

Border States

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Border States, the official journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association, is published biennially. Although preference is given to work previously presented as papers at the organization's annual meetings, the editors welcome the submission of manuscripts dealing with all aspects of the Kentucky-Tennessee region. Completed manuscripts of no more than fifteen double-spaced pages—including notes, works cited, or bibliography—should be submitted in duplicate. Send manuscripts to: Ellen Donovan (English) or Mary Hoffschwelle (History) in care of Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee 37132, by September 1, 2006. Manuscripts will be read by at least two members of the editorial board and, barring unforeseen problems, authors will receive notice of the board's decision in six to eight weeks.

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Editors' Notes

The essays in the sixteenth volume of *Border States* focus on significant turning points in the Kentucky-Tennessee region: the story of white settlement of the region, responses to the New Madrid earthquake, and the ways in which the country music industry responded to the cultural earthquakes of the 1960s and 1970s. Mabel Benton DuPriest argues that Elizabeth Madox Robert's novel, *The Great Meadow* (1930), sought to commemorate and validate the settling of the region by using the conventions of Virgil's *Aeneid*. David Fletcher examines the responses to another early event of the region—the New Madrid quake—to suggest the ways in which those who suffered the quake were changed (albeit sometimes temporarily) by their experience. Finally, Vanessa Carr looks at the ways that popular country songs sung by women reflect changes in values that had been central to the music's largely female, white, and working-class audience.

These essays began as presentations at the fiftieth annual meeting of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association at Lake Cumberland in Jamestown, Kentucky, and the fifty-first meeting at Montgomery Bell State Park in Burns, Tennessee, during which the participants experienced their own climactic event—a tornado. We appreciate the work of the participants and the editorial board in bringing this issue to fruition.

The Great Meadow: A Founding Epic Feminized
Mabel Benton DuPriest
Carthage College

Central Kentucky is an incipient Rome, a frontier woman is an epic hero, Elizabeth Madox Roberts' novel *The Great Meadow* is Vigil's *Aeneid* revisioned: these claims themselves would seem to require an epic effort to substantiate. However, Elizabeth Madox Roberts' infusion of epic qualities into her fiction has been noted by a number of critics. In *Herald to Chaos*, Earl H. Rovit quotes statements from Elizabeth Madox Roberts' private papers relating to her interest in merging the modern novel with the classical epic: "The only subjects worthy of permanent consideration. . . are the fundamental passions, or instincts. Homeric themes of blood and waste and death . . . of life" (9-10). Earlier, in 1936, another critic, advocating the introduction into modern literature "something like" the quality of epic and folk-song, asserts that "Elizabeth Madox Roberts has been working effectively in this direction" (Adams 84).

More specifically, critics have noted the particular connection of *The Great Meadow* to a particular epic: *The Aeneid*. Rovit cites the episode in which the protagonist's father quotes the opening lines of *The Aeneid*, and then observes that "the journey of Diony [the protagonist] is thus invested with the significance of that other journey to found a nation, and the symbolic reach of the action ascends into the epic plane" (55). In a similar vein, M. E. Bradford notes the significance of quotation, and like Rovit implies the connection between the novel and the "Founding Epic"¹: "Miss Roberts is writing about the dual origins (political and personal) of the genuinely American regime and the function of the frontier in shaping the nation's democratic characters" (x). The parallels between the epic and the novel are the primary focus of a 1969 article by Jo Reinhard Smith, "New Troy in the Bluegrass: Vergilian Metaphor and *The Great Meadow*." While the connections between the two texts have been noted, none of the critics identify the truly significant parallels, nor do they sufficiently demonstrate the similarities of the parallels they do cite. More importantly, however, none of these commentators draw attention to how Roberts' novel is constructed not only to correlate with but also to vary from her model: she has inherited a classical text with an evident male bias and orientation; in depiction of action and character and theme, she feminizes this model.

¹ By "Founding Epic" I am referring to *The Aeneid*, and to the Renaissance epics modeled on that text (Ariosto's *Orland Furioso*, Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*) which use the epic form to tell the story of the founding of a civilization or dynasty.

As noted above, the connection between the epic and the novel is established in the context of Diony's leaving-taking from her family in Albemarle County, Virginia. In this episode she is preparing for the return of Berk Jarvis, whom she is engaged to marry, and with whom she is intending to journey to the new land of Kentucky. During this period of preparation, Thomas Hall, Diony's classically-educated father, "took a daily farewell of her" (120). One of these daily farewells is the opening lines of *The Aeneid*. He quotes the lines first in Latin, then "his voice breaking from the Latin chant would concede known meaning to all that he had sung, as 'I sing of arms and the hero who, fate driven, first came from the shores of Troy to Italy and the Lavinian coast, he, *vi superaum*, by the power of the god, much tossed about, *multum jactatus*, much tossed about on land and sea" (121). He does not need to draw the parallel between the journey of Aeneas and the journey Diony is about to undertake; it is evident to him.

In another explicit allusion, Roberts incorporates into her novel a convention specifically identified with the epic: the use of the catalogue or list. Virgil, following his model, Homer, includes within his epic a variety of lists: two examples are the list of allies of Turnus in Book VII, and, to balance that, the list in Book X of the allies of Aeneas. Though the convention of epic catalog is used more than once in the novel, its most significant appearance is in a key moment of the narrative: the arrival of the settlers at Fort Harrod. Like its classical model, it consists of a listing of characters, in this case, the inhabitants of the fort, categorized by family grouping. The catalogue is introduced in language that captures several qualities of its source: "These are of those who lived in Fort Harrod, who built the stockade, who manned the walls and sallied out to meet the enemy. With some of them were their wives and children. Some were present at one time and others at another, and some were dead before the late summer of 1777, but the dead lived in the report of the living" (174). Several elements that correspond to the epic's catalogue can be noted: one element is style, the elevated style with its consciously balanced phrases and word order; another element is the information conveyed, the exploits of those about to be listed; a third correspondence is the idea of fame or reputation, the idea that the memory of those listed will live on.

The specific allusions to *The Aeneid* point the reader to that text as a model and instigate the interest in noticing similarities between the two texts. The most evident parallel is the action of the novel which repeats the major action of the epic: a migration to a land new to the sojourners and a transplanting of a culture there, a transplanting that is resisted by the indigenous populations. This migration and transplanting in both narratives is conducted in a context of loss or lack; in both narratives the migration is divinely authorized or sanctioned and both experiences demonstrate a sense of significance and value in the culture being transplanted or imposed on the new land.

The Aeneid is a story of refugees. Aeneas and his followers are the remnants of the defeated city of Troy. Unlike the Greeks who, though suffering personal calamities, sail home after the ten-year conflict, Aeneas and those with him have lost their home. Theirs is not a voyage of return, but a voyage of exploration; their only home will of necessity be a new home, one they establish themselves. Similarly, Diony's desire to journey with other settlers to Kentucky is prefaced by a realization of her own personal homelessness. In one of the opening scenes of the novel, Diony's brothers are discussing the changes they will make to the family property when they inherit it. Diony asks: "'Where will my land be, for my house?' . . . It came to her now, as a sudden disaster, that Five Oaks would not be her place. 'Where mought be my place?'" (18). It is only through marriage, she is informed, that she will have a place. This realization, this "sudden disaster," stands for the old ways of doing things: the practices of primogeniture and male inheritance, as well as the acknowledgement that, in already settled areas, the availability of land was finite. It is these constrictions that encourage Diony and other settlers to seek the frontier.

Both migrations begin with a sense that there is divine purpose behind them: in the one case, the journey is actually commanded by the gods, in the other it is authorized and sanctioned by a higher purpose. In *The Aeneid*, the hero receives his command to seek a new land in a dramatic scene. It is the night of the Fall of Troy. Aeneas, and the other unsuspecting citizens, have gone to bed. In Book II, Aeneas provides the account of how—with the attack of the city already underway, with the armed Greeks pouring into the streets of Troy from their hiding place within the fateful wooden horse—the shade of Hector appears to him in a dream, both to inform him of what is occurring, and to give him a commission. These are Hector's words: "Ah, goddess-born, take flight . . . and snatch / yourself out of these flames. . . Troy entrusts / her holy things and household gods to you; / take them away as comrades of your fortunes / seek out for them the great walls that at last, / once you have crossed the sea, you will establish" (Bk. II, 395-396, 400-404). Aeneas receives two additional visitations this same night—one from his goddess mother, and one from the shade of his wife—both with the same message and commission. And, of course, he is reminded of his divinely-directed purpose as he travels from Troy on his own odyssey.

The significance of the migration to Kentucky is initially established by means of the language used to describe the place itself. In the first episode of the novel, two visitors come to call at Five Oaks, and while there tell of a conversation with a man who had been to the land beyond the mountains. "He told about a promise land. I never before in all my time heard tell of a land so smooth and good, a well-nigh sort of Eden" (10). Subsequently, another neighbor, Berk Jarvis, comes to call, bringing with him a hunter who had himself been to the land they call

“Ken-tuck-ee.” After the hunter provides a description which portrays a rich and beautiful country, Diony’s father, Thomas, makes an observation about the land beyond the mountains that not only acknowledges its material potential, but invests it with a sense of divine purpose: The Author of Nature has point-blank made a promise land A place fitted to nurture a fine race, a land of promise (49). Later in the narrative Thomas Hall’s observations become more explicit. Thomas Hall had hoped that Diony would accept a marriage proposal offered her by a Tidewater gentleman and return with him to the refinements of the life in that area. Diony, however, has given her heart to Berk Jarvis and, along with her heart, her pledge to travel with him and a group of settlers into Kentucky. At first Thomas objects, but when he eventually comes around to approving the match and her plan to leave Albemarle County, his approval reflects the exalted destiny he senses in the journey. Asserting that the natural law reveals a purpose beyond the knowledge of men, and agreeing not to stand in Diony’s way, he states: “For such a length of time as it staggers the mind to contemplate, Man has been marching outward spreading over the earth It’s a strong mark of the hidden purposes of the Author of all things. . . . It will never be said of me I hindered Diony” (115).

In these words, Thomas Hall indicates that he perceives the journey of Diony and her fellow travelers to be in response to a divine plan, as clearly as Aeneas himself was instructed to follow the dictates of the gods in venturing forth to found a new city. That this sense of divine purpose is shared by Diony is indicated by her reaction when she gains her first sight of the land to which she and the others have been traveling. Passing through the last of the Wilderness Road, and seeing the land ahead of her, “she had a sudden overwhelming sense of this place as of a place she had known before. Feeling that she had been here before, that these events were the duplicate of some former happening” (173). While Aeneas’ conviction of having reached the predestined goal of his journey comes through pronouncements of prophets and seers, the rightness of the goal of Diony’s journey is validated by her own inner, epiphanic recognition: this is the place where she is destined to be, and destined, like Aeneas, by a power beyond herself.

In both narratives, this sense of destiny is pervaded by the notion of purpose—the belief that the migrating settlers are bringing some important value to the new land. Trojan refugees are representative of a rich and talented heritage, including heroes such as Hector and indeed, Aeneas himself, and bringing with them the customs and skills that were part of Priam’s kingdom: art and knowledge, the gifts of the civilized life. A more specific intention or purpose is made clear to Aeneas in his trip to the Underworld. There, with his father Anchises as interpreter, Aeneas sees the vision of what the gods have intended to result from his establishing the Trojans in this new land. The heroes of future ages pass in parade, then Anchises describes the destined role, the particular gift, of the Roman civilization he is foretelling to Aeneas. First he

mentions arts and skills which other cultures may practice with greater fame than Romans. Then he states, “but yours will be the rulership of nations, / remember, Roman, these will be your arts: / to teach the ways of peace to those you conquer, / to spare defeated peoples, tame the proud” (VI, 1134-1137). It is their sense of social order, and their genius for law that these refugees are destined to bring to the land they settle.

