Review of *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* by Claudia Stokes

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In her acknowledgments for The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion, Claudia Stokes thanks Rubén Depertuis for allowing her to audit a class on the New Testament. Stokes’s attention to the biblical dimensions of nineteenth-century sentimentalism is crucial to the success of her study, since although sentimental tropes still pervade American culture, their theological freight can be invisible to twenty-first-century readers, whose lives are less immersed in scripture. In chapters on the Second Great Awakening, on hymnody, on apocalyptic plotlines, on Mormon domestic literature, and on the sentimental self-fashioning of Mary Baker Eddy, Stokes reunites seemingly vague stock images (the heavenly home, the suffering mother) with their often highly specific sectarian origins.

Perhaps because sentimentalism is itself a vague and porous category, the volume’s introduction covers a lot of ground quickly, generating a collection of themes rather than a single straightforward argument. However, this thematic eclecticism emerges as a strength in the ensuing chapters. Stokes is clearly methodologically inspired by Jane Tompkins’s famous reading of Christian eschatology in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). However, Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a richly allusive text by any standard, and certainly by the standards of nineteenth-century sentimental literature. Can other texts—say, Anna Warner’s “Jesus Loves Me”—disclose similarly complex theological underpinnings? Stokes shows persuasively that they can.

The book’s first chapter focuses on the Second Great Awakening in an attempt to move beyond the narrow Calvinism-versus-sentimentalism dichot-
mony that has sometimes organized scholarly conversations. This chapter is structurally necessary because, as Stokes argues, the Second Great Awakening’s populist fervor allowed Northern white women to claim a high degree of religious and literary authority; this enabled women such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and (later) Mary Baker Eddy to produce a flood of nineteenth-century texts elevating themselves and their readers through emotional depictions of domesticity, motherhood, and Protestant Christianity.

Beginning with chapter 2, “My Kingdom,” The Altar at Home delves into the historically inflected close readings that constitute its most significant contributions to the field. For example, hymns were controversial in early America, in part because they were an egalitarian genre that could be written—and, of course, voiced—by marginal people, including women. Stokes then considers Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World (1850), noting how the novel manages Ellen Montgomery’s devotional singing. Ellen’s hymns are models of propriety that nonetheless gently unsettle the powers that be: “For Warner, Christian egalitarianism need not be implemented through the radical erasure of class but instead may be effected by the refinement and education of the lowly, with hymns serving a vital role in that effort” (83). In other words, writers like Warner domesticated the hymn, making it safe for middle-class consumption while retaining traces of its egalitarian roots and its increasingly feminine religious authority.

In chapter 3, Stokes extends her exploration of sentimental authority by showing how Harriet Beecher Stowe imparted “a domestic character to Protestantism” (107) through the management of plot devices that link small-scale feminine tasks to the large-scale workings of a pending (or perhaps even arrived) Christian apocalypse. Moving away from Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s obvious apocalypticism, Stokes argues that Stowe’s smaller-scale domestic texts, such as The Minister’s Wooing (1859), hinge on “unveilings” rooted in the imagery of Revelation and on the optimistic certainties of Christian premillennial eschatology.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore how sentimental literature—a middle-class, Protestant genre—was embraced and used by two religious minority communities, the Mormons and the Christian Scientists. Stokes argues persuasively that sentimental texts did not just reflect American religious practices but actually shaped them. For example, Eliza Snow’s “O My Father” deploys a string of sentimental tropes—suffering motherhood, family reunification in heaven—that might strike non-Mormon readers as unexceptionally conventional. However, as a popular Mormon hymn by one of John Smith’s plural wives, “O My Father” advanced a discourse of “divine motherhood” that became part of Mormon theology and that is still cited by women within that church as evidence of sanctified female authority. Likewise—albeit under vastly different circumstances—Mary Baker Eddy also drew on
sentimental tropes to construct her persona as the leader and “Mother” of
the Christian Science Church. Again anodyne sentiments conceal particular
spiritual aims; as Eddy effuses: “Oh give me the spot where affection might
dwell / In sacred communion with home’s magic spell” (200). Eddy’s prose,
poems, and hymns insist on her modesty even as they shore up her absolute
authority as the personal “long-awaited fulfillment of millennial, apocalyptic
prophecy” (210). The contradictions—and the force—of sentimental lan-
guage surely reached their zenith in this extraordinary figure, and here
Stokes’s readings are fresh and compelling.

The field of literary sentimentalism is crowded with scholars, so it is per-
haps inevitable that The Altar at Home must sometimes use predecessor stud-
ies as rhetorical foils. This is my one quibble with Stokes’s otherwise fasci-
nating account: it could engage in deeper conversations with the scholars it
cites. For instance, Ann Douglas’s still-foundational The Feminization of Amer-
ican Culture (1977) is quickly dismissed at the beginning of chapter 1, but
Douglas’s thesis in fact dovetails interestingly with Stokes’s: both chart the
consolidation of female religious authority, and both examine, from differ-
ent angles, the capaciousness, or productive vagueness, of sentimental ico-
nography. Why not explore these confluences?

That said, The Altar at Home juxtaposes ideas—new and old—in provoca-
tive ways. As Stokes demonstrates, “sentimental power” (to use Jane Tomp-
kins’s term) was not just rhetorical or aspirational—it in fact exerted a pro-
found influence on American religious history.

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