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0521660033 - The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing
Edited by Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould
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DALE BAUER AND PHILIP GOULD

Introduction

Writing in response to the question "How Should Women Write?" (1860), Mary Bryant prescribed a literature that would be at once intellectual and intense, written "honestly and without fear" to suit the seriousness of the era. This volume is our effort to meet Bryant's challenge, to bring her charge to bear on the history of American women's writing and the legacy of and prospects for its criticism to date.

Once dismissed as simply sentimental and thus undeniably inferior, nineteenth-century American women's writing, for at least the last twenty years, has been newly "recovered" or "rediscovered." The critical occasion for the *Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* derives of course from the extensive revitalization of this scholarly discipline. Yet this volume also provides an account of the changing critical assumptions that govern the contemporary study of American women's writing itself.

Contemporary reappraisals of nineteenth-century American women's writing have changed both the shape of the American literary canon and the discipline of American literary history. Influential studies abound, from Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) and Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: a Guide to the Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870* (1978, 1993) to Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (1985) and Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (1986). Important anthologies of women's writing have also contributed to the critical recovery of American women's literary history, including Judith Fetterley's *Provisions: a Reader from Nineteenth-Century American Women* (1985), Lucy Freibert and Barbara White's *Hidden Hands: an Anthology of American Women Writers, 1790–1870* (1985), Karen Kilcup's *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: an Anthology* (1997), and Paula Bennett's *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets* (1997). These works have introduced a generation of scholars and students to previously unavailable or unrecognized texts. Indeed, the great success of Rutgers University Press's

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American Women Writers Series; the Early Women Writers Project offered by Brown University and Oxford University Press; the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers; the genesis of the journal *Legacy* devoted to American women's writing: all of these publications print a growing body of work suggesting the catalyst for the current Companion volume.

Traditionally characterized as "domestic" or "sentimental," the discipline's genres include, in fact, history-writing, letters and diaries, reform journalism and religious tracts, as well as gothic, domestic and sentimental fiction, poetry, and drama. Like the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz, scholars have given us "thick description" of the cultural contexts and functions of individual texts. This Companion volume, however, challenges the "seamlessness" of cultural contexts by reexamining such crucial premises for critical study as the nature of "domesticity," the function of sentimentalism, and the relations between "private" and "public" domains. In this way, it suggests the germane questions over the meanings of such key terms as the "sentimental," "separate spheres," and the "public," as well as newly important ones like "assimilation" and "sanctification," that shape the field's future. It contains individual case studies that collectively model directions for future criticism. We cannot claim comprehensiveness, given the expansiveness of this field; yet the chapters assembled here provide new models of envisioning both the literary and critical canon to date.

The project of "recovery" devoted to nineteenth-century American women's writing derives immediately from the changes in the academy and the canon that the rise of Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies Programs inaugurated in the 1970s. Yet the politics undergirding the recovery project can be traced to the 1940s and 1950s – the era in which American Studies developed. As Dana Nelson's chapter in this volume argues, women's writing suffered during this era under the ideological assumptions wielded by the most influential or the most banal critics. How and why, one might ask, did this occur? In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" (1981), Nina Baym outlined the features of much of this literature that so offended the critical status quo: its popularity, its affinity for social and domestic realities, and its pervasive use of sentiment in narrative and characterization. Alternatively, the "American" literary tradition – articulated in part through efforts to define a national culture – privileged male writing that supposedly exemplified cultural "essence" in its romantic recoil from both popular culture and surface realism: Baym calls it a form of "consensus literature of the consensus," which reaffirms cultural norms as it enacts its own melodramatic fantasy of isolation ("Melodramas," 129).

Rather than see American critics as simply misguided, or at worst misogynistic, we might instead seek to explain why cultural politics devalued

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sentimentality in American women's writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, American liberalism self-consciously redefined itself against the "Left": the loose association of utopian socialists and Soviet-inspired Marxist communists whose political influence was waning in America, a result largely of such political events as Stalin's purge trials and the Nazi–Soviet alliance of 1939. Centrist (or "new") liberals now viewed the traditional Left as morally bankrupt and defined themselves against the viability of "ideology" itself. In its place, they substituted the principles (or one might say ideology) of irony, ambiguity, and isolation – exactly the values that Baym has so astutely demystified for us. They also saw communal and utopian ideals as yet another form of cultural totalitarianism; interpreted popular, or mass, culture as the chief expression of this danger; and, perhaps most important, espoused a Calvinistic view of human nature that favored a hard-edged "realism" as opposed to sentimentality. These were principles of literary taste as well. Liberal tenets that privileged "artistic" consciousness (in the face of a mass audience), the use of irony (as opposed to "ideology"), and romantic technique meant to capture psychological (as opposed to sociological) reality all served to undermine the canonical status of much of women's writing – with the exception of an Emily Dickinson or Edith Wharton, who could wield irony in all the right ways.