A similar intention is found in the novel. Over seventy miles into their journey, the travelers are resting for a few days at Inglis Ferry. Here Diony makes an acquaintance with an old man named Bethel. He entertains her with a ballad he has composed, telling the story of Hannibal Hane, a man who, like them, is a traveler into the wilderness. But Hannibal Hane is lawless; his aim is to plunder. As old Bethel tells stories, he also makes a powder horn, beautifully decorated, for Diony’s husband, Berk. As he works on it, he says, “Berk Jarvis, there’s power in your horn. Indian law has not got enough power in it. It’s time the law and the women went there” (147). As in the epic, these settlers too are intended to transplant their values, among those values is law; they are, in fact, destined to impose order on a perceived lawless environment.

The two narratives are also parallel in what occurs when the journey’s goal is reached: armed conflict with the native inhabitants. In both instances, the native inhabitants are perceived and portrayed negatively, but also both narratives suggest ambivalence regarding the justice of the newcomers’ claims. In *The Aeneid*, Aeneas has been given a commission not only to settle but to found a new race, and in order to do so he must marry Lavinia, daughter of King Latinus. However, Lavinia had already been promised in marriage to another man, Turnus, and it is difficult not to respect his prior claim. Similarly, when the land of Kentucky is first described, Polly, Diony’s mother, says: “That land, it belongs to the Indians. . . Hit’s Indian property. The white man has got no rights there. Hit’s already owned” (105).

Nevertheless, the negative perspective of the original inhabitants dominates. In *The Aeneid*, Turnus is characterized as “insane,” as having “lust for war’s damnable madness,” and as “raging” (VII, 607, 609, 610). The local inhabitants are perceived as inferior to the Trojans, to be people of “rustic minds” (VII, 639), and Books IX-XII are a tale of warfare. In *The Great Meadow*, although her mother had acknowledged the Indians’ rights to their land, Diony’s father’s comments in the same conversation are more typical: “If the Indian is not man enough to hold it let him give it over then. . . . It’s a land that calls for brave men, a brave race. It’s only a strong race can hold a good country. Let the brave have and hold there” (106). Also in *The Great Meadow* warfare forms a significant part of the action; the hostility of the native Indians is a fact of life for the settlers. The violence is portrayed most vividly in the episode

when Elvira Jarvis, Berk's mother, and Diony are attacked, and Elvira is killed defending Diony. In this encounter, as in other encounters, the Indians are termed "savages" (196), and one of their methods of warfare—scalping—is used to demonstrate that savagery.

An additional parallel can be found in episodes which help establish each text as a "Founding Epic." In fulfilling this function, Virgil's *Aeneid* includes an episode in which the future is envisioned. In Book VIII, Aeneas, seeking allies, is guided by divine instruction to a city established by Greeks from Arcadia and ruled by King Evander. This city, as Aeneas sees it, is poor and rustic, but it is the location of what in future centuries will be Rome. As Aeneas and Evander move through the city, the sites to come are identified by the narrator; finally, "they drew near / a poor man's house, the home of King Evander; / and here and there the cattle lowed along / what are today the elegant Carinea / and Roman Forum" (VIII, 470-474). Similar to this episode is a passage in *The Great Meadow* which presents Diony's vision. Both scenes include a projection into the future which contrasts to the humble, uncivilized scene of the present. Alone in the cabin, Diony is described as falling into a reverie. The description of the setting of the scene emphasizes its simple, frontier quality: it is the "cold season of the early year" (208). She sits in a "stiff little chair" (207); their supper had been baked on the hearth, and would be served in "her few wooden vessels" (207). In this frontier cabin, Diony in her reverie intuits their role in founding what will be a rich and bountiful civilization: "This was a new world, the beginning before the beginning" (207). Her vision itself is bountiful: she sees "a vision of fields turned up by the plow," "a vision of sheep," "a vision of stone walls and rail fences setting bounds to the land, making contentment and limitations for the mind to ease itself upon" (207-209). She sees "a vision of neighbors," "a vision of places to sell the growth of the farms," "a vision of bridges over streams . . . [a] road," "a vision of fine cattle . . . good horses" (209-211). The wilderness becomes the source of prosperity, of commerce, but her vision extends beyond the material. She also sees "a dream of letters . . . of knowledge . . . books on a shelf . . . where one might sit for an hour . . . looking for some final true way of life" (207-212).

The last set of parallels to be noted is the most interesting. Both writers intend not only to follow but also to modify the tradition he or she has received. Virgil bases his epic on Homer's works, borrowing Aeneas' voyaging to reach a home from *The Odyssey* and basing the warfare between two claimants for one woman on the story of the Trojan War in *The Iliad*. However, Virgil adapts his model. He re-orientates the moral perspective of his narrative in order to represent virtues and ideals that are typically Roman, not Greek. His hero is marked by *gravitas* and *simplicitas*; he is far different from the devious double-talker Odysseus, whose qualities are praised by Athena in Homer's epic. And, although Roberts' modeling of her

narrative on Virgil's is evident, she, like the epic poet, modifies her source. What she has received in the tradition is an evidently anti-female narrative; she feminizes it.

In *The Aeneid*, women and goddesses are trouble from beginning to end. Juno's hatred of the Trojans is implacable, and she frequently employs other female deities to cause disruption among them. Even Aeneas' mother, Venus, whom he encounters in Book I, is self-centered and unsympathetic. Dido's appeal is seductive to readers, but is nearly disastrous to Aeneas. The women who are part of the refugee group are obstacles to achieving the goal of finding the new lands, for in Book V Juno uses Iris to incite these women to burn the ships. As a result, they are left behind, and only the "chosen / young men" finally accompany Aeneas to Italy (V, 959-960). When they finally do arrive in Italy, Lavinia's father is willing to obey the intention of Jupiter and agree to Aeneas as her husband. It is her mother, Amata, who (stirred up to rage by Juno) resists the match and, in turn, inflames Turnus, thus bringing about the war. Finally, the primary action of the last portion of the text, modeled on *The Iliad*, is the conflict between Aeneas and Turnus for Lavinia, just as *The Iliad* depicts the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans for Helen. But Lavinia is not Helen of Troy. She is not depicted as the enchanting prize, about whom old men (as in Book 4 of *The Iliad*) cannot help but fantasize. To win Lavinia seems only to be valued as a fulfillment of a pious duty. In fact, the most sympathetic woman in the text may be Creusa, Aeneas' Trojan wife who is lost during the night of the Fall of Troy and whose virtue is her absence.

Roberts' narrative reverses this anti-female perspective. In several key points of comparison, Roberts presents women who overturn the negative depictions of women in the epic with positive portrayals. One example occurs on the journey itself. Unlike the Trojan women who rebel against further journeying by burning the ships, the women on the trail to Kentucky persist despite the fear they experience. Nearing the Gateway, surrounded by ominous landscape, Diony sees fear on the faces of the women and knows fear herself. But men are frightened too; in fact, one man is angered by the contemptuous comments made to the women because he is experiencing the same feeling.

Another point of comparison is the behavior of women when the journey ends. When Aeneas and his followers reach their intended location, it is women who create the problem. Things are far different among the pioneers in Kentucky. A mutuality of endeavor between men and women is established in the symbolic if not the literal arrival of the journey's end—the passage of the travelers through the Cumberland Gap. The language used to portray this passage is significant in demonstrating the reciprocity between the men and women who participate in it: "Together, men and women, they went slowly forward, the men to the fore, the man's

strength being in the thrust, the drive, in action, the woman's lateral, in the plane, enduring, inactive but constant" (168). Arriving at Fort Harrod, women and men work together to survive in this new land. "Men carried forward the work of soldiery, and the large strong women who could blow the great wooden trumpet, the warning horn that called the men home from the outside if there were danger about the fort, assisted the men, sometimes standing as guard at the gates" (189). In fact, in the character of Elvira Jarvis, women even take on the men's role of physical combat. When Diony and her mother-in-law are attacked by Indians, Elvira fights back as vigorously as a man, and although the Indians eventually overpower and kill her, they honor her as a warrior: "The story called the large woman the fighting squaw and it was said she had a strength fit to kill a buffalo in the power of her arms" (205).

It is the resolution of the novel, however, which most clearly overturns the epic's anti-female perspective and shows how Roberts has feminized her model. Both narratives include the archetypal conflict of two men with claims to the same woman, but the novel provides a resolution to this conflict which strongly contrasts to the warfare between Aeneas and Turnus over Lavinia. Interestingly, this is a scene that critics do not praise. Earl H. Rovit, describing it as the one weakness of the novel, declares it is not "integral to the meaning of the novel," and states that this "final episode has a note of contrived artificiality" (55). Another critic, Frederick P. W. McDowell, agrees (86). Both critics name a similar cause for disliking the scene: the difference between the two claimants of Diony is insufficiently drawn. This observation, however, misses the significance of the scene. The focus is not on either of the two men, but rather on the woman, and, even more importantly, on a woman in the role of decision-maker who by her action provides a prototype for the possibility of female self-determination.

In this scene, both men believe they have a good claim to Diony. Evan Muir exclaims, "You come back too late Iffen a man keeps away so long he can scarcely hope to find what he left when he went out. My work of two years is here, and surely that is a thing a man can't give over in a day. My own child is here as well as yours." But Berk responds with his point of view: "I built the house . . . and I bought the land with my warrants. I married Diony first and the first claim is mine. You had your season. Now you can go" (314). They are facing each other, ready to fight, when neighbors, the Harmons, arrive. After Muir explains the issue to them, Molly Anne Harmon says, "When a man is gone from his wife and his home, when he's kept away by war or iffen he's lost in distant forests for such a length of time that she marries again to another, it's the custom, iffen he comes back again, for the woman to choose which man she will have thereafter." And her husband supports her statement. He has known of a similar circumstance, and he explains what happened in that case: "the people said let her choose It's the right and law in the wilderness." Molly Anne reaffirms, "It's the law in a

new country, and they say together, "It's the law in far places." Diony does choose Berk, and Evan follows the Harmons' decree: "Let the other go in peace" (316-317).

Thus, the archetypal pattern of males struggling against each other for dominance over the female, the female being the passive prize, is modified. Here, in the new land, in the wilderness, in the far places, there is a new law, a law which invests a woman with power and allows her to be an active participant in the choices which affect her life. And in following this new law, the result is not conflict, but peace, and order restored without violence. Diony, the protagonist of this narrative, parallels and contrasts to important figures in Virgil's epic. Like Aeneas, she participates in the transplanting of a culture to a new land, in the founding of a new civilization. But unlike her classical prototype, Lavinia, she is an active agent in her own experience. In her character and through her action she represents an image of women that overturns the image presented in the epic. Lavinia represents woman as object, a prize to be won by or awarded to a man. Diony represents woman invested with the right of self-determination.

The Great Meadow, then, builds on tradition, but significantly changes it. Like many ancient tales, it depicts the founding of a new civilization in what is portrayed as a savage land. But for the new inhabitants, it is a promised land, and these adventurers believe themselves to be following a divinely sanctioned destiny. As Roberts' novel follows this pattern, she is in the same tradition as those New England writers who saw the settlement of Puritans as a re-enactment of the Israelites entering the land God had chosen for them. But with the explicit reference to the *Aeneid* in her narrative, Roberts makes it apparent to the reader that she is following this classical epic as her model, and in doing so places herself in the tradition of Virgil and other writers of founding epics—Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser—who not only receive but also modify tradition. The land of promise, as Roberts portrays it, is not only a new land, but a place where there will be a new law and a new perspective, one in which the voice of women and the opportunity to choose become integral features.

