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JEALOUS FOR JUSTICE: EDNAH DOW CHENEY TRANSLATES
TRANSCENDENTALISM TO LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY SOCIAL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, the Transcendentalist and women's movements combined to alter the discussion on the politics of womanhood, developing creative space for progressive individuals to actively make change in the expansion of human rights. I argue that Ednah Dow Cheney, a young widow and single mother in the mid-1850s, merged the spirit of Transcendentalism that she inherited from her family and friends and her burgeoning passion for social activism to become a dedicated public servant. In her early years, Cheney was a faithful attendee at the radical sermons of Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker; at about the same time, she also sat in on the Conversations of Margaret Fuller, author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and a pioneer in the field of feminist Transcendentalism. Later in life, Cheney would resourcefully combine Fuller's and Parker's bold ideas to translate them into a sustained life of social activism. Despite the crucial role that Cheney played in running prominent reform organizations, such as the New England Freedmen's Aid Society (NEFAS) during the Reconstruction era, especially in an environment that was particularly restrictive for women, her story has been left largely overlooked by recent scholarship. Through archival research on the NEFAS and close readings of the texts of Cheney and Fuller, I work to recover Cheney's sustained life of activism and intellectual growth from its present state of obscurity.

Keywords: Feminism, Transcendentalism, Fuller, Reconstruction Era, Nineteenth Century

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the Transcendentalist and women's movements combined to alter the discussion on the politics of womanhood, developing creative space for progressive individuals to contribute to the expansion of human rights. Ednah Dow Cheney, a young widow and single mother in the mid-1850s, merged the spirit of Transcendentalism that she inherited from her family and friends with her burgeoning passion for social activism to become a dedicated public servant. In her early years, Cheney was a faithful attendee at the radical sermons of Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker; she also sat in on the Conversations of Margaret Fuller, author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and a pioneer of feminist Transcendentalism. Later in life, Cheney would resourcefully combine Fuller's and Parker's bold ideas to translate them into a sustained life of social activism. For instance, in the second half of the 1850s and into the early twentieth century, Cheney founded the New England School of Design and the New England Women's Club, managed the New England Hospital for Women and Children and the Boston Education Commission of the Freedmen's Aid Society, and lectured for the New England Suffrage Association and the Concord School of Philosophy. More significantly, she continued through the century to become a feminist intellectual in Fuller's vein of thought and became a leader in the Freedmen's Aid movement.

Despite the crucial role that Cheney played in running such prominent organizations in an environment that was particularly restrictive for women, her story has been largely overlooked by recent scholarship. Anne Rose's 1981 book, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-*

1850, provides a starting point for conversation on the application of Transcendentalism not just as a philosophical movement, but also as a theory that fostered activism; however, the book also ends at the very point where the writings of Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson were absorbed and carried to social involvement by the second generation of Transcendentalists, which included individuals such as Ednah Dow Cheney, Caroline Healey Dall, and Julia Ward Howe. Moreover, while Therese B. Dykeman's scholarship on Cheney in *Presenting Women Philosophers, American Women Philosophers 1650-1930* demonstrate the influence of Cheney's writings on the histories of American aesthetics, it provides little insight on the social impact that Cheney had in New England and in the Reconstruction, postwar South. Finally, although scholarship has significantly picked up on the influence of key female Transcendentalists, such as Fuller, the role of the second generation of Transcendentalists, Cheney's generation, in bringing Transcendentalist thought into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through social activism remains only partially explored by Tiffany Wayne and Phyllis Cole; there has been no specialized study of Cheney, and while Wayne and Cole include moments in Cheney's history, the focus is placed more on developing a larger history of the period. Therefore, this paper is an effort to recover a new piece of the history of the Transcendentalist movement, long assumed to have ended by the 1850s, through the life of Ednah Dow Cheney.

It was in the politically charged atmosphere of the Post-Civil War Reconstruction Era that Ednah Dow Cheney, in the spirit of creative activism, blended together controversial Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's abolitionist tradition and Margaret Fuller's feminist legacy to not only build a niche for women who were trapped within the cult of domesticity, but also to construct a path to liberation for freed African American slaves through the Freedmen's Aid schools. Ednah Dow Cheney's philosophy was rooted in the teachings of Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker. Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* developed the concept of "self-culture" for women, calling for women to tap into the divine source specifically within them

in order to rise to perfection. As an adolescent in the early 1840s, Cheney attended Fuller's Conversations, which were a series of interactive discussions, primarily for female Transcendentalists and intellectuals, conducted by Fuller in Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's bookstore; Cheney's intellectual growth as a feminist and Transcendentalist over the course of Fuller's Conversations was significant, as she was deeply impacted by Fuller's calling for women's development of "self-culture," which Cheney later used as a foundation for her own social work. In 1852, two years after Fuller's death, Cheney commemorated Fuller in a letter to her friend:

I am reading Margaret Fuller's life with the interest you may imagine, - especially her youth is very real to me. It is a reproduction of what she was to me and I see myself in it, as I always did in her. Only she was far greater, richer, more intense. I am diluted; and perhaps, for that very reason, at twenty-seven have a stout frame, an uncurved spine, and a head that does not often ache, either with thought or neuralgia...I feel here, as I always did with her, a painful sense of inferiority; and yet it kindles life (New England Women's Club 11).

Cheney's characteristic humility and her reverence for Fuller are remarkable, particularly in light of the dramatic reform movements that she not only participated in, but also often established. She may have viewed herself as a "diluted" reflection of Fuller; however, throughout the course of her life, from her attendance at Fuller's Conversations in the early 1840s to her 1895 lecture on Fuller at the Congress of American Advancement of Women, Cheney strived to add vibrant, new life to Fuller's ideas, thereby introducing Fuller to a new generation.

Cheney's love for Fuller's romanticism and emphasis on "self culture," nurtured at around the same time she was beginning to attend Theodore Parker's liberal sermons in the early 1840s, harmoniously combined with Parker's abolitionist mission. Cheney's passion for social justice was only heightened and facilitated further by the thriving intellectual community at Parker's sermons. In her autobiography, *Reminiscences*, she eulogizes Theodore Parker, the fellow Transcendentalist and reforming minister of the Unitarian church: "His soul was on fire with anti-slavery zeal and intense anxiety for the fate of the country he loved so much...I only wish...to give my testimony that in the midst of all [the] violent agitation he was the most tender and

devoted of pastors to his own flock” (117). The impassioned lines reveal that Parker’s devotion to the abolitionist cause deeply resonated Cheney’s own fervor for justice.

Throughout his career as a minister, Theodore Parker had gathered a tight community of women to his preaching and was a catalyst to women activists of the younger generation. Philip Gura writes that Parker had always been a “powerful and striking presence” and that “in the pulpit these characteristics made him a riveting and seemingly uncompromising presence. No one wanted to incur his wrath” (117). Although originally from humble origins, Parker succeeded as an intellect, and George Ripley, who recognized Parker’s commitment to serious scholarship, invited him to the Transcendentalist group meetings, after which Parker became a key figure in the Transcendentalist movement (Gura 117). Parker’s congregations were heavily supported by women, and Cheney particularly noted that Parker was always “surrounded by a band of women who were glorious helpers in his work. They were not foolish, sentimental maidens who worshipped and flattered him; but they did him brave service” (*Reminiscences* 105). Parker’s leadership and politically-charged sermons encouraged men and women alike to participate in the abolitionist movement; in this way, women, especially, developed a network of activists who were eager to take part in the public arena through social reform. In fact, it was through Parker’s personal assistant, Hannah Stevenson, that Cheney was led to the opportunity of becoming a leader in the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society, two years after Parker’s death.

In fact, neither Margaret Fuller nor Theodore Parker lived to see the Civil War period, let alone the Reconstruction era, and in this way, Ednah Dow Cheney, through her contributions in postwar reform movements, played an integral part in extending Transcendentalism to the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, to further highlight Cheney’s innovative character, she was one of the few activists who recognized the connections between Parker’s and Fuller’s ideas and was able to apply them to her own life. Parker and Fuller, themselves, had a rather unstable relationship infused with animosity; Dean Grodzins notes that according to Caroline Healey Dall,

a colleague of Cheney's who knew Parker and Fuller in the early 1840s, the two transcendentalists "developed an 'intense subtle antagonism'" and "Parker was unable to see [Fuller]...as his intellectual peer" (Grodzins 110-11). Therefore, it was wholly up to Cheney to extract and blend the core philosophies of both characters throughout her life as a social reformer.

Cheney's involvement with the Reconstruction movement was also a part of a larger trend among women in the post-Civil War time period. Carol Faulkner's observations of the involvement of women in social work help to place Cheney in the context of the spirit of revolution brewing in the era:

Though not all women in the freedmen's aid movement participated in the organized suffrage movement, they endorsed a broad definition of women's rights...In addition, most of the women in the freedmen's aid movement were single by choice or circumstance, and thus unusually independent of men...[Most] of these women expressed a commitment to the expansion of women's sphere or expressed dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities open to women (Faulkner 7).

Thus, those who were against women's active participation in the Reconstruction era realized "the connections between freedmen's aid and women's rights, and feared the expansion of women's public power" (Faulkner 7).

As the decades before the Civil War period opened up opportunities for women to get involved in the public sphere, the nation's first feminist periodical, *The Una*, provided a public outlet of expression for progressive, like-minded women. The periodical survived for a short three years, during which Ednah Dow Cheney was involved with the adjustments that came with being a newly-wed and a mother. Along with fulfilling her commitments to her family, Cheney contributed to the newspaper several times to promote the School of Design for Women in Boston, which she had founded. Moreover, in the March 1854 issue of the periodical, Cheney wrote a scathing response to Unitarian Minister John Weiss Jr.'s article in the *Christian Examiner*, which dealt with the religious reform community in which he was heavily involved. Cheney was disappointed with Weiss's claim that he had a right to be William Ellery Channing's

successor as the new generation's leading reformer and abolitionist. Weiss, according to Cheney, "was expected to be 'one who would plead for woman on the same broad platform of the worth of her own individual nature.' Cheney criticized Weiss for arguing that womankind should look forward to a 'spiritual and heavenly reward,' rather than an earthly one, a hardly comforting position she rightly identified as the same that conservative Christians offered to southern slaves" (Wayne 61).

