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Decadent Phelps: New Womanhood and the Decentered Self in

*Confessions of a Wife*

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Abstract

Most scholars associate the popular, prolific, and respected writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), who was one of the most important American women writers of her generation, with the mid nineteenth century. In contrast, this essay argues for the salience of her late novel *Confessions of a Wife* (1902) by situating it within New Woman, aesthetic and decadent writing. Although Phelps is occasionally treated as a New Woman writer, it is the political New Woman in *The Story of Avis* or *The Silent Partner* upon which scholars have focused. In this essay, I read the decadent New Woman interested in exploring sexual gratification and forbidden emotions in *Confessions of a Wife*. In this late novel, Phelps advances her critique of marriage and exploration of the divided self by engaging in aesthetic motifs like an extravagant throwing of the voice, a welter of references from material culture, and references to Oriental tales. Such aesthetic motifs enable Phelps to foreground the decentered nature of subjectivity and particularly the subjectivity of women who desire sexual gratification, loyal companionship, and intellectual sustenance.

## Essay

Once a literary scene evolves, what is the significance of new writing by aging writers? When *Confessions of a Wife* (1902) was published, its author, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, was 58. A popular, prolific, and respected writer of novels, short stories, poems, and essays, she was one of the most prominent U.S. women writers of her generation. Her religious novel, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), established her as a writer of literary talent and was one of the bestselling novels of the nineteenth century both in the USA and Britain. *Gates* was followed by several other novels and religious texts that garnered positive reviews, and stories of her women's rights activism was reported in the prominent British periodical the *Englishwoman's Review*. Although forgotten by the mid twentieth century, Phelps is now best remembered for her novels *The Silent Partner* (1871) and *The Story of Avis* (1878). These novels treat the topics of women and professionalism with moral earnestness and a faith in a Christian god. She is known for writing what Susan S. Williams calls "ethical realism" and for saying "art for truth's sake."<sup>1</sup> By the time she wrote *Confessions of a Wife*, the literary scene had changed. Aestheticism and decadence were all the rage, with their belief in art for art's sake and their questing for Eastern sensuousness over Christian righteousness.<sup>2</sup> The New Woman novel was in vogue; many popular novels overtly questioned whether women should marry, become mothers, or go to work.<sup>3</sup> By using aesthetic techniques to explore a previously unrecorded female consciousness, many white women writers in Britain and the USA combined the trends into a special brand of female decadence.

*Confessions of a Wife* takes into account these developments in aesthetically and politically notable ways. The twentieth-century novel advances Phelps's previous thinking. Phelps is already considered a New Woman writer: lists of U.S. New Woman fiction include three novels by Phelps, *The Story of Avis* (1877) for its portrayal of a woman artist, *The Silent Partner* (1871) for its portrayal of women wage earners and women reformers, and *Doctor*

*Zay* (1882) for its portrayal of a woman doctor.<sup>4</sup> *Confessions of a Wife* fits even more readily into turn-of-the-century transatlantic feminist literary developments. In *The Story of Avis* (1877), Phelps details the psychological effects of a female consciousness divided between sexual desire and professionalism, and she critiques the institution of marriage for wearing down women artists with sordid domestic concerns. In the twentieth-century novel, Phelps furthers this critique of marriage and the exploration of the divided self. *Confessions* may well have influenced New Woman decadent writing directly, because the novel caused quite a stir when it first appeared in serial and then book form in 1902. Various American newspapers heralded it as “the most talked about book of the fall,” and the American book release had to be delayed for a week because of vast advanced orders.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile it was reprinted by two publishers in Britain, and one of them issued a third edition of 5000 copies.<sup>6</sup> However its publication under a pseudonym (Phelps never publicly claimed authorship) has contributed to its long-term obscurity.<sup>7</sup>

The prevailing critical consensus is that Phelps did her best work when she was young. Most scholars focus on *The Gates Ajar*, *The Silent Partner*, *The Story of Avis*, and *Doctor Zay*, with many dismissing her late novels as only a weak echo of a mid-century song. It is Phelps’s early novels that are available to readers in affordable scholarly editions, particularly *The Story of Avis*. In the 1985 edition, Carol Farley Kessler proclaims *The Story of Avis* to be Phelps’s “best and most socially explosive novel.”<sup>8</sup> In her introduction and her influential biography of Phelps, Kessler associates Phelps’s early work with feminist plots in which women choose not to marry and her late works with conservative plots in which women do marry, are unfulfilled in the institution, and yet resigned to their fate.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Susan Coultrap-McQuin argues that Phelps’s late work suffers in artistry and politics because of changes in the literary marketplace that devalued sentimentality, moral instruction, and religiosity.<sup>10</sup>

Other more modulated views see late Phelps as offering original and provocative explorations of marriage and New Womanhood. Ronna Coffey Privett argues that the late texts do not accede to a conservative ideology but accept “the possibility that a passionate relationship (in her society, read ‘marriage’) provides some outlet for many women’s romantic and nurturing feelings, emotions which were not completely satisfied by education, employment, or reform work”.<sup>11</sup> Following from Privett, Janet Peterson Gerstner reads *Confessions of a Wife* as combining “palpable authorial anxiety” with “bold textual acts”.<sup>12</sup> Although Gerstner’s essay is an extensive published treatment of *Confessions*, she does not resolve the contradiction identified in her title (“Victorian Woman *Or* New Woman? Woman *Or* Artist?”).

