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TRANSCENDING THE LIMITATIONS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S DOMESTIC SPHERE AND FICTION: ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS'S CONTRIBUTION

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ABSTRACT: Nineteenth-century literature written by women has traditionally been associated exclusively with the domestic space. Most upper middle-class white women of that period were similarly confined within the limits of their home environments. However, this article critically examines and questions the sometimes too hermetic interpretations of the role that the domestic realm played in the lives and literary works of nineteenth-century women writers. Specifically, it portrays how Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), instead of assuming submissively those domestic restrictions, strove to transcend them and shared her innovative initiatives with her contemporary women through her writings. To achieve this objective, this work analyses new female attitudes and the actual houses and domestic environments inhabited by Phelps and some of her female characters. It focuses on how they endeavoured to escape from these settings or to transform them into contexts that might favour their professional lives, instead of passively accepting them as inevitable obstacles to their true vocations.
RESUMEN: La literatura decimonónica escrita por mujeres se ha asociado tradicionalmente con el espacio doméstico en exclusiva. Del mismo modo, la mayoría de las mujeres blancas de clase media-alta de ese período estaban confinadas en los límites del ámbito hogareño. No obstante, este artículo examina y cuestiona de forma crítica las a veces demasiado herméticas interpretaciones del papel que el entorno doméstico desempeñó en las vidas y obras literarias de las escritoras decimonónicas. Concretamente, refleja cómo

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), en lugar de asumir pasivamente esas restricciones domésticas, luchó por trascenderlas y compartió sus iniciativas innovadoras con sus contemporáneas por medio de sus escritos. Para conseguir este objetivo, este trabajo analiza nuevas actitudes femeninas y las propias casas y entornos domésticos que Phelps y algunos de sus personajes femeninos habitaron, centrándose en cómo se esforzaron por librarse de ellos o por transformarlos en contextos que facilitaran sus vidas profesionales, en lugar de limitarse a aceptarlos como obstáculos inevitables para sus verdaderas vocaciones.

INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth-century literature written by women has habitually been associated with the domestic space, as clearly demonstrated by the labels traditionally applied to it. Among them, the term "domestic fiction" stands out, as Nina Baym explains in *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (24). This article draws on Baym's conceptual framework in its objective of recognising the real merit of a "moderate, limited or pragmatic feminism" (Baym 18) of certain female writers who, in very adverse circumstances, managed to become significant women's rights advocates. However, there were women writers, like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), who went even a step further, as, contrary to those analysed by Baym who preferred to focus on the power derived from their version of the "cult of domesticity" (27), Phelps also provided fictional role models of women succeeding in traditionally male-dominated professions (Kelly 1983, vii).

Concurrently, this essay seeks to broaden the often-narrow interpretations of the role that the domestic realm has played in the lives and literary works of nineteenth-century women writers —as Ronna Coffey Privett, among other scholars, denounces (6)—, with the intention of analysing not only the limitations but also the power that the home space has also offered to some of them. Thus, building upon Caroline Hellman's assumption that domestic habitation is usually a private act and writing a potentially public one, this study will portray how the domestic realm has sometimes served as a catapult to disseminate progressive ideas among late nineteenth-century women. This objective, which has also been inspired by Diana Fuss's recognition of the important influence that spatial and material origins and circumstances exert over literary creations (1), responds to the

interdisciplinary nature of this study, combining sociohistorical, biographical, and literary aspects.

As previously mentioned, this article's focus is on the valuable contributions of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), who was "extremely prolific and popular during the years she wrote" (Privett 2), was once recognized as "one of the most famous of American authors" (Vedder 189) and whose celebrity transcended even to the other side of the Atlantic (Cognard-Black and Goldby 117). Her extensive literary production surpassed fifty-seven books, almost one hundred and fifty short stories (Harde 4), and numerous magazine articles, poems, plays, and biographies. However, she ceased to receive the attention that she deserves (Privett 2, Bennett v) despite the fact that she was a pioneer in her proposal of a new model of womanhood which contemplated the possibility of getting out of their oppressive domestic spheres (Al-Badarneh 1) and abandoning the traditional conception of households, in search of new life options. Her bravery is also remarkable because she dared to do so at a time when, according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "to place a woman outside of a domestic setting […] violated virtually every late-Victorian norm" (252).

The following analysis will illustrate how Phelps was one of the brave nineteenth-century women writers who, even being surrounded by a conservative context that tried to make her renounce her professional aspirations in favour of the requirements of the feminine domestic model of the "True Woman" —inspired in the "Angel in the House"—, fought to escape from those literal and metaphorical limitations with her own example and through her writings. This should lead to supporting Privett's assertion that "Phelps's writing represents a voice calling out from beyond the limits of the domestic storyline, demanding changes in American society, both for women and other undervalued members" (12).

