

Women's Rights in the Civil War Era: Interpretation of E.D.E.N. Southworth's *Britomarte* through Frances B. Cogan's Model of Real Womanhood

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Abstract

Feminist criticism remains a typical literary theory for analysis of nineteenth-century domestic novels and often focuses scholarship on identifying three common interpretations: first, that the novel expresses feminist ideals; second, that it expresses antifeminist ideals typical of nineteenth-century True Womanhood; third, that it expresses conflict between the ideals of feminism and True Womanhood. These interpretations imply that nineteenth-century domestic novels divide into separate categories based on modern feminism. However, nineteenth-century women did not think of themselves as only feminist, antifeminist, or ideologically uncertain. The use of a specific ideal other than those of feminism or True Womanhood could result in more inclusive, varied, and historically accurate literary analyses. Frances B. Cogan identified a third ideal, Real Womanhood, of which nineteenth-century authors seem to have made frequent use, and which was popular in nineteenth-century culture. This essay builds on Cogan's historical and literary study of Real Womanhood in order to reconcile the seeming contradictions regarding women's rights in E.D.E.N. Southworth's novel *Britomarte*, to piece together an overview of popular mid-nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood, and to propose a revised approach to literary criticism. Southworth seems to have supported the ideals of Real Womanhood. The character Erminie exemplifies Real Womanhood, the character Britomarte develops into a Real Woman, and secondary characters display traits of Real Womanhood. Southworth's expression of Real Womanhood ideals in her 1865 novel *Britomarte* aligns with her life events and worldview, and potentially influenced women in their return to domestically-oriented roles after the Civil War. Interpreting E.D.E.N. Southworth's *Britomarte* in conjunction with Frances Cogan's model of Real Womanhood exemplifies the countless possibilities for redefining scholarly approaches to nineteenth-century fiction in light of an expanded definition of women's rights.

Keywords: feminism, Civil War, E.D.E.N. Southworth

1. Introduction

E.D.E.N. Southworth's novel *Britomarte*, serially published from October 1865 until September 1866, and published in two volumes in 1868 and 1869, opens with the eponymous character's speaking earnestly about women's rights. She continues to protest against American society, in which women typically earned a fourth as much as a man earned while holding the same occupational position and often doing significantly more work, in which unscrupulous men limited women's career options, and in which women could not vote. American marriage laws disgust her; the government did not allow married women to own property. She concludes that not only will she eschew marriage, but she will not work for money as long as women are underpaid, and "will never accept assistance from any man whomsoever."¹ Britomarte's resolutions seems to fit her into the modern conception of an independent woman in the nineteenth century, what Frances Cogan calls a "broad classification" of "alienated, steely proto-feminists who rule

their worlds with a rigid back.”² From a contemporary reader’s perspective, any independent nineteenth-century woman might appear to be a determined, modern feminist.

According to Barbara Welter, the nineteenth-century antithesis to the feminist was the “True Woman.”³ The True Woman was self-effacing, self-sacrificing, and confined to the domestic sphere. She was “frail”, existing to support her family, but dependent on men for her protection and for her home, the very care of which supposedly made her a fulfilled woman.⁴ The True Woman recognized her constitutional physical and intellectual weaknesses, and avoided overtaxing herself and eliciting “neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system.”⁵ Many doctors predetermined women’s roles by asserting that their health was too unstable for them to go far from home. Exertion seemed unfitting and dangerous for women. Feminists like Britomarte saw these notions as impractical and unnatural.