What I propose is that in fact *Confessions of a Wife* does transcend this contradiction by foregrounding the decentered (not just divided) nature of all selves and particularly the selves of women who desire sexual gratification, loyal companionship, and intellectual sustenance. The main character, Marna Trent, does not have to resolve her conflicted longings for autonomy and sexual gratification because her self, unlike Avis’s, is allowed to be plural. The novel’s exploration of the self is intimately bound up with its aesthetic motifs. When using the term “aestheticism”, I refer to the work by Talia Schaffer in *Forgotten Female Aesthetes* and *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* and Elaine Showalter in *Daughters of Decadence*.<sup>13</sup> Despite their differing terminology (Showalter uses the term “decadent” while Schaffer insists on the term “aesthete”), both demonstrate how writers use lush description, an extravagant throwing of the narratorial voice, pagan and Oriental fantasy, and arch language to explore forbidden areas of the mind. In contrast to Phelps’s best-known work, this writing is not morally earnest and does not look political. In the male aesthetes like Oscar Wilde or Arthur Symons, such textual forms further an intense search for immediate

experience. In female aesthetes, such textual forms explore the possibility of women's political, sexual, and artistic emancipation.

This linguistic experimentation makes women's aesthetic writing a precursor of modernism, despite the prevailing view that modernism was a male-authored literary movement. Such a focus on linguistic experimentation, shared by Showalter, Schaffer, and Marianne DeKoven<sup>14</sup> has sparked some criticism: many New Woman writers used realist techniques to further New Woman aims (as Phelps does in her earlier work), and scholars like Ann Ardis and Martha Patterson argue that the field's obsessive focus on modernism obscures overtly political work of the period.<sup>15</sup> There are strengths and weaknesses to both overtly political realist texts and covertly political modernist texts. In any case, as Ardis, Patterson and Ann Heilmann have documented, there are two sides to the New Woman coin, the serious New Woman fighting for careers and professionalism and the decadent New Woman exploring sexual gratification and forbidden emotions.<sup>16</sup> By reading *Confessions* alongside *The Story of Avis* and *Walled In* (1907)—another late Phelps novel I briefly discuss later in the essay—one can see that Phelps was fascinated by both sides of the New Woman coin, in different novels, and at different stages of her career. The analysis of decadence and New Womanhood in *Confessions* should help us see these movements differently. If Phelps wrote both mid-century women's literature and *fin-de-siècle* New Woman writing, then there was continuity rather than rupture between the movements. As for decadence, Phelps shows that it penetrated deeply into the American scene, it was not just a man's genre but a fundamental ingredient in women's exploration of female consciousness, and, in safe forms, it could be popular with the common reader.

### **Decadent style**

A brief reading of *The Story of Avis* illustrates just how far Phelps came between her early and late work. More so than *The Silent Partner* or *Doctor Zay*, *The Story of Avis* showcases an interest in emotions and self-transformation. Avis wonders about “the strange changes of her life” as she copes with returning from Europe to her hometown; the narrator declares that marriage frightens all brides and grooms because it involves change; Avis changes when she falls in love, and again when she develops enough domestic inclinations to choose wedding china that expresses her individuality; her romantic feelings for Philip change in the fatigue of caring for a baby; and Philip’s feelings for women are inconstant.<sup>17</sup> The novel criticizes marriage on the grounds that it expects people to remain the same, even though both they and their perceptions of their spouses undergo such remarkable changes.

Change in the novel is conceived as frightening, scandalous, and destructive. For example, when Avis confronts Barbara Allen over her indiscretions with Philip, the narrative emphasizes Avis’s fear of change:

A certain terror fell upon her at finding in her own heart no sting sharper than that of a sad scorn. She had rather hoped that she might find herself a little jealous of Barbara. She hung over her love for her husband as we hang over a precious, diseased life, of which we have not the courage to despair. She fanned it wildly [...] With a sickening dismay she perceived that Philip—he too—began to seem to her small and far, like a figure seen in the valley of an incoherent dream. She felt as if she had suddenly stepped into a world of pygmies, and had a liliputian code to learn before she could take up the duties of citizenship therein.<sup>18</sup>

