CAROLINE MATILDA PILCHER: THE *LADIES’ REPOSITORY’S* IDEAL CHRISTIAN WOMAN

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In the first part of the 19th century, a growing number of literary magazines were published for women, perhaps the most famous being *Godey’s Lady’s Book* published by Sara Hale. This magazine became the source for manners, fashion, and the proponent of the woman’s share of influence, namely, motherhood, with the raising and nurture of children. The *Ladies’ Repository*, which was published from 1841–1878 under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church, was the Methodist answer to this more secular journal. Although the editor was always a Methodist Episcopal clergyman, as the years progressed more and more of the poems, stories, and articles were written by women. This journal became one of the first places where the Methodist Episcopal woman’s faith, concerns, hopes, and aspirations were voiced. In the first volume a sketch of the life of Caroline Matilda Pilcher was published. Not only is Pilcher significant as a representation of the ideal Christian woman of the time, but also her life embodied many of the recurring concerns of the *Ladies’ Repository* throughout its over three and a half decades of publication. However, before examining Pilcher, the founding of the *Ladies’ Repository* and its historical context will be briefly outlined.

I

The birth of the *Ladies’ Repository* in 1840 occurred in a period of rapid change in the United States. By that time, the original thirteen states had grown to twenty-six, dramatically changing the size and identity of the United States. There was also a revolution in transportation that provided better and faster passage from the east coast to Europe and to the West. In 1840, regular trans-Atlantic steamer service began cutting the time of crossing to less than 16 days. By 1840, the number of miles of canals nearly tripled to 3,326 miles. Now New York City was connected by the Erie and Ohio canals to the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Railroads grew from 73 miles to 2,818 miles and would grow to 9,021 miles by 1850.

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A social reformation also took place during this time, including the higher education of women and Blacks. By 1840, Oberlin College was admitting women and Blacks on equal terms with white men and Mt. Holyoke Seminary, the first college intended specifically for women, had opened. This was also a period of spiritual ferment and transformation. In the Second Great Awakening, Phoebe Palmer and Charles Finney, along with other church leaders, linked spiritual revival with social reform. As a result, by 1840, many benevolent societies had formed, such as the American Home Missionary Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, American Bible Society, American Tract Society, American Sunday School Union, the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance, and the American Anti-Slavery Society.

In this time of rapid geographical and social change, with its new secular literature for women and the population growth west of the Alleghenies, the 1840 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church voted “to establish a religious periodical for the benefit of females” to be published in Cincinnati, Ohio. In the report of the Committee on Memorials to establish Periodicals for Females, Chairman L. L. Hamline noted that there were an increasing number of periodicals designed for women, however,

a great portion of this literature is of a light and trivial character. Many of those who contribute to it, aim not to provide aliment for the understanding, but food for a morbid appetite. An antidote is needed . . . blending if possible the theology of the Bible, as inculcated by Methodism, with the attractions of chastened literature . . . Look at the great west. Almost one half of our white members dwell in the valley of the Mississippi [while] no conference periodical in pamphlet form is published west of the mountains. No periodical for females is published in all the west . . . [and] Female education is exciting unprecedented interest in the west, and conventions and colleges of teachers are discussing it with extreme earnestness and zeal.

The vote was taken and the motion passed.
The periodical born at this General Conference became known as the *Ladies' Repository, and Gatherings of the West: A Monthly Periodical devoted to Literature and Religion.* At the end of its first year subscriptions totaled 8,000. With the name shortened to *Ladies' Repository,* the journal was published and printed in Cincinnati for nearly four decades. Although always edited by a Methodist Episcopal clergyman and its essays on theology and natural science written by male ministers and professors, many of the stories, both factual and fictional, and poems were written by women. The articles, stories, and poems reflect the temper of the times, and express the framework identified and expressed by women for understanding their own lives.

