

INTRODUCTION

Looking Beyond the Pulpit

The contributions of women to Methodism were significant but more often assumed than acknowledged.

—Dee Andrews,

The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800



A small group of Methodist women brought Ruth Short back to life. Long before she died, my grandmother disappeared behind the shroud of dementia, and I had somehow forgotten the lively woman she once was. Following her funeral, some women from the church prepared a bereavement dinner for our family. My grandmother had not attended that small, red brick church in Hartford, Arkansas, in several years, but the faces of the women who served the dinner were still familiar to me from all the Sundays we had accompanied Grandmother to church. One of the women sang a solo during the funeral service, and when my sister and I told her how much we appreciated it, she explained that the first time she sang that song, Mrs. Short had approached her after the church service to ask if she would sing it at her funeral. Surprised by the request, the woman said, “Mrs. Short, I have never sung at a funeral.” To which my grandmother responded, “Well, I’ve never died, but I guess that won’t stop me.” That story about my grandmother prompted another and another until this small group of women with their casseroles, compassion, and wonderful recollections performed a miracle; they had resurrected the outspoken, loud-laughing, devout-Methodist woman who was my grandmother.

In a way, I guess I have been studying Methodist women all my life, but it was just a few years ago that I encountered them in the academy. I distinctly remem-

ber the day when I first learned about female Methodist ministers in eighteenth-century England while reading Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's "Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric" in *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Their introduction directed me to Vicki Tolar Collins's article "Women's Voices and Women's Silence in the Tradition of Early Methodism."¹ Following this discovery, one of my friends gave me a copy of *Adam Bede*, so in a way, it was George Eliot's fictional Dinah, along with Mary Bosanquet, Margaret Davidson, Sarah Crosby, and Ann Tripp, who piqued my curiosity about women in the early American Methodist church and helped forge in my mind the connection between women, American Methodism, and rhetoric.² Hailing from a long line of Methodist women, the connection made perfect sense to me.

Initially, I turned my attention to the pulpit. In her book *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740–1845*, historian Catherine Brekus meticulously identifies the names of fourteen women preachers and exhorters in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the first Methodist church established in the United States. Brekus also acknowledges nine women who were preachers in the African MEC and five women who preached in other Methodist denominations that emerged from the MEC, including the Reformed Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists, and the Methodist Protestant Church.³ Among this list, women such as Julia Foote, Jarena Lee, Fanny Newell, Hannah Pearce Reeves, and Phoebe Palmer have increasingly garnered scholarly attention.⁴ However, in a church overwhelmingly comprised of women, and in a movement that rapidly swelled to the largest denomination in nineteenth-century America, this small group of courageous female ministers offers a limited glimpse of women during the American Methodist movement's dramatic expansion in the first decades of the nineteenth century, especially considering that women preachers and exhorters were frequently viewed as radicals and barred from many Methodist pulpits.

I began to consider my own experience growing up in the Methodist church. I was an adult before I heard a sermon delivered by a female minister, and it was 2002 before I belonged to a Methodist church where a woman presided as the senior pastor. In *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, Roxanne Mountford shares a similar experience growing up in another denomination. She writes, "As a child, I never saw a woman preach; the only women who stepped before the pulpit gave announcements, led hymns, or told tales of missionary work in Third World countries."⁵

In my own childhood, even though women were absent from the pulpit, I had always perceived that women ran the church. My Sunday school teachers and summer Bible school teachers were primarily women. Women raised money for the church's foreign missions; women populated prayer networks;

women prepared the bereavement dinners and comprised the altar guild, which seamlessly changed the colors of the altar cloths during Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. On Monday mornings, women counted, recorded, and deposited the money taken up during “Sundays” offerings, wrote personal notes to visitors, and faithfully visited members in the local hospital. Consequently, I decided to search for Methodist women where I had always found them—beyond the pulpit.

This book examines additional rhetorical spaces in antebellum churches in order to recover a more accurate history of American women’s rhetoric. Scholars’ ongoing efforts to recover women’s rhetoric seek to acknowledge women’s rich, expansive rhetorical legacy. By charting the rhetorical roles assumed by and ascribed to women in the Methodist church’s popular and widely disseminated antebellum periodicals, this book claims a broader definition of women’s rhetorical roles within churches. While a few examples drawn from these periodicals present African American and Native American women, the overwhelming majority present white women from middle and lower socioeconomic classes.

