“What did you mean?”: Marriage in E. D. E. N. Southworth’s Novels

CINDY WEINSTEIN

California Institute of Technology

Sentimental novels are filled with communication gone awry. This observation applies to the written word, as well as the spoken. For example, in *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen Montgomery’s Aunt Fortune withholds a treasured letter written to Ellen by her mother and, in doing so, reveals Aunt Fortune’s arbitrary disciplinary regime (which is ultimately reversed by Alice Humphreys’s intercession). Likewise, much of the plot of Caroline Lee Hentz’s *Ernest Linwood* hinges on a misreading of a “marriage certificate” in which “the difference between the names of Henry Gabriel and Gabriel Henry St. James” goes unnoticed (440). E. D. E. N. Southworth’s *The Unloved Wife* depends upon Lilith Wyvil’s reading a “fatal letter” that first helps to destroy her marriage and then requires hundreds of pages to reconstitute it (91).

As conventional as these devices of miscommunication are in sentimental novels of the period, I would submit that the works of E. D. E. N. Southworth reveal a complexity, indeed an urgency, about verbal exchanges.¹ Thus, I shall explore how conversation itself, especially in the context of marriage, where the stakes, particularly for a woman, could not be higher, is the site where language becomes particularly destabilized, putting women in a constant and vulnerable state of misunderstanding. This is why the phrase “what did you mean?” appears so often in Southworth’s works. “What did you mean?” is, of course, a question that produces potentially more unclear language, which is why many of the heroines are intent on keeping a close eye on the material documents—that is, marriage certificates—that (seem to) make absolutely clear what was meant when they spoke the words “I do.”

But because Southworth’s female protagonists are perpetually not understanding what is being said to them and, further, are not being understood themselves, by the time they say “I do” to the individual who either innocently or purposefully misunderstands them, it is too late. Thus, she devotes

her entire career either to imagining women who are on the brink of becoming *femes covertes* (hidden women) and trying to make sure that they are, at the very least, “hidden” by a kind man or to situating her female protagonists within the limitations of being *femes covertes* and finding ways for them to act as full, even autonomous individuals within those constraints. She does this by scrutinizing the marriage relation and, more specifically, by interrogating the speech acts—and here I am purposefully invoking the theory of philosopher J. L. Austin, whose study of language surprisingly intersects with Southworth’s concerns—leading up to and including the words “I do.” Southworth examines the pledges (indeed, one of her novels is titled *Broken Pledges*), the promises, and the vows made before the wedding and even at the ceremony itself, in the process discovering a discursive site both of coercion and consent.

(MIS)MARRIAGE

Very real economic motives drove Southworth to write long and numerous books. She was the sole supporter of two children and had been abandoned by her husband, who occasionally showed up to try to take a cut of her profits based on his rights as her spouse. But her frenzied compositional pace, voluminous output, and incredible plot complications are usefully viewed in terms of her vexed relation to a literary tradition that demanded an ending about which she was deeply suspicious. Simply put, she did not want her novels to end in marriage, which they had to, given the conventional requirements of sentimental fiction, and so her narratives keep their distance from that ending as long as possible. Indeed, in novels with titles such as *Family Doom*, *The Fatal Marriage*, *The Maiden Widow*, *The Unloved Wife*, and *The Missing Bride*, it is hard to believe that marriage is the relation to which women ought to aspire and the one in which women will be emotionally and economically cared for. Southworth certainly has her doubts, and she is not alone. Marriage, as virtually every sentimental writer notes, makes a woman vulnerable to physical and mental abuse, and, legally speaking, she becomes a *feme covert*, literally a hidden woman whose husband takes her property, her name, her very self. Novel after novel represents marriage as both a potentially terrible mistake (in fact, one of Mary Jane Holmes’s novels is called *Ethelyn’s Mistake*) and a joyous fulfillment of a woman’s destiny, and because of Southworth’s awareness that this ending is not automatically a happy one, the marriage toward which the entire plot is driving is often subject to what can seem like endless (and pointless) deferral.²

Because Southworth was acutely aware of just how vulnerable a woman is when she becomes a wife, her representation of marriage and the courtship

leading up to it is especially charged and complicated; as any reader of Southworth knows, she takes a very long time getting to the altar. No author is more consistent and often outrageous than Southworth in the obstacles she invents to keep her protagonists apart. Her repertoire features an assortment of fictional concoctions ranging from the inaccurately identified dead body to the name change of a character or the rather unexceptional artifice of the lost letter to the more bizarre obstruction of an ancient Indian curse. It is almost in spite of these artifices or accidents that her novels conventionally conclude with happy marriages. She also achieves delay through the following strategies: She introduces a voluminous array of characters whose intersecting lives and relationships must be disentangled before a marriage can occur, and she comes up with many awful scenarios and negative possibilities that must be cleared away—exorcised as it were—in order for the union to take place. Indeed, the sheer number of characters in her novels acts as a strategy for additional obstruction. After all, two people can be subject to only so many lost missives and misunderstood wills. Multiply that by several groups of star-crossed lovers, and it is not simply a matter of getting the hero and heroine down the aisle, but all those other characters whose love lives have gone awry through various sorts of misunderstandings must get sorted out as well. Thus Southworth's novels often end with not just one couple getting married, but several. It is marriage with a vengeance. The outrageousness of her contrivances, though, has a specific function. If the couple can outlast the arbitrariness of fate (that is, the machinations of Southworth, the creator of that fate—and the wilder, the better), then this marriage just might last. That this “happy” ending is subject to such bizarre, bordering on compulsive, delays registers Southworth's recognition of just how vulnerable a woman is when she marries. Furthermore, these delays tend to assume a specific form: They are often, though not always, a function of what we might call textual accidents, by which I mean, quite literally, accidents that happen to texts.