Although Welter advanced her theory in a famous work titled “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860”, her model of a True Woman still applies to the 1865 *Britomarte* because the novel starts before the Civil War and True Womanhood would have influenced the characters. Moreover, Welter proposes that True Womanhood faded around the Civil War because of the unusual circumstances that necessitated women’s entering untraditional roles. For Welter, then, the plot of *Britomarte* would have proved that women could indeed break free from the confining societal expectations imposed on them by True Womanhood once the Civil War called them to action because Britomarte becomes a successful soldier and spy. Welter’s theory of the demise of True Womanhood, however, does not account for why Britomarte appears so willing at the end of the novel to choose life as a wife with little interest in promoting women’s rights. Frances Cogan provides an alternative model to True Womanhood and feminism through her interpretation of nineteenth-century nonfiction and domestic fiction in her book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*. This essay builds on Cogan’s historical and literary study of a third ideal of womanhood in order to reconcile the seeming contradictions regarding women’s rights in E.D.E.N. Southworth’s novel *Britomarte*, to piece together a definitive overview of Southworth’s own ideal of womanhood, and to propose a revised approach to modern literary criticism and Civil War historiography.

Indeed, although Southworth’s character Britomarte is a feminist at the beginning of the novel, by the end, she might seem to be a True Woman. Britomarte proves herself to be a perseverant soldier and a daring spy during the Civil War. The novel closes, however, with her marriage, and she gives up her ideas about how to support women’s rights, insisting that she supports women’s rights “*in general*” but also stating: “[F]or my individual self, the only right I plead for is woman’s dearest right – to be loved to my heart’s content all the days of my life!”⁶ Britomarte might seem to betray her feminist ideals by preferring wifedom to a traditionally male role, and Southworth seems to approve her decision because she ends the novel with Britomarte’s total recantation of her pledges regarding women’s rights. Britomarte violates all three of the resolutions that she made, namely, to eschew marriage, not work for money when women were paid unequally, and never let a man help her. She breaks the first by marrying her persistent beau, Justin; presumably breaks the second by working as a soldier; and breaks the third throughout the novel as she reluctantly realizes that women cannot provide all the help that she needs. While Southworth might seem to be a feminist because she lauds Britomarte’s bravery in war and calls one of her women’s rights speeches “a work of genius”, she also might be an antifeminist and a propagator of the True Woman ideal because she seems to portray Britomarte’s true role as being in the home, passively being loved.⁷

For decades, scholars have attempted to find interpretations of Southworth’s novels that reveal how Southworth’s “feminism” developed, but they find similar seeming contradictions in other Southworth novels besides *Britomarte*; and even more perplexingly, the contradictions neither evince that Southworth’s views developed from True Womanhood to feminism nor indicate a regression from feminism to True Womanhood. Authors such as Paul Christian Jones, Linda Naranjo-Huebl, Kathryn Conner Bennett, Helen Waite Papishvily, Ken Egan, and Susan Coultrap-McQuin have debated over the degree of feminism expressed in Southworth’s writings. One example of the attempt to define Southworth’s “feminism” begins with Linda Naranjo-Huebl’s claim that one of Southworth’s novels is “a retreat from Southworth’s earlier feminism.”⁸ Paul Christian Jones responds by arguing that this particular Southworth novel is actually “progressive” and portrays “the need for a larger role in society for women”; she seems “anything but conservative, conventional, and orthodox.”⁹ The current debates about Southworth are over at what points in her novels she embraces change as expressed through feminist ideals.

One answer to the question of how “feminist” Southworth was is that she simply vacillated between feminism and antifeminism. In particular, Annie Merrill Ingram attributes the seeming contradiction in *Britomarte* to Southworth’s own uncertainties regarding society’s expectations and does not devote any space in her article on the novel to finding “Southworth’s motivation.”¹⁰ As long as criticism concerning Southworth is based in comparing and contrasting the ideas in her novels to modern feminist ideals, critics will be at a standstill, finding no result other than Ingram’s idea that the feminist issues in Southworth’s novels are “not fully resolved.”¹¹ As long as modern feminist criticism

provides the standard for interpreting Southworth's works, scholars will be limited to speculating as to whether specific sentences or passages indicate feminism instead of unearthing the degree and progression of her beliefs.