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Signs and Wonders and the New Madrid Earthquakes

David W. Fletcher

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From December 1811 through February 1812, major earthquakes occurred along the lower Mississippi River near New Madrid in Missouri Territory. The earthquakes, estimated by seismologists to exceed 8.0 on the Richter scale, shook the entire region and caused disturbances as far away as the eastern coast of the United States, southern Canada, and northern Mexico.¹ Two thousand aftershocks followed, and one observer aptly noted that the earth “twitched and jerked like a side of freshly killed beef.”² Although the earthquakes rocked a sparsely populated area (Fig. 1), their reach and consequence stirred the imaginations of those who witnessed, felt, or heard about them.

The earthquakes and the convergence of other remarkable sensations like the Great Comet of 1811 were pivotal events in the Old Southwest. For many, they provoked images about the end of the world and sparked fires of spiritual renewal. In the ideological milieu of the frontier world, a world that believed in attributing supernatural meanings to extraordinary or unusual events, notions about divine intervention or magical efficacy prevailed.³ Cataclysmic events, especially when they were destructive of life or property, often evoked the language of cosmic disturbance, universal upheaval, and world cessation. But these “signs” and “wonders” were not conclusive over a long period of time. Although the memory of the earthquakes lingered for years, the shock of their immediacy was lost. For the long-term, their potency to spellbind fickle mortals was temporary, and their ability to inspire apocalyptic language was fleeting. For the short-term, though, New Madrid residents, travelers in the area, and thousands of others endured a shaking on 16 December 1811 unlike anything they had experienced before.

One traveler on the Mississippi River at the time of the earthquakes was William Pierce. Pierce began his tour of the “Western Waters” from Pittsburgh, and he and his companions set out for New Orleans in a flat-bottomed boat near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers on Friday, 13 December. By 15 December, just before the eruption of the quakes, he was “about 116 miles from the mouth of the Ohio” or in the vicinity of Little Prairie (near Caruthersville, Arkansas). Pierce recalled, “The night was extremely dark and cloudy; not a star appeared in the heavens, . . . indeed, the sky has been continually overcast, and the weather unusually thick and hazy.”⁴ A few hours before dawn, all hell literally broke loose. In his letter to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post*, penned on Christmas Day at Big Prairie

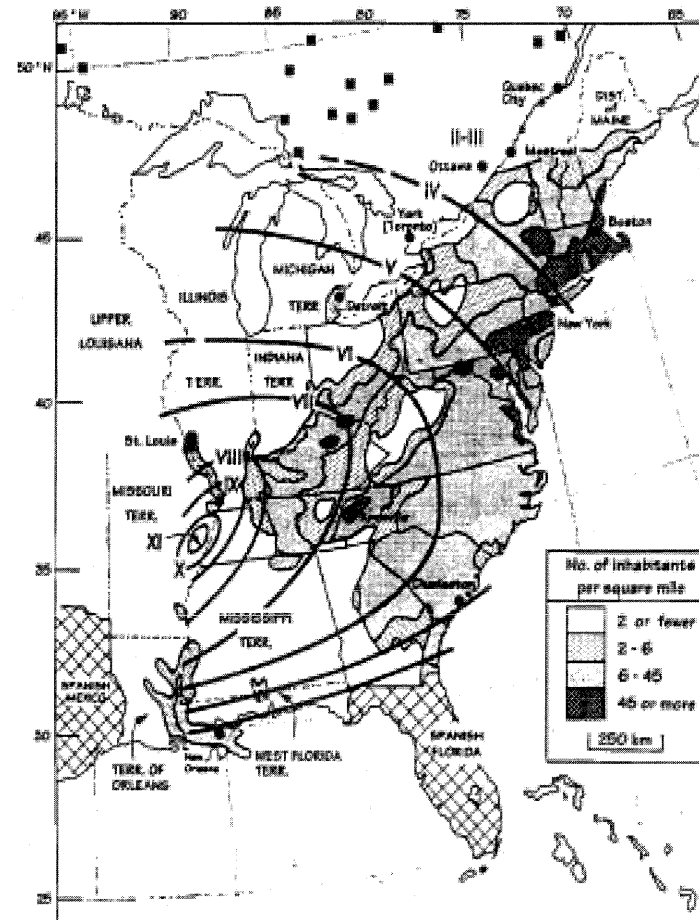


Fig. 1. Zones of seismic intensity and population distribution at time of New Madrid Earthquakes of 16 December 1811. Based on calculations of Arch C. Johnston and Eugene S. Schweig, "The Enigma of the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812," *Annual Review of the Earth and Planetary Sciences* 24 (1996): 343, in Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 110.

(near Helena, Arkansas), Pierce recounted colorfully the remarkable things he had seen since the quakes began. Agitated by the bizarre events, Pierce found it impossible to describe in ordinary language what had happened. He wrote:

Tremendous and uninterrupted explosions, resembling a discharge of artillery were heard. . . . There was a volcanic discharge of combustible matter to great heights, and incessant rumbling was heard below, and the bed of the river was excessively agitated, whilst the water assumed a turbid and boiling appearance. . . . Never was a scene more replete with terrific threatenings of death. . . . We contemplated in mute astonishment a scene which completely beggars description, and of which the most glowing imagination is inadequate to form a picture.⁵

Pierce tried to explain the destructive forces of the earthquakes in language typical of early nineteenth-century science. But, moved beyond “rational” descriptions by the unusual happenings he personified nature in poetic and even apocalyptic terms. He described the earth’s wreckage with vivid, heightened language:

Here the earth, river, &c. torn with furious convulsions, opened in huge trenches, whose deep jaws were instantaneously closed; there through a thousand vents sulphurous streams gushed from its very bowels leaving vast and almost unfathomable caverns. Every where Nature itself seemed tottering on the verge of dissolution. Encompassed with the most alarming dangers . . . it was a struggle for existence itself.⁶

Pierce wrote about other unsettling occurrences as well. He related the panic of the water fowl, the terror of the Indians, and the confusion of local inhabitants. He had heard how the suddenness and potency of the quakes put the people in the little town of New Madrid in a state of “confusion, terror and uproar.” They were so disturbed that “those in the town were seen running for refuge to the country, whilst those in the country fled with like purpose towards the town.” This chaotic spectacle of crazed turmoil (see Fig. 2) prompted Pierce to summarize his version of the quakes in language of cosmic disturbance. Instinctively, he perceived a coordinated effort of heaven and earth:

All nature indeed seemed to sympathize in the commotion which agitated the earth. The sun rarely shot a ray through the heavens, the sky was clouded, and a dreary darkness brooded over the whole face of creation; the stars were encircled with a pale light, and the comet appeared hazy and dim.⁷

Pierce ended his letter with an amazing observation. He told the editor, “My dear Sir, I have given a superficial view of this awful phenomenon; not much to convey instruction upon a very interesting subject, as to gratify the curiosity of the public relative to so remarkable an

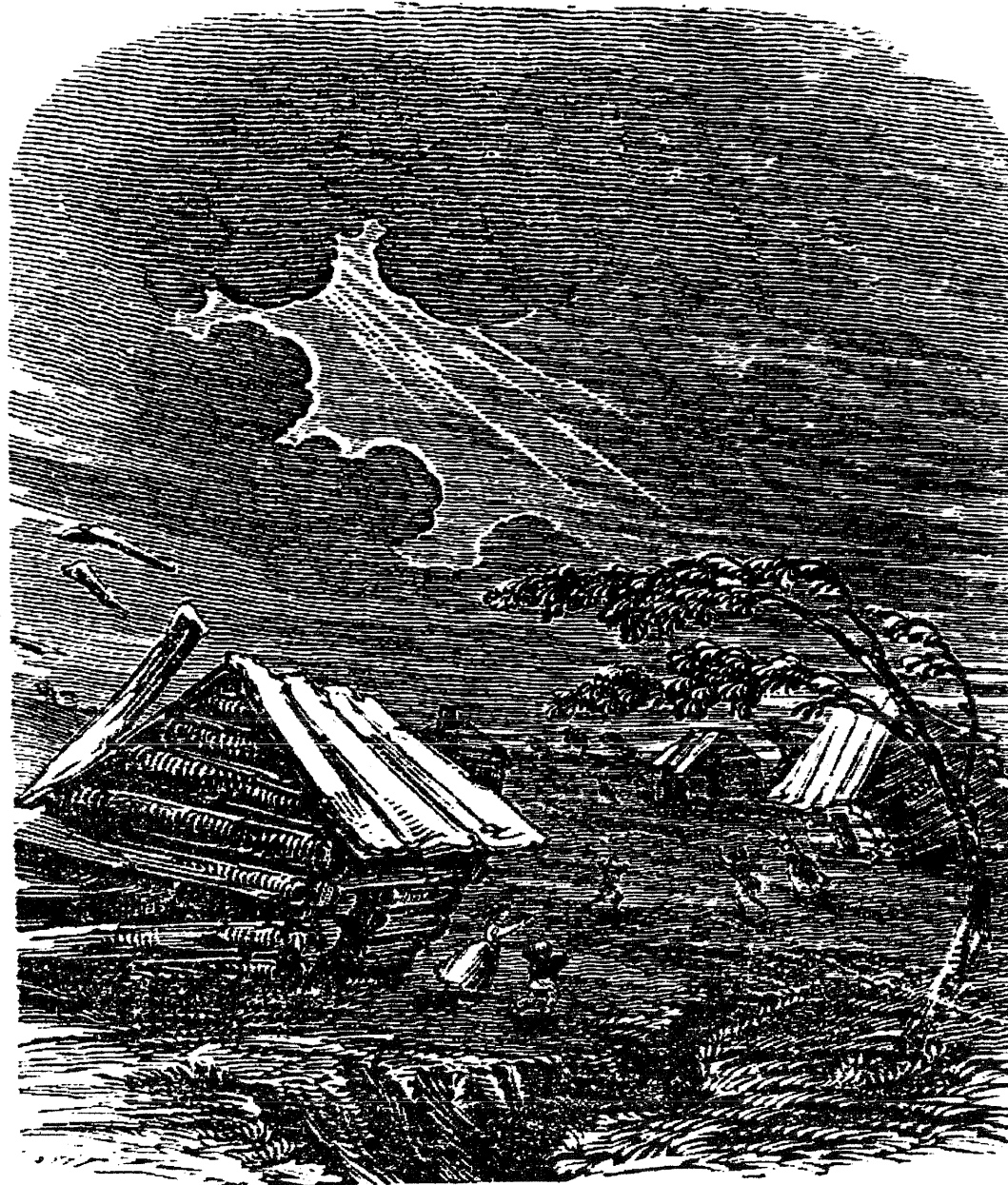


Fig. 2. "The Great Earthquake at New Madrid," from Henry Howe, *The Great West* (Cincinnati, 1851), 237, in Norma Hayes Bagnall, *On Shaky Ground: The New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811 - 1812* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 29.

event.⁸ If not to be understood as a tactful use of modesty, Pierce's incredulity at the strict accuracy of his own eyewitness account puts doubt on the reliability of his testimony. Alternatively, if Pierce's letter can be regarded as a dependable source for the earthquakes (e.g., because he included a lot of fascinating details "collected from facts"), then he assuredly bore witness to his own emotional upheaval. To be sure, Pierce wrote from notes that were made in haste, so his narrative appears to be arranged logically in some places but jumbled up in other places. This can be accounted for quite simply. Pierce himself was disquieted by the earthquakes, and this led him to embellish his report with ideas of cosmic upheaval. He confessed to the *Evening Post* this lack of strict, rational analysis or, as he called it, "a superficial view . . . not much to convey instruction." For apocalyptic language, nothing less should be expected than this mood of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Another witness to the power of the shocks and their devastating effects was John Bradbury, a Scottish naturalist who had come to America to study and collect botanical specimens for the Liverpool Philosophical Society. He too, like Pierce, had to resort to apocalyptic language to describe the significance of what he saw. On 14 December, Bradbury and his party arrived at New Madrid where he disembarked to pick up some supplies. His impression of the small outpost was one of disappointment, since he "found only a few straggling houses . . . [and] only two stores . . . very indifferently furnished."⁹ The next morning they left New Madrid, passed the first or Upper Chickasaw Bluffs (near Osceola, Arkansas) in the course of the day, and by evening came in view of *Chenal du Diable* or Devil's Channel (i.e., Devil's Race Ground), a dangerously shallow point on the river. Because the sun had set already, Bradbury wisely instructed his French crew to moor the boat with its cargo of 30,000 pounds of lead to a small island about five hundred yards from the channel's entrance. There, in the middle of the river, the crew ate supper and settled down for the night.