Permeating Southworth's novels, therefore, are multiple instances of missing or delayed letters, misinterpreted newspaper articles, competing wills, and illegitimate marriage certificates. In addition to the potential hermeneutic misapprehension of their language, the material documents containing these words, names, and legal dispensations are vulnerable to fire, theft, or fate. That is why some of Southworth's characters, most often women, actually carry their marriage certificates with them. This is the case with Lionne Delaforêt in *The Fatal Marriage*, a novel to which I shall return, whose marriage certificate hangs from her neck so whenever it is necessary to remind Orville Deville of his marriage to her, she has the document at the ready. In the instance of Belvedira Boone, one of the main characters of *A Leap in the Dark* and its sequel, *The Mysterious*

Marriage, her marriage certificate, which she keeps with her at all times in a special box, inexplicably disappears. Eventually, the certificate is exhumed, and we learn that it had been taken and buried by an African American character, who was initially mistaken for a ghost but who had actually entered the house through the chimney and committed the theft. Indeed, the more outrageous, the better.

The textual accidents of Southworth's novels are not so much a part of narrative technique, as is the case in *Moby-Dick*, for example, as they are essential to the plot. They also point us to a recognition that all language in Southworth, verbal and written, is deeply problematic because it is potentially fraudulent. Whereas spoken words disappear into thin air, the written word, even if it is a lie, has the virtue of being recoverable and rendered transparent. Language, quite literally, gets lost, and the plot of the novel is to find it, to restore it to its rightful owner, to restore it to its rightful meaning, and to bring about a marriage (or to demonstrate the lie[s] culminating in that marriage).

This last point about marriage might seem to be a nonsequitur in relation to the issues about language and interpretation I have begun to introduce, but my point in this essay is to demonstrate that the restoration of language (via a retrieved document or statements made in a court of law) is intimately connected in Southworth's fictions to the successful completion of the marriage plot, the necessary terminus of all sentimental novels. Southworth's vexed relation to this specific generic requirement can be explained in many ways, but it seems evident that her depiction of courtship and marriage makes clear that, from her point of view, all conversation about marriage, even up to the marriage vow itself, is fundamentally flawed by an inability to know what the parties are really saying to each other. The title of this essay—"What did you mean?"—a quotation taken from *The Maiden Widow*, is a refrain that runs throughout Southworth's novels (154). To wit: "Oh! What do you mean?" in *The Missing Bride* (94), "What do you mean by that?" in *Self-Raised; or, From the Depths* (219), "What do you mean?" in *The Mysterious Marriage* (118), "What—what do you mean?" or "What mean you?" in *The Fatal Marriage* (228, 366).³ Sometimes the mistake in meaning is innocent, and a person thinks she has said one thing when the receiver has heard something else; sometimes the mistake is intentional, and the words are purposefully manipulated in order to bring about a desired outcome (sexual intercourse). To be sure, written documents can conceal the truth, but that truth eventually will be uncovered.

The spoken word, even (and especially) the "I do," is always potentially tainted by its insecure relation to the person saying it (has he said it before?) and the person asking them both to say it (is the woman being set up by a couple of devious men?). Furthermore, marriage sometimes exists in a state of

in-betweenness where one person (usually the woman) thinks she is married, even in the absence of a ceremony, and the other person (usually the man) uses that ambiguity to his advantage. Characters have access to an enormous linguistic range, which is part of the problem in its imprecision when it comes to describing marriage: Nero, a black character in *The Fatal Marriage*, observes Orville's flirtation with Lionne and remarks, "Now, see here, honey—sollum betroffed is sollum betroffed! Still, it aint by no means marriage!" (69). In *The Maiden Widow*, Berenice attempts to explain her "betrothal in marriage," which cannot be consummated in marriage (because of an ancient curse): "[O]ur betrothal does not so much mean that we shall ever marry each other as that we shall never either of us marry any one else!" (108, 109). Another character in that novel explains (sort of) that the man who loves her has "frightened [her] into half promising to be his wife" (121). Characters have good reason to be continually asking one another what they mean.

Thus, Southworth scrutinizes not only the marriage relation, but also and more particularly, the speech acts leading up to and including the final "I do." These include the promises, the pledges, and the vows eventuating (or not) in the wedding vow. Hers is an interrogation of the speech acts that form the plot of courtship and end in the marriage ceremony. Hers is also a deeply contextualized understanding of the marriage vow. For example, the consequences of saying "I do" are profoundly different for a woman and a man. Not only does the woman become a *feme covert*, she often becomes pregnant shortly after uttering those words. When a man says "I do," his wife is rendered completely vulnerable. He is not. Thus, Belvedira tries to commit suicide when the man she marries in a secret ceremony disappears for several years (he eventually finds his way back to her) because she had "gr[own] to believe that even [their] marriage had not insured [their] reunion" (*Mysterious Marriage* 255). Lilith Hereward, the protagonist of *The Unloved Wife* and its sequel, *Lilith*, faces a similar dilemma after her husband discovers her alleged betrayal and announces that though he will not divorce her: "I shall not the less surely repudiate you, and forbid you to bear my name, or to speak of me as in any manner related to yourself" (*Unloved Wife* 317). In taking away his last name, he leaves her with none, and she is, as she asserts, "in some sense of the word . . . dead" (*Lilith* 149).

