

# Commercialized Femininity in Ella Wheeler Wilcox's

## *Poems of Pleasure*

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### Wilcox in the Context of Commercialization

Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *Poems of Pleasure*, published in 1888, reflects the liberalization of American life and poetry that occurred in the nineteenth century as a result of industrialization and commercialization. *Poems of Pleasure* expresses conservative ideals, despite its unique popularity as a poetry book for women, thus preventing it from being labeled truly progressive-- its focus on feminine subjects and emotions ultimately valorizes the conservative Cult of Domesticity. As a luxury object and signal of wealth, *Poems of Pleasure* demonstrates how women were targeted as the subjects of commercialization, in a way that is explicitly feminine. Thus, *Poems of Pleasure* demonstrates the growing importance of women in the American economic and political spheres of the late nineteenth century.

The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century produced rapid population economic growth in both the United States and Great Britain. More wealth in circulation, and more ways to obtain this wealth for oneself, resulted in the emergence of a socioeconomic middle class. Advancements in technology, manufacturing, and transportation led to population growth (Jackson 1).

New technology meant that social mobility became increasingly attainable in the nineteenth century as new white collar jobs such as bank tellers, bookkeepers, and clerks proliferated and comprised a growing middle class (Jackson 1, 2). The growing population was one of consumers, functioning as expanding markets in the U.S. and abroad with the rising demand for goods and services (Jackson 1).

“The interplay of demographic factors, especially urbanization, innovations in the production process, rising wages and -- last but not least -- improved

means of transport, especially railroads, made the coming of the mass market possible” (Laermans 80).

Despite its lucrative potential, most writers of the nineteenth century did not know how to appeal to this emerging middle class, whose values, behaviors, and beliefs were not as known or stable as those of the traditional class structure (Jackson 3). The emerging middle class was inherently transgressive. Anyone could work their way into membership, regardless of birth or upbringing (Jackson 4). Thus, its values were less tied to tradition and more in line with progress and change.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, rigid socioeconomic structures, wherein the poor stayed poor and the rich maintained generational wealth and status, governed the United States as introduced to the Americas by British colonizers throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. In these earlier centuries of British import to America, the poor and socially marginalized were transferred across the Atlantic as indentured servants, legally bonded to wealthy landowners (Dippel 12). The impoverished, the imprisoned, the “unskilled” laborers, and the marginalized were coerced, in one way or another, to enter into servitude in the American colonies. Indentured servitude promised freedom after seven years of bonded labor, but the harsh conditions often killed servants before they could obtain freedom (Dippel 17). Many of those who survived their entire sentence either left the colonies shortly after such unhappy existence or struggled through a vulnerable life in post-servitude poverty (Dippel 17). Thus, indentured servitude kept the lower social classes strictly within the bounds set by the elite, preserving socioeconomic order. As such, Great Britain’s socioeconomic binary was planted into the foundations of America’s socioeconomic system and the growth of the middle class, with its gains in cultural, political, and economic significance, threatened traditional American structures and the residual identification between the U.S. and Great Britain that persisted after the American Revolution.

Post-Civil War economic depressions encouraged people in both the North and the South to move westward, to a land without American tradition or its rigid structures (Jackson 6). Westward expansion was a biracial endeavor, resulting in a more racially diverse population with less rigid color lines than in the East U.S. (Dippel 7). Furthermore, the lack of cultural infrastructure, such as justice systems, for Americans moving westward resulted in the creation of new ways of life. For example, in western mining towns, the people developed irregular, innovative regulations in the way of property and behavior (Quay 9). Western American culture thus deviated from those established in the east, as it was often based in make-shift, nontraditional practices. As society threatened to move further from traditional livelihoods and beliefs imported from across the Atlantic ocean, Wilcox's career reflects the conservative desire to maintain the status quo despite revolutionary change. Westward expansion also blurred the lines between good and bad, with some criminals and outlaws, such as Billy the Kid and Frank and Jesse James, earning hero status among the inhabitants of the West (Quay 11, 12). Westward expansion, in offering the poor an opportunity to break from their poverty and move into the expanding middle class, meant that the American identity was changing in the nineteenth century.