RELEVANCE OF HOUSES IN (UPPER) MIDDLE-CLASS WHITE WOMEN'S LIVES AND LITERATURE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The importance of houses in literature has been highlighted by numerous salient scholars, among whom is Phyllis Richardson, who analyses some outstanding literary examples in *House of Fiction: From Pemberley to Brideshead, Great British Houses in Literature and Life* (2021). In the American context, Marilyn R. Chandler's *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (1991) is noteworthy. Here, Chandler

acknowledges that many novelists have devoted attention to the themes of house and home (16). More recently, Rodrigo Andrés and Cristina Alsina Rísquez's *American Houses: Literary Spaces of Resistance and Desire* (2022) delves into the examination of this intense relationship between American literature and houses. Rosanne Lynn Welker's *Housetelling: Rendering the American Dream House in American Literature, 1840-1930* (1995) is especially appropriate for the present study, as it covers the particular period that is analysed here. Judith Fetterley, in her anthology of nineteenth-century American women writers, observed that they focused on detailing the social environment that forms the individual self from an early stage, and it is undeniable that their first and closest social context was their homes (9). Carol Holly supports this idea when she affirms that "the action of most nineteenth-century women's fiction occurs in or around the home" (57). This is to be expected, as these women's lives were traditionally limited to the domestic sphere to such an extent that the ideal female model was widely known as "The Angel in the House."[1] Referring particularly to the American context, Alexis de Tocqueville reinforces this idea when he noted that nineteenth-century women in the United States were "confined within a narrow circle of domestic life" (225).[2] This confinement was supported and recommended even by doctors, as stated in *The Ways of Women in Their Physical, Moral and Intellectual Relations, by a Medical Man* (1873), with the assertion: "In-door industry is […] commendable, and there it is supposed that woman is in her appropriate sphere" (26).

As Chandler explains, houses convey ambivalent implications, as they provide us with the solidness of stability (6, 13, 15) but, at the same time, they "mire us in worldly concerns" that divert our energies and attention from "the nobler pursuits of mind and spirit" (6) and they may even turn into our personal prisons (20). In agreement with this, Caroline Hellman asserts that, after studying personal and literary interiors of women writers, she has inferred that "the nineteenth and early twentieth-century American home was an admittedly ambiguous space of both power and subjugation for women" (2).[3] Consequently, it is not surprising that writers from

[1] This term became popularised by Coventry Patmore's famous narrative poem of this same title (1854).

[2] Linda Kerber analyses the term "women sphere" in detail in her article "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" (1988).

[3] More terrible implications of the domestic realm, such as domestic abuse and violence, have also been portrayed by nineteenth-century women writers, as Maria E.

different epochs have studied how to combine these two sides of the domestic coin. For example, Catharine Beecher (1800-1878), in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), defended that the well-being of both the family and the nation depended on the proper management of domestic life, including the appropriate apportionment of time to household duties and self-cultivation (171). Many other female writers have also portrayed how difficult it is to reach this balance. Among them is Phelps's mother, Elizabeth Wooster Stuart Phelps (1815–1852), whose short story, "The Angel Over the Right Shoulder" (1852), can be interpreted as a critique of Beecher's faith in the possibility of systematizing domestic activities in combination with women's other interests or professional aspirations. The elder Phelps's daughter would inherit this position, because, as Mary Angela Bennett asserts, besides showing her dislike for domestic tasks, her belief strengthened over time that dedicating oneself to these matters left no room for anything else (17).

Those negative implications affected upper middle-class American white women in the past with especial virulence, as they were, to a great extent, confined to the domestic space, as previously asserted. Their lives were fiercely constrained by the "Cult of True Womanhood," which Barbara Welter thoroughly examines in her well-known essay with that same title (1976). According to it, women were basically determined by their domesticity and their activities were limited to the house.[4] Thus, Victorian society sought to promote female qualities that would improve their roles at home, such as piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Consequently, even many literary works written by women, which gained unprecedented popularity, served this purpose.[5] Especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, they propagated the notion that women could hold considerable power and even superiority with respect to men, but

Bodenschatz —for example— analyses in *I Am Master Here And You Shall Learn To Know It": Recovering Domestic Abuse Literature By 19th-Century Transatlantic Women Authors* (2015).

[4] Phelps overtly criticised the ideal of the "True Woman" in her article "The True Woman" (1871).

[5] There were manuals teaching this women's ideal such as the two anonymous *The Young Lady's Book: A Manual of Elegant Recreations, Exercises, and Pursuits* (1832) and *Woman as She Was, Is, and Should Be* (1849); and *The American Woman's Home* by the Beecher sisters. There were also many women writers who spread these ideals in fiction, as Jane Tompkins —among other critics— analyses in *Sensational Designs* (1985).

always in a moral sense and within the limits of the domestic realm (Campbell 10).

This "seclusion" of women in the private sphere continued well into the nineteenth century (Privett 8) and even the end of the nineteenth century because, as Carol Farley Kessler explains, although its prominent urbanization and industrialization might lead to the assumption of a parallel modernisation of women's lives, men remained in control of these innovations and, as a consequence, she concludes that women experienced a more separate sphere than ever before (1992, xix).[6]

ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS'S REACTIONS TO DOMESTIC LIMITATIONS

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps fought against the predominant domestic limitations for women through her life and writings, even if this was not very profitable in an era when editors and critics favoured, instead, literary works depicting heroines who incarnated the "True Woman" ideal (Coultrap-McQuin 12). One of Phelps's main biographers, Lori Duin Kelly, highlights her persistent effort "to correct the prevailing stereotype of them as [...] completely fulfilled and happy in their supposedly 'natural' spheres of home and children" (vii) and concludes that, with her writings, Phelps "challenged the notion that a woman's place was in the home" (vii). This purpose can be noticed, also, in her non-fiction. As Kelly explains, the largest proportion of her numerous articles published in very relevant magazines such as *The Independent* and *Harper's Bazar*, among others,[7] are related to the woman question (1983, 49). To give an example, in "What Shall They Do?" (1867), Phelps defends that friends and relatives of women who are apt and want an "outside object for her days" must help these ladies to reach their goals (522). In another one, titled "Unhappy Girls" (1871), she overtly told parents: "Send your girls away from home [...] Help them into the broad ways of active life" (1). These and many other instances

[6] Kessler considers that even the women's movement increased its conservatism after the 1890s (1982, 103). Numerous experts, such as Carol Holly (45), Nancy Cott (1-18), Barbara Epstein (7), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (11-52) and Nancy Woloch (13-14) agree with her.