The passage focuses on consciousness. It spatializes consciousness, comparing it to a map of physical regions, with the regions heavily coded as acceptable or unacceptable. In fact, the forbidden space where Philip can be inconstant in love is rendered exotic and “other” in terms of race. This technique of spatialization emphasizes feelings, their intensity and their

disruptiveness. Because change is conceived as frightening, Avis decides to preserve her love for Philip, to not let it change. In this novel, Phelps associates constancy in love with the immortality of the human soul: “No argument for the immortality of the human soul seemed to her so triumphant as the faith and constancy of one single human love”.<sup>19</sup> Phelps risked her literary reputation by writing about consciousness with such candour and extravagance in the 1870s. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reviewer of *The Story of Avis* complained that “the author represents unhealthy and abnormal moods of mind and emotions as being natural and typical. [...] There is about its moral atmosphere suggestive of an air sick and heavy with strange and cloying scents”.<sup>20</sup> We can see, then, that here she anticipates her aesthetic turn. The novel’s ending, however, contains such forbidden emotions: Philip dies before Avis gives up her determination to avoid change.

By 1902, 25 years after *Avis*, the literary market had changed to allow decadent emotions to boil to the surface with less risk of being called morbid. *Confessions of a Wife* explores forbidden emotions fearlessly, and it was first serialized in the highbrow *Century Magazine*, a publication read by many middle- and upper-class readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Reviewers associated the novel with the diaries of Marie Bashkirtseff, Laurence Houseman’s *The Englishwoman’s Love Letters*, and Mary MacLane’s *The Story of Mary MacLane* (1902). The reviews (and letters to the editor, which appeared in several newspapers) were hotly mixed. The novel was praised for being “clever and amusing” and “extremely interesting” with “marvellous accuracy of observation”, and for “deserv[ing] all the notice it has attracted.”<sup>21</sup> Yet many complained it was “hysterical”, “morbidly analytical” or “unwholesome”,<sup>22</sup> suggesting that women revealing their most secret emotions in an extravagant, decadent style still elicited anxiety.

In its content alone *Confessions* criticizes the institution of marriage more sharply than does *The Story of Avis*. Marna Trent’s engagement to Dana Herwin feels like an interruption

of her autonomy. Infidelity is a strong possibility; Dana prefers singing and playing the violin with the fun-loving Minnie Curtis, and once Dana is in Uruguay, Marna grows attached to the family doctor, Robert Hazelton. Homosexuality is invoked as a cause of marital strife in a reference to Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) and gossip about "other men and other pleasures, *any* other pleasures but those he [a husband] shares with her [a wife]".<sup>23</sup> Divorce became a stock fictional ingredient in American novels during the 1880s, and here, divorce is chatted about casually—"a sensible, middle-aged woman once told me that she and her husband came to the brink of a divorce over the first house they built" (125). Marna's friend, the aptly named Mrs. Fannie Freer, is an abandoned wife who raises her children on meager earnings; in their conversations, Mrs. Freer exemplifies modern practicality rather than Victorian martyrdom. Marna's critique of marriage is vocal: "If a woman does not make a man happy, has she any right to assume that it is his fault?" (155).<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the narrative voice of the novel participates in aestheticism's turn toward the subjective. As Gerstner argues, the novel is an example of diary fiction, and the diary format highlights shifting identities. The novel is ostensibly the diary of Marna Trent as discovered in an excised, disorganized condition by Mary Adams; Phelps published the novel under Adams's name. Readers are treated to Marna's secret thoughts about the books she culls from her father's library, the sex appeal of her two suitors, her disinterest in religion, her love of beautiful objects, her rage over the inequality of marriage and her inner self. Undated or casually dated entries filled with ellipses and one-line paragraphs lend the novel a disorganized feel.<sup>25</sup> Following from Gerstner, we can say that *Confessions* takes *The Story of Avis* one step further by becoming "the story of Marna as told by herself".

*Confessions* announces its difference from Phelps's oeuvre not only by imitating diary entries (which Phelps already did in *The Gates Ajar*) but also by playing with aesthetic style. The narrative voice is unashamedly girlish, confident, candid, curious, and careless: it is an

arch throwing of the voice much practiced by female aesthetes.<sup>26</sup> The first paragraph proclaims that Marna is more heathen than Christian because of her love of beauty. She airily flaunts her intuitive attitude to knowledge:

To-day I found something which pleased me [...] in that old French book of Father's that I read aloud in to keep up my accent [...] it seems to me to be worth while, which is saying something, for most things do not strike me that way. (4)

While Avis mourns the loss of her artistic outlet, Marna relishes in the slapdash nature of her only artistic outlet—her diary entries; this decadent quality makes her less of a stand-in than Avis was for the highly accomplished author. Caprice and humility are common in Phelps's narration, but the extremity of this narrator takes her to new territory. The style resembles the literary experimentation of aestheticism, both in its elliptical quality and in its precocious voice eager for immediate sensuous experience. There are direct stylistic affinities between *Confessions* and female aestheticism, including “The Amber Gods” (1860) by Harriet Prescott Spofford, “Three Dreams in a Desert” (1890) by Olive Schreiner, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Now Spring Has Come” (1893) by George Egerton, “An Egyptian Cigarette” (1900) by Kate Chopin, “The Undefinable: A Fantasia” (1908) by Sarah Grand, and *A Woman of Genius* (1912) by Mary Austin. Like *Confessions of a Wife*, these texts employ a precocious first person voice to explore the unarticulated and forbidden territories within an ostensibly respectable woman's mind.

