that “the structures used to shape our narrative of women’s literary history may have unconsciously continued the existence of the restrictive ideologies that initially erased the vast majority of women’s writings from literary history and teaching texts” (15). Ezell’s book was published in 1993, and over twenty years later, the same problems that she identifies concerning the recovery of women writers and accounts of women’s literary history are still relevant.

At the macro-level, women’s fiction has historically been devalued through the hierarchical categorization of literature. During the nineteenth century, literary critics began distinguishing between “popular” fiction and “literary” fiction when assessing the literary value of individual texts. Fiction designated as “literary” was highly respected and considered exemplary of high art and culture. Those texts deemed “literary” were included in the Western literary canon proper and enthusiastically discussed by esteemed scholars. “Popular” fiction, by contrast, was considered to be the mindless reading of the masses, who consumed the newly available paperback indiscriminantly and without paying critical attention to carefully analyzing the aesthetic merits or demerits of any individual text. Gender politics entered heavily into this method of evaluation, as distinctions between “the popular” and “the literary” were often based upon a text’s

adherence to characteristics that, not surprisingly, were found in the work of those who claimed positions of authority. In this way, literary prestige itself has been a veiled form of masculine privilege. This distinction between “the popular” and “the literary” started brewing during the Victorian age when the number of female authors had increased significantly and some even dominated sales and popularity (Poster 287). Threatened by the growing popularity of Victorian novels written by women, the designation of “the popular” and “the literary” functioned as a strategy to quickly redeem and perpetuate patriarchal power over the literary terrain:

It is no coincidence that the popular and the literary became more sharply divided at the very period when female authorship was on the rise. The few novelists who achieved substantial popularity in the Victorian era but are still reprinted in the twentieth century and discussed regularly in academic journals are male (Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope ...). The Brontës and [George] Eliot, whose fiction has been accepted as “literary,” wrote under male pseudonyms, thus distinguishing their work from that of popular women novelists. Nineteenth-century cross-dressing has resulted in twentieth-century canonicity. The nature of patriarchal society and the inertia of reception can account for the omission of popular women authors from our literary histories. (Poster 288)

Carol Poster astutely describes how the creation of a literary hierarchy was used as a way to suppress the growth of women’s discourse. Even if women’s writing warranted the label of “literary,” the gender politics of the canon clearly coerced readers and writers alike to associate the “literary” (and thus, more prestigious) with the male author and the “popular” (and thus, less prestigious) with the female author. This damaging association continued to gain momentum in the twentieth century. Modernists like James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence contributed to a growing insistence on a separation between popular literature and true art (Stewart 21). This generation of modernist writers “would eschew the depiction of the commercial side of literature in favor of a focus on ‘the development

of the Artist” (Stewart 21). They assumed, of course, that the modernist “Artist” was male.

Especially during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the hierarchical division of literature became yet another avenue through which to suppress (the markedly successful) historical fiction written by women³⁶. Innovations in print-making made news and book publication faster and more cost-efficient than ever before. At the same time, improvements in radio broadcast technology and film production made both forms of media major competitors in the entertainment industry, so many publication companies lowered book prices even further by transitioning from hard to soft cover books. The commodification of printed material made it more affordable and more accessible to an increasingly literate middle-class, which forced those who had enjoyed power and privilege prior to the new era of mass production to grapple with the reality that literature and art were no longer the unique possessions of the wealthy and educated elite. Many literary scholars in the first decades of the twentieth century were gripped by a profound fear that the growing middle-class and their rapid consumption of mass-market paperbacks threatened “the vitality and integrity of true artistic accomplishment” (Hutner, “The 1950s” 270). In addition, post-war literary critics echoed general concerns about

³⁶ Janet Montefiore argues that women writers in the 1930s were particularly omitted from literary discussions. She reviews a number of literature surveys on the period and notes that “In all these representations of the Thirties, women are conspicuous by their absence” (Montefiore 21). She suggests that several “political folk memories” that were created to deal with the tumultuousness of the times (she cites communist fears, the precipice of World War II, and the economic and political oppression of the working-class) are “all male” and “presupposes knowledge as a masculine domain (Montefiore 21-22). Montefiore contends that this elision of women writers is not simply the result of “sexual prejudice” but due to the “lingering notion of women as private creatures living apart from the public sphere inhabited by male politicians and intellectuals” (22). Ultimately, she argues, using concepts from Maurice Halbwachs, that “the public and political narratives” that form collective memory have made the inclusion of 1930s women work impossible (Montefiore 27).

the drop in the male population, the boom of post-war divorce rates, the threat to the traditional family unit structure posed by the entry of women in the workforce³⁷, and a widespread fear that masculinity (and, therefore, American society) was in danger of unforeseeable disasters due to the fragile psyches and physical limitations of returning GIs³⁸. The New Woman³⁹, after her emergence in the nineteenth century, continued to provoke strong anxieties about the loss of male control in the workplace, in the home, and in the academy during the first five decades of twentieth century.

Fears of losing elitist and masculine control over the field of literature prompted intellectuals to guard their authority by defining, developing, and defending the hierarchy of literary value. Especially during the 1920s, literary scholars became invested in making a clear distinction between “literary” fiction and “popular” fiction. The Post-World War I literary landscape, which featured the “advent of the ‘best-seller,’” was strictly divided, essentially characterizing the pillars of “modernism as masculine” and “popular writing as feminine” (Stewart 22). For early twentieth-century literati, “the middlebrow had become the symbol—and engine—of the resistance that had balked the elite from providing its tonic of art and ideas to a ‘mass’ society,” so they made extensive efforts to “assail the midcult more ferociously than ever” (Hutner, “The 1950s” 270).

³⁷ See pages 278-279 of Susan Thistle’s article entitled, “The Trouble with Modernity: Gender and the Remaking of Social Theory.”

³⁸ See Thebaud’s discussion entitled “Explorations of Gender” (pages 1-13) and “The Great War and the Triumph of Sexual Division” (pages 21-75) in volume five of *A History of Women*.

³⁹ Fleissner defines “The New Woman” as follows: “She was commonly identified with certain unmistakable changes in the lives of white, middle-class women, in particular, in the decades following the Civil War: increasing rates of higher education (in 1870, 21 percent of American college students were female, by 1910, 40 percent); a new presence in the workplace, particularly in burgeoning white-collar fields such as clerical work (2.5 percent female in 1870; dominated by women by 1930); and, in the home, trends toward smaller families” (Fleissner 37).

Differentiating between “good” and “bad” literature became a major focus in 1940s and 1950s literary scholarship.

The campaign against mass-market fiction was fueled by many of the most respected literary critics of the early and mid-twentieth century. At the individual level, Seton’s fiction was attacked directly by Edmund Wilson, who is often credited with being “the most important critic of the twentieth century” (Dabney 518). Wilson had a colossal impact on literary scholarship during the time that Seton was publishing. In 1950, Wilson published *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle for the Forties*, which served as a proverbial guidebook to assist readers in distinguishing between the “popular” and the “literary.” Wilson, as the chief book critic for *The New Yorker* from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s, was endowed with literary authority capable of solidifying the reputation of a single writer for decades, and he reserved some of his most biting criticism for Anya Seton. In the February 16, 1946 edition of *The New Yorker*, Wilson wages an unbridled attack against Seton’s historical novel *The Turquoise* (1946) in his article entitled, “Ambushing a Best-Seller: ‘The Turquoise’”: “The whole thing is as synthetic, as arbitrary, as basically cold and dead, as a scenario for a film. And now the question presents itself: Will real men and women buy and read this arid rubbish, which has not even the rankness of the juicier trash?” Here, Wilson even transfers his criticism of Anya Seton onto any “real” man or woman who purchases *The Turquoise*. In so doing, he equates the literary hierarchy with a cultural hierarchy. His message is clear: no person of consequence should be caught dead with a copy of *The Turquoise*, lest he or she wishes to commit social suicide. And yet the majority of Wilson’s review consists of a detailed plot summary that does not call attention to any specific literary flaw, nor does

he provide concrete evidence to demonstrate why he considers the novel “basically cold and dead.” Wilson’s blanket dismissal of *The Turquoise*, which is devoid of any critical exegesis, is likely a result of his general hatred of mass-market publishing and lingering anger over the fact that Seton’s earlier novel *Dragonwyck* (1944)—which Wilson also dismissed as “popular trash”⁴⁰—was scheduled to be released in film version less than two months after his review of *The Turquoise*. In Steven Dillon’s recently released book-length analysis of 1940s culture, he attributes Wilson’s attitude toward Seton to the fact that Wilson linked what he saw as “mass culture corruption of Hollywood to the antiliterary goal of writing a bestseller” (Dillon 35-36). Wilson’s literary tastes, in Dillon’s estimation, are equivalent to “material that other readers would find dry as dust” (36). While Wilson criticizes some best-sellers written by men, he always seems to find within them *some* redeemable quality. For example, in his review of Lloyd Douglas’s best-seller *The Robe* (1942), which was also later released in film version, Wilson writes that, despite the novel’s ““five-and-ten cent store writing,”” he found the quality ““rather surprising”” and goes on to credit Douglas’s imaginative skill (Wilson qtd. in Berthoff 129). Not surprisingly, the most respected (male) literary critics who were invested in creating this literary hierarchy designated the majority of women’s fiction as “popular” or “middlebrow” in an effort to maintain masculine control over the field of literature.

Pre-1960s scholarship in literature did not always provide lucid reasons for the designation of texts as “popular” or “literary,” yet the overwhelming majority of fiction written by women during the first half of the twentieth century is still considered to be “popular” fiction. Of course, on the surface, being a novelist who is widely read would

⁴⁰ (Dillon 35)

seem a testament to the writer's skill and craft. However, "popular" fiction has been conceptualized in the American literary imagination as a testament to the writer's *lack* of artistic ability. According to Pavel, even most twenty-first century scholars of literature "openly or implicitly" support the following belief: "Whereas 'literature' is indifferent to (if not contemptuous of) the marketplace, original, and complex, popular fiction is simple, sensuous, exaggerated, exciting, and formulaic (for example, Gelder; Radway; Makinen; Warpole). 'Real' writers spend decades agonizing over each sentence, while genre hacks produce a new paperback each year, to be 'consumed' in airports and quickly discarded" (Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* 22). The correlation between popular fiction as second-rate literature is so pervasive that it is visible in the scholarship of both men *and women*.

The analytical maneuver of differentiating between popular (encoded as "bad") and literary (encoded as "good") fiction has routinely assisted in the dismissal of popular women's fiction and the simultaneous legitimation of a literary critic's object of study. An example of this phenomenon can be found in Nancy A. Walker's 1990 book, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women*. Although Walker focuses her analysis on women's novels published from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s (after the publication of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*), her adamant differentiation between female-authored "popular romance novels" and what she calls "realist novels" aligns with the same kind of maneuver that was used to dismiss best-selling fiction written by women in the 1940s and 1950s. Within Walker's ten-page introduction, she makes six attempts to assure her reading audience of the value of her study by setting it apart from popular fiction, and more specifically, from fiction that

contains elements of romance. Referring to “popular romances” as those “wholly unironic texts which do not question their own assumptions or the assumptions of readers” (5), Walker stresses that the texts used in her study are *not* of the popular variety:

It is important to set the novels with which this study deals—fictions by Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, Gail Godwin, Margaret Drabble, Fay Weldon, Doris Lessing, Alice Walker, and others—against the popular romance novels which, according to some estimates, account for four out of ten paperback book sales, not least because the popular romance is a recurring metaphor and narrative element in these novels of struggle and change. The popular romances, such as the Harlequins and Silhouettes, are *acceptable* fantasies; they endorse rather than challenge cultural assumptions about women’s nature and aspirations, reinforcing what Rachel Brownstein has called the ‘marriage plot’ as the proper script for women’s lives. (*italics original*, Walker 5)

In one swift move, Walker becomes a purveyor of the kind of dismissive attitude which has relegated women’s popular fiction to the outer margins of mainstream scholarship. Of course, at the same time, her decision to reinscribe this normative ideology is almost certainly prompted by the desire to elevate the legitimacy and value of her own work.

While I am not suggesting that all popular fiction, in any genre, contains the kind of self-consciousness and facility required to launch a successful critique of normative gender ideology, I am also unwilling to take up the mantle of indiscrimination that has been applied to popular fiction—especially popular fiction written by women—in order to render them devoid of any scholarly value. Male dominance in the literary canon has thrived on the pressure to adopt the sort of uncritical dismissal that Anya Seton’s historical novels have received. The fact that all three of Seton’s historical novels sold well quite immediately after their publication branded her work as “popular” rather than “literary,” and accordingly, as unworthy of scholarly attention. The initial designation of

My Theodosia, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* as “popular” fiction has, unfortunately, been the enduring opinion of scholars for nearly 80 years.

Also functioning at the macro-level of systematic normative policing, literary anthologies have and continue to play a central role in defining and policing the literary canon, and their impact on the perceived relationship between gender and literary ability cannot be overstated. Statistical evidence from one of the most respected literary anthologies in American scholarship, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (*NAEL*), serves as a demonstration of the gender bias that exists in the field of literature. Thousands of students and scholars view these anthologies as definitive source books. By their very inclusion, the texts in the *NAEL* become vetted as “the literature of the greatest cultural value” (Gualtieri 97). The astounding exclusion of women’s writing in eight consecutive editions of the *NAEL*, published between 1962 and 2006, coupled with the fact that the editorial boards of all eight editions consisted of a male majority, blatantly suggests that only men have the “ability to determine which works are of value” and that men are the only ones “who are knowledgeable” about true literary value (Gualtieri 97). The first edition of the *NAEL* was published in 1962 and had an editorial staff entirely composed of men who “were selected on the basis of their expertness in their individual [genre] areas” (Gualtieri 100-101). In fact, the first four editions of the *NAEL* (published in 1962, 1968, 1974, and 1979) were composed of entirely male editorial boards. The first edition (1962) includes the work of only six female authors, which equates to occupying 1.164% of the pages in the entire edition (Gualtieri 100-101). Even in the eighth edition, which was published in 2006, the gender composition of the editorial board was still gravely uneven (at only 33.33% female), and the work of women

writers occupies a shameful 14.619% of the page total (Gualtieri 103). Furthermore, as Robinson notes, most of the women who are included in major literary anthologies are those who “conform as closely as possible to the traditional canons of taste and judgement” (89). Of course, there have been, since the late twentieth-century, literary anthologies in circulation which exclusively focus on literature written by women.

Anthologies of women’s fiction have certainly played an important role in giving voice to authors who have been traditionally excluded from comprehensive literature anthologies. However, in practice, these specialized anthologies have also *contributed* to the marginalization of women’s fiction. The creation of “alternative” or “separate” anthologies assists in “othering” female authors, marking them as different, and by proxy, unworthy of comprehensive literary anthologies (Gualtieri 105). Because the appearance of women’s literature anthologies has not had a significant impact on improving the gender parity in most comprehensive anthologies—not to mention that fact that contemporary anthologies of American literature still rarely deviate from the *same* short-list of women writers whose inclusion in the literary canon has been approved of by male scholars—the gains made by specialized anthologies of women’s literature have, unfortunately, not been enough to combat the gender bias that remains prevalent in today’s comprehensive literary anthologies.

The macro-level mechanisms that control both the practical and ideological access to non-normative ideas about women and women’s writing have endured for most of the twentieth century—and clearly, still have an impact on twenty-first century literary study. Until the feminist textual recovery movement that began in the 1980s, the curriculums in primary, secondary, and post-secondary American classrooms have predominately taught

literature through the example of male authors. Certainly, there have been special cases like Jane Austen, the Brontës, and Virginia Woolf, but course reading lists, when they do include women, have rarely deviated from the regular offering of the same small handful of women writers. The compulsory educational focus on fiction written by men has also been reflected in standard literary histories, which has only more deeply ingrained the notion of male intellectual and literary superiority into the minds of American readers.

At the individual level, Seton's exclusion from the literary canon has also been enforced through the literary histories of fiction that were published during the time that Seton was writing *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*. Most literary histories of the 1940s and 1950s support the myth that women writing during these two decades did not produce the kind of literature that is worth revisiting today. In *What America Read: Taste, Class, and The Novel*, one of the most informed and extensive examinations of popular American fiction published from 1920 to 1960, Gordon Hutner demonstrates that literary histories of the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century have been especially narrow and deceiving, particularly in their lack of attention to the novels written by women. The historical events of the late 1940s have contributed to the habitual failure to include women's fiction—even best-selling women's fiction—in the literary histories that claim to trace the fiction of this period. According to Hutner, American women writers were “slighted in the years that followed [the recent war] for not being veterans” because “their contributions were typically considered less important than those of the male writers” (“The 1940s” 268). Hutner reasons that the critical attitude toward women's writing that existed directly after the end of World War II has had lasting effects on its reception today:

The residual effect of these women writers' invisibility was a diminution of the value of domestic fiction, on the one hand, but, on the other, a consistent level of misprizing the achievements of women writers in the decades to come. So much of the historiography of the postwar era is a narrative of omission and neglect, beginning in the late '40s, when the search for a way of interpreting the relative weakness of the literary scene led critics to lose sight of the centrality of women writers and turn their attention to males. For it was then that the inordinate critical demands on American fiction also began to interpret the middle-class novel as too trivial to warrant serious attention. The result was the loss of a crucial mission for the novel to serve. (Hutner, "The 1940s" 268)

The history of 1950s literature has also, unfortunately, often been traced through a rather narrow selection of material, typified in the contemporary imagination by the experimental fiction of Beat Generation writers like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg (Hutner, "The 1950s" 271). While this decade of writers is not unique in that the most revered authors are men, the opinions of contemporaneous literary critics seem to have had an unusually strong hold on how current scholars view women's writing from this decade:

In general, contemporary scholars of American culture have accepted the judgement of '50s critics like Bernard DeVoto, who derogated the way '50s novelists tried to come to terms with the postwar era, including the atomic age and anticommunism. In doing so, they perpetuate, unwittingly, the critical scorn for their efforts to register and confront the way we lived then—the situation of women, relations between the races, rebellious youth, and the crisis of ethics pervading public life. (Hutner, "The 1950s" 285)

This "critical scorn" ultimately led to the concealment of many of the important conversations that were occurring about traditionally marginalized groups. The "residual disregard" of minority writers is partially contributable to the way that academic critics have treated literary histories of the 1950s, with little effort to "provide the full history of fiction in [this] decade" (Hutner, "The 1950s" 285). In addition to being conspicuously

underrepresented in literary histories, the devaluation of women's fiction has also been executed through the proliferation of genre biases in the academy.

At the generic level, the associated labels, definitions, conventions, and reputations of different literary genres are rooted in historically and culturally specific notions of aesthetic value. The dominant assumptions that exist about certain genres (and their associated sub-genres) have both immediate and lasting effects on the scholarly reception of individual novels. The process of genre labeling, therefore, wields tremendous power in determining literary prestige, acceptance into the literary canon, and reputation in literary scholarship. Hybrid genres like historical fiction have been especially difficult to define because of the long-standing opinion that history and fiction are fundamentally opposed. The genre of historical fiction, in particular, has received more divisive opinions than most because of its inherent hybridity: it straddles the traditionally clear-cut lines between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, and reality and fantasy. Prior to the "historical turn"⁴¹ of the early nineteenth century, the historical accounts of respected (male) scholars were considered definitive records of the past. History was considered a purveyor of fact, an objective chronicling of national affairs, social movements, and contributions of important people. On the other hand, fiction has been commonly understood as the work of pure imagination; while real places, events, people, or circumstances might be referenced in works of fiction, they are not bound to the corroboration of fact. The majority of genre studies scholarship on

⁴¹ Strehle and Carden define the historical turn as the point at which "History lost its privileged status as a closed and final narrative" and had to surrender the illusion that it could deliver an authoritative narrative through an "unmediated access to external fact" (xxii).

historical fiction has been devoted to fleshing out the way that truth and objectivity should be understood in historical narratives.

The adoption of history as a formal academic discipline in American universities was largely influenced by the founders of the Göttingen School of History in Germany. Established during the late 18th century, the Göttingen School demanded the implementation of a scientific approach to historical research. Following the teachings of the Göttingen School, German historian Leopold von Ranke was extremely influential in inaugurating history as a scientifically rigorous field—deserving of the same respect afforded to the hard sciences. Therefore, because the historical fiction writer “intervenes in a field which already exists as an authoritative discourse” (Ferris 73), it received criticism for being a sort of erroneous interloper in a field that was already established as the veritable record of the past.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, several well-known philosophers began to challenge the hitherto widely accepted Rankean philosophy of history as a scientifically objective, source-based record of the past. In reaction to von Ranke’s theory, Hegel, Droysen, and Nietzsche contended that because interpretation is an “irreducible and inexpugnable” component of history, the appointment of one version of history as *the* unadulterated record of the past is impossible (H. White, “Interpretation” 283). Unlike von Ranke, Hegel, Droysen, and Nietzsche “placed historiography among the literary arts,” rather than the sciences, and “sought to ground the historian’s insights into reality in a poetic intuition of the particular” because they believed that “poetry was a form of knowledge, indeed the basis of all knowledge (scientific, religious, and philosophical)” (H. White, “Interpretation” 285). To assist in organizing the overwhelming compendium

of historical information, Hegel, Droysen, and Nietzsche each created his own model for classifying different kinds of historical representation. Despite their progressive emphasis on the interpretive element of historiography, their proposed models of classification still had the effect of implying that certain historical representations are more legitimate, and therefore more important, than others.

It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that theorists devoted sustained attention to some of the questions that had previously been raised by Droysen, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Theorists like Michel Foucault, with the publication of *The Archeology of Knowledge* in 1969, and Hayden White, with the publication of *The Content and the Form* in 1987, called attention to the ways that knowledge is ultimately constructed by discourse and that the act of narration—of communicating knowledge—is a subjective process in which power and authority are constantly being negotiated. White’s philosophy, which rejects the traditional understanding of history as an unbiased record of the past, was initially received by traditionalists as an unwelcome “attack” on “historiographical convention” (de Groot 2). However, White’s reasoning effectively “cast a shadow of doubt on the ‘objectivity’ of history writing and its claim to truth” (Nagy 9). While expectations in form and documentation differ according to the genre with which the history writer is engaged and according to what audience she or he intends to address, the historical knowledge conveyed in both college history textbooks and best-selling historical novels is mediated by the same subjective decisions about *what* information is included or excluded and *how* that information is presented.

Through the influence of several theoretical movements, including post-structuralism, deconstruction, New Historicism, postmodernism, postcolonial studies, and

cultural materialism, twenty-first century historians generally concede that accounts of the past cannot totally escape the subjective element of narration, which is held in common with historical fiction. Heilmann and Llewellyn reason that “If history and fiction are both constructs, because history is itself largely narrative, the two remain interdependent” (121). Just like the fiction writer, the historian must make decisions about emplotment, thematic focus, point of view, and word choice, all of which have the potential to alter the story being told. In his essay “Interpretation in History,” White provides a compelling example of the power of the narrative element by comparing the differences between four authors’ historical representations of the French Revolution:

... the events which occurred in France in 1789-90, which Burke viewed as an unalloyed national disaster, Michelet regards as an epiphany of that union of man with God informing the dream of the romance as a generic story-form. Similarly, what Michelet takes as an unambiguous legacy of those events for his own time, Tocqueville interprets as both a burden and an opportunity. Tocqueville emplots the fall of the Old Regime as a tragic descent, but one from which the survivors of the *agon* can profit, while Burke views that same descent as a process of degradation from which little, if any, profit can be derived. Marx, on the other hand, explicitly characterizes the fall of the Old Regime as a “tragedy” in order to contrast it with the “comic” efforts to maintain feudalism by artificial means in the Germany of his own time. In short, the historians mentioned each tell a different story about the French Revolution and “explain” it thereby. (H. White, “Interpretation” 294-295)

The four different messages that are conveyed by Burke, Michelet, Tocqueville, and Marx about the same historical moment demonstrate how heavily historical narratives are influenced by authorial interpretation and presentation. One historiographical convention that White does not call attention to in his example, however, is the fact that the story of the French Revolution is being told through four *male* voices and that not one of these four renditions mentions the contributions of women—not even the Women’s March on Versailles.

Gender politics have heavily influenced the generic level of systematic normative policing. Historical fiction written by and about women, in particular, has endured misogynistic criticism in the academy for decades. After the publication of *Waverly* in 1814, the historical novel was “perceived as a ‘masculine’ form” of literature throughout the rest of the nineteenth century (Wallace, “Writing the War” 78). During the early years of the twentieth century, however, the best-selling historical novels were written by women. As a result, the genre of historical fiction became increasingly associated with women writers. The popularity of women’s historical fiction became a major cause for concern among male literary scholars, whose response to the new monopoly that women writers had over the genre was ultimately reflected in Georg Lukács’s study entitled *The Historical Novel* (1937). Lukács’ study, which solidified Walter Scott’s *Waverly* (1814) as the most worthy exemplar of the modern historical novel, was rather immediately revered by scholars as *the* authoritative text for determining the literary value of historical fiction.

In opposition to the most widely read historical fiction authors of the time, Lukács does not mention a single female author in *The Historical Novel*—a strategic move which helped to re-establish the general superiority of male authors and to brand women’s “popular” historical fiction as devoid of *true* literary value. Originating with Lukács’s study on Walter Scott, almost all subsequent accounts of the historical fiction genre have “been dominated by a masculinist and Marxist approach,” and consequently, fueled “the marginalization of women’s historical novels” (Wallace, “Difficulties” 206). The “denigration of the historical novel” impacted the scholarly reception of women writers the most because they dominated the genre during the first three decades of the twentieth

century (Wallace, "Writing the War" 79). Wallace refers to the 1930s as the decade that led to "the feminization" of the popular historical novel, for it is no coincidence, she argues, that following over two decades of women dominating the genre of historical fiction, literary scholars began to have an "increasing tendency" to dismiss historical fiction as "unworthy of serious critical attention" ("History" 76-77). A little over ten years after the publication of Lukács's *The Historical Novel*, respected literary theorists like F.R. Leavis, in his book *The Great Tradition* (1948), vehemently criticizes historical novels, which contributed to the exclusion of historical fiction "from the realm of canonical literature" and essentially "condemned any other author writing in the 'bad tradition'" (Wallace, "Writing the War" 79). Similarly, Byatt says that many accomplished historians "frowned on" or "disapproved of" historical fiction at the mid-twentieth century (9). Thus, when Seton was publishing her historical novels, the scholarly attitude toward historical fiction, in general, and women's historical fiction, in particular, was especially disapproving—and this attitude continued well into the 1980s.