Along with the socioeconomic upheavals demonstrated by American movement towards the west and the development of a steady-growing middle class, gender roles and norms in America were also changing as the nineteenth century saw huge movement in closing the literacy gap between white men and women. Circa 1800, about 50% of American white women were literate, compared to about 75% among their male counterparts. By 1870, 90% of white women were literate (Smith-Rosenberg 2).

One consequence of this increasing literacy among women can be seen in the proliferation of Women's Clubs across the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Women's Groups "developed out of needs perceived by individual women" as they took on new social,

economic, and political roles (Gere 4). These organizations, typically almost exclusively comprising middle-class white women, cultivated literary and intellectual growth among Wilcox's target audience (2). About 2 million American Women were members of a Women's Group by the end of the nineteenth century (5). Members met to discuss political issues ranging from immigration to the establishment of new local infrastructure. These organizations also enabled women to engage with the whirlwind of change brought about by the nineteenth century through reading and writing (5). Papers written by group members on women's suffrage, for example, asserted the changing political role of women (5). As with Wilcox's own work, these progressive new groups were guided by traditional structures such as the church, thus embodying the limits to the liberation of white women in the nineteenth century (4).

The nineteenth-century transformation of American culture coincided with the rise of consumerism. Americans moved westward in search of a better life facilitated by economic mobility, which itself was growing more accessible with the technological advancements brought forth by the Industrial Revolution. The capitalistic implication of increasing female literacy rates is seen in the rise of female readership as a target market. Importantly for Wilcox, these readers were cognizant of their shared feminine identity as the changing political climate gave increasing importance to the political significance of women and institutions like Women's Clubs facilitated the organization of women around their identity.

### ***Poems of Pleasure:an Introduction***

Ella Wheeler Wilcox took advantage of the liberal opportunities of her time, participating in them herself by attaining a career. Paradoxically, her success lay in tapping into the conservative sentiments still held in both the U.S. and Great Britain. The dominant themes of her poetry, exemplified in her book *Poems of Pleasure* such as marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, reflect this

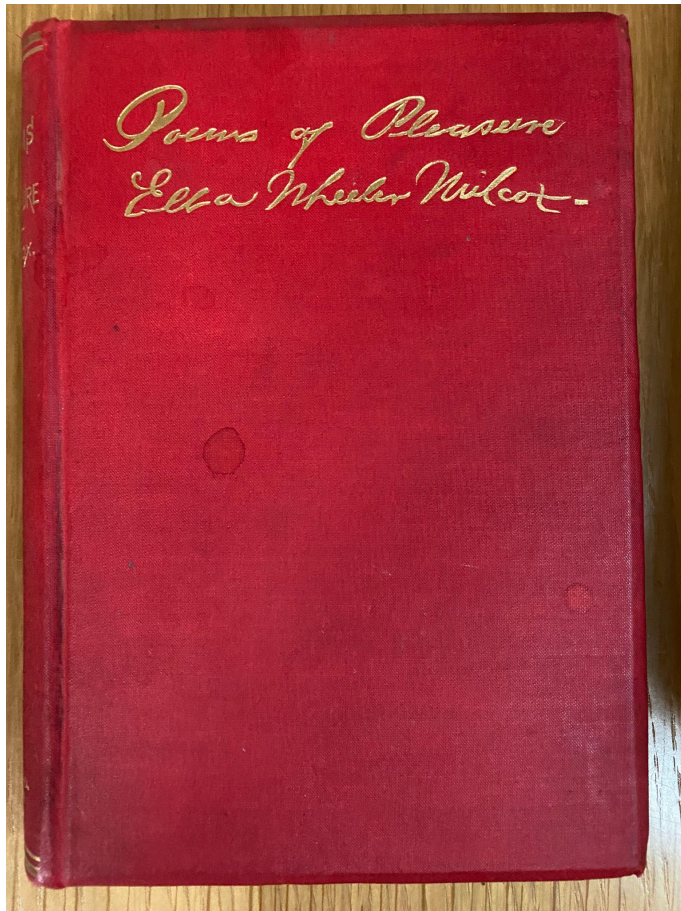
conservatism. However, Wilcox also writes of passionate, romantic love. She transgresses the expectations for women as docile and passive, revealing, instead, great strength in femininity.