Cheney's review of Weiss reveals her own steadfast dedication to the expansion of the role of women in society. In response to Weiss and all others who condemn women's desire to become more involved in the public sphere of society, Cheney called upon the perceived moral superiority of women "to justify her 'duty to enter into and purify' the political sphere" (Wayne 61). Cheney's powerful response to Weiss unveils a statement of principles that were later reflected in Cheney's own postwar work at a time when she was freer as a widow than she had been as a newly wedded wife. Cheney also shaped her argument to claim that it was woman's responsibility to take grounded, practical action, rather than settle for vague, theoretical notions. Although influential figures, such as Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson, will always stand as a beacon of ethical leadership in the nation's history, it was the collective effort by individuals, like Ednah Dow Cheney and her colleagues, that catalyzed a collective movement for change.

The first chapter of this thesis establishes the intellectual connection between Fuller and Cheney through a close analysis of their writings. Cheney's autobiography, *Reminiscences of Ednah Dow Cheney (Born Littlehale)*, is used as a foundational text to trace Cheney's feminist roots to Fuller. The second chapter contends with the way that Theodore Parker and his congregation facilitated and inspired Cheney to develop herself as an activist and a woman leader of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society. Evidence from archival research conducted at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Houghton Library provides further insight into the

conditions under which Cheney worked while at the New England Freedmen's Aid Society (NEFAS); the archives revealed the NEFAS's Daily Journal of records and also a series of letters addressed to Cheney from various Freedmen's Aid teachers in the South. Ultimately, this paper follows two trajectories of Cheney's life by not only tracing her growth as a feminist intellectual, but also by defining the complex roots of social activism through an exploration of her family history, her associations and influences from Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller, and her writings and lectures in her later years.

Chapter 2

Cheney's Legacy from Fuller and Ongoing Feminist Thought

Cheney, influenced by the teachings of Margaret Fuller, extended Transcendentalist philosophy into direct social action into the early twentieth century and furthered the feminist movement in her own way by challenging the commonly held gender roles of the time. Her entrance into Fuller's world came with the support of her parents and grandparents, who were liberal enough to take their daughter to hear Emerson. In her autobiography, *Reminiscences of Ednah Dow Cheney (Born Littlehale)*, Cheney recalled that one of her first experiences with Transcendentalism was when, in her early teens between the years of 1840-1850, she was "at a lecture before the society 'for the diffusion of knowledge' ...with [her] father and mother" (99). It was around this time that she was also attending classes to study Plato and Dante; Cheney noted that Amos Bronson Alcott, abolitionist and women's rights advocate, would often join her classes and engage with her peers over their readings (*Reminiscences* 100). Even from the time when she was a child, Cheney had absorbed a rather unorthodox spiritual lifestyle; her own grandmother "never joined the popular church, and read Emerson and Parker with great enjoyment" at a time when Transcendentalism was vilified and perceived as an "elite" and exclusive club (*Reminiscences* 3). Cheney's father, Sargent Smith Littlehale, was also a prominent figure in Cheney's life, as she claimed that he was "very liberal in his views...and was a believer in Woman Suffrage at a very early date. The first anti-slavery word that I ever heard was from him" (*Reminiscences* 4). Exposure to her father's progressive beliefs set the initial stepping stones for Cheney's subsequent life as an activist for freedmen and women in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, her involvement in the Freedmen's Aid Bureau, of which she was the secretary in the

headquarters in Boston, could have stemmed from her childhood experience living on a diverse street that was inhabited by a variety of individuals from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. She recalled that Belknap Street, where she was born, expanded into several sections; the upper part was

often called Joy Place...Here were some of the finest houses and most 'swell' people in the city. In the middle part were families of good standing, and in this part was our house, where I was born. The lower part was almost entirely occupied by colored people, who streamed by our house, and gave us children that familiarity with this people which, thank God, has prevented me from having any difficulty in recognizing the 'negro as a man and a brother' (*Reminiscences* 7).

Cheney's childhood environment and her rich connections to the Transcendentalist society through her family provided the perfect breeding grounds for a strong life of intellect and activism. As her colleague, Julia Ward Howe, wrote on Cheney, "The home atmosphere was favorable to mental growth. Love of learning, with a taste for good literature, was an inheritance" (*Representative Women* 8).

Cheney moved on to reflect on her mother and her network of friends; one particular acquaintance of her mother stood out: Mary Ann Haliburton. Daughter of a bank officer in New Hampshire, Haliburton met Ednah Parker Dow when they were young children; their relationship grew throughout the years, as the two companions engaged in intellectual discussions and were involved in the various literary societies of the time (*Reminiscences* 27). Cheney was especially inspired by Haliburton's story following her father's remarriage after his wife's premature death. Violently opposed to the remarriage, Haliburton left her home: "At last she came to the resolution to leave home and support herself by teaching drawing, for which she had some talent. But she had a brother then in business in New York who was scandalized at the idea that his sister should work for her support" (*Reminiscences* 27). Finally, Haliburton was convinced by her brother to leave her work and live off of a monthly allowance from her brother for the remaining years of her life. Cheney's exposure to such a radical-minded woman combined with Haliburton's own

return to domestic life further shaped Cheney's understanding of the restrictive state of women in society. As a widow and a mother, Cheney reflected back at her relationship with Haliburton and fondly remembered that Haliburton had always said that she "wished she had been born a widow with one child; for she thought it was the most 'independent position for a woman'" (*Reminiscences* 28). But, more than anything, Cheney stressed the way that her friends impacted her self-education: "I am greatly indebted to her, not only for a great deal of intellectual stimulus...but especially that she introduced me to two of the most precious friends of my life...Margaret Fuller and Mary Shannon" (*Reminiscences* 28).

Over the summers, Cheney would visit the prestigious Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, where she attended lectures given by Emerson and also built intellectual friendships that would introduce her to the early British Romantic poets. In this early era of her life, she was acquainted with Mary Shannon, and decades later, Cheney would reflect upon their friendship, describing Shannon as "broad and progressive in her thought, a dear and honored friend of John Weiss, Samuel Johnson, and Theodore Parker, an original member of the Free Religious Association, an active Abolitionist, a friend of the Freedman's schools, and a thorough Woman Suffragist" (*Reminiscences* 55). She also made acquaintance with Harriot Kezia Hunt whom, she claimed, "was among the most remarkable and characteristic of pioneers of women physicians" (*Reminiscences* 51). In the coming years, Cheney and Hunt would work together to found the Women's School of Design in Boston. The connections Cheney developed at Exeter Academy remained with her throughout her career and were crucial in fostering in her a sense of intellectual inquiry combined with the practical notion of activism.

At the young age of thirteen, between November 1837 and February 1838, Ednah Dow Littlehale (later Cheney) and her classmate Caroline Healey (later Dall) engaged in a debate on the position and rights of women in society. Margaret McFadden explores this correspondence in "Boston Teenagers Debate the Woman Question, 1837-1838," stating that while Cheney's

strategy was to “deemphasize differences between the sexes, as a matter of justice in light of their common humanity,” Caroline Dall claimed that “women are different from men, and these differences give them strength and power in different separate areas. Abandoning those separate spheres will denigrate women, take away their power, and make them ‘mannish’ instead of ‘ladylike’” (McFadden 837). McFadden also notes that the strong education that the two girls received was vital in the development of a “‘feminist’ consciousness” and that both individuals relied on the “vocabulary and ideas of the Enlightenment and liberal Protestantism—belief in human value, egalitarianism, and women’s worth,” to structure their arguments (McFadden 841). These early debates reveal a rare glimpse of Cheney’s life before her marriage and before her meeting with Margaret Fuller. Even beyond Cheney’s bold and radical assertions on the rights of women in the political sphere and her call for civil disobedience (“If we don’t have a hand in making laws, I don’t think we ought to obey them”), these early writings bring out her inherently ambitious character. Dall had evidently expressed to Cheney that fame would not bring happiness as much as it would bring misery and that women should refrain from seeking fame; in response, Cheney furiously wrote, “Many thanks Carry for this good advice, but I think it will go up to the moon, for I have not the least idea of following it. I may sink down into obscurity, I may become a humble member of society, but it will not be willingly. While I live my powers shall be devoted to a different purpose” (McFadden 841-42). She even declared, “I never intend to be married...I shall not have any husband or children to take care of...I am equal to the men, and not superior to them. I am a slave until I am free” (McFadden 845). Perhaps it was because of this early independent thinking that she was not married until the age of 29.

In 1841, about three years after the debates between Cheney and Dall, the two young women attended Fuller’s “Conversations,” a series of discussions that had a profound impact on their modes of thinking later in their lives. Over fifty years later, in 1895, Cheney would recall in a “Lecture Given at the Congress of American Advancement of Women” that she “had the

inestimable privilege of attending [Fuller's] conversations for three successive seasons, and I count it among the greatest felicities of my life that I thus came under her influence at a very early age, an influence which has never failed me in all the years of my life" (*Reminiscences* 205). Margaret Fuller took on the challenge of reconceiving the position of women through the Transcendentalist philosophy established by Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Man Thinking" in an environment that posed severe limitations on women. Starting from November of 1839, Fuller's "Conversations" were conducted in the bookstore parlor of reformer and activist Elizabeth Palmer Peabody; through these lectures, she hoped to initiate dialogue among women on the major issues that she felt that women must contend with: "What were we born to do? How shall we do it? which so few ever propose themselves 'till their best years are gone by" (Marshall 387). The Conversations had a lasting impact on the second generation of transcendentalists succeeding Fuller, which is particularly evident through the dialogue between Fuller and Cheney following a lecture one day; Cheney noted in her autobiography that Fuller had once approached her, asking, "Is life rich to you?" Cheney's response reveals the high regard with which she held Fuller; she stated, "It is since I have known you." Cheney also remarked that "She did not make us her disciples, her blind followers. She opened the book of life and helped us to read it for ourselves" (*Reminiscences* 205). Fuller created independent thinkers out of the young minds that attended her Conversations.

As Tiffany Wayne points out, the language of Transcendentalism promoted independent thought and self-development; it encouraged women to cultivate their strengths and achieve their highest potential. The philosophy held that "all humans, regardless of sex, race, or social position, had the right to pure *self-culture* and to engage in a *vocation*, or life's work, suited to one's individual character" (Wayne 3). Thus, Fuller's reinterpretation of Transcendentalist thought provided her younger disciples with a doctrine of self-culture that imbued women with a sense of agency and ownership. Phyllis Cole states that "these New Women shared a Romantic faith that

individual consciousness, permeated by the divine energy of the universe, could rise to revelation and authority” (“Women’s Rights and Feminism” 223). Fuller’s Transcendentalism granted women agency in a social landscape in which Emerson’s call for resignation from oppressive demands of external, social institutions in order to further cultivate the internal consciousness could not be applied to women, who “had no Harvard regiment to boycott, no pulpit, profession, or citizenship from which to stand aside” (Cole, “Exaltadas” 8). Therefore, women readers and writers engaged in conversations with each other through periodicals, diaries, and even books, using Fuller’s feminist interpretation of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” to conceive women’s equality beyond “the rights tradition and its claim to public citizenship” (“Exaltadas” 8).