Even many contemporary assumptions about historical fiction continue to be influenced by those who have been regarded as significant progenitors of the genre. Most twenty-first century scholars of historical fiction still consider Walter Scott's *Waverly* (1814) to be the first modern historical novel (Ferris 73; Nagy 10; De Groot 2), even though the historical novel written by Marie-Madeline de Layfayette, *The Princess of Cleves* (1679), precedes the publication of *Waverly* by over a century (de Groot 12; Maxwell 65). Despite its dismissal by scholars like Leavis, the general reputation of historical fiction in the academy has gradually improved over the last thirty years. The critical revelation that even the dominant historical narratives which have traditionally

shaped our historical knowledge has assisted in the relatively recent⁴² scholarly attention given to works of historical fiction. Jerome de Groot, in his 2010 book *The Historical Novel*, proclaims that “The historical novel is a genre that is increasingly studied on university curricula and discussed at the research level” (2). However, de Groot does insist that there remains a lingering bias that popular historical fiction does not qualify as “serious literary fiction” (de Groot 98). Historical fiction written *by women* especially continues to be shunned by some of today’s most influential scholars. Diana Wallace, in an essay published in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* (2012), provides a compelling recent example of this gender bias:

An important turning point in the respectability of the genre seems to have been 2009 when the Man Booker Prize was won by Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009), out of a shortlist in which five out of six novels were historical. Yet in the same year, the historian David Starkey lambasted what he called “the quasi-history of historical novels, written by women, about women and for an overwhelmingly female readership” as mostly “tosh.” (Wallace, “Difficulties” 206)

Degrading comments like Starkey’s, unfortunately, appear much more often than the increasingly diverse and interdisciplinary contemporary scholarly community would like to admit. Certainly, the monumental efforts of feminist scholars have drastically improved the marginalization of women’s history and women’s literature since the time that Anya Seton was writing her historical novels in the 1940s and 1950s, but the need for re-visiting and re-envisioning women’s writing of the past clearly should remain a priority in today’s critical agenda. The dismissive scholarly attitude specifically toward women’s historical fiction is due in large part to its association with one of its sub-genres: historical romance.

⁴² According to Nagy (7) and de Groot (2), this increased scholarly attention to historical fiction can be seen over the past three decades.

At the sub-generic level, historical romance has been among the most vilified genres in the academy due to its enduring popularity with readers and because it is generally considered to be the literary domain of women. Once the hierarchy of the “literary” over the “popular” was established, the association of “literary” fiction with male authors and “popular” fiction with female authors laid the foundation for making the uncritical presumption that, because historical romance fiction is popular and dominated by women writers and readers, then the sub-genre itself is an inferior form of literature, written by inferior (female) authors, and read by inferior people (women). Through the denigration of the sub-genre itself, historical romance readers have also been culturally inscribed as “passive dupes” (Makinen 14). In fact, even before the adamant movement to differentiate between “popular” and “literary” fiction that began in the nineteenth century, the rise of the novel in the late seventeenth century and coincident rise in literacy among middle-class women initiated the correlation between women, romance, and frivolity. Strehle and Carden trace this phenomenon as follows:

By 1739, the connection between “girls,” “romances,” “idle stuff,” and forms of behavior in which men—sensible, worldly men—believed they had no part. The impulse to distinguish between novel (as realistic history) from romance (as sentimental fantasy) and then to attach the romance derisively to women—and women derisively to romance—has led critics to denigrate the genre of romance and to lose its intimate connection to the novel. (xv)

The lasting effects of this patriarchal maneuver are rather astounding, for the logic which supports the gender-genre-authority correlation is inherently flawed. Most works of fiction—whatever their primary generic label may be—contain elements of the romance; even many canonical novels include romantic conventions. The intergeneric use of the romance—and even of the marriage plot—transcends time and gender. After all, Strehle

and Carden remind us, “Romance narratives—fiction focused on the ways identity expresses itself in the choice of a love partner, sometimes including the attempt to live with that choice in marriage—emerge in every century, written by men and women” (xv). Nevertheless, most twentieth-century literary critics viewed historical romance as an “inferior” and “frivolous” genre (Strehle and Carden xvi). Mary Bly, in her recently published essay “On Popular Romance, J. R. Ward, and the Limits of Genre Study,” warns against criticizing any piece of literature based on its presumed adherence to generic constraints. Many important authors are passed over because “Novels that fall under the rubric of ‘mass-market romance’ are often studied together due to the perception that the conventions of the genre are more important—and more influential—than a specific author’s work” (Bly 62). “In short,” Bly says, “we’re ignoring the trees for the forest” (64). Merja Makinen offers a similar argument in her book *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001). She says that the “received assumption” that the romance (along with fairy tale and detective) fiction is “inherently conservative” is problematic because genres are “all such loose, baggy, chameleons” (Makinen 1). Discontinuing this trend of envisioning canon and genre as synonymous is also crucial because it creates important opportunities for re-assessing the subversive power of many female authors whose work has been unjustly dismissed as either frivolous entertainment or wholly conformist.

The sustained assault against popular fiction in general and the historical romance novel in particular did not begin to soften until the publication of Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* in 1984. *Reading the Romance* played a significant role in bringing popular romance fiction into the realm of academic scholarship. For Radway, popular literature has been consistently married to the idea that mass-market popularity

and serious literary value cannot possibly coincide (“The Utopian” 140-144). Radway’s efforts to “look at the conditions organizing women’s private lives” that prompt women to regularly read romance novels in the 1970s and 1980s served as a sort of critical wake-up call to a scholarly community that had been indiscriminately dismissing popular fiction for over seven decades (Radway, *Reading* 11). Radway’s focus on popular culture—a field which was in its scholarly infancy when Radway was writing her dissertation in the late 1970s—grew out of her desire to explore some of the presumed differences between “popular” and “elite” literature and later blossomed into the study she offers in *Reading the Romance*.

The central tension that scholars of popular romance fiction (including historical romance novels) like Janice Radway, Johanna Russ, and Merja Makinen identify is whether or not these novels ultimately uphold patriarchal social order and heteronormative behavior or ultimately subvert, resist, or challenge the patriarchal status quo. Linda J. Lee, quite appropriately, refers to these disagreements as the “two polarized camps” of romance novels (54). Even at the end of Radway’s in-depth and seminal study of popular romance novels, she, too, does not offer a definitive conclusion about the debate; she confirms in the new introduction to the 1991 re-release of *Reading the Romance*, that the question of whether the romance novel ultimately reinscribes the status quo or ultimately challenges the status quo has not yet been answered. She writes, “it cannot be said with any certainty whether the writers who are trying to incorporate feminist demands into the genre have been moved to do so by their recognition of the contradictions within the form itself or by the pressures exerted by developments in the larger culture” (Radway, *Reading* 17). In fact, in one of the most recently published

essay collections about popular historical romance novels, *Doubled Plots: Romance and History* (2003), editors Susan Strehle and Mary Panizza Carden confirm that even twenty-first century scholars and readers of romance are still fervently divided. Strehle and Carden assert that each narrative has a “contradictory impulse”: “on the one hand, the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender that project women’s destined and desirable end in the family; on the other hand, the narrative talks back, revealing women’s frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions” (xii). Strehle and Carden ultimately argue in favor of “a more complex understanding of its [the romance plot’s] relation to cultures that shape it and therefore its meaning” (xii), which also falls short of putting an end to the war between the “two polarized camps.”

Nearly five decades of divided opinions is a strong indication that scholars may never come to an agreement about whether romance novels are ultimately hegemonic or subversive. Therefore, instead of adding yet another entry to this debate, I am more interested in approaching Seton’s novels from a standpoint which accepts both conclusions as partially true. In other words, if we can admit that most fiction that includes marriage in the plot (keeping in mind that while a novel may include a marriage, the plot is not necessarily *driven* by the traditional marriage plot) is inherently contradictory because it resists even as it reaffirms patriarchal order, then perhaps we can move closer to answering *why* this contradiction exists and why it is replicated over and over again by decades of women writers. By accepting, in a truly postmodern move, the simultaneity of two possibilities and shifting focus away from the end goal of naming the winner of the “two polarized camps,” we can open up a different critical space to analyze

reasons why this internal struggle has been an enduring feature of women's fiction in order to better understand the complex ways that gender dynamics work in the realm of fiction and their relationship to the material world.

While Anya Seton's *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* certainly contain elements of the romance genre (i.e. all three heroines engage in romantic relationships and marry one or multiple times), their *raison d'être* is to tell the hitherto silenced life stories of three important women in history. The romantic relationships that Seton's real-life heroines experience are not included for the sole purpose of entertaining an ideal picture of the blissful heterosexual courtship and eventual marriage. All three heroines, instead of yearning to experience marital bliss, resist the social pressure to marry as long as possible. Most significantly, the plot in all three of Seton's novels is not solely driven by the heroines' relationships with men; rather, the plot is driven by the recorded historical events that touched the heroines' lives and, of course, Seton's interpretation of those events. While the people and places in Seton's historical novels are portrayed to the reader through the filter of Seton's analysis and re-creation of historical information, they are not simply invented for the sole purpose of embellishing Seton's personal artistic desires.

In fact, in Anya Seton's Collected Papers, which are maintained by the Greenwich Historical Society in Cos Cob, Connecticut, *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, *The Winthrop Woman* are all listed as "biographical novels⁴³," the genre label with which Seton personally associated her work. Nevertheless, in publisher's advertisements, book reviews, and libraries, Seton's novels have consistently been referred to as historical

43 (ASP 1.1)

romances. Lucinda H. MacKethan, Seton's self-proclaimed biographer, attributes the scholarly dismissal of Seton's historical novels to their popularity. The fact that most of her novels were best-sellers, MacKethan explains, "guaranteed that they would be ignored by posterity, particularly the later twentieth century academic guardians of high culture" ("The Setons at Home"). According to Moser, the "marvelously protracted embrace of love" in all of Seton's novels is what unfairly "kept her shelved among heaving bosoms and lantern-jawed rogues" at libraries. Because Seton's work had been publicized as romance novels, Moser laments, "Seton rarely received the literary respect she was due."

Throughout her entire writing career, Seton resisted the historical romance sub-genre label because of its negative reputation and because the impetus, research, and content of her historical novels make them vastly different from the majority of popular historical romances. Seton offers an articulate differentiation between her historical novels and historical romance novels in the "Sidelights" section of *Writer's Magazine*:

There is a difference. The standard costume piece of historical romance needs very little research. It is sufficient to pick a congenial period, then read a couple of books in order to properly clothe and feed the characters, who are invented by the author. And, since love and conflict are common to all humans in all ages, the historical background can be negligible . . . I remember a historical novel about William the Conqueror whose author said ingenuously in the foreword, "I know the Tower of London was not built at the time I said it was, but I needed the Tower for my plot" . . . I have a passion for facts, for dates and for places. I love to recreate the past, and to do so with all the accuracy possible. This means an enormous amount of research, which is no hardship. I love it . . . The actual writing, however, is another matter. That is just plain work, day in, day out, for a year or more . . ." (qtd. in *Contemporary Authors* 661).

Seton emphasizes the necessity of clearly distinguishing the genre of historical fiction from its sub-genre, historical romance. It is inappropriate, Seton argues, to consider

“standard” historical romance novels as being synonymous with historical novels simply because they are both set in the past. The inclusion of historical events or personages for the sole purpose of adding intrigue to a plot is an acceptable practice in the sub-genre of historical romance; however, for Seton, historical novels are different because historical fiction writers place primary emphasis on presenting the information in historical records as accurately as possible and *then* build their narratives *around* the information held in existing accounts of the past.

In all three novels, Seton adheres to the major genre convention of historical fiction: attesting to the authenticity of the history which informs her narrative. In the “Author’s Note” that appears in the beginning of all three texts, Seton testifies to her devotion to historical accuracy. In the “Author’s Note” of *My Theodosia*, Seton assures her audience that she has “tried to be historically accurate in every detail” (*Theodosia* v). In the “Author’s Note” of *Katherine*, Seton states that “It has throughout been my anxious endeavor to use nothing but historical fact” (*Katherine* ix). Finally, in the “Author’s Note” of *The Winthrop Woman*, Seton confirms that “This book is built on a solid framework of fact; from these facts I have never knowingly deviated, nor changed a date or circumstance” (*Winthrop* vi). Also included in all three “Author’s Notes” is a summary of the research that Seton conducted for each novel.

Especially because Seton focuses on the lives of three historical *female* figures, she had to conduct even more extensive research because most mainstream historical texts contain very little information about women in the past. So, in addition to consulting all available traditional sources such as biographies, newspaper articles, and published collections of letters, Seton seeks out several non-traditional sources that are

not as readily available. In this way, Seton “performs a balancing act to ensure a large reading public” by assuring them of the historical legitimacy of her narrative through the use of mainstream historical texts, “while simultaneously engaging in a subversive critique of the Western tradition” (Michael, “Feminism” 6)—a tradition that has consistently privileged the voices of those in power. Seton’s inclusion of historical material from non-traditional sources alongside information from mainstream historical texts implicitly grants authority to the voices of those who have so often been marginalized or entirely excluded (i.e. women, racial minorities, the lower classes) in chronicles of history proper.

For *My Theodosia*, in addition to the reading all of Burr’s published letters, Seton also studies the Burr letters that, at the time, had not yet been published, and she even tracks down some Burr letters “which are privately owned” (Seton, *Theodosia* v). For *Katherine*, Seton spent four years researching the English counties that appear in the novel and dug through “the remains of John of Gaunt’s numerous castles” on her hands and knees (Seton, *Katherine* ix). She also gathered information from “rectory studies” and the dialogic accounts given by keepers of “local legend” (Seton, *Katherine* ix). For *The Winthrop Woman*, Seton studied “the original, and so far unpublished, [Winthrop] manuscripts” which are not included in the five published volumes of *The Winthrop Papers* (Seton, *Winthrop* viii). She also read personal Winthrop diaries and “innumerable family letters,” studied the topography where Groton Manor used to stand, attended an archeological dig on “the Indian village sites in Greenwich,” and consulted with “Elizabeth’s own descendants” (Seton, *Winthrop* vii-x).

The complicated relationships between gender, genre, and literary value have often been obscured in scholarship by reinscribing the hegemonic assumptions related to all three. Many female authors, including Anya Seton, have been dismissed by the misguided notion that there is “a simple causal link between the genre and unfortunate aspects of hegemonic culture” (Bly 61). While not all popular genre fiction “is successful in feminist terms,” Makinen firmly asserts that “it is time to acknowledge the work of genre historians and to argue that popular genres are not fixed, but that like any popular product they are continually adapting to and contributing to their historical contexts, and that at times of gender modification and magnification . . . genres have assimilated the conflicting discourses on gender” (5). Numerous feminist literary theorists have argued that conservative genre conventions leave very little room for feminist writers to effectively subvert patriarchal ideologies. Indeed, there is no doubt that genre conventions of historical fiction have been overwhelmingly determined by men who almost exclusively focus their analyses on historical fiction *written by men*. However, over the last four decades, feminist literary scholars have also called attention to the fact that historical fiction, like any other genre, “often possess[es] an internal flexibility” (Pavel, “Literary Genres” 201). The flexibility of the historical fiction genre, in terms of its capacity for subverting dominant cultural gender norms, is not often acknowledged. According to Heilmann and Llewellyn, historical fiction allows marginalized groups to “write into being the unaddressed past and its muted subalterns” and to “rewrite an established male-authored work” (142). Similarly, Byatt argues that historical fiction fulfills “the political desire to write the histories of the marginalized, the

forgotten, the unrecorded” (11), which precisely aligns with Seton’s contribution to the genre of historical fiction.

At the individual level, Seton was unavoidably influenced by the literary and gender conventions of her time, and while her novels may not, on the surface, seem as radical or revolutionary as those which more visibly reject convention (i.e. Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, 1928), many feminist theorists like Judith Butler have noted that a total abandonment of convention may not only be impossible because discourse is always already imbued with (masculine) authority (Butler 24-25, 145), but it may not be the most effective way to challenge convention itself. Magali Cornier Michael contends that “a complete abandonment of convention, while theoretically attractive, may not be the best political approach in furthering feminist aims” (“Feminism” 9-10). Likewise, Frye suggests that the more “supernatural or utopian or futuristic” fiction that openly challenges gender norms, like Gilman’s *Herland* (1918), is not necessarily the most successful in effecting change:

Though such fictions effectively dramatize “a rupture from the normal rules of the world” and reveal alternative possibilities for imaged future hopes, they do not enact the possibilities for actively renegotiating the current “rules of the world” or adding possibility to present experience. For this process, we need fictions that interact more immediately with our own social context, fictions that make claim to speak of the world as we might experience it in the present. (Frye 6-7)

The most effective means of disrupting social convention is through writing that “offer[s] a representation of the world that is familiar and thus both accessible and plausible to the reader” (Michael, “Feminism” 9). Many feminists, including Linda Hutcheon, have asserted that “challeng[ing] the male tradition *from within*” is oftentimes more effective in creating social change than the use of more radical

critiques (my emphasis, 16). Thus, it is through Seton's inclusion of elements which are both literarily and experientially⁴⁴ familiar to her reading public that she is able to foster a more comfortable relationship between her texts and her readers. In doing so, she creates a more receptive discursive space in which to present her critique of patriarchal power. This strategy of challenging *from within* is "politically effective in that it invites a large readership . . . and yet challenges those conventions through disruptive strategies that allow for the creation of a space for creating something new" (Michael, "Feminism" 9-10). After all, fiction is "politically effective only in so far as it affects or transforms the consciousness of readers and therefore depends on some sort of convergence between reader and text" (Michael, "Feminism" 9-10). So, while Seton could not totally escape the literary and gender conventions that existed during the 1940s and 1950s, a certain degree of conformity places Seton's novels in a position to garner the largest readership; and, consequently, the subtle challenges to convention that are embedded in Seton's work are exposed to the largest audience: "In choosing to become genre writers, feminist writers have clearly made a bid for a wider readership" (Makinen 10). In fact, Seton's use of one of the most accessible communicative platforms available to mid-twentieth-century women—the novel—placed her work in a position to effect the most social change.

Despite their dismissal in scholarship, the fact that *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* have engaged the interest of the general reading public over the course of seven decades is a testament to the transcendent appeal of Seton's work⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ I am defining "experiential" in this context as human experiences which are relatively universal such as romantic and familial relationships, economic concerns, unexpected obstacles that impede one's goals, etc.

⁴⁵ It is necessary here to call the reader's attention back to page 51 of this chapter, which more specifically articulates how the relationship between popular literature, aesthetic/literary value, and feminist literary

This quality of being culturally applicable for nearly a century would not be possible without a certain degree of adherence to convention. Seton, like many other women writers of her time, works to discreetly expose the “hidden or disguised challenges to patriarchal notions” embedded in her historical novels (Friedman and Fuchs 3).

Friedman and Fuchs refer to this strategy of subtly rejecting the literary conventions which have been used to reinforce masculine power as “covert inscription” (3). Seton employs this strategy of “covert inscription” by constructing historical narratives that simultaneously conform to and resist established literary conventions and gender norms⁴⁶ in order to avoid the negative repercussions that followed the publication of more radical texts written by women of her time.⁴⁷

The discursive spaces that Seton navigates in *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* are mediated by the historically-specific social and literary trends of the 1940s and 1950s. Unfortunately, many literary scholars often dismiss texts that, on the surface, seem to offer an uncritical replication of dominant ideology. Undoubtedly, this has been the case with Anya Seton’s historical novels. Interposed between the conventions that have proved to grant her work a large readership and enduring popularity are distinctly feminist critiques of the myopic focus on men in history, the

significance should be understood in my analysis of Seton’s historical fiction. Again, I am *not* suggesting that *all* popular fiction—in any genre—contains the kind of self-consciousness and facility required to launch a successful critique of hegemonic gender ideology. However, I do mean to call attention to the critical practice of applying indiscriminate and broad-stroke dismissals of popular fiction in general—and popular fiction written by women in particular—that began in the early-twentieth century, and (although to a lesser degree) continues to be a problem for women’s fiction today. See Wallace’s argument in “Difficulties, Discontinuities and Differences: Reading Women’s Historical Fiction.”

⁴⁶ I am not suggesting that gender norms are ahistorical or culturally universal, but I am defining gender norms according to some of the dominant notions about men and women that appear to be consistent throughout Seton’s novels, even though they are set in three different centuries. These dominant notions about gender are identified in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

⁴⁷ Such as Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* (1928), which explicitly discusses a lesbian relationship

overwhelming absence of information on significant women of the past, and the tremendous limitations that gender norms place on the authentic expression of identity.

CHAPTER THREE

“REALISTICALLY FLAWED⁴⁸”: PORTRAYALS OF FAMOUS MEN IN ANYA SETON’S HISTORICAL FICTION

“A crucial aim of feminist research is to pull back the curtain on men’s lives and masculine institutions in order to demystify socially constructed masculinities, particularly in their most powerful forms. As early feminist scholars note, male privilege renders women’s lives invisible. But male privilege renders aspects of men’s lives invisible, too.”

—Liberty Walther Barnes and Christin L. Munsch⁴⁹

To a great extent, dominant ideologies that exist during specific historical moments have a symbiotic relationship with the beliefs reflected in the discourses of concurrent history textbooks, medical manuals, and novels. After the establishment of history as a formal academic discipline in the early nineteenth century and until the social movements of the late twentieth century, mainstream historical texts⁵⁰ predominantly focused on the accomplishments and life stories of men⁵¹. Historical literature during this time period largely echoed the emphasis in history proper on prominent men of the past.

⁴⁸ The phrase that Seton’s eldest daughter, Pam Forcey, used in an email exchange to describe her mother’s portrayal of the well-known men featured in her mother’s historical novels (15 Jan. 2016).

⁴⁹ (Barnes and Munsch 594-595)

⁵⁰ Refer to Footnote 11 of the Introduction, which offers a definition of how “mainstream historical texts” should be understood throughout this project.

⁵¹ See Chloe Ward’s article entitled “Biography, History, Agency: Where Have All the ‘Great Men’ Gone?” in which she traces the focus on “the great men” in historical and biographical texts from the 19th century to the 1970s. She asserts that most texts during this period perpetuated the notion that “The ‘great men’ were the rightful representatives and embodiments of the modern nations” (Ward 80). It was not until after the mid-twentieth century that raising questions about the invisibility of women and minorities began to “displac[e] the ‘great men’ from their positions as the primary agents of historical change” (Ward 82).

The conventional narrative in both history texts and historical literature celebrates the heroic men responsible for establishing modern Western civilization: “From the Pilgrim Fathers to the astronauts, those enshrined in the American historical Pantheon have been Anglo-Saxon men-of-action. Our national heroes have been presidents, explorers, soldiers, and self-made men” (Kruppa 605). The historical hero has thus been encoded as “white, Protestant, and male” in the Western cultural conscience (Kruppa 605). The focus on prominent white men⁵² is, of course, an accurate reflection of their historical position in the social hierarchy. It is true that, overall, men have controlled the policies of national, state, and local governments. Men have held the highest positions of authority in business and commerce. They have dominated the fields of medicine, science, history, and literature. Men have also been the traditional authority figures in nuclear and extended families. Nancy Chodorow asserts that “It is well documented that men have more power, can express anger, take up more space, and are catered to by women” (539). Certainly, this is not to suggest that *all* men *have always* exerted dominance over women in *all aspects* of life, nor does the continually privileging of historical accounts of “Anglo-Saxon men-of-action” mean that different narratives—even counter-narratives—do not exist. However, the persistence of patriarchal culture explains *why* “Anglo-Saxon men-of-action” are often the central focus of history textbooks and historical novels. The master narrative of the historical male hero⁵³ has had a major impact on dominant perceptions about the significance of men and women of the past, as well as dominant perceptions about masculinity and femininity.

⁵² Typically, white men who are well-educated and belong to the higher classes.

⁵³ Again, see Ward who asserts that the majority of mainstream historical texts “ultimately confor[m] to the heroic, inherently ‘masculine’ plot of individual triumph over the banality of everyday circumstances” (86).

Historical fiction, with its unique melding together of fact and fiction, is a genre that creates discursive space for feminist critiques of the male-dominant sexual ideology that has informed mainstream historical narratives because it allows writers and readers to re-imagine the past and to question the messages that have habitually been told about men and women in history. Of course, some historical novels follow the generic convention of basing narratives on existing historical records more closely than others. Some historical novels only employ general details to “properly clothe and feed the characters⁵⁴” of a particular time period, while others make every effort to create narratives that adhere to the information that can be corroborated in historical records. Seton’s novels are exceptionally adherent to recorded history, which required Seton to conduct years of historical research prior to writing each one⁵⁵. Seton’s decision to develop her narratives around diligent historical research proves to be a strategic move in launching her critique of dominant historical narratives. Because stories that are built upon “meticulously-researched detail” create “an effect of realism” for readers (Wallace, “History” 82), Seton’s adherence to this generic convention helps to create a discursive space in which readers are more receptive to change because it is framed by a social context that feels realistic.

In all three novels⁵⁶, Seton constructs a historically realistic cultural framework⁵⁷—and more specifically, a gender system—which establishes the normative behavioral expectations of her male and female characters. A “gender system” is

⁵⁴ Seton qtd. in *Contemporary Authors* 661.

⁵⁵ Refer back to Chapter Two, pages 68-70, for specific examples of the exhaustive research that Seton conducted for each novel.

⁵⁶ *My Theodosia* (1941), *Katherine* (1954), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958)

⁵⁷ One that is, at the same time, familiar enough for her readers to understand.

essentially “the set of gendered social roles together with the system of ideas and representations that culturally define masculine and feminine and thus shape sexual identity” (Thebaud, “Explorations” 4). Especially because Seton’s novels take place in three different centuries, it is important to acknowledge that the dominant discourses which have been used to name and conceptualize characteristics commonly associated with biologically male subjects have changed over time. According to Chodorow, it was not until the development of contemporary feminist theory that “The claim that there are many masculinities and femininities, that gender is constructed in contextual, contradictory, and contingent ways, and that gender is a cultural or discursive product” entered into the conceptual framework of American culture (524). The concept of gender as a social construct is much more widely accepted today than it was when Seton was writing her novels during the mid-twentieth century.