By flaunting Marna's inner self, *Confessions of a Wife* works toward a theory of decentered subjectivity. For the novel is not just “the story of Marna as told by herself” but “the story of Marna as told by her multiple selves”. The modern theorists of subjectivity, Henri Bergson and William James, argued that consciousness was not composed of discrete parts, such as the geographically discrete entities that characterized Avis's self, but a stream that was always in flux. They emphasized that it is difficult to represent the true nature of our

“self in duration”.<sup>27</sup> Before Marna falls in love with Dana Herwin, she is divided between a respectable self and a rebellious self. The rebellious part imagines the bohemianism that would be available to her had she been born male:

Why, if I were a man, I should be outside, in the clubs, the streets, the theaters,--God knows where,--doing bohemian things, watching people in the slums, going to queer places with policemen, tramping up and down and watching the colored lights on the long bridges, taking tremendous walks out into the country, coming home at any hour, with a latch-key, and wearing a mackintosh—no, I should wear an oil-coat, a *long* oil-coat, and a fisherman’s sou’wester, and I should go,--I wonder where? and I should do—I wonder what? (10)

Walking in public, going to clubs, being a flâneuse, being “queer”, wearing sporty outdoor clothing, and holding a “latch-key” to enter and exit home independently were activities that became rallying points for New Woman writers; the “latch-key” as a symbol of New Womanhood is alluded to in the title of George Egerton’s *Keynotes* (1893). Avis too carries a latch-key; in this respect, she is ahead of her time. Denied such freedoms, Marna escapes to her garden on stormy nights and dances in loose-fitting nightclothes. On the outside she is a respectable drawing-room girl, but on the inside, she is “heathen.” (3) Marna often refers to her inner self as the “Wilderness Girl”. The Wilderness Girl swells with rage, passion, emotional lability, Native American “savage[ry]” (34), and violence: “There never was a more civilized woman who had more of the ‘forest primeval’ in her than I, and never one who was less suspected of it” (34). Marna claims that this rebellious self is hidden—so much so that while “my hand and my brain are writing this sentence, putting words together decently and in order”, the Wilderness Girl has “fled into a pathless place” where “there is no trail” (35). While *The Story of Avis* seeks to contain emotional inconsistency, *Confessions of a Wife*

creates a narrative style that allows for decadent explorations of a self who falls in love, out of love, and in love with a different man.

### **The decadent self**

Once the courtship between Dana and Marna begins in earnest, the different parts of Marna's self become less well organized, less easy to control, and less easy to label. Wrongly placing Phelps solely in the midcentury, Phelps scholars have read the self-division in Phelps's work as a clear-cut division between a respectable self and a rebellious self. Coultrap-McQuin identifies Phelps's struggle with a dual nature with the conflict between professionalism and motherhood.<sup>28</sup> Gerstner expresses this self-division in terms of "Victorian womanhood" and "New Womanhood", a designation that obscures how many New Woman writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and George Egerton were also internally divided over the role of sexual gratification in marriage, maternity, and careers.<sup>29</sup> Yet rather than a divide between respectability and rebellion, *Confessions* stages a disorganized and amoral conflict between myriad aspects of the self. The conflicting selves are not conservative or progressive, Victorian or New Woman, but simply different. They are morally neutral and psychologically inevitable.

The conflict between passion and autonomy drives Marna's self-division. Marna's is a passionate story. She is courted by both Robert Hazelton, a short, plain thirty-something doctor, and Dana Herwin, a boyish lawyer with dark curly hair and "the bewildering beauty of a pagan god" (31). Robert's proposal warrants no attention whatsoever in the early pages of the diary, and it is only after the failure of Marna's marriage that she admits to rejecting Robert because of sexual taste. In contrast, Dana's stratagems dominate the early pages. During the storm, he sneaks up behind Marna and orders her into the shelter, where he professes his love, steals a kiss and proposes. Marna's conflicting desires for sexual

fulfillment and autonomy put her self in flux. After encountering Dana in the garden, Marna wonders “if this is the way people feel when they have done some dreadful thing – like one person before the deed and another person after” (13). The Wilderness Girl first emerges in the diary after she admits that she loves him (47) and again when she thinks of what they did in the room together after they got engaged (55); she emerges as an admission that Marna desires him as he desires her, and at the same time as a rebellion against that desire and a fear about the unsatisfying outlets available for such desire. The problem with the Wilderness Girl as a satisfactory articulation of the divisions within Marna is that the Wilderness Girl is also a Puritan who is dismissive of sexual need or stratagem. Marna is more “strenuous” (98) in this regard than any other female character, unlike her nemesis Minnie Curtis or her mother’s friend Mrs. Gray. These minor female characters downplay the moral and emphasize the amoral significance of Marna’s ceaseless indecision, her internal lability.