Wilcox published *Poems of Pleasure* in 1888 by Belford, Clarke & Co., a publishing agency with offices in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. This was a young firm when Wilcox published with them, having been founded just eight years earlier in 1879 in New York City. Belford, an immigrant from Canada, and his career were products of a changing and commercializing America. In fact, his first publications were illegally pirated. In any case, Belford stuck with the business and ultimately saw substantial profit (“The Lucile”).

The Belford, Clarke & Co. publishing agency was most active at the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century, peaking in 1888 and 1889 with seventeen publications in a year (OpenLibrary.org). *Poems of Pleasure* was then one of many commercialized texts published by this private publisher. Belford, Clarke & Co. published works in both the United States and Great Britain, so Wilcox was working with a group that had access to markets on both sides of the Atlantic. This may account for the transatlantic accessibility and subsequent popularity of her poetry. Among Wilcox’s fellow authors at Belford, Clarke & Co. were U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster and Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon (OpenLibrary.org). Thus, her poetry entered the American and British arenas with the substantial support of a well-established, respected publisher with high-class clients.

The physical production of *Poems of Pleasure* reflects this luxury. This is a medium-sized book, too large to fit in your pocket and too small to function as a coffee table book. Its dimensions, roughly seven by five inches, appears intentionally literary; this book is not meant simply for display, but it is also not meant to be carried around like a newspaper. The physical stature alone asserts the place of *Poems of Pleasure* among the shelves of a library. Its aesthetics reaffirm this claim, with its bright red binding and hard, sturdy cover. The red cover also hints at the potentially-scandalous

poetry in *Poems of Pleasure*. Another of Wilcox's books, *Poems of Passion*, was published with a similar binding and was labeled "SCARLET POEMS IN SCARLET BINDING," with a reference to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and its use of red as a symbol of immorality (Sorby, "Milwaukee"). This cover offers protection and durability, but also requires care because it could easily stain or be soaked through. The front cover is bare, save for the gold, embossed cursive lettering which reveals only the name of the work and its author, while the back cover remains entirely blank. The title and author name are written in script, resembling the well-trained handwriting of an elegant woman. Wilcox's name reads like a signature, suggesting that she is this very woman, and her readers are, too. The appearance of *Poems of Pleasure* is thus ornate and demands gentle care. There are no advertisements or reviews, which suggests that this book sells itself, that the prestige of its author, publisher, and visual appearance wholly convey the value of what lies within.



*Poems of Pleasure* is a book that knows its self-worth. Upon opening the front cover, the reader is greeted with an end paper that bears no words. Instead, one's attention is absorbed entirely by the wallpaper design of this page: a golden meadow of flowers and leaves. The choice, whether on the part of Wilcox or her publishers, to adorn this book with gold accents implies a belief in the intrinsic value and beauty of its poetry. The attention to aesthetics also suggests the

status of this book as a luxury object. The purchasers of this book were not attracted solely by its intellectual or poetical properties; they also would have appreciated *Poems of Pleasure* for its ability to signal their own wealth and taste.