Fuller’s Conversations took place in the context of an era shaped by the ideology of separate spheres, which pushed women to reimagine the restrictive boundaries in which they were placed in order to gain political clout and to assert themselves in the public sphere. Barbara Welter later coined the term “Cult of True Womanhood” to describe the qualities of domesticity and purity that nineteenth-century women had been encouraged to develop. Such an ideology confined women to a society that assumed that women were naturally inclined to seek shelter from the outside world in the private arena of the home, while men were expected to work hard and engage in aggressive competition in the public sphere (*Women’s America* 174). Dissatisfied and restless under the oppressive regulations of such a culture, both middle-class and working-class women implicitly challenged this idealized sexual division through their actions. While some women of this time were involved with organizations outside the domestic sphere, such as charities or foundations to promote the abolitionist movement, others sought to develop their intellect by attending lectures and writing letters. For this second group of women, self-education was critical. Furthermore, between the years of 1839-41, just at the period when Cheney was attending Fuller’s Conversations, the organized women’s movement had not yet started; the public women’s movement was still slow in the making, and it was not until 1848 that it gained

momentum. In this way, through her intellectual involvement in her early years and her reform work in the late nineteenth century, Cheney was part of both the pre- and post- Civil War women's movement.

For those women who refrained from participation in the organized women's rights movement, private letters and journals circulated among like-minded thinkers served as alternate modes of expression. As such private discussions heightened, women began to manipulate and reshape the city of Boston by physically claiming spaces in buildings and forming their own institutions. Deutsch emphasizes that "women intended some of the institutions they formed to mediate between the privacy of the parlor and the public nature of the city. They created these as separate female spaces rather than female-controlled and feminized mixed-sex spaces" (Deutsch 15). Therefore, Fuller's Conversations were a part of a quieter women's movement that preceded the more public political actions of first-wave feminists, such as Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Charles Capper identifies three groups of women that attended Fuller's Conversations in 1839. The first group included Fuller's own group of close friends, such as Ellen Sturgis Hooper and Anna Barker, while the second group of women included the wives of men who were active members of the social reform movements taking place in the period, such as Lidian Emerson and Sophia Ripley. The third group, the focus of this study, was composed of younger, often single, women in their late teens and early twenties. Capper remarks of the latter group, "Neither so intellectual nor so Transcendental-minded as Fuller's protégées, still they were high-spirited, interested in new trends, socially active in Boston literary and reform circles, and, most important, although not intimate with her, ardently devoted to Fuller" (Capper 291). Ednah Dow Cheney and her friend, Mary Haliburton, both were a part of this second group of women, who stood steadfast to Fuller's principles and were loyal attendees of her conversations. Fuller had a profound influence on Cheney's long career of thought and writing, as becomes evident through Cheney's works on Goethe and Ibsen. Her writing is a reflection of the feminist

philosophy that Cheney had nurtured throughout the years and had lived out through her time as a social worker.

Cheney and Fuller on Goethe

While the first half of Cheney's life was largely dedicated to forming and running public institutions while raising her daughter, Margaret, Cheney spent the second half of her life, after the 1870s, completing most of her writings. In 1886, four years after the death of this daughter at twenty-seven, Cheney provided a lecture on Goethe for the Concord School of Philosophy. The Concord School, founded by Amos Bronson Alcott in 1879, hosted a series of lectures and discussions on philosophers related to Transcendentalism, such as Emerson, Plato, and Kant. Cheney's lecture, "Das Ewig-Weibliche," was a specific study of Goethe that borrowed from Fuller's notion that women harnessed a divine energy that allowed them to transcend worldly limitations and rise to authority (Cole, "Woman's Rights" 223).

Through Goethe, Cheney and Fuller proposed that the two sexes could not be identified with the use of absolute terms, and that man and woman were containers of the same divine force. Arthur Schultz argues that in Goethe's *Faust*, Fuller recognized Goethe's ideal of woman, "das ewig Weibliche" ("the eternal womanly"), as the "key to the interpretation of woman's essential character" (Schultz 178). Schultz's claim remains consistent with Fuller's statement in her 1841 essay on Goethe that was published in *The Dial*, which claimed that "Goethe always represents the highest principle in the feminine form" ("Goethe" 26). Nearly four years later, in 1845, Fuller departed from the literary biography of Goethe that she had detailed in her article for *The Dial* to construct a more focused, gender-based analysis of Goethe. For instance, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she wrote that in *Faust*, "we see the redeeming power, which, at present, upholds woman....[Margaret], enlightened by her sufferings, refusing to receive temporal

salvation by the aid of an evil power, obtains the eternal in its stead” (Fuller 316). Cheney later echoed Fuller’s interpretations in her 1886 lecture, elaborating on the Chorus’ use of the phrase “Das Ewig-Weibliche” in the conclusion of the first part of Goethe’s *Faust*; Cheney claimed that the Chorus took the reader to the “supreme abstract idea of womanhood,” which “seems intentional on the poet’s part. Faust has learned at last the meaning of mortal life...it is no single loved one, but the Eternally Womanly which is henceforth to lead him upward and on” (*Das Ewig-Weibliche* 221). Once again, Cheney, like Fuller, announced that the permanent ideal, the “redeeming power” was manifested in Margaret, and appealed to all of humanity, calling for a universal rise to perfection.

Although traces of Fuller are easily detected in Cheney’s analysis of Goethe, Cheney also shaped her argument to make it relevant to her late nineteenth century audience. For instance, in her attempt to establish Fuller’s point that “there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman,” Cheney delved deep into a scientific discussion on plant life and biology, which was a topic vastly different from Fuller’s subject and style of writing (*Woman in the Nineteenth* 310). Perhaps influenced by her daughter, Margaret Swan Cheney, who had been a student of science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cheney wrote, “the sexes are like the stamen and pistil, different modifications of the same type, and so perpetually varying that it is impossible to make any statement of distinguishing characteristics, which will be invariably true”; moreover, unlike the animal world where “sex is less differentiated in the lowest forms of life,” Cheney added that in the “highest types of human life, we always find a blending of the characteristics of the sexes” (*Das Ewig-Weibliche* 231). In this way, Cheney adapts Fuller’s radical statements to match the naturalistic and rationalistic thought that was so integral to the late 1800s.

In “Reign of Womanhood,” an address Cheney delivered in 1897 during the Unitarian Service to commemorate the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, Cheney wrote that woman’s “ideal of man must match her own standard of spiritual purity and truth, or instead of leading him on she is

dragged down to the dust with him” (227). The reciprocity of divinity and virtue that Cheney expected in men as well as women was shared by Fuller, who had held a similar vision of the transformation of all humanity; on masculinity and femininity, Fuller had written, “There cannot be a doubt that, if these two developments were in perfect harmony, they would correspond to and fulfil one another, like hemispheres, or the tenor and bass in music” (*Woman in the Nineteenth* 343). Thus, although not nearly as focused on gender and, perhaps, less radical a feminist than Fuller, Cheney’s expectation of reciprocity was more than a passive female piety that conformed to the conventions of “true womanhood”; rather, it was a powerful idea, calling for the development of a more perfect humanity.

Traces of Fuller in Cheney’s *Nora's Return: A Sequel to "The Doll's House" of Henry Ibsen*

In Henrik Ibsen’s *The Doll House* (1879), Nora Helmer, realizing her own need to find a greater meaning in life and suffocated by her husband’s frustratingly patronizing behavior towards her, finally leaves her home, husband, and family. Responding to that final scene when Nora sharply slams the door and walks out of the suffocating bourgeois sphere of domesticity, authors awoke worldwide to imagine the sequence of events that would follow the shocking rejection of family life. Of the several sequels that were written, it was Walter Besant’s outrageous depiction of Nora that provoked Cheney to construct her very own sequel to Ibsen’s play. Reflecting back in her autobiography, Cheney passionately wrote that in 1890, the year in which Besant’s story was published, she was “so moved to indignation by Walter Besant’s conclusion of the book, which seemed to me wholly false to the original idea, that I hastily wrote my own solution” (*Reminiscences* 67). Her short book titled, *Nora's Return: A Sequel to "The Doll's House" of Henry Ibsen*, was sold as a fundraising item at the New England Hospital Fair in December of 1890 (*Nora's Return* 3). Within a few pages, Cheney revolted against Besant’s

depiction of Nora as an unforgiving woman who was merciless towards her husband, Torvald, and painfully out of touch with her family's needs. In sharp contrast to Besant's story, Cheney's sequel remained true to Ibsen's text, as she presented Nora as a woman who revolted against society's definition of woman's identity in terms of the stature of her husband and as limiting her options to gain a fulfilling education. Even more, both Nora's and Torvald's developments in Cheney's sequel highlight the value of self-culture that was so central to Margaret Fuller's doctrine.

As Cheney's sequel was produced in reaction to Besant's writing, it is important to note the specific themes that Cheney addressed and counteracted. *Nora's Return* approached the conflict between Nora and Torvald through a more intimate narrative structure in which the reader gains insight into the characters' sentiments through their written journal entries. Cheney recognized that Besant had distorted Nora in making her a cold-hearted home-wrecker, thus departing from Ibsen's intentions with the protagonist's bold decision to leave Torvald. In Besant's interpretation, Nora's friend, Kristine, visited and begged her to think of her "helpless children" and her husband: "Did you never ask yourself what it meant for such a man to be deserted by his wife, *and without a cause?*" (321). Within the dialogue between Kristine and Nora, Besant emphasized that Nora's action was unjustified; Nora had walked away from her children, which was the ultimate sin for a woman living according to accepted nineteenth century attitude. However, Cheney was careful to address this issue in *Nora's Return*; she took special care to articulate Nora's grief at having to leave behind her children: "Gone are the joys and pangs of motherhood, the nights of watching and care, the hours of joy and glee. The mother might play with them, but their honor, their life, their souls, were [Torvald's] care" (13). In this way, Cheney's Nora, while choosing to leave the family, also affirmed conventional notions of motherhood and domesticity. At the same time, Cheney's Nora followed Fuller's advice in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*: "If any individual live too much in relations, so that he

becomes a stranger to the resources of his own nature, he falls, after a while into a distraction, or imbecility, from which he can only be cured by a time of isolation” (312). Nora’s motive in leaving was to develop those “resources” to which she had become a stranger; the same applied for Torvald, who was hopelessly dependent on Nora for all the tiresome domestic services and entertainment. In the same passage, Fuller had also said that “Union is only possible to those who are units. To be fit for relations in time, souls, whether of man or woman, must be able to do without them in the spirit” (*Woman in the Nineteenth* 312). Thus, the fission of the Helmer household forces the husband and wife to develop themselves as human beings, as man and woman.