Similarly to aesthetic writing, the novel presents a dizzying array of references to material culture and literature: Sèvres porcelain; Wilton carpets (carpets made in Wilton, England after the style of Oriental carpets); frescoes; Bayard Taylor’s “The Bedouin Love Song,” Jayadeva Goswami’s twelfth-century poem the *Gita Govinda*, Max Müller’s *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879), and the Buddhist Wheel of Life. Female aesthetes commonly invoke Oriental references to explore passionate, sensuous alternatives to Western gender roles and bourgeois marriage. Examples include Spofford’s “The Amber Gods”, Schreiner’s “The Buddhist Priest’s Wife” (written 1891-2) and Chopin’s “An Egyptian Cigarette”. The New Woman novel *The Wheel of Life* (1906) by Ellen Glasgow features a society lady, Gerty Bridewell, who lounges in a Japanese kimono (much as Marna wears a red wrapper) while complaining about her husband’s infidelities and the difficulty of keeping up her beauty; Gerty proclaims “I’m bound to it—I can’t get away. I’m bound to the wheel”.<sup>30</sup> In *Confessions*, as in many other period texts, the Oriental references showcase the worldliness

of the Trent household.<sup>31</sup> The men in her family treat Marna as one of the family art objects. It is Dana who introduces Marna to Edwin Arnold's translation of the *Gita Govinda*. Marna embraces the Oriental objects to explore her own adventurousness, and is thus drawn into the men's vortex of exoticizing and controlling the Orient. Like so many other Americans and Europeans of the day, Marna's image of the Orient has less to do with the real experiences of Asian people than with her own search for permitted experiences of sexual and sensual pleasure. But this novel distinguishes itself from popular Orientalism in Marna's degree of self-consciousness and urgency. She seeks to resolve the differences between Oriental and Christian texts to create a new whole that works for the emancipated woman.

Is passionate love compatible with marriage? Marna continually asks herself this by reading far and wide, looking for a model that combines love and marriage successfully. She considers an inverted form of the Teutonic fairy tale of Undine, such as that told in Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811), in which a female water spirit *obtains* a soul by marrying a mortal. In this version, Undine is a water spirit who *loses* her soul by becoming engaged to a mortal. The inversion implies that passionate love destroys independent women.

An Oriental model for combining passionate desire with lifelong fidelity appears in the Radha and Krishna story. When Dana gives Marna a copy of Edwin Arnold's *Poems*, she finds "Indian Song of Songs", a translation of the *Gita Govinda*. The poem becomes a motif in the love story of Marna and Dana; it celebrates carnal and promiscuous love among goatherds and mortal Radha's lifelong fidelity to the god Krishna, despite his frequent absences. Marna and Dana's story parallels the tale; Marna remains faithful to Dana throughout their marriage, but Dana frequently leaves on business trips and vacations, eventually taking a consulship in Uruguay to shield his opium addiction. Reading the poem before her marriage, Marna concludes that Radha is too good for Krishna. But Radha and Krishna's joyous reunion at the end of their lives, prompting a second wedding ceremony full

of flowers, concludes both Arnold's translation and *Confessions of a Wife*, in which a matured Marna and convalescing Dana renew their love and commitment in the garden.

Christian readings require the most reworking. Marna often tries to convince herself that lovers' feelings of sexual "exhilaration" are actually sacred "exaltation" (72). She confides that happiness has made her "afraid" because of its potential to open up oceanic uncontrollable aspects of the self:

I am so happy that I am afraid. It is as if I were a wave—alive and strong this minute, but sure to be broken and spent the next. Happiness is a tide: it carries you only a little way at a time; but you have covered a vast space before you know that you are moving at all. (76)

Marna links that feeling with these lines from "Sung to a Friend" (1885) by Phelps (though not attributed on the pages of the diary), which in the original emphasize the sacred nature of eternal love:

By the law of the land and the ocean,  
I summon the tide eternal  
To flow for you and me. . . .  
When shall the flood-tide be? (77)

In her faulty memory Marna leaves out a line about God's hand, "By the hand that holdeth the torrent" that appeared in Phelps's collection, *Songs of the Silent World and Other Poems* (1885).<sup>32</sup> Without this line the poem emphasizes erotic feeling. The final line here, questioning how to identify, track, and time passionate love, is new. Marna eroticizes another element of the original poem by writing that she has become "a weed upon a wave" and "because I am a weed I do not buffet the wave, but love it" (82). This is an image of self lost in physical love. By revising her own Christian poetry and showing its parallels with pagan and Oriental literature, Phelps asserts the timeless and disruptive nature of passion.