2. Main Topic of Research

Southworth, however, might not have been a feminist or an antifeminist, and her novels might not reflect a conflict between the two ideals. Analyzing *Britomarte* through the lens of Frances Cogan's *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* leads to conclusions that could offer an important corrective to scholarship not only on Southworth, and not even on only nineteenth-century studies, but on scholarship addressing the development of women's rights in Western literature and culture, effectively enhancing historiographical methods through questioning the accuracy of the customary use of feminist criticism in analyzing women's writing. Cogan's concept of Real Womanhood suggests that Southworth was neither a feminist nor an antifeminist, demonstrating that using feminism as an interpretive lens sometimes can be anachronistic and can lead to a disfigured sense of history. Southworth's moderate views might account not only for critics' puzzlement over her purported feminism, but explain why women such as Britomarte relaxed into traditional female roles after the Civil War. While listening carefully for views from throughout the ideological spectrum of women's rights, perhaps scholars will piece together an account of the manner in which women returned to their former roles after the War, an account that does not lean towards anachronism.

Frances Cogan wrote *All-American Girl* as a response to a type of feminist historiography which implies that because no ideal besides the True Woman existed in the nineteenth century, women's social conditions could improve only if they embraced feminism. Cogan notices that although nineteenth-century fiction and nonfiction sometimes promote the True Woman or the feminist, another ideal is much more prevalent: the "lost" ideal of the "Real Woman."¹² A Real Woman was neither a militant "man-hater" such as Britomarte, nor an indolent loungeur such as the heroines in some other nineteenth-century novels.¹³ The "popular ideal" of Real Womanhood encouraged women to excel in the areas of academics, exercise, and professional occupations, activities in which True Women were too fragile to attempt success; but Real Women also insisted that women had duties distinct from those of men which involved their talents for taking care of their families.¹⁴ Many nineteenth-century feminists, on the other hand, avowed that women should not be defined based on intrinsic qualities, but on each woman's individual role.¹⁵ A Real Woman, then, strongly supported women's rights, but firmly grounded herself in the role of taking care of people within the home as well as taking care of the community.

Real Womanhood embraced two branches of women's rights: a woman's right to participate in forming the community, a social right, and her right to partake in family life, a personal right. Proponents of Real Womanhood saw True Women and feminists as extreme. True Women gave up their social rights in order to concentrate on personal rights, or on their family life in the domestic sphere. Feminists focused on radically and immediately changing their social rights, sometimes seeming to forget about their personal rights to be active members of a family as well as dissidents. Real Women balanced their rights to communal and familial relationships, to societal and personal rights, and always insisted that women could be strong.

Southworth propagates the Real Woman ideal in *Britomarte* because she admires both Britomarte's perseverance in advocating women's rights and her realization that she feels the happiest when she marries her boyfriend. Southworth, however, could not have viewed Britomarte as an exemplary heroine because she struggles for balance in understanding societal rights and rights within the home until the end of the novel. She stifles her emotions in favor of trying to be entirely logical and does not seem to know that being logical includes taking her feelings for her boyfriend into account. Southworth portrays Britomarte as the protagonist around whose actions the plot centers the most, but Britomarte's closest friend, Erminie, is the real heroine because she consistently models Real Womanhood. Southworth writes that Erminie is the most womanly person in the novel and that she would be readers' "favorite" character.¹⁶ The novel centers around how Britomarte becomes a Real Woman like Erminie.

The scholar Karen Tracey claims that Erminie is not a typical True Woman because she excels in roles outside of her home, but she attributes the phenomenon to Southworth "redefining the concept of 'true woman.'"¹⁷ Tracey sees Erminie as an evolutionary link between True Womanhood and feminism. Tracey, however, notices that the position that society can benefit from women taking care of communities as well as households is "not new" because nineteenth-century domestic fiction commonly propagates it.¹⁸ According to Tracey, Erminie is simultaneously an evolved and improved version of a True Woman and an example of a nameless feminine type fundamental to domestic fiction. This proposition is contradictory because Erminie cannot be both a new type of True Woman and an example of heroines long central to domestic fiction. True Womanhood became popular around 1820 and the first domestic novel was published in 1822, so True Womanhood existed along with another ideal associated with the domestic

novel.¹⁹ Erminie represents an ideal that is contemporary with True Womanhood and warrants its own separate title, that of Real Womanhood.