Furthermore, Cheney’s Nora worked to expand the opportunities for women in society by extending their duties to the public sphere, rather than confining them to the private sphere, as Torvald and Besant had attempted. In Ibsen’s play, Nora boldly told Helmer that he and her father had wronged her by making her a “beggar” and a “doll-wife.” In this crucial scene, she declared that she had other duties, along with being a wife and a mother, that were “equally sacred”; she said “before all else, I’m a human being, no less than you—or anyway, I ought to try to become one” (Ibsen 193). Nora claimed that as a human being, she was entitled to the same rights that men enjoyed, even if the customs of society told her otherwise. She stated that she could not continue her life as a mother and a wife without fully discovering herself: “I have to stand completely alone, if I’m ever going to discover myself and the world out there” (Ibsen 192). Therefore, Cheney shows Nora at the home of a poor sailor’s family, reflecting on her condition: “I am a wreck. What is gone? All my early life of loving trust...I hardly knew what truth was. Love and beauty were all I had heard of woman’s life; were they not enough?” (*Nora’s Return* 9-10). Cheney began to question the foundations of her life that were established by her father and husband, and in questioning, she began her journey to the truth. Cheney’s message fell in line with Fuller’s call for woman to “dedicate herself to the Sun, the Sun of Truth...I would have her

free from compromise, from complaisance, from helplessness, because I would have her good enough and strong enough to love one and all beings, from the fulness, not the poverty of being” (*Woman in the Nineteenth* 312). In the end, in Cheney’s account, it was Nora’s dedication to seek the truth, uninhibited by the demands of Torvald, that eventually led her to grasp the complexities of her existence as a woman.

Moreover, through *Nora’s Return*, Cheney argued that women and men, both, had to discover their individual identities before they could learn to understand each other in relative terms. In this regard, Cheney’s Helmer goes through a process of self-discovery just as his wife, Nora, did. While reading a passage from Plato, he realizes how he had never bothered to share such knowledge with her, as he had not realized that women could have such interests; moreover, in response to Plato’s line that “each one is in search of his counterpart,” Helmer responds: “My counterpart! Am I not whole? Do I need another? And is that other my equal, my counterpart?” (*Nora’s Return* 23). This passage in Cheney’s text is particularly significant because Plato was one of the most revered of philosophers to the Transcendentalists; it is not by mere coincidence that Helmer is reading Plato when he has an epiphany on the situation on his strained marriage. Furthermore, Fuller, like Plato, idealized the ultimate union of souls as lying beyond even the existence as units, and it is this understanding that Cheney underscores through Torvald’s reflection on his “counterpart.” Meanwhile, Nora experiences an epiphany of her own, in her realization of meaning in her life: “Yes, I have found myself again; I have found what is left me—the one thing which will make life over again for me. It is service...Love is not enough, I must learn also, I must prepare for life” (*Nora’s Return* 24). With this realization, Nora joins a hospital as a nurse. In this way, Cheney’s Nora directly contradicts the Nora of Besant’s story, who, as the narrator claimed, made “love the sole rule of conduct” (Besant 320). Cheney’s Nora instead follows Fuller’s declaration that “It is a vulgar error that love, a love to woman is her whole existence; she also is born for Truth and Love in their universal energy” (*Woman in the*

Nineteenth 347). Thus, Cheney stays true not only to Ibsen's Nora, who had left her husband for self-discovery, but also to Fuller's statement on women, which had called for the search for a higher, more spiritual Love that would draw the inward soul out to perfection.

Distinct to Cheney from her experience while working for the New England Hospital for Women and Children was the insight that, as she had written, "the mind and heart, during sickness and convalescence, are open to religious and moral influences, and the grateful patient often became a zealous convert to the church which had given him help in the hour of suffering" ("Care of the Sick" 346). Thus, as Nora, a nurse, returned to heal a cholera-infected Torvald in Cheney's sequel, Torvald, although too ill to realize that it was his wife taking care of him, began to absorb the purity of Nora's spirit. After all, following Nora's leave after Torvald had sufficiently recovered, Torvald reflected: "But how could she stay with me, when I had so wronged her, so insulted her? I never understood her. I was a stranger to her, and she a beautiful idol to me, no more." In this way, Cheney's Nora played a similar role to Fuller's Margaret, who had contained the enlightened force that lifted Faust from his sin in Goethe's play; Nora's epiphany in Cheney's sequel allowed the divine spirit that she had cultivated, the "eternal womanly," to influence Torvald and raise him from his faults to realize the truth.

Cheney's sequel concluded with Nora's return to the Helmer household after the two characters had gained a sense of understanding and had learned to achieve Fuller's stated goal of "self-dependence." Helmer, although he missed his wife, learned to care for his children and to better appreciate Nora. At the same time, working in the hospital provided Nora with a sense of fulfillment through self-reliance: "My life is sure now; I can serve, and, if I cannot be happy, I can be calm, patient, and content with that" (*Nora's Return* 56). Nora had reached the point of self-actualization in which she was finally on sturdier grounds and standing upon an independent foundation of her own making. Margaret Fuller wrote that she wanted "woman to live, *first* for God's sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god... Then she will not take what is

not fit for her from a sense of weakness and poverty. Then, if she finds what she needs in man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved” (*Woman in the Nineteenth* 347). Cheney reiterates that in living first for God, woman would learn to embark on a steadfast journey towards perfection; equipped with such high, transcendent ideals, Nora would not be forced to rely helplessly on a flawed man such as Helmer. Once Nora learned her true place in service, her own standing in life, she could, once again, remain open to meaningful love and equal partnership.

Thus, when Nora received a note from Torvald that expressed his remorse and his willingness to sacrifice for his wife, Nora was able to forgive and return to the Helmer household. Upon her arrival, Nora was welcomed lovingly by her children and found that her husband has furnished her old room with new supplies: a bank book, keys to the house, a watch, and paintings by Raphael and Michelangelo. Such items not only affirmed woman’s right to manage the practical and financial modes of her own lifestyle, but also the higher, intellectual goals that a woman may want to pursue, as Raphael and Michelangelo were essential to the transcendentalists because of their representations of the ideal. In this way, Cheney worked to blend contemporary life with the more idealistic, early nineteenth century philosophy. Moreover, Nora’s success in the hospital led to an offer for a promotion; however, Cheney’s Nora rejected the job in favor of managing the family and occasionally helping with the hospital in the coming years. The rejection of the management position seems oddly out of place with the themes conveyed by Cheney throughout her sequel; this scene may indicate that Cheney was affirming the domestic role as a woman’s primary one, which is radically different from Fuller’s principle. Nonetheless, Nora’s decision to leave Helmer for a higher pursuit was justified and was not motivated by a simplistic drive to fulfill selfish desires, as Besant had claimed. To Cheney, Nora adhered to Fuller’s interpretation of a woman’s highest duty in that she realized that “It is not woman, but the law of right, the law of growth, that speaks in us, and demands the perfection of each being in

its kind, apple as apple, woman as woman” (*Woman in the Nineteenth* 347). Nora’s journey was one that allowed her a temporary but decisive departure from domestic roles to explore the spiritual qualities of human life, and to return once more to fulfill Cheney’s ideal of womanhood.

Ednah Dow Cheney’s literary and intellectual development was shaped by the radical thought of Margaret Fuller, whose feminist interpretation of Transcendentalism, in Cheney’s words, “planted in my life the seeds of thought, principle, and purpose.” As Cheney insisted to an audience of women in 1895, “I owe it to her to speak in her name, and try to make her life again fruitful in others” (“Lecture Given” 193). However, Cheney was not a passive figure, but rather a creative individual who took Fuller’s words and made them relevant to the audience of her time. Following her poignant words on Fuller’s influence, Cheney also moved on to argue a place for herself and her colleagues; she wrote that Fuller was not an “exceptional” woman and that “her nature was builded on grand lines, and included much of that large range of powers which belong exclusively to neither sex, but which are the solid basis of humanity” (“Lecture Given” 193). Thus, Cheney’s philosophy, though largely shaped by Fuller, also emerged from her own range of experience and education.

The 1895 lecture on Fuller, quoted above, marked Fuller’s influence not only in Cheney’s life, but also within the nineteenth century society. In her autobiography, Cheney said of Fuller, “It was not acceptance of the outward rule, but of the inward law of life that she demanded, and that law could only be found in freedom. It is by the test of life and experience that we learn both our limitations and our powers” (“Lecture Given” 194). And so, as Cheney’s Nora ventured beyond the protected walls of the Helmer household and into the public realm of the hospital, she gained deeper insight into her own state. Only a few months of being a nurse led her to feel, for the first time in her life, “the meaning of truth. Here I must not only speak the truth, but live it, for I am not here to please, but to serve” (*Nora’s Return*, 24). Cheney’s Nora was finally released from the years of lies and deceit within which Ibsen’s Nora had found herself tangled for the sake

of Torvald. She was freed from “the life of woman,” which Fuller remarked was “outwardly a well-intentioned, cheerful dissimulation of her real life.” Instead, Cheney’s Nora learned to live her life in accordance to the truth, never again veiling the reality of her condition. In her 1895 lecture, Cheney had specifically stated that “Margaret was no sentimentalist, who valued self-sacrifice for its own sake. She thought that self-culture was the duty of every human being” (“Lecture Given” 202). In keeping with this, Cheney made certain that her character followed through Fuller’s design, cultivating her spirit through Cheney’s personal choice of service—hospital work—and rising to truth and perfection. Although Nora’s return to domesticity in *Nora’s Return* may have been more affirming of the domestic roles of womanhood than Fuller’s would have been, Cheney nonetheless deeply valued the experience gained from both public service and intellectual nourishment.