For most of these women, the church and church-affiliated organizations were the first organizations they participated in outside of the home. However, women’s activities were usually voluntary and were often excluded from formal institutional records and historical accounts. Methodist periodicals offer glimpses of women’s influence within the powerful antebellum Methodist movement. By looking at the periodicals produced by the church and read by its parishioners, I am not only recovering women’s rhetorical roles, I am also examining the rhetoricity of the press—how the religious press both supported and circumscribed women’s roles. Whether Methodist periodicals are reporting roles assumed by women or roles that they are ascribing to them, the layer of the press is always there. Documenting women’s expanding rhetorical roles through the religious press also demonstrates how the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of periodical studies provides fruitful territory for recovering women’s rhetorical history. Driven by the rapidly expanding availability of digital archives, periodical studies consider texts that are important cultural artifacts representative of their social and political contexts.⁶ Periodicals provide another avenue for encountering individuals excluded from formal institutional histories.

Beyond the Pulpit examines the spaces where women appear in *Methodist Magazine* (*MM*; established in 1818) and the *Christian Advocate* (*CA*; established in 1826), the two most popular general-audience periodicals produced by the antebellum Methodist church, and concludes by discussing the church’s creation, in 1841, of a women’s magazine, the *Ladies’ Repository* (*LR*).

The primary space for women in *MM* was memoirs, more akin to modern-day obituaries than the texts we refer to as memoirs today. Hence, this book charts a progression for the presence of women in the church's publications: from admittance into the text most often through death to the church founding a magazine just for women. In between, I identify numerous rhetorical roles assumed by and ascribed to women in the church's periodicals, including iconic ministers, domestic evangelists, models of piety, benefactors and fundraisers, benevolent organizers and advocates, Sunday school administrators and teachers, missionary assistants, and assistant ministers. Identifying the discursive and spatial locations in which women appear in these periodicals delineates women's movement beyond their prescribed domestic borders. It also reveals women performing powerful rhetorical roles within their homes, assumed to be private spaces, but which through publication and mass distribution became public spaces. Instead of focusing on achievements of female rhetors, this study attends to the everyday descriptions of women's activities included on the pages of Methodist periodicals. In doing so, it offers insight into the more "regular" and persuasive work of ordinary women and the religious press.

Methodist periodicals are important sites for studying antebellum women's rhetoric, because it is only here that we begin to see many of the important rhetorical roles women played in this vast nineteenth-century institution. Even when women kept diaries, wrote letters, or prepared meeting minutes and reports of their activities, these works were seldom considered valuable, thus, most have been lost to later generations. Methodist periodicals also depict the dramatic growth of the Methodist church in antebellum America. Spurred by the Second Great Awakening, Methodism exploded across the United States during the early nineteenth century, increasing from less than 3 percent of all church membership in 1776 to more than 34 percent by 1850. By midcentury, one out of every fifteen Americans belonged to the Methodist church, and by the start of the Civil War, Methodists occupied more than twenty thousand places of worship across the country. The Methodist church became by far the largest religious body and the most extensive national institution in the United States outside of the federal government.⁷

Founded by John Wesley as a revival movement inside the Church of England in the first half of the eighteenth century, Methodism was initially carried to America by English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants. Wesley did not dispatch itinerant ministers to America until 1769. Prior to this, one of the immigrants who brought Methodism to America was a woman named Barbara Heck, later hailed as the mother of American Methodism. According to the legend, Heck discovered a group of men playing cards in her kitchen. She

scooped the cards into her apron, threw them into the fire, put on her bonnet and went to see her cousin Philip Embury, who had been a Methodist class leader and local minister in Ireland, pleading with him, "Philip, you must preach to us, or we shall all go to hell together, and God will require our blood on your hands."⁸ Having no place to preach and no congregation, Embury was reluctant, but Heck encouraged him to hold services in his own home, insisting that she would provide the congregation. The first meeting at Embury's house consisted of Heck, her husband, their African American servant, and John Lawrence, one of the reformed card players. This meeting in 1766 represented the beginning of the first Methodist society in New York, and the motivating force was a woman operating persuasively outside of the pulpit.