II

One such woman was Caroline Matilda Pilcher. An article that was written about her was titled, “The Christian in Death.” Caroline died in 1840, in Michigan. She was twenty-two, a wife, a mother, a Christian. A summary of her life, including excerpts from her journal, and quotations of her conversations appear as an obituary in the first volume of the *Ladies' Repository,* 1841. The early 19th century woman’s understanding of faith and her role and mission in the world as a Christian can be heard in the voice of Caroline Matilda Pilcher (1818–1840). She becomes the example of the best of Christian womanhood. This was the time of the antebellum “cult of true womanhood,” where the mother taught her children, devoted time to charity and was the exemplar of morality, piety, and virtue, both in the home and in the larger

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8A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993). Schneider documents frontier Methodism as subverting the patriarchal culture of honor with a pious intimate fellowship of affection. The sharing of testimonies in class meetings, love feasts and camp meetings, the singing, and the praying all contributed to this fellowship of affection. People heard and saw the power of God to transform lives, to fill lives with overflowing love. The family of God, the people of Zion, were separated from the world by their affections directed toward God and their piety. As class meetings declined and as church buildings were erected, replacing the intimacy of the services held in someone’s home, the focus of Christian nurture became the home.
society. Issues raised in the article about Caroline Matilda Pilcher's life would appear again and again in the pages of the *Ladies' Repository*.

Caroline's life mirrored the times. She was the daughter of a physician, born near Niagara Falls. When she was ten, her family migrated west and settled in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Caroline's parents were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church and instructed her in the “principles of religion.” Educated and with “a great aptitude to learn, and an ardent desire for knowledge,” Caroline showed that females both wanted to and indeed could learn. At the age of thirteen, she “embraced religion . . . through pastoral labors bestowed on her the day previous. . . .” She wrote:

> It was Monday, July 18, 1831, when, for the first time, the light of God shown into my benighted mind. O, what joy then filled my heart! All was happiness within, and I felt truly like a new creature. The consideration that God was reconciled almost overwhelmed my soul. . . . Then I humbly repented before God—I believed that there was efficacy in the blood of Christ to take my sins away.”

She joined the Methodist Episcopal Church the following month, “of which she continued a worthy member until taken to the Church above.” She desired holiness and wrote on May 25, 1834, “O, for a dedication of my soul and body to the service of God.” She continually affirmed that her help is in God and that she would sacrifice all if she could be the means of saving souls. The reality of death and separation from friends and loved ones caused her to reflect on July 19, 1834:

> I must expect to be separated from the friends I love. Yes, we meet and part here below, but will soon reach heaven. Glory to God, there is a resting place!

During a protracted illness, just before her death, Caroline said on April 3, 1840:

> . . . Hallelujah, hallelujah, HALLELUJAH! I never expected such a halo of glory! What unfading glory waits for me? O, that ineffable glory! it almost burst this tenement of clay. My heart is so full, my head rings every moment with hallelujahs! No wonder so many have shouted glory when leaving this world. I feel I have no longer to dread suffering, but to praise and dwell in his presence forever. O, glory! Never was language formed full enough to tell what I feel. . . .”

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12*Ladies' Repository* 1 (February 1841): 60.
13*Ladies' Repository* 1 (February 1841): 61.
The obituary concluded, “In this frame of mind she continued until the spirit returned to God who gave it. She expired on Sabbath, April 5th, 1840, at 1 o’clock, P.M., in the 22d year of her age.”

Caroline Matilda Pilcher as a model of Christian womanhood, embodies several recurring themes of the *Ladies’ Repository*. First, Caroline, though a woman, was educated and enjoyed learning. In this first volume there were many articles about women having minds as good as men and able to learn. While this was controversial at the time, the *Ladies’ Repository* throughout its history consistently supported the value and importance of women’s higher education. Second, Caroline “embraced” religion and experienced the fullness of God’s love. The normative faith journey of the individual in the 19th century included a moment of decision based on an experience of God’s love and forgiveness. Third, since Caroline had been nurtured in a Christian home, her raising hastened the arrival of her moment of experiencing God’s love and forgiveness. She was taught “Christian principals” at home by parents who were active members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which at that time would have meant that each parent had experienced God’s forgiveness and God’s love shed abroad in their hearts. The importance of Christian nurture, especially in the home, as the foundation for good citizenship and the moral society, increasingly filled more pages in later volumes of the *Ladies’ Repository*. Fourth, Caroline’s reaction to this experience of God’s love was the desire to save souls. This highlighted her conviction that she was a woman could and should participate in this ministry. The women’s role in God’s work, from individual evangelism and prayer to works of charity, was always encouraged in the *Ladies’ Repository*. Later Caroline would marry a minister and enter into the special service to the community of the minister’s wife. Fifth, Caroline