[7] Other relevant magazines where Phelps published her numerous articles were: *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *McClure's Magazine*, *Century*, the *North American Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Congregationalist*, *Forum*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping*.

lead to the inference that Phelps questioned and tried to deconstruct the generally accepted norms and impositions that required from women a complete dedication to the domestic household.

Even if the women's movement already existed in the second half of the nineteenth century, when associations like the National Woman's Suffrage Association (1869) and the American Woman's Suffrage Association (1869) were fighting for their rights, this attitude was not yet generalised. This was especially true in the case of Phelps's milieu, which supported the traditional idea that responsible women had to attend solely to the needs of family and home (Kelly 1983, vii). Phelps herself recognised this when she affirmed: "I was taught the old ideas of womanhood, in the old way" (1896, 99). Considering this context, Phelps's initiatives questioning them can be recognised as even more meritorious. For instance, Austin Phelps —her father— was the author of popular works opposing women's suffrage, what exemplifies his conservative position with regard to women's roles.[8] According to Kessler, Phelps considered that her father was responsible for her mother's extreme concentration on the domestic tasks that not only provoked a detriment in her health but also prevented her from her complete fulfilment as a professional writer (1992, xx).

Even if, as it has been suggested, Phelps had always rejected the demands of domestic life, it is irrefutable that the residences that she inhabited wielded a considerable impact upon her. As Bennett says, "Phelps's best stories are those in which the scene is laid in the surroundings in which she has lived" (58). To begin with, some information about the first family house that she inhabited in Andover, Massachusetts —"a very masculine place," (Phelps 1896, 133)— will be offered. This house had been the setting of the birth of the American Home Missionary Society and of the American Temperance Society, among other relevant Christian and philanthropic institutions of that time (Gilman 78).[9] Taking this into consideration facilitates a better understanding of how Phelps, instead of simply feeling limited by her initial conservative household, took advantage of its positive influence, as she always demonstrated a great interest in different humanitarian

[8] Among them are "Woman-Suffrage as Judged by the Working of Negro-Suffrage" (1878) and "Reform in the Political Status of Women" (1881).

[9] For more information about the relevance of the Phelps's house, see Sophia Lee's article.

causes, even if showing a predilection for those related to the amelioration of women's lives.

Figure 1. Phelps's parents' house in Andover (Phelps 1896, 24)

Figure 2. The study in Phelps's parents' house (Gilman 79)

However, the influence of this house on Phelps was not positive in every aspect. In Arthur Gilman's opinion, this extremely large,[10] handsome and costly house, built in 1812, had not been designed in a very practical way (82-83). When Phelps's father occupied this house as Professor at Andover Theological Seminary, in 1848, he was young and with limited financial means (Gilman 84). This economic scarcity was mentioned very frequently in Phelps's works (1896, 14) and is considered as one of the main reasons why her mother, Elizabeth Wooster Stuart Phelps, had to be in charge of too many domestic tasks (Gilman 84-85) and it also lies behind the reason why the elder Phelps felt compelled to lead a professional career as a writer.[11] Even if the motives for the latter's death are not officially detailed (Kessler 1981, 28-29), her daughter showed her conviction that the weight of domesticity and family responsibilities combined with her

[10] Phelps's first-hand experience of the negative consequences derived from taking care of huge houses led her to prefer small dwellings. Thus, she can be considered as one of those nineteenth-century writers who Jasmine Ford and Lilia Gomez-Lanier situate in the origins of the "tiny house movement" (394).

[11] Phelps's mother became extremely famous especially thanks to her book *The Sunny Side; or The Country Minister's Wife* (1851).

professionalism killed her (Phelps 1891, 87; Phelps 1896, 15; Privett 17).[12] Being deprived of her most beloved relative apparently as a consequence of her patriarchal context, Phelps's almost innate refutation of domesticity can be easily understood. Indeed, Phelps's mother exerted a tremendous influence on her, despite having passed away when Phelps was only eight years old.[13] Elizabeth Wooster Stuart Phelps had also questioned the prevailing cult of domesticity in her literary works, which Kessler labels as "an implied critique of woman's sphere" (1981, 82). Kessler supports this assertion explaining that the elder Phelps offered a realistic depiction of the unjust situation of women who were limited to a domestic environment (1981, 29). She also highlights how Phelps's mother, through her work —as her daughter would years later do—, defended the imperious necessity for women to save time for self-development, and demonstrated that domestic obligations frequently impeded this endeavour (1982, 82). Thus, her mother's challenging domestic context served Phelps to draw wise lessons for her future. In effect, Phelps declared that she was glad that she had her mother's visions and she clearly demonstrates how much influenced she was by her in her literary works and in her own life. Phelps remained childless and single almost her whole life and her heroines also reflect the impossibility of having a successful professional career if women also wanted to be housewives.