Unlike contemporary intellectuals who may have needed to maximize content and minimize space for the sake of money, Wilcox and her publishers use large margins throughout *Poems of Pleasure*, allowing her words space to breathe and exist as the centered focal point of the page. The title pages which introduce the various sections of her poetry, such as page eight's "Passional," utilize wide margins as well. This ample allocation of space suggests luxury, as the small pages already limit how much content can fit on each page. Beyond the generous margins, the pages themselves are relatively thick, betraying no want of funds for durable, quality paper. The book includes 158 numbered pages of this quality, in which she displays the financial capacities of her publishers to produce high-quality books.

*Poems of Pleasure* was thus published with great care to its physical quality, and it was intended to rest safely in the home library of its wealthy owners, who would have had enough disposable income to find themselves in the middle-, if not upper-, class. Ultimately, this copy found itself in the personal library of one Vera L. Withall, who, in 1953, labeled the inside cover page with a personalized sticker bearing the words, "From the library of Vera L. Withall." This sticker also includes a print of a lovely home, enclosed within a large gate and a garden of flowers and trees. Smoke blows from the chimney, suggesting a domestic coziness within the walls of the private house. Withall's ownership of such bookplates implies that she was a collector of books and appreciated them as objects to own and treasure. If the pictured house is any indication of her own abode, this copy of *Poems of Pleasure* indeed found its way into the peaceful home of a wealthy, domestic-minded woman.



### Powerful Sentimentality in *Poems of Pleasure*

In *Poems of Pleasure*, Wilcox writes of feminine subjects which occupied the domestic sphere. She writes often of romantic love, a subject which she expresses through melodramatic, emotional, and sentimental language. In “Surrender,” Wilcox’s opening poem, she characterizes love as a powerful, fierce force (Wilcox, p. 9). The speaker, a victim of this great power, appears strong in her surrender to love. She is brave, throwing herself into “strange chaos” (line 2) and submitting herself to tumultuous change: “old ties, old dreams, old aims, all torn apart” (line 4). The speaker does not fear the future, nor is she weighed down by the past (lines 7-8). Thus, Wilcox establishes love as an act of bravery and its agents, specifically female lovers, are deemed strong and courageous for their pursuit of, and complete surrender to, its formidable power. The intensity with which Wilcox describes being in love, such as her mention of the “great shining glory” of her lover’s smile (line 6) or her description of “Love’s rapture thrill” (line 24), evokes such passion and force as to remind one of war. Wilcox thereby co-opts the emotional and intellectual connotations of war, with all its masculine praise and domination, and uses it to dress her depiction of love, a theme that is more typically perceived as feminine and tame. As one reviewer put it in 1913, Wilcox’s writing on love “plays less around the devotion of one woman for one man than about the inspiring and uplifting power in human love” (Barnard 1039). *Poems of Pleasure* exemplifies this feminine strength in the poem “Love Much” (Wilcox 39): “Love much. Earth has enough of bitter in it” (line 1).

With its passion-charged metaphors and insistence on love as a force to be reckoned with, *Poems of Pleasure* spotlights a liberated female sexuality. “The Difference” explicitly defines lust in the context of love, invoking erotic language to provide an almost violent intimacy: “Lust is the hot simoon whose burning breath...” (Wilcox 14, line 3). Though she associates lust with Satan, Wilcox argues that not all sexuality is evil. Rather, *passion*, presumably born from love and deep interest, “is what God felt” (line 5). Another tale of two lovers, “Dawn,” speaks romantically of the love affair

between Light and Night, detailing intimate sleeping positions (“Warm lip to lip and limb to limb” (line 7)) and admiration for male beauty (“languid lips of Night” (line 3)) (Wilcox 21). Thus, *Poems of Pleasure* validates female sexuality, “representing women lovers with pulsing, breathing bodies” (Haralson 491).