The marriage between Marna and Dana sours within weeks of the wedding.

Descriptions multiply of a decentered self, as the following selection illustrates:

I seem to be adrift on all sides of my being. (99)

Dana does not have much time to devote himself to Father now. He seems to be whirled along. We all seem to be whirled along like the figures in the Wheel of Life drawn by some ancient Oriental people,--I forget who,--all ignorant that they are helpless, and all hurled on to a blind fate. (109)

It as if I had never existed before I loved him, and it is as if I had lived cycles since I became his wife. I have traversed worlds that astronomy never knew, and I am transmuted into a being whose nature I do not recognize. (110)

I am surcharged, like a Leyden jar, and every now and then there is a crash, a sort of explosion of the nerve-force, and I find I am a little weak and spent. (116)

Half the time I am sawn asunder by the conflict between love and self-respect. (164)

The date when a woman accepts the fact that the man she loves cannot or will not understand her, and that she must abandon the attempt to make him do so, is one of the birthdays of experience. These are as definite as the other sort of birthday—as my daughter's for instance, which occurs to-day. (178)

Like Avis, Marna feels conflicted between love and autonomy. Yet unlike Avis, Marna reaches for a cacophony of cultural reference: the reference to a Leyden jar surcharged with excess electricity plays on the medical discourse of neurasthenia, and the reference to the

Wheel of Life turns that Buddhist concept into a naturalistic trope for powerlessness in the face of inner and outer nature.

The decentered self is an important component of the novel's critique of marriage. For only part of Marna ever loved Dana, much as Marna only partially fulfills Dana's emotional, sexual, and professional desires. A self's inconsistency makes passionate love a bad foundation for a marriage. Marna's fascination with Buddhist reincarnation stems from an awareness that the hazards of domesticity have changed her:

I never was thought exacting in any other relation of life; but marriage makes a new being of a woman: a wife is as truly born into an unknown world as her child is. It seems to me that I have my own character to form, as completely as my daughter's. I, Marna Trent, slain on my wedding-day, am a transmigrated soul—the “twice-born”, as the Buddhist calls it. I am in my second existence. . . . Will there be any others? (144)

De La Motte Fouqué's *Undine* traces a transformation from fun-loving girlhood to conscience-stricken matronhood. But Buddhism offers the possibility of many existences, and Marna turns to that radical possibility at the novel's closing. Such a possibility is suggested by the character Mrs. Gray, who tells Marna, once her marriage sours, “My dear, marriage is full of phases. Don't mistake them for finalities” (149). There are conservative and radical interpretations of this cryptic advice. In the conservative reading, Marna could hope things get better. In the radical reading, she could recognize that none of us know our selves or our relationships that well.

Granted, the conservative ending tames some of this radical experimentation. Robert Hazelton is the most Christian of the novel's characters, and as he heals Dana, he exhorts Marna to be gentle with her erring husband. Robert treats the mentally ill, and he advises not subjective lability but marital fidelity and mental consistency: “nothing must come between yourself and him—not even the shadow of that which never has been and can never be—no

other feeling, no other thought” (336). Perhaps a conservative ending was necessary to fold the fragmented diary entries into a novelistic form; the novel resembles decadent short stories more than it resembles New Woman novels like Emma Frances Brooke’s *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), or Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925). The book editor of the *New York Times* certainly felt relieved by the ending, which meant that “the book, in book form, can safely be placed in the hands of both humanity’s halves”.<sup>33</sup> Despite this concession for the publishing world, Marna remains interested in romantic passion and fleeting experience. When Robert reveals his illicit desire for Marna-- “Something had happened. What? The lifting of an eyelash, the foray of a soul. Nothing more. Yet am I hurled by the movement of the drama” (227)--Marna resolves not to consider her life a clear unity. Indeed, Lori Duin Kelly speculates that Dana will die soon, leaving Marna free to marry her new love.<sup>34</sup> While Avis’s husband dies and her novel offers ample closure, this novel is comparatively open-ended.

## Conclusion

As Charlotte Rich argues, historians of New Womanhood often theorize the difference between the political New Woman and the sensuous New Woman as a difference of generation.<sup>35</sup> Many writers of Phelps’s generation sniffed at the New Women for being, as Phelps’s contemporary Rebecca Harding Davis put it, “pretentious” and “wordy,” “fond of regarding the women who went before her as ignorant, weak thralls of a tyrant.”<sup>36</sup>

Generational conflicts between feminists are not unique to the present day. In Phelps, however, one sees both types of New Woman novels written by one writer at different stages in her life. *Confessions of a Wife* can be read profitably by students interested in critiques of marriage, experiments with subjectivity, and female decadence. In this novel, Phelps invokes

new motifs to experiment with the new, less compartmentalized and less hierarchical selves that were coming to occupy authors more readily associated with decadence and New Womanhood. One can recognize its value better if one situates the novel within turn-of-the-century literary and social trends rather than seeing it as a reworking of mid-century themes or plots.