Formally established as the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784, Methodism gained popularity at a time when America was redefining the relationship between church and state by eliminating all vestiges of state-supported churches. As the Methodists rapidly assumed numerical dominance among America's Protestant denominations, the church reshaped religion in the new republic. Methodism aligned well with America's democratic impulse and optimism. In his examination of Methodism's influence on American culture, historian Nathan Hatch notes that Methodists stressed three themes that resonated with Americans: God's free grace, the liberty to accept or reject that grace, and dynamic religious expression, which was encouraged among women and all classes of individuals. Methodism's focus on free will and free grace contrasted with Calvinistic doctrines of limited grace or predestination common to Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Moreover, Methodism was a voluntary movement that drew members by choice rather than tradition. With this practice, Hatch suggests that Methodists "embraced the virtues of pluralism, of competition, and of marketing religion in every sphere of life."⁹ Methodists introduced a less formal, vernacular expression of Christianity that was more accessible, enthusiastic, and extemporaneous.

Methodism grew because of its missionary zeal, which motivated its itinerant ministers to travel wherever there were people. Methodist clergy conducted worship in homes, barns, fields, and at camp meetings and sought all classes of individuals in cities as well as rural and frontier regions. Historian John Wigger provides an illustrative example of one Methodist family that moved from Kentucky to Butler County, Ohio, in 1806. Wigger notes, "At that time, Butler County was an 'almost unbroken forrest' containing so many wolves that shortly after their arrival the family's two large dogs opted to return to Kentucky, swimming both the Miami and Ohio Rivers, on the way."¹⁰ Out of this dense, wolf-ridden forest, the first visitor to appear on the family's doorstep was a Methodist itinerant minister traveling the area on horse-

back. Historian Nancy Hardesty similarly notes that Frances Willard became a Methodist because a Methodist circuit rider provided the only form of organized religion in the “wilds of Southern Wisconsin” where her family lived.¹¹

Ultimately, Methodism offered an egalitarian form of religion that “empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value rather than subjecting them to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine and the frowns of respectable clergymen.”¹² As a progressive force, Methodism chipped away at traditional patterns of deference such as class; professional clericalism; and conventional boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and education. Methodists recognized religious expression by all individuals—including women.

Local Methodist societies organized around gatherings that provided religious forums for individuals to preach, exhort, testify, pray, and encourage each other. In addition to Sunday worship, members and prospective members attended small group gatherings called class meetings. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, Methodist societies often required members to attend class meetings, which were led by an appointed class leader who was responsible for overseeing the spiritual progress of class members. During these meetings, individuals opened their spiritual experiences and salvation to discussion, examination, and prayer. Methodists in good standing were also invited to participate in quarterly circuit-wide love feasts. These meetings brought together all the parishioners along one circuit to address administrative matters and share worship. Additionally, Methodists came together for large revivals and camp meetings. In each of these forums, men and women were encouraged to share their testimonies and discuss their spiritual triumphs and failures.

As with most religious institutions of the era, the Methodist church was overwhelmingly composed of women. However, few records of early Methodist women can be found in the main Methodist archives (located at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey). It is not until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the church’s Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, established in 1869, began dispatching women missionaries that women begin to emerge in the archives. Moreover, in their own recovery efforts, religious historians have often narrowly defined women’s rhetorical roles within antebellum American churches. Historian Ann Braude claims that most studies of church histories have “perpetuated the contention that the views of one man in the pulpit are more important than those of the many women in the pews.”¹³ A similar inclination exists in studies of women’s rhetoric, which frequently emphasize the pulpit as the sole rhetorical space within churches.

This emphasis on the pulpit excludes the vast majority of women’s in-

fluence within antebellum churches and the church's role in these women's rhetorical development. In recent years, many scholars—including Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Nancy Hardesty, Catherine Brekus, Susan Lindley, and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell—have mapped the relationship between antebellum churches, women's social activism, and their rhetorical development, yet much of this research has centered on a small group of “extraordinary” women and their efforts to access or subvert church pulpits. Through these recovery projects, we are becoming better acquainted with these early public speakers and religious activists. Pulpit debates are an important chapter in women's rhetoric that warrant continued research, especially since, as Roxanne Mountford argues in the *Gendered Pulpit*, and as my own experience growing up in the Methodist church attests, the pulpit remains an often-contested, gendered space today. However, *solely* focusing on the pulpit in antebellum American churches stresses women's lack of institutional power and overlooks other spaces where “ordinary” women exerted influence within the church and how the church provided sites for women's rhetorical development. In her study of women in the Black Baptist Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham similarly stresses the need to move beyond studies of early women preachers in black churches, claiming that these discussions alone marginalize women's roles.¹⁴ Higginbotham's desire to provide a more representative portrait echoes other scholars, including Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald and Barbara Biesecker who have warned against limiting women's rhetoric to the study of a few canonical figures. Ritchie and Ronald, for instance, acknowledge that charting women's rhetorical history by describing the courageous efforts of a few brilliant women could keep “‘recurrences’ or the ‘traces’ of the emerging tradition invisible.”¹⁵