Continuing the discussion on how young Phelps's home environment influenced her, it is necessary to add information about how it affected her education. In her autobiography, Phelps explains that, as she did not belong to the "privileged sex" (1896, 91), almost no college education was open to her —or any other woman— in the 1860s (Kessler 1992, xx). However, she had the exceptional opportunity to go to Mrs. Edwards School for Young Ladies (Gilman 91, Phelps 1896, 60). Concurrently, she tried hard to avoid all the domestic tasks that she was supposed to do (she refers to herself as "the girl who is never domestic" 1896, 103) and portrayed this same

[12] Witnessing her mother's funeral when she was only eight years old must also have also left an ineffaceable imprint in the little girl's mind. It was "one of the strangest funeral services," (Bennett 15): following the deceased's instructions, her third child was baptized at the side of her coffin (Phelps 1891, 91). Kelly considers that this may had been intended as the elder Phelps's warning to her daughter regarding the immense challenge of balancing career ambitions with household responsibilities (1983, 14-15).

[13] This deep connection is most evident in Phelps's adoption of her mother's name. Originally, she was baptized under the name Mary Gray (Bennett 1, 16).

rejection in her heroines.[14] Even if Phelps occasionally lamented her lack of a suitable sanctuary for reading and writing during her youth, she managed to develop her literary vocation in a "wide domestic topography" (Phelps 1896, 103), as she details: "Often I stole up into the attic, or into some unfrequented closet, to escape the noise of the house while at work. I remember, too, writing sometimes in the barn, on the haymow" (1896, 103).

Reflecting her willingness to escape from home limitations, for young Elizabeth Stuart Phelps the most important part of her parents' house was outdoors: its two ample gardens (Gilman 85). Not in vain, the writer refers to how much she enjoyed having fun in nature when she narrates not only her own childhood but also that of many of her heroines (1896, 20). She preferred two other small summer houses — close to the main building— that were surrounded by nature rather than the main building.[15]

[14] Mira Bank notices that as the nineteenth century was coming to its end, more women declared overtly their aversion to domestic tasks (23).

[15] Recent studies on the author even consider her as an ecofeminist (von Schlichten iii). Whenever Phelps describes houses (real or fictitious), she praises their natural surroundings. Avis also used to work "in the garden studio," and demonstrates her enjoyment of natural settings (Phelps 1877, 78).

Figure 3. One of the two small summer houses in the Phelpses' Andover house (Gilman 87)

Figure 3 illustrates the place where Phelps must have started her professional career. She created her first contribution to the *Youth's Companion* when she was just thirteen years old (Phelps 1896, 18-20). Gilman highlights the simplicity of this dwelling (95), which is a characteristic that will be mentioned in other houses present in both Phelps's life and literature, implying her prioritising of practicality instead of mere superficial embellishment. In this airy atmosphere Phelps read, in 1860, a novel in verse that proved to be profoundly influential and stimulating for her: *Aurora Leigh* (1856), by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.[16] It describes the struggles of another woman to transcend the limits of domesticity in order to develop her artistic vocation. This experience, together with that of her mother, would inspire the creation of her most autobiographical and "favourite heroine" (Phelps 1896, 157), Avis, the non-domestic protagonist of *The Story of Avis* (1877), who would leave her conventional parental house to study art abroad, in Europe (35-37).[17] In the above-described room, Phelps started her most successful book, *The Gates Ajar*, published in 1868 (Bennett 64).

Gilman emphasises the close connection that Phelps had with Andover and most especially with her father's house. Her delicate health (Phelps 1896, 60) contributed to her feeling very comfortable at home, as Gilman explains: "Beyond that house […], she had no world and no wish to find one" (92). This statement seems to contradict Kelly's assertion that "Phelps challenged the notion that a woman's place was in the home" (1983, vii), but a deep analysis of her life and work reveals that what she tried to demolish was not the mere fact of staying at home, but the traditional roles of women inside of it, just

[16] According to Baym, Browning stands out as the sole English writer to have influenced American women authors. Phelps surpasses this assertion, too, because Phelps recognised the enormous impact of Browning's *Aurora Leigh* on her, but she was also strongly influenced by another English writer, George Eliot, with whom she maintained regular correspondence (Griffith, 94).

[17] In effect, from an early age, Avis is said to find "the details of keeping her house in order too much for her" (Bennett 82). As an adult she would insist: "I am afraid I am not just like other women" (54). This differentiation affects other female protagonists of Phelps's novels, as happens in *Doctor Zay*, where other female characters declare about the protagonist: "She ain't like the rest of us" (177).

absorbed by imposed domestic or familial tasks. However, Phelps also travelled to other locations, normally with professional purposes. For example, she mentions visiting Harriet Beecher Stowe's house in Florida, where Phelps showed her some proof-sheets (1896, 136). And she explains: "For many years my winters were practically spent among Boston friends" (1896, 140). She expresses her gratitude for having had there the opportunity to meet distinguished guests, among whom she mentions the publisher James T. Fields (1896, 143), whose kindness she underlines with many examples as well as his support of the political advancement of women, coeducation and kindred movements (1896, 147).

Apart from this, and even if she liked staying at home as it seems, she showed a great interest in social issues from an early age and participated in reform work in Abbot Hill, a factory town not far from her parents' Andover house (Kelly 1983, 11-12; Bennett 33, 55). These experiences led to her recognition of the oppressive conditions of female factory workers and inspired some of her stories and her novel *Hedged in* (1870). This same eagerness had previously led her to move to Lawrence several times for a whole month looking for first-hand information about an accident that had occurred in 1860, in the Pemberton Mill. That material and the writer's diligence led, in 1868, to the publication of "The Tenth of January" in *The Atlantic Monthly*. It has significant merit because her intention was to write what she would years later consider a "realistic" story,[18] but at the time when the tragedy happened, she had not been allowed to depart from her father's residence and proceed to the scene of the incident, on the basis that she was female. This social interest of Phelps must also be read as a questioning of the theory of the different spheres for men and women that was popularised by John Ruskin's famous book *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), among others, in the nineteenth century. Phelps anticipated with this what Gerda Lerner would explain years later in her essay "The Lady and the Mill Girl" (1969). Here, she explains that the theory of the separation of spheres was closely connected to class differences, as middle-class literature supporting this distinction took especial force at a time when women from poorer classes had to leave their homes in order to work hard in factories, for example (5-15).