At approximately two o'clock the next morning, Bradbury was roused from his sleep "by a most tremendous noise, accompanied by an agitation of the boat so violent, that it appeared in danger of upsetting." He scurried past four of his frightened boatsmen to the door of the cabin where he saw "the river as if agitated by a storm" and heard "the crash of falling trees and the screaming of wild fowl on the river." After the initial shock, Bradbury secured some "papers and money" and scrambled ashore to assess the damage. By candlelight, he measured one "really frightful" chasm about four feet deep and over eighty yards long and continued to work with the crew throughout the night to safeguard their resources and their very lives.¹⁰

As the aftershocks persisted, he took note of the violence—loud noises, screeching birds, shaking and jarring, and crumbling riverbanks—and the panic and confusion of his crew.

Surely Bradbury himself was disturbed by the situation and the extreme terror felt by his patron and the boatsmen. He noticed that “the men appeared to be so terrified and confused, as to be almost incapable of action,” and he recorded over and over in French their agitation— “*O mon Dieu . . .*” After daybreak, as he and his companions watched canoes and small boats—lacking their passengers but still containing goods and belongings—float down the foamy, timber-filled river, he keenly felt their narrow escape from death. For Bradbury, this sight was “a melancholy proof” that the people and crafts they had passed the previous day succumbed to the earthquakes.¹¹ But his acquiescence to a superstitious rationale for the earthquakes seemed to indicate that the scientist’s critical judgment had been clouded by his direct experience of the powerful forces at work.

On 17 December, the day after the big shocks, Bradbury and his crew talked with twenty or so people who had gathered to pray in a log cabin near the Lower Chickasaw Bluffs (close to Memphis). He “found them almost distracted with fear” and saw “a bible lying open on the table.” The weary, rattled people told the river travelers about ruptures in the earth from which many “had fled to the hills.” One man, whom Bradbury portrayed as “possessing more knowledge than the rest,” informed them that the earthquakes had been caused by the recent comet “that had appeared a few months before.” The man then elaborated on the cosmic origin of the earth-shattering phenomena. The comet had

two horns, over one of which the earth had rolled, and was now lodged betwixt them: that the shocks were occasioned by the attempts made by the earth to surmount the other horn. If this should be accomplished, all would be well, if otherwise, inevitable destruction of the world would follow.

Incredibly, Bradbury judged the man “confident in his hypothesis, and myself unable to refute it, I did not dispute the point.”¹² Either the Scotsman politely chose not to negate the man’s folklore, or he himself had been shaken by the quakes to the point of irrationality. Perhaps Bradbury recognized above all else the “catch” or “escape” clause in the man’s pronouncement—“If this should be accomplished . . . if otherwise . . .” This customary feature of apocalyptic language preserved the ambiguity of its predictive aspect and protected the utterance from failure, since one condition or the other would take place necessarily. All the same, Bradbury passed along this cosmic anecdote as a workable but apocalyptic reason for the origin of the earthquakes.

In their acceptance of apocalyptic warrant for the earthquakes, eyewitnesses like Pierce and Bradbury were not alone. Following the initial upheavals, George Crist of Nelson County near Louisville confessed, “Everybody is scared to death. . . . A lot of people thinks that the

devil has come here. Some thinks that this is the beginning of the world coming to a end.” After more shocks in February 1812, Crist feared, “If we do not get away from here the ground is going to eat us alive. . . . We are all about to go crazy—from pain and fright.” He moved away later with no regrets: “As much as I love my place in Kentucky—I never want to go back.”¹³ Among common folk, supernatural conjectures about the cause of the earthquakes wavered between demonic involvement and righteous indignation. Many believed the quakes signaled the imminence of the world’s end, and this led to panic and a desire to escape. As Crist remarked, because he and his family did not want to experience any more tremors, they moved away to what they believed to be a safer place. This uneasiness, even of those who lived a distance from the epicenter, showed the extensive power of the earthquakes, their role in affecting people’s apocalyptic consciousness, and their influence on migratory patterns.

Religious leaders especially noticed this uneasiness among settlers in the region. Preachers attested significant numbers of baptisms and conversions, since sinners wanted to avoid further outpourings of God’s wrath. In the immediate vicinity of the quakes, membership in the Methodist Church increased the following year by a whopping 50 percent. Preachers labeled these end-of-the-world converts “earthquake Christians.”¹⁴ Peter Cartwright, a Methodist preacher who had moved to the Cumberland region from Virginia, noticed that the severe earthquakes in the winter of 1812 “struck terror to thousands of people, and under the mighty panic hundreds and thousands crowded to, and joined the different Churches.”¹⁵ At Nashville, he experienced the following reaction during a turbulent aftershock:

Early the next morning I arose and walked out on the hill near the house where I had preached, when I saw a negro woman coming down the hill to the spring, with an empty pail on her head. . . . When she got within a few rods of where I stood the earth began to tremble and jar; chimneys were thrown down, scaffolding around many new buildings fell with a loud crash, hundreds of the citizens suddenly awoke, and sprang into the streets; loud screaming followed, for man thought the day of judgment was come. The young mistresses of the above-named negro woman came running after her, and begging her to pray for them. She raised the shout and said to them, “My Jesus is coming in the clouds of heaven, and I can’t wait to pray for you now; I must go and meet him. I told you so, that he would come, and you would not believe me. Farewell. Halleluiah! Jesus is coming, and I am ready. Halleluiah! Amen.” And on she went, shouting and clapping her hands, with the empty pail on her head.¹⁶

Sentiments like these, among people who saw in the earthquakes a sure sign of the imminent end of the world and the salvation of righteous believers, came predominantly from churchgoers and preachers on the frontier. The catastrophic earthquakes and the concurrent comet

presaged for Christians the end of the world and the beginning of divine judgment—for the saints a time of shouting hallelujahs in anticipation of meeting Jesus and for sinners “a time of great horror.”¹⁷ But the impression of apocalyptic ideas and their lasting effect was uncertain and unpredictable.

Like the Methodists, the Baptists enjoyed quick evangelistic growth during this time of nature’s fury. But a good number of these new believers turned away from the church once the earthquakes subsided. At a funeral service in the fall of 1811, Reuben Ross, a Baptist elder from Stewart County, Tennessee, observed a great light in the northwestern sky just as the casket was put in the grave at dusk. The startled mourners said they saw a “harbinger of impending calamity.”¹⁸ When the earthquakes came later many converted and, according to Ross, became “earthquake Christians.” Many who “got religion” in a hurry during the shockwaves lost it soon after the rumblings stopped. Ideas about the end of the world and its imminent destruction commanded their attention only as long as the immediate physical evidence of the earth’s trembling backed up the apocalyptic claims. And some disagreed with apocalyptic expectations on grounds of strict “logical” reasoning. One rustic individual inferred that the end was not imminent. Powerful shocks had “rudely bounced” him “from his bed in the darkness,” but he was certain that “Judgment Day” could not come at “night.”¹⁹

Other settlers were not so fickle in their response to the earthquakes. As a result of his experience, Jacob Bower, a Pennsylvania emigre who lived in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, got convicted permanently. He reminisced about “the ever memorable morning” of 17 December 1811:

When most people were in their beds sound asleep, there was an Earthquake, verry violent indeed. . . . I expected immediate distruction [and] had no hope of seeing the dawn of another day. Eternity, oh Eternity was just at hand, and all of us unprepared; just about the time the sun arose, as I supposed, for it was a thick, dark and foggy morning, there was another verry hard shock—lasted several minutes terrible indeed. To see everything touching the earth, shakeing—quivering, trembling; and men’s hearts quaking for fear of the approaching judgment. Many families ran together and grasped each other in their arms. One instance near to where I lived, the woman & five children, all gathered around her husband, crying O my husband pray for me, The children crying, Father, pray for me, O, pray for me, for the day of Judgment is come, and we are unprepared!²⁰

Bower maintained that the tremors continued for about two years but were hardly noticeable, and Deists and Universalists “in those days were scarce.” When the quakes eased

off, many who “converted” became uninterested in church and religion. For his part, Bower remained steadfast, took up preaching, and surmised that the earthquakes produced fewer apostates than the revivals he knew about. He wrote:

It was frequently said by the enemies of religion, the Baptists are all *shakers*, that when the Earth is don shaking, they will all turn back, and be as they were before. But . . . I have witnessed about nineteen revivals of religion 11 in Kentucky, 6 in Illinois, and 2 in Missouri. And I have the pleasure of being acquainted with many, who were brought in, the time of the Earthquake, and these were as few, and perhaps fewer apostates among them, as any revival I have ever seen.²¹

Perhaps in this assessment Bower reflected his own fidelity to Christian ministry more than anything else, but he did raise an important point about one difference in the revivals and the earthquakes. The earthquakes, unlike the revivals that operated under the aegis of church leaders and had some human controls, came suddenly without warning and caught people by surprise. This had the obvious effect of literally shaking people to act, to do something in response to the earthquakes. How people reacted often depended on what they believed about the earthquakes. They had a variety of options from which to choose, because interpretations of the earthquakes differed.

At the onset of the earthquakes, people were curious and wanted to know how and why the earthquakes occurred. The exceptional amplitude of the tremors—by one estimate felt in twenty-seven states—resulted in many newspaper reports across the United States and Canada (e.g., in St. Louis, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York, Quebec, and Montreal).²² Variant descriptions came from cities, towns, and rural areas, even though the essential features of the quakes were the same. Some people wondered about the “how” or the nature of the quakes. Jared Brooks of Louisville, Kentucky, crafted a rudimentary measuring device to keep a tally on the earthquakes and classify them according to intensity.