While conceptions of masculinity in Western culture have undoubtedly changed over time, Meyerowitz, Craib, O’Neil, and Barlow⁵⁸ have found that masculinity has been routinely defined through opposition (to femininity). They also contend that certain characteristics have been rather consistently understood as inherent of men in modern Western civilization. According to Meyerowitz, “In different historical contexts, masculinity represented strength, protection, independence, camaraderie, discipline, rivalry, militarism, aggression, savagery, and brutality⁵⁹” (1351). Craib

⁵⁸ Barlow discusses how perceptions of men throughout history have safe-guarded male dominance: “Almost universally throughout history men have been presented as heroes of war and protectors of the state. Conversely, women have been construed as exclusively victims in need of protection. In their exclusive position as those who fight and die for society and the state, men come to be regarded as full citizens with automatic citizenship rights. In the logic of the master narrative, it follows that men should determine the direction of society and the state . . . Women do not have the same right—or indeed capabilities—to participate in decision-making structures (16).

⁵⁹ In contrast, “femininity represented weakness, fragility, helplessness, emotionality, passivity, domestication, nurturance, attractiveness, partnership, excess, and temptation” (Meyerowitz 1351).

argues that “The qualities of masculinity. . . seem invariable, and are associated with the male as breadwinner, provider, worker, the active and public half of the species: a man is strong, aggressive, rational, independent, task-oriented, invulnerable and successful” (724). Similarly, O’Neil asserts that traditional social “expectations and standards of masculinity include such characteristics as strength, invulnerability, successfulness, toughness, self-reliance, aggressiveness, and daring” (O’Neil, “Gender” 11). When all three descriptions are compared, a common set of distinctly masculine characteristics begins to emerge. O’Neil aptly refers⁶⁰ to this common set of male characteristics as “the masculine mystique.”

Clearly named in honor of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), O’Neil’s concept of “the masculine mystique” focuses on male normative gender expectations. He offers the following definition: “The masculine mystique and value system comprises a complex set of values and beliefs that define optimal masculinity in society. These values and beliefs are learned during early socialization and are based on rigid gender role stereotypes and beliefs about men and masculinity” (O’Neil, “Patterns” 205). O’Neil then goes on to identify nine specific assumptions that inform “the masculine mystique,” three of which are most applicable to the concept of normative masculinity with which Seton’s novels engage. O’Neil’s descriptions of these three assumptions are as follows:

- [1.] Masculinity, rather than femininity, is the superior, dominant, more valued form of gender identity.
- [2.] Vulnerabilities, feelings, and, emotions in men are signs of femininity and to be avoided.
- [3.] Interpersonal communication that emphasizes human emotions, feelings, intuitions, and physical contact are considered feminine and to be

⁶⁰ In O’Neil’s article entitled “Patterns of Gender Role Conflict and Strain: Sexism and Fear of Femininity in Men’s Lives.”

avoided. Rational-logical thought rather than intuitive and emotional expressions is the superior form of communication. (O'Neil, "Patterns" 205)

These assumptions, all of which are relevant to Seton's engagement with gender norms, hinge upon differentiating masculinity from femininity and create a hierarchy of value which consistently privileges masculinity over femininity. What is perhaps most significant to note about these three assumptions is how deeply enmeshed the conceptualization of social power is in traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity.

My analysis of Seton's portrayal of the male characters in *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* will be based upon characteristics which have been repeatedly encoded as "masculine." In the following order, I will discuss Seton's engagement with three specific dogmas about men and masculinity that have been habitually reinforced in mainstream historical narratives⁶¹: 1.) men are less emotional than women 2.) men are dominant in relationships with women 3.) and as the stronger sex, men possess relatively few weaknesses or flaws. Like O'Neil's assumptions about "the masculine mystique," all three of these dogmas are defined by juxtaposing notions of maleness with corresponding assumptions about femaleness (i.e. women are hyper-emotional; women are submissive in relationships with men; as the weaker sex, women are more prone to weaknesses or flaws). In the gender system that Seton constructs in all three novels, her real-life male characters demonstrate that they are indeed aware of the

⁶¹ Again, it should be kept in mind that emotion, dominance, and strength are instantiated differently according to time period and culture, but I have chosen to pursue these three gender dogmas because they are central concerns in the *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*. Where necessary, I use footnotes to provide further articulations of historically-specific differences in the conceptualization of emotion, dominance, and strength to prevent ahistoricism.

behaviors which are socially acceptable for their sex. The normative gender expectations of men are circulated in Seton's novels through character-to-character verbal and behavioral policing, as well as through internal dialogue that is either self-reflexive or about other characters. Seton's male characters often exhibit signs of experiencing either external or internal pressure to conform to sex-specific standards of behavior; however, they do not always act accordingly.

In *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*, Seton performs the important feminist activity of lifting the veil of masculine invulnerability and complicates traditionally rigid understandings of maleness. Through her portrayal of the ways that her real-life male characters resist normative expectations of masculine decorum, Seton calls into question some of the dominant beliefs about gender that have often been perpetuated in mainstream historical narratives⁶². *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* serve to dissolve the illusion that the well-known men of history are perfect. Seton's goal is not to *tarnish* the (glowing) reputations of the historical men in her novels, but instead, to present them more *realistically* than they have been represented in dominant historical narratives. By providing more realistic representations of several famous men in history, Seton dislodges the association of masculinity from innate perfection. According to Seton's eldest daughter, Pam Forcey, Seton was intent on making the well-known historical men in her novels "realistically flawed" (Jan. 15, 2016). In her personal life, Forcey explains, Seton "seemed to understand" that there existed a "dilemma" between "a strong male figure who could challenge her" and "a male figure who could respect her strengths and desires" as a woman (Forcey Jan. 15, 2016).

⁶² Specifically, mainstream historical narratives written before 1960.

In her work, Seton attempts to reach beyond the traditional marriage plot⁶³ by exposing the masculine façade of superiority and perfection. By depicting prominent men in history more realistically, Seton implies that, contrary to the impeccable portrayals found in most mainstream historical texts, they, too, are human, and therefore, like women, are flawed.

In all three novels, Seton mobilizes her critique of masculinist gender ideology by using what was, at the time, a relatively unconventional narrative technique for female authors. According to Frye, “the traditional narrative form for women writers” has been “the first-person female voice” (8). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, many British and American female authors experimented with different narrative forms. However, much of women’s fiction published during the first half of the twentieth century was narrated (either in first or third person voice) solely from the perspective of the female protagonist (Frye 8). While all three of her novels are written in third-person, Seton breaks from literary convention by expanding the reader’s purview beyond the perspective of the female protagonist. So, in addition to the perspective of the female protagonist, Seton delivers the narrative from the perspectives of nearly every other character in the book. This is a strategic narrative move because, typically, readers are only made aware of the female protagonist’s fears, insecurities, and romantic longings. Limiting readers’ perspective to that of the female protagonist naturally makes her

⁶³ The marriage plot and romance are primary characteristics of most popular mid-twentieth century women’s fiction. See David R. Shumway’s discussion of romance in best-sellers. Shumway says that, “in a nutshell,” the “middle-class myth of romance” can be described as follows: “Love is tested against a series of obstacles. It leads inevitably to marriage, and both love and marriage are somehow for-ordained. The marriage is not merely good or loving, but cosmically meant to be” (121). While Seton’s historical novels certainly contain elements of the contemporary romance and adhere to the marriage plot to some degree, one of the central tensions of her novels is the female protagonist’s resistance to several aspects of the traditional heterosexual romance/marriage plot. This will be discussed extensively in Chapter Four.

anxieties and sentiments more visible than those of any other character; readers see her in emotional states that have traditionally been understood as indicative of vulnerability and weakness. When the inner dialogue of male characters is absent, they automatically appear less vulnerable than the female protagonist. Thus, by making the reader privy to the inner-thoughts and motivations of her male characters⁶⁴—even those of famous men in history—Seton takes away their façade of masculine invulnerability. Seton’s use of this unconventional narrative strategy is a subtle but effective means of leveling the discursive playing field between male and female characters in a way that complicates not only literary norms, but gender norms as well.

The first dogma about gender that Seton’s novels challenge is the notion that men are less emotional than women. Masculinist normative gender ideology is largely rooted in Aristotelian logic about the nature of men and women. The conceptual division of “the emotional woman” and “the rational man” has been one of the consistent, juxtaposing touchstones of traditional gender norms: “Western cultures share the stereotypical belief that women are more emotional than men. This stereotype has long featured in Western philosophy, where a binary opposition between emotion and reason has been closely associated with the opposition between masculinity and femininity” (Fischer and Manstead 71). As inherently rational beings, men are “naturally” suited to be in powerful leadership positions, whereas women, as inherently emotional beings, are incapable of weighing options objectively and employing emotionally-detached logic. In the “western tradition of political thought” the “most familiar story stresses the antagonism between reason and emotion and regards emotion as the dark chaotic force that the fully rational

⁶⁴ To be clear, only the reader—not the female protagonist—has access to the thoughts of other characters.

self triumphs over, separates from, or governs” (Brickford 1026). Because emotion is viewed as “misleading rational perception,” men, who are “inherently” capable of dispassionate reasoning, must lead those who are “weak, dangerous, and in need of being governed” (Brickford 1026). Women, believed to be inherently hyper-emotional, are thus counted among those who are “in need of being governed.”

In addition to different expectations in emotional expression, traditional gender norms have also dictated the kinds of emotions that are considered appropriate for each sex. The stereotype suggests that women are more likely to experience feelings of love, fear, and self-doubt. Fischer and Manstead argue that emotions such as love and fear have been understood not only as “feminine” emotions, but “emotions that imply powerlessness or vulnerability” which “pose a threat to Western conceptions of masculinity, because they make one appear weak, helpless, and out of control” (72). Anger and pride, in contrast, are considered to be “powerful emotions” that are “more in keeping with the masculine role in Western culture, because they may help to confirm or enhance one’s power or status” (Fischer and Manstead 72). Gender normative ideology, then, not only dictates which emotions are appropriate for men and women, and in turn, defines masculinity and femininity, but it also upholds a patriarchal social order through the perpetual pairing of “masculine” emotions with *power* and “feminine” emotions with *powerlessness*.

Seton challenges the historical master narrative that powerful men—as pillars of masculine strength—are emotionally invincible. Through her portrayals of well-known men, Seton demonstrates that gender norms are ideological *constructs* rather than reflections of how her male characters behaved. In all three of her novels, Seton provides

a counter-narrative that interrupts the traditional depiction of the impassive male hero. In *My Theodosia*, Joseph Alston, known in history books for being a wealthy plantation owner and the 44th governor of South Carolina, is often portrayed as being extremely emotional, “easily upset,” and “liable to be hurt” (Seton, *Theodosia* 148). Meriwether Lewis, an even more well-known historical figure than Alston, also displays emotions that do not align with traditional notions of masculinity. As one of the original explorers of the Louisiana Purchase, the master narrative that has been told about Lewis presents him as a paragon of masculine strength, and therefore, impervious to sentimentality or romantic distraction. During this historical period, extreme sentimentality was considered a natural weakness of women’s emotional facilities. Men, in contrast, were expected to control their sentimental emotions as a testament of their masculine strength (Fischer and Manstead 72). Yet, in Seton’s portrayal of Lewis, he is so consumed by his love for Theodosia that it begins to affect his performance as the private secretary to President Thomas Jefferson: “Each day it was harder to leave her; they put off the parting hour until the forest lay hot and muted under the noon heat. Jefferson did not question his tardiness, Merne enjoyed his complete trust, but his tired old eyes wondered, and Merne threw himself savagely into the accumulated work, cursing his own weakness” (Seton, *Theodosia* 220). Despite the wondering glances Lewis receives from Jefferson for his frequent mornings absences and the internal pressure he feels to abandon such sentimental pursuits, Lewis remains “beside [Theodosia] like a gawking school-boy, unable to leave her” (Seton, *Theodosia* 208). The “weakness” that Lewis curses is, of course, allowing himself to fall in love. The reason that Lewis considers his love for Theodosia a weakness is rooted in his socialization as a male: “Men’s gender role

socialization and the values of the masculine mystique” teach men to devalue feminine emotions (such as love) and instill in men “a learned fear of femininity” (O’Neil, “Patterns” 203). Lewis chastises himself for giving in to “puerile sentimentality,” but as he watches Theo leave after their final meeting before his expedition, he is nevertheless struck with a “devastating sense of loss and loneliness” (Seton, *Theodosia* 256-257). Knowing that his overwhelming emotions are not considered in keeping with proper male decorum, he attempts to re-direct his feelings in order to re-claim his masculinity: “It was a tavern he wanted, a tankard of cold, tingling ale, the companionship of males, forthright masculine talk. There, perhaps he would find surcease and forgetfulness” (Seton, *Theodosia* 257). Here, the implication is that “forthright masculine talk” is a remedy to the sentimental “feminine” talk he has just had with Theo.

In *Katherine*, Seton’s portrayal of John of Gaunt, the powerful Duke of Lancaster and King of Castile and León, includes several instances when the Duke is extremely sentimental and openly expressive. It is clear that John of Gaunt is aware of male gender norms because he tries to repress his love for Katherine by transmuting it into meaningless carnal lust—a more acceptable “masculine” emotion. Jackson argues that masculinist discourses serve to maintain “a separation between love and sex and within which the former is seen as a peculiarly feminine concern” (Jackson 202). John tries to erect an emotional “barrier” against Katherine and is “ashamed of his longing” for her, so he engages in a “calculated slaking of his lust with two count ladies and the Norman whore” (Seton, *Katherine* 230). These trysts, however, leave him “uncured,” meaning that he is unable to dismiss his feelings for Katherine (Seton, *Katherine* 230). When casual sex with other women fails to rid the Duke of his obsession with Katherine, he

then tries to convince himself that as soon as he has sex with Katherine, “he would be cured” of any genuine attachment to her (Seton, *Katherine* 230). John wishes to be “cured” of his feelings for Katherine because he considers it an impediment to his political progress, especially because marrying Katherine would not be socially acceptable on account of her low birth. In spite of his attempts at repression, the Duke clearly experiences an intense emotional attachment to Katherine, which is confirmed when his sister, Princess Joan, overhears John crying out for Katherine in his sleep. Joan describes the incident as follows:

Then I heard a strange noise in the State Chamber which is next to mine, and where John slept. It was a sound of outcry and struggle. I opened the door between and listened fearfully, meaning to shout for the guard, and then I knew that he was in the grip of some frightful dream. He choked and panted and cried out your name. “Katrine! Katrine!” He cried it with a frenzy that would wring your heart. I went to him and woke him, and he was angry with me and bade me get out. We did not speak of it again. (Seton, *Katherine* 356).

Seton demonstrates to readers that the Duke’s outward presentation of emotional invulnerability to the public is merely a façade. The image of the Duke writhing around on his bed in physical distress while pining for Katherine casts him in a much different light than that of the composed and calculating politician featured in dominant historical texts. When John is discovered in a vulnerable emotional state, he experiences “a discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self-concept that is culturally associated with gender” (O’Neil, “Patterns” 204). His “real self” is emotionally dependent on Katherine, but, cognizant of masculine gender norms, he knows that “the ideal *masculine* self-concept” requires that he does not express feelings of panic and longing. Therefore, upon being discovered in such a state, John becomes angry (a more acceptable masculine

emotion) and avoids addressing the incident with Joan altogether because he does not want to appear “weak.”

Similarly, in *The Winthrop Woman*, readers witness how the outwardly strong, rugged, and confident William Hallet, who is known for being one of the original settlers of Greenwich, Connecticut, is cast in a role similar to the classic damsel in distress. He relentlessly pines for Elizabeth Fones, even though she is married to Robert Feake, and sinks into a lovesick “despondency” (Seton, *Winthrop* 467). Hallet worries constantly that their love had been, for Elizabeth, “a transient thing,” yet he holds out hope that they will one day be together (Seton, *Winthrop* 467). Because the act of “waiting” for a lover “encapsulates the powerlessness of the lover” (Jackson 211), Hallet’s actions transgress traditional gender norms which cast women, not men, in the role of the waiting, powerless lover. In the throes of his longing for Elizabeth, Hallet lays “twisting and tossing on his hay mattress” night after night (Seton, *Winthrop* 468). Hallet languishes, almost incapacitated by his emotions, which places him rather symbolically in the same position as the fair lady waiting in a high castle tower for the return of her beloved knight.

Traditional gender norms also establish that men are inherently courageous and therefore unsusceptible to crippling fears or insecurities. Historically, “feminine” traits like being “weak, dependent, submissive” are viewed negatively, while “masculine” traits like strength, independence, and dominance are viewed “positively” (O’Neil, “Patterns” 206). Fear, in particular, is considered unmasculine and understood as “a sign of powerlessness and vulnerability” (Fisher and Manstead 75). Seton’s novels challenge this gender norm by demonstrating that even some of the most powerful men in history

suffer from debilitating anxiety and self-doubt. In fact, in all three novels, the main male characters—Joseph Alston, Robert Feake, and John of Gaunt—are compared to scared children on several different occasions.

In *My Theodosia*, Joseph Alston is often directly described as “insecure,” and his “unmanly” lack of self-confidence often reduces him to childish outbursts which both infantilize and emasculate him (Seton, *Theodosia* 148). Theodosia, in fact, pities Joseph because she knows that “beneath his undisciplined emotions and overbearing manner was the heart of an anxious small boy, unsure of himself” (Seton, *Theodosia* 57). One of the most vivid scenes in which Joseph transgresses male gender norms occurs on the night of his wedding. When the couple is finally alone, Joseph is hesitant to consummate the marriage on account of “The inner uncertainty and fear of being inadequate, which had bedeviled him from childhood” (Seton, *Theodosia* 119). He stalls by lashing out in anger and kicking one of his servants, but “under his clumsy show of masculinity, he was as frightened as she [Theodosia]” (Seton, *Theodosia* 122). When Theo is obviously repulsed when Joseph tries to kiss her, Seton’s description of Joseph’s reaction to Theo’s coldness infantilizes him: “His mouth was twisted like that of a small child that has been unbearably humiliated and does not understand. His eyes, bewildered and desperate, slid quickly away from hers” (Seton, *Theodosia* 122). Fear and the pain of rejection overwhelm Joseph, and he ends up weeping in his wife’s arms on their wedding night.

Even the often confident and unintimidated character of Aaron Burr succumbs to fear in *My Theodosia*. When he is re-captured after a brief escape from authorities, Burr collapses in terror: “. . . he had lost control of himself, had been reduced for one instant to a shaking, piteous mass of nerves” (Seton, *Theodosia* 341). Because giving in to fear is a

transgression of male gender norms, the memory of his breakdown “shamed [Burr] as nothing else had,” so he tries to “bur[y] it anew where it would not trouble him” (Seton, *Theodosia* 341). Burr’s feeling of shame and his impulse to forget his public display of fear is a clear indication that he feels pressure to conform to masculine gender norms which equate fear to weakness. Here, Seton’s portrayal of Burr interrupts the hegemonic expectations of masculine invulnerability.

Seton disrupts the master narrative of the fearless male hero in her portrayals of the main male characters in *The Winthrop Woman* and *Katherine* as well. In *The Winthrop Woman*, Robert Feake, who is considered to be one of the courageous original settlers of Greenwich, Connecticut, suffers from night terrors. He is so scared from his own dreams that he “whimper[s] like a child” and screams “in tones of the utmost horror mingled with pleading” (Seton, *Winthrop* 322). Elizabeth often has to comfort Robert as if he were one of her young children. In *Katherine*, Seton’s portrayal of John of Gaunt demonstrates that not even powerful male leaders are impervious to fear. When John catches word that there are rumors circulating amongst the people of England that he is not a true-born noble, he tries to hide the fact that this piece of gossip makes “his whole body trembl[e] inwardly” (Seton, *Katherine* 296). Later, when a crowd of Londoners publicly accuses John of Gaunt of being a “changeling” as he is leaving the late Duchess Blanchette’s requiem mass, he reacts with anger. Since anger “is often associated with masculinity” and considered a more acceptable masculine emotion than fear (Lewis 225), the Duke responds to the crowd’s accusation with rage. He organizes his royal military in preparation to exact punishment on the people of London, but Katherine prevents John from dispatching his forces. As Katherine cleverly distracts John from his purpose with

conversation, his anger cools, and it becomes clear that the Duke's wrath is not actually rooted in a desire to re-assert his power over the people; rather, it stems from an intense fear that John has harbored since boyhood and, as an adult, associates with the loss of his manhood.

Once he is alone with Katherine, John tells the story of how his childhood nurse's son, Pieter Neumann, accused John of being a "changeling" out of jealousy over her affection; while speaking, John's hands "trembl[e]" and his face resembles that of a "foolish frightened child" (Seton, *Katherine* 363, 365). His fear is so intense that he acts "like a whimpering babe—cowering in terror of treachery, and injustice and loss" (Seton, *Katherine* 296). As Katherine listens, she fights her impulse "to kiss and comfort him, as she had her babies" because she knows that "he would push her away in anger, as surely as Tom or little John struggled in manful pride against ill-timed caresses" (Seton, *Katherine* 363). The Duke is essentially infantilized when Katherine compares him to her young son John Beaufort: "It were folly to make a comparison between the thirty-six-year-old Duke of Lancaster and a four-year-old child, and yet—in both she had seen the same intrinsic shape of fear" (Seton, *Katherine* 361). Emotions that violate the normative code of male conduct—fear and self-doubt—are particularly unacceptable if they impact a man's official duties or his public image. Especially for men in leadership positions, the repercussions "of showing stereotypic feminine qualities could be disrespect, failure, and emasculation," all of which "are high costs to a man who wants to fulfill the masculine mystique" (O'Neil, "Patterns" 206). It is clear that both John and Katherine are well aware of the "high costs" that John would pay if others knew about his secret fear because, after John confesses it to Katherine, "Neither Katherine nor the Duke ever

mentioned the night at Kennington Palace⁶⁵” again (Seton, *Katherine* 369). They attempt to conceal John’s transgression of male gender norms from his retinue and the public so that he will not be emasculated.

Another violation of male gender norms that is considered particularly egregious for men in high positions of authority is allowing *romantic love* to dictate or impact political actions. Because love is “indefinable, mysterious, [and] outside rational discourse” (Jackson 207), it should have no place in the political realm. Men, simply by virtue of their maleness, are considered to be natural leaders because they are not at risk for being “distracted” from their duties by matters of the heart. In Seton’s historical novels, however, the male characters who hold some of the highest leadership positions in government frequently transgress this gender norm. For example, in *My Theodosia*, when Meriwether Lewis is summoned to testify in Aaron Burr’s trial for treason, Theodosia begs him not to take the stand because, especially as the returning hero of the Louisiana Purchase expedition, his testimony is sure to do great damage to Burr’s defense. Lewis’s initial reaction to Theo is not only biting, but it also serves as a verbal endorsement of the rational man/emotional woman binary: ““Why not? Because you and I have known love? That is the reasoning of a fool—or a woman”” (Seton, *Theodosia* 359). Yet, when it comes time for Lewis to testify, he is already miles away from Richmond. Despite his haughty show of masculine supremacy, Lewis does not testify against Burr purely on account of his love for Theo. In essence, his decision not to testify is due to the very motive which he verbally condemns as that “of a fool—or a woman.”

⁶⁵ Not to be confused with Kensington Palace, which was built nearly four centuries later.

In *Katherine*, the Duke of Lancaster quite frequently makes political decisions based on his relationship with Katherine and even neglects his official duties in order to spend time with her. At one point, the Duke risks public humiliation by dressing in a pilgrim's costume in the streets of Bordeaux just so that he can go see Katherine. Seton describes John's love for Katherine as "obsess[ing] him to a point *beyond reason*" (my emphasis, *Katherine* 245). John's abandonment of "reason" violates one of the most foundational characteristics of normative masculinity. Even John finds his transgressive behavior appalling, saying to Katherine, "look to what straits you've brought the ruler of Aquitaine—skulking in sackcloth, bribing the frowsy scoundrels for a place of assination" (Seton, *Katherine* 245). Later in the novel, when he finds out that Katherine's husband, Hugh Swynford, has died, John immediately and entirely neglects several pressing official matters, including the negotiation of the alliance with Castile through his impending marriage to Queen Costanza. He abruptly absconds with Katherine for over three weeks. Several of the Duke's advisors attempt to police his behavior because it does not accord with the proper masculine decorum of keeping emotions, particularly the sentiment of love, in check. Captal de Buch interrupts the Duke's time with Katherine at Chateau la Teste to engage him in signing several official contracts sent by Castilian commissioners, but John refuses to attend to them. The Captal is shocked by the Duke's behavior and tries to correct it by saying, "Be reasonable, my lord. One must never let one's little pleasures interfere with the really important affairs of life" (Seton, *Katherine* 267). The Captal's comment not only devalues Katherine as merely one of life's "little pleasures," but it also insinuates that romantic relationships with women are unimportant when compared to matters of state.

Another one of the Duke's advisors, Baron Michael de la Pole, also attempts to police John's unmasculine behavior. When the Duke is forced to flee to Scotland during the Peasant's Revolt and is then denied access back into England by dissenters, the Duke's greatest concern is over the safety of his beloved Katherine. Knowing that she was in the Savoy Palace when the mob of Londoners set it ablaze, the Duke makes a desperate plea to de la Pole to seek confirmation that Katherine has escaped unharmed. Even in the midst of the destruction caused by the Peasant's Revolt and his falling out of favor with the people of England, the Duke's priorities are driven by his love for Katherine. De la Pole finds it "very strange that at such a time when [the Duke's] whole life might well be ruined, the Duke should waste thought for a woman, and one who was not even his Duchess" (Seton, *Katherine* 490). During the fourteenth century, norms of masculine emotion were largely dictated by class status and the code of chivalry, which place expressions of love firmly within the realm of socially acceptable male behavior⁶⁶. However, cultural codes of the time did dictate which women, based on their family lineage and class status, were acceptable objects of affection for a man of John's social rank. Thus, John's intense concern over a woman of such low birth does not adhere to the social norms prescribed for men of John's status. Furthermore, because success in military and political campaigns were central markers of masculinity in the fourteenth-century, the Duke's concern for a woman "at such a time when his whole [political] life might well be ruined" is considered by his advisors to be a transgression of male gender norms.

⁶⁶ See Gordon's discussion of fourteenth-century social norms.

The gender system in Seton's novels is often enforced by character-to-character verbal policing or through character behaviors which indicate disapproval. Seton's inclusion of these policing tactics is imperative to providing the reader with a clear picture of the gender system that her characters navigate, but it also serves, through contrast, as a subtle way to emphasize moments when (whether the behavior is ultimately policed or not) characters *do* resist the parameters of that gender system. The characters' resistance to or rejection of gender norms serves two crucial purposes. First, even if the character's transgression of norms is eventually "punished" by policing forces, simply performing the transgressive act itself demonstrates to readers that there exists in male and female characters the impulse or *desire to resist* the gender system in its current form, which suggests that the system itself is too restrictive. Second, when characters perform a transgressive act that goes "unpunished," this demonstrates to readers that not only is resistance possible but changing the system itself may not be as implausible as it might appear.