This is why documents are so important and textual accidents are so potentially devastating. For Southworth, marriage vows do not always perform marriage; sometimes they merely say, "I am saying 'I do.'" At the conclusion of *Lilith*, when one of the other main characters gets married, we are informed that "a small party . . . witness[es] the signing of the marriage contract," in addition to which "there were two notaries public with their clerks" (234), after which a "civil ceremony, which the French law requires, was duly observed"

followed by “the grand pageant of the ecclesiastical rites” (235). The ending of the novel does not grant this last “I do” any more validity than the preceding utterances; rather, it takes as a given the need to bolster those words with as many witnesses, documents, and civil and religious forms as possible.

By examining Southworth’s rendering of the act of making a vow—who says it, who means it, where it is said—we can begin to understand her attempts to carve out a space where women are not simply the victims of “I do,” but subjects with an active role in shaping the meanings of those vows. Indeed, the status of a promise, of a pledge, of a vow is very much on the minds of Southworth’s characters, one of whom asks quite bluntly, “Do you know the nature of a vow?” (*Missing Bride* 199). Obviously, “the nature of a vow” is not automatically understood. Some characters think of it as having a status as binding as the law; others assume a vow spoken is not the same as a vow meant (“when I was promising, I had a mental reservation” [*Missing Bride* 231]). In other words, Southworth thinks of the vow as a quite complicated speech act, which contains within it a possible gap between the speaker’s intention and her or his utterance, a gap between the time the vow is uttered and the solemnizing of that vow, and the difference between a vow made in public and a vow kept private. These ambiguities more often than not favor the man, but in the case of *The Missing Bride*, for example, Miriam, the main character, marries in a private ceremony, though “she never would consent to be his own, until their marriage could be proclaimed” (128). Having said “I do” does not mean she will. What, then, does “I do” mean?

“I DO” OR THE FATAL MARRIAGE

The most important speech act a woman will utter, at least according to much nineteenth-century American fiction, is “I do.” To say “I do” is to do it, which is to marry. J. L. Austin develops a theory of speech acts in his classic 1962 linguistic treatise, *How to Do Things with Words*. He begins by distinguishing between constative and performative utterances, the former being subject to the criterion of true or false, the latter being equivalent to an action (which is neither true nor false). He will go on to unravel this distinction by explaining how “there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act” (138). However, in the opening chapters of the book, Austin establishes his definition of performative utterance as separate from constative statements and focuses on the following speech acts: betting, bequeathing, promising, and—last but not least—marrying. Austin uses “I do” as a paradigmatic example of performative utterance because saying “I do” is the equivalent of doing.

Yet not so fast. Austin concedes that certain requirements must be in place for the action to be achieved by the performative utterance, and when they are not, the utterance is not functioning properly; for example, “we are not in a position to do the act because we are, say, married already” (16). Interestingly, he further explains that it is not that an act has not occurred—bigamy has—it is that the act that was supposed to have occurred (marriage) has not. For Austin, performatives cannot be contested on the grounds of truth or falsehood, as is the case with constatives, because actions are not true or false. Rather performatives, like actions, are understood according to the logic by which they “have [been] happily brought off” (14). Actions, that is, are either accomplished or void. When “something goes wrong and the act . . . is therefore at least to some extent a failure,” the performative utterance has “misfired” or been “abused” (16). For the purposes of this essay, it is not necessary to go into the many finer distinctions Austin develops in his account of the various kinds of infelicities. What is important to take from his analysis, though, is the notion that performative utterances are “not a true or false report of something” (25). “I do” is not necessarily a true or false report of someone’s feelings for someone else. “I do” is not even a guarantee that a marriage has taken place. If it is the second time a man has said “I do” (and his first wife is still alive and they are not divorced), the utterance has, according to Austin, “misfired” (16).

Southworth goes so far as to suggest that even a marriage that follows all of the legal formalities is not necessarily binding and might “misfire” if one of the parties is an unwilling participant in the ceremony. Much of *The Fatal Marriage* revolves around the question of exactly what it means when a fifteen-year-old boy and a twelve-year-old girl are forced to marry. As the protagonist Orville Deville falls in love with another woman, he wonders about the legality of what the narrator refers to as his “baby-marriage” with Adelaide Lorne: “Is it binding? *should* it be binding? should a betrothal, solemnized at the instance [sic] of their guardians between a boy and girl who met then for the first time and never afterwards met again, be binding upon either party?” (94, 73). Deville decides that these ties are not binding. He marries Lionne Delaforêt and in the eyes of the law commits bigamy because the “baby-marriage,” “though only nominal, being the *prior*, is consequently the *legal* one” (193). The meaning of a marriage, in Southworth’s analysis, is not fixed but rather subject to the context in which it takes place. If the wedding is forced, if the couple is too young, if the wife is unsure, if the husband is lying—all of these contexts play into Southworth’s sense of the illegitimacy of a marriage. Thus, the words “I do” are necessary but not sufficient to make a marriage binding. One might think of this slippage as potentially liberating for all concerned because if marriages can be mistakenly or unintentionally entered into, presumably they also can be dissolved.⁴

