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Martha E. McMillan and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *House and Home Papers* (1867)

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Martha E. McMillan and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *House and Home Papers*

1867

Michelle Gaffner Wood

The day after their marriage James McMillan took his bride to her new home—the McMillan farmhouse—located four miles east of Cedarville on “the pike,” now State Route 42. Because James’ mother Nancy and his unmarried sisters – Jane, Jennette, and Martha – lived with James at the farm, Martha did not immediately commence housekeeping. In fact, between January and October 1867, Martha travelled back and forth between her parents’ home and “Mother McMillan’s.” James would drop her off at her parents’ home, and he would pick her up the next day or a few days later.

On June 5, Martha’s friend Mary Park gave Martha the domestic guidebook entitled *House and Home Papers* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe had published a series of domestic advice essays in the *Atlantic Monthly* between January and December in 1864 (Hedrick 312). In her 1863 letter to James Fields in which she pitches the series of home papers, Stowe indicates that her reason for wanting to write “a series of household papers” is to divert readers’ attentions from the horrors of the war (Hedrick 312). Stowe proposes:

a sort of spicy sprightly writing that I feel I need to write in these days to keep from thinking of things that make me dizzy and blind and fill my eyes with tears so that I can’t see the paper [...] I mean such things as are being done where our heroes are dying as Shaw died—It is not wise that all our literature should run in a rut cut thro [sic] our hearts and red with our blood—I feel the need of a little gentle household merriment and talk of common thing—to indulge which I have devised this. (qtd. in Hedrick 312)

According to Joan Hedrick, one Stowe biographer, Stowe “accurately predicted that the horrors of war would create a reaction toward the comfort of home things” (312-313). As a result of the series’ popularity, Ticknor and Fields published the essays as *House and Home Papers* in 1865 (Hochman 83). The narrative persona, Christopher Crowfield, delights his readers with stories of his own family’s quest to create a beautiful, welcoming, and functioning parlor. Yet at the same time, this white, middle-class man warns his readers against creating a parlor that is so exclusively furnished that the room becomes uninhabitable, unwelcoming, and uncomfortable. The tension in the book lies in the fact that the book both maps the mid-nineteenth-century parlor and closes the door on it as well.

Crowfield represents the conversations he has with his wife and daughters as they consider together how to make a home comfortable for all its inhabitants and its guests. Crowfield’s chief complaint about antebellum parlor ideology is that the formality of the parlor makes home life uncomfortable and unwelcoming. He critiques how families become burdened by the care of expensive carpets and furniture and as a result create rooms that people must shut up and in which the select company who enters feel uncomfortable. The series begins with “The Ravages of a Carpet”; it considers “Home-Keeping vs. House-Keeping,” “The Economy of The Beautiful” and concludes with a chapter that considers how a comfortable home-space other than an exclusively furnished parlor might contribute to “Home Religion.”

House and Home Papers reflects and influences consumerism and religious discourses of the mid-nineteenth century. According to Lori Merish, Stowe’s *House and Home Papers* “naturalized middle-class patterns of private ownership and helped establish consumerist domesticity as an instrument of cultural hegemony” (4). Further, Merish contends that during the antebellum time period religion and secular consumerism “were forged into a novel synthesis of

pious consumption, which saw luxury goods as a primary means to spiritualize the self and to animate both economic and moral progress” (4-5). While this is true, one can also see how Crowfield warns against consumer excess as well. Of course, his wife and daughters resist his warnings and create a parlor that no one can use so that the furniture and the carpets will not be ruined. Crowfield’s warnings remap the parlor by suggesting that families can come together in rooms that are inviting and not formal, yet at the same time he lives in a house that maintains an exclusively-furnished parlor.

Even though the women in Crowfield’s family create an uninhabitable parlor, Crowfield continues to emphasize the idea that families and guests will gather in comfortable spaces and that one purpose for this gathering is for families to participate in “home religion.” According to Clifford Clark, Jr. in “Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840-1870,” Horace Bushnell, a minister from Hartford, Connecticut was the first to locate Christianity, not in the church, but in people’s private homes in his 1847 book *Christian Nurture* (540). In *The American Home*, David Handlin adds that in antebellum America “home religion had become an accepted part of American Christianity” (4). The reason “home religion” was so important to antebellum ministers was that they thought that homes could more easily influence children to remember “moral examples” and “guide [them] as [they] made [their] way in a world full of ruinous temptations” (Handlin 14). *House and Home Papers* and Christopher Crowfield advocate a thrifty consumerism that will create home-spaces the family will not want to leave. As a result, these home-spaces can become a place of informal, private, conversational instruction much like the setting and tone *House and Home Papers* represents for its readers. At the beginning of the book’s final chapter, “Home Religion,” Stowe brings home and religion together when she places her reader into