The importance of identifying these traces is especially evident in the case of the Methodist church; if rhetorical historians rely on the pulpit as the primary gauge of women's roles, we limit ourselves to a small group of daring female preachers or a half century beginning with women's formal ordination in 1956.¹⁶ Furthermore, emphasizing the pulpit highlights the tendency to assess women's rhetorical power in terms of prominent public roles, which reinscribes the same standards that historical women faced during their own lives and ultimately erases or downplays other women's contributions. I believe that studies of women's rhetoric need to travel both paths—examining the most ardent activists as well as the nameless women who exerted influence through women's organizations, conventional women's roles, and evangelical sites such as the religious press. Combined, these paths will present a more accurate picture of women's rhetorical history and legacy.

Women were often the first in their communities to become Methodists. “As a movement,” John Wigger claims, “Methodism was created as much by women as it was by men.” He notes that Wesley’s heart-religion, with its intimate group meetings and emphasis on religious community, initially attracted female converts.¹⁷ Many came to the church on their own or in the company of other women, and they often joined the church even if their fathers or husbands did not. Although their participation in the fledgling Methodist movement occasionally provoked ridicule and harassment, women had more freedom to follow their religious convictions and join Methodist societies, whereas men were wary of damaging their positions in the community by associating with an upstart religious sect. Historian Cynthia Lyster shares an illustrative anecdote about an Anglican priest who traveled from England to Maryland in 1784. The priest was dismayed to discover that some of his local vestrymen supported both the Methodists and the Anglicans. Trying to explain their dual allegiance, one vestryman responded, “Pray sir . . . we cannot divorce our wives and turn our daughters out of doors, because they have joined the Methodists.”¹⁸ In addition to leaving their husbands’ churches to join the Methodists, women often demonstrated their support by hosting itinerants and religious gatherings in their homes. Women served as critical allies to itinerant ministers—using family members and acquaintances to help these itinerants establish networks throughout their assigned territories. Moreover, women acted as caretakers and counselors—providing lodging, food, and medical aid to traveling clergy, mending and sewing their clothes, advising and encouraging them, and often offering financial assistance. Women also proved to be persuasive evangelists, often convincing their family and friends to join the church, thereby furthering Methodism’s primary mission of gaining new converts. However, as the church grew and transitioned from fledgling sect to mainline denomination, a narrative of women being “silenced” emerged.

Throughout religious history, women have tended to lose public voice and power when dissenting religious movements become institutionalized. This silencing occurred within the churches of the Puritans in New England, the eighteenth-century Baptists in America, the early Methodists in England and America, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. As religious movements become entrenched, they usually replicate secular male hierarchies. In other words, the roles for women inside an established church begin to mirror the roles assigned to women in society.¹⁹ Nathan Hatch and John Wigger claim, “More than any other large-scale religious movement of the time, early Methodists allowed women to speak in their meetings, but not without limits.

By the 1830s and 1840s Methodists had largely turned their backs on lay female preaching and exhorting in search of middle-class respectability.”²⁰

Portrayals of women’s roles within the early American Methodist church often present this type of peak-and-valley narrative—beginning with women’s empowerment during the mid- to late eighteenth century and ending with the silencing of women in the early nineteenth century.²¹ Catherine Brekus likewise asserts that the early Methodist church encouraged women to “shout, sing and testify in public,” but as the church embraced an ideology of domesticity, it deprived women of the liberty to speak, “urging them to ‘keep silence in the churches.’”²² In his historical monograph on Methodists in America, Wigger similarly acknowledges women’s liberty to publicly preach, exhort, and pray, as well as their roles as class leaders and deputy preachers in the early Methodist movement. However, Wigger claims that as the movement matured, Methodists increasingly concluded that women should not forsake their domestic roles of wife and mother to pursue what they conceived as masculine, public roles.²³ In her examination of early Methodism in the Middle Atlantic region, historian Dee Andrews also points to female class leaders and women who counseled and guided itinerant ministers. Yet, she later claims that women’s consignment to the domestic sphere removed them from the “public domain of America’s fastest-growing religious movement.”²⁴ I view the valley in this peak-and-valley narrative as one of the gaps often found in the history of women in rhetoric that needs to be filled. As rhetoric and composition scholar Andrea Lunsford laments, the history of women in rhetoric is a story full of gaps, silences, and erasures.²⁵