Finally, throughout her literary journey, Cheney extended the claim that with the rise to the ideal condition, men and women, both, may finally access the divine energy, “the eternal womanly,” that may consistently uplift humanity from its tribulations. In her contemporary voice, Cheney communicated Fuller’s call for women in her analysis of Goethe; she conveyed Fuller’s argument, which, she said, was the same for woman as for humanity and which involved “the individual right of freedom and development. She shall work out her life according to her own insight, finding access to the infinite soul by direct aspiration and reception, without arbitrary constraint” (“Lecture Given” 194). Margaret, the key figure in Goethe’s *Faust*, remained as the ideal subject for Fuller and, later, Cheney, both of whom recognized that the transcendent spirit, feminine in form and manifested in Margaret, had the power to collapse all obstacles emerged out of humanity’s fallible nature. In an essay commemorating the women who had helped to change the social landscape of Boston, Cheney poignantly wrote that “Although the influence of Sarah Margaret Fuller...was by no means confined to Boston, it was here fully felt; and it lingers in all the life and character of Boston women” (“Women of Boston” 351). Therefore, Ednah Dow

Cheney, through her own life as an author and reformer, carried on that “lingering” spirit of Margaret Fuller well into the late-nineteenth century, building a solid platform for feminist justice in the early Progressive Era.

Chapter 3

Theodore Parker, Freedmen's Aid, and Ednah Dow Cheney

At about the same time period that Cheney was attending Margaret Fuller's Conversations, Cheney was also beginning to attend the radical sermons of Theodore Parker, the controversial Unitarian minister of Boston's 28th Congregation. Cheney's exposure to Fuller's Transcendentalism and her already liberal upbringing had cultivated in her a mind that was open to Parker's liberal gospel. Tiffany Wayne asserts that alongside Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Ripley, Parker was influenced by European romanticism, publicly debating "the nature of God, the divinity of Christ, the historical importance of the Bible, and the individual's relation to knowledge and truth" (Wayne 4). Parker's radical sermons on Christianity, particularly his 1841 *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, triggered public outrage, as he argued against the accepted understanding of the miraculous authority of the Bible; Parker's humanization of Christ, which recognized Jesus as the divine human, emphasized that all human beings had the power to achieve that same level of divinity through ethics. Cheney wrote that she "was not wholly unprepared to accept his ideas," as her father "had been a parishioner of Dr. Holley, who was very liberal for his day" (*Reminiscences* 101). In this way, Cheney's own liberal upbringing served as an ideal platform for the radical ideas that sprang from the Transcendentalists.

Reform activity was at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement; Wayne states that "the belief in human potential was at the center of the culture of the antebellum romantic perfectionist reform." The Transcendentalists were, as a consequence, specifically interested in reforming customs and institutions that inhibited the development of human potential (Wayne

43). Thus, Cheney, as a young woman immersed in such a heated culture and exposed to Parker's sermons, which charged individuals with the moral responsibility to participate in the abolitionist movement, grew to live out the teachings of Theodore Parker through her immense work with the New England Freedmen's Aid Society.

In her *Reminiscences*, Cheney remarked that although until 1845, she had only heard Parker occasionally at lectures, after that period, she had developed a much more intimate relationship with him; she recollected that it was "impossible to tell all that Theodore Parker was to me. He threw a new light upon the life and thought of Jesus" (*Reminiscences* 102). The teachings of Fuller and Parker intersected to form a potent foundation for social justice in Cheney's life. Cheney's relationship with Parker developed further into a rich, personal connection, as Parker came to be a great source of comfort to her when Cheney's youngest sister, Anna Walter, passed away. Cheney was touched by Parker's immense depth of sympathy for her and after his visit to her home upon Anna's death, Cheney "felt that I could still live for her, and with her, and that her loving presence would go with me through life, as it has. It was Mr. Parker's wonderful trust that gave him much power to comfort and strengthen the hearts of others" (*Reminiscences* 103). In this way, while Fuller and Cheney had a much more professional and formal relationship together, Cheney and Parker, however, were on more familial terms.

Parker's sermons that pushed the boundaries of the abolitionist movements and called for a radical reformation of society resonated with Cheney deeply. In her autobiography, Cheney recalled that Parker's "soul was on fire with anti-slavery zeal and intense anxiety for the fate of the country he loved so much. He preached many sermons on the stirring questions of the time, and it was then that the most bitter opposition was aroused against him" (*Reminiscences* 115). Robert Collins notes that Parker's forceful stance against slavery can be especially identified Parker's "Letter on Slavery" in which he asked, "Can the Christian relations of human brotherhood, the Christian duty of love to men, be practically preached in the slave States? I only

publish an open secret in saying that it is impossible” (Collins 4). Parker, who was an attendee at the meetings of the Transcendentalist club and who had even written several articles for the prominent Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*, often delivered bold arguments within his sermons that were consistent with the Transcendentalist line of thought. Furthermore, Cheney provided an account of Parker’s sermon on the day that the first fugitive slave, Shadrach, was arrested in Boston; Parker had explained the sad tale of the fugitive, then concluded by the surprise announcement that Shadrach had, in fact, safely found his way to freedom. Cheney remarked that the stark silence of the audience grew to “a burst of applause, the relief of which it is impossible to describe. It was like opening the doors of a dungeon” (*Reminiscences* 110). Parker’s captivating sermons nurtured the anti-slavery fervor within his audience, leading to the development of a community of like-minded individuals, connected in their common passion for the abolition of slavery.

Parker’s relationship with women is paradoxical, as his female-dominated congregation was in direct conflict with his perception of feminist intellectuals of the time. For instance, although he was a supporter of women’s rights, he also did not consider Margaret Fuller as an equal intellect. At the same time, Cheney recorded that Parker was always “surrounded by a band of women who were glorious helpers in his work” and who were also pivotal figures in inspiring Cheney to her influential work with the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society (*Reminiscences* 105). Parker’s conflicted beliefs in the position of women appear in his 1853 *Sermon of the Public Function of Woman*, which outlined the roles of a liberated woman, who “is here to develop her human nature, enjoy her human rights, and perform her human duty. Womankind is to do this for herself, as much as mankind for himself” (*Public Function*, 574). It is interesting to note that in the call for women in the public arena, Parker conservatism surfaces as he does not refute the domestic role of woman, but rather seeks to expand its boundaries: “Woman’s function, like charity, begins at home; then, like charity, goes every where” (*Public Function* 566). This

conservative vein of thought on a rather liberal topic in the nineteenth century was much aligned with Ednah Dow Cheney's reserved views on the role of women; Cheney herself was not as radical as her teacher, Margaret Fuller, and retained value for woman's domestic roles. As Carol Faulkner notes, Cheney's "support for women's rights also acknowledged women's 'nature' or 'sphere' as 'the tenderer sex'" (Faulkner 61). On the other hand, Parker's sermons encouraged young women like Cheney to expand from their roles as mothers and wives into public figures, and Cheney remained devoted to the freedmen's cause "in a culture of reform that was increasingly hostile to it" (Faulkner 61).

Cheney's interaction with the women of Parker's congregation, no doubt, exposed and initiated her to a life of social activism, specifically dedicated to the freedmen's cause. Cheney's discussion of the personalities of women, such as Caroline Thayer, Matilda Goddard, and Abby Folsom, reveals the development of Cheney's own character and the role that women played in Parker's congregation. For instance, Cheney spoke of Miss Caroline Thayer, who "aided Mr. Parker in all his benevolent work" and "was of especial value by her literary help. She was a very careful student of history, and when he was investigating any subject she would read any books he desired, and mark everything important for his work, thus saving him many hours of precious time" (*Reminiscences* 107). Therefore, the women Cheney met through Parker were intellectuals with a keen awareness and interest of social matters, always eager to assist Parker with his endeavors. Cheney also exalted Matilda Goddard, who seamlessly combined her domestic roles with the public functions. Cheney wrote, "She was the most practical of housekeepers, and the most perfect of economists" and that Cheney thanks "God for the light she has been in my life" (*Reminiscences* 108-109). Goddard had tirelessly dedicated her life to the caring of "destitute infants," finding them foster homes and managing them until they were adopted. Once again, Goddard embodied Cheney's values and her understanding that the woman had equal roles in the private and public spheres. Moreover, Abby Folsom, although Cheney explained that she may

have been a nuisance at the congregation, was also “deeply interested in the anti-slavery work....She went among the poor, doing constant deeds of kindness, rescuing the drunken woman from the very gutter and taking her into her own poor rooms. Mr. Parker...and other noted abolitionists recognized her noble qualities, although they suffered grievously from her tongue” (*Reminiscences* 112). Cheney’s good-humored remarks on Abby Folsom, along with her respect for Folsom’s work, shed light on the sense of community that surrounded Parker; women from all districts and directions were united in the sole cause to uplift the condition of the oppressed.

One woman, Hannah Stevenson, was of particular consequence to Cheney, allowing Cheney the opportunity to work as the Secretary of the Teachers’ Committee of the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society (NEFAS) after Stevenson’s resignation. Faulkner notes that prior to the Civil War, Stevenson had worked as the personal assistant to Theodore Parker, and after serving as a nurse for the Union army in Washington, D.C., “she helped found the Educational Commission, later the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society”; Stevenson was the head of the Teacher’s Committee when the NEFAS reluctantly agreed to affiliate with the American Freedmen’s Union Commission (AFUC). Stevenson was adamant that the New England Society adhere to its sole mission to engage in “‘resolute, vigorous work for the colored people, & them only.’” Stevenson’s comments revealed a wariness of associating with a Commission that was not solely concerned with freedpeople” (Faulkner 34). Frustrated with the new affiliation, Stevenson resigned from the New England Society and called Ednah Dow Cheney to take over her position. Faulkner notes that Stevenson’s decision also “reflected her unstated resentment at the all male leadership of the new commission. The AFUC had no female officers, even though its two largest branch societies, the New York National Freedmen’s Relief Association (NFRA) and the New England Society had substantial female leadership” (Faulkner 35). Thus, in 1863, the same year

that President Lincoln engaged the service of freed African Americans in the Civil War, Cheney began decade-long career with the Freedmen's Aid Society.