Brooks apparently was satisfied with the empirical aspect of his attempt at primitive seismology and did not speculate on any nonphysical cause of the quakes. But the experiment itself called into question unstudied explanations, whether natural or supernatural, as something deficient.²³ Others investigated the “why” or rationale of the earthquakes. In his “Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes,” Senator Samuel Mitchill from New York collected extensive evidence and summarized the particulars in ten principal points. He concluded that he gave enough data to satisfy the proponents of three major hypotheses used “to explain the awful phenomena of earthquakes . . . the *mechanical* reasoner . . . the *chemical* expositor . . . [and] the *electrical* philosopher.”²⁴

After the shocks died down and the excitement of the immediate disruptions faded away, the earthquakes began to take on new meanings in the memory of individuals and society in general. There was of course the customary use of the earthquakes by Christian evangelists as a rhetorical tool to warn sinners of impending judgment and to persuade them to get saved. But not everyone was inclined to accept supernatural explanations of the earthquakes *prima facie*. Empiricists like Brooks stayed busy well after the initial shocks with physical observations and record-keeping. Politicians such as Mitchill obliged diverse popular opinions, put forth considerable information about what had happened, and simply ignored supernatural hypotheses. Even poets, who tried to make sense of it all through nonliteral, metaphorical elucidations, did not feel compelled to invoke divine fiat. In this spirit, Henry Schoolcraft waxed poetic:

And the earth, as if grasped by omnipotent might,
Quaked dreadful, and shook with the throes of affright,
Deep northwardly rolled the electrical jar,
Creating amazement, destruction, and war;
The rivers they boiled like a pot over coals,
And mortals fell prostrate and prayed for their souls:
Every rock on our borders cracked, quivered, and shrunk,

And N ackitosh tum bled, and N ew M adrid sunk.²⁵

This mixed utility of the earthquakes accentuated their multi-causal nature as well as their unknown origin, but apocalyptic imagery in depictions of the earthquakes did not disappear. Based on the understanding of the earthquakes as “signs” and “wonders,” memory of them persisted and new meanings for their outbreak were found. Travelers who came afterwards to the lower Mississippi region took note of their imprint in people’s memory and on the physical landscape. One of these visitors, Charles Latrobe, contended in his travel notes that portents like the splendid comet, rivers flooding, unprecedented sickness, and a spirit of restlessness “combined to make the year 1811 the *Annus Mirabilis* of the West.”²⁶

Latrobe, a London-born Moravian gentleman, toured the United States beginning in 1832, and his version of the earthquakes personified the earth as alive, distressed, and hungry: The vicinity of New Madrid seems to have been the centre of the convulsion. There . . . the earth broke into innumerable fissures. To the present day . . . slight shocks . . . are there felt . . . strange sounds may at times be heard, as of some mighty cauldron bubbling in the bowels of the earth. . . . Thousands of acres with their gigantic growth of forest and cane were swallowed up, and lakes and ponds innumerable were formed. The earth in many parts was observed to burst suddenly open, and jets of sand, mud and water, to shoot up into the air. . . . Islands disappeared, and in many parts the

course of the river was completely changed. . . . The gaping earth unfolded its secrets, and the bones . . . hidden within its bosom for ages, were brought to the surface. Boats and arks . . . were swallowed up. . . . And finally, you may still meet and converse with those, who were on the mighty river of the West when the whole stream ran toward its sources for an entire hour.²⁷

Latrobe also believed the year's concentration of wonders—comet, floods, and earthquakes—pointed to a supernatural explanation. Latrobe, however, moved beyond incredible and inexplicable occurrences to what could be postulated and explained reasonably. While conceding the emotional appeal of fabulous events that were beyond human control, he hinted at their value for replication by humans on the same landscape the earthquakes had touched. He summed up his argument:

It was at this very epoch in which so many natural phenomena were combining to spread wonder and awe, that man too, in the exercise of that power with which his Creator has endowed him, was making his first essay in that region, of an art, the natural course and further perfection of which was destined to bring about yet greater changes than those affected by the flood and earthquake: and at the very time that the latter were agitating the surface, the very first steam-boat was seen descending the great rivers, and the awe-struck Indian on the banks beheld the Pinelore flying through the turbid waters.²⁸

By transferring the “power” of radical change from divine to human initiative, Latrobe shifted the responsiveness of humans in general (i.e., “wonder and awe”) to the Indians particularly (i.e., “the awe-struck Indian”). He thereby broadened the meaning of the concurrence of these wonders to include pro-settler and anti-Indian goals and designs. As a result, he regarded the pangs of the earth and the portents in the heavens to be providential signs for the westward trek of explorers and settlers particularly through new technologies like the steam engine that had been developed about the same time. This more complex reading of the earthquakes by Latrobe fit with the circumstances of the time as the country pressed further westward during the 1830s.

Before Latrobe, others had been alert to the signs of the times. One writer to the *Connecticut Mirror* chided New Englanders for their lack of responsiveness. “Had such a succession of Earthquakes as have happened within a few weeks been experienced in this country five years ago, they would have excited universal terror,” the writer quipped. The contributor believed the “extent of territory” shaken by the earthquakes was “astonishing” and suggested a ready explanation: “What power short of Omnipotence could raise and shake such

a vast portion of this globe?” For this Christian interpreter of events, the evidence was too weighty to withhold judgment:

The period is portentous and alarming. We have within a few years seen the most wonderful eclipses, the year past has produced a magnificent comet, the earthquakes withing the past two months have been almost without number—and in addition to the whole, we constantly “*hear of wars and summons of wars.*” May not the same enquiry be made of us that was made by the hypocrites of old—Can ye not discern the signs of the times?²⁹

Another unnamed contributor, to the *Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, posted a shrewd observation almost two weeks prior to the initial outbreak of earthquakes in December of 1811. The anonymous contributor remarked that:

Fires, storms, tornadoes, freshets, duels, murders, and assassinations, have been more active . . . in the current year, than in any within the recollection of the oldest member of our society. Some of the *augurers* think those events are only the forerunners of greater calamities; that the wandering meteor called the Comet has been universally acknowledged by all nations of the harbingers of evil [sic, as the harbinger of evil]. Much as the deist and free-thinker may laugh at the signs and omens looked at and respected by the ancients, yet the evidence is strong in favor of the doctrine. Unfortunately for us, there is a science lost to the world . . . Astrology.³⁰

This writer gave no hint about personal religious persuasion apart from belief in the “science” of astrology. This belief unquestionably went beyond traditional Christian teachings about God’s transcendence over the world and providential care of its creatures. Astrological cults had their own ideas about control of the world and their own set of rituals performed by priestesses and priests (i.e., “augurers”) to explain the dark secrets of the cosmos and foretell the future. This cut hard against Christian claims that the “word of God” was revealed and the “keys of Death and Hades” were held by Jesus and his apostles exclusively.

But the anonymous contributor to the New Orleans newspaper was right about one thing. Astrology was an ancient practice with centuries of tradition in support of it. With a heritage that possibly exceeded that of Christianity, Deism, and “Free-thinking” combined (at least by a standard of longevity), astrology could do what progressive and rationalistic ideology could not do—grasp and make sense out of the mysteries of the universe. According to this contributor’s cosmic assessment, the “wandering meteor” and other strange occurrences were ill omens of some dark disaster for humanity despite the disbelief of scoffers and the ridicule of rationalists. What “greater calamities” might occur remained unclear and undefined by the

writer. In its uncertainty, the apocalyptic language of this non-Christian corresponded to the apocalyptic rhetoric of many Christians. In its foresight of the earthquakes' imminence, it echoed the predictions of the famed Shawnee chief Tecumseh who two months earlier had prophesied the comet and the earthquakes and ascribed cosmic meaning to what was happening across the continent. But the "greater calamities" came and went, and the end of the world did not come. For all these apocalyptic visionaries, the value of their insights would have to wait until another catastrophic moment.

On Sunday night, you all may know,

*222. A call to the people of Louisiana*³¹

Come, my friends, and neighbors all,
Come listen and I'll tell you,
Concerning of the mighty call
That took place in Louisiana.

On Sunday night, you all may know,
As we were all a sleeping;
The Lord from heaven look'd down,
And set the earth to shaking.

Some jumped up, ran out of doors,
Whilst others follow'd after;
And some they stood all in amaze,
Crying, Lord, what is the matter?

As for myself, I must confess
I could but stand and wonder;
Expecting ev'ry moment to hear
Some louder claps of thunder.

The rest of the night was spent in grief,
And wishing for the morning;
But little thought, the people had,
That was the second warning.

As soon as day light did appear,
The elements were darken'd;
I walked out about the yard,
And saw the earth was cracking.

Immediately the shake came on,
Which you will all remember;
The houses reeled to and fro;
The earth it split asunder.

The people gather'd all about,
In places there were many;
The Christians stood with lifted hands,
Lord, spare the Louisiana.

More than six months have past and gone,
And still the earth keeps shaking;
The Christians go with bow'd down heads,
While sinners' hearts are aching.

The great event I cannot tell,
Nor what the Lord is doing;
But one thing I am well assur'd,
The scriptures are fulfilling.

I thought at last these are the times,
That in latter days should follow,
When judgments should pass thro' the land
And bring the days of sorrow.

But if you will go onward still,
And still rush on in sinning;
You need not hope for better times,
For they are now beginning.

The prophets did foretel of old,
That great events are coming;

The Lord Almighty's bringing on
The days of tribulation.

Prepare, before it is too late,
To meet the Lord from heaven;
King Jesus stands with open arms,
To save your souls from ruin.

¹ On the extent of the earthquakes, see Myron L. Fuller, *The New Madrid Earthquake (A Scientific Factual Field Account)*, United States Geological Survey Bulletin 494 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912; repr., Marble Hill, Missouri: Gutenberg-Richter Publications, 1995), 13-31; James Penick, Jr., *The New Madrid Earthquakes*, rev. ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 1-14; Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 108-138. For a good description of the destruction, see William Atkinson, *The Next New Madrid Earthquake: A Survival Guide for the Midwest* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 9-25.

² "Earthquakes and the New Madrid Fault: Seismic Activity, Maps, Information," <<http://www.showme.net/~fkeller/quake>> (accessed 16 April 2006); Fred Roe, "The Great New Madrid Earthquakes," 3 November 2002, <<http://www.tuppenceworth.ie/biglife/quake.html>> (accessed 16 April 2006).

³ See the helpful discussions by Jon Butler, "Toward the Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse," *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225-256; and Peter W. Williams, "Religion, Time, and History: Providence and Prophecy," *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), 119-130.

⁴ William Leigh Pierce, letter to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post*, 25 December 1811, *An Account of the Great Earthquakes, in the Western States, particularly on the Mississippi River; December 16-23, 1811* (Newburyport, Massachusetts: Thomas & Whipple, 1812), 3-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811 . . .* (Liverpool, England: Smith and Galway, 1817), 196.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 199-201.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199-202.

¹² *Ibid.*, 205-206. For testimony to the comet, see "New Madrid—references by specific subject," n.d., <<http://www.ceri.memphis.edu/compendium/subject.html>> (accessed 16 April 2006).

¹³ George Heinrich Crist, unknown documents, 16 December 1811, 23 January and 8 February 1812, and 14 April 1813, submitted by Floyd Creasy, a descendant of Crist, to "The Virtual Times: The New Madrid Earthquake," n.d., <<http://hsv.com/genlintr/newmadrd/acnt3.htm>> (accessed 16 April 2006).

¹⁴ See "Arkansas Stories: The Great Earthquakes of 1811," n.d., <<http://www.arkansasstories.com/newmadrid-earthquake-two.html>> (accessed 16 April 2006); and "The Arkansas News: Massive Earthquakes

Shake Mississippi River Country,” n.d., <http://www.oldstatehouse.com/educational_programs/classroom/arkansas_news/detail.asp?id=443&issue_id=32&page=4> (accessed 16 April 2006).

¹⁵Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (1856; repr., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 126.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley, or, Pioneer Life in the West*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Cranson and Curtis, 1854), 238.