But it is much more difficult for women than men to make the case that, on the grounds of a compelling context, a marriage should be discounted. Deville, for example, initially justifies his second marriage to Lionne by declaring his first to Adelaide null and void because “we could neither have known each other or understood the purport of what we mutually promised” (127). Yet, when he begins to like Adelaide and covet her utter devotion to him, he invokes that same marriage whose validity he had denied just a few pages before as absolutely binding upon her. He intones, “I am master!” and emphasizes, Adelaide is “my wife! my wife! my own, own indisputable wife! no power on earth can take her from me! . . . she belongs to *me!* she is *my wife!*” (129). When he wishes to question the status of his “baby-marriage” with Adelaide, he provides an account of their marriage, which he speciously calls a “betrothal,” that is subject to intention, age, affection, and context; however, when he wants the “baby-marriage” to matter, he invokes the law of coverture. Lionne’s only (lousy) option is to make her first marriage to Deville (but his second, at least in certain of his moods) binding, and if she cannot do so on the grounds of affection, she will try to do so by invoking the authority of the law. Despite her belief that she is the spouse of Deville’s “true marriage,” she carries at all times the marriage certificate in order to document her legal status as his wife (193).

Documents verifying marriage have almost talismanic properties in Southworth. They have the authenticating power that words, such as “I do,” do not. The “certificate of marriage” between Lionne and Orville is the only thing preventing Orville from completely obliterating Lionne’s existence (184). The irony, of course, is that that very certificate accomplishes a different kind of obliteration—turning her into a *feme covert*—but clearly, that identity is preferable to none. Interestingly, it is as if without that textual evidence, the story Southworth has told about Lionne and Orville’s marriage would be rendered null and void. Southworth’s own text is, in other words, in a relation to the marriage certificate not unlike Lionne’s. Lionne will show the certificate to anyone who will read it. This includes Kate Kyte, a friend of Lionne’s, who “star[es] at the document,” as well as Orville himself who, when Lionne confronts him and asks, “do you remember this document?” . . . drawing from her bosom and holding out a small written paper, . . . cover[s] his face with his hands and groan[s]” (204, 351). Later in the course of the novel, Orville is ready to run for political office, but Lionne warns him against trying to establish a good name for himself, conveying the following to him: “copies of the two marriage certificates that constituted Deville a bigamist; and next against them on the left, a copy of the statue-law that constituted the crime of bigamy a felony, punishable with imprisonment or slavery” (412–13). There is yet another copy “of that fatal marriage-certificate” Lionne attempts to use to extract her

vengeance upon Deville, but he is ready to take his chances in a court of law, never imagining, though why not speaks to his own lack of imagination, that Lionne would go so far as to destroy his reputation in public (her previous acts of retribution have been private) by putting "the documents . . . in the hands of justice" (454, 468). As the documents or, more precisely, copies of the documents proliferate, Deville comes closer to being charged with the crime of bigamy, which ultimately leads him to commit suicide. But Lionne dies, too, the victim of her monomaniacal vengeance against Deville.

In meting out justice according to her own code of conduct, Lionne becomes a "monomaniac" who does terrible things, not least of which is kidnapping Adelaide's biological child (461). Southworth's faith in the justice system seems, perhaps, misplaced and oddly optimistic, given her cynicism about marriage, but when the alternative is private vengeance as opposed to public, she will always favor the latter. Indeed, one of Southworth's favorite heroes is her character Ishmael, a lawyer who, in Mary Kelley's apt description, "devote[s] his life . . . to defending wronged women in court and to seeking to amend laws that discriminate against them" (324). A similar penchant is evident in the conclusion of *The Fatal Marriage*, in which the narrator observes that "[t]he judge . . . was supposed to lean somewhat to the side of the prosecution" of Deville (480). Southworth's courtrooms are fantasies of linguistic restoration and transparency, where language—at last—means what it should. Bigamists, like Deville, can no longer dissimulate behind the alleged distinction between his betrothal to Adelaide and their marriage (126); he can no longer refuse to acknowledge "[a] felony to which he dared not give its legal name" (127).⁵

In *The Fatal Marriage*, there is no good resolution for two of the protagonists. Lionne, heart-broken but deeply vengeful (and a mother, thanks to Deville), loses her mind and devotes her every waking moment to destroying him, which she eventually accomplishes by handing over the documents to the courts. Perhaps the most fascinating and unexpected aspect of the novel's conclusion is Adelaide's reward. In the final paragraph, we are told that "[i]n due time [Adelaide's] hand was sought by the Duke of Donaldben, a gentleman in every way worthy to make her forget the sorrows of her youth, and with whom she lived a long life of nearly perfect married love and happiness" (487). As much a victim of Deville's ethical lapses as Lionne, Adelaide at one point actually tries to give Deville back to Lionne; in other words, when she discovers his secret marriage, she acknowledges the second wife's rights and recognizes that, in fact, the "baby-marriage" was an unfair manipulation of two children who did not know any better.