Cheney, centered in the midst of the political upheaval in Boston, experienced the anxieties triggered at the time, driving her to get more involved in the movement to help the freedmen. Cheney recalled, "I had no near friends in the army, but I shared in all the anxiety during the terrible defeats of the first years of war. But when at last it was decided to enlist the colored men in the regiments, I took a more active part" (*Reminiscences* 83). Initially, she was placed in a committee to provide relief to the 54th regiment under Colonel Shaw's command. Cheney worked alongside Abby May, who was also one of the vice-presidents of the Executive Committee; the committee provided the troops "those comforts which the government could not furnish" (Cheney, *Memoirs of Crocker & May* 21).

Cheney's specific interest in education, derived from her early years in the 1850s, carried on to her work with the New England Freedmen's Aid Society. In 1851, she had founded the School of Design for Women in Boston to provide an avenue for women who desired to become financially-independent; the school taught young women skills that could be transferred in the newly industrialized economy. Julia Ward Howe, Cheney's colleague, reflected as follows: "Short-lived, the school yet served to show the existence of talent among American women, and is remembered as 'one of the failures that enriched the ground for success'" (*Representative Women* 9). Although the school may have failed, Cheney's steadfast belief in the power of education drove her to get involved with sending teachers to Colonel Shaw's troops, who were, at that time, encamped south of Boston. Cheney recalled that the troops were always very eager and grateful for the chance to learn, and that she believed that it "was a most interesting work...As we had but little time, we tried to teach them to read the New Testament, in which they had great delight" (*Reminiscences* 83).

In 1866, Ednah Dow Cheney became a prominent figure as an Executive Committee member and the secretary of the Committee on Teachers. Cheney conveyed her passion for the freedmen's aid movement, writing: "It was my privilege to enter into the great work of educating the freedmen of that day. I owe a debt of gratitude to Hannah Stevenson, who called me to her side to aid in this great cause" (*Reminiscences* 85). Cheney entered the scene during troubling times, when funds towards the freedmen's societies were being cut. Faulkner notes that after 1866, contributions towards such societies rapidly declined, as the government and the AFUC steadily lost interest in the freedmen's cause; "As early as October 24, 1866, Hannah Stevenson, Ednah Dow Cheney...[inquired on] the sorry state of their treasury....The Committee on Teachers threatened to resign unless they could guarantee payment to their teachers, but were reluctant to do so" (Faulkner 46). The NEFAS, steadfast in its mission to educate the freedmen and with dwindling funds, eventually began to charge fees for the freedmen's schools, starting from 1865 (Faulkner 61).

It was also in 1866 that Cheney and Abby May served as delegates of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society and attended an AFUC convention in Baltimore to elect a president for the National Union. Cheney commented, "It was then an unusual thing for women to be appointed on such occasions"; along with a colored Bishop, who was also a representative of a branch society, they "found themselves as great a source of embarrassment to the majority of the convention" when the convention was to conclude with a grand dinner "at which the presence of Women and Negroes would be an insupportable anomaly" (*Memoirs of Crocker and Abby May* 22). Therefore, Cheney, along with the unusually large crew of women at the NEFAS, were making history, paving new grounds for women in an era that was wholly unprepared for their entrance.

The magnitude of ambition and perseverance that was so rooted in Cheney's character was especially highlighted in 1868, when Cheney, while contending with the financial woes

related to the New England Society and managing the arrangement of the freedmen schools from Boston, was also actively involved the founding of the New England Woman's Club and the Free Religious Association. Cheney's involvement with the Freedmen's Aid Society and the New England Women's Club nurtured intimate relationships with pivotal figures of the anti-slavery movement, such as Harriet Tubman and Harriet Jacobs. The second of these women, Harriet Jacobs, is mentioned at the very start of Cheney's chapter on her Freedmen's work in her autobiography in which Cheney describes Jacobs as a "woman of great refinement and sweetness of character" (*Reminiscences* 80-81). Jacobs, an escaped slave who had "suffered in her own person all the terrible evils of beautiful young girl as house servant," later became involved in several positions as a teacher of the freedmen, the manager of a boarding house for Harvard Students, and, in 1868, she was hired as a clerk for the New England Women's Club (Yellin 218).

Cheney remained consistently tied to Jacobs' family throughout the years, supporting her endeavors as much as she could. In 1867, Jacobs wrote a deeply personal letter to Cheney; rather than attending the Equal Rights Association meeting in New York, Jacobs visited Edenton, North Carolina, "under the old roof twelve feet from the spot where I suffered all the crushing weight of slavery" (Yellin 210). Already accustomed to writing letters to Cheney for the New England's Freedmen's Aid Society, Jacobs also provided a glimpse of the state of the freedpeople in Edenton, North Carolina, whom, she saw, were still being mistreated and "cheated out of their crop of cotton"; while there was a school established for the freedpeople, the "Chrildren [sic]...cannot attend School, the distance is so far. some of the freedmen are very anxious to establish Plantation schools" (Jacobs). Jacobs' private letter to Cheney provides an insight into the poignant thoughts of a former slave, returning to her place of oppression, and also shows Cheney's own emotional investment in Jacobs' life. Later, when Jacobs, at the age of eighty-one, was suffering from two fatal diseases, Jacobs' caretakers requested financial help from Cheney to pay for medical expenses. Jean Yellin notes that "Cheney, ever an organizer, proposed that they

mount a public benefit for Jacobs,” and although Jacobs’ caretakers rejected the idea, Cheney, impassioned to help her friend, nonetheless collected funds from a few old activists (Yellin 258). Cheney’s personal relationship with Jacobs and her compassion for the suffering of freed slaves deepened her determination to help the freedmen’s cause through the New England Society.

Thus, restless and despairing with the NEFAS’s funds diminishing to alarming levels, Cheney went above and beyond standard expectations, making visits to the south in 1866, 1868, and 1869 to conduct a thorough inspection of the freedmen’s schools. Cheney’s 1869 visit to the freedmen’s schools with her thirteen-year-old daughter, Margaret Swan, and her colleague, Lucretia Crocker, left a great impression on her, as she recorded the trip in both her autobiography and her *Memoirs of Lucretia Crocker*. The band of three sailed to several areas, including Savannah, Georgia, visited Columbus, North Carolina, and Charlottesville, Virginia. The visit was tightly packed with meetings with community members, students, teachers, and “Whenever practicable, we stayed at the teachers’ homes, and thus became acquainted fully with their lives and work” (*Reminiscences* 89). The three had very little time to rest, as they were always caught up in the task of resolving local disputes between teachers and the community. Cheney noted that “in every interval between the schools the teachers brought their difficulties and troubles to [Crocker], and she had to arbitrate quarrels, as well as arrange programmes and decide upon methods” (*Memoirs of Lucretia Crocker and Abby May* 31). Therefore, the work that both Crocker and Cheney invested went beyond the simple motive of “inspecting” schools; the visits were often therapeutic for not only the teachers, who were young, living in alien environments, but also for the students, who were rejuvenated by Crocker’s and Cheney’s uplifting spirits. Miss Elizabeth Botume, a freedmen’s aid teacher in South Carolina, wrote that “the poor women” who came to Cheney and Crocker with their “doubts and cares, and the mysteries of life, so new and strange to them, were encouraged and strengthened. They got a new and broader life from our visitors which they never forgot” (*Memoirs of Lucretia Crocker and*

Abby May 38). It was this emotional and personal bond that helped the New England Freedmen's Aid Society forge such strong connections to drive the mission of the Society, even as finances and faith in the program dwindled with each passing month.

Ednah Dow Cheney, with her specific duties to arrange and manage the freedmen schools in the south, also continued to fortify and develop relationships with the teachers, acting as a support system for the young women, who were "unprotected, living in lonely places" (*Reminiscences* 97). Cheney remarked that "the relation with the teachers was delightful, and formed a basis for enduring friendships," and that the teachers for the Freedmen's schools "deserve remembrance as true martyrs to the cause, for they did faithful and exhausting service with very slight rewards, except in the consciousness of the good they accomplished" (*Reminiscences* 98). Carol Faulkner writes that it was through the personal efforts of the women of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, such as Lucretia Crocker, Ednah Dow Cheney, and Hannah Stevenson, that the NEFAS was able to outlive all other branches of the American Freedmen's Union Commission. Faulkner remarks that "these women kept up correspondence with teachers and branch societies and endeavored to keep teachers funded as long as possible. Their long record of aid reveals a strong commitment to freedmen's aid and education" (Faulkner 65). Cheney's remarkable ability to balance the personal connections to the freedmen's teachers with her efficient and systematic manner of recording information for use in gathering funding was central in the delicate upkeep of the NEFAS.

Cheney's records in the Daily Journals of the NEFAS reveal a woman who is focused in her will to sustain schools in the South and to help stabilize the aggravated teachers, living in rather stressful situations under very tight budgets. As the conditions of many of the schools in the south were already dire, with students coming from rather poor families dependent on agriculture for income, payment to teachers and funds for school supplies was often erratic. In the 1870 Daily Journal of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Cheney recorded a report she

had received from a teacher in the south, Mrs. Philbrook: “they have raised \$28 in taxes – hopes to raise more now that cold weather is over – the state has done nothing for the schools in the city yet – hopes they will soon have help from it” (Daily Journal 107). Cheney notes that another teacher had reported that the “school has decreased in numbers, but is making good progress – the people are very poor” (Daily Journal 108). By 1870, the NEFAS had already implemented their 1869 decision to put a halt to a significant portion of their work; therefore, in order to keep the New England Society afloat, Cheney and the other female committee members made the executive decision to charge students of the freedmen’s schools a small amount to help pay for the schools’ teachers and supplies. Cheney’s brevity by extracting mere facts from the emotionally charged letters from the teachers stands as a testament to the pragmatism that was so characteristic of her. On the other hand, although letters from Cheney to the teachers were not available to be analyzed, it is unlikely that the teachers in the south would be writing such personal letters to Cheney, had Cheney not encouraged or reciprocated the sentiments in the same way.

The letters written to Cheney by the Freedmen’s Aid teachers, stored in manuscript form at the Massachusetts Historical Society, reveal not only the volatile conditions under which the teachers were expected to fulfill their duties, but also the nature of work that Cheney conducted with the New England Society. Cheney primarily dealt with the financial aspects of maintaining the freedmen’s schools and also with the hiring of teachers. The letters often show that Cheney, too, was often also under pressure from the troubled teachers. Miss Elizabeth Botume, whom Cheney had met during her 1869 visit to the south with Lucretia Crocker, wrote on October 6th, 1873:

Miss Louie H-m who assisted me in my School last year is now in Phil.
I wish her to return South with me & she wishes to do so, but she feels she cannot do this unless her travelling expenses are paid...
She is a most-valuable teacher & has been [for] years in the work.