¹⁸James Ross, *The Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia: n.d.), 201, quoted in Walter Brownlow Posey, *The Baptist Church in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1776-1845* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 57.

¹⁹Mary Trotter Kion, “Great American Plains: Earthquake in the Year 1811,” 2 November 2001, <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/great_american_plains/81962> (accessed 16 April 2006).

²⁰“The Autobiography of Jacob Bower: A Frontier Baptist Preacher and Missionary,” in William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830* (1931; rpt., New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 191.

²¹Ibid., 200.

²²Otto W. Nuttli, ed., “Appendix—Nuttli 1973 Paper, Contemporary Newspaper Accounts of Mississippi Valley Earthquakes of 1811-1812,” February 1972, <http://www.eas.slu.edu/Earthquake_Center/SEISMICITY/Nuttli.1973/nuttli-73-app.html> (accessed 16 April 2006); R. Street, “A Contribution to the Documentation of the 1811-1812 Mississippi Valley Earthquake Sequence,” *Earthquake Notes* 53, no. 2, (April, June 1982), <http://www.eas.slu.edu/Earthquake_Center/SEISMICITY/Street/rstreet.html> (accessed 16 April 2006).

²³Fuller, *The New Madrid Earthquake*, 22-26, 33.

²⁴Samuel L. Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes which occurred on the 16th day of December, 1811 etc.,” *Transactions of the Literary and Philosophical Society of NY*, Vol. 1 (May 1814): 281-307; transcribed by Susan E. Hough, May 2000, <<http://pasadena.wr.usgs.gov/office/hough/mitchill.html>> (accessed 16 April 2006).

²⁵Henry R. Schoolcraft, “Transallegania or the Groans of Missouri,” from *Journal of a Tour into the Interior of Missouri and Arkansas, from Potosi, or Mine a Burton, in Missouri Territory, in a South-West Direction, toward the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1818 and 1819* (London: Richard Phillips and Company, 1821), cited at “Local History Website of the Southern Missouri State University Department of History: Schoolcraft’s Journal,” n.d., <<http://history.missouristate.edu/FTMiller/LocalHistory/Schoolcraft/schrcftpoem.htm>> (accessed 9 August 2006). Compare “A call to the people of Louisiana,” an apocalyptic ballad about the earthquakes that was composed by an unknown author about 1812. See end of article.

²⁶Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833*, vol. 1 (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835), 102. Compare John D. W. Guice, “1811-Year of Wonders in the Mississippi Territory,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 167-170; and Jay Feldman, “A Time of Extraordinaries,” *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 3-22.

²⁷Latrobe, *Rambler in North America*, 110-111. Compare Eliza Bryan, letter to Reverend Lorenzo Dow, 22 March 1816, in *History of Cosmopolite, Or Lorenzo’s Journal*, 344-346, cited at “New Madrid Eyewitness Accounts,” n.d., <<http://www.ceri.memphis.edu/compendium/eyewitness/bryan.html>> (accessed 16 April 2006).

²⁸Latrobe, *Rambler in North America*, 103.

²⁹“Signs of the Times,” *Connecticut Mirror* (Hartford), 10 April 1812, cited in Nuttli, “Appendix–Nuttli 1973 Paper, Contemporary Newspaper Accounts of Mississippi Valley Earthquakes of 1811-1812.”

³⁰*Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (New Orleans), 4 December 1811, “Nicholas Roosevelt’s 1811 Steamboat New Orleans: Louisiana Gazette,” n.d., <<http://www.myoutbox.net/nrlgaz.htm>> (accessed 16 April 2006).

³¹Martha Aldredge, comp., *A New Selection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs . . . for . . . Camp-Meetings* (Woodstock, New York: n.p., 1832), cited in Arthur Palmer Hudson, A Ballad of the New Madrid Earthquake, *Journal of American Folklore* 60, no. 236 (April - June 1947): 149-150.

Listen to a Country Song
Vanessa R. Carr

During the 1960s and 1970s, the evolution of themes in women's country music reflected the discourses of women's liberation and the contemporary sociopolitical environment.¹ Songs challenged expectations of female behavior, exhibited awareness of feminism (sympathetic, hostile, or ambivalent), offered social commentary, and carried on country music's lyric traditions regarding romance, infidelity, and alcohol use. Regardless of subject matter, female artists frequently performed songs that cast them as active protagonists rather than passive victims. The wide range of topics women sang about, sometimes varying greatly within the repertoire of a single performer, mirrored the breadth of concerns and viewpoints held by country music's largely female, white, and working-class audience. Eight songs recorded by Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Emmylou Harris illuminate four specific issues that arose in song: domesticity, sexual double standards, pride in one's roots, and liberation.

Domesticity

For married women, love relationships usually came as part of a package deal that included the duties of domesticity. Whether or not they also worked outside of the home, married working-class white women carried the majority of childrearing and housekeeping responsibilities in their households. A typical double-duty day, described by textile worker, wife, and mother Clara Thrift of Thomasville, North Carolina, consisted of "work all day, come home and put out the wash, fix dinner, clean up the kitchen, get the kids' things ready for school the next day, get them to bed, and then sometimes I'd be up to three or four in the morning mopping floors and ironing."² Loretta Lynn and Emmylou Harris addressed the issue of domesticity in "One's On the Way" and "To Daddy," respectively. Their songs described the tasks of wife and mother and shed light on the ways in which the dynamics of women's marriage relationships intertwined with their domestic roles. In 1972, Loretta Lynn's "One's On the Way" shared the perspective of a typical working-class housewife. The song's narrator keeps up with celebrity gossip, popular culture, and current events, but it all seems to pass her by, lying just beyond her grasp. The singer describes the busy distracted nature of housewifery:

Now what was I doin', Jimmy get away from there, darn there goes the phone.
Hello honey, what's that you say, you're bringin' a few old army buddies home?
You're callin' from a bar? Get away from there! No, not you honey, I was
talkin' to the baby. Wait a minute honey, the doorbell. Honey, could you stop
at the market—hello? Hello? Well, I'll be. . . .

Outside of her life at home, movie stars live extravagant lives, women's magazines give lifestyle advice, and activists march for women's rights. "But here in Topeka, the screen door's a-bangin', / the coffee's boilin' over and the wash needs a-hangin' / One wants a cookie and one wants a-changin', / and one's on the way."³

The twang of country lead guitar, the slide of pedal steel, and the murmur of backup vocals introduce the mid-tempo "One's On the Way." Lynn's vocal tone throughout the song conveys the sense that she is simply reporting on daily matters. Backup singers return when she sings "one's on the way" at the end of every verse, and their vocals emphasize each pronunciation that, on top of all she already has to keep track of, another child is due. Every time the singer lists off the things that are happening in her house in Topeka, the percussion mimics a ticking clock, perhaps the effect of a wood block, alluding to the pressure she feels to complete her chores before the day ends. Piano and background vocals embellish the last verse as Lynn sings about "the modern way to live," represented by her references to women's liberation, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and the birth control pill. At the song's end, Lynn ad libs a final line that echoes her own family situation: "Oh gee, I hope it ain't twins again."⁴

The woman in the song does not complain about her life, though it is not easy, nor does she condemn the movie stars and women's liberationists who lead lives that seem so separate from her own. Instead, she offers a matter-of-fact reminder that women like her exist. She is a wife and mother who cares for her home and children alone all day, and whose husband's lack of consideration adds to her workload in the evening. She may not travel the globe, hit the nightclubs, or protest discrimination like the women she sees on television and reads about in magazines, but she does mirror the reality of countless women whose lives are largely shaped by their domestic roles and responsibilities. "One's On the Way" is yet another instance of Loretta Lynn's commitment to singing for and about the women who make up her audience. As she explained in 1978, "When I sing those country songs about women struggling, trying to keep things going, I know how they feel, 'cause that's the way I felt."⁵

In 1978, Emmylou Harris also released a song dealing with women's experiences of domesticity. In spite of the song's title, "To Daddy" is actually about the narrator's dutiful and uncomplaining mother, who for years led a plain life at home with the children, while night after night her husband stayed out late. As far as her kids could tell, she never minded that Daddy took her for granted, ignored her, and withheld affection from her. "She never wanted to be more than a mother and a wife," and the only thing that mattered to her "was to make our house a home and make us happy." One day the children woke up to find that their mother was gone.

She left a note for Daddy, explaining that she had “gone in search of love I need so badly,” without which she could no longer live.⁶

“To Daddy” is a quiet song, introduced by a lone acoustic guitar and Harris’s voice. This hushed opening draws attention to the singer’s story. Additional guitars, electric piano, drums, bass, pedal steel, percussion, and harmonica add texture to the music as the tale progresses, filling in the spaces between words. Harris’s singing is alternately stoic and gentle, offering a sensitive portrayal of Mama’s troubles. She virtually sobs during the bridge, when the family awakens to find that Mama has gone. Backup vocals and increased instrumental layers highlight the intensity of this moment. The music grows quiet as the singer reads the goodbye note, and with tremendous sadness in her voice, Harris, as Mama, declares, “I have needed you so long, but I just can’t keep holdin’ on.” The last line of the song is loud and at the high end of the melody, a simple but resolute “Goodbye to Daddy.”⁷

Unlike the housewife in “One’s On the Way,” Mama was not aware of what was happening in the world around her; she only knew she had to make a change in order to survive. “To Daddy” reached number three on the country charts, indicating that listeners sympathized with the long-unloved woman who finally left her family to seek happiness. After all, perhaps she was not so different from some of the song’s listeners. The singer hints at Mama’s misery well before she finally leaves; following each claim that Mama did not miss the things she did not have and only cared about taking care of her husband and children comes the refrain, “If she did, she never did say so to Daddy.”⁸ This line casts doubt on the recurring assertion that Mama unreservedly accepted her situation. “To Daddy” tells one story that expresses the dissatisfaction of numerous women. While it cannot be understood as the exact experience of all working-class wives and mothers in 1978, perhaps it aided some listeners in grasping how the burdens of domesticity created unrewarding lives for many women.

The music of Loretta Lynn and Emmylou Harris affirmed the experiences of their female audience members and elicited compassion and understanding from listeners. Lynn and Harris both knew firsthand the work that came with marriage and motherhood, as well as how hard it was to balance domestic responsibilities with employment outside the home. Many working-class women enjoyed homemaking. Homemaker and activist Janice Bernstein was “absolutely happy just being a housewife. I loved it. . . . I was never dissatisfied with my life.” Some felt bored and trapped, as was the case for activist Mary Sansone: “It was very difficult for me because I was so outgoing, you know, and all of a sudden I found myself confined to a house, a husband, and then children.” A lot of working-class women worked outside their homes because they had to, and frequently held jobs that were boring, low-paying, and dangerous.

Others found fulfillment in jobs outside the home, where they learned skills and earned independence along with their wages. A twenty-five-year-old mother of two felt guilty for leaving her children to go to work; nonetheless, she admitted, “I don’t really want to stay home. . . . I guess I really work because I enjoy it. I’m good at it, and I like that feeling. It’s good to feel like you’re competent.” When women did enjoy working outside their homes, their domestic responsibilities usually weighed on their minds. A thirty-two-year-old mother of four explained, “whatever you do isn’t right. You’re either at work feeling like you should be home with your sick child, or you’re at home feeling like you should be at work.”⁹

During a concert in 1980, Loretta Lynn performed a medley that called attention to how the demands of marriage and motherhood can restrict women’s choices: “Pregnant Again,” “One’s On the Way,” and “The Pill.” She commented, “After them three baby songs I’m wore out. Sure glad to get that out of the way.” She then proceeded to sing “I Wanna Be Free.” Emmylou Harris wanted her music to raise awareness of women’s realities, asserting in 1986, “there still needs to be a lot of consciousness raising. Just to know what the issues are, what a woman has to deal with, how to make it easier for her just to live a normal life.”¹⁰ Through their songs, Loretta Lynn and Emmylou Harris drew attention to the demanding and often tedious domestic work women performed in their homes. They illuminated the ways in which confining women to traditional gender roles sometimes limited their happiness and fulfillment.