Most egregious of all to this cultural movement was the sentimentality perceived or apprehended in much of American women's writing. For postwar liberals, sentiment took on overtly political meanings. Consider, for example, the foundational text of postwar politics, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center* (1949), which proclaimed at the outset that "American liberalism . . . has stood for responsibility and achievement, not for frustration and sentimentalism" (xix). Schlesinger even went so far as to lampoon the "sentimental abstractions of [Leftist] fantasy" and to accuse American radicals of a "somewhat feminine fascination with the rude and muscular power of the proletariat" (46). Schlesinger's rejection of sentimentalism must be understood in the context of his rudimentary construction of class politics and sexuality, as well as his vexed preference for "realism" to which sentimental women's writing was subjected and compared. Critics like Schlesinger faulted the sentimental novel's investment in social realism and affective relations, its fidelity to the facts of the daily lives of bourgeois white women, and its simultaneous failure, as Baym argues, to depict "the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances" ("Melodramas," 131).

Much of the work devoted to American women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s represents the revision of this postwar critical tradition. Such revisionism has facilitated both the recovery of forgotten texts and the discovery of new ones. In turn, the critical assumptions animating this recuperation have

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over time been continually – and productively – revised. One salient issue that many of our contributors address is the debate over the critical languages that have structured subjects such as sentiment, sensation, and emotion. In the historical and critical context for sentimentalism, Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* appears to be an extension of a liberal narrative, for she argues that nineteenth-century American women's writing actively participated in the creation of a debased form of American mass culture predicated on particularly sentimental forms of consumerism. Not unlike Schlesinger, Douglas proclaims: "Sentimentalism . . . might be defined as the political sense obfuscated or gone rancid. Sentimentalism, unlike the modes of genuine sensibility, never exists except in tandem with failed political consciousness" (254). During the 1980s, however, Jane Tompkins, in *Sensational Designs*, led the revisionary rebuttal to such a view. Taking novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) as literary exemplars, Tompkins recontextualized these texts within a rich array of religious, evangelical and moral reform discourses (e.g., sermons, conversion narratives, missionary tracts) to argue for their feminized – and feminist – reorganization of culture. These novels, she argued, served a functional purpose of "doing cultural work," a phrase that has been celebrated as the *raison d'être* of women's writing in general, as though women's writing had to justify itself purely by the work it can – or should – do. Assumptions about women's work and its invisibility certainly die hard.

Valuable as such a revision has been to the field, critics have even begun to question the dichotomies upon which our critical understanding of sentiment was founded and what such affect reproduces. For example, in her introduction to *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992), Shirley Samuels represents a view that is now more willing to recognize ideological inconsistencies, and even shortcomings, in women's sentimental writing. The limits of sympathy, moreover, often reveal the possible tensions existing on the "margins" of nineteenth-century America. As many critics have shown, African-American women put sentiment to different uses from their white, bourgeois counterparts. These writers challenge the category of the sentimental, specifically its capacity to fulfill the aspirations of women on the social margins; in fact, many see the sentimental as replicating social distinctions and oppressive categories. Ann Sophia Stephens's *Fashion and Famine* (1854) or *Malaeska* (1860), for example, illustrate the failure of white women to embrace their ethnic or working-class "sisters." Harriet Wilson's autobiographical novel *Our Nig* (1859) particularly deflates domestic ideology's egalitarian claims by exposing its racial limitations. Indeed, the male characters in this novel – set in New

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England – demonstrate greater sympathy for the protagonist Frado than do the noxiously racist Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter. Critics such as Carla Kaplan and Ann duCille argue that in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) Harriet Jacobs shows how African-American women are excluded from the domestic institution of marriage and, thereby, from the privileges of ownership. Moreover, Priscilla Wald's chapter on immigrant women in this volume shows how the prescriptions for the "American woman" limited the possibilities of assimilation for different races and classes.

Critics now view the sentimental as something necessarily didactic: it not only teaches but needs to be taught. As Elizabeth Barnes has argued, the "pedagogy" of sympathy inculcating the virtue of sentimental benevolence was not inherent in the individual, and was certainly not women's sole birthright. Domesticity and intimacy become the center of the social controversies over women's place in culture and politics. Antebellum novels thus are premised upon important questions about gender and authority. What was women's relation to national culture? Could they participate in the abstract cause of nation-building, or were they "naturally" limited by their domestic sensibilities?