Will not your Society pay Miss H—'s travelling expenses...? (Letters).

There are several letters such as this, requesting not only funds from Cheney, but also demanding the transfer of certain teachers to specific schools. Since by 1873, the NEFAS's budget was tighter than ever, as both the American Freedmen's Union Commission and the Freedmen's Bureau had closed down, cutting funding to all branches, every dollar was precious. Carol Faulkner notes that the Freedmen's Aid Societies, with the exception of paying the teachers' salaries, depended on the Freedmen's Bureau for all other expenses, such as keeping up the rent costs for schoolhouses and paying for the teachers' transportation to the south. Thus, Cheney's ability to maintain solid relationships, even while being unable to fulfill all the requests of the teachers, would have been crucial to the survival of the Society.

The teachers' letters also provided Cheney with an understanding of the troubling circumstances that the teachers lived through. In other letters, teachers even requested items, such as Christmas presents for their students, who were living through trying times. One such teacher was Philena Carkin, with whom Cheney seemed to have kept a close connection. Carkin's letters were fairly frequent and long, filled with her anxieties and her experiences in the south. In a letter to Cheney, whom she had addressed as a "sympathizer" on January 1st, 1874, Carkin expressed her delight with the Christmas presents, but soon went into detail about tragic events that had occurred locally:

Have had quite a pleasant Christmas this year. The box sent by the ladies of Kings Chapel gave great satisfaction to all. It was a delightful surprise to the scholars...

I enjoyed the holiday very much until the night before last when there came a sad break into my quiet enjoyment.

A house not far from us took fire accidentally about seven o'clock in the evening and burned to the ground in a short time. It was owned by two colored men. There were three families in the house, and they lost nearly all their furniture and clothing. Once of the men had five hundred dollars which he had recently drawn from the bank, the saving of years of hard labors, and he was away at the time it was all burned (Letters).

As Carkin was based in Charlottesville and the house was owned by two African Americans, it is difficult to gage whether the fire was ever an "accident." The hostility against the

black men that Carkin witnessed may have been doubly traumatizing for her as a vulnerable woman in the south, aiming to educate freedmen, a movement that by 1874 had grown ever more unpopular. Carkin did all she could to help the three troubled families that had fallen victim to the fire: “I sent all the clothes I could spare from my own wardrobe, and thus furnished various garments, so they might have enough to keep them warm” (Letters). Such teachers were not simply educators, but social workers as well, emotionally invested in the local community. Cheney’s role in being the “sympathizer” was crucial, as it allowed teachers, like Philena Carkin, an outlet for all their frustrations, horrors, and sorrows.

In the same letter, Carkin addressed the Society’s inquiry on the finances and the students’ payments; Carkin’s response is revealing of the difficulties that Carkin’s students had to contend with:

The last letter I received from the Society this question was asked, “Is ten cents per month all they are able to pay?” There are some who could pay more, but there are others who find even that small sum difficult to raise.

For instance there is one poor woman who sent five children. She is a seamstress with poor health, and failing eyesight. She had two cows which she sold in order to raise money to send her children to school this year. I allowed [her] to send one without the tax. Another woman who supports her three children by washing and ironing, I allowed to send a little girl free of charge, for as they have neither sufficient food nor clothing. I know that even that small sum could not be paid (Letters).

Once again, Carkin tried her best to accommodate students, who often had scanty means of paying the charges for the school. She was resourceful in her ways by allowing students to pay for their education by letting them complete janitorial tasks that would have otherwise cost a relatively large sum of money. The outpour of grief from Carkin to the Society’s question about finances reveals the unstable conditions under which Carkin was surviving. Moreover, the despair from the Society’s side of the story and the remarkable ability of the NEFAS to survive for two more years, until 1876, with such meager funds as described by Carkin, also brings to the forefront the immense tenacity of the NEFAS committee members.

It was around this time that the NEFAS was under incredible pressure to assimilate under the government-funded “normal” schools in the south; however, committee members, such as Cheney, were unwilling to submit to such pressures because of the fear that the freedmen’s cause would be diluted. Faulkner writes, “Though women reformers felt pressure from male reformers who urged freedpeople’s independence, they continued to push for aid to freedmen’s schools” (Faulkner 60). The radical differences in the male reformers’ call for the independence of freedpeople in comparison to the female reformers’ feminized, often maternal, rhetoric shaped the overall success and outcome of the freedmen’s aid societies. After all, the male-dominated AFUC was the first freedmen’s society to collapse in 1869, claiming that its work for the freedmen was completed and that it was time for the freedpeople to stand on their own (Faulkner 46). Although the female-dominated New England Freedmen’s Society would later echo the AFUC’s sentiments, the NEFAS managed to last five years longer, until 1875, mostly through “dramatic appeals which proclaimed the necessity for aid to freedmen’s schools” (Faulkner 62). Faulkner adds that the women of the NEFAS were also probably more involved than the men of the AFUS because these women were arguing for “federal intervention, relief, and land reform” while also “seeking political rights and economic independence for themselves and former slaves” (Faulkner 66).

Therefore, it is not surprising that when Cheney received a letter on December 21st, 1873, from the Superintendent’s Office of the Department of Public Education in Columbus, Georgia, requesting the assimilation of the freedmen’s schools to the public system, Cheney was rather persistent in her decision to remain independent. Superintendent Dews desired to “get possession of the Claflin academy” and to “work in harmony” with the freedmen’s school “in the education of our colored people” (Letters). Dews made three bold propositions that Cheney would have been hostile to:

The proposition was this 1. We would take possession of the Claflin Academy & enlarge it to accommodate all. 2. The school to be entirely free & controlled by the same laws that govern the white schools. 3. That if you desired it, Miss Alford & Mr. Mathews retain their present positions at your expense (Letters).

The letter from Dews makes it apparent that the public school department was not eager to keep the same teaching faculty that was kept under the NEFAS's jurisdiction. It was also uncertain how a school could be kept "entirely free," and yet also be "controlled by the same laws" as the white schools. Dews' letter was also in response to Cheney's earlier reply on July 9th, 1873, in which she asked Dews for a "definite proposition." She had also explicitly stated that:

It has been our desire for some time to work in harmony with local School Boards, wherever we can do so without disturbing the organization of our schools....It is our present expectation to carry on the Claflin school at least for one or two years longer under the present efficient Principal who has brought the school to such a point of excellence. Whenever our work ceases in your community we hope and believe the Trustees will continue to use the building...for the purpose to which [it was] originally dedicated (Daily Journal).

Cheney's letter stressed the primary concern of the NEFAS, which emphasized the importance of maintaining the integrity of the efforts made by the freedmen's aid society by the public school system. While converging into the public school system was a tempting offer, especially in dire times when the funds for the freedmen's schools were diminishing rapidly and when apathy towards the cause was widespread, once again, the noble perseverance of the NEFAS community was highlighted.

A troubled letter by a teacher in Camden, Miss Ball, on February 27, 1874 painted a grim picture of the state of the freedmen's schools in the south:

I hardly know how to answer your letter concerning the Camden schools; the State would, I presume carry them on, but there is no one in authority now who feels any special interest in us or the schools, and probably any southern white teacher who may apply for a situation here will obtain it.

One of the most cultivated ladies here wishes to hire a very capable boy, a pupil of my school. He is willing to work for her if she will let him have some time for study, but she says to him, "you can read and write, that is enough," and will not in any way help him in his education.

This is probably the ~~general~~ feeling among them.

The white people seem very indifferent even about the education of their own race and I fear the color people might become so without good schools.

I hope the society will do something for Camden if possible, though I wish to remain at home awhile (Letters).

Miss Ball's words highlighted the growing sense of apathy towards freedmen's education in the south. The fear that freed African Americans would be deprived of an education if the freedmen's society closed down was an important contrast to the American Freedmen's Union Commission's declaration that its work was complete and that the freedpeople were under stable hands under local governing systems (Faulkner 62). Under these conditions, the New England Freedmen's Aid Society continued on with its mission. Another letter by Caroline Alfred, posted on April 1874, conveyed the reluctance of freedmen's teachers to remain in the staff of a school that had been taken over by the public school boards:

Both Miss Holmes and myself are willing to remain here another year, if we can go on in the old way, but neither of us would wish to remain under other circumstances. I enclose a copy of the Columbus Enquirer of yesterday containing an account of the Public Schools of this city. You will see the gratitude evinced to Mr. Leass for his action, and the whole truth has not been told, for I have been informed that he has given much more than has been credited to him.

You will see how exclusively they are considered as white and can judge something of the temper which would be manifested towards any person who would be connected with the colored Public School. In fact, the colored public school as at presented conducted is a disgrace, and an outrage on decency. There is no bathhouse and it is treated in a most disgraceful neighborhood (Letters).

Caroline Alfred also commented on impact on the freedmen's schools after being absorbed into the public school system. Most of them had been transformed to cater to the white population, holding ample resentment towards the staff and attendees of the "colored Public School"; moreover, she remarked that the public schools for African Americans were already in a rather poor state, lacking the respectful standards that were painstakingly upheld by the NEFAS. It is also significant to note the passion and dedication that the freedmen's aid teachers invested in the education of the freedpeople, despite the fact that the NEFAS often could not afford to adequately compensate for their jobs. In *Reminiscences*, Cheney remarked that she held great

admiration and gratitude towards the freedmen's aid teachers, not only because most did their work without sufficient reimbursements, but also because "[a]fter ten or twelve years of service the teachers returned to the North to find their places filled by others and new methods and requirements demanded for which they were unprepared" (98).

Two years after Caroline Alfred's despairing letter, in 1876, the New England Freedmen's Aid Society collapsed, strained beyond its limits after the Freedmen's Bureau closed, which had been "a gradual process that began in 1869 and ended in 1872" (Faulkner 46). Faulkner notes that the NEFAS, out of its own frustration, repeated the AFUC's statements that "education should be the responsibility of Southern states and the freedpeople" (Faulkner 62). However, despite its closing, the NEFAS outlasted all other branches of the AFUC, and women played a very active role in both sustaining the branch for such a long time and deciding its conclusion (Faulkner 65). Faulkner claims that Cheney's concerns about the NEFAS's diminishing funds earlier in the 1870s emerged from the personal concerns of the women active in the education of freedmen, "as their identities as reformers depended on the Freedmen's Bureau and black education" (Faulkner 46). While this may have been true to a certain extent, at least for Cheney, who was also deeply involved at the time as a reformer with the New England Hospital for Women and Children, the concern may have been genuine, especially since she had been personally acquainted with women, such as Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Tubman. Moreover, under the influence of Parker's teachings at and as a member of the solid anti-slavery community that had developed in Parker's congregation, Cheney's dedication to the freedmen's aid movement also served to fulfill the values and goals that had been taught to her at a very early age. Reflecting on her freedmen's work in her autobiography, Cheney remarked that she counted those years as "the most interesting and fruitful work of my life. The relation with the teachers was delightful, and formed a basis for enduring friendships. The privilege of such a journey with

Miss Crocker was never to be forgotten. We worked afterward together in the Women's School Suffrage Association" (*Reminiscences* 98).