Southworth portrays Erminie as a Real Woman who equals and surpasses men in her reasoning abilities. Erminie's fiancé, Colonel Eastworth, confesses to her that he is a secessionist spy and that in order to avoid arrest, he is going to leave Washington D.C., where he is visiting her family. He asks her to elope with him to the Confederacy. Erminie first thinks of her father, which might indicate "passive, unthinking, close adherence to parental dictates," an action of which Eastworth accuses her.²⁰ Erminie, however, insists that she does not refuse Eastworth because her father is a Unionist or because she is accustomed to thinking of herself as a Unionist, but because she herself firmly believes in the Union, and hours of her fiancé's arguments for the Confederacy fail to convince her. Southworth portrays Erminie as the intellectual superior of her fiancé, who is a respected soldier twenty years older than she is, because she supports the Union.

One might argue that Erminie is a True Woman because she is immune to the ambitions that beguile Eastworth and blur his moral vision, making her seem piously submissive to male-generated religious standards that were calculated to divert women from aspiring to break out of the domestic sphere.²¹ Erminie's religion, however, is linked to thoughtful devotion to her country rather than to the influence of dominative men, and her spirituality is an expression of defiance against the fiancé who tries to control her decisions. Eastworth tries to dazzle her with the idea that she could "share the fate of one who would lift [her] up beside him to, perhaps, the highest position in the gift of the young Confederacy!"²² Eastworth imagines himself as a swashbuckling president or general of the conquering Confederacy, leading a flamboyant military parade into Washington D.C., but glamorous daydreams do not appeal to Erminie because she is not vainglorious. She believes that marrying a Confederate would betray her country and holds steadfastly to her resolve to refuse his proposal despite her heartbreak. Erminie is an exemplary Real Woman because she withstands the domineering Eastworth's importunities and remains morally independent and strong.

Erminie, however, is not a feminist. She indirectly answers Britomarte's question about whether women should be independent of their husbands by saying that she likes to depend on her father. She disagrees with Britomarte's view that women should not marry as long as unjust laws require them to be financially dependent on their husbands. She believes that as long as spouses truly love each other, a wife can find being dependent on her husband pleasant. She seems to think that the greatest right of a woman is to be loved. If a woman is loved, all of her other rights will be granted to her. Erminie does not worry about urging politicians to change women's legal rights because she trusts that her family will never be unjust towards her. She is not a feminist because if she were, she would be more insistent about women's social rights instead of embracing her role as a housekeeper and depending on her father.²³

Britomarte is a feminist at the beginning of the novel, but she quickly feels tempted to stop being a "man-hater" and therefore to give up, as she assumes, her stance as "a woman's champion."²⁴ Less than twenty-four hours after meeting Erminie's brother, Justin, Britomarte blushes when he sits next to her, and his remarks on the local scenery inspire an "unusual tremor" in her that leaves her speechless.²⁵ Britomarte tries to kill her love for Justin, thinking that marriage and women's rights are not compatible due to male hegemony. Southworth portrays Britomarte at this point in the novel as struggling for balance between understanding women's social and political rights and comprehending women's personal and domestic rights. Britomarte neglects her own welfare and personal fulfillment as a woman in order to promulgate feminism because she thinks that her alternative is becoming a True Woman.