[18] Recent research situates Phelps as a pioneer of realism (Forster 44).

In any case, as it has already been affirmed, Phelps's main social interest lay in "the woman question," as she overtly recognised on different occasions[19] and as she evidenced with her life and oeuvre. She was convinced that women could follow professional careers that should not be limited to the fields considered appropriate for them in her times and which were normally restricted to their houses.[20] She spread these thoughts from the early seventies in her literary works, many of which were published in the *Independent.* Thus, as Bennett specifies, "there is the woman preacher of 'A Woman's Pulpit,' the brilliant college girl of 'The Sacrifice Consumed,' the philanthropist of 'The Autobiography of Aureola,' and the telephone girl of 'The Chief Operator,' to name but a few of her shorter sketches" (59-60). Examples of these innovative, remarkably gifted, independent and smart women also appeared in her novels; for example, in *Doctor Zay* (1882), *The Story of Avis* (1877) and *The Silent Partner* (1871), among many others.

As it has been asserted before, for different reasons, Phelps's parents' house did not offer her the ideal atmosphere for her professional writing. This facilitated Phelps's decision to abandon it and try to find her own space. When Phelps was 24, after her first literary success, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), she acquired enough money to fulfil one of the requisites to pursue a serious literary career that Virginia Woolf would mention many years later, in "A Room of One's Own" (1935). As Gilman explains: "Not long after the publication of that book, she found it necessary to make some changes in her mode of life which would give her hopes of firmer health and more quiet in which to pursue her literary work" (97). He adds that she learned "like the ministers who study in their churches, or the carpenters who go to their benches, the value of a workshop out of the house" (97). Phelps's removal to the adjoining neighbour's house affected exclusively her working space, because, for some more time her home remained in her parents' house (Gilman 97, 100; Bennet 64-65). She shared rooms with Dr. Mary Briggs Harris, her best friend, who would also inspire Phelps for the creation of the professional female doctor who is the protagonist of her novel *Doctor Zay* (Bennet 64).

[19] Phelps recognised this fact in a letter to Whittier, saying: "I am, as perhaps you may suppose, almost *invested* in the 'Woman Cause.' It grows upon my conscience, as well as my enthusiasm, every day" (qtd. in Bennett 56).

[20] Phelps defended that, to facilitate women's entrance in other spheres different from the domestic, they needed to get rid of their typical constraining dresses (Bennett 66).

Gilman describes Phelps's new working place as responding to its functional purpose (97-99). Consequently, it is described as "extremely plain," "painted white" (Gilman 98) but abundant in windows which made it a very well lighted and "cheerful" place to work (Gilman 98). Notice how, whereas, in her parents' house, the best oriented room belonged to her father, now her study was situated in the best location, being "the southeast corner chamber" (Gilman 98). There is also a quite peculiar detail that can be attributed to the rather unconventional nature of Phelps, which is the inclusion of a hammock, where she may have rested looking for inspiration for her stories.[21]

Figure 4. Phelps's study in her Andover "working" house (Gilman 93)

[21] Avis also had a hammock in her room, which "had a peculiar and negligent effect, grateful to her in the confined house" (Phelps 1877, 133). To finish the description of this study, Gilman remarks the important presence of Phelps's dog, because animals occupied a prominent position in her house as well as in her life (Phelps 1896, 197; Bennet 114). In effect, she collaborated with the antivivisection movement and wrote several literary works dealing with this subject (Kessler 1982, 76; Kelly 2010, 61).

Figure 4 portrays the place where Phelps used to work, only in winter,[22] because she chose East Gloucester as her summer resort (Gilman 97, Larter 26). She finally built her own house there, at Eastern Point, in 1876 (Kessler 1982, 59; Bennett 66).[23] This initiative highlights, once again, how Phelps portrayed with her life her conviction that women should transcend the limitations derived from the imposition of remaining as passive beings in the confinement of other (male) people's houses. Bennett's assertion reinforces this idea: "Having conceived the idea that a woman should have a home of her own even if she remained unmarried, she acquired one for herself" (66). In *Chapters from a Life,* Phelps describes her discovery of what would be the "undisturbed" setting of her own house (193), which can be appreciated in figure 5.

[22] Phelps also wintered in Boston (Kessler 1981, 29) and in different resorts in the South (Bennett 77-78).

[23] I would like to express my gratitude to the magazine *Good Morning Gloucester* and to the Historic Newton Association for the valuable information that they have afforded in relation to Phelps's houses in Gloucester and Newton respectively.