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14 The *Ladies’ Repository* in its first volume, included several addresses by presidents of women’s seminaries, extolling the excellence of women’s minds and the importance of women’s education. See for example, Caleb Atwater, “Female Education,” I (January 1841): 10–13. Such addresses continued to be included from time to time. By 1870, education of women was accepted and the issue became how best to teach, see Mrs. V. C. Phoebus, “Our American Female Education,” 30 (August 1870): 114–18.


was a woman of two books, the Bible and the Methodist hymnal. In her final weeks of life, she gave her husband a bible inscribed with these words,

O heavenly treasure, guide of my youth, my solace in the hour of affliction, and blessed beacon which points my soul to a land where I shall flourish in immortal youth! ... open this book, and read for your consolation, of that glorious morn, when the trumpet shall sound, and we shall be raised incorruptible, to be separated no more. Till then adieu.

While reading and singing the hymns of her Methodist hymnal with her mother, the gravely ill Caroline received comfort and inspiration from their verses. One of her favorite hymns spoke of the hope that a Christian has in death. She marked this hymn and in her final days gave the hymnal to her parents.19 And finally, Caroline attests to her belief that in death all friends are reunited, making death glorious and filled with joy. Although she had a painful illness which caused her suffering for many months, she testified to the presence and support of God and her family and friends preparing her for her death.

Death and dying were one of the major recurring themes during the years in which the *Ladies’ Repository* was published. The stories and poems addressed over and over again, the death of parents, of children, of friends, of spouses. A Christian death was portrayed as an end to suffering, perfect rest with Jesus, a momentary separation from loved ones, going home to the glories of heaven and enjoying the presence of God. This was the comfort offered in the face of so much grief, the hope beyond the tears. Caroline Matilda Pilcher

"The hymn was “Why should we start and fear to die?” by Isaac Watts. The obituary notes that the hymn is on page 487. This would correspond to both the 1821 MEC hymnal, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Principally from the Collection of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A. Late Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford* (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason, 1821), and the 1821 hymnal with the 1836 Supplement, *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Principally from the Collection of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Late Fellow of the Lincoln College, Oxford* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1836).

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Why should we start and fear to die?  
What tim'rous worms we mortals are!  
Death is the gate of endless joy,  
And yet we dread to enter there.

The pains, the groans, the dying strife  
Fright our approaching souls away;  
Still we shrink back again to life,  
Fond of our prison and our clay.

Oh! if my Lord would come and meet,  
My soul should stretch her wings in haste,  
Fly fearless through Death's iron gate,  
Nor feel the terrors as she pass'd.

Jesus can make a dying bed  
Feel soft as downy pillows are,  
While on his breast I lean my head,  
And breathe my life out sweetly there.
continued the tradition that “Methodists die well.” Because of their assurance of faith and the experience of God’s love, death was glorious, not fearful.  

III

Through the women’s essays, stories, and poems, the Ladies’ Repository became the voice of women. No longer is the church with its preaching and worship (the man’s sphere) at center stage, now it is the individual woman and her thoughts and actions which are in the limelight. The women writers assumed that Christians go to church on the Sabbath to worship God, sing, pray, and receive instruction. These writers emphasized the woman’s conversion, a life changing experience of God’s love with its resulting desire to serve God through acts of charity and saving souls.

In the early 19th century, women had begun to develop a voice of their own. One significant new avenue for this voice was the written word. From its beginning, the woman’s voice was heard in the Ladies’ Repository. Caroline Matilda Pilcher’s voice was heard through selections of her diary and recorded conversations. The Ladies’ Repository shared Caroline Pilcher with others making the values and practices embodied in her life a model for the “modern” literate Christian woman, that is, the readers and contributors of the Ladies’ Repository. For in the growing “cult of true womanhood,” the woman’s spiritual strength served to protect the home, the nation, democracy and civilization.

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21 Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Margaret Homans, using psychological and linguistic theory, examines primarily nineteenth century English women authors. She explores the relationship of women’s experience in a society which had clearly differentiated gender roles and how their experience was reflected in their literature. In The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), Ann Douglas focuses on the leisured upperclass women authors and their symbiotic relationship with male ministers. Although the study is limited primarily to the Northeast and to Congregationalist, Episcopalian and Unitarian women, her insights on their influence in the larger culture are helpful.

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