Britomarte might seem to become a True Woman because her emotions challenge her intellectual insistence on female equality and independence. Although she destroys a letter from Erminie that mentions Justin, she cries and kisses it first.²⁶ She tries to be independent, but she feels that her life is linked to Justin's. During a shipwreck, Britomarte passionately resists boarding a lifeboat without Justin, faints when he forces her to leave him, and becomes "almost insane" despite her insistence that she loves him only as if he were her brother.²⁷ Britomarte does not convince even herself when pretending that she does not love him, and her profound attachment leads her to feel that her life is almost not worthless if he dies. When Justin enlists in the Union army, she decides to disguise herself as a soldier. Her main motivation is joining him, not helping her native country. Since Real Womanhood is "fiercely nationalistic," Britomarte might seem to be a True Woman due to neglect of her patriotic duty.²⁸ Britomarte's emotions do not control her almost automatic refusals to Justin's proposals, but they influence her other thoughts and actions to the point that she cannot tolerate separation from him. Britomarte's emotions might seem to overwhelm her feminism and convert her to True Womanhood.

Britomarte's intense emotions and intellectual response to them, however, are a sign not of True Womanhood, but of Real Womanhood. Although Britomarte sentimentalizes Erminie's letter about Justin, she quickly realizes that she does not want to indulge her emotions, destroys the letter, and continues to reject Justin's perturbing proposals, proving the strength of her will. Britomarte's seeming hysterics during the shipwreck might remind readers of the "derangements of the nervous system" to which many nineteenth-century doctors claimed women were prone and to which True Womanhood advocates pointed as proof that women were overstrung.²⁹ Britomarte, however, reacts to a

harrowing scene of death with a trait of Real Womanhood, her feelings of duty towards her loved one. Britomarte's disguising herself as a soldier in order to protect Justin emphasizes the Real Woman's responsibility towards those whom she loves. Although Britomarte believes that romantic love is subordinate to love of country, patriotism alone might not induce her to disguise herself and risk her life. When both a country and an individual need her help, however, Britomarte acts quickly and decidedly. Britomarte's tenacious love for Justin and the Union, along with her powerful will, indicate that she is a Real Woman.

Southworth thinks that Britomarte lacks balance between her intellect and emotion because her conclusions concerning women's societal rights prevent her from marrying the man whom she loves. "Woman's Rights had her heel upon the neck of woman's love," Southworth writes.³⁰ The only way for Britomarte to reunite her intellect and emotions is by accepting Justin's recurring marriage proposals.³¹ His "ineffable tenderness and infinite love" brings out the "womanhood kept bound and captive in the lowest depths of her heart by pride and principle."³² Southworth agrees with Britomarte that women deserve more respect and freedom, but Southworth does not want the rigidity of Britomarte's women's rights beliefs to stifle her emotional life. Southworth shows Britomarte as intellectually brilliant because of her concern for women's equality, but also as foolish because she does not respect her own woman's role by entering into the vocation of wifehood to which her emotions direct her.

After eliminating the hypothesis that Britomarte marries Justin because of emotions characteristic of True Womanhood, readers might think that she marries because she intellectually adopts True Womanhood notions of dependence on men. According to Southworth, Britomarte learns the "truth": that women are "helpless" without men.³³ Britomarte is continually reminded of her physical inferiority to men; during a storm at sea, she is too fragile to be outside of the cabin; when she protests that she wants to stay with Justin after the ship wrecks, he lifts her up like a "kitten" and places her in a lifeboat; while she, Justin, and a servant, Judy, live on a desert island, she is too weak to help with many physical tasks.³⁴ The language describing women's physical inferiority is explicit, and Britomarte's new belief in women's need for men's assistance might make her seem like a dependent True Woman.

Southworth, however, does not seem to define "helpless" in the way that True Womanhood advocates did.³⁵ "The 'True' woman . . . was too much beset by her chronic biological disposition to have [a] stout constitution, [a] fearless active life, and . . . steady nerves."³⁶ Britomarte markedly breaks this stereotype when she is a strong and intrepid Union spy. She walks for days through farmland and woods without any resources to help her in case she is injured or attacked, keeps pace with soldiers, slashes herself with wounds in order to look like an experienced Confederate soldier, lives in a food-deprived guerrilla camp under the constant strain of keeping up her disguise, guards a door for a night while the guerrillas plan raids, creeps through woods during a storm and then rides a horse during a nocturnal escape from the guerrilla camp, climbs down a tree to escape imprisonment, and shoots a Confederate. While Southworth might assert that women are physically inferior to men, she seems to believe that women are intrinsically hardy, and can exercise and handle stress adroitly.