*Poems of Pleasure* also utilizes love as a sentimental theme in order to reach wide audiences and appeal to readers across national boundaries. In her poem “The Way of It,” Wilcox characterizes romantic love as a universal experience to which anyone can relate (Wilcox 16). She opens the poem with a bold declaration of such truths, claiming, “This is the way of it, wide world over” (line 1). Wilcox takes advantage of the ongoing globalization in the nineteenth century when she acknowledges the potentially global reach of her writing. She speaks to an increasingly connected “wide world,” which finds unity in a shared sentimentality-- this common phenomenon is none other than unrequited love. According to Wilcox, such “passionate Love” gives rise to another universal experience, pain (line 24). She writes that “passionate Love is Pain’s own mother.” This relationship is explicitly maternal and feminine, yet no less formidable for these qualities. In claiming love and pain as womankind, Wilcox asserts a power in femininity and sentimentality.

Despite this liberal approach to gender roles, “The Way of It” maintains some elements of the gender-binary power structure. Wilcox establishes an active and a passive participant in a given love affair, writing, “One gives and the other receives” (line 3). This statement not only has sexual connotations, but also functions in a rigid binary structure. In such a straightforward relationship, there are two participants and each fulfills a certain role in relation to the other. “The Way of It,” therefore, characterizes sex as pragmatic. Thus, beyond the heterosexual undertones, this line also reflects a valorization of monogamy and gender roles.

### **Vestiges of Tradition: Conservative Messages in *Poems of Pleasure***

It is thus in the sphere of matrimony and domesticity where *Poems of Pleasure* finds itself shrinking away from its progressive ideals, such as feminine power. The conservative message of Wilcox's poems about marriage is supported by the traditional, didactic function of these poems as opposed to the powerful sentimentality of her writing on feminine love. For example, in the poem "Angel or Demon," Wilcox affirms the importance of the Cult of Domesticity and other such conservative values for women (Wilcox 18). In doing so, she instructs readers on how to behave in a marriage. She claims that true womanhood is found in morality and loyalty, writing, "A pure, faithful love is the creative spirit / Which makes women angels!" (lines 9-10). Thus, Wilcox reinforces the belief that women are arbiters of purity and goodnature. Her use of the word "angels" provides a religious and moral connotation for a woman's role and also suggests a sense of duty or work, as angels are under God's employ. This characterization of women as angels maintains a rigid expectation for her female readers and reasserts their place within the patriarchy.

To further support this position that the poem takes from its onset, Wilcox tells her audience, presumably a husband, "We are bound soul to soul by life's holiest laws" (line 11). Wilcox thus defines marriage as a holy law, implying a religious justification for the tradition of marriage. She later reiterates this religious foundation by classifying love itself as a divine force: "This fire from God's altar, this holy love flame, / That burns like sweet incense forever for you" (lines 25-26). The word "law" in line eleven also suggests a reverence for governing institutions as a means of regulating love. Wilcox defends this claim that institutionalized marriage is a force for good when she writes of the pain she may have endured had the object of her love been untrue or improper (lines 21-23).

*Poems of Pleasure* upholds the Cult of Domesticity beyond marriage and into motherhood. In "The Birth of the Opal," Wilcox uses metaphor to detail the conception of a child (Wilcox 12).

Expressing similar binaries as mentioned in the discussion of “The Way of It,” Wilcox replaces man with the sun and woman with the moon. These entities have cultural connotations as active and passive in nature, respectively; the moon reflects the sun’s penetrative light and wanes and waxes according to a monthly cycle. Wilcox’s own spirituality may have informed this metaphor (“ELLA...DIES”). In this poem, the sun and the moon “blend into one” (line 27) to produce an opal, “the child that was born into them” (line 28).

In writing an homage to conception, Wilcox glorifies the function of matrimony as a means to reproduce. She likens sex to a cosmic event which produces a “rare and wondrous gem,” signaling that something precious and beautiful comes from marital intercourse (line 26). Indeed, the sex described in this poem is preceded by a long courtship. The “Moonbeam,” the feminine character of this love story, is tame and mild in response to the “Sunbeam’s” first advances (line 1). The Sunbeam woos the Moonbeam until, at last, she lets down her guard and the two wed (line 23) before birthing their child, “the beautiful Opal” (line 25). Thus, Wilcox is sure to make marriage a key component in the production of a beautiful child.