Christopher Crowfield's study. Christopher Crowfield's daughters and wife have so bedecked the parlor during the course of the essays that the Crowfield family have to close the formal parlor in order to protect the carpets, furniture, and accessories from every day wear and tear. The family convenes in Crowfield's study and uses the room as he suggests a sensible parlor should be used. Though one could suggest that by shutting the door on the antebellum parlor, Stowe reimagines antebellum parlor morality, she still keeps religion in the home. In the last chapter, Crowfield emphasizes the fact that families must make comfortable spaces that invite family members and others to participate in family life, whether that be the parlor or a more comfortable space, such as Crowfield's study. Crowfield demonstrates how this warm, informal gathering on Sundays contributes to "home religion."

It was Sunday evening, and our little circle were convened by my study-fireside, where a crackling hickory fire proclaimed the fall of the year to be coming on, and cold weather impending. Sunday evenings, my married boys and girls are fond of coming home and gathering round the old hearthstone, and "making believe" that they are children again.

We get out the old-fashioned music-books, and sing old hymns to very old tunes, and my wife and her matron daughters talk about the babies in the intervals; and we discourse of the sermon, and of the choir, and all the general outworks of good pious things which Sunday suggests. (Stowe 309)

Home Religion implied family devotions, keeping the Sabbath, and representing the hope of heaven in the home. *House and Home Papers* brings together savvy consumerism, good taste, practicality, hospitality, and religion. At the same time, the text warns pious housekeepers at the century's mid-point to consider seriously the fact that while parlor furnishings might be

important, mid-century morality and hospitality ought not to be defined by parlor furnishings as those two ideologies had been during the antebellum time period (see Bushman xvii-xviii).

It stands to reason that Martha read *House and Home Papers* because during the month of October, at the same time that her mother-in-law and her sisters-in-law were preparing to move to a house in town, Martha writes numerous entries about choosing carpet, the first furnishing, according to Crowfield, that families should purchase for their parlors (McMillan, October 3, 1867). As she is purchasing carpets and other commodities to begin her own housekeeping, she calls the McMillan farmhouse “our home” for the first time in the October 15 entry. By purchasing her own consumer goods and by decorating the McMillan house with them, she acts as the newlyweds Crowfield portrays as they endeavor to set up comfortable housekeeping. Just like the couples Crowfield mentions, Martha and James are newlyweds who must buy consumer goods to make the McMillan house their own.

Between October and December 1867, Martha is busy purchasing goods and installing them in her new home. On October 25 and October 30, she receives carpets at her house and travels to purchase more carpet. By December 14, the carpet has been put down in the front sitting room. On October 11 and October 16, her father delivers new furniture to her house. Just as Crowfield suggests, Martha adds wallpaper to her sitting room (Stowe 89-90). She and Mary work on “papering” the sitting room on November 7 and November 9. Of course, Martha must add blinds to the windows. Crowfield reminds his readers that women add blinds so that the sun will not fade the carpet (Stowe 17). James installs Martha’s blinds in the front sitting room on December 16. Finally on December 16, after all the carpets have been laid, the wallpaper applied, the window blinds installed, and the furniture arranged, Martha records that she and James have their “first sitting in the front room.”

In *House and Home Papers*, Stowe both maps the parlor and warns against consumer excesses that make the parlor uninhabitable. Martha's December 16 entry reflects the influence of nineteenth-century domesticity discourses and its conflation of parlor furnishings and religion when she writes that because "home is the temple of our sweetest kinsman...the highest earthly estate...it is a place of dignity. Therefore [one should] give it honor; make it beautiful..." Yet the entry also reflects how Martha heeds Crowfield's warning about creating uninviting and uninhabitable parlors since she and her husband can enjoy "their first sitting in the front room" (McMillan, December 16, 1867). Martha does not create a home-space that is unwelcoming or uninhabitable. The numerous community members and travelers who people the pages of the remainder of Martha's journals seem to indicate that, in fact, Martha creates the very kind of home Stowe imagines and represents in *House and Home Papers*.

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