Such a stand may very well have been the one taken by an antebellum judge, but it is astonishing coming from Adelaide since she has been trained from

early on to obey, to please, and to submit. Adelaide may be a *feme covert*, but she is ready to act in a way that fiercely challenges her husband's ownership of her. She is willing to accept Lionne's first marriage as legally binding (even though he is not), despite the fact that Adelaide's first marriage was the prior and therefore, according to the novel at least, the truly legally binding one. Moreover, the fact that the two women are trying to negotiate their relative rights vis á vis Deville puts him in the position of being the object. Or to put the point another way, the women are trying to figure out to whom Deville belongs. This interpretation has its limits because Adelaide and Lionne are also struggling to adjudicate the question of which wife really belongs to Deville. Who has the greater claim to being Deville's possession? Divorce will not settle this question, and Adelaide refuses to consider it; she has been trained her entire life to love him and does not want his character to suffer. She does, however, attempt to run away and vanish into the Maryland countryside, but she is unsuccessful and is brought back to Deville in order that the novel can continue questioning the validity of both marriages.

I call attention to Adelaide's fate at the very end of the novel because it is so bizarre and truncated. That fate also supports the notion of Southworth's conflicted relation to sentimentalism. Adelaide gets over the death of the man who was the *raison d'être* of her life in record time and quickly experiences "renewed health and peace" (486). We are informed that Adelaide was "not destined to wear her days out in mourning over the past," which is a kind way of saying she bids good riddance to the man in her life who wreaked such havoc (487). Then, she marries again. It all happens so quickly and so seemingly unnecessarily, until one remembers that marriage is the only acceptable conclusion for sentimental novels. For all intents and purposes, the novel ends with the rapid-fire deaths of Deville, Lionne, and Deville's mother (one of the guardians who forced the marriage), which means that Adelaide is now free to do anything, including the one thing the novel has shown us will lead to unhappiness. That, of course, is to marry. But Southworth must give her audience a marriage.

It is, perhaps, odd to argue that in a novel full of unbelievable twists in the plot (and I have outlined only a few), one can point to a moment that stands out for its inauthenticity. That moment is Adelaide's second marriage, which gets two sentences in a long novel, and the terse description speaks volumes about the arbitrariness of the convention that a sentimental novel must end in marriage. Southworth wants to reward Adelaide for her good works and kindness toward Lionne (after all, Adelaide is the only main character not to die), but the only way she can do so is by granting her character perfect happiness in marriage, a condition the novelist has shown to be virtually impos-

sible. Southworth is in a bind. While sentimentalism places certain demands on her plot, her plot has demonstrated the profound limitations of those very requirements. Thus, Adelaide is given a moment in the story where she defies the role of *feme covert*, only to be put back into that position—as a reward—at the novel's utterly inauthentic end.

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN? OH, WHAT DOES IT MEAN?”

Southworth rarely receives this kind of close reading. The texts I have been discussing, let alone their language, do not often come in for analysis. Language, however, is very much on the minds of Southworth's characters, as the quotation from *The Fatal Marriage*, with which this section begins, implies (123). Her characters exist in a chronic state of misunderstanding, whose most obvious level functions to propel the plot. But I submit that in addition to characters not recognizing each other or letters getting lost in the post, the misunderstandings in many of Southworth's novels—and here I shall take up *The Family Doom* and its sequel, *The Maiden Widow*—are quite clearly linguistic and are organized around the very particular issue of marriage and how men and women talk about it before they actually marry.

As with *The Fatal Marriage*, but on a considerably larger scale, in *The Family Doom* proposals, pledges, promises, vows are constantly made, except that no one seems to know exactly what they mean. With a title like *The Family Doom*, the novel implies that a fatal marriage is somewhere in the offing. It is not, though, because it has already happened in the story of the widows of Henniker House. Granted, marriage has happened four times, but the point of the novel is to prevent it from happening again. And Southworth manages to avert a fifth generation of marital disaster by giving her protagonist not a future without marriage, but a way to make sure she enters into the right one. Within the framework of perpetually ambiguous speech acts that characterizes this particular story of star-crossed lovers, Southworth's novels allow women a chance to renege on their pledges, an opportunity to be misunderstood yet not suffer too terribly, and everyone is happier for it.

The two volumes tell the story of a group of women, related by blood or by marriage who have married and lost their husbands because of an ancient Native American curse, which has exerted its fatal grip over multiple generations. It can be broken only when “the maid shall be widowed / Before she is wed” (*Maiden Widow* 240). *The Family Doom* and *The Maiden Widow* concern Berenice Brooke, the youngest of the cursed women, who falls in love with Vane Vandeleur. She cannot marry him because to do so, under the conditions of the curse, would result in his death. Their temporary solution is to pledge