The second major dogma of normative gender ideology that Seton engages with in *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* is the conventional power dynamic between men and women. Throughout the history of Western civilization, men have been considered innately superior beings. Because "our 'dominant fiction' or ideological 'reality' solicits our faith above all else" in "the adequacy of the male subject," the relative inadequacy of the female has made her the naturally submissive party (Silverman 15). The master narratives in mainstream history books habitually portray men as single-handedly controlling the trajectory of human history. Critical decisions are made by men; critical actions are taken by men. Privileging men over

women and privileging masculinity over femininity has, in fact, been part of American discourse since the founding of the nation. During the Revolutionary War, “the rhetoric of ministers and pamphleteers emphasized the masculine qualities of republican virtue, distinguishing masculine virtue from effeminate corruption” (Osborne 112). The equation of masculinity with power and femininity with submission has essentially been embedded in American national identity since its founding.

Throughout history, women have been discursively excluded from political power because “*manly* strength [has] served as a powerful and popular metaphor for government” (my emphasis, Osborne 114). The majority of mainstream historical narratives suggest that women are largely uninvolved in shaping history, a message which parallels the traditional gender norm that men are dominant and women are submissive. According to Lerner, “The myth that women are marginal to the creation of history and civilization has profoundly affected the psychology of women and men” and ultimately led to the widespread belief that the proper “place in human society” for men is a position of dominance (221-222). This myth has also promulgated the notion that men are naturally independent, whereas women are naturally dependent. The historical endurance of male dominance is due in large part to the continual privileging of what is “natural” for men and women and, of course, habitually equating the “natural” to “goodness” and “truth.” In this way, patriarchal ideology has effectively silenced many opposing viewpoints by naturalizing male dominance as an essential and incontestable kind of social order⁶⁷. In the words of Althusser, dominant ideology retains and perpetuates its power because “it imposes” beliefs “without appearing to do so” by

⁶⁷ This norm, however, does shift in cases when a woman’s societal rank is considered “higher” than a man’s societal rank.

framing them as “obviousnesses” (x). Gender hegemony, including the notion that men should be dominant in relationships with women, “involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear ‘natural;’ ‘ordinary;’ ‘normal’” (Donaldson 645). Hegemonic beliefs about the power hierarchy between men and women are then reinforced “through punishment for non-conformity” (Donaldson 645). These punishments may be in the form of those formalized by the state (historically, for example, denying women the right to own property), but informal methods like social exclusion or verbal policing can also be just as effective in coercing subjects to conform.

The conventional “logic of the master narrative” has reinforced the idea that men, due to “their exclusive position” in society, should “determine the direction of society and the state” (Barlow 16). This logic has also carried over into heterosexual marital relationships. Men, seen as the proverbial heads of the household, are given authority in most decisions pertaining to dependents: their wives and children⁶⁸. Historical narratives often reiterate the hegemonic belief that because women do not have the same “capabilities” as men, women should not be involved in “decision-making processes” (Barlow 16-17). Seton challenges this master narrative in her portrayals of the relationships between her male and female characters in several ways: by demonstrating that male characters do not always make the decisions in their relationships with women, by demonstrating that female characters do not always obey the commands of men, and by demonstrating that some of her male characters are *dependent* on women. At times, Seton’s male characters are even submissive in their relationships with female characters.

⁶⁸ In this discussion, I am focusing on the nuclear family.

For example, in *My Theodosia*, while he consistently tries to have authority over all decisions, Joseph's efforts most often prove to be futile because Theo regularly commences with her own decisions, regardless of her husband's opinions. When Theo learns that her father has been jailed in Richmond on charges of treason, Joseph wants nothing to do with the trial because he does not want the Alston family⁶⁹ to be accused of collusion. When Theo announces that she intends to make preparations to travel to Richmond, Joseph replies: "You cannot. I forbid it. I will not have any of my family mixed up in this disgraceful affair" (Seton, *Theodosia* 331). Theo's response completely rejects Joseph's command: "Nevertheless, I shall go. And you need not consider me belonging to your family if you do not wish to. I would prefer not to see you again" (Seton, *Theodosia* 331). Joseph "recoil[s]," stomps away, and proceeds to throw a temper tantrum in a different room of the house (Seton, *Theodosia* 331). When Theo's maid Eleanore comes running to tell Theo that Joseph is "shouting and bellowing like a mad bull," Theo's reaction and her verbal response to Eleanore demonstrates that Theo is not intimidated by Joseph's blustering (Seton, *Theodosia* 334). She remains confident in her power to overrule Joseph and never doubts that she will go to Richmond: "Theo shrugged, her lips parted in a faint, remote smile. 'Mr. Alston's behavior is a matter of complete indifference to me'" (Seton, *Theodosia* 334). As Eleanore reflects on the scene, she thinks to herself that "Monsieur Alston is, after all, no match for Madame [Theodosia]" (Seton, *Theodosia* 334). Joseph is vexed by his wife's refusal to submit to his will because her behavior does not conform to the conventional power dynamic between husbands and wives; however, he does not verbalize his thoughts to her: "Damn

⁶⁹ In this case, Joseph Alston is concerned about members of both his nuclear and extended family.

it, she was his wife! How dared she run counter to his wishes” (Seton, *Theodosia* 334). As Theo expected, “Joseph soften[s] his stand before Theo left for Richmond,” having “clung as long as he could to his authority” (Seton, *Theodosia* 334). Ultimately, it is Theo’s authority that prevails. She considers Joseph to be much “like the sheep dog” who will obey her commands (Seton, *Theodosia* 283). Even when Joseph shows up in Richmond to try to “persuade Theo to return with him at once,” Theo simply “ignore[s]” his request and stays in Richmond as long as she pleases (Seton, *Theodosia* 365). Theodosia is quite aware of the power she has over her husband and asserts it whenever Joseph attempts to deter her from any purpose.

In *Katherine*, Seton depicts King Edward III’s beloved mistress, Alice Perrers, as frequently taking more initiative than the King to make important political decisions. King Edward III defers his authority to Perrers’s judgment on a number of serious national affairs (Seton, *Katherine* 299-300, 303, 306, 325). For example, Bishop Wkyeham, one of the royal bishops who is jailed for backing the Commons, seeks an audience with Alice Perrers—not the King—to plead his case and to “restore his rich temporalities” because he knows how much power Perrers has over the King. When Perrers presents a document concerning Wykeham’s fate in front of the King, he obeys her orders without question and signs a bill to enact “Wykeham’s restitution” (Seton, *Katherine* 370). Even during Parliament meetings, the King is more focused on gazing at his mistress than asserting his authority in serious national affairs (Seton, *Katherine* 299-300).

In *The Winthrop Woman*, the traditional power dynamic in Elizabeth and Robert Feake’s marriage is almost entirely reversed. On their wedding night, Robert even

verbally pledges submission to Elizabeth: “I will always—if I can—do what you wish” (Seton, *Winthrop* 223). Throughout their marriage, Robert almost always defers to Elizabeth to make decisions on matters that are considered to be strictly of masculine domain: land purchases, political affinities, religious observances, interactions with government officials, and even matters of family protection⁷⁰. When the Feake family hires a Native American servant named Telaka, who is often seen practicing chants in her native language, the people of Watertown start accusing the Feake family of practicing witchcraft. The townspeople begin blaming any negative incident that occurs in the community on the Feake family and Telaka’s supposedly evil spells. A crew of Watertown men descend upon the Feake household, capture Telaka with the intent to kill her, and threaten the safety of the whole Feake family. Elizabeth springs into action to protect Telaka and her family. She secretly enlists the help of the town minister to arrange for Telaka’s release and makes arrangements for the whole family to board a shallop under cover of night to escape the angry mob in Watertown. Robert follows all of Elizabeth’s orders without question because of his “innate dependence on Elizabeth’s judgement” (Seton, *Winthrop* 380). While the Feake family and Telaka are safely on board the *Dolphin* and bound for Connecticut, Robert sleeps in the deck below, fully assured that Elizabeth will handle all important details for their relocation. When the *Dolphin* briefly docks for supplies in Plymouth, Robert, who is heartened by Elizabeth’s calm management of the legitimate danger his family faces, casually pokes his head out of the cabin to ask Elizabeth why they have stopped. She tells him to stay below deck to

⁷⁰ Here, it is important to clarify that, in Seton’s portrayal of the Feake marriage, Robert’s general deference to Elizabeth’s authority is established long before Robert shows signs of mental deterioration. In fact, at the climax of his mental deterioration, Robert abruptly absconds to London without engaging in any consultation with Elizabeth.

avoid being recognized by anyone on the docks of Plymouth harbor. He promptly follows her directions and again defers entirely to her judgment: “No use thinking of it, and Bess knew what to do, if aught must be done” (Seton, *Winthrop* 353). The thoughts and actions of Seton’s characters demonstrate that power *can* be negotiated between the sexes and that *not all* male-female relationships⁷¹ *always* operate with patriarchal power dynamics.

Seton also challenges the norm of male dominance by interrupting the traditional axiom that men, by virtue of their innate strength and independence, do not depend on others—especially not women. Seton’s portrayal of Aaron Burr upholds the convention of paternal authority; at the same time, however, it calls attention to how dependent Burr is on his daughter. Contrary to being a self-made man, Burr owes a considerable degree of his political achievements, his financial status, his public image, and the outcome of his trial for treason to Theodosia’s interventions. Theo agrees to marry the wealthy Joseph Alston in order to improve Burr’s financial situation and to fund Burr’s campaign for vice presidency. When Burr is wanted for murder in the North, Theo holds a party at Joseph’s plantation with several influential men to ensure Burr’s safety from capture in the Southern states. Theo also convinces her husband to allow Burr to stay with them while he is a fugitive. Theo successfully changes public opinion of Burr by influencing several prominent members of Richmond society who “rall[y] around the charming Mrs. Alston” while Burr is on trial for treason (Seton, *Theodosia* 345). In addition, Theo prevents Meriwether Lewis from testifying against Burr and “succeed[s] brilliantly” in winning over Burr’s defense lawyer, Luther Martin, whose (hitherto lazy) “handling of

⁷¹ Again, factors like race and social status can also alter the tradition of male dominance over women.

the case increased in fervor” through Theo’s singular influence (Seton, *Theodosia* 346). Martin remarks, “Did I know no other good of Burr—and I do, mind ye—it would be enough for me that he has such a daughter” (Seton, *Theodosia* 346). Finally, in a rare moment of emotional vulnerability, Burr actually confesses to Theo that he depends on her alone: “You’re the only one on whom I can *depend*, from whom I have no secrets. What should I do without you?” (my emphasis, Seton, *Theodosia* 225). Although Burr publicly portrays himself to others as the epitome of the self-made man, most of his successes—including the outcome of the trial which saves his life and grants him his freedom—are largely due to the efforts of a *woman*: his own daughter, Theodosia.

In *Katherine*, Seton’s portrayals of the Duke of Lancaster and the King of England reveal that they are both dependent on and extremely influenced by women. Seton depicts the most powerful man in the whole of England, King Edward III, as being so dependent on his mistress, Alice Perrers, that he “cannot live without her” (Seton, *Katherine* 303). As previously discussed, the King’s dependence on Perrers extends past the realm of romance as well. Similarly, the Duke’s dependence on Katherine is made clear when he drops to his knees and tells her that he “cannot exist” without her (Seton, *Katherine* 245). In the novel, Katherine is depicted as single-handedly stopping John from waging a civil war against the people of England. Just as the Duke is giving final instructions to one of his military leaders, Katherine rushes into the room, interrupts the Duke, and *orders* him to obey *her*: “Katherine drew herself high, her chin lifted and she said inflexibly, ‘All this will wait until you’ve talked with me. I command it, my lord’” (Seton, *Katherine* 358). From this point on, Seton depicts the power dynamic between Katherine and John as shifting so dramatically that other characters notice how much

authority Katherine exerts over John. Geoffrey Chaucer observes that “Katherine ha[s] thoroughly tamed that fierce Plantagenet leopard!” (Seton, *Katherine* 391); Hawise, Katherine’s waiting woman, remarks to Katherine, “You can do anything with his grace nowadays” (Seton, *Katherine* 403); and the Duke’s closest advisors “did not hesitate to attribute the Duke’s new restraint to Katherine’s influence” (Seton, *Katherine* 370). Seton’s portrayal of the centrality of Katherine’s role in the Duke’s life challenges the depiction of the Duke’s relationship with Katherine given in most of the mainstream historical texts⁷² in circulation at the time *Katherine* was published.

The third gender dogma prevalent in dominant historical narratives that Seton challenges in her novels is the portrayal of historical male figures as perfect specimens of humanity. According to Barlow, “Almost universally throughout history men have been presented as heroes” (16). History books have habitually elevated men as paragons of strength, courage, ambition, and intellect—especially the famous men who are featured in Seton’s *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*. Chloe Ward, in her article entitled “Biography, History, Agency: Where Have All the ‘Great Men’ Gone,” affirms that “The ‘great men’ of history have been valorized as *the* sources of change in the world” (my emphasis, 77). Conversely, women, when they are included in historical narratives, are not given the same valorizing treatment; oftentimes, their identity in history books is constructed entirely around their relationships with famous men. Men alone are presented as “the rightful representatives and embodiments of the modern nations” (Ward 80). In “Western academic and narrative traditions,” mainstream texts apply the “‘heroic life’ as a narrative mode” to male historical figures and portray them

⁷² If Katherine Swynford is mentioned in the mainstream historical texts published during the mid-twentieth century, her role in the Duke’s life is generally portrayed as peripheral and insignificant.

as “object[s] of popular veneration” (Ward 81). Absent from these dominant historical narratives are the flaws and failures of famous men. The narratives told in history books are shaped by “the selection of materials” and “the mode in which [a historian] presents his theme,” but they are also “determined by the conscious or unconscious desires to glorify the actions of the group to which [the historian] belongs” (Teggart 28). Thus, because history has traditionally been told by men⁷³, historical narratives have been dedicated to glorifying the actions of men⁷⁴—and leaving out any information that has the potential to damage their spotless reputations.

One of Seton’s most unique narrative strategies that challenges the master narrative of the flawless male hero is achieved by placing emphasis on the physical appearance of her male characters. Historical texts rarely make comment on the appearance of powerful men in history because the narrative focus is on highlighting men’s accomplishments. In contrast, the narrative identity of women, even in historical literature, is often centered around physical appearance. Seton subverts the typical focus of the stories told about men in history through the mere provision of details about their physical characteristics. Furthermore, Seton’s inclusion of this information places it in a position of greater importance, and symbolically, generates more equality in the narrative treatment of men and women. Through this discursive strategy, Seton dislodges masculinity itself from the prototypical *male gaze*⁷⁵. By placing her male characters in the objectified position, who are then critiqued by the *female gaze* of the novel’s

⁷³ More specifically, well-educated white men who are part of the middle and upper classes.

⁷⁴ Again, typically, white men of a certain social status.

⁷⁵ The theory of the “male gaze” was first proposed by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975, but has since been applied to literature by many feminist scholars. One of the ways that women have been kept in a subordinate social position is through the objectification of their bodies via the male gaze.

protagonist, Seton performs a critical feminist intervention to masculinist sexual ideology—which is made even more powerful by the fact that Seton’s male characters are real historical figures.

Seton’s use of the *female gaze* is particularly effective in disrupting the convention of the flawless male hero because many of her descriptions of famous men are rather unflattering. For example, in *My Theodosia*, Theo’s first impression of Joseph Alston dims the light on his reputation as the wealthy and powerful 44th governor of South Carolina:

He had a pompous air about him; he looked arrogant and humorless. He was of medium height and heavy-set, a circumstance which his bright plum-colored suit did nothing to conceal. It seemed stuffed to bursting across his broad back. His hair was black and cut short a la Brutus; it clustered on his round head in tight curls. Theo thought instantly of a bust of the Emperor Tiberius which she had once seen in a Philadelphia drawing-room: the same thick neck, low forehead, and full, disdainful mouth. (Seton, *Theodosia* 39)

The focus on Joseph’s physical features in *Theodosia*’s analysis of her husband is significant because it reverses the male gaze. In several other instances throughout the novel, *Theodosia* specifically critiques Joseph’s body⁷⁶. During a conversation with her father, *Theodosia* refers to Joseph as a “fat purple sheep” and when she sees Joseph after a period of separation while he is traveling for political purposes, she notices that he has “grown fatter” (Seton, *Theodosia* 59, 193). *Theodosia*’s evaluation of Thomas Jefferson’s physical appearance upon first meeting him at a political dinner is equally unflattering:

His big loose-jointed frame appeared shrunken inside a wrinkled brown coat, that looked as though he had visited the stables in it—as indeed he

⁷⁶Conceptualizations of the “ideal” male body and the “ideal” female body have varied according to historical time period, but Seton makes her female protagonists’ opinions about the desirable and undesirable qualities of the male body quite clear.

had. His thin sandy hair was indifferently combed, there were ink stains on his fingers. Far worse than all this was his footgear, and Theo reflected Dolly Madison's look of dismay when she discovered, as did all the guests with varying degrees of horror, that the President, whose corns hurt him, was shuffling about in heelless and stained carpet slippers that made small flapping noises on the bare floor. (Seton, *Theodosia* 239-240)

This description of one of the most revered men in American history—a Founding Father, no less—certainly does not evoke an image of radiant, masculine perfection. In addition to an unappealing appearance, Seton's portrayal of Jefferson also brings to light flaws in his character that would never be found in the pages of mainstream history books.

The grand narrative that has been told about Thomas Jefferson is called into question several times throughout *My Theodosia*. Contrary to “the vision of Jefferson crafted by his most well-known biographers who presen[t] him as a Southern gentleman dedicated to the life of the mind” (Gordon-Reed vii), Seton's portrayal of Jefferson often calls attention to his lack of social graces, silly inventions, and questionable political decisions. At the Whitehouse, Jefferson is described as creating “a cult of rudeness and boorishness” (Seton, *Theodosia* 234). He is also described as a leader who is rather “placid” in his role as President (Seton, *Theodosia* 21). In contrast to Jefferson's supposed dedication “to the life of the mind” and brilliance as an inventor, Seton depicts him as “sitting on his backside and philosophizing, or puttering with his idiotic mechanical contrivances, or, worse yet, tending his collection of birds” (Seton, *Theodosia* 21). Seton even offers a counter-narrative to the standard opinion about Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, which has been lauded as one of the biggest American accomplishments in the early nineteenth century and regarded as a testament to Jefferson's political genius as an American visionary. The purchase is described “an

egregious piece of folly,” “a piece of unbridled bad judgment,” and a decision that was “against all advice” of his cabinet (Seton, *Theodosia* 226). Aaron Burr says of Jefferson’s decision, “I have no doubt Bonaparte was delighted to get rid of the burden, and is now sniggering up his sleeve at us poor, gullible fools” (Seton, *Theodosia* 226). Seton’s provision of a narrative that runs counter to the master narrative creates room for doubting the blind reverence which has traditionally surrounded Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase in the pages of most history books.

In *Katherine*, contrary to the common depiction of famous men as models of morality, Seton’s portrayal of the powerful John of Gaunt, who is “a man reputed one of the most chivalrous knights in Christendom,” demonstrates that he is not quite an exemplar of ethics (Seton, *Katherine* 208). While the Duke is giving confession to Brother Walter Dysse, he admits that he is having an affair with Katherine out of wedlock, but when the friar tells the Duke that he must be truly repentant for his “sins of the flesh” and “lustful thoughts,” John snaps back at the friar, ““But I’m *not* repentant!”” (emphasis original, Seton, *Katherine* 250). When the friar tries to encourage the Duke’s contrition, John storms out of the chapel after saying that he wants Katherine’s husband, who is injured from serving in the Duke’s own army, to die (Seton, *Katherine* 251). Furthermore, although the Duke appears to be in mourning over the death of his wife, Duchess Blanche, his grief seems far less sincere when, only five months later, he tries to get Katherine to commit adultery with him. As he forces himself on Katherine, she cries, ““Have you forgot why we are both in black!”” (Seton, *Katherine* 208). Katherine successfully escapes the Duke’s violent advances, but the episode reveals that John does not maintain the kind of moral fortitude expected of a revered chivalric knight.

Seton's portrayal of King Edward III of England in *Katherine* also interrupts the historical master narrative of a glorious ruler responsible for building the 14th century English empire. A summative example of the conventional depiction of King Edward III provided in several mainstream historical texts can be found in the Preface of one of the hundreds of extensive biographies published about his life:

King Edward III ruled for fifty years. Under his genial splendor, the fractious wilderness inherited from his murdered father became transformed into an English nation. It was a reign outstandingly rich in dramatic events and sometimes violent in its contrasts. There were spectacular feats of war at Sluys, Crécy and Poitiers, as well as at Nájera beyond the Pyrenees. They made the king and his eldest son, the Black Prince, into figures of legend. (Packer x)

Characteristic of most commentaries about “the great men of history,” this passage focuses on Edward's many accomplishments and casts him as a heroic “legend.” A more recently published biography by noted historian Ian Mortimer is actually entitled *Edward III: The Perfect King* (2006). In the publisher's description, King Edward III is lauded as “one of England's most influential kings—and one who shaped the course of English history,” as well as “one of the country's most illustrious leaders for centuries.” The description also credits King Edward III with making “feudal England a thriving, sophisticated country and one of Europe's major military powers” through his “lasting influence on the justice system, artistic traditions, language, and architecture of the country.”

In *Katherine*, the picture that emerges of King Edward III is quite different; he does not appear to be the “perfect king” that historians like Ian Mortimer have tried to portray⁷⁷. During Parliament, the King hardly pays attention to the important matters

⁷⁷ Seton's portrayal of Edward III was significant when *Katherine* (1958) was published because, at the time, not many historians had called attention to the exceptional diversity in public opinion about his

being addressed, including “defense against possible invasion and resumption of the war in France” (Seton, *Katherine* 299). Shortly after Parliament is called to order, King Edward “gradually drooped and shrank into his purple robes of state,” his “palsied fingers slipped from the scepter, and his face grew tired and mournful like a hound’s” (Seton, *Katherine* 299). He even dozes off from time to time. When he manages to stay awake, he simply casts longing glances “toward the newel staircase . . . [where] Alice was hidden there on the turn of the stair” (Seton, *Katherine* 299). Even before matters are settled with the Commons, Seton depicts the King as “wander[ing] toward the stair” because “he wanted his dinner, which would be served him in a privy chamber with Alice” (Seton, *Katherine* 299-300). In this scene, Edward’s sons let him go and attend to business in his stead because he is rather useless and distracted.

In *The Winthrop Woman*, Seton’s portrayal of the famous John Winthrop diverges from the depictions given in most history textbooks. Like most well-known men in history, the dominant narrative that has been told about John Winthrop has depicted him as a dutiful leader, an embodiment of American enterprise, and an exemplar of virtue and integrity. In contrast, Seton’s portrayal of Winthrop depicts him as having several character flaws, including ruthless authoritarianism, unbridled arrogance, lack of integrity, and blatant hypocrisy. In his role as the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, he is often overly punitive to others. Winthrop treats the men in his company like “naughty children,” and eventually the men’s “rage was such that it nearly touched off the insurrection [of] Winthrop” (Seton, *Winthrop* 312). Several of Winthrop’s former

abilities as a ruler. Contemporary opinions of Edward III scholars remain divided, as evidenced in the collection of essays entitled *The Age of Edward III* (2001), and are perhaps best summarized by A.K. McHardy’s assertion that while Edward III’s reign is generally considered “an important one in history,” evaluations of his leadership are still “mixed” (171).

supporters leave the colony for Rhode Island because “they had had enough of Bay tyranny forever” (Seton, *Winthrop* 312). Even Winthrop’s third wife, Margaret Tyndal, whom Seton depicts as often being blind to her husband’s unwarranted cruelty to others, comes to see him as an overly “harsh” leader whose sense of “justice and mercy” has faded away, “leaving only self-righteousness” (Seton, *Winthrop* 312). Seton’s portrayal of John’s authoritarianism suggests that it stems from a combination of arrogance and a hypocritical sense of piety.

At a social gathering, very shortly after the death of his second wife Thomasine Clopton, Seton depicts John’s hypocritical behavior as shocking to his sister Lucy. Before the party, John sternly advises Lucy “to beware of the world” and to “deny all pleasure” during festivities, and yet, during the party, Lucy witnesses her “saintly” brother being overtly flirtatious with one of the female guests and even sees him drink wine after “he had been for some months denouncing wine as the devil’s spittle” (Seton, *Winthrop* 21). In addition, Seton portrays Winthrop’s sister Ann as being appalled when John marries “so soon and so quickly” after his second wife, Thomasine Clopton, dies. Later, he marries Martha Coytmore only six months after the death of his third wife, Margaret. Winthrop not only ignores “the customary year out of respect” for Margaret, he also impregnates his new wife immediately (Seton, *Winthrop* 513). Nevertheless, as Elizabeth points out, “What [John Winthrop] calls lechery in others no doubt wears some sweeter name when he applies it to himself” (Seton, *Winthrop* 513). With this statement, Seton depicts Elizabeth as boldly calling attention to the way that Winthrop considers himself exempt from the high standards of behavior that he so frequently chastises others for failing to meet.

Seton's characterization of John Winthrop as a harsh judge of others is especially apparent when he beats his niece Elizabeth, who is only seven at the time, so severely for such a minor offense that John's own father intervenes. John whips Elizabeth with a hazel switch until she faints from the pain and sudden loss of blood. As soon as Elizabeth regains consciousness, John tries to make her "'kiss the rod which has saved [her] from damnation'" (Seton, *Winthrop* 30). When the bewildered Elizabeth vomits on the stick instead, John raises his arm to begin beating her again, but Adam Winthrop stops his son and accuses him of being "overhard and canting" (Seton, *Winthrop* 30). John protests, quoting the Bible, but Adam's response calls direct attention to his son's hypocritical piousness: "'Since ye hanker so to quote Scripture, ye might mind ye of the Fifth Commandment!'" (Seton, *Winthrop* 30). This silences John and puts an end to his assault on young Elizabeth, but it does not prevent him from being sanctimonious later in the novel. Seton's portrayal of this exchange between Adam and John Winthrop further emphasizes her characterization of the famous John Winthrop as a hypocrite.