Given America’s rapidly changing identity throughout the nineteenth century, *Poems of Pleasure’s* commitment to conservative ideals within a domestic sphere speaks to a widespread desire for maintenance of the status quo. While many of Wilcox’s readers would have been products of progress, be it increased socioeconomic mobility or literacy, the religious and family-centered messaging in her work suggests a resonance among an audience who valued stability and tradition within a transformed culture. That her conservative poems have life and popularity in a post-Civil War, post- early Industrialization America, is, to Wilcox and her audience, a celebration of American resilience and the continuation of an American tradition despite great change. The same goes for her British audience, who were undergoing similar transformations during decolonization efforts and their own Industrial Revolution.

### **Transgression: Wilcox's Intimacy and Career**

*Poems of Pleasure's* emphasis on domesticity as the realm of femininity brings the reader into its many homes and relationships. The reader is given a glimpse into the personal and intimate lives of nineteenth-century women; as her audience, these women would have felt like they were looking into a mirror. Thus, Wilcox' poems speak to private topics and private emotions. This level of intimacy breaks the wall that other popular nineteenth-century poetry was working to uphold with its valorization of didactic poetry that could function in the public sphere.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the most popular and well-known poets were the so-called "schoolroom poets." These were didactic writers whose poetry was functionally pedagogical (Sorby, *Schoolroom*, xii). Wilcox, however, wrote with such transgressive intimacy that she was able to achieve transatlantic popularity despite her breaking from the conventions of popular poetry. She broke from established norms like Browning's puzzles, Tennyson's romantic legends, Kipling's ballads, or Masfield's melodrama (Barnard 1039). Instead, *Poems of Pleasure* centralizes sentimentality in a meditation on emotion and personal experience-- a kind of poetry that embodies "l'art pour l'art." In fact, the sentimentality infused throughout *Poems of Pleasure* is almost anti-didactic. This book reflects a self-conscious humanity which valorizes the private life, as opposed to civic life which comprises much of the didactic poetry from which *Poems of Pleasure* (Sorby, "Milwaukee"). Despite the focus on private subject matters, these poems express relatable concepts as proven by its transatlantic commercial success, and many were published in accessible newspapers. Thus, in her "intimate self-display," Wilcox makes the private public and offers her intimate emotions as something common (Lutes).

*Poems of Pleasure* also serves as a testament to another modern subversion of the nineteenth-century: a woman's career. Wilcox, born into a poor family, had been career-minded and

ambitious from a young age, selling her “literary wares” as a child in order to “improve her condition of life” (“ELLA...DIES”). This ambition translates into her poems, with one obituary describing her work as “industrious writing” (“ELLA...DIES”). With such a perception of Wilcox as a laborer, one can see how she commodified her poetry, markedly and loudly feminine, in order to achieve independent socioeconomic growth.

Contemporary discomfort with Wilcox’s success is evident in reviews and criticism of her work. In these responses to her poetry, male critics lament its feminine essence. For example, the aforementioned obituary notes how Wilcox scandalized critics and publishers with the romantic passion of her poetry (“ELLA...DIES”). Other documents, such as a 1898 interview with Wilcox, reveal how contemporary misogyny worked to negate Wilcox’s intellectual and artistic achievements. In this interview, which opens with an intense description of her physical appearance, Wilcox’s commentary on her history as a writer is interrupted by the interviewer’s question: “You are still called the Rose of Wisconsin, are you not?” (“ELLA...Impressionistic”). One review, published later, in 1912, demonstrates how a self-proclaimed “unromantic male critic” ridicules *Poems of Pleasure* for its “verbose sentimentality,” using this assertion to discredit the work despite his concession that it sold well in America and Britain (“Poems”).