an oath to one another whereby “she has bound herself by the solemn vow never to marry Vane Vandeleur until those impossible conditions are fulfilled, which, according to the Indian oracle, would make the marriage safe” (*Maiden Widow* 91). Other pledges and promises are also made and broken. In *The Family Doom*, Vane refuses to “accept [Berenice’s] pledge” because he has made a “promise” to Berenice’s mother that her daughter will “be entirely free from any engagement.” Nevertheless, Berenice “keep[s the pledge] for Vane”: “I also promise to be faithful to you, and to wait with you any length of time, and to use every means in my power to merit your constancy and to gain my mother’s consent!” (92). Later, when Berenice learns about the curse and tells Vane, “I must not marry you,” he chastises her for renegeing on the pledge he could not accept but she insisted on keeping: “And you promised that though you would yield passive obedience to your mother and guardians, yet, when you should become of age, you would be my wife” (148). Other pledges follow in the novel’s sequel, *The Maiden Widow*, as when Vane refuses to accompany another character to Europe on the grounds that “I have pledged myself to my beloved Berenice . . . to be, at least, her friend and neighbor” (95). In turn, through “the voluntary act of Berenice, in releasing him from his pledge to remain in the neighborhood,” he leaves (101). The plot demands that Berenice and Vane must be legally (and publicly) married, and it takes all of Southworth’s ingenuity to resolve the paradox that Berenice be both maid and widow prior to her wedding. But she accomplishes the impossible. Berenice marries Basil Wall, an ailing old man, who within hours of their marriage dies, making Berenice maid and widow.

As if that part of the curse has not been enough of an obstacle to their marriage, readers find that the curse can be broken only “[w]hen the noon shall be midnight, / And eve shall be morn” (*Maiden Widow* 240). To overcome this obstacle, Southworth provides an eclipse of the sun. With the curse broken, the story might end, but the author introduces yet another plot complication, this one involving Vane, who has been out of the country during the time when the characters have cooked up the scheme of Berenice’s “nominal marriage” to Basil Wall (294). Except there are two Basil Walls: the old, decrepit one and the youthful Wall, although a marriage announcement would not necessarily make that distinction evident. Thus, just when Southworth seems to have cleared the way for her protagonists to marry, readers learn that “Old Captain Storms had run off with a wrong version of that marriage story, as Vane had drawn a wrong inference from the marriage notice.” Another one hundred pages awaits readers to whom the narrator has confided, “[D]oes my reader believe that Berenice Brooke had forfeited her faith, and married young Basil Wall?” (206).

The fact that Vane judges Berenice so harshly and infers so wrongly, even after everything they have been through—the separations, the pledges, the promises, the vows—is evidence of a problem that will not go away, despite his apologies and her blushing. In other words, it is only a matter of time until the next misreading occurs, although there will be no curse to blame for the misunderstanding, except for the curse of their marriage. “What is the meaning of [the lines in the daily paper]?” is Vane’s first response to his misreading of the marriage notice (*Maiden Widow* 187). His second is violence: “There shall be another Widow of Widowville. Ah! one can understand the meaning of the malediction when one sees such treachery!” Vane’s emotions quickly travel from wanting to marry Berenice to “reproach[ing]” her with her “falsehood” to imagining deadly violence (189). With good reason, then, Southworth, as well as the widows of Widowville, wards off that marriage and many others as long as possible. But marriage, or, to use Anne duCille’s term, “the coupling convention,” remains the inevitable conclusion for the sentimental novel. The final chapters go back and detail the ceremony of the “nominal marriage” between Berenice and Old Basil Wall, and a final page lists the long-awaited marriages of four sets of additional characters (313).⁶

Although *The Family Doom* and *The Maiden Widow* end in multiple marriages, virtually all the female characters are faced with the choice of either embarking upon a marriage that will obliterate their self-respect, but which they have at one point or another vowed to enter into, or breaking that vow and marrying the person who will allow them, within the limits of coverture, a degree of self-possession. This may not seem like much of a choice, but in the world of the novel, the difference between the first-wrong-marriage and the second-right-one matters immensely. Thus, minor and major characters, mostly women but sometimes men, all constantly make pledges from which they are allowed to extricate themselves.

One of the many subplots in the story of Berenice and Vane involves Halcyone McAlpine and Clarence Fairlie. This couple affords a comedic version of what happens when the utterances of courtship are incorrectly viewed as actions, as performative. Clarence has a crush on Halcyone and insists that if she does not agree to marry him, “I will walk out and put a bullet through my brain” (*Family Doom* 157). Becoming concerned about his state of mind, Halcyone tries to calm him down, saying, “I don’t reject you,” which Clarence interprets as a “promise to marry him” (158, 159). Halcyone insists, “I meant no more than I said” and “I by no means meant to promise to marry him” (159). In a follow-up conversation with her girlfriend, who actually would like nothing better than to promise marriage to Clarence, Halcyone revisits the scene of her promise, which she insists on calling a “half promise” (164). Through stra-

tegic badgering, Halcyone convinces Clarence that “he had been foolish in his love, and hasty in his proposal,” and the two live happily ever after, separated, and with the partner each loves (141).

By focusing on the utterances of courtship, and allowing men and especially women to change their minds and renege on their pledges (painful as that might be, but less painful than a fatal marriage), Southworth tries to create a more flexible trajectory for women where their language is not the equivalent of their actions, where misspoken words do not doom them. Thus, when Clarence calls Halcyone his “promised bride,” her next words are, “[O]h, your promised fiddlestick!” (*Family Doom* 166). Southworth’s novels make it clear that the only words that have performative power are “I do.” Once they are uttered, by man or by woman, they cannot be undone, and anyone who tries to pretend an action has not occurred will be punished accordingly. By contrast, a “half promise” to marry and even a “whol[e] promise” can and should be undone in order that true love will prevail. Characters say, “I’m bound to you forever,” but they are not (*Family Doom* 119). Even Berenice, who “has bound herself by the solemn vow never to marry Vane Vandeleur” is allowed to unbind that vow and marry him (*Maiden Widow* 91). Although circumscribed by marriage and the demands of sentimental convention, Southworth’s plots work to establish for women a degree of agency and freedom within an institutional framework that legally allows neither.