Seton also emphasizes that John Winthrop is excessively arrogant by incorporating a passage from one of the *real* personal journals that he wrote about the status of Massachusetts Bay Colony. In one entry, he writes:

Mr. Winthrop was chosen governor again, though some laboring had been, by some of the elders and others to have changed, but not out of dislike of him, (for they all loved and esteemed him) but out of their fear lest it might make way for having a governor for life, which some had propounded as most agreeable to God's institution and the practice of well ordered states. (Seton, *Winthrop* 329-330)

Speaking about himself in the third person, Winthrop is confident that his journal will be in high demand "for public consumption" (Seton, *Winthrop* 329). Not surprisingly, while Winthrop's journal is supposed to chronicle the events of Massachusetts Bay Colony, it

“seldom indicate[s] any viewpoint but the Governor’s” (Seton, *Winthrop* 329). It is also apparent throughout his journal entries that Winthrop’s estimation of “God’s will” nearly always aligns with his own. Seton further emphasizes Winthrop’s egotism in her description of his appearance as he approaches Massachusetts Bay harbor to greet his family members who have just arrived from England: “Winthrop dressed in his most ceremonious suit of rich black satin, topped by the old fashioned lace-edged ruff he still wore. His broad black beaver hat was garnished with silver braid and a glittering buckle—the sumptuary laws naturally did not apply to the Governor” (Seton, *Winthrop* 301). In the novel, Winthrop often condemns others for engaging in any form of extravagance, he considers himself exempt from the same judgment. Contrary to his historical reputation as an extremely pious man (which has been bolstered by the material in his own journal entries and letters), John Winthrop’s depiction in *The Winthrop Woman* demonstrates that even the famous founder of Massachusetts Bay Colony is imperfect.

My Theodosia, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* challenge the assumptions of “the masculine mystique.” Seton’s portrayals of real-life male characters get underneath the archetype of the invulnerable, dominant, and flawless male hero by providing readers with a more realistic rendering of the well-known men in history. Her novels provide important counter-narratives to the stories habitually told in the mainstream history books that have served to uphold the traditional power hierarchy between men and women. By juxtaposing masculinist ideals of gender with the narratives she creates about the lived experiences of her male characters, Seton demonstrates that normative gender ideology is a *construct*, not a reality.

CHAPTER FOUR

ESTABLISHING THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL FEMALE FIGURES IN
ANYA SETON'S HISTORICAL FICTION

“Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh.”

—Adrienne Rich⁷⁸

Many, if not most, mainstream historical texts⁷⁹ published before the 1960s were written by male authors, delivered through a masculinist ideological lens, and focused on the life stories of men. While this phenomenon of privileging male voices may appear quite obvious from the vantage point of contemporary theory, the majority of early and

⁷⁸ (Rich, “When We,” 18)

⁷⁹ Again, I am defining “mainstream historical texts,” (and the synonyms that I use, including “mainstream historical narratives,” “dominant historical narratives,” and “dominant historical texts”) based on Derrick Alridge’s discussion of master narratives in his article entitled, “The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr.” (2006). Throughout my discussion of Seton’s work, mainstream historical narratives should be understood as widely circulated texts that focus on providing historical information to the general public and may be delivered through several major generic forms like history textbooks, biographies, or historical novels. Mainstream historical texts tend to reinforce dominant ideology by offering “simplistic, one-dimensional, and truncated portraits that deny [readers] a realistic and multifaceted” understanding of history (Alridge 663). Mainstream historical texts often present “heroic, uncritical, and celebratory master narratives of history” (Alridge 664). Mainstream historical texts also habitually focus on famous historical figures, like the “Founding Fathers,” and present them “in isolation from other individuals and events in their historical context,” while leaving out “the more controversial aspects of their lives and beliefs” (Alridge 662).

mid-twentieth history texts written by (male) professionals in the field were generally considered conclusive records of the past. The manner in which history was established as a formal field of study in the academy during the early nineteenth century had a tremendous impact on the general perception of history books well into the twentieth century. In order to legitimize history in universities amongst the already well-established academic fields of science and medicine, historians emphasized that studies of the past could be done objectively by using proper research techniques to make evidence-based claims. As the respectability for history as a formal academic discipline grew, “the virtue of objectivity [became] unquestionably attributed to great historians, technically expert and visionary geniuses who soar beyond the passions and interests of ordinary people in ways that allow them to produce compelling if not perfect history” (Smith 24). This new brand of “scientific historians” referred to themselves as “a fraternity, an army, a monastery” (Smith 28), all terms that suggest exclusively male participation and define historiographical authority as decidedly masculine. Hence, the “the founding myth of objectivity” long served to conceal the gender bias that exists in dominant historical texts, just as the “status of the great [male] historian” long protected the information in dominant historical texts from scrutiny (Smith 25). Most of the critical conversations that took place prior to the feminist textual recovery movement of the 1970s and 1980s largely ignored how the portrayals of men and women in historical texts have been influenced by normative gender ideology. In fact, according to Shapiro, even many contemporary scholars of historiography are “reluctant to see gender as woven into the whole fabric of social relations and institutional practices” (13). Masculinist historical discourse is perpetuated when the depth and pervasiveness of traditional gender

constructs in representations of the past are left unacknowledged. It is, therefore, imperative for today's scholars to view the relationship between gender and history as "symbiotic" (Dimock 620). Gender should be understood within the historical writing and reading process "not as an external or even secondary consideration, but as an *organizing principle*, as the perceptual coordinates by which details are selected and meaning imposed, in short, as the cognitive ground shaping an entire field of vision" (italics mine, Dimock 617). Only when gender is recognized as an *organizing principle* of subjectivity does it become possible to expose the ways that masculinist ideology has controlled the narratives created about men and women of the past.

One of the most powerful ways of perpetuating masculinist ideology in mainstream historical narratives—including the narratives told in historical fiction—has been achieved by ensuring that there is an *absence* of knowledge about the lives of women. Because discursive meaning can also be conveyed through "suggestive silences and omissions" (Shapiro 19), the overwhelming exclusion of women from mainstream history texts has made it appear as if women have been, aside from their ability to bear children, relatively unimportant to Western society. In *My Theodosia* (1941), *Katherine* (1954), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958), Seton challenges dominant historical discourse by including historical information that has habitually been *left out* of mainstream history. As discussed in the previous chapter, one way that Seton disrupts dominant historical narratives, which routinely portray men as paragons of excellence, is by offering more *realistic* representations of well-known heroes like Thomas Jefferson and John Winthrop. The second way Seton challenges dominant historical narratives is by including more extensive information about several important but widely unknown

women in history. Because mainstream historical narratives “take for granted the male prototype as the subject of history” (Baron 150), Seton’s decision to position a real-life female figure at the center of her novels is an important feminist literary intervention.

Even when mainstream historical texts do mention women, their historical importance is often reduced by limiting their narrative presence to their interactions with well-known men. Dominant historical texts, which “celebrat[e] the achievements of [male] politicians, entrepreneurs, and soldiers,” typically only give credit to women of the past for being the “wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters” of famous men (Kruppa 605-606). Seton, in contrast, opens up the traditional discursive borders that have confined the narrative identities of women throughout history. While Seton’s portrayals of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones are in keeping with the information available in vetted historical records, her engagement in a much more sustained and rigorous study of all three women reveals that their historical importance is not confined to their roles as the “wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters” of famous men. By demonstrating the ways in which her real-life female protagonists resist several hegemonic gender norms that have served to perpetuate patriarchal ideology throughout history, Seton’s historical fiction reveals that Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones forge—to the extent possible within the culture of their respective time periods—identities that are independent of their relationships with men. Beyond simply “recovering” the life stories of her female protagonists, Seton provides a counter-narrative about several characteristics that have been portrayed as “inherently

feminine” and perpetuated as reasons why women should remain in a subordinate social position relative to men⁸⁰.

Since the historical records available to Seton at the time she was writing *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* contained significantly less biographical information about her female protagonists compared to the abundance of information that was readily available to inform her portrayals of male characters, Seton had to painstakingly sift through a much wider breadth of historical records to search for any mention of the three women that she was determined to bring to life in her novels. This process of mining mainstream historical texts for evidence about the lives of those who have been marginalized throughout history is called “deviant historiography,” a term proposed by Jennifer Terry in her article “Theorizing Deviant Historiography.” Terry’s own investment in deviant historiographical studies primarily concerns lesbians and gay men of the past, but her theoretical method for analyzing the way that various discourses have worked, throughout history, to define subjects is akin to the work that Seton performs in terms of male and female subjectivities. A deviant historiographical approach “looks for not only how subjects are produced and policed, but for how they are resistant and excessive to the very discourses from which they emerge” (Terry 286). The task of tracing what Terry refers to as “subaltern consciousness,” by which she means the experiences of historically marginalized subjects like women or homosexuals, is especially difficult because historians “are constrained to search for subaltern consciousness in elite history, those accounts of the past which simultaneously constitute the dominant historiography and the history of dominance” (Terry 286).

⁸⁰ Again, variables such as race, socio-economic status, and culture of origin may alter the traditional power hierarchy which places men in a dominant position over women.

However, Terry argues, because “A subject is the occupant of a subject position situated as such through discourse, or, more precisely, through the relay or relation between hegemonic and counter discourses,” deviant historiography serves as “a method for mapping the complex discursive and textual operations at play in the historical emergence of subjects” (284-286). Put more simply, researchers like Seton have limited access to the experiences of historically marginalized subjects because the vast majority of surviving historical records trace the lives of “elite” subjects (i.e. white men in positions of power: kings, presidents, governors, etc.). Since these “elite” subjects are defined *in relation to* other subjects (particularly the marginalized), a targeted examination of the “operations at play” (such as the gender power hierarchy) provides a clearer picture of not only the marginalized subjects themselves but also the social and discursive frameworks by which they have been defined throughout history.

Through Seton’s depiction of the life stories of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones, she brings to the fore ways that women in the past have been systemically oppressed. This is a crucial form of feminist intervention because male dominance and female submission has been habitually naturalized, and therefore, made invisible in the collective historical consciousness. Hélène Cixous offers a powerful articulation of how patriarchal power has been maintained throughout history:

In fact, every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems—everything, that is, that’s spoken, everything that’s organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us—it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition, an opposition that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as “natural,” the difference between activity and passivity. (44)

Dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity prior to the late twentieth century were “typically conceived as relational,” where “masculine to feminine are juxtaposed and linked to sets of dichotomous terms: aggressive/passive, strong/weak, work/home, culture/nature, and so forth” (Baron 109). Because “Researchers often have taken for granted the dichotomous character of gender categories,” this “binary framework” must be kept in mind when exploring “the historicity of gender” and when examining “masculinity and femininity” (Baron 159). To be clear, I am not suggesting that a “binary framework” of gender—which polarizes masculinity and femininity—should be endorsed. Rather, my intention is to expose how this binary framework has been employed to uphold patriarchal ideology in dominant historical texts in order to demonstrate how Seton’s real-life female protagonists resist these rigid dichotomies.

Seton challenges masculinist historical narratives and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity primarily through the thoughts and actions of her female protagonists. The ways that Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones resist normative gender behavior can be organized by examining how they disrupt hegemonic beliefs about women relative to the following two major subjects: 1.) The Domestic Role and 2.) Sexuality. Using the aforementioned chronology, I will begin my analysis of each subject by identifying the specific beliefs that have been perpetuated about women in relation to the domestic role by examining major discursive channels (literature, medicine, science, etc.). Next, I will briefly address *how* these specific beliefs have been reinforced, particularly during the time that Seton was writing *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*. Finally, after establishing a working knowledge of the traditional beliefs about women and the subject at hand, I will move to an analysis of

how Seton's protagonists resist adhering to these normative expectations of feminine behavior. When I turn to the literature, it should be kept in mind that Seton employs a variety of narrative maneuvers to demonstrate how Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones resist adhering to traditional gender ideology. In some instances, the protagonists' resistance is noticeable through either their inner or outer dialogue. There are moments when all three protagonists experience moments of frustration with a society that affords women less autonomy and less power. Seton also demonstrates how her female protagonists take certain actions to resist normative gender expectations. A third narrative maneuver that Seton employs is the creation of contrast between the thoughts or behaviors of the female protagonist and those of other female characters in the novel; this narrative strategy serves to highlight the female protagonists' subversion of gender norms.

There are three specific expectations which have been enforced as imperative to the fulfillment of women's traditional domestic role: heterosexual marriage, motherhood, and home-making. The first—and most foundational requirement—for fulfilling the traditional female domestic role is marriage⁸¹. For centuries, male dominance in marriage has been upheld by legal, social, and religious doctrines. Despite some shifts in the social expectations of men and women throughout human civilization, “the persistence of male domination and sexism” has been transcendent (Forster 293). Marriage, as an institution and cultural imperative, has been used as a tool for guaranteeing uninterrupted male dominance through the symbolic and legal transfer of authority over women from fathers to husbands. In the decades that directly preceded the

⁸¹ The discussion of “marriage” throughout this chapter specifically concerns *heterosexual* marriage.

publication of *My Theodosia* in 1941, social debates about “the woman question”⁸², the entry of women in the work force during World War I, and the eruption of 1920s subculture embodied by the flapper girl all created widespread anxieties about the preservation of patriarchal power through the institution of marriage and the ideal of “the Angel in the House”⁸³. These anxieties provoked a vehement patriarchal backlash. Diana Wallace says that a “focus on marriage” can be observed in “the conservative ideology of domesticity which characterized the inter-war period, especially the 1930s” (Wallace, “Revisiting” 63). When men returned from World War I, marriage rates in the United States dramatically increased (Wallace, “Revisiting” 63). While World War I wreaked havoc on a significant portion of the Western male population, pride in battle and victory also “bolstered a male identity that had been in crisis on the eve of the conflict” and “restored women to their place” of being “dutiful and admiring wives” (Thebaud, “The Great War” 23). After World War II, women were again hopeful that their wartime contributions in the workforce would secure the dawning of a new era which elevated the single career woman to the highest levels of social respectability. However, as had been the case after the first World War, women were expected to return to the private sphere of wifehood, motherhood, and domestic duty. In mass media, “women were told that it was their civic duty to return home, just as it had been their duty a few years earlier to join the workforce” (Thebaud, “Explorations” 8).

⁸² A phrase which has been used to refer to the heated social debates that began circulating during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the proper role of middle and upper-class Western white women in industrialized countries.

⁸³ “The Angel in the House” is a term used to refer to the ideal image of the submissive wife that was coined after the publication of Coventry Patmore’s so-titled poem in 1854 but whose ideological significance lasted well into the twentieth century.

The marriage imperative was especially intense in the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century. During the 1940s, “representations of women were polarized in propaganda into good or evil—either wives and mothers keeping the home fires burning, or potential spies, loose talkers, or betrayers of both husband/lover and country” (Wallace, “Writing the War” 85). Further evidence of the campaign to restore women to their traditional role, and thus, to remain under the control of their husbands, is recorded by Matilda Butler and William Paisley in their rather comprehensive examination of the dominant messages that were circulating in mass media throughout the twentieth century: *Women and the Mass Media: Sourcebook for Research and Action*. During the 1940s and 1950s, the press was engaged in a “systematic magnification of the woman’s traditional role,” particularly in magazines like *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which has served as a sort of guidebook for proper female behavior since its founding in 1883 (Butler and Paisley 104). Articles on the best practices for pleasing one’s husband and romantic stories that culminated in happy marriage abounded.

Seton’s personal opinion about the traditional female domestic role is made clear in her diary entries, and ultimately, sheds light on what, exactly, compelled Seton to select Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones, in particular, to be the protagonists of her historical novels. In a diary entry dated January 27, 1928, four days after Seton’s twenty-fourth birthday, she counts off the fulfillment of the proverbial women’s “to-do” list: “Check off matrimony, check off virginal palpitations, check off maternity, check off domesticity, check off travel (but not permanently), I am ready for more” (ASP 4). Having just turned a year older, Seton muses about what she has accomplished in accordance with the traditional domestic role and attempts to grapple

with the fact that, having met the “key” components to this role (marriage, motherhood, and domesticity), she is left unfulfilled. This realization—that fulfillment of the traditional domestic role—has not, in fact, made her entirely happy comes as somewhat of a surprise to Seton because the culture surrounding her had always led her to believe that the meaning and purpose of women’s lives *should be* found in their roles as wives, mothers, and home-makers. Having fulfilled all of these roles, Seton poses the question, “What am I to do with the next forty years?” (ASP 4). She expresses her dissatisfaction with the prospect of spending the rest of her days fulfilling these roles. In the same diary entry, she writes:

Here I am, waiting and restless. Waking up each morning with a flat loathing for life and a feeling of unrealized possibilities. Perhaps—it is true, the criticism that 9/10ths of the population would immediately pass. I have not enough to do, and yet if I can find the key, I’m sure that my leisure will bring more happiness to me and my babies . . . There are two things I demand, and therefore, will eventually get. – a lover or many lovers, and success from writing. (ASP 4)

For Seton, living to be a wife, mother, and home-maker has become monotonous and bland. The feeling of dissatisfaction—this “flat loathing for life and a feeling of unrealized possibilities”—that Seton awakes with every morning is the same feeling that her characters, strewn across time as they are, feel about the domestic role. The particular thread that ties all of these women together, the thread that Seton recognized as both familiar and remarkable in her own life and in the lives of her protagonists—is a refusal to allow social expectations about the domestic role to entrap and limit their lives. Certainly, while Seton and her protagonists do not fully escape the domestic role, for all of them fulfill the same expectations that Seton “checks off” in her own feminine “to-do” list, they all find subtle ways to leverage small victories—small escapes—and small bits

of happiness in these moments of resistance. And hiding in between the pages of history books were stories—stories of women, throughout the ages—with whom Seton could personally relate. For Seton, knowing that *women like her existed* throughout history—women who did not wholly delight in the domestic role, women who found marriage and motherhood unfulfilling, women who wanted something beyond the pale of their own kitchen tables—was, in the end, a kind of fulfillment. So, in pursuit of fame and fortune—two endeavors which have been traditionally encoded as masculine—Seton took up the pen. Seton answers her own question regarding the direction of her next forty years later in the same journal entry: “I want universal popularity, a lover, success in earning money, presumably by writing” (ASP 4). Seton was ultimately intrigued by Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones because she saw them as historical pioneers for living, in some ways, outside the bounds of the traditional female domestic role. By creating narratives about women whom she saw as resisting certain social conventions—by demonstrating that these women have, indeed, existed throughout history—Seton suggests that perhaps it is the *social codes* that need changing, not the women who resist them. In this way, Seton’s work contributes to a wider, more complex cultural consciousness about gender, about femininity and masculinity, and about traditional gender roles.

The first and most foundational aspect of the female domestic role is matrimony. As an institution, marriage has been a primary avenue through which to maintain patriarchal power. Traditionally, marriage has been considered the culminating moment in a woman’s life, and for white Western women in the upper and middle classes who lived during the time periods of Seton’s novels, marriage has also been the most socially

acceptable option of material survival. In a traditional marriage, men are the respected heads of household, meaning that, simply by virtue of their maleness, they are considered the highest authority figure within the nuclear family. A husband's wife and children are expected to obey his orders. In dominant ideology, the "theory of man and wife" is one in which "the wife is to bend herself in loving submission before her husband" (W. Thornton 96). Traditional marital conventions dictate that wives work "exclusively in the household" and that husbands work "exclusively in the [job] market" (Lundberg and Pollak 36). Historically, religious doctrines, property laws, and gender-specific socialization have reinforced male dominance in marital relationships.

The marriage imperative has been so ingrained in Western culture that, from a young age, most girls are bombarded with stories of romance that ultimately coerce them into believing that finding a husband should be their primary goal in life⁸⁴ upon reaching marriageable age⁸⁵. The expectation of marriage is made clear to the female protagonists in all three of Seton's historical novels, but they all try to refuse the marriage proposals that are foisted upon them. In *My Theodosia*, which is set in the early nineteenth century, Aaron Burr announces to Theodosia that "Early and brilliant marriage [is] the crowning accomplishment for a woman" (Seton, *Theodosia* 31). On Theodosia's seventeenth birthday, she is bombarded with talk of marriage by almost every character with whom she interacts. Theodosia's responses to this sudden and intense pressure to marry makes clear that *she* has no desire to get married anytime soon, or perhaps, ever. This attitude,

⁸⁴ See Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Therein, Rich asserts that "The ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at [women] from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool" used to enforce marriage as both imperative and desirable ("Compulsory" 24).

⁸⁵ "Marriageable age" has, of course, varied according to the laws and mores of different time periods.

of course, comes as a shock to other characters, who then attempt to correct her “misguided” way of thinking. While Theodosia is at her dressing table, her adopted sister Natalie prattles on excitedly about the potential male suitors who are to attend the evening party. Theodosia, sharing none of her sister’s enthusiasm for romance, calmly responds to Natalie’s comments with, “I have time yet to think of marriage—if, indeed, marry I must” (Seton, *Theodosia* 8). Natalie is appalled by Theo’s resistance to marriage and immediately attempts to police Theodosia’s highly transgressive mindset. Natalie’s response is scolding: “Ciel! . . . Of course you must marry. Imagine remaining always a virgin, without position, without being rangée, simply the daughter of your father! You are heedless, ma chère, and you have no mother to tell you these things, so I must” (Seton, *Theodosia* 8). Theodosia pays no attention to Natalie’s desperate guidance and rushes out to prepare her horse Minerva for a vigorous morning ride—alone. Upon entering the stables, in response to Theodosia’s request for the little Irish stable boy to saddle Minerva, even he reinforces the marriage imperative: “Sure, and you look pretty as a peach, this morning, Miss Theo; your seventeenth birthday will be agreeing with you . . . Likely you’ll be choosing yourself a fine young husband from the elegant throng that’s coming to the mansion today” (Seton, *Theodosia* 11). Theo flashes the little boy a look of annoyance, replies “tartly” with “Likely I won’t,” and flicks her horse to a quick gallop down the sandy road (Seton, *Theodosia* 11). As she rides, Theodosia fumes about the other characters’ insistence on finding a husband and decides that she is perfectly content with the freedom that being the daughter of Aaron Burr affords her.

Upon arriving in town, Theo encounters a young Washington Irving, with whom she chats about literature. Eventually, Irving kisses Theo. Instead of swooning, as Irving

expects her to do, Theo seems relatively unaffected by the gesture. Confused by her behavior, Irving asks if she is in love or engaged to someone else. She again vehemently confirms that she has no desire to marry: “Oh, no. . . . And I mean never to marry” (Seton, *Theodosia* 17). Irving finds the idea preposterous and immediately says: “Stuff! Of course you’ll marry” (Seton, *Theodosia* 17). After Theo returns to Richmond Hill for her party, she is horrified to learn that her father also has his mind on finding her a suitable husband. Burr requests that Theo charm a wealthy plantation owner from South Carolina named Joseph Alston. Unbeknownst to Theo, Burr has already decided that Theo will marry Alston because the union will grant Burr access to Alston’s money and political power in the south for the benefit of Burr’s presidential campaign.

Within a matter of weeks after meeting for the first time, Alston asks Theodosia to marry him. Theo is utterly shocked and immediately denies his proposal. Infuriated and expecting her father to agree with her decision, Theo is sorely disappointed when her father tells her that he has already given his blessing to Alston. After making her repugnance for Alston abundantly clear, Theo pleads with her father to change his mind. Eventually, however, Theo, as tradition demands, obeys her father and unhappily concedes to marry Alston, but her feelings about marriage and Alston remain unchanged. As soon as the priest pronounces them husband and wife, Theo thinks to herself: “‘Husband!’ The words struck through her brain. This thick-set stranger with the curly hair and petulant mouth—Husband! Terrifying and ludicrous too. Almost she could have laughed, as he stepped forward clumsily and kissed her on the mouth” (Seton, *Theodosia* 115). Theo’s despair only increases after the wedding when she must travel with Joseph back to his plantation in South Carolina.

Every time Joseph must leave the Oaks for business or political errands on behalf of his father-in-law, Theo rejoices in her husband's absence because she can "Almost forget that she [is] a wife" (Seton, *Theodosia* 150). During times when Joseph is home, Theo attempts to cope with her despair by telling herself that all marriages are—at least eventually—unfulfilling and passionless: "This is all there is to marriage for anyone, she thought, tolerant affection and this—this degrading submission of the body" (Seton, *Theodosia* 264). Theo "cl[ings] desperately to this theory, using it as anodyne" to endure the first months of her marriage (Seton, *Theodosia* 264). The "theory," however, ultimately fails to comfort Theo, especially when it is proven false by her own adopted sister. After marrying Thomas Sumter and giving birth to a daughter, Natalie comes to visit Theo in South Carolina. Natalie, who is bubbling over with excitement about being pregnant with her second child, gushes to Theo: "Marriage is heaven, Theo, is it not, Chérie? . . . What greater happiness is there in life than sleeping with the man you love and in bearing him children?" (Seton, *Theodosia* 265). Startled by the stark contrast between her sister's contentment with marriage and motherhood and her own dissatisfaction with both, Theo cannot immediately bring herself to respond. Natalie, having expected to her sister to echo these sentiments, is noticeably confused by Theo's momentary silence. Knowing that, as a woman, she *should* be content in the traditional domestic role, Theo quickly feigns happiness despite her true feelings. Theo resolves to spend as much time as possible apart from her husband, traveling North and often staying at Richmond Hill instead of the Oaks.

In *Katherine*, which is set in fourteenth-century England, the female protagonist also tries to resist marriage. After Katherine turns sixteen, Queen Philippa sends one of

her messengers to escort Katherine from the convent at Sheppey⁸⁶ to the royal castle at Windsor for an interview with the Queen which will determine Katherine's fate out of the only three available to women in the fourteenth century: royal service, the cloister, or marriage. During her stay at Windsor, Katherine catches the eye of Sir Hugh Swynford, a knight in the Duke of Lancaster's royal army. He stalks Katherine and attempts to rape her in the castle gardens, but the Duke of Lancaster happens upon the scene and scolds his knight. However, when Hugh declares that he wants to marry Katherine, the Duke deems Hugh's behavior as "honorable it seems, in the end" (Seton, *Katherine* 41). Because Katherine is injured from trying to fight off Hugh's advances, the Duke takes her to his wife, the Duchess Blanche, to clean and dress Katherine's wounds. When the Duke addresses his wife to explain why Katherine is injured but does not express any qualms about Hugh's proposal, Katherine screams at the Duke that she refuses to marry Hugh (Seton, *Katherine* 41). Katherine's outburst is doubly courageous because, as a woman and, at the time, a member of the peasant class, speaking out against the Duke of Lancaster is a grave offense. The Duchess Blanche, who—even in her position as the Duke's wife—would never dare to challenge her husband's authoritative blessing on the union, immediately scolds Katherine's outburst. Katherine is fortunate when she is not punished for her bold defiance because, upon catching sight of the resemblance between Katherine's eyes and those of his beloved childhood nurse, the painful memory of her death startles the Duke so much that he abruptly leaves the bedchamber.