By identifying “little narratives”—the brief everyday descriptions of women’s activities included on the pages of the church’s periodicals, I am using Beth Daniell’s term. Drawing on Jean-Francois Lyotard’s conception of overarching “grand narratives,” Daniell posits postmodern “little narratives” as a means of challenging broad narratives that often exclude women.²⁶ By attending to little narratives, we hear voices that are otherwise silenced. During the antebellum period, when women had limited opportunities to speak publicly, texts were especially important to them; hence, the Methodist church’s mass-produced and distributed periodicals represent valuable artifacts for recovering women’s rhetorical roles. This book also attempts to complicate the spatial correlation of the church with voice and the domestic sphere with silence, as well as the underlying implication that the most meaningful religious voices reverberate from the physical church, particularly the pulpit, during formal worship.

My identification of women’s little narratives in Methodist periodicals

not only looks at texts written by women, but also texts written about women or directed at women. I have included these latter two groups because they provide valuable evidence of women's participation in public discourse. For instance, recognizing a woman's efforts to collect money for the church's missions provides evidence of her public advocacy for the church. At the same time, when a church periodical assigns a certain role to women either through a depiction or through advice it directs at women, the press has in some way prescribed, inscribed, or sponsored women's rhetorical activities. Here I am referencing Deborah Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy, which she defines as "[A]gents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way."²⁷

Because representations of women in the church's periodicals were often presented for ideological reasons, I believe it is important to acknowledge that women assumed certain roles, such as becoming Sunday school teachers or participating in benevolent organizations, while others were assigned to them, such as iconic deathbed ministers or holy mothers. Altogether, the little narratives found in Methodist periodicals offer insight into women's contributions to this influential and dynamic religious movement and illuminate women's active and symbolic roles in American Christianity more generally. Moreover, these narratives highlight how the church and women's participation in the church-supported efforts expanded women's rhetorical skills and boundaries.

American Methodists inherited their commitment and many of their approaches to publishing from John Wesley, who believed that the printed word and literate practices such as reading, writing, and hymn singing promoted spiritual growth.²⁸ The American church officially established the Methodist Book Concern in 1789, just five years after the church was established. Using their press to spread evangelical values and to build their denomination, Methodists became publishing pioneers in America. The church continually experimented with different genres, packaging, distribution, marketing strategies, and correspondence with their book agents and customers. The minutes from the 1796 General Conference, the governing body of the church,²⁹ confirm the important evangelical role early Methodists assigned to publishing. The General Conference stipulated, "The propagation of religious knowledge by the means of the press is next in importance to the preaching of the gospel," and asserted that supplying parishioners with "pious and useful books" so that they "may fill up their leisure hours in the most profitable ways, is an object worthy of the deepest attention of their pastors."³⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, churches competed with and railed against what they considered "pernicious" reading, which included romance novels, trivial

fiction, and treatises about deism or other works that would have been considered antireligious.

Methodists believed that preaching and the press were intertwined; itinerant ministers both preached and distributed printed materials for the Methodist Book Concern along their circuits. In a practice dating back to Wesley, itinerant ministers were commissioned as both preachers and colporteurs. Selling Bibles, books, tracts, pamphlets, and hymnals produced by the Methodist Book Concern not only assisted itinerant ministers in spreading the gospel, but also helped them supplement their meager incomes because the church gave ministers a percentage of each sale. For instance, in the Ohio conference in 1816, the average book bonus for itinerant ministers was \$75, which is noteworthy when compared to their \$100 annual salary.³¹ This average sum also suggests that these ministers likely pushed the books.

With the addition of periodicals—multigenre publications issued serially at regular intervals—ministers/booksellers also assumed roles as roving reporters. Initially, the Methodist Book Concern did not employ writers, so most of the original content printed in the church's periodicals came from either the ministers who served as the periodicals' editors or itinerant ministers in the field. In the roles of editors and contributors, ministers exerted tremendous influence over the content of the church's periodicals. Indeed, most viewed their writing as an extension of their ministerial duties, which is understandable, considering that the church's periodicals were intended to minister, educate, and indoctrinate.³² In their interpretation, arrangement, and retelling of stories, ministers often cast incidents and individuals into a religious context or pursued a particular rhetorical purpose, thus transforming people and events into evangelical appeals.