I would, however, call attention to the fact that three characters do remain unmarried, and these are the widows of Henniker House, where “Woman’s Right’s [sic] and Petticoat Government reigns” (*Family Doom* 9). Indeed, early on, Captain Storms, one of the novel’s many main characters, hypothesizes the following reason for why they do not marry: “It is said that a woman is never free until she is a widow. In her girlhood she is under her parents; in her wifehood she belongs to her husband; but in her widowhood she belongs to herself” (*Family Doom* 48). Unlike Adelaide, once these women have been released from coverture, Southworth does not force them to become hidden again. They have, as it were, served their time, and Southworth must have believed her readers more than satisfied with the five marriages that conclude the novel.

ART AND EXPRESSION IN THE AGE OF SOUTHWORTH

According to Fanny Fern in an 1867 New York *Ledger* article, “[A]t this day it is difficult to find [a woman] who does not write, or has not written, or who has not, at least, a strong desire to do so” (342). Like Fern and many other sentimental writers, Southworth had “a strong desire [to write],” to tell stories about the difficulties of marriage, the power of maternal affection, and the fact

of unfulfilled expectations. But the content of her novels and the conditions under which she wrote them are not all that distinctive from the canonical male authors of the time. True, she had to tell her stories in such a way that her novels would sell, which means an adherence to certain generic requirements (but is this all that different from Melville's revisions of *Typee*?). True, that pressure to sell also meant she had to write a lot in a little time (recall that Melville wrote *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* in about five months). True, her stories feature outlandish coincidences (more so than finding one white whale in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?).⁷ And true, her characters act in ways that are not always identifiably realistic (less so than Isabel strumming her guitar while Pierre hungrily watches?). That said, the art and expression in the age of Southworth, to invoke and revise the title of F. O. Matthiessen's book, is also very much about expression or, to use the vocabulary of Austin, about utterance and its effects. Southworth's utterances are ones we should attend to not only because she wrote so many novels that had such an enormous following, which in itself tells us a great deal about the concerns and tastes of her nineteenth-century audience, and not only because they disclose a world of words where the most important pronouncements exist in a state of hermeneutic limbo, thereby wreaking havoc on women's lives. We should attend to these utterances, as I have tried to show, because they zero in on questions of voice, of language, of narrative construction. In focusing on this last point, in particular, Southworth's relation—both divergent and overlapping—to the more canonical writers of the American Renaissance becomes clearer. She is no longer their authorial *feme covert*.

NOTES

Portions of this essay are from "Sentimentalism," by Cindy Weinstein, which appears in the *Cambridge History of the American Novel*, edited by Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge UP, 2010), and are reprinted here with permission.

Thanks to Lisa Thomas, Mary Eyring, Theresa Strouth Gaul, and Nicole Tonkovich for assistance with this essay.

1. Not all readers of Southworth are convinced that she ought to be categorized as a writer of sentimental fiction. Dana Luciano, for example, maintains that the "work is far more sensational than sentimental" and launches a critique, through sensationalism, "of domestic life, the horrors of domination, manipulation, and exclusion that the sentimental bonds of the 'natural' family attempt to conceal" (342, 326). It is true that Southworth's texts deploy sensationalism as critique, but I do not think this is incompatible with sentimental fiction, which itself mounts a critique of the natural family. See my *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Litera-*

ture (1–44). Nina Baym has this to say in her classic *Woman's Fiction*: “Southworth did not reject false or purloined wills, forged or intercepted or lost letters, storms, floods, fires, droughts, kidnappings, mock murders, feigned marriages and suicides, carriage accidents, shipwrecks, poisonings. Yet her imagination is too spacious and robust to be called gothic, and similar incidents appear in most of the fiction of her time” (117–18). Also see Paul Christian Jones’s recent essay in which he argues that Southworth’s sentimentalism functions as the foundation for her critique of capital punishment.

2. Shirley Samuels observes the following about Southworth’s *Fair Play* and *How He Won Her*: “War operates as an effective delay as the women find distinctive methods for entering into patriotic service—and yet the delays of extended plots may also be seen to defer the anticipated marriages in ways that provide another form of satisfaction. That is, the romantic thrust of the book seems first about relations between women. . . . That the novels end with marriage after 1,000 pages may not be as significant as that the resolution through marriage is deferred for 1,000 pages occupied by the interruptions of war” (150). A similar claim can be made for *The Fatal Marriage*, *The Family Doom*, and *The Maiden Widow*, though the generic pressure to resolve the plot through marriage(s), and Southworth’s vexed relation to that resolution, should not be underestimated.

3. *The Maiden Widow* repeatedly uses phrases such as these: “[W]hat is the meaning of all this” (29, 154); “[W]hat *did* you mean? And what *do* you mean, tell me that!” (154); “What is the meaning of them” (187); “What do you mean by it?” (212); “What do you mean, my dear?” (234); and “What is the meaning of this?” (263).