⁸⁶ Where Katherine spent five years upon being orphaned by her father's death. Since Katherine's father, Sir Payn de Roet, died while serving King Edward in battle, Katherine and her older sister Philippa came under Queen Philippa's charge.

Before Katherine even has a chance to meet with the Queen, Hugh secures the Queen's blessing on the match so that Katherine has no feasible way to refuse his proposal. When Hugh gives her a betrothal ring, Katherine brazenly announces, "I don't want it . . . I don't *want* it! . . . I don't want to marry you" (Seton, *Katherine* 47). Hugh is hurt by her rejection, but without the slightest consideration of Katherine's feelings, he insists that the entire matter has already been arranged. Exasperated by her entrapment, Katherine dejectedly slips on the ring, which hangs "heavy and loose as an iron shackle" on her finger, a description which further emphasizes that Katherine views marriage as a prison (Seton, *Katherine* 48). Katherine tries to view her impending fate with a dismal tolerance, but the full depth of her despair is unignorable when she awakens on her wedding day. As Katherine lies in bed, staring at the ceiling rafters in silence, "It seemed as though a cold hand was gripping her heart, and she dared not move for fear the cold would spread and freeze her whole body" (Seton, *Katherine* 88). Katherine does not make any effort to feign the image of a blushing bride; her total dismay is obvious to all who attend the wedding.

In *The Winthrop Woman*, which takes place in the seventeenth century, the female protagonist Elizabeth Fones *completely* disregards the orders of both her father and her powerful Uncle Winthrop to marry a lawyer named Edward Howes. She firmly rejects Edward Howes's proposal, even as Thomas Fones insists that the marriage is best for her because it will cure her stubborn independence. Elizabeth's reply to her father's disapproval of her unfeminine insubordination demonstrates that she had no intention of becoming appropriately submissive: "No, I am *not* moderate, Father! Or tame, or sober of thought—God forgive me—sometimes I feel torn in two—by the strength of passion

in me, by longing for wildness and freedom . . . This I know you cannot understand” (italics original, Seton, *Winthrop* 47). Elizabeth refuses to submit to her father’s will and remains confident that “though he was stubborn enough, she knew how to manage him” (Seton, *Winthrop* 44). Though Elizabeth is slightly more concerned about defying her Uncle Winthrop’s orders because “nobody in the family had ever questioned her Uncle Winthrop’s decisions,” she nevertheless disobeys him by treating Howes “with alternations of tolerance and boredom” (Seton, *Winthrop* 44). She avoids Howes’s visits to the Fones home by galivanting around the city with her cousin Harry Winthrop. Elizabeth develops a sexual attraction to Harry and becomes pregnant with his child. When Thomas Fones and John Winthrop find out that Elizabeth is pregnant with Harry’s child, they are furious, but, in accordance with religious credence, have no choice but to give their blessing on the marriage. Thus, Elizabeth not only manages to escape marrying Howes, but she also ensures that she can marry a man of *her choosing*.

After Elizabeth is widowed when Harry drowns just months after they are married, John Winthrop again tries to force Elizabeth to marry a man that he has selected for her. Having taken up his governorship of the newly founded Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop—from an ocean away—directs Elizabeth by letter to marry a man named William Coddington. When Winthrop arranges for Coddington to attend a formal dinner at Groton Manor to solidify the proposal, Elizabeth takes “one horrified look” at the unattractive Coddington and resolves to reject him by means of embarrassment (Seton, *Winthrop* 165). During the dinner, “Elizabeth flirt[s] with young Leigh, she [drinks] too much claret, she laugh[s] too high, [and] she interrupt[s] Coddington whenever he trie[s] to deliver an opinion” (Seton, *Winthrop* 166). The

crowning moment of Elizabeth's blatant rejection of her uncle's proposed match comes after dinner when Elizabeth invites the guests to join her in a game of analyzing their surnames. She begins with her own maiden name and then moves on to make Coddington the butt of her joke:

“My maiden name—” she cried, “was Fones—that's easy since it makes us think of fawns. But yours, Mr. Coddington—why what a wondrous suggestive name it is! We think of a great fish, do we not? We think of little pods, and bags—aye, and can we help—when viewing so handsome, so virile an owner of the name,” she paused, [and] went on with a silken malice, “Can we *help* think of a codpiece?” (italics original, Seton, *Winthrop* 167)

Upon being humiliated, Coddington takes his leave and subsequently withdraws his marriage proposal. Elizabeth's behavior infuriates her Uncle Winthrop, but she feels no guilt for her actions; she is glad to be rid of Coddington and remains unfazed by her Uncle Winthrop's anger. She is the only member of the Winthrop family—men included—who stands up to him. John Winthrop makes a third attempt to select a husband for Elizabeth and chooses a man named Robert Feake. This time, Elizabeth does not find the match distasteful. Upon meeting Feake, she is pleased that “so harmless had this opponent turned out to be” (Seton, *Winthrop* 214). Feake is very docile and treats her with an unusual deference: “His compliment and the devotion in his eyes were naturally not unwelcome; more welcome yet was a sense of power” (Seton, *Winthrop* 214). Elizabeth accepts Feake's proposal because she knows that she will be able to dominate him in their relationship. Directly after their wedding, Elizabeth makes it clear to Feake that she will not follow the traditional power dynamics of marriage. She firmly tells Feake that she will not submit to his will, nor obey the orders of any man: “‘The Governor is no more my master.’ Nor, she added silently but looking hard at Robert, ‘is

any man” (Seton, *Winthrop* 222-223). While none of Seton’s protagonists ultimately evade marriage, all of them defy the social expectation of quiet submission by, at the very least, boldly asserting their personal objections.

The second fundamental aspect of the traditional female domestic role is the bearing and rearing of children, specifically *within* the bounds of marriage. Motherhood has been historically constructed in Western society as a woman’s duty—one largely associated with her personal worth. Motherhood, argues Adrienne Rich, is essentially a “*political institution*” because it has, through “covert socializations and overt forces,” perpetuated patriarchal ideology (italics original, “Compulsory” 11). Shored up by dominant discourses in law, religion, and medicine⁸⁷, the social pressure for women to embrace motherhood has been a consistent feature in Western society for centuries⁸⁸. During the time that Seton was coming of age in the early decades of the twentieth century, feminist activists like Margaret Sanger in the United States and Marie Stopes in England did offer important challenges to the long-standing motherhood imperative by leading advocacy campaigns for women’s birth control. Their efforts certainly brought awareness to the double standard between men’s and women’s reproductive rights⁸⁹. However, both Sanger and Stopes endured intense social backlash and were even jailed for a period of time. When women were called upon to enter the workforce to support

⁸⁷ For example, male control over women’s reproductive rights has continually been used as a means of limiting the social, economic, and sexual freedom of women. The Comstock Act, which was passed in the United States in 1873, “made it illegal to ship any information or devices that could be used for preventing conception—which were defined as obscene—on either public or private freight carriers” (Folbre 348).

⁸⁸ Rich asserts that “The institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled—patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality—are strengthened by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery, and efforts at censorship” (“Compulsory” 11).

⁸⁹ Folbre defines this double standard as follows: “The Western cultural tradition seldom condemned men’s efforts to postpone or avoid fatherhood, whether through abstinence, delayed marriages, prostitution, or use of condoms. The same tradition, however, damned most women’s efforts to postpone or avoid motherhood as selfish violations of female responsibility for others” (345).

wartime industry, one of the primary social concerns that developed on the home front was “that wage employment would tempt women to neglect their family duties” (Folbre 343). Much of the propaganda that started circulating immediately after the end of World War I, and again, at the end of World War II implored women to return to home and hearth. Thus, around the time that Seton was publishing her historical novels in the 1940s and 1950s, the momentum that had been created by the suffrage movement and the campaign for women’s reproductive rights earlier in the twentieth century was being stunted by the post-wartime shift in focus on preserving the traditional nuclear American family. Even after the fervor of the civil rights movements in the second half of the twentieth century, many of the surveys conducted by social theorists regarding motherhood in the twenty-first century reveal that most women still report experiencing significant social pressure to have children⁹⁰.

All three of Seton’s protagonists experience the social pressure of motherhood. Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth are made aware by other characters that they are *expected* to have children, and in particular, to have sons⁹¹. While all three women do have children, Seton’s depiction of their attitudes toward motherhood starkly contrasts with conventional expectations of female behavior; traditionally, motherhood has been instantiated as a “*constitutive* of feminine gender identity” and as “*desirable and fulfilling* for all women” (italics mine, Gillespie 122). However, upon learning of their pregnancies, none of the protagonists react with customary feminine excitement. In fact,

⁹⁰ See McQuillan et al.’s 2008 article entitled, “The Importance of Motherhood Among Women in the Contemporary United States,” which shows that contemporary American culture continues to “conflate motherhood and femininity” and that “Motherhood is central to contemporary gendered expectations for women” (483).

⁹¹ All of whom, it is important to note, belong to the middle or upper social classes that existed during their lifetimes. Motherhood was conceptualized differently for the lower classes, particularly in terms of being the *central* tenet of femininity and in regards to the imperative to bear as many children as possible.

on several occasions, mention of their children evokes in the protagonists little more than a sense of obligatory duty rather than a source of true pleasure. Married women who do not display a compelling desire to be a mother transgress “traditional constructions of femininity,” and are, therefore, “frequently seen by others as unfortunate or psychologically flawed, selfish, and deviant,” or even “unnatural, unhealthy, and unfeminine” (Gillespie 124). Historical notions of femininity dictate that bearing and raising children should be the primary focus of women’s lives. Yet, in Seton’s narratives about Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth, motherhood is not depicted as the primary focus of their lives. In this way, Seton not only challenges traditional notions of femininity, but she also calls the historical belief that women “have always” wanted children⁹² into question.

In *My Theodosia*, Theodosia, in contrast to the other female characters in the novel, is noticeably uninterested in becoming a mother. At a dinner party, when the other female guests are talking about flirtations with men, childbirth, and child-rearing, Theo finds these “feminine” topics of conversation dull. Upon noticing Theo’s visible detachment and boredom, one of the dinner guests remarks to Theo, “You are the queerest girl” (Seton, *Theodosia* 49). Theodosia does not bother to respond, lost in thought about how the evening was “a formless disappointment” (Seton, *Theodosia* 49).

⁹² See Rosemary Gillespie’s article “Childfree and Feminine: Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily Childless Women” (2003). Therein, Gillespie argues: “It may be that there have always been women who preferred to remain childfree. The choices of women in the past have remained hidden. Being childfree has always been socially sanctioned for some groups, such as spinsters, widows, nuns, and nannies. Although these roles may have provided legitimacy for those who eschewed motherhood, they were defined by loss, self-sacrifice, and/or the nurturing of others’ children” (133). Gillespie’s discussion demonstrates that, while specific “socially sanctioned” places for some women (particularly based upon one’s social class) have existed throughout history, these designated spaces of relative acceptance of the childless woman “failed to challenge, and even served to bolster” the conceptualization of motherhood as an essential part of womanhood (133).

Theo's distaste of children is also apparent when she decides, despite her husband's angry objections, not to accompany the Alston family to Sullivan's Island (as is their tradition during the fever months in South Carolina), her primary reason being that she detests being around the "noisy children" and "wailing babies" of the extended Alston family (Seton, *Theodosia* 148). When Theo learns that she is pregnant, she is profoundly disappointed. She describes the feeling of the child moving inside her womb as "monstrous" (Seton, *Theodosia* 125). Instead of being a joyful, glowing mother-to-be, Theodosia is horrified by the prospect of having a child. She resents the bodily discomfort that the child has caused her and only looks forward to the baby's birth because it will free her of its physical burden: "After this strange thing which has transformed my poor body shall be painfully wrested from me. After I shall be released and alone again" (Seton, *Theodosia* 173). For Theodosia, independence and solitude are preferable to motherhood. She longs to "be released and alone again," which indicates that she also has no desire to take care of the child once it is born. Despite the customary stance of "husband[s], doctors, and friends" who "insist that [a woman's] every desire will be fulfilled by the joys of motherhood," Seton's portrayal of Theodosia presents readers with a female viewpoint that runs counter to the dominant cultural discourse of "blissful maternity" by calling attention to "the more complicated and exhausting reality of motherhood" (McQuillan et al. 484). Theodosia's attitude toward having a child is a stark contrast to the excitement expressed by the other characters.

Theodosia also transgresses the social norms of maternity by refusing to abide by the customs of childbirth that existed in the early nineteenth century Southern states. When Theodosia requests a doctor to assist in birthing her son, her husband objects to the

idea because he believes that childbirth should be monitored at their home by his female slaves⁹³. Theodosia does not relent, insisting that there is a complication with her pregnancy which requires the care of a medical professional. Alston's inner dialogue while pondering whether or not to take Theo to Charleston to see a doctor is laden with frustration that his wife refuses to adhere to "normal" and "natural" feminine behavior:

He flung his cigar into the fireplace, and glared at her. Why must she always be different from other females? Why could she not accept this normal business of women in the natural way, as Mrs. Alston did, and his sister, and every other woman he had ever heard of? They kept their embarrassing condition as unobtrusive as possible, never mentioning it, never fussing, until at the proper moment they quietly disappeared from masculine eyes, and eventually reappeared with a new addition to the family. (Seton, *Theodosia* 164)

Through the inner dialogue of Joseph Alston, Seton calls attention to the way that Theo transgresses norms of feminine behavior by juxtaposing Theo's actions with the those of "every woman [Alston] has ever heard of." The passage also effectively demonstrates the material effects of patriarchal hegemony on the lives of women during the nineteenth century. Theo's bravery in advocating for her own health and her dogged insistence that she needs medical care is considered an "obtrusive" annoyance to Alston, whose lack of respect for the physical sacrifice that women endure during pregnancy is made clear when he refers to it as an "embarrassing condition," a condition for which, of course, he is partially responsible. Alston's sense of male superiority also makes him totally ignorant of the fact that Theo has never had any desire to sleep with him or to carry his child. Theo is considered "different" precisely because she refuses to quietly submit to her husband's opinions regarding *her* body. In the end, Theo nearly dies in childbirth due to the fact that she did not receive medical attention immediately upon her request.

⁹³ Who have not received any medical training

In *Katherine*, the female protagonist is also disconsolate about her first pregnancy. When one of Katherine's housemaids tells Katherine not to raise her voice on account of her condition, Katherine says, "Oh, a murrain on the child!" (Seton, *Katherine* 123). While Katherine is pregnant with her first child, she refers to the baby as "her burden" and that she longs "to be free" of it (Seton, *Katherine* 134). Katherine also is not completely focused on her role as a mother, which is expected to take precedence over everything else in her life—including her own happiness. Katherine resists this norm by refusing to make motherhood an all-consuming role in her life. Directly after Hugh dies, Katherine is not focused on the future legacy of her children. In fact, as Hugh's squire Ellis is weeping with Hugh's armor in his hand and talks about Thomas Swynford growing into the armor to continue his father's legacy, Katherine's response is entirely focused on her own pleasure when the Duke comes for her: "She nodded, but her babies seemed as remote as everything else" (Seton, *Katherine* 261). Again, when the Duke summons Katherine to London, her eldest daughter Blanchette "crie[s] frantically" when her mother leaves, but Katherine is only momentarily distraught over her daughter's screams. As soon as Katherine passes a tavern sign that has the Duke's coat of arms on it, she has "a thrill of delight. And she forgot Blanchette" (Seton, *Katherine* 308). To be clear, I am not calling attention to Katherine's behavior as a means of passing judgment on the quality, if that could indeed be measured, of her mothering; rather, I am calling attention to the fact that her behavior defies normative expectations, which have indeed been coded as "good" and "bad." By traditional standards of motherhood, Katherine would be considered a "bad" mother for pursuing pleasure outside of her role as a mother: "'Bad' mothers expose the dark underside of an essentialist view of motherhood:

if mother-love and self-sacrifice are the natural expressions of maternity, then anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing of one's own needs over those of the child are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous" (McQuillan et al. 483). The "natural expressions of maternity" dictate that raising children should be a woman's sole focus, and the metric most often used to assess a woman's worth and morality. Katherine frequently leaves her children in the care of other women so that she can travel with the Duke. Because one of the specific hegemonic beliefs about motherhood "equates mothering with maternal presence" (McQuillan et al. 483), Katherine decision "to live apart from [her] biological children—is variously regarded as unnatural, improper, even contemptible" (Gustafson 1). Especially in this way, Katherine resists the culturally constructed "standards of motherhood" which have been used to limit women's social role to the domestic realm.

In *The Winthrop Woman*, Elizabeth is just as displeased with being pregnant as Seton's other two protagonists. During her first pregnancy by Harry Winthrop, Elizabeth refers to the unborn child as: "this monstrous thing that clutched and rent and would destroy her" (Seton, *Winthrop* 148). After Harry dies and Elizabeth marries Robert Feake, she "suffer[s] a miserable shock" upon learning that she is pregnant again (Seton, *Winthrop* 439). Also, like the other two protagonists, Elizabeth does not allow her role as a mother to consume her identity; she pursues her own happiness. While she waits for Hallet to beg the courts to give them a marriage license after her divorce from Feake is granted due to his mental illness: "Her only comfort was the reading of Will's books. Even the children were not in focus for her, though she gave them a great deal of her time, and was very gentle with them as some sort of guilty compensation" (Seton,

Winthrop 479). Elizabeth experiences guilt for not being consumed by the care of her children precisely because social pressures to conform to dominant notions of motherhood are so pervasive that they become internalized by women. The cultural instantiation of motherhood-related guilt and shame has been a powerful tool used to enforce normative gender ideology.

In addition to marriage and motherhood, the third foundational component of the traditional female domestic role is the expectation that women, in addition to caring for children, will perform daily household labor⁹⁴. Historically, there exists “the presumption that housewifery is a natural function of women, thus that it is axiomatic and static, requiring no explanation or discussion, requiring no recognition as a significant part of the economy” (M. Thornton 96). Seton’s female protagonists resist the proper feminine decorum by expressing abhorrence for the household duties, having a general lack of interest and boredom with home-making, putting little effort into performing household tasks properly, and, in some cases, avoiding household duties entirely. Seton also makes clear that her female protagonists do not find themselves “naturally inclined” to fulfilling domestic duties and are far more interested in activities outside the home. In addition, Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth all express the desire to escape the domestic realm⁹⁵.

⁹⁴ Again, it should be kept in mind that expectations of household labor vary according to race, class status, region, and historical moment. All of Seton’s female protagonists are white women who belong to either the middle or upper social class, and all of them have at least one woman, a member of the lower classes or a victim of enslavement, who assists in household duties. Nevertheless, it is made clear in the novels that the female protagonists are *expected* to focus only on matters relevant to the domestic realm and to dedicate their lives to pleasing their husbands, raising their children, and caring for their households.

⁹⁵ See Ulla Wischermann’s article “Feminist Theories on the Separation of the Private and the Public: Looking Back, Looking Forward” (2004). Therein, Wischermann provides an explanation of how the concept of separate spheres should be understood in my analysis of Seton’s historical novels: “In spite of their critique of dichotomous concepts, many feminist theorists try to retain the categories of private/public. The intention here is by no means to rehabilitate them, but rather to reinterpret them. The categories are

In *My Theodosia*, Theodosia's inner dialogue reveals that she is extremely uninterested in the very matters that she is supposed to, as a female, find appealing⁹⁶. Several times throughout the novel, Theodosia bemoans the fact that there are "only two topics of conversation for each sex: domestic detail and family gossip for the women, race-horses and rice for the men" (Seton, *Theodosia* 148). Theo is also bored by the limited activities in which she is allowed, based on her sex, to participate. While the men in the Alston family have the freedom to "escape" the "daily turmoil" of the domestic realm by riding their horses to inspect the plantation fields all day, Theo is vexed by the fact that the women in the family are not allowed to accompany them (Seton, *Theodosia* 145). It is clear from her inner dialogue that Theo is aware of what is and is not considered to be socially acceptable for women but finds the expectations of women to be exceedingly dull: "She [is] expected to amuse herself with proper feminine occupations—whatever they might be: apparently nothing except needlework and gossip. She was bored, and her nerves were frazzled by the constant pressure of people and noise" (Seton, *Theodosia* 145). Theo often feels intensely confined by remaining in the household for long periods of time and daydreams about escaping on Minerva⁹⁷. She longs for the freedom to travel by herself across the plantation lands by horseback but knows that doing so will inspire considerable backlash for transgressing gender norms: "She might have ridden here; there was a large stable of horses—but not alone! Oh,

not meant to remain in force as separate from each other and underlaid with a gender subtext, but rather to be characterized and analyzed in a process-related perspective as relational" (187).

⁹⁶ Based on Vickery's conclusions about the social expectations that were in place during Theodosia Burr's lifetime: "Most eighteenth and nineteenth-century women lived within a world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting—that endless trooping of women to each others' homes for social purposes. It was a world inhabited by children and by other women. Women helped each other with domestic chores and in times of sickness, sorrow, or trouble" (385).

⁹⁷ Her horse at Richmond Hill, the Burr estate.

never! A decorous trot, accompanied by one of the grooms, was all that was permissible, and that was considered eccentric for a married woman” (Seton, *Theodosia* 146). For a short period of time, when Theo is newly married, she attempts to adhere to these expectations in order to be socially accepted, particularly by her in-laws, but very quickly, she abandons her efforts to conform because she is unwilling to live in the miserable entrapment of domesticity:

Try as hard as she could—and she did try hard—she could not seem to establish any enduring basis of common interest or deep sympathy with them [the other women in Alston’s family]. She knew they disapproved of her. Even her initial kinship with Sally, John Ashe’s bride, had lapsed. For Sally was interested in nothing but her husband, and Theo found it difficult to sustain enthusiasm over John Ashe’s peculiar preference for eggs roasted rather than boiled, or his distaste for French pomade and Virginia tobacco. Besides, Sally, along with the rest of the family, had decided that Theo was eccentric and gave herself airs. Witness the inordinate amount of time which she spent in reading and writing. Witness, especially, her slack methods of housekeeping. (Seton, *Theodosia* 198)

Theo is only momentarily distraught over the social rejection she receives from others on account of her “eccentric” unfeminine behavior. Theo’s resistance to normative gender behavior is often emphasized through contrast; nearly all other female characters in the novel conform to “proper feminine decorum.” Through the juxtaposition of Theo’s behavior with that of other “conforming” women—like Sally Ashe—Seton communicates three important messages to her readers. First, she calls attention to the individual strength of her real-life protagonist; Theodosia’s desire for and attempts to forge a more autonomous life outside of the domestic realm and beyond the traditional domestic role complicates the dominant image of women that exists in mainstream historical texts. Second, Seton demonstrates how gender normativity is instantiated through the upholding of normative beliefs and the policing of non-normative behavior.

Third, Theo's dissatisfaction with the domestic role represents a broader challenge to gender norms. Normative ideology gains power through posing as "natural," and therefore, "incontestable." Seton's portrayal of Theo undermines the notion that "proper feminine decorum" is rooted in *inherent* male and female characteristics.

Like Theodosia, the female protagonist in *Katherine* initially tries to be fulfilled by her duty of running her new husband's manor. However, after just a few weeks, Katherine's "initial interest in the manor waned" (Seton, *Katherine* 121). She quickly finds the work unappealing, grows bored with the lack of excitement and monotony of housewifery, and feels trapped and lonely, although she is grateful that Hugh is gone for long periods of time while serving in the Duke of Lancaster's royal military. She tries to "wrestle to bring her hard rebellious spirit" to adhere to her lot as a homemaker, but she is ultimately unsatisfied with this role (Seton, *Katherine* 123). Eventually, "Katherine's despondency reach[es] a point where she [feels] that she would have welcomed goblins or any other weird visitant which might break the monotony and isolation of Kettlethorpe" (Seton, *Katherine* 120). She becomes even more depressed and apathetic during the months that she is pregnant, and often stays shut up in her bedroom all day, wishing for a new life. The manorfolk find Katherine's behavior strange, for the lady of the house is supposed to be invested in running domestic affairs, but they are, in the end, thankful for the degree of freedom that Katherine's inattention to the household affords them. Katherine desperately wants to travel and to escape her life at Kettlethorpe. After Hugh is injured in the Castilian war, Katherine begrudgingly goes to attend his bedside in Bordeaux, leaving her children at Kettlethorpe. When Hugh dies a few days later, instead of mourning or returning to Kettlethorpe, she chooses to go on an adventure with the

Duke of Lancaster. Katherine is, of course, happy to be with John because she loves him, but a significant part of the new happiness that she experiences results from the excitement of traveling to places she has never seen: Château la Teste in Les Landes and the Pyrenees mountains. As the Duke's horse carries her farther and farther away from Bordeaux—from her old life—Katherine begins to feel a “very strange” sensation that she has not felt before as an orphan at Sheppey or as a housewife at Kettlethorpe: happiness (Seton, *Katherine* 262). Katherine delights in riding on horseback across the countryside, smelling the sea, watching grand waterfalls, and singing Old English songs to the sound of John's lute. For several weeks, Katherine is freed from wifhood, motherhood, and household duties entirely. Her happiness, however, ebbs considerably when she must return to caring for her own children, being a mother to the late Duchess Blanche's children, and performing domestic duties at Kenilworth Castle.

In *The Winthrop Woman*, the female protagonist's aversion to “feminine” duties is even sharper. Through assisting her father Thomas Fones with his apothecary shop prior to marrying Harry, Elizabeth develops a keen interest in science and medicine—fields that were, in the first half of the seventeenth century, almost exclusively considered to be *masculine* pursuits. When her father tries to coerce Elizabeth into marrying Edward Howes, he chides her for not investing in more “feminine” tasks. Following a remark about Elizabeth's recognizable aptitude in “the arts of apothecary,” Thomas Fones says, “‘Tis a pity you've not the *same* skill in ordinary female tasks as well, your mother tells me you have scant interest in stitchery or spinning . . . You will *have* to learn those skills when you are a wife—the wife of Edward Howes’” (italics original, Seton, *Winthrop* 47). When Thomas Fones's anger reaches a fever pitch over his daughter's persistent refusal

to marry Howes, Elizabeth placates her father by saying that she will accept Howe's marriage proposal on the condition that the wedding be postponed for several months, even though she has no real intention of actually going through with the marriage.