Britomarte's keen intellect, therefore, would dismiss the proposition that women were intrinsically incapable of performing physical feats that required steady nerves because she would recognize the significance of her espionage exploits. When Southworth and Britomarte, then, state that women are "helpless" without men, they do not mean that women are entirely dependent, but that tall and muscular men sometimes carry a "fat sheep weighing more than sixty pounds" on their backs better than "medium size" women.³⁷ Women and men are better at different types of tasks, and while Britomarte could not carry a sheep when Justin could, Justin could not scramble down a tree with Britomarte's agility.³⁸ Southworth champions recognition of women's equality with men but also of the differences between the genders. Britomarte's realization that men and women have diverse physical strengths and weaknesses is indicative of a stage in the process of her becoming a Real Woman who appreciates her unique, womanly talents.

Britomarte finally concludes that prudent marriage, not marriage laws, determines women's welfare because many men are good. Women's social conditions need to be improved, but as long as they choose dedicated husbands, they are safe from their husbands taking advantage of the unjust laws. Britomarte abandons her misandrist resolutions that are based on assumptions about how women should fight for equality and marries Justin as an expression of her own right to respect, happiness, and love. Britomarte understands that women experience discrimination, but at the beginning of the novel draws the distorted conclusion that women should avoid all men until the government recognizes women's rights. Britomarte's method of promoting Woman's Rights changes although her belief in them does not waver, implying that Southworth agrees with Britomarte that women deserve more rights, but disagrees with her initial conclusion, portraying female characters as happy only after they find balance between social and familial rights.

The secondary female characters in the novel, including Elfie, Alberta, and Judy, display prominent traits that resemble Real Womanhood. The vivacious Elfie, Britomarte and Erminie's friend, develops into a Real Woman due to the challenges of the Civil War. Elfie hatefully threatens to kill her Confederate boyfriend and wishes that the Union would execute him, but eventually forgives his mistake and compassionately nurses him after he is wounded and taken

to a Union hospital. Once she mends her relationship and she is simultaneously loyal to the Union, she is a veritable Real Woman, who understands her personal, family-oriented role as a cultivator of life as well as her social role as a devotee of justice. The Confederate antagonist, Alberta, displays the Real Woman qualities of bravery and loyalty because she follows her husband into enemy territory and rides into battles with him. Although she betrays her country, the action is not characteristic of any of the branches of ideal womanhood, and her death in a skirmish expresses her determined dedication to her political views and to her husband. The servant Judy, who is shipwrecked on a desert island along with Britomarte and Justin, howls over lack of tea, supposed fear of wild animals, and a fight with pirates. She, however, is not a True Woman because her howls are not manifestations of fragility, but of vigorous and unabashed emotion. Her quaint mannerisms, including bluntness and taking the devil's name in vain, distinguish her as unreserved, the opposite of a meek, submissive, and inhibited True Woman. Elfie, Alberta, and Judy demonstrate that Real Womanhood transcends national and class-based boundaries.

Southworth depicts Real Women as diverse and widespread in *Britomarte*. The only perfect type of the Real Woman throughout the novel is Erminie, but many other women display qualities which are essential to Real Womanhood, and two of the characters, Britomarte and Elfie, metamorphose from persons who are overly concerned with social rights into ones who recognize how to balance social and familial roles. The events in *Britomarte* imply that Real Womanhood is a universal possibility as long as women develop their intellectual and physical talents, balance their intellects and emotions, and participate in societal and familial tasks to the best of their ability. Southworth, therefore, likely believed in the ideals of Real Womanhood, agreeing with her character Britomarte that women need more rights but rejecting her initial conclusion that women should avoid all men and focus on taking over societal roles until the government reforms.