Another late Phelps novel--*Walled In* (1907)—is also a candidate for reading under the rubric of decadent New Womanhood. In this novel, a fun-loving, maritally unfaithful New Woman, Tessa Ferris, is a step-sister of a serious New Woman nurse, Honoria Tryde. By making the serious New Woman and the decadent New Woman loving stepsisters, Phelps signals the deeper allegiance between the two sides of the New Woman coin. She also works to heal certain generational divides within feminist writing.

Like many writers of the nineteenth century, Phelps was a prolific writer whose works carry readers into vastly different intellectual and artistic trends. Scholars might think of her the way that Leon Edel proposed scholars think of Henry James—as a writer with early, middle, and late stages that are discrete and equally valuable, not as a writer who did her most characteristic work at one point in her life.<sup>37</sup> The kind of attention that Edel and other scholars have paid to different stages in Henry James has not yet been paid to Phelps. Similarly, it would be rewarding to extend this attention to the different stages of a writer's career to some of Phelps's female contemporaries.<sup>38</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote about the question of marital incompatibility in *Pink and White Tyranny: A Society Novel* (1871),<sup>39</sup> a novel that does not, however, share *Confessions of a Wife's* focus on decentered subjectivity; Mary Wilkins Freeman qualified her celebration of female spinsterhood in such early stories as “A New England Nun” (1887) and “A Poetess” (1890) with an overt declaration of a spinster's ability to draw men's attention in “The Old-Maid Aunt” (1908). Scholars' understanding of

Freeman as a pre-feminist writer who celebrated asexual spinsters have prevented all but a few from appreciating other strands in her work.

Like those of Freeman or Stowe, Phelps's contributions deserve to be read outside the narrow pigeonholes in which scholars generally divide up the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead of placing her solely in the period in which she first established herself as a writer, scholars might recognize that her textual innovations and cultural commentary remained significant into the twentieth century, with useful things to say about the decentered New Woman self to the younger writers who had taken center stage. Re-evaluating Phelps in this manner affords a certain critical gratification. That this writer, in her fifties, was exploring new literary techniques and social trends demonstrates the continuing importance of writers across their long careers.

### **Acknowledgements**

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<sup>1</sup> Susan S. Williams, *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850-1900* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006), 156; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters From a Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 249.

<sup>2</sup> For overviews of aestheticism, particularly among white women, see Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999); Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2000). Aestheticism is often conflated with decadence, and although I agree with Schaffer that the term decadence has tended to privilege male writers, who were more distraught than women were at the thought of history declining, I find both terms indispensable in this instance

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because of the word decadence's association with languishing self-indulgence. On decadence see Elaine Showalter, ed. *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago, 1993); David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890-1926* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For overviews of New Woman fiction, see Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990); Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Martha Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2008); Charlotte Rich, *Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era* (St. Louis: U of Missouri P, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ann Heilmann, "The Awakening and New Woman Fiction," *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 99; Rich, 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> "Books of the Hour," *Saint Paul Globe*, 18 Oct. 1902: 6; "New Books and Magazines," *Omaha Daily Bee*, 14 Nov. 1902: 7; "Marna and Dana—The Most Talked-of Book of This Moment," *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1902: 751.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Blanck and Michael Winship, eds., "Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward (Mary Adams)," *Bibliography of American Literature*, Vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990) 420-51 (443); Advertisement, *Athenaeum* 1 Nov. 1902: 573.

<sup>7</sup> According to press at the time, only Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century Magazine*, where the novel was serialized, knew who the author was, but it is not clear from these reports whether he knew before or after the novel was accepted via the usual channels. "Books and Authors," *New-York Tribune*, 8 Nov. 1902: 11. The public knew that "Mary Adams" was a pseudonym, and many assumed it to be a pseudonym of an experienced writer because of the novel's craft; reviewers and letters to the editor made sport of suggesting many names, although Elizabeth Stuart Phelps came up most often, even while the novel was still being serialized. See for example "Boston Items," *New York Times* 1 June 1902: 328.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Farley Kessler, introduction to *The Story of Avis*, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1985) xiii-xxxii (xxi).

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<sup>9</sup> Carol Farley Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (Boston: Twayne, 1982). Lori Duin Kelly's literary biography is another useful source on the later fiction: *The Life and Works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Victorian Feminist Writer* (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing Co., 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990), 167-92.

<sup>11</sup> Ronna Coffey Privett, *A Comprehensive Study of American Writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, 1844-1911: Art for Truth's Sake* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 2003), 203.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Peterson Gerstner, "Victorian Woman Or New Woman? Woman Or Artist? Anxiety, Authority, and Ambivalence in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Confessions of a Wife*," *Women in Dialogue: (M)uses of Culture*, ed. Dilek Direnç, Günseli Sönmez İşçi and Klára Kolinská (Newcastle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 43-66 (45).