Sexual Double Standards

In the mid-1960s, a pattern emerged in which female characters in country music stood up to the men in their lives. No longer did they tolerate inconsideration or neglect from their male partners. They grew tired of being cheated on and abused by men, and they were fed up with the double standards women faced in both their heterosexual relationships and in the larger society. In 1968, Dolly Parton recorded “Just Because I’m a Woman” for her album of the same title. The song is performed from the viewpoint of a woman whose husband has just found out that she was not a virgin when they married. Although he, too, was sexually active before their wedding night, he is disappointed and hurt by this news. She apologizes for not being “the woman you thought I’d be,” but wants to make sure he understands that “my mistakes are no worse than yours just because I’m a woman.”¹¹ The singer asks her husband to think about the women he may have left ashamed, and to not judge her past differently from his own.

“Just Because I’m a Woman” is a mid-tempo song with acoustic guitar, steel guitar, and fiddle taking turns as featured solo instruments. Parton’s singing starts off tenderly, and grows more fervent as the song progresses. At times there is a pleading quality to the sound of her voice, which turns to confident authority in the bridges when she tells her husband not to pity himself because his wife is “no angel.” She pauses after “listen”—as if to catch her husband’s attention—before continuing with “and understand, my mistakes are no worse than yours.” In each refrain, the word “my” is high in the song’s melodic range, accentuating her statement of self-assertion. At the song’s end, she repeats the refrain once more, this time with an emphatic “no” placed before it: “No, my mistakes are no worse than yours just because I’m a woman.”¹²

The fact that Dolly Parton classified premarital sexual activity as a mistake in her song indicates a conservative viewpoint regarding sexual activity. This is no big surprise for country music of the 1960s, and, in fact, some radio stations refused to play “Just Because I’m a Woman” because of its sexual content. Despite such bans, her song reached number seventeen on the country charts as it denounced the societal double standards that judge women more harshly than men for the same actions. As the song puts it, “Now, a man will take a good girl and he’ll ruin her reputation. / But when he wants to marry, well, that’s a different situation. / He’ll just walk off and leave her to do the best she can, / While he looks for an angel to wear his wedding band.”¹³ The women who are left behind to do the best they can have to deal not only with the consequence of ruined reputations, but also, possibly, with unplanned pregnancies.

Loretta Lynn took a stand against sexual double standards in “Rated X” (1973). The song discusses the gossip, prejudices, and unwanted advances that women encounter when their marriages end in divorce. Although “divorce is the key to bein’ loose and free,” the singer warns that it can give a woman a reputation for being sexually promiscuous—or, as she puts it, “rated X.” Since people fixate on a woman’s previous sexual experience, “their minds eat up with sin” and even a simple friendship with a male raises suspicion. Lynn cautions that a woman who is rated X will not only be criticized, but she is also likely to be propositioned by every man she meets, even her best friend’s husband: “The women all look at you like you’re bad, the men all hope you are.”¹⁴

“Rated X” is an energetic song with the electric guitar setting a strong swinging rhythm. The steel guitar solos throughout, and subtle “oohs” and “ahs” back up Lynn’s singing. She talk-sings parts of the last line of the first verse, highlighting her initial use of the term “rated X”: “You can’t have a male friend when you’re a has-been of a woman, you’re rated X.” During the choruses of the song, the rhythm changes to a more straightforward beat, the melody goes

At the end of the song she ad libs as the music fades out: “Why us women don’t have a chance. ’Cause if you’ve been married, you can’t have no fun at all. ’Cause you’re rated X. No matter what you do they’re gonna talk about you, look down their noses. I don’t know what to think about it. Gives them something to talk about.”¹⁵

Like many of Loretta Lynn’s singles, “Rated X” went to number one on the country charts. In addition to warning divorced women about what they would face, her song clearly stated that double standards regarding divorce were wrong and unfair: “I think it’s wrong to judge half the picture if a cheap camera makes a mistake.” She reminded listeners that they did not know the whole story of how a marriage ended. Lynn was tired of people condemning divorced women, and reproached the men who treated them as “some kind of goal.”¹⁶

Through “Just Because I’m a Woman” and “Rated X,” Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn provided commentary on American society’s practice of policing the sexual behavior of women while ignoring the exploits of men. Both women hoped that their songs would voice the thoughts of other women who might be afraid to stand up for themselves on issues such as sexual double standards. As Lynn said of female singers and their fans, “Women sing about what they’re feeling and that way they keep from saying it, they get it off their minds. And these women sitting out there in the audience, they feel the same way. It gives them something to strike back with.” Parton felt the same, saying that songwriting was therapeutic for her and that she hoped her songs might provide the same benefit for her listeners, for “somebody else who wanted to say the same thing but couldn’t.”¹⁷

Pride in Roots

The theme of pride in one’s roots frequently arose in country songs of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Country music paid tribute to the value of hard work and verbalized appreciation for the intangible possessions of love, happiness, and integrity. Pride was conveyed through identification with “being country.” Such songs praised a simple but happy way of life that routinely glossed over the actual hardships working-class people faced. Through songs that affirmed pride in one’s origins, female artists could advocate for working-class dignity without promoting notions of white supremacy. At the same time, while singing about being country they ignored issues of racial difference, conflict, and cooperation, and left their own privileged identities as white Americans untouched and unquestioned. Two of the most famous pride-in-roots songs were Loretta Lynn’s “Coal Miner’s Daughter” and Dolly Parton’s “Coat of Many Colors.”

In 1970, Loretta Lynn released her signature song, the autobiographical “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” She published a best-selling autobiography by the same title in 1976, and in 1980 the book was made into a film starring Sissy Spacek. The song tells of Lynn’s childhood in Butcher Hollow, Kentucky. The singer describes how hard her parents worked to raise their family: her father working in the coal mines and corn fields, her mother tending the children and scrubbing clothes until “her fingers bleed”—all without complaint. “Coal Miner’s Daughter” depicts the day-to-day events of poor country life, and how “everything would start all over come break of morn.” The whole family worked hard to help out, and although they struggled financially, “we had love, that’s the one thing that Daddy made sure of.”¹⁸

Banjo, steel guitar, backup singers, piano, and lead guitar accompany this story song, but they stay far in the background to allow the instrument of Lynn’s voice to tell her tale without distraction. The song modulates into a higher key after the second verse, accenting the description of her parents’ loving sacrifices that follows in the new key’s two verses. A second modulation signals the end of her look back to “Butcher Holler” and underscores how precious her memories are to her. At this point the singer triumphantly cries out, “Yeah I’m proud to be a coal miner’s daughter.” She ends the song remembering how she had never imagined leaving Kentucky, and remarks on how different her life is now as compared to the past.¹⁹

The song was another number one country hit, and after the book and movie expanded on her story, Loretta Lynn became forever known as the Coal Miner’s Daughter. In a video recording of a 1980 concert in Reno, she makes it obvious how important the song is to her. It is the only part of the show during which she withdraws from her audience. She keeps a serious expression on her face, does not smile or move around the stage, and does not respond to the audience’s applause. She seems to be singing “Coal Miner’s Daughter” more for herself than for her fans. Loretta Lynn is not just the daughter of a coal miner. She is *The Coal Miner’s Daughter*.²⁰

Dolly Parton’s song “Coat of Many Colors” (1971) shares a story from her childhood in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. The singer tells of a coat her mother made for her out of many-colored rags someone had given the family. While sewing the pieces together to make the little coat, she told her daughter the Bible story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. This story made the child proud of her coat, and she felt special to have received the hard work and attention of her mother: “I just couldn’t wait to wear it, and Mama blessed it with a kiss.” When the girl arrived at school, the other children laughed at her coat and teased her. She told them the Bible story, and how her mother had taken the time to carefully craft the coat just for her, but they kept taunting her. In spite of her peers’ reaction, the little girl in the story treasured

her coat, and took pride in herself: “I know we had no money, but I was rich as I could be / in my coat of many colors my mama made for me.”²¹

Acoustic guitar and light percussion keep “Coat of Many Colors” moving along. Parton starts the song off in storytelling mode: “Back through the years I go wanderin’ once again.” At the end of the first section, she stresses the “so” in “she made my coat of many colors that I was so proud of,” and her singing grows tender as she moves on to the next verse. An organ and a kick drum softly enter the music, enhancing the story of Joseph and her mother’s wish that the coat will bring her “good luck and happiness.” The key changes as the little girl rushes to school to show off her coat, but the singer’s tone is full of sadness and disappointment when she encounters her classmates’ teasing. She sounds absolutely weary by the end of this verse. There is desperation in her voice as she relates trying to explain the value of the coat to the other children. Backup vocals join the singer during the last bridge, where she sounds resolute as she concludes, “one is only poor only if they choose to be.” At the song’s end she repeats “made just for me” one last time to reinforce how proud she is that her mother made the coat for her and her alone.²²

The incredibly painful experience her song disclosed taught the young Dolly Parton about pride and self-worth. In the line “one is only poor only if they choose to be,” the singer seems to naively ignore the realities of poverty. But what the child in the story is saying is that, while she and her family are poor, there is more to them than their economic status. As an adult, Dolly Parton treasures her memories of childhood, but has mixed emotions about that time of her life. She says of her childhood, “I want to treasure it and I do, but I wouldn’t want to have to live that way again.”²³

Feeling pride in their roots was an essential way for working-class whites to combat the dismissive and often misrepresentative labels of “rednecks,” “hillbillies,” and “white trash.” But as “Coal Miner’s Daughter” and “Coat of Many Colors” demonstrate, the simpler life of one’s past was looked upon with ambivalence. Both songs shared the hardships of poverty, but both singers drew positive lessons of identity and pride from their experiences. In 1973, Dolly Parton released an entire album about grappling with the ambiguity of pride. The themes of the songs from *My Tennessee Mountain Home* alternate between longing for home, honoring her parents and community, and mourning the suffering her family knew. In contrast to a number of songs claiming that her former life was idyllic, “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)” was blunt about the realities of her family’s existence. She recounted working all day in the fields only to awaken the next morning to find a storm pounding the crops to death, going to bed hungry many nights, and watching her parents endure pain and prolonged illness. Parton’s early

life shaped her dreams and the individual and performer she became yet, as the chorus of “In the Good Old Days” repeatedly states, though “no amount of money could buy from me the memories I have of then, / no amount of money could pay me to go back and live through it again.” Embracing pride in one’s roots necessitated the acknowledgement of pain as part of the past that memory tended to idealize.²⁴

Liberation

Amid the political turmoil of the late 1960s and ’70s, country music became a vehicle for social commentary and political statements. Both male and female songwriters wrote about subjects associated with the women’s liberation movement, including female empowerment, women’s sexuality, contraception, marital discontent, and divorce and single motherhood. Although performers did not publicly identify with the movement, songs from this period demonstrate that country music was considering some of the same questions as the women’s movement. These concerns were not addressed in overtly political ways, but rather through the subtle storytelling style of country music.