"Virtually nonexistent in 1800," Nathan Hatch claims, "religious periodicals had, by 1830, become the grand engine of a burgeoning religious culture, the primary means of promotion for, and bond of union within competing religious groups."³³ Furthermore, Benedict Anderson suggests that the act of reading a mass-produced periodical can instill a sense of unity or belonging. As individuals imagine others reading the same piece, they begin to conceive of themselves as part of a larger community, which explains how print could be used to cultivate a denominational identity.³⁴ However, the pervasiveness of Methodist periodicals was more than imagined. The Methodist church's widely disseminated *CA* boasted the second-highest subscription list for any periodical in 1829.³⁵ Periodicals also provided a timely forum for connecting Methodists across the country and creating textual communities that cast women into new institutionally sanctioned roles, established different sacred spaces, and ultimately transferred religious authority beyond clergy in the

church on Sunday morning to family, home, and the publications themselves.³⁶

These textual communities effectively converted women into rhetorical agents for the church, extending their influence to audiences beyond their local congregations and communities. This agency is evident in the following excerpt from an article published in an 1832 issue of the *CA*: “From my early youth I have felt a predilection for the employment of teaching; this sentiment strengthened as I advanced in years, and when, through the mercy of God, I was led to obey the requirements of the Gospel, and give to him my heart, a new impulse was given to my desires, and I resolved to engage in the work, and seek to become instrumental in planting the seeds of virtue and piety in the minds of youth.” Filled with conviction and confidence, the young Methodist woman who penned these words made a perilous journey with her sister by sea and land from Boston to Tuscumbia, Alabama, to provide religious instruction to the town’s youth at a Sabbath school there. According to the young woman, unnamed in the paper, the Sabbath school opened before her “a scene of labor” to which she hoped with “earnest wishes and prayers that my feeble efforts might be blessed of God.” Despite what she described as the “difficulties attendant upon settling in a new country,” the “languid state” of the Sabbath school, the “low state” of religion she found in the local community, and the tremendous “exertions” required, the young woman claimed, “I have spent some of the happiest hours of my life with my Sabbath charge, and I find in the performance of this duty much satisfaction.” This young woman considered her work in the Sabbath school an important part of Methodism’s mission to ignite religious zeal in a community that she feared was more focused on secular pursuits than salvation. In fact, the young woman’s efforts to spread the gospel were acknowledged by the title “Female Missionaries” that the newspaper attached to her letter, which was originally addressed to her minister in Boston but reprinted in the Methodist church’s popular newspaper eight months after she wrote it.³⁷

Institutionally, Methodists in the early nineteenth century rarely recognized single women as missionaries in their own right, yet in print, the *CA*’s editors elevated this woman and her sister to the roles of missionaries and religious models. In an introduction to the letter, the editors extol, “The spirit which led, and the motives which influenced these young ladies, were those of the cross of Christ. They left their friends, and a part of the country where they might have had good employment, for a new and distant part, that they might be more useful.” Embedded in these editorial comments is an evangelical emphasis on Christian action, usefulness, and placing religious concerns ahead of financial or familial comfort. The editors also transformed these women into religious exemplars for their male and female readers, as-

serting, “There are calls from thousands in the southern and western parts of our country to females as well as males, to engage in the instruction of youth; and in this work they may cultivate the wilderness and the solitary place, and greatly help forward the cause of God.”³⁸ Emblematic of rhetorical conventions repeatedly employed in Methodist periodicals, particularly gendered depictions that construct women as religious models, this article highlights the roles antebellum women chose to assume as well as those roles assigned to them in print.

Motivated by their religious conviction, these two young sisters journeyed to Alabama to assume professions as teachers and purveyors of the gospel. Under a religious mantle, these antebellum women radically expanded their field of labor and influence, and under a religious masthead, their roles and influence were further expanded by the Methodist church. Through the acts of rhetorical accretion, publication, and dissemination to a broad audience, the *CA*'s editors transformed these women into religious models for emulation. In this instance, the paratexts³⁹—the editorial comments and the title affixed to this letter—framed these sisters' actions as spiritually inspired and anointed these women as religious examples. Based on her study of the widely disseminated memoir of British Methodist Hester Ann Rogers, Vicki Tolar Collins refers to this act as “rhetorical accretion, a process which respeaks and redefines the original speaker,” often with male voices “talking over” a woman's text instead of talking through it.⁴⁰ Scrutinizing the depiction of women in these publications can expose how male ministers—who wrote, collected, and edited most of the texts appearing in Methodist periodicals—purposefully converted women into pious models, which sometimes had the collateral effect of elevating antebellum women to ministers or missionaries, offices they were otherwise precluded from holding.