From a young age, Elizabeth craves adventure and balks at the fact that, because she is a woman, she is not allowed to engage in adventures outside the home. When her brother Samuel goes off to school, Elizabeth thinks, "I wish *I* was going to school, or rather I wish I was going out *somewhere*" (italics original, Seton, *Winthrop* 60). A few years later, just after she has married her cousin Harry Winthrop, Elizabeth expresses the same desire for excitement and travel—to engage in activities outside of the domestic realm. She is much more interested in science. Referring to rendering medical aid to people at Groton Manor: "Elizabeth found this work congenial, as many other household duties were not . . . she took pride in her knowledge of drugs, and in the trust which Groton inhabitants were beginning to have in her remedies and diagnoses" (Seton, *Winthrop* 111). To her dismay, the "many other household duties" that Elizabeth is expected to perform leave little time to pursue her studies in herbal medicine.

After John Winthrop receives the official charter to found Massachusetts Bay Colony, he announces that only the men in the family will be accompanying him on the initial journey to the New World because he believes that women lack enough fortitude to survive in the colony until it is more established. Elizabeth is furious that she is ordered to stay at Groton Manor to attend to domestic duties and, once she gives birth, spend her days taking care of her child. In a sudden outburst to her Aunt Margaret, John Winthrop's second wife, Elizabeth exclaims, "'Why was I not born a man?' she cried. 'Why can't I enjoy myself in London too? Why must I still sit here waiting,

wondering—it's too humbling—and dull—dull!” (Seton, *Winthrop* 102). Later in the novel, when she is scolded by her Aunt Margaret for behaving “dreadfully” toward William Coddington, Elizabeth again wishes that she was a man. She says to her Aunt Margaret, “Dear God, that I were born a man, and could strike out alone—with Joan” (Seton, *Winthrop* 168). Elizabeth's wish to be “born a man” clearly results, according to the reason she gives, from her desire to have the same freedoms that men enjoy, particularly the freedom to “strike out alone.”

Later in the novel, when she is married to Robert Feake and living next to Daniel Patrick and his wife, Anneke Patrick, on a plot of land in Watertown, Elizabeth's distaste for being confined to domestic labor becomes apparent when compared to the other women living near her. In comparison to how invested Anneke Patrick is in the role of homemaker, Elizabeth's “slack” methods and dissatisfaction with the domestic realm are especially noticeable:

Anneke's kitchen, like Anneke's person, exuded a sparkling cleanliness . . . Anneke's aprons were as spotless as her brick hearth. Her copper kettles and pewter dishes twinkled like stars; from her coils of yellow hair, smooth as butter, no strand ever was misplaced. Placid and practical, she understood the effortless management of domesticity, and loved her work, never suffering from the rebellious and spasmodic yearnings which afflicted Elizabeth. (Seton, *Winthrop* 300).

Here, the character of Anneke Patrick is the embodiment of the traditional female homemaker and essentially serves as foil to Elizabeth's rejection of the traditional female homemaker. Whereas Anneke embraces her “proper” female role and even “love[s] her work,” Elizabeth views her household duties as an incessant annoyance. Instead of tending to the cornbread baking in the oven, washing the dishes, or repairing the leak in the water bucket for the well, she goes for a long walk. Upon returning home, Elizabeth

“wish[es] only to sit and contemplate her flowers while indulging in delightful plans for their future as medicines” (Seton, *Winthrop* 300). Instead, she is bombarded by a neighborhood girl with a “list of emergencies”: the cornbread “had burnt to a crisp,” the last linen sheet from England “tor[e] right down the middle,” and the leak in the bucket made it impossible to haul water from the well” (Seton, *Winthrop* 300). Elizabeth becomes so frustrated with the fact that she, as a married woman, is charged with tending to all of these inconveniences instead of pursuing her interest in medicine that she strikes her eldest daughter in a fit of rage (Seton, *Winthrop* 300). Throughout the entire novel, Elizabeth deeply resents the social expectation that women remain in the domestic role. The cultural imperative that women are not supposed to deviate from the traditional domestic role—with the specific expectations of marriage, motherhood, and household labor—have been used to perpetuate male dominance. Seton challenges these expectations through emphasizing, in her portrayals of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones, the ways in which they either resist or reject the traditional female domestic role.

The second major cultural imperative that Seton interrupts in her historical novels concerns traditional norms of female sexuality. Throughout British and American history⁹⁸, women have been conceptualized through a masculinist lens that negates female sexual agency, denies women control over their own bodies, and subjects female bodies to sexual violence. Misogynistic beliefs have largely dictated conventional beliefs about sexuality and served to create dominant assumptions about gender-specific norms of sexual behavior. In his study of the relationship between gender and the sexuality

⁹⁸ The two countries in which Seton’s three novels take place.

norms that have existed throughout the history of Western society, Jeffrey Weeks concludes that, despite slight shifts in gender-specific expectations of sexual behavior and changes in the discursive terms used to articulate them, dominant notions about sexuality have always been “fundamentally gendered” (Weeks 34). The gender-specific sexual mores during various historical moments have primarily been built on the transcendent belief that either “God-given” or “natural” biological differences between men and women necessitate different social standards of “normal” masculine and feminine sexual behavior⁹⁹.

Not surprisingly, since male dominance has prevailed in Western society, the beliefs about the supposedly innate differences between male and female sexuality have generally perpetuated patriarchal power. Weeks asserts that fundamental beliefs about sexuality have an inextricable relationship to social power. Because “issues of sexuality are at the heart of the whole workings of power in modern society,” the way that sexuality has been conceptualized in the past has had a significant effect on the construction of gender norms (Weeks 34). Women’s sexuality has habitually been policed in ways that uphold masculinist gender ideology. The differences in socially acceptable expressions of male sexuality and female sexuality have indeed contributed to the “construction and maintenance of the power relationship between men and women” and have, ultimately, “been central to the subordination of women” (Weeks 34). One of the major beliefs that has supported the long-standing double standard between social expectations of male sexual behavior and expectations of female sexual behavior has been that “Male sexuality is a necessary, needed release, while women do not have such

⁹⁹ The moral double standards of sex for men and women have been largely informed by the “‘natural’ transhistorical law [which is] based [on] unalterable differences between the sexes” (L. Hall 37).

strong impulses” (L. Hall 39). The “mystique of the overpowering, all-conquering male sex drive, the penis-with-a-life-of-its own,” explains Adrienne Rich, “is rooted [in] the law of male sex right to women” (“Compulsory” 24). Women are socialized to accept the naturalness or inevitability of the male sex drive, which absolves men from judgement for the very same sexual behaviors for which women are condemned; women are taught that they are abnormal if they have a strong sex drive or that they are morally corrupt if they pursue multiple sexual conquests. Ultimately, these dominant cultural norms have consistently limited female sexual expression in ways that male sexual expression has not.

This double standard in acceptable sexual behaviors for men and women has been instantiated in Western culture through several authoritative institutions, including law¹⁰⁰, religion, and medicine. Legislation has worked symbiotically with “the forces of moral regulation (from churches to the medical profession)” to “shape the climate of sexual opinion” (Weeks 34). Normative sexual behavior has “been forged in collaboration” with “medico-scientific discourses” to “pathologize” deviance from dominant cultural norms (Shapiro 17). When sexology was established as a formal field of study at the end of the nineteenth century, churches became concerned that their patrons would be

¹⁰⁰ For examples of British laws that reflect the historical double standard between men’s sexuality and women’s sexuality, see Lesley Hall’s article, ‘Hauling Down the Double Standard: Feminism, Social Purity and Sexual Science in Late Nineteenth-Century’ (2004). The Divorce Act of 1857, for example, “made a single act of adultery by the wife sufficient grounds for dissolving the marriage, while the husband’s adultery was so minor a peccadillo that it had to be combined with cruelty, desertion or some other matrimonial offence to provide grounds for the wife to obtain a decree” (L. Hall 39). Hall also discusses how the Contagious Disease Acts of the 1860s reinforce unequal degrees of sexual freedom between men and women. The acts allowed the prosecution and incarceration of prostitutes but exempted the men who slept with prostitutes from any legal punishment based on the belief that men naturally had “uncontrollable sexual urges” that made “sexual release” a biological “necessity” (L. Hall 39). On the other hand, because women were believed not to have natural or necessary sexual urges, prostitutes were punishable by law (L. Hall 39).

persuaded to stray from the sexual norms sanctioned by religious doctrine. The religious community acted quickly to prevent parishioners from unholy sexual behaviors by incorporating the new “sexological language” in ways that “reinforced traditional patriarchal gender and sexual roles” (Jones 149). Because the fields of law, religion, and medicine have been historically dominated by men, the sexuality double standard between men and women has been continually reified, and therefore, difficult to contest.

While Seton was coming of age during the early twentieth century, the new field of sexology was being developed. Empowered by the success of the suffrage movement and their entry into the workforce during World War I, women (like Sanger and Stopes) began campaigning for a more autonomous female sexuality. Phillips and Reay also credit the emergence of “the consumer youth culture of the charity girl and the flapper” of the 1920s with calling unprecedented attention to “female sexual autonomy and [the] recognition of female desire” (19). Often, however, women’s efforts to combat the sexuality double standard were “deliberately undermined by male sexologists” (L. Hall 40). Even Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, who are often “recognized as the founding fathers of [the] sexual revolution” at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, were considered “radical” at the time because they studied (male) homosexuality, but they were “nonetheless conservative in their approaches to female sexuality” (Pines 10). Their studies continued to support one of the most historically transcendent beliefs about sexuality: men are “naturally aggressive” and women are “naturally passive” in their sex lives (Pines 10). Around the time that Seton was writing *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* in the 1940s and 1950s, social opinions about female sexuality rapidly shifted back in alignment with more

conservative, traditional, and therefore, masculinist ideological beliefs about male and female sexuality. This shift in the cultural climate accords with the post-war social pressure for women to return to the domestic realm and their “proper” roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

Seton’s personal view of sexuality is made clear in her journals. In the section of her January 27, 1928 entry regarding her ambitions for “her next forty years,” she writes that, in addition to becoming a successful writer, earning money, and having an extra-marital lover, her biggest desire is made clear in the final sentence of the paragraph: “Above all I want Sex” (ASP 4). Seton further reiterates her desire for sex in the following two statements: “Life is not entirely worth the living to me without the sex” and “Perhaps Freud is right and it’s all sex” (ASP 4). Seton demonstrates that she is knowledgeable about the recent developments in the fields of sexology and psychology, and while she is writing during the 1920s when women’s advocacy for more sexual freedom did bring to the fore the inequalities of the traditional sexuality double standard, Seton’s assertion that life is not worth living without sex would still be considered a rather radical opinion for a woman. Yet, the amount of content that is devoted to the topic of sex in this and other diary entries is quite substantial. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that the context in which Seton makes these statements is within the privacy of a personal diary that appears not to be intended for public consumption. One could argue that most women express themselves more candidly in diaries than they do in their daily interactions with other people. However, even when taking these factors into consideration, the primacy she gives to her sex life and the way she unapologetically embraces—even celebrates—her sex drive (and in a later journal entry, her sexual

conquests) is nevertheless remarkable when compared to traditional standards of female sexuality. Sexological studies of the time, by and large, re-affirmed the long-held belief that a strong sex drive is a distinctively masculine characteristic that was thus abnormal for women¹⁰¹.

Later in the same January 23, 1928 diary entry, Seton engages in a lengthy discussion about her sexual desires and her intention of finding a lover outside of her marriage. Directly after this discussion, Seton moves to an analysis of her sexual relationship with Hamilton Mercer Chase, her second husband. In her analysis, Seton demonstrates frustration with the double standards of male and female sexuality:

What of my husband? We share soul sex-periences less than any two people could. Body experiences too are negligible. He removed some of my just grievances last month by almost impassioned moments, still he does the unforgiveable in making me feel unattractive. No, that isn't quite fair. We are compatible because I do the "cowpatting" or so it seems to me—But it is always the woman's job. (ASP 4)

The first double standard that Seton brings into focus concerns expectations about male and female sexual fulfillment in marriage. Having just expressed a desire for a lover outside of her marriage, Seton literally poses the question that would have been asked of her by any hypothetical listener who is familiar with early twentieth-century gender norms: what about her husband? The question itself is reflective of the conventions of marriage, one of which is the condemnation of adultery. While committing adultery is certainly not condoned for married men, the offense is often viewed as somehow less egregious in comparison to adultery committed by married women. Men, according to traditional beliefs, are naturally more prone to committing adultery because they are

¹⁰¹ See Miller's discussion about women and hypersexuality on pages 75-77 of her article entitled, "Sexologists Examine Lesbians and Prostitutes in the United States, 1840-1940."

plagued by innate and uncontrollable sexual urges. Women, on the other hand, are expected to remain sexually faithful to their husbands, especially because, according to traditional beliefs, women are not plagued by the same sexual urges that men innately experience. Furthermore, as a woman, Seton is expected to be fulfilled by the “proper” female role of wifehood. Seton makes it abundantly clear she is not fulfilled—emotionally or sexually—by her husband. In fact, she blames the unsatisfactory sex on her husband, which is not in keeping with the dominant belief that wives are responsible for, first and foremost, their husband’s sexual pleasure, as well as the mutual pleasure of the couple. She addresses this norm directly when she complains about the double standard that the “cowpatting¹⁰²” is “always the woman’s job.” Instead of docile, “feminine” acceptance of the disappointing reality of their sex life, Seton transgresses cultural norms by prioritizing her own sexual pleasure over her husband’s, and since she finds his love-making “negligible,” she pursues an extramarital affair to satisfy her sexual needs. In her very next diary entry on January 1st, 1929, which contains only three sentences, Seton triumphantly reports that she has found a lover who does meet her sexual needs: “Not quite six months later it gives me a thrill to put down that the lover came, and three more ambitions were satisfied by him. I’m in a hell of a mess, but I do not regret it. Better this than nothingness” (emphasis original, ASP 4). Seton privileges her own sexual needs, at the risk of the “hell of a mess” it creates (presumably) in her marriage with Chan. She makes clear, too, in another transgression of “proper” feminine behavior, that she does not feel any of the guilt that she is “supposed” to feel. In the third

¹⁰² Seton’s use of the term “cowpatting” in this context could be variously interpreted, but the interpretation that I consider most probable here is that women are charged with the responsibility of flattering the male ego, particularly in terms of sexual arousal and foreplay.

and last sentence, Seton again eludes to her lack of satisfaction with a role that is expected to bring all women fulfillment: wifehood. Like Seton, all three of her female protagonists are portrayed as transgressing norms of female sexuality.

Even though Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones each lived in a different century, several fundamental beliefs about female sexuality can be traced within the gender framework that Seton creates in each novel. The first belief is that, unlike women, men naturally have strong sexual urges that *must* be satisfied, so the offense of having sex with other women, including prostitutes, has not historically been regarded as a serious lapse in morality. In contrast, because women do not naturally have strong sexual urges, the moral judgment waged against women who commit adultery or become prostitutes is much harsher. Men are also believed to be the natural aggressors in sexual relationships, whereas women are naturally passive participants. In accordance with their innate sexual characteristics, men are naturally dominant and women are naturally submissive in sexual relationships¹⁰³. Furthermore, female sexuality is viewed as having two exclusive purposes—to provide men with sexual pleasure and to bear children.

In some ways, Seton's portrayal of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones conform to established norms of female sexuality. For example, all three protagonists do have children, even though none of them have the desire to reproduce. Theodosia and Katherine, despite a complete lack of sexual attraction to their first husbands, unhappily submit to their husband's sexual advances for a brief period of time at the beginning of their first marriages. Elizabeth Fones manages to defy family

¹⁰³ This is fundamental belief is also perpetuated in the majority of twentieth-century literature, especially in historical romance novels written by women.

pressures and marry a man to whom she is genuinely attracted, but her marriage to Harry Winthrop only lasts a matter of months before Elizabeth is widowed. In the case of her second marriage, Elizabeth is not necessarily sexually attracted to Robert Feake, although she does not find his appearance entirely repulsive either. The reason, as previously mentioned, that Elizabeth agrees to marry Feake is because he is extremely submissive.

Seton's portrayals of Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth, however, also demonstrate ways that they do not conform to the established norms of female sexuality. At a certain point in each novel, all three female protagonists begin to establish more authority in their relationship with (at least) one of their spouses through a combination of being more assertive, refusing to always obey their husbands' wishes, and taking advantage of opportunities to control the sexual aspect of the relationship¹⁰⁴. This technique of leveraging more power in their marriages by means of either partially or totally controlling the sexual dynamics of the relationship is significant because it transgresses the norm of male sexual dominance over women and has, historically, been one of the only accessible means—trapped by patriarchal limitations¹⁰⁵ on formal education, economic opportunities, and political involvement—by which more social power and independence can be gained. Several studies of heterosexual relationships demonstrate that there is a culturally ingrained correlation between power and sexual intimacy¹⁰⁶. Seton interrupts the totalizing notions of masculine sexual dominance and

¹⁰⁴ Theodosia only has one marriage—to Joseph Alston. In Katherine's first marriage to Hugh Swynford, she gains freedom from the sexual obligations of wifehood when he becomes impotent, but Katherine takes advantage of the opportunity to establish more authority in other aspects of their relationship. In Elizabeth's second marriage to Robert Feake and in her third marriage to William Hallet, she is sexually dominant.

¹⁰⁵ To varying degrees based on factors like class, race, and historical moment.

¹⁰⁶ See Howard's study which found that refusing sex as well as the act of initiating sex "reflect directly the degree of power or dependency of each partner" (105). Also see Browning et al.'s study which consistently found that "the more powerful partner [is also the partner] more likely to refuse sex" (342).

feminine sexual passivity through her portrayals of the thoughts and actions of her female protagonists. Seton employs several different narrative techniques, which she applies variously in her portrayals of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones, in order to call into question normative ideologies about male and female sexuality. Seton offers her critique of sexuality norms through 1.) the attitudes that the female protagonists have toward sexual relations with their husbands, through 2.) the female protagonists' rejection of their husbands' sexual advances, through 3.) the female protagonists' expression of sexual desire and through 4.) the female protagonists' behavior toward men that they find sexually attractive.

In *My Theodosia*, the title character is depicted as being consistently repulsed by her husband's appearance and his attempts at intimacy. Theodosia considers Joseph's love-making entirely "inept" (Seton, *Theodosia* 124). She "loath[s]" Joseph's clumsy sexual advances and "[can] not even remotely share" any feelings of sexual passion toward him (Seton, *Theodosia* 183). She is so sexually revolted by her husband that during one of his attempts at engaging her in sex, she simply "remove[s] herself from his touch, not violently, but as though he had been some inanimate object, a branch or a curtain, which interfered with her progress" (Seton, *Theodosia* 331). Theodosia also constantly comes up with reasons why Joseph should sleep in a separate room in an effort to avoid the possibility of intercourse. She even uses fabricated health complaints such as frequent headaches or "a recurrence of the kidney complications" to reject his advances (Seton, *Theodosia* 388). Theo's constant sexual rejection wears on Joseph's self-confidence and diminishes the impact of his efforts at masculine authority over Theo's decisions and behavior. Even when Joseph tries lashing out in anger in an attempt

to intimidate Theodosia into sharing a bed with him by banging his fist on a table and shouting, “I have not seen you for weeks, and this is the way you receive me! It is always the same story, is it not? . . . you are tired, or the boy [their son] may be disturbed. I will not stand for it, I tell you!” (Seton, *Theodosia* 282). However, the true power dynamic of their relationship is made clear through Joseph’s own inner-dialogue: “Even as he shouted at her, he knew his anger and bluster were futile” (Seton, *Theodosia* 282). Finally, when Theodosia walks in on Joseph having sex with his female slave named Venus, instead of being outraged or hurt, she rejoices because it provides her with a reason that will guarantee a “final complete denial of [Joseph’s] conjugal rights” (Seton, *Theodosia* 388). She delights in finally being freed of “the embraces which had always been revolting” (Seton, *Theodosia* 388). The “final” and “complete” denial of Joseph’s conjugal rights ultimately affords her even more power over Joseph and a considerable amount of independence to travel and do as she pleases without even bothering to ask for her husband’s consent.

In *Katherine*, a similar sexual power dynamic develops between Katherine and her husband Hugh Swynford. Since the first time Katherine laid eyes on Hugh, she found him physically revolting. She tries to avoid eliciting his lust with various excuses and views their sexual relationship with a cold detachment. Katherine “long[s]” for the times that Hugh has to leave Kettlethorpe to perform his knightly duties for the Duke of Lancaster’s royal military forces, for it “seemed to her that it would be bliss to be alone in bed, and freed from the importunities of this hairy, naked man” (Seton, *Katherine* 116). Like Theodosia, Katherine rejoices when she is ultimately released from her wifely obligations. Shortly before the birth of their son Tom, “Hugh had not been able to claim

a husband's rights" due to problems with impotence (Seton, *Katherine* 170). This "circumstance which disturbed [Hugh] so profoundly" and "troubled him so bitterly" was, to Katherine, "a heartfelt relief" (Seton, *Katherine* 170). The impossibility of having an intimate relationship with Hugh creates an ever-increasing distance between them. Hugh translates his feelings of emasculation into an almost total relinquishment of power. He "no longer gave her commands" and tells her that she can do as she pleases (Seton, *Katherine* 184-185). Katherine welcomes this greater independence to travel and to have more freedom to pursue an emotional affair¹⁰⁷ with the Duke.

In *The Winthrop Woman*, after Robert Feake and Elizabeth are married, Elizabeth is disappointed to learn that her husband is not a good lover. She considers nights "tragic" due to Feake's "fumbling overeagerness, his total inexperience, [and] his peculiar embarrassment" (Seton, *Winthrop* 225). The supposed "natural" roles of male and female sexual behavior are relatively reversed in the Feake marriage. Elizabeth, who is not the shy and virginal bride, is skilled in "the arts of love-making" and, contrary to convention, she takes on "the role of teacher" in their sexual relationship (Seton, *Winthrop* 225). Feake's "never importunate virility dwindle[s]" with the passage of time (Seton, *Winthrop* 225). Although Elizabeth desires sexual fulfillment, she accepts her husband's lack of a "natural" male sex drive because he continually fails to meet her sexual needs. Their sexual relationship is also stifled by Feake's declining mental health. After witnessing the murder of his best friend Daniel Patrick, "Whatever precarious hold [Feake] had on reality broke off sharp when his friend was killed" (Seton, *Winthrop* 418). Thereafter, Feake makes "no attempt to approach Elizabeth again as a husband, for which

¹⁰⁷ Katherine and John do not engage in a physical relationship until after Hugh's death.

she was deeply grateful” (Seton, *Winthrop* 439). Feake becomes increasingly consumed with delusions that affect him so profoundly that he abandons Elizabeth and their children to return to London.

The attitudes and behaviors of all three female protagonists drastically changes when they are free to pursue men to which they are genuinely attracted. In this way, Seton disrupts the notion that sexual passivity is an inherently female trait. Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth engage in the “non-normative” feminine behaviors of expressing sexual desires and being the sexual aggressor in the relationships with men whom they choose to pursue. In *My Theodosia*, when Theodosia first sees Meriwether Lewis leaning against the railing of a box seat at the Park Theater, she is instantly attracted to him. She stares hungrily at his physical features, noting his lean body, the shape of his shoulders, his full lips, and the sharpness of his jawline. Theo is so consumed with carnal desire that her body unconsciously responds: “Her cheeks, her neck grew hot, but she could not look away” (Seton, *Theodosia* 80.) She is so visibly affected by her attraction for Lewis that her father asks if she feels ill. Theo quickly assures her father that she is well and enjoying herself to ensure that Burr will not insist on leaving early on account of her health. After the play ends, Theo frantically comes up with a plan that will enable her to see Lewis alone in the Vauxhill Gardens. After effectively getting rid of Joseph with a fabricated story about losing her engagement ring, Theo manages to commune in the gardens with Lewis until Burr discovers them and angrily dismisses Lewis. Burr scolds Theo for behaving improperly as an engaged woman.

After the incident with Lewis, Theo and Alston marry and several months pass before Theo crosses paths with Lewis again. While accompanying Burr to a political dinner, President Jefferson proudly announces that Lewis will be leading the upcoming expedition of the Louisiana Purchase. Theo's desire for Lewis instantly re-ignites and her "awakened body ache[s]" to be intimate with Lewis (Seton, *Theodosia* 230). Far from being passive and demure, Theo boldly instructs her waiting woman to arrange a secret rendezvous with Lewis at a house in the woods where illicit lovers can rent rooms to carry on their affairs discretely. Theo is fully intent on consummating their romance, but Lewis resists the temptation because he knows that sleeping with her will make it emotionally impossible for him to embark on his journey. They part unhappily after finding no feasible way to be together.

Katherine, too, is portrayed as embracing her sexuality. She describes intercourse with John as "ecstasy" and her own sexual appetite as ravenous, "unslaked even by the bliss of fulfillment" (Seton, *Katherine* 264). She often lusts after the Duke of Lancaster, and when they are apart, much of her longing to see him is for the purpose of satisfying her own sexual desires: "Each time that she saw John after deprivation, her body flamed and seemed to melt" (Seton, *Katherine* 288). Much like Theo's descriptions of Lewis, most of Katherine's thoughts about the Duke revolve around the particular physical features that arouse her. Katherine experiences the kind of intense sexual urges that fundamentally contradict traditional beliefs about natural female sexuality. Instead of being a passive lover who privileges male desire, Katherine rejoices in their "carnal love" and derives from it sexual pleasure that is "equal" to John's physical gratification (Seton,

Katherine 295). Katherine's unabashed indulgence in her own sensuality runs counter to the proper reserve that is considered characteristic of female sexuality.