4. Southworth’s plot actually intersects with legal concerns about what historian Michael Grossberg calls “youthful marriage” (141). Orville is fifteen, and Adelaide is twelve (92). Although there was a consistent movement among the states to raise the statutory age to “sixteen for women and eighteen for men,” justices were often loathe to intervene in what was also “considered private matters. . . . Many jurists and their professional allies retained a striking, if increasingly anachronistic, faith in the social utility of youthful nuptial freedom” (142). Grossberg cites an Alabama case whose details resemble those of *The Fatal Marriage*. A man who has committed bigamy attempts to nullify his first marriage because “he was below the statutory age of seventeen” (143). The court refused to do this, citing his bigamous second marriage as a worse infraction than his first under-aged one. If we were to use this case to comment on Southworth, we would say that his marriage to Adelaide would be upheld; however, Grossberg also notes, “the bench treated marriages as voidable when one or both parties wed below the new statutory ages” (143). Clearly, the plot of the novel reflects, on the one hand, the ambiguity surrounding the legality of “youthful marriage” and, on the other hand, the absolute crime of bigamy: “[E]very state outlawed bigamy and authorized criminal penalties” (121). Southworth clearly thinks the “baby-marriage” outrageous (she calls it a “solemn farce” [92]) but thinks it even more outrageous that Deville refuses to acknowledge it at first, then does, then refuses to acknowledge his second marriage to Lionne.

5. It is worth noting that this is a fantasy. Historical research by Hendrik Hartog and

Nancy Cott demonstrates the flexible nature of marriage and hence the ambiguity that Southworth's work is trying so hard to contest. Hartog, for example, writes about bigamy: "When bigamous second (and sometimes third) unions were challenged in court, judges were remarkably accepting and accommodating of the bigamous pair" (87). Cott observes, "Except in the few states that absolutely prohibited or nullified self-marriage by law, courts were generally satisfied when a couple's cohabitation looked like and was reputed in the community to be marriage, whether or not authorized ceremonies could be documented. The inconsistent record-keeping in the nineteenth century meant that circumstantial evidence oftentimes had to be used to prove solemnized marriages also" (39). Joyce Warren observes about Southworth's portrayal of Hagar in relation to the justice system in *The Deserted Wife*: "[W]e have the wife's story; Southworth details the accumulation of abuse from the wife's point of view. Although Hagar's story would not have held up in court, it apparently gained a sympathetic hearing from a 'jury of her peers'—the women who read Southworth's novels and helped to propel her to fame and fortune as a novelist" (91).

6. In her reading of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which takes up some of these same issues, Amanda Claybaugh notes that while the novel "is set in a world in which husband and wife are capable of parting, it nonetheless shows that true separation is more difficult than it might at first seem. The marriage vow proves to have an unexpected force" (191).

7. See Luciano's essay, which argues that authors such as Southworth "reimagine the role of women's language in American culture and mount a powerful critique of the gender, linguistic, and sexual codes of their middle-class audiences" (38). Caroline Levander's chapter on *The Fatal Marriage* and *Pierre* focuses on Lionne's voice, specifically how its disembodiment gives her power over Deville, whereas I am more interested in the various speech acts of the novel and how their function varies depending upon speaker, context, and intention.

WORKS CITED

- Austin, J[ohn] L[angshaw]. *How to Do Things with Words*. Ed. J. O. Urmson. New York: Oxford UP, 1962.
- Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.
- Claybaugh, Amanda. *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.
- Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

- Fern, Fanny. "The Women of 1867." 1867. *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*. Ed. Joyce W. Warren. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986. 342–44.
- Grossberg, Michael. *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985.
- Hartog, Hendrik. *Man and Wife in America: A History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Hentz, Caroline Lee. *Ernest Linwood: A Novel*. Boston: Jewett, 1856.
- Jones, Paul Christian. "I put my fingers around my throat and squeezed it, to know how it feels': Antigallows Sentimentalism and E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*." *Legacy* 25.1 (2008): 41–61.
- Kelley, Mary. *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*. 1984. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002.
- Levander, Caroline Field. *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Luciano, Dana. "The Gothic Meets Sensation: Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, George Lippard, and E. D. E. N. Southworth." *A Companion to American Fiction, 1780–1865*. Ed. Shirley Samuels. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. 314–29.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford UP, 1941.
- Samuels, Shirley. "Women at War." *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*. Ed. Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 143–56.
- Southworth, E. D. E. N. *The Family Doom; or, the Sin of a Countess*. New York: Lupton, 1869.
- . *The Fatal Marriage*. Philadelphia: Peterson, 1863.
- . *Lilith: A Novel. A Sequel to The Unloved Wife*. New York: Burt, 1891.
- . *The Maiden Widow. A Sequel to The Family Doom*. Philadelphia: Peterson, 1870.
- . *The Missing Bride; or, Miriam, the Avenger*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, n. d.
- . *Self-Raised; or, From the Depths*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, n. d.
- . *The Unloved Wife: A Novel*. New York: Burt, 1890.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*. 1852. Ed. Ann Douglas. New York: Penguin, 1981.
- Warren, Joyce W. *Women, Money, and the Law: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Gender, and the Courts*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2005.
- Weinstein, Cindy. *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.