Also evident in the example of these missionary sisters is the liminal space between private and public spheres that church work and church publications provided women. Arguments against the conception of separate spheres, which limited nineteenth-century white, middle-class women to a narrowly circumscribed domestic sphere, are certainly nothing new. However, the church, which is typically conceived as part of women's prescribed sphere of activity, is often assumed to operate as conservative and limiting. By showing how church work and church publications operated as empowering rhetorical sites for women, *Beyond the Pulpit* contributes to our understanding of how antebellum women's public and private boundaries were often blurred.

The conception of separate spheres carried a prescriptive domestic ideology based on the idea that while nineteenth-century white, middle-class men worked in the marketplace pursuing commerce, their wives and moth-

ers preserved the religious and moral foundation of society through their domestic roles. Readily apparent in these gendered-spatial assignments is the inequitable distribution of power. At the same time that men achieved a firmer grasp on economic, legal, and political power, women's subordinate roles as wives and mothers became more clearly prescribed. Cultural geographer Gillian Rose acknowledges that feminists have long recognized the ways in which spatial assignments have been used to maintain male power.⁴¹ Consequently, feminist scholars have continually debated whether, in its nineteenth-century context, domestic ideology oppressed women or empowered them. Some scholars have depicted domestic ideology to be confining, some have shown it as liberating, and some have suggested ways in which it was both. By plotting the church and its periodicals as a liminal space between separate spheres, my work here further interrogates that concept as well as the strict boundaries it assumes.

Taking into account the rise of capitalism and secularization, some scholars locate the nineteenth-century church, along with the home, in the private sphere because of its irrelevance to materialistic production. Yet the work of the church was not tied to any specific locale but rather part of a vast middle ground often described as "civil society," "the social," or the "informal public."⁴² As both a private and public space, the church became an important liminal zone in which women could expand their sphere of operation while maintaining social respectability. Cultural geographer David Sibley labels these liminal zones "zones of ambiguity" because they mark uncertain boundaries between two spheres that offer the opportunity for change.⁴³ In her classic work, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas similarly focuses on this liminal space as she describes an alliance between Protestant churches and women's sentimental culture that emerged during the nineteenth century as both groups sought new means of wielding influence. Although Methodists were not included in Douglas's examination, I believe an alliance between the Methodist church and women can be seen in the church's periodicals. Because the church and church-supported activities were located in an indeterminate realm—between domestic activities and market enterprise—church work ultimately provided white, middle-class women with a sanctioned rhetorical borderland from which they could step beyond the domestic sphere while still maintaining social mores of the era. At the same time, church work often increased women's moral authority inside the home.

While depicting women as pious models and religious instructors inside their homes, Methodist periodicals also mapped women's migration outside of the home by reporting their participation in social programs and religious missions. Consequently, the Methodist church sanctioned, publicized, and in

some instances even encouraged women's movement beyond domestic boundaries. In her study of women's print culture in American Christian foreign mission movement in the late nineteenth century, Sarah Robbins notes the power that missions' publications had on their audiences. Both the creation and the consumption of these texts tied women to the larger movement and reinforced their commitment.⁴⁴