In *The Winthrop Woman*, Elizabeth Fones also embraces her feminine sexuality and expresses intense sexual desires. She fantasizes about being intimate again with her first husband Harry Winthrop, wishing for "his knowing hands and lips for which her body yearned each night" (Seton, *Winthrop* 112). Shortly after Harry passes away, John Winthrop makes work of selecting another husband for Elizabeth. While she does not share in her uncle's eager desire for her to re-marry, Elizabeth does express a desire for a sexual partner. In response to Margaret Winthrop's encouragement to follow her "Uncle John's recommendation" and "make the match with William Coddington," Elizabeth says that if "she must marry," the only reason will be because she wants "to get a man in [her] bed" (Seton, *Winthrop* 164). Prior to meeting Coddington, Elizabeth is hopeful that he is at least attractive because "Her awakened body yearned for lovemaking after the long abstinence; she wished for new romance that would release her" (Seton, *Winthrop* 165). Her hopes for finding sexual gratification with Coddington, however, immediately cease "after one horrified look at him" (Seton, *Winthrop* 165). Later in the novel, after her second husband Robert Feake abandons her and their children, Elizabeth takes on the (traditionally masculine) role of sexual aggressor¹⁰⁸ with Will Hallet. In the dead of night, Elizabeth sneaks over to Will's cabin for the sole purpose of having sex with him, even though she is still legally married to her second husband, Robert Feake. Traditional

¹⁰⁸ In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the female genitals were conceptualized "as primarily passive vessels designed for man's pleasure and active reproductive drive" (Philips and Reay 10). During this period, most of the popular "childbearing guides and domestic conduct books" asserted that men should have control over female sexuality (Philips and Reay 10).

beliefs about sexuality have perpetuated the notion that “Men push for sex while women set limits” (Browning et al. 345). In a complete reversal of “cultural standards that define women as passive and asexual” (Michael, “Emergence” 53), Will denies her advances because, though he too desires her sexually, he has become too emotionally attached to engage in a casual sexual encounter; he tells her plainly, “I love thee too much for a hole-and-corner tumbling, and I want thee for my wife” (Seton, *Winthrop* 469-470).

Elizabeth, who had eagerly anticipated having intercourse with Will, is profoundly disappointed and tries to be patient while Hallet makes work of convincing the Dutch courts to award Elizabeth a legal divorce from Feake and a new marriage license.

Seton’s portrayals of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones offer important challenges to the conventions of mainstream historical texts and the conventions of traditional gender ideology. Through a combination of extensive research and narrative imagination, Seton’s careful reconstruction of the daily lives of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones defy the traditional focus of mainstream historical texts on the heroic male. By developing narratives that primarily focus on women of the past, Seton decenters men as the exclusive agents of history. Moreover, instead of treading down the well-worn paths of women who have been the few and consistent exceptions to the widespread exclusion of women in mainstream historical texts (such as Helen of Troy, Joan of Arc, and Marie Antoinette), Seton focuses on women who are not widely known to the general reader. Seton’s novels are thus unique contributions to the mainstream historical record. In addition, the narratives that Seton creates about her real-life female protagonists challenge several of the hegemonic assumptions about women that have been reiterated in mainstream historical texts.

Seton's rendering of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones, in several ways, offers a counter-narrative about the traditional female domestic role and female sexuality. While Seton's protagonists do not entirely break free from the constraints of the traditional female domestic role, nor are they always free to explore their sexuality with the same privileges that traditional conceptions of male sexuality allow, they do make visible, through moments of transgression, that gender norms are *not* natural, accurate, or historically transcendent. By emphasizing moments when her female protagonists resist the gender system in place within each novel, Seton calls attention to how the portrayals of men and women in history have been shaped by an overwhelmingly rigid and misogynistic ideology.

CONCLUSION

Among the hundreds of correspondences between publishers, book reviewers, and fans in the Anya Seton Papers¹⁰⁹, there are two letters which provide a small but revealing glimpse into the culture that surrounded Anya Seton and the kind of literary world she was entering around the time that her first novel *My Theodosia* was published in 1941. Both letters are written by Thomas H. Uzzell¹¹⁰. The first letter, dated January 11, 1938, is addressed to Seton's second husband, Hamilton Chase. Based on Uzzell's introductory statements, it can be surmised that, prior to writing Hamilton Chase, Uzzell first met Seton when she made a casual visit to his copy-editing office to ask a few questions about manuscript publication, during which Uzzell evidently viewed some of Seton's writing samples. Uzzell then states that the intent of the letter is to inquire if Mr. Chase will "allow" Seton to attend Uzzell's "Wednesday evening classes about fiction" at New York University (ASP 23.131). Uzzell makes it clear that—if Seton is indeed *serious* about her desire to pursue writing—his fiction writing classes are quite necessary because "Mrs. Chase's writing efforts are seriously handicapped" (ASP 23.131). He further explains that "[Seton] gropes and is tormented constantly over her struggling with problems which beginners should understand" and frankly states that "Mrs. Chase is so far an amateur" (ASP 23.131). At the time Uzzell was writing his letter to Hamilton

¹⁰⁹ Housed at the Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich (Connecticut).

¹¹⁰ Author of *Narrative Technique: A Practical Course in Literary Psychology* (1928), lecturer on fiction writing at New York University, and professional manuscript copyeditor from the 1920s-1950s.

Chase, Seton had already begun preliminary research and drafting for *My Theodosia* on her own.

The next correspondence from Uzzell¹¹¹, this time, is addressed to directly to Seton. On December 18, 1942, almost five years after writing the letter to Hamilton Chase, Uzzell informs Seton that he has “not read the Aaron Burr novel” (without providing a reason why) but did “happen” to read her short story “For Tomorrow” in “the Journal”¹¹² (ASP 23.132). He immediately offers his review of the story: “Women readers love to pour over doctors and their world; all of them being maternal, think they would be excellent nurses; all of them hope they will learn much from their sufferings and failures (since they can’t learn any other way) and all of them like to imagine being married to a man combining good looks, good income, and the dignity of some traditional profession. You have given them a full dish. Very good. I congratulate you” (ASP 23.132). Uzzell then reflects back on the Wednesday night fiction classes at New York University that Seton—having been given permission from her husband—attended for a short time in 1938. In his reminiscence, Uzzell entirely reverses his initial evaluation of Seton’s writing skills as they were articulated in his letter to Hamilton Chase. Uzzell claims that he *immediately* noticed¹¹³ that Seton was “very exceptional among those who came to [him]” and claims that, compared to his other female students, “You were

¹¹¹ At least the next communication from Uzzell which appears in the Anya Seton Papers. It is, of course, possible that there were other correspondences between Uzzell and Hamilton Chase or Uzzell and Anya Seton that were lost or not included in the archives.

¹¹² Interestingly, “the Journal” which Uzzell refers to here is *The Ladies’ Home Journal*. While his truncation of the magazine’s title could simply be a shorthand way of identifying a magazine which either he considers familiar or assumes that Seton will recognize as familiar, I interpret this move, (given the overall tone and content of the Uzzell letters), as a kind of rhetorical method of separating himself from the magazine’s primarily female readership and as an underhanded means of devaluing the status of the publication (again, on account of its female readership).

¹¹³ It is clear in the context of the letter that Uzzell is, in fact, referring to his first impressions of Seton’s work and not how his opinion of her work has evolved over time—or even how his opinion of her work had evolved over the time that she spent in his fiction classes.

expressive; you were bold and wicked in your honesty in thinking and talking about life” (ASP 23.132). Uzzell concludes his letter to Seton with a request, and the way in which Uzzell couches his request is especially important to note. Directly after reminding Seton that he offered her a discounted price to attend his classes and made “many suggestions” that helped to “further [her] career,” Uzzell writes: “I am not rehearsing this merely to prepare the way for the request of a favor from you, but I do have such a request. I have never used testimonials from my successful writers, partly because I didn’t think I needed them . . . The other day, however, I came across an old picture given me by Paul Gallico, years ago when he was a student of mine. I sent it to him telling him he could have it if he would write me a note I could use, telling the world what a good teacher I turned out to be” (ASP 23.132). Uzzell goes on to explain that he has not received a statement from Paul Gallico¹¹⁴ that is “nearly strong enough” and finally proceeds with asking Seton to write him a testament of his skill in the instruction of fiction writing (ASP 23.132). The Anya Seton Papers, to my knowledge, do not contain a copy of Seton’s response to Uzzell, if she indeed wrote one.

The nature of Uzzell’s two correspondences serve as a small-scale representation of the much larger factors that have collectively contributed to the scholarly dismissal of women writers like Seton during the 1940s and 1950s. In both letters, Uzzell’s air of masculine superiority, particularly in terms of his knowledge of fiction, is apparent. In the first letter, while one could argue that Uzzell could have offered the same biting criticisms to a potential male student, I find the possibility unlikely for two reasons. First, if one considers the situation in reverse, the likelihood that Uzzell would have

¹¹⁴A successful *male* writer who was also one of Uzzell’s former students

waged the same kind of arrogant criticism to a potential *male* student is slim, and second, given the time period, the scenario of Uzzell writing the wife of a potential male student to inquire as to whether her husband was “allowed” to take fiction classes is highly improbable.

In both letters, Uzzell casts himself as the resident authority on writing. In the first letter, Uzzell points out that *his elite knowledge* of literature would be invaluable to such a naïve young woman, bewildered by the intellectual complexities of the field of literature. In the second letter, instead of complimenting Seton on the completion of a full-length novel that required an immense amount of research and sold quite well, he focuses on her relatively smaller accomplishment of publishing a short story in a much more “feminine” medium (implicitly, a “less important” medium). It is also significant that Uzzell refers to *My Theodosia* as “the Aaron Burr novel” because this maneuver immediately discredits (in addition to the fact that he has not bothered to read it) Seton’s centralization of a historical female figure. For Uzzell, it appears to be unfathomable that such a lengthy novel focuses, in fact, on the life of Theodosia Burr. He again asserts his literary authority by offering his (unsolicited) review of “For Tomorrow.” His review, although some might interpret his remarks as being rooted in jovial sarcasm or as simply a rye way of elevating Seton to a position “above” other women, Uzzell’s comments nevertheless paint women with sweeping and derogatory brush strokes. Uzzell compliments Seton on giving women readers (which implies, of course, that *no* men have read her story¹¹⁵—besides him) “a full dish” after naming aspects of the story that resemble a checklist of the main features of the traditional female domestic role (“all of

¹¹⁵ The implication that no men have read Seton’s “For Tomorrow” in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* is not the same as acknowledging that the majority of the magazine’s readers are women.

them like to imagine being married to a man”; “all of them being maternal.”) In addition, Uzzell conceals what could be seen (based on his remarks in the first letter) as a flaw in his expertise in fiction by claiming, in his second letter, that he recognized that Seton’s writing “was exceptional” at the time of their first encounter. Uzzell thus saves himself the embarrassment of having once pegged the now successful Seton as “an amateur,” and at the same time, largely contributes her current success to the “many suggestions” he made that helped to “further [her] career.”

Finally, instead of making a straight-forward request that Seton write a statement which testifies to his exceptional merits as a fiction teacher, Uzzell’s request is prefaced with a story about how he has not received an adequate response from Paul Gallico. Given the other indications of Uzzell’s misogynistic attitude, his story about Paul Gallico seems to imply that *only* when his request from a successful former *male* student *falls through* does he *resort* to asking Seton for her recommendation. Uzzell’s letters, I believe, provide twenty-first century readers with a small but authentic illustration of the relative intensity of the patriarchal social order that existed at the time Seton was writing *My Theodosia* (1941), *Katherine* (1954), and *The Winthrop Woman* (1958).

On a grander scale, male dominance and masculinist ideology in the fields of history and literature have created a multitude of obstacles that have impeded women’s voices from being heard. The work of feminist activists, feminist scholars, and in particular, feminist New Historicists has, without doubt, led to a much more gender inclusive literary climate than the one Seton was navigating during the mid-twentieth century. In some ways, it might even appear as if the hegemonic gender ideology that Seton challenges in her historical novels has all but disappeared in the second decade of

the twenty-first century. Accepting this conclusion, then, begs the question: if the gender bias that female authors endured in the 1940s and 1950s no longer exists in the field of literature today, what immediate relevance does a writer like Anya Seton have in 2017? The reality is that, while matters have drastically improved for female authors since Seton published *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*, current research shows that a marked gender bias *still* exists in the contemporary literary world¹¹⁶. The tragedy of the scholarly dismissal of Anya Seton's historical fiction, however, extends beyond being yet another example of gender bias in the field of literature.

Rather than employing a radical critique of dominant ideology, Seton engages in a subtler approach, which requires a certain degree of conformity. Seton upholds the tradition of creating narratives that remain faithful to the information available in records of the past, conforms to some of the established conventions of mid-twentieth century women's fiction, and creates male and female characters that, in some ways, adhere to the dictates of normative gender ideology. However, she also embeds in her narratives covert inscriptions which resist and subvert certain conventions of history, literature, and gender. My two main goals throughout this project have been to 1.) identify and explain the reasons why Seton's historical novels have not received the scholarly attention they

¹¹⁶ Several recent studies indicate that white male authors remain the majority of writers who are vetted, celebrated, and studied by the scholarly community. The nationally-renowned VIDA (Women in Literary Arts) "Count," which is an annually released "compilation of the gender breakdown of prizes, reviews, and literary journals in the United States," has shown that, in every year since the VIDA "Count" was established in 2010, VIDA's statistics have consistently demonstrated "bias toward men in the publication and review of literary works" (Enszer 722). In a quantitative analysis of gender parity in three twenty-first century editions of Norton literature anthologies—*The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2011), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2003), and *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2004)—statistics showed that women writers "account for only one-third of those included, at best, and recent editions show a decrease in the inclusion of women writers, despite over four decades of feminist literary activism to reshape literary canonization" (Enszer 722). Furthermore, as of 2014, men controlled the majority of "the high echelons" of publishing, as well as the "leading small independent presses," and despite the fact that women are the "clear majority" of Americans who are "buying and reading works of fiction," professional literary reviewers and critics are "also most frequently male" (Anderson 13).

are due, and 2.) to call attention to the ways in which *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* offer important feminist interventions to patriarchal social order.

In Chapter One, I offer evidence of Seton's sustained popularity with readers and her relative absence in scholarship, outline the main goals of my project, and argue that Seton's historical novels have been unjustly dismissed in the realm of scholarship due to a complex set of socio-cultural factors. In Chapter Two, I perform an analysis of the historical events and literary trends that were occurring prior to and during the time Seton was writing *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* in the 1940s and 1950s. Throughout my analysis, I articulate how dominant perceptions about women's fiction, popular novels, the genre of historical fiction, and the sub-genre of historical romance have negatively affected the literary community's reception of Seton's historical novels. I also explain how male dominance in literary anthologies, literary histories, the Western literary canon, and literary authority within higher education institutions and editorial review boards has served to perpetuate the kind of unequal treatment and attention that is routinely given to women's writing. The habitual privilege given to male voices in the production, legitimation, and dissemination of historical knowledge, including what narratives are commonly told (or not told), has created a tremendous gender bias in accounts of the past. Mainstream historical texts have deep and long-lasting effects on our perceptions of men and women in history, our ideals regarding proper gender roles and behaviors, and even our conceptualization of masculinity and femininity.

In Chapter Three, I identify the ways in which *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* effectively interrupt the master narrative of the invulnerable male hero that has long dominated the pages of most mainstream historical texts. Using a feminist

New Historicist approach, I argue that Seton's portrayals of the well-known historical male figures in her historical novels challenge three specific beliefs of "the masculine mystique"¹¹⁷ that have been upheld by hegemonic gender ideology: 1.) men are less emotional than women 2.) men are dominant in relationships with women 3.) and as the stronger sex, men possess relatively few weaknesses or flaws. By employing a narrative strategy which provides her readers access to the private thoughts and feelings of her male characters, Seton creates a more "realistically flawed"¹¹⁸ depiction of the men who have often been celebrated as paragons of masculine ingenuity and portrayed as the god-like architects of Western civilization¹¹⁹. Like Barnes and Munsch, who found that hegemonic masculinity continues to be upheld by today's Institutional Research Boards (IRBs), I believe that "a crucial aim of feminist research" is to expose the "aspects of men's lives" that have been "kept hidden" in order to "maintain [the] grandeur, power, and mystique" of male privilege and masculine ideology (594-595). Seton, through her representation of famous men like Thomas Jefferson, John of Gaunt, and John Winthrop, challenges male privilege and masculine ideology by pulling back the Oz-like "curtain" that has surrounded "men's lives and masculine institutions" (Barnes and Munsch 595). Thus, part of the feminist significance of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* is rooted in Seton's demystification of masculinist historical ideology.

In Chapter Four, I identify and discuss the other main reasons why Seton's historical novels are significant. First, I argue that Seton disrupts the widespread and

¹¹⁷A concept advanced by James M. O'Neil in his article, "Patterns of Gender Role Conflict and Strain: Sexism and Fear of Femininity in Men's Lives" (1981).

¹¹⁸ The phrase that Seton's eldest daughter, Pam Forcey, used in an email exchange to describe her mother's portrayal of the well-known men featured in her mother's historical novels (15 Jan. 2016).

¹¹⁹ Even Aaron Burr, whose historical reputation has always been clouded by accusations of murder and treason, frequents the pages of history books that, at the very least, do not deny him the honors of being an ambitious and cunning politician.

disproportionate absence of women in mainstream historical texts by placing at the center of her novels three real-life historical female figures who are very rarely given any attention in accounts of the past. Through a combination of intensive research and imaginative narration, Seton painstakingly re-creates the long-forgotten life stories of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones. In Seton's characterization of Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth, all women possess the qualities of strength, resilience, and assertiveness¹²⁰—qualities that have been traditionally coded as innately masculine. Throughout each novel, Seton calls attention to how each protagonist exhibits—albeit in different ways and to varying degrees—these qualities in ways that either resist or reject traditional codes of feminine behavior. I argue that, through the thoughts and actions of her female protagonists, Seton underscores the rigidity and entrapment of two components that are foundational to perpetuating traditional notions of proper feminine and male dominance: 1.) the female domestic role and 2.) female sexuality. All three protagonists, Seton demonstrates, are ultimately unfulfilled by the three major dictates that make up the traditional female domestic role: marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. Furthermore, Seton's portrayals of Theodosia, Katherine, and Elizabeth show that all of them do not *totally* adhere to several dominant expectations of “natural” female sexual expression. *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* bring more exposure to the mechanistic ways that patriarchal power has, historically, been enforced by Western legal, religious, medical, and social institutions.

¹²⁰ To be clear, I am not implying that Seton depicts her female protagonists as stock characters or that they are ultimately indistinguishable from each other; rather, I am simply drawing attention to the characteristics which Seton emphasizes as being a part of each protagonist's personality.

While sifting through thousands of yellowing scraps of letters, dusty pages of childhood diaries, and coffee-stained sheets of middle-aged dreams and disappointments, I was struck by the fact that a life—what now remains as the only record of Anya Seton’s whole life—lay scattered on the table in front of me, a perfect stranger. After I left the Greenwich archives and traveled home, the pages of Seton’s life would be placed back into manila folders, which would then be stuffed into the cold, unfeeling cardboard boxes that sit in a locked closet, day after day, in the dark. Somehow, I had to piece together the life of Anya Seton and to make sense of her artistic vision. Somewhere, I hoped, in the scraps of letters addressed from people whose names I did not know . . . somewhere, perhaps in the messages written inside random holiday greeting cards . . . somewhere, within the hundreds of pages filled with that characteristically slanted and scrawling handwriting that took weeks, at first, to decipher, sometimes by way of squinting, for hours, at a single, illusive word . . . somewhere, in the ever-unbinding pages of her novels . . . somewhere, in the cloudy thoughts between wake and sleep, I had to find the *raison d’être* of Seton’s life and work. The answer—or, at least, *my answer*—came to me when I imagined Seton, on her knees in the dirt, digging in the “remains of John of Gaunt’s castles,” or drinking (whiskey was her favorite) with the keepers of “local legend” in London pubs, or craning her neck over the straining backs of workers as they shoveled into the sacred ground of “Indian village sites in Greenwich.”¹²¹ Over seventy-five years ago, Seton was engaged in the same task which has consumed me for the past three years: she was searching desperately for clues about the lives of Theodosia Burr, Katherine Swynford, and Elizabeth Fones. And in Seton’s case, this task was much more arduous,

¹²¹ All of which Seton did in real life for her research, as documented in the “Author’s Notes” of *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman*.

for the information she was seeking was not tucked in the organized folders of catalogued boxes.

There is something deeply troubling about the fact that what remains from the lives of women in history pales in comparison to what remains from the lives of men in history. Seton was troubled by the fact that mountains of historical records about the life of John of Gaunt exist, while the historical records about Katherine Swynford's life barely amount to mole-hill. I am troubled by the fact that, had I chosen to write about one of Seton's male literary contemporaries like Ernest Hemmingway, not even the finding aide for his historical records could have fit into the small closet which houses the entire Anya Seton archive. As much as many of us would like to think that patriarchy is no longer the dominant ideology of the twenty-first century, the bold truth is that masculinist ideology continues to silence the voices of women and to devalue the lives of women *today*. Anya Seton, who recognized the tremendous absence of information about women in mainstream historical texts, brilliantly turned to the genre of historical fiction to tell the stories of women whose meager historical records demonstrate the general lack of value attributed to their lives. *My Theodosia*, *Katherine*, and *The Winthrop Woman* are, thus, not only significant contributions to the field of women's literature, they are invaluable contributions to women's history.

"The history of women is written on tombstones in rural cemeteries, stitched into the fabric of quilts and samplers, captured in daguerreotypes in family albums, pressed like a faded flower in books of manners and decorum, forgotten in the minute-books of innumerable women's organizations, present in the ballads of mountain women and in the blues of torch singers, and with us still in the memories of living women whose lives are woven into the texture of the American experience. The record is there, but it will not be discovered by looking under the topical heading, 'Women,' in the Library of Congress catalogue."

—Patricia S. Kruppa¹²²

¹²² (Kruppa 612).

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¹²³ Shortened to "ASP" throughout this project. Each in-text citation of the Anya Seton Papers is followed by a box number and (if applicable) a folder number, which are separated by a period. For example, the in-text citations (ASP 2.19) would indicate that the source is from the Anya Seton Papers, box 2, folder 19.

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Education

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Concentration: Culture, Criticism, & Contemporary Thought, Cum. GPA 4.0
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Master’s Paper: “‘Disembodied Spirits’: Gender Flux, the Abject, and the Gothic Power Struggle in Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* and *Jamaica Inn*”

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Humanities Instructor
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Courses Taught: HUM 152, Cultures of America

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Courses Taught: ENGL 101, Freshman Composition I (Expository Writing)
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English Instructor

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Administrative, Leadership, and Volunteer Experience

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- Humanities Representative, Graduate Student Networking Association, School of Arts and Sciences, University of Louisville, 2016-2017
- Faculty Advisor for Undergraduate Students, Vincennes University-Jasper, 2011-2013
- Founder and President, The English Enthusiasts (Student Organization), Tiffin University, 2000-2004
- Chief Editor/Content Coordinator, *TU Review*, Tiffin University, 2000-2004

Professional Organizations

- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2016-Current Member
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- Modern Language Association (Northeast), 2014-Current Member
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Grant Writing and Management Experience

- Application, management, and oversight of Club Programming Committee (CPC) grants for the Association of Humanities Academics, University of Louisville, 2015-2017
- Graduate of the Grant Writing Academy, University of Louisville, 2015
- Recipient of Arts & Sciences Graduate Student Research Fund, University of Louisville, 2015
- Recipient of the Humanities Ph.D. Research Travel Grant, University of Louisville, 2015
- Recipient of the Modern Language Association (Northeast) Graduate Student Caucus Travel Grant for the 46th Annual NeMLA Convention, 2015

Certifications and Awards

- Outstanding Graduate/Professional Student of the Year Award, University of Louisville, 2016-2017
- Featured in the Student Spotlight for the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, University of Louisville, February 2017
- Dissertation Completion Fellowship, University of Louisville, Spring 2017
- Graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies, University of Louisville, 2016
- Recipient, Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Louisville, 2013-2017
- Best Paper Award at Clute Institute's International Academic Conference, October 2011
- Best Paper Award at Clute Institute's International Academic Conference, March 2011
- The James Richard and Virginia Bash Memorial Award for Outstanding Academic
- Achievement of a Graduate Student in English, Indiana State University, 2010
- Recipient, Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Indiana State University, 2008-2010
- Graduated Summa Cum Laude: University of Louisville, 2017; Indiana State University, 2010; Tiffin University, 2008
- Graduating Class Recipient of the Dean's Award for Overall Outstanding Achievement, Tiffin University, 2008
- Excellence in the Field of Study in English Award, Tiffin University, 2008
- Academic Distinction Award, Tiffin University, 2008
- Outstanding Freshman of the Year, Tiffin University, 2004
- Dean's List, Tiffin University, 2004-2008
- Academic Achievement Award, Tiffin University, 2004-2008

Presentation and Publication

- “The ‘Popular’ vs. the ‘Literary’: Perpetuating Patriarchal Power over the American Literary Canon during the Mid-Twentieth Century,” paper presented at The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, (February 2017)
- “The (Im)Possibility of Truth in Memoir: Re-Defining Authenticity in Vivian Gornick’s *Fierce Attachments* and Dorothy Allison’s *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*,” paper presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association Annual Convention (May 2015)
- “The Shift from Objectivity to Subjectivity: Movement, Intellect, and Art in Nineteenth-Century Realism and Twentieth-Century Modernism,” published in *American International Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (October 2012)
- “Empowering the Non-Traditional College Student and Bridging the ‘Digital Divide,’” published in *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 1 (February 2012)
- Founder and director of Vincennes University-Jasper’s first annual Faculty Colloquium (November 2011)
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- “Peer Editing in the 21st Century College Classroom: Do Beginning Composition Students Truly Reap the Benefits?,” paper presented at the International College Teaching and Learning Conference (March 2011)
- “The Animal Channel” (short story), published in *The Fuse*, literary arts magazine (May 2011)
- “Judith Butler’s ‘Exclusionary Matrix’: Sex, Gender, and Ambiguity,” class lecture, Literary Theory and Criticism (April 2010)
- Paper presented at Purdue University’s Graduate Colloquium on Early American and Atlantic World Topics (April 2010)
- Paper accepted for presentation at The National Association of African American Studies (NAAAS) conference (February 2010)
- Paper presented at The National Association of African American Studies (NAAAS) conference (February 2008)
- Published several times in the *Challenger*, Tiffin University’s major quarterly publication, and in the *TU Review*, Tiffin University’s online literary magazine (2004-2008)
- Paper presented at Tiffin University’s Arts and Angles professional lecture series (March 2008)

Curriculum Assessment, Institutional Research, and Learning Outcomes

- Faculty Assessor of Student Learning Outcomes in Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, and Cultural Diversity for the General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC), University of Louisville, Spring 2016
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Technological Competencies

- LiveText Institutional Assessment Software
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