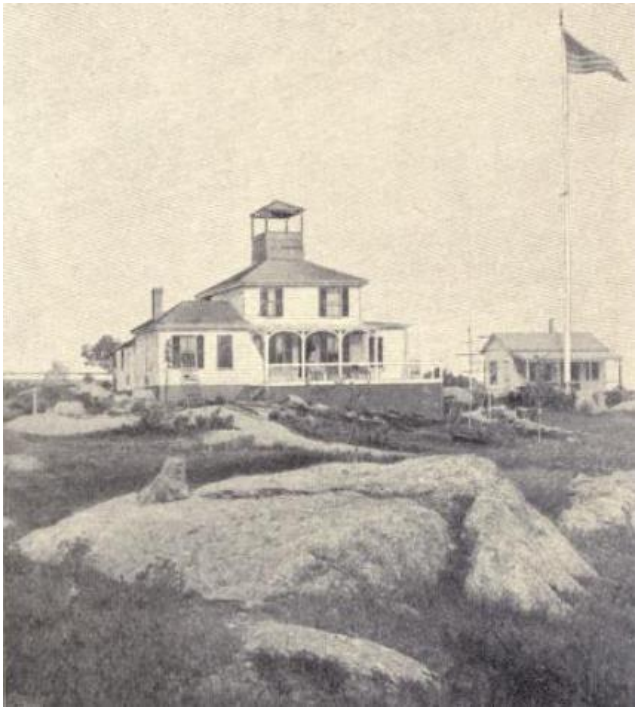

Figure 5. Phelps's Gloucester house (Phelps 1896, 218)

In this new context, Phelps showed again how she did not confine herself inside her house. Instead, there she enjoyed a freedom that contributed, for example, to her putting into practice her interest in social reform. Particularly, she contributed to Gloucester's temperance movement (Kessler 1982, 59; Larter 26), whose germ was said to have been born also in her parents' house in Andover (Gilman 78, 81).[24] The unconventionality of the location of the house (Gilman 105; Phelps 1896, 194), in a wild maritime landscape "not discovered yet by

[24] Phelps always shows great interest in ameliorating the poor's life conditions, but her main interest lies in women. In this particular Gloucester context, she was concerned about fishermen's wives, as can be noticed not only in her novels *An Old Maid's Paradise*, A *Singular Life* (1895) and *The Madonna of the Tubs* (1887), but also in her poems "Gloucester Harbor" (1885) and "The Stone Woman of Eastern Point" (1892), to mention some of them.

summer visitors" (Bennett 66), is brought to focus in the fictional writings where she describes it, especially in "The Voyage of the America" (1875) and *An Old Maid's Paradise* (1879). This peculiarity reflects —metaphorically— the uncommonness of women possessing their own houses at that time, as well. Besides, in *An Old Maid's Paradise*, Phelps distances its protagonist, Corona, from typical female conventions by describing her as the designer, builder and owner of her own house. Added to this, Corona's family completely differs from the traditional Victorian model, because it includes her house keeper as one of its members, as the narrator specifies: "It was a family of three, mistress, maid and dog" (5).[25] Furthermore, in her non-fictional writing, Phelps recommends this uncommon "experiment at home-making"[26] to unmarried women (1896, 192).

In the description of her Gloucester house offered by Phelps in her autobiography (1896, 194-196), we can also appreciate how she enjoyed her possession in a practical way, considering that the house could help her by providing the required working atmosphere and not the opposite, as it was traditionally expected from women. This underlines a characteristic that we have also noticed in reference to Phelps's other dwellings in her biographical writings, which is that she does not pay much attention to decoration details, but rather to those surrounding the building. For instance, she excelled in the description of what she liked to observe from her windows: the maritime landscape and her neighbours, humble fishermen families whom she was always willing to help (1896, 194-96). However, Gilman provides further particulars of her house, all of which served to boost Phelps's professional career as a writer. Nancy Larter reinforces this idea when she specifies that Phelps even created a separate "little building, which was her outdoor study," where she used to write (26). Larter quotes Phelps's recommending to all "who live by their brains and pens, an outside workshop" (26). Besides, in her own Gloucester home, Phelps would strengthen her connections with other literary colleagues (Larter 26), so much that she remembered her life at Gloucester "as the years of the friends" (1896, 198). Her house helped her to cultivate her friendships with relevant literary figures of her period (Larter 26)

[25] Notice the contrast between this description and this popular one, which considered that a family consisted of "the Master of a Family with all these subordinate Relations of Wife, Children, Servants and Slaves united under the Domestick Rule of a Family" (Locke 86).

[26] Kessler considers that this initiative of Phelps can be considered a "real-life feminist experiment" (60).

such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, or Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose visits are narrated in *Chapters from a Life* (Chapter VIII). She talks about other famous women writers that she met, among whom are Celia Thaxter, Lucy Larcom, Lydia Maria Child, and Phillips Brooks, to all of whom Phelps dedicates a whole chapter (IX) of her autobiography.

With this initiative, as well as with those reflected in most of her brave female characters, Phelps was challenging not only the normalcy regarding the ownership of houses but also other aspects related to home life. Besides, Phelps tried to invert the traditional conception that male-owned houses were like prisons where women were kept almost as servants, thus seeking to secure a future in which women would be, instead, their possessors and rulers.