This is the context in which Wilcox broke out with widely popular, commercially successful poetry for a female audience. Sentimentality was perceived as inferior because feminine, but *Poems of Pleasure* imbues femininity with formidable strength. This femininity which informed her work is what empowered her poems and, essentially, what made them popular. Wilcox was primarily a hit among “those who regarded sentiment as the prime requisite for a poem” (“ELLA...DIES”). Sellers “were eager to have her contributions, which breathed the spirit of intense feeling and spoke to the heart” (Barnard 1041). Wilcox sought to make a career for herself, but did not subscribe to the canonical respectability of contemporary poetry. *Poems of Pleasure* recognizes women as deserving of

their own acclaimed poetry, and Wilcox's market-minded perceptibility is what permitted her success in a male-dominated field.

Wilcox's poetry represents the growing awareness of an American womanhood created by community and history, as, simultaneously, the late nineteenth century saw women become "increasingly visible both as consumers and as objects of consumption" (Sorby, "Milwaukee"). Wilcox, with her ability to identify as the common woman born into meager prospects but dreaming of more, reflected the intimate internalities of her readers. The success of *Poems of Pleasure* in tapping into this identity and *selling it*, attests to the development of women as an economic market, and, thereby, a commodification of femininity. One manifestation of this was the transferring of Wilcox's poems from one woman's hands to another through the act of gift giving (Barnard 1039). In writing from a female perspective and giving space to feminine themes, Wilcox embodied "reverence, beauty, and pathos," thus appealing to female consumers and uniting with them in a sisterhood (McCallister 183).

### Concluding Thoughts

This book is full of nuance and contradictions. Many of the formal elements that Wilcox employs work to make these poems accessible. She uses simple end-rhymes, consistent stanzaic patterning, and commonplace language throughout *Poems of Pleasure* to augment its relatability in subject matter. Her use of traditional structures aligns with the conservative aspects of her content, as this simplicity asserts *Poems of Pleasure's* place within the standards of Western poetry. At the same time, its accessibility is also a progressive feature of this book, given that Wilcox's poems were often available to the public in magazines or newspapers. The opulent manufacturing of *Poems of Pleasure* suggests that it was not financially accessible to all, but was rather restricted to a middle or upper class with a certain amount of disposable income. The design, and decisions such as page thickness,

would have been made by Wilcox or her publishers. Therefore, regardless of the poetry's content or style, the decision to turn this book into a symbol of wealth was an economically-informed choice in the interest of profit. Belford, Clarke & Co. would have had enough money from past endeavors to invest in more expensive production, and with Wilcox's history of commercial success, this was sure to turn a profit. This was likely the intention of the publishers when they put, on the title page of this book, an advertisement in reference to Wilcox's previous, best-selling works. Therefore, though *Poems of Pleasure* stands for liberation in many ways, its function as a commodity limits just how progressive it can be.

In examining this book so closely, I grew to appreciate its commonalities with the Bible. For one, it lauds love as a great power. Also, the explicit religious messages function as an instructive spiritual guide. Thirdly, poems such as "Two Prayers" even read as religious texts. The diversity in subject matter, most of which pertain to daily life and relationships, mirror the broad scope of the Bible's many lessons. Writing on love, Wilcox's often zealous tone resembles religious fervor. Just holding this book in your hands evokes the Bible, as it is roughly the same in size. Many of the poems within *Poems of Pleasure* had already been published; the aesthetic upgrade and ornate decoration of this edition calls to mind luxury editions of the Bible, which signal wealth just as this book does.

In a way, this book is a Bible of the True Woman of the nineteenth century, with its holistic depiction of the ideal woman in the place of Jesus as the religious and moral standard. Like the Bible, *Poems of Pleasure* unites people across political and geographic boundaries under a shared identity and set of beliefs and values.



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