The three factors of easy divorce, early marriage, and deficient moral and physical education which Southworth denounces in the introduction to her 1849 novel *The Deserted Wife* match with specific situations in the novel *Britomarte*, indicating consistency in her conviction of Real Womanhood. Elfie scornfully condemns both her Confederate boyfriend and the Confederate cause by saying: "If I were fool enough to marry you this week, why, next week, or next month you might secede from me!"³⁹ In the introduction to *The Deserted Wife*, Southworth criticizes the breaking of marriage vows, an action upon which Real Women frowned because it seemed to communicate women's family roles as insignificant and because men who deserted their wives did not seem to respect them. In *Britomarte*, Erminie's impatient fiancé, Colonel Eastworth, beseeches her father to let her marry although she is only sixteen. Erminie's caring father denies his request because she is too young. Southworth depicts the scheming miscreant Eastworth as an approver of early marriage, implying that it is unwise, and in the introduction, she condemns it due to girls' inability to handle marital responsibilities. Real Womanhood advocates referred to early marriage as a "curse" and "demanded (especially for girls) that full education, physical growth, and mature judgment be acquired before a girl considered the subject seriously."⁴⁰ Southworth recommended daily aerobic and anaerobic exercise, time outdoors, wholesome food, and cold baths, which would prevent women from being "delicate," a quality of True Womanhood.⁴¹ Britomarte and her friends seem to be anything but "delicate": Britomarte is a fearless soldier and spy, Erminie walks through hospitals for hours while ministering to ill soldiers, Elfie has a "healthy young appetite" despite the distress of being kidnapped, and Alberta accompanies her guerrilla husband everywhere, including battles.⁴² Southworth believes that if women receive adequate physical educations, they will be happy and not be tempted towards immoralities such as divorce. Her beliefs regarding marriage and education correspond to the ideals of Real Womanhood. Southworth wanted to empower women to excel morally, intellectually, and physically inside and outside of the domestic sphere.

Southworth hints that she can relate personally to gender discrimination and prefers the ideal of Real Womanhood over those of True Womanhood and feminism in *Britomarte*. Britomarte recounts the fact that in a public school, a widowed female teacher with five children receives only \$250 per annum, while a male teacher holding an identical position receives \$1000. Southworth described herself as a "widow in fate, though not a widow in fact" because her husband deserted her and their children.⁴³ She taught in public schools with a salary of \$250 per annum. The fact that both Southworth and her fictional character Britomarte depict the same situation of a widow receiving an unjust salary of \$250 strongly suggests that Southworth agrees with Britomarte on women's rights based on her own experience of unequal wages.

Southworth associates women's rights with abolitionism, which she supported, in *Britomarte*, portraying the emancipation of women as moral as the liberation of slaves. Justin speaks to Britomarte about "those social reforms that were occupying the minds of all philanthropists . . . the abolition of slavery [and] the emancipation of woman."⁴⁴ Southworth was "capable of intellectually understanding the injustice of slavery and the moral conviction that it must be abolished."⁴⁵ She is likely to have listed abolitionism with women's rights because she believed in both of them. As a conscientious author who "worked hard . . . to make her moral intentions clear," Southworth would have tried to leave no doubt concerning the moral goodness of women's rights in the minds of her readers.⁴⁶

Southworth knew that what she wrote reached nearly every literate person in America, and said that because the novelist had a larger audience than any preacher, her spiritual responsibility was greater and that she “must teach Christian lessons in parables as our Lord and Savior did.”⁴⁷ Because Southworth believed in the moral goodness of Real Womanhood, she tried to promote it in her novels. Readers imbibed Southworth’s morals, not only because the novels which contained them were sensational, but because the readers viewed morals as a part of the enjoyment of reading domestic fiction. The scholar Nina Baym states, “The lesson itself is an entertainment in that the heroine’s triumph over so much adversity and so many obstacles is profoundly pleasurable to those readers who identify with her.”⁴⁸ Nineteenth-century readers, then, expected to find morals that they liked in fiction, and since popular novelists such as Southworth wrote for a wide audience, the morals in their works must have been generally accepted. Southworth’s audience was enthusiastic enough about Real Womanhood that she was the best-selling American novelist of the nineteenth-century.