However, Phelps's novel, *Burglars in Paradise* (1886), seems to anticipate in fiction what would happen a couple of years later in reality: Phelps's marriage. This is implied by the quote: "by the old, old ladder of Friendship […] the most dangerous housebreaker of all climbed up to Paradise […]" (Phelps 1886, 220). As we get closer to the end of this book and to the conclusion of Phelps's life, it seems that the "loveliness" of an exclusively female Paradise turns gradually into "loneliness" (Phelps 1886, 194, 197) that must have made Phelps change her perspective in relation to her marital status. Concurrently, in Phelps's literary works from the 1880s, her rejection of marriage is not so drastic. This change is more radical from 1888 to 1900, when her female characters are portrayed serving and taking care of their male partners, who even turn into the protagonists of her literary works (Kessler 1982, 102, 104). Kessler attributes this change to Phelps's distancing from her "boon companion,"[27] Dr. Mary Briggs Harris, with whom she had shared workrooms during the late the 1870s; and the limitations that her lack of health imposed on her independence (1982, 64).[28] To this can be added an apparent fear of solitude after the loss of people she loved, such as her favourite brother and other friends (e.g.: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edward Rowland Sill). Maybe as a consequence of these events, in Phelps's 1880s writings we notice, instead, that, even if she continues

[27] This is the exact expression Kessler uses to refer to this friend of Phelps. Phelps demonstrated, also through her 1870s writings, the high consideration she had for support among women, especially among those who were independent and were trying to succeed professionally.

[28] According to Kessler, there was a moment when Phelps realised that "a person's bodily needs must be satisfied before self-fulfilment can occur" (64).

depicting the negative sides of traditional positions of women in the household, she seems to use her literature to offer possible arrangements to the relation between men and women. These should facilitate the consideration of sharing their lives, and are very much related to their mutual assumption of domestic responsibilities and to husbands' support of women's professional vocations. They are depicted in some of her works of this period, for example, in novels such as *Friends: A Duet* (1881) or *Doctor Zay* (1882). Here, Phelps illustrates some of the ideas that she had previously shown in one of her articles titled "The True Woman" (1871), and are, in general, connected to the sharing of the domestic and familial burdens of men and women in equal terms (1).[29] We don't have evidence that Phelps found in Herbert Dickinson Ward (1861-1932), seventeen years younger than her, this ideal male companion, but the truth is that she married him on October 20, 1888, in Gloucester. Maybe the "dangerous housebreaker" who used the "old ladder of Friendship" and "climbed up" to Phelps's Paradise was precisely this gentleman, who, like the male protagonist of the novel astutely "made himself useful in many ways", according to Bennett (85).[30]

That winter, after more than twenty years living in Gloucester (Privett 100), "The Old Maids' Paradise was closed […] forever" (Phelps 1896, 242). The couple found themselves "wafted from shore to farm" (Phelps 1896, 273). A very efficient maid was responsible for the execution of household tasks, thus permitting Phelps and Ward to dedicate enough time to their writing profession (Kessler 81). After spending several winters in various suburbs in Boston, they bought a house in Newton Center,[31] which followed Phelps's preferences with respect to her previous dwellings, as it was also an "unpretentious home" (Farrington 65), an appropriate and practical place for working, being simple but with beautiful views (Phelps 1896, 275-276).

[29] Phelps's ideal of marriage was perfectly detailed in her later article "A Dream within a Dream" (1874).

[30] Kessler also notices how, even if Phelps contributed to the *Woman's Journal* from 1884 to 1895, and was an honorary member of the Andover Woman Suffrage League in 1887, after her marriage, she retired from active involvement in the women's movement (1982, 102).

[31] Bennett gives the exact address: "133 Dudley Road" (135).

Figure 6. Phelps's Newton house (Phelps 1896, 275)

The Garden Walk

The Approach to the House

Figure 7. The imposing natural surroundings of Phelps's house in Newton (Farrington 69)[32]

[32] All the photographs taken from Farrington's article are courtesy of HathiTrust (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101079227995&seq=69&q1=Phelps).

In "Tribute to Suburban Life" (1907), Phelps highlights, again, her preference for nature rather than for indoor spaces, as shown before. In this praise to living in the countryside, Phelps declares that "we are what our homes are and we should root these like the grass, and in it" (1907, 65). From this we infer how crucial it was for her to create a house that really matches each individual's particular nature and lifestyle and which will not obtrude on their highest purposes. In *Chapters from a Life*, Phelps praises the solitude and quietness that her Newton house provided them, something that their writing profession required (276).

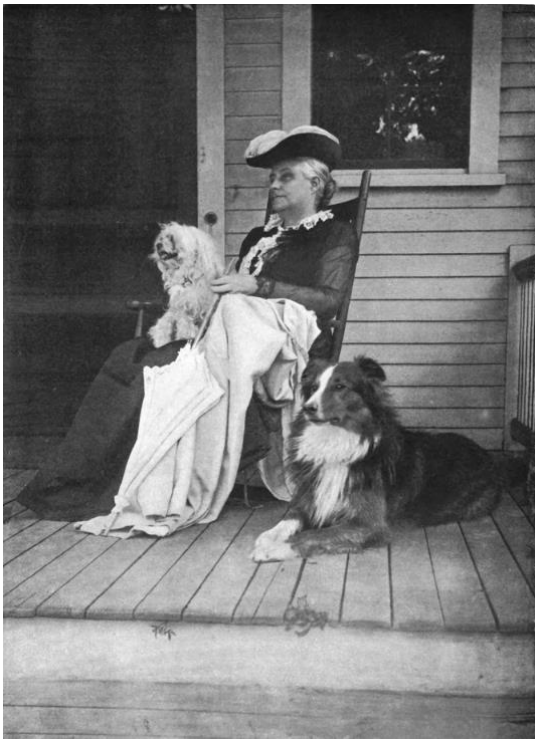

Figure 8. Phelps on the porch of her Newton house (Farrington 66)

Edward I. Farrington confirms this when he describes this residence as "an ideal spot for an author to do her work" (66). He, who labels Phelps as a "serious minded" and "hard-working woman" (66), adds information about the exact place where she wrote, her study, which was, as in her parents' and her Gloucester's house, in a different building (65), as evidenced by figure 9. Its description responds to the characteristics of houses that Phelps considered important, containing indispensable elements that create a perfect working space for the professional writer that Phelps was. Among them were a good orientation, adequate illumination, and quietness (1907, 65), all of which can be appreciated in figure 10.