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Through her writings, Cheney showed a particular affinity towards documenting the history of the women whose life prospects were budding in the nineteenth century. Her autobiography, *Reminiscences*, is far more centered upon the history and impact of influential leaders of the time period, particularly Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller, in relation to her own life. The book reflects the way in which Cheney's social work had been tied to the rising individuals of the time. Her chapters on her experiences with the freedmen's aid society are directly adjacent to her commemoration of Parker. She, perhaps unintentionally, establishes the inextricable connection between Transcendentalism and social activism, particularly focusing on the way that transcendentalism inspired activism even in the post-Civil War era, when the final embers of the transcendentalist movement were assumed to be shedding their last glow. She traced the social impulse of transcendentalism, joining with other voices that discussed transcendentalism within the context of humanitarian activism.

Cheney, eventually a contemporary of Jane Addams' Hull House, was a social progressive with quite exceptional roots in Romanticism in the late nineteenth century age of rationalism and naturalism. According to Therese Dykeman, Cheney's substantial writings on art, particularly in her often neglected 1881 book, *Gleanings in the Fields of Art*, should be integrated into narratives on the histories of American aesthetics because "it was among the earliest American aesthetics...it was unique...and third, its gender inclusiveness spoke both to her time and to the future century" (Dykeman 41). More integral to this present study of social activism and Transcendentalism, Cheney establishes in her *Reminiscences* the connections between

morality and idealism, as presented through art; she wrote, “the life of the artists has always seemed the highest and truest expression of the full life of the soul. But the word has expanded in meaning, until I have seen that it must stand in true relation to the whole circle of thought and action. The artist must not be a dreamer only, but a worker for humanity, a reformer” (*Reminiscences* 128). This notion that the pursuit of the ideal mandates morality is reminiscent of Theodore Parker, who had called his congregation to cultivate divinity through ethics, and also of Margaret Fuller, who had asked women to tap into the divine essence emanate within them to rise to perfection and self-culture through public influence.

Perhaps it was Cheney’s characteristic pragmatism, rooted in her love for the romantic, that opened Cheney’s eyes to the connections inherent within Parker’s and Fuller’s messages, though they may have been disseminated disparately. Cheney’s idealism, reflective of Fuller’s poetic pleas for self-culture in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, melded harmoniously with Parker’s concrete abolitionist mission. Moreover, women’s philanthropy within Cheney’s time period typically involved social work involved with urban poverty, temperance, and abolitionism. Therefore, Cheney, through her participation in the various organizations of Boston, such as the New England Hospital for School and Design, the New England School of Design in Boston, and the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society (NEFAS), were all work that was within the ascribed boundaries of a woman in the nineteenth century. However, Cheney was also unafraid of challenging the limitations placed upon her gender, as she was also the secretary of the NEFAS, a leadership position generally beyond women’s reach. Cheney frequently both conformed and subverted her roles as a woman and sometimes even utilized gendered activities, such as those of early nineteenth-century letter writing, to further her reform work. The steady success of the NEFAS in a period when all other freedmen’s aid societies were collapsing with the closure of the government-established Freedmen’s Aid Bureau, the NEFAS, through its continuous communication with the freedmen’s teachers and pleas for funding survived the longest. Cheney

professionalized the early nineteenth century letter-writing tradition that Carroll-Smith Rosenberg had examined in her landmark essay “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America”; Rosenberg detailed the existence of deep, same-sex friendships that were sustained through a female culture of letter-writing (1). Cheney borrowed from this custom, as most of the teachers she corresponded with were women located in rather stressful circumstances, and innovatively adapted it to her work in the NEFAS. Moreover, her meticulous entries in the NEFAS’s Daily Journal stand as powerful testimony to her pragmatic spirit, rooted in the mission of extending education and a fair chance to the freed African American people of the south in the postwar period.

Cheney’s earlier intellectual development, which had been absolutely critical to her growth as a reformer later in life, borrowed from the variety of traditions of Margaret Fuller, Goethe, Ibsen and Emerson. Hinged on the Enlightenment and Romantic emphasis on the creative power of the mind, Cheney was convinced of the power of education in progress. Her social work dominated primarily in educating and healing underprivileged populations through her various school programs and her work at the New England Hospital for Women and Children. Cheney idolized Margaret Fuller, poignantly stating that because of Fuller, “I was no longer the limitation of myself...I felt that the whole wealth of the universe was open to me” (*Reminiscences* 205). At the same time, Cheney also emphasized that Fuller was, by no means “an exception to her sex,” as “there were noble women around her, not a few, worthy to be her peers in the love and esteem of her fellow-citizens” (*Reminiscences* 192). In this way, Cheney creates space for transcendentalist –inspired intellectual-activists, who drew from Fuller’s line of thought and contributed to society in equally significant ways. Even in her late-nineteenth-century sequel of Ibsen’s *Doll House*, Cheney integrates crucial moments of Fuller’s Transcendentalism into her story, but also transforms it to a philosophy relevant to her later audience.

Cheney's powerfully optimistic 1895 lecture on Margaret Fuller, delivered to the Congress of American Advancement of Women, united her belief in women's suffrage with her public social mission at a time when the national women's movement was developing at a painfully slow rate. In this period, Margaret Fuller's idealistic discussions on the soul were considered irrelevant to the politics of the Progressive Era. However, despite the forces rising against romanticized culture of Fuller's era, Cheney refurbishes Fuller's ideas and introduces them to the late-nineteenth century audience; she argued that Fuller's "wonderful book, 'Woman in the Nineteenth Century' . . . contains the pith and marrow of the woman movement, and makes the largest demand for her natural equality and political rights" ("Lecture Given" 194). Cheney attempted to further facilitate the women's movement by politicizing and universalizing Fuller's thought to weave it into the modern conversation; Cheney explained to her audience that Fuller's "whole plea for woman [was] the same as for humanity, the individual right of freedom and development" ("Lecture Given" 194). Cheney's unwavering confidence in Fuller, even as she was witnessing the decline of the very institutions to which she had devoted her life, is remarkable.

The late 1890s also brought forth the era fraught with racial tensions that were heightened under the doctrine of "Separate but Equal," as the imprint of Cheney's work with the Freedmen's Aid Society was gradually fading. However, remnants of Cheney's social work lingered among groups of African American women whom Cheney had helped; Kathleen Adams writes that Cheney was working closely with black clubs in the late nineteenth century and also writing for the first African American women's newspaper, *Woman's Era*; in fact, she was so involved with the black clubs that a southern black school and a black club in Tuskegee were both named after her (145). More intriguing, Adams states that although around this time Cheney was touring the country and lecturing about Fuller, "there is no explicit sign that Fuller mattered to black clubwomen"; this has been attributed to the fact that Fuller had not been involved with the racial

issues or with the mid-century anti-slavery movement (145). This shows that Cheney was not simply repeating Fuller's philosophy, but instead blending it with her own interests. Her dedication to her friend, Harriet Jacobs, even until Jacobs' final few days of life when Cheney had initiated a funding program to help Jacobs with her financial woes, stands as testimony to the deep commitment Cheney felt for African American women.

Cheney's spirit of resilience is further conveyed through her autobiography, released in 1902, only two years before her death. Once again, even as she was watching the steady decline of the older institutions as they were replaced by those of the early twentieth century, Cheney recognized the need for further liberation and justice. Ever-unsatisfied with the unequal balance of society, she declared, "if we can come to the close of one century, and look so gratefully and proudly over the results of emancipation, cannot we look forward with confident hope for the greater work of reconstruction, which has already begun, and which will go on through the ages?" (*Reminiscences* 172). Julia Ward Howe, a close friend Cheney had made at one of Theodore Parker's meetings, best commemorated her at the New England Women's Club Memorial Meeting, which was held in honor of Cheney after her death; Howe said that Cheney "was always jealous for justice, and it was this trait which made her... a tower of strength to her associates" (New England Women's Club 4). With her transcendentalist roots nurtured by both her pragmatic spirit and her ceaseless thirst for further emancipation and equality, Cheney's legacy left an indelible mark at the turn of the twentieth century, as she tirelessly labored to heal the wounds of injustice inflicted upon the nation.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education

B.A., English, 2013, Penn State Brandywine, Media, PA

B.A., Bachelor of Philosophy, 2013, Penn State Brandywine, Media, PA

Honors and Awards

- Francis J. Ryan Award for Outstanding Paper in the Undergraduate Roundtable, Eastern American Studies Association Conference, March, 2013
- Schreyer Honors College Research Grant, Penn State University, July 2012
- Penn State Academic Excellence Scholarship, Penn State Brandywine, June 2012
- First Place *Penn in Hand* poetry winner, Penn State Brandywine, April 2012
- Penn State Academic Excellence Scholarship, Penn State Brandywine, 2010-13
- Tim Mark Scholarship for the Arts, Penn State Brandywine, 2010

Association Memberships/Activities

- Phi Kappa Phi Academic Honor Society
- The Thoreau Society

Professional Experience

- English Tutor at the Penn State Brandywine Writing Studio

Research Interests (usually for graduate applicants and prospective professors)

I have broad interests in nineteenth and twentieth century women's literature, and am particularly interested in furthering my understanding of American Transcendentalism and the British Romanticism.

Professional Presentations

Mookerjee, L., Cole, P. (2013). The Second Generation: Ednah Dow Cheney Carries Margaret Fuller's Feminist Transcendentalism into the Early Progressive Era. Eastern American Studies Association (EASA) Annual Conference, Harrisonburg, VA, March 23, 2013.

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Clements, A., Guertin, L., Yerger, T., Mookerjee, L. (2011). Going global: Google Earth as a tool for teaching world music. The Pennsylvania Music Educators Association Annual Conference, Hershey, PA, April 15, 2011. Student co-presenter Mookerjee.

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