3. Conclusion

Southworth, therefore, influenced her American audience to continue approving Real Womanhood, and her audience implied through purchasing her novels that she should continue to promote it. When studying the nineteenth-century, searching for models of Real Womanhood could be useful because it seems to have been a common concept to which women of all classes in all of the United States could relate. Scholars might appreciate and evaluate nineteenth-century domestic fiction, women’s rights, and developments of American cultural support of women’s rights in a more informed manner if they associate them with Real Womanhood as well as feminism. Real Womanhood is especially significant for historiography, especially that which attempts to describe accurately the influence of women, their domestic and societal roles, and their fiction on the Civil War and Reconstruction.

E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *Britomarte* suggests that women accepted their return to conventional roles after they entered into traditionally male roles during the Civil War because the ideal of Real Womanhood emphasized familial and societal balance, and women could still participate in community despite their pecuniary losses and household occupations. Because “the question of how the multitude of these . . . women coped with the political adjustments and other dislocations of wartime . . . remains largely unexplored,” making a definitive statement regarding how women reacted to returning Union and Confederate soldiers replacing them in occupational positions is difficult, yet a general assumption is that “the majority of American women were *forced* to return to their traditional domestic roles following the end of the war” (emphasis mine).⁴⁹ The many believers of the common ideal of Real Womanhood, however, likely would have eagerly performed societal duties during the War in order to help their communities, but also would have been happy to spend more time looking after their families when men claimed their occupations after the War. Based on the sentiments that Southworth expresses in *Britomarte*, Real Womanhood influenced women to embrace their family life while pushing for social rights instead of to indignantly perform household chores while longing to go back to the workforce. *Britomarte* itself could have influenced women to continue asking for rights without being activists since many women liked the Real Womanhood morals in the story and often identified with fictional heroines.

A literary analyzation of E.D.E.N. Southworth and her novel *Britomarte* influenced by Frances Cogan’s model of Real Womanhood reconciles seeming contradictions regarding women’s rights within domestic fiction, allows readers to understand many nineteenth-century novelists as decided supporters of women’s rights with specific and concrete beliefs, and shows the popularity of an alternative model to feminism and True Womanhood. The seeming women’s rights conflict in *Britomarte* is resolved when the characters realize their societal and familial missions, effectively becoming Real Women, which implies that Southworth propagated women’s rights through the medium of Real Womanhood. Southworth’s values must have been mainstream because her audience signaled approval of ones conveyed in her novels by spending more money on her novels than those of any other nineteenth-century American author. Current feminist interpretations of Southworth’s and other domestic novelists’ works likely tend towards anachronism due to the apparent cultural acceptance and popularity of Real Womanhood.

Analyzation of *Britomarte* through the lens of Real Womanhood suggests a revised approach to analyzing the works of Southworth and other writers of domestic fiction and a new angle with which to approach Civil War historiography. Real Womanhood is the inclusive solution to bifurcated political readings because it compromises separate emphases on the public and private spheres. Reading *Britomarte* as a novel that expresses women’s determination to obtain their rights as an expression of Real Womanhood instead of or in addition to expressions of feminism exemplifies an transformative interpretive method that scholars can use for nearly all nineteenth-century novels because of the popularity of Real Womanhood. The method of using Real Womanhood as a critical lens validates the relevance of domestic novels, altering the common view of them as either as pitifully antifeminist or as mildly feminist.

Interpreting E.D.E.N. Southworth's novel *Britomarte* in conjunction with Frances Cogan's model of Real Womanhood represents the countless possibilities for redefining scholarly approaches to nineteenth-century fiction and history in light of an expanded definition of women's rights.

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