Figure 9. Phelps's study in Newton (Farrington 65)

Figure 10. Interior of Phelps's study in Newton (Farrington 65)

Nevertheless, Phelps's literature of this period showed a relevant change, as it portrays women who accepted more conventional and domestic lifestyles that led to supposedly happy endings. This practice seems to respond in part to her editors' requirements, added to the author's economic need to be published (Kessler 1982, 104, 109). Besides, in the novels of these years, Phelps portrayed another alternative for women who were not domestic and prioritised their professional vocations before whole dedication to house chores: the help of home maids.[33] This is especially evident in *The Successors of Mary the First* (1901). Here, Phelps shows that, even if in previous epochs she had considered that houses could be paradises if women owned them and were

[33] Unfortunately, Phelps's solution could only ameliorate the situation of women from the middle and upper classes, who could afford the assistance of other women from the working class when the former wanted to liberate themselves form domestic requirements.

independent from men, now, she seems convinced that domestic bliss rather depends on counting on competent servants. This necessity is evident in the words of one of the characters, who reflects not only hers, but Phelps's negative vision of the attentions required by houses that has been analysed all throughout this essay:

> Every house was meant for neatness and sweetness, and joy and comfort, and cheerful growth of character, and for all that was splendid in life. In point of fact, what did they stand for? An eternal struggle to get meals cooked, and rooms swept, and clothes washed, and children taken care of […]. Our homes ought to be bowers of rest. They are hornets' nests of worry. (205-6)

CONCLUSION

After having always defended women's transcending the limits of the domestic homely and family life, Phelps's major turnaround in her personal life, her marriage, might seem an incoherence on her part. However, I propose to interpret Phelps's writings and life parting from the assertion of one of her characters that "All women have stories. It's only a question of how we read them" (*The Successors of Mary the First* 246). This essay advocates for a re-reading of Phelps's experiences and literary works, which, seen from a more just perspective, represent her clear conviction that women should follow their own initiatives and not those imposed by society. Thus, in the particular case of her marriage, she was not refrained from her wish to marry Herbert Dickinson Ward by the possible criticism that she was sure to receive from a conservative society who might dislike her marrying a man who could perfectly be her son rather than husband. Maybe she reached the conclusion that it doesn't matter who the owner of the house is (literally and metaphorically speaking), because, as she beautifully expresses, "Paradise, like the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us, after all" (*An Old Maids Paradise* 195).

After this analysis of Phelps's relation with houses and households in different senses, we can conclude that she is a writer whose effort in her present time obtained energy and inspiration from her past, with the clear intention of ameliorating women's future. This is because, to end with Kessler's words, "Phelps recasts her mother's living and writing into a critique of what was and a suggestion of what might be" (82). And this critique is inseparable from both Phelps's conviction of the ambivalent influence of houses in the lives of women:

on the one hand, women need their own spaces in order to develop their own vocations; and, on the other, these same places may require so much time, effort and attention, that, if not adequately organised, they may turn into the main hindrance for the consecution of their self-fulfilment. Even if both Phelpses (mother and daughter) brought up this quandary almost two centuries ago, it seems that it has not been satisfactorily solved yet. Both of them portrayed this in their respective literary works, where some of their protagonists discovered that the main obstacle for their personal fulfilment lay in their commitment to their manifold and consuming household duties,[34] but had the sensation of having discovered this too late. Thus, they hoped to pass on their insights to their daughters soon enough for them to resist domestic impositions. This is especially evident in the elder Phelps's "The Angel over the Right Shoulder" and in her daughter's *The Story of Avis*, respectively.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps portrayed how difficult it is to combine professional activities and domestic and other traditionally female demands. As demonstrated in this article, with her life and works, she experimented with options that may lead to female self-fulfilment, such as keeping one's own house independently, looking for exclusively female support, ensuring male companions' collaboration, and counting on the help of efficient house maids. But it seems that she realised that it is almost impossible to find a solution for this dilemma. In her final writings (for example in her 1902 novel, *Avery*) she went back to inferences present in previous ones, concretely in her famous *Gates* books on the afterlife.[35] In these literary works, she seems to assume that solutions lie in a utopian setting and constitute rather miracles. However, what cannot be denied is that Phelps —and her mother before her— brought to light a problem that still needs to be solved and she also portrayed a whole catalogue of possible solutions for those women who wanted —or want— to transcend the limitations that domesticity represent to them. Every woman is different, and each one has to choose her priorities. What is necessary is to guarantee that this freedom of choice exists for all of them. And this is also what Phelps earnestly endeavoured to procure for women,

[34] In effect, in many of Phelps's literary works we can see what Kessler perfectly summarises with this assertion: "For the female artist, the way becomes strewn with obstacles. Wifehood, homemaking, and motherhood —for which Phelps shows a woman to have no particular instinct— use all energy, all time" (1992, xxiii).

[35] "The *Gates* books" refers to Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *Beyond the Gates* (1883), and *The Gates Between* (1887) and its dramatized version, *Within the Gates* (1901).

through her own courageous example and with her brave and highly meritorious writings, as this article has demonstrated.

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