Similarly, the little narratives in these Methodist periodicals bound women together, strengthened their commitment, and ultimately helped the women conceive of new identities for themselves. For example, a report from the Methodist Annual Conference of 1831, written by men and printed in the *CA*, directly addresses the members of the Asbury Female Mite Societies, calling them "respected sisters." The report encourages women's fundraising efforts for superannuated preachers and preachers' widows and young children, stating: "[Y]our labour of love has afforded a sum, if not sufficient to supply every want, yet enough to cause the tears of affliction and poverty to give place to those of gratitude . . . and we exhort you to use your best endeavors to provoke others to love and good works, that from each of our stations and circuits a rill may flow into the fund of the Asbury Female Mite societies until every necessity is relieved."⁴⁵ This little narrative, which is directed at women, offers evidence of women's effective public advocacy for the church through their fundraising. It also emboldens women in their efforts by asking them to encourage others to pursue good works. Ultimately, evidence of women's rhetorical roles and activity such as this can easily be overlooked. Uncovering traces of ordinary women's rhetoric often requires us to listen hard, imagine, and revalue the texts in which they appear. Literary scholar Jennifer Sinor acknowledges that feminist and cultural studies research has already begun questioning the "arbitrary line separating the high from the low, the public from the private, and the personal from the political," which is often used to distinguish which texts are valued and which are not.⁴⁶ Newspapers and magazines, which are quickly discarded today, were valued by antebellum audiences who had limited access to printed texts. Methodist periodicals were deemed important by the church that produced them and the readers who consumed them. These periodicals were often saved, reread, and sometimes even bound; they were also passed among friends, neighbors, and members of congregations. Thus, it is important for us to situate these texts within their historical context.

For me, uncovering women's rhetorical roles in the antebellum Methodist church simply became a matter of *looking* for them in the church's periodicals and also reconsidering traditional female roles which are too often overlooked because they were deemed proper "feminine" occupations. For instance,

Catherine Brekus asserts: "As ministers' wives, Sunday school teachers, home and foreign missionaries, and charitable workers, women found outlets for their talents that did not require them to overstep the boundaries of acceptable female behavior. Many seem to have concluded that it would be easier to channel their religious ambitions into more 'feminine' activities than to face public ridicule or clerical sanction."⁴⁷ While Brekus's characterization is accurate, I believe it is incomplete because it does not acknowledge the way these acceptable roles became sites for women's rhetorical development and expanded rhetorical activity. By acknowledging women's influential roles as Sunday school teachers, missionary assistants, minister and missionary wives, and benevolent organizers and fundraisers, I am building on the work of Anne Boylan, Patricia Hill, Julie Roy Jeffrey, Lori Ginzberg, and other scholars who have ventured beyond the pulpit to explore additional rhetorical spaces for women in antebellum churches. In doing so, I am contributing to the argument that the church provided an empowering rhetorical space for innumerable women. For them, marrying ministers, teaching Sunday school, and joining benevolent organizations opened new rhetorical opportunities and broader spheres of influence. These religious "careers" offered women ways to enact their faith; in other words, women drew meaning and identity from this work.

By undervaluing that which has been deemed "women's work," our re-mapping efforts have frequently concealed and diminished the significance of these initial steps that women took beyond their prescribed domestic boundaries. The church did not initially view Sunday school teaching and benevolent work as female pursuits; however, the status of these roles seemingly declined when women predominately entered them. Moreover, women's rhetorical roles in the church and the role of the church as an important site for women's rhetorical development are frequently concealed by pervasive stereotypes in the academy and the reluctance to study religious sites. Roxanne Mountford acknowledges that feminist scholars and the humanities have generally ignored religious women and religious subject matters, no matter how culturally significant. "In our secular age," Carol Mattingly further suggests, "scholars tend to disregard women associated with evangelical or religious causes not considered progressive by today's standards."⁴⁸ Women were drawn to religion and religious institutions from a variety of motivations; in addition to cultural expectations and the desire to submit to God, women also came in search of individual identities, the desire to join supportive communities, and as a means of self-assertion.⁴⁹ However, too often these latter motivations are ignored. Even when scholars discuss the most vocal feminist reformers, their religious motivations, spiritual identities, and conflicted feelings about religion are often downplayed or ignored. Ultimately, this type of revisionist

historical mapping expunges the role religion and churches played in sanctioning ordinary women's actions and voices. Indeed, historian Gerda Lerner claims it is in this manner that historians and institutions often use selective memory to exercise the power of forgetting.⁵⁰ Acknowledging that history is more a matter of the present than the past, Robert Connors notes that while history doesn't change, our perspective on history does. By looking at historical women, feminist and rhetorical scholars are searching for a legacy or a path of "how we got here."⁵¹ Clearly, the path seems much more direct if drawn from the actions of the most ardent women's rights activists; however, most contemporary American women are more likely to find temperance women, clubwomen, and active church women in their own genealogies, which seem to offer an alternative story about "how we got here." Through its examination of everyday women's rhetorical roles in the largest religious movement in nineteenth-century America, *Beyond the Pulpit* contributes to this more expansive story.