<sup>13</sup> Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, Talia Schaffer, ed., *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Pearson, 2007); Showalter, "Daughters of Decadence".

<sup>14</sup> Marianne DeKoven, "Gendered Doubteness and the 'Origins' of Modernist Form," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 8.1 (Spring 1989): 19-42.

<sup>15</sup> Ardis and Patterson argue this point in dramatically different ways. While Ardis argues against the conservative politics of high modernism's focus on formal experimentation, she locates openly angry precursors to modernism in the works of British New Woman writers. Most significantly for the present article, she argues that the Victorian conception of identity as "something seamless, unified, and consistent over time" is shattered when the novelists attempt to portray women grappling with the conflict between sexual desire, respectability, and autonomy (Ardis, 3). She sees this redefining of female subjectivity especially in Emma Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* (1894); I find Phelps's *Confessions* to be even more revolutionary than Brooke's novel. Drawing on the works of U.S. New Woman writers, Martha Patterson argues that organizing women's writing of the period under the rubric of the women artist obscures writers, often writers of color, who lacked access to the high art establishment.

<sup>16</sup> Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*.

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Avis*, ed. Carol Farley Kessler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1985), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Phelps, *Avis*, 187-88.

<sup>19</sup> Phelps, *Avis*, 201.

<sup>20</sup> “New Books,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 31 Oct. 1877, in *The Story of Avis*, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, ed. Carol Farley Kessler, 273.

<sup>21</sup> “New Books,” *The Sun* [New York], 1 Nov. 1902: 9-10; “Marna and Dana”; “Some Notable New Novels,” *Houston Daily Post*, 21 Dec. 1902, 29; “Books and Writers,” *Evening Star* [Washington, D.C.], 29 Nov. 1902: 24.

<sup>22</sup> “Confessions of a Wife,” *Indianapolis Journal*, 27 Nov. 1902, Part Two: 2; Eva Eickemeyer Rowland, “Marna and Barbara Again,” *New York Times*, 3 Jan. 1903: 10; “A Hectic-Hysterical Love Story,” *Academy* [London], 1 Nov. 1902: 467.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Confessions of a Wife* (New York: Century, 1902), 154. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>24</sup> In a study that charts popular discourse about divorce in the United States through the twentieth century, Kristin Celello argues that a double standard in marriage still prevails; people expect the woman to do more of the “work” required to keep a modern marriage intact. Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009). In the context of popular marriage discourse, Marna’s statement seems prescient.

<sup>25</sup> Gerstner, “Victorian Woman or New Woman?,” 54-56.

<sup>26</sup> Schaffer, 5, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Coultrap-McQuin, 170.

<sup>29</sup> Gerstner, “Victorian Woman or New Woman?”.

<sup>30</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *The Wheel of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1906), n. pag., *Project Gutenberg*, 19 Nov. 2014 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14696/14696.txt>.

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<sup>31</sup> The ethnic and gender politics of white women's Orientalism have been aptly explored by Mari Yoshihara, and although she does not study Phelps, I draw on her discussion here. Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 192-194.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "Sung to a Friend," *Songs of the Silent World and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), n.p., *Project Gutenberg*, 2 Dec. 2014  
<https://archive.org/stream/songsofthesilent33486gut/pg33486.txt>.

<sup>33</sup> "Marna and Dana."

<sup>34</sup> Kelly, 113.

<sup>35</sup> Rich, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Harding Davis, "The Newly Discovered Woman" [1893], *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*, ed. Jean Pfaelzer (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995), 405-408 (408, 406).

<sup>37</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years 1843-1870* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), xi-xii.

<sup>38</sup> Few other women writers of Phelps's generation adopted decadent New Womanhood to such a degree as she did. The most obvious comparable writers are those that Naomi Z. Sofer groups with Phelps in *Making the "America of Art": Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2005) as a "generation" who cultivated a new vision of female authorship, authorship as high art—a generation between the women domestics and the professional writers like Cather and Wharton. Sofer groups Phelps with Harriet Beecher Stowe, Augusta Evans, Louisa May Alcott, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and Rebecca Harding Davis. Phelps is one of the youngest of these writers. Woolson, for example, wrote covertly feminist rather than overtly feminist work throughout her career, and she died young in 1894. Her story "Miss Grief" (1880) has already been read in a decadent New Woman context by Elaine Showalter in *Daughters of Decadence*. Phelps differs from these writers by being a self-conscious women's rights agitator all her life, and by adopting decadent and aesthetic techniques in this late novel.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs also make Stowe's case when arguing that midcentury writers are narrowly pigeonholed in an antebellum context: "Against 1865: Reperiodizing the Nineteenth Century," *J19: the Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1.2 (2013): 259-284.