In the mid-1970s, Emmylou Harris’s “One of These Days” and Loretta Lynn’s “The Pill” echoed two of the major issues with which women’s liberation was concerned: women’s independence and reproduction. Harris’s “One of These Days” (1975) had been recorded by country star George Jones three years earlier. The lyrics alone might show the song to be about seeking spiritual freedom and release from the ordeals of earthly existence. While this reading is still implicit in Harris’s version, the song takes on a new and profound meaning when its lyrics are sung by a woman’s voice. The singer awaits the day when she will be free to do as she pleases. “I can be bad or I can be good. / I can be any way that I feel, / one of these days.” Someday she will appease her constant impulse to leave the burdens of her current life behind, and “I’ll look back and I’ll say I left in time.”²⁵

“One of These Days” is an evenly-paced song accompanied by electric and acoustic guitars, pedal steel, bass, drums, and piano. Harris sings calmly, sounding certain that the future holds peace and fulfillment for her. Backup singers join her on the choruses, where their vocals stress the singer’s yearning to release the “urge to go all bottled up inside.” An instrumental break halfway through the song features the bluegrass sounds of banjo and mandolin. Harris harmonizes with herself through the song’s second verse, anticipating the possibilities of a less troubled life; she “might someday walk across this land,” or go “cross the country singin’ loud as I can, / one of these days.” Both choruses end with the singer’s trust that she will find peace of

mind somewhere, and she finishes the song with a repeated declaration of certainty that “There’s gonna be peace of mind for me one of these days.”²⁶

A song about individual freedom and self-determination, “One of These Days” was not typical for women in country music. By 1975, the aspirations of women’s liberation were spreading through the United States and some of the movement’s goals had already been met. The feminist slogan of “the personal is political” meant that the details of women’s experiences mattered, and it also implied that women could create big change in the world by altering their own lives. Emmylou Harris was a young woman during the political and social tumult of the 1960s, when, as she recalled, “you believed that the world could be a better place, that you really could make a difference, and things could be changed. . . . I really do believe that, that the world can change and that people can change, but it has to come from each individual person.” Released in the mid-1970s, Harris’s version of “One of These Days” could have been received by listeners as a statement of female independence and a hope that women’s struggles would be rewarded in the not-too-distant future.²⁷

Also in 1975, Loretta Lynn delivered a song that connected female liberation to the practical matter of contraception. In “The Pill,” Lynn sings from the viewpoint of a woman who has known nothing but childbearing since she married. “All I’ve seen of this old world is a bed and a doctor bill,” she sings. The song uses the metaphor of a hen laying eggs to portray the woman’s continual state of pregnancy. Every year another child is born, and “while holdin’ a couple in my arms, / another’s on the way.” She is fed up with having baby after baby and raising them with virtually no help from her husband. She finally notifies him, “You’ve set this chicken your last time / ‘cause now I’ve got the pill.” The birth control pill gives this woman the power to negotiate with her husband about how their marriage will be from now on. It also offers her new potential for sexual liberation and enjoyment without the worry of unwanted pregnancies: “The feelin’ good comes easy now, / since I’ve got the pill.”²⁸

“The Pill” is an upbeat tune, with steel and electric guitars taking turns as featured instruments. Lynn’s voice is front and center throughout the song, with subtle background “oohs” and “ahs” joining her at times. Her tone effectively conveys the song’s range of emotions, including anger, determination, and confidence. The straightforward rhythm turns to syncopation in the middle of each bridge, when a piano enters the music. The song modulates to a higher key just before the third verse, highlighting the singer’s assertion that “This chicken’s done tore up her nest, / and I’m ready to make a deal.” She laughs a little as she sings, “And you can’t afford to turn it down, / ‘cause you know I’ve got the pill.” There is another hint of laughter in her voice when she informs her husband that he, too, will benefit from the pill: “It’s

gettin' dark, it's roostin' time, / tonight's too good to be real. / Oh Daddy, don't you worry none, / 'cause Momma's got the pill." She repeats this line before ending the song, as if to doubly reassure him.²⁹

Some working-class women were suspicious of the birth control pill, particularly in the early years of its availability. They found pride and satisfaction in motherhood, and they were concerned about the safety of the pill. Others thought, as one young wife and mother reported, "only bad girls went out and got birth-control pills." Many radio stations banned "The Pill," particularly in the Bible Belt, but it still reached number five on the country charts. The song caused controversy among Loretta Lynn's fans. Loudilla, Loretta, and Kay Johnson, co-presidents of the Loretta Lynn International Fan Club, reported in March of 1975, "some letters have come in here to our office stating they think it is a shame that Loretta recorded such a dirty song, that she has tarnished her image, and other such comments." The Johnson sisters acknowledged the right of fans, radio stations, and disc jockeys to "denounce the song," but felt that the bans amounted to censorship and "a blatant lack of respect for the majority of American citizens!"³⁰ Furthermore, while they accepted criticism of the song, they would not stand for any criticism of Loretta Lynn herself.

Another consequence of "The Pill" was that some reporters labeled Loretta Lynn a feminist, at which many of her fans took offense. In an open letter to her fan club, Lynn explained, "Some of the writers take a few things I say and add. . . . I'm hoping any fans are friends enough of mine to understand. I just can't help what they write." She reassured them that she was "still country" and still the same person she had always been. "I'm not women's lib and I don't care what they say. . . . I'm just me and that's all I've ever been. I think that's the way you want me to be." Nearly twenty years after "The Pill" hit the airwaves, Lynn professed, "I couldn't understand why everybody got so upset by 'The Pill.' Everybody took the pill." She believed each woman deserved to have control over her own life, "and the pill is what helps her do it."³¹

"One of These Days" and "The Pill" demonstrate that music can simultaneously reflect and promote change—sometimes unintentionally. Emmylou Harris believed "so much in the power of music because my life has changed through music. . . . And that is like light, it can travel anywhere and touch people anywhere." Loretta Lynn had not set out to cause a big stir with her music: "I was just singing about how I felt about things."³² But sometimes all it takes to initiate change is for a woman to speak her mind. Whether within the context of self-determination and spiritual freedom or the practical use of contraception to increase individual au-

tonomy, the music of Harris and Lynn promoted female consciousness and contributed to the soundtrack of liberation.

Women's country music of the 1960s and '70s expressed female consciousness, though most artists rejected the label of feminism and dissociated themselves from the women's liberation movement. Music articulated sympathy for and identification with female listeners who held an array of opinions about both the limitations and the potential of feminism. Even when songs did not exactly express sisterhood, their woman-oriented themes reached out to audiences and allowed listeners to feel that they were not isolated with their problems, that other women shared similar experiences—in much the same fashion as the consciousness-raising groups of the women's liberation movement. Emmylou Harris summed it up in her belief that “that's what

¹ This piece is from the third chapter of my MA thesis, “Just Because I'm a Woman”: *Country Music and Women's Liberation, 1964-1979*, completed in May 2006. The complete thesis can be found in the Esther Raushenbush Library at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York.

² Clara Thrift, in Victoria Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls: Personal Histories of Womanhood and Poverty in the South* (Ithaca: ILR Press, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1986), 112.

³ Loretta Lynn, “One's On the Way,” by Shel Silverstein, *20 Greatest Hits*, MCA Records compact disc MCAD-5943.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Loretta Lynn, in Joanmarie Kalter, “Country Mamas: Toughing It Out Till They Get to Heaven,” *After Dark*, April, 1978, 59.

⁶ Emmylou Harris, “To Daddy,” written by Dolly Parton, *Profile: Best of Emmylou Harris*, Warner Bros., CD 3258, 1990.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Janice Bernstein and Mary Sansone, in Nancy Seifer, *Nobody Speaks for Me!: Self-Portraits of American Working Class Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 99, 59; Lillian Breslow Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 172.

¹⁰ *Loretta Lynn in Concert*, produced by Allan Nadohl, directed by Gene Weed, 61 minutes, MCA Home Video, 1980; Emmylou Harris, in Jennifer Harris, “The Ballad of Emmylou Harris,” *Nashville*, June 1986, 59.

¹¹ Dolly Parton, “Just Because I'm a Woman,” *Just Because I'm a Woman*, BMG Heritage, 3949, 2003.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Information on radio bans found in Jancee Dunn, “Women Who Rock: Dolly Parton,” *Rolling Stone* 934, 30 October 2003, 55; Parton, *Just Because I'm a Woman*. Although Parton does not mention pregnancy in this song, several of her songs are about young pregnant women who have been abandoned by their boyfriends (e.g., “The Bridge” and “Down from Dover”). It is not far-fetched to read that implication into this song, as a “good girl” is left “to do the best she can.”

¹⁴ Loretta Lynn “Rated X,” *20 Greatest Hits*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Loretta Lynn, in Kalter, 62; Dolly Parton, in “Songwriters Craft,” exhibition, Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee; author visit 26 January 2006.

¹⁸ Loretta Lynn, “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” *All Time Greatest Hits*, MCA Nashville, 088 170 281-2, 2002.

¹⁹ Ibid. Loretta Lynn pronounces and spells Butcher Hollow as “Butcher Holler.”

²⁰ *Loretta Lynn in Concert*.

²¹ Dolly Parton, “*Coat of Many Colors*,” Buddha Records 99642. The song does not mention that Parton’s real-life classmates actually pulled off the buttons and tried to tear the coat off of her body before locking her in the school closet. She went home that day feeling heartbroken and angry with her mother, “cause I thought somehow she had deceived me.” Dolly Parton, interviewed by Ralph Emery, *On the Record*, The Nashville Network, 25 October 1994.

²² Parton, “Coat of Many Colors.”

²³ Dolly Parton, interviewed by Ralph Emery. David Cantwell and Bill Friskics-Warren interpret the importance of using “only” twice in this line: “I refuse, Parton insists as she wanders back through the years, to believe a story about myself in which poor is all I am. I am poor, but I will be more than that—I *am* more than that. Despite your contempt, the things I love are worth loving. And since my mother slaved over this amazing coat ‘just for me,’ I must be worth loving too.” David Cantwell and Bill Friskics-Warren, *Heartaches By the Number: Country Music’s 500 Greatest Singles* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press and Country Music Foundation Press, 2003), 7.

²⁴ For information on country music as a “defensive voice” for the white working class, see Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 270; Dolly Parton, “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad),” *Jolene/My Tennessee Mountain Home*, BMG International, 74321 822362, previously released in 1969 on Parton’s *In the Good Old Days*.

²⁵ Emmylou Harris, “One of These Days,” written by Earl Montgomery. *Profile: Best of Emmylou Harris*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Emmylou Harris, in *Emmylou Harris: At the Ryman*, produced and directed by Bayron Binkley, Warner Reprise Video, 1992.

²⁸ Loretta Lynn, “The Pill,” written by Lorene Allen, Don McHan, and T.D. Bayless. *20 Greatest Hits*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rubin, 63; “From Headquarters,” in *Your Friend, Loretta*, Loretta Lynn International Fan Club Newsletter, March 1975, 2, 3.

³¹ “Loretta Sez,” in *Your Friend, Loretta*, Loretta Lynn International Fan Club Newsletter, September 1975, 2; Loretta Lynn, in liner notes by Jimmy Guterman for Loretta Lynn, *Honky Tonk Girl: The Loretta Lynn Collection*, MCA MCAD3-11070, 1994, 18.

³² Emmylou Harris, in *At the Ryman*: Loretta Lynn, in liner notes for Lynn, *Honky-Tonk Girl*, 12.

³³ Emmylou Harris, in Paul Kingsbury, “Woman, Walk the Line,” *The Journal of Country Music* 15 (1992): 30.