Thus, sentimentalism is not so much a feminine possession or "essence," but is a widely circulating cultural discourse. Again, the terms of criticism have shifted: where we had once imagined emotions as women's sphere, critics posit emotional life as a cultural construct; where we had once imagined women in the private sphere, social historians have more recently identified the intersubjectivity of citizens and the interpenetrating realms of home and work.

Such a conflation of spheres introduces a second important area of critical revision: the social and ideological relations between the "public" and the "private." The ostensibly "separate" arenas of men's and women's activities emerged as the ideological counterpart to the economic shift in the 1830s and 1840s, a shift predicated on a basis of commerce outside the home and the attendant rise of the middle class; hence, the "domestic" or bourgeois woman was invented. As Linda K. Kerber argued in 1988, however, historians are now willing "to show how women's allegedly 'separate sphere' was affected by what men did, and how activities defined by women in their own sphere, influenced and even set constraints and limitations on what men chose to do – how, in short, that sphere was socially constructed both for and by women" ("Separate Spheres," 18). Yet we are not ready to throw out the baby with the bathwater; even as the concept of separate spheres is being phased out, the "baby" is still with us in the stylistic and political differences among women writers, especially in relation to their male counterparts. This work is still too new to be dismissed out of hand as finished.

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Like the suspect model of "separate spheres," the cultural geography of the "center" and "margins" also raises troubling questions. What, for example, happens when we incorporate race and ethnicity into this model of center and margins? Do women, such as Sarah Winnemucca, a Native American autobiographer whose *Life Among the Piutes* appeared in 1883, share the same cultural and political vision as their white "sisters"? Winnemucca and the Native American novelist Alice Callahan (whose *Wynema* appeared in 1891) both employ sentimental conventions to stage moments of cross-cultural exchange, but does this mean that their works endorse the model of "sisterhood" one finds, for example, in Margaret Fuller's political "conversations" of the late 1830s? The limitations of this model, moreover, have concerned critics such as Robyn Warhol and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, who have argued for the sentimental hegemony in white women's antislavery writing over both white readers and black bodies. The ending to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where Stowe expatriates her African American characters to evangelize Africa, makes these limitations clear. How, then, does one conceptualize the literary dynamic of sentimental identification? How can we feel with someone of different race or class, when the liberal individual is defined by his or her difference (see Ammons, *Conflicting Stories*)?

Directly related to the politics of sentimentalism is the question of the presumed "radicalism" of American women's writing. During the 1970s and 1980s, critics recuperated the canonical importance of this writing (especially the sentimental novel) by arguing for its cultural significance, particularly its antipatriarchalism. But as June Howard has argued, sentimental politics may be suspect at times because the emotions are associated "with tears, with humanitarian reform, with convention and commodification" ("What is Sentimentality?," 74). The interior life of emotions shows the fascination with middle-class individuality that is simultaneously the cornerstone of nineteenth-century liberalism. Traditionally, critics juxtaposed sentiment and liberal capitalism as the gendered opposition of "female" and "male" values. But is this opposition historically tenable? There is ample evidence to question it. As Nina Baym has argued, much of nineteenth-century women's historical writing situates the female "voice" within the ideological confines of Protestant bourgeois culture.

So, too, with the political ambiguities of women's writing about antislavery. The issue of women's rights significantly divided American abolitionists during the late 1830s. But does this mean we read Lydia Child's *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), or Angelina Grimké's "Appeal to Christian Women of the South" (1836), as necessarily "radical" writings? Certainly, these works' progressive ideas infuriated conservative readers (Child, for example, lost her library privileges), but to

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our eyes they may at moments perpetuate racial and social stereotypes. How do we avoid "presentism" – imposing our contemporary assumptions and mores on historical subjects – while still acknowledging the historical limitations of women's perspectives? What do we bring to their writing, and what do we expect from it?

Indeed, the current turn in work on women's literature has clarified the earlier focus on women's particular networks, especially about such issues as temperance, poverty, and prostitution; politics (where women sent petitions to political leaders); or ladies' societies. Scholars now chronicle women's constant and multivocal public dialogues throughout the nineteenth century. Influential studies by Lori Ginzberg, Christine Stansell, and Mary Ryan have challenged the traditional wisdom of separate spheres by examining such diverse groups as women's associations and the urban poor. As Ryan notes, there is a lot at stake in this historiography, for "the public [is] a richly evocative term, a linguistic marker of highly privileged meaning, both moral and political" (*Women in Public*, 10). In this regard, then, "feminist political theorists push at the boundaries of the public by holding that sphere to the highest standards of openness, accessibility, [and] tolerance of diversity" (12).

Hence the feminist critique of the influential work of Jürgen Habermas, who historically conceptualