

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03966-6 - The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton

Nancy Bentley

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This book examines fiction and ethnography as related forms for analyzing and exhibiting social life. Focusing on the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and Edith Wharton, the study argues that novels and ethnographies collaborated to produce an unstable but powerful master discourse of “culture,” a discourse that allowed writers to turn new social energies and fears into particular kinds of authorial expertise. Crossing a range of institutions (anthropology, literature, museums, law) and texts (novels, ethnographies, travel books, social theory), this study allows fiction to take its place in a web of social practices that categorize, display, and regulate what Wharton calls “the customs of the country.”

For the functional identity of literature – an identity always hotly contested – the implications are far-reaching. Although belonging to the sphere of high culture, the work of Hawthorne, James, and Wharton was neither a sealed-off aestheticism nor a nostalgic retreat from modern life. Their fiction, Bentley concludes, was part of a broad effort, across the nation and throughout literate American society, to negotiate issues of social control and cohesion through new representations of culture.

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NANCY BENTLEY

University of Pennsylvania



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For my parents,
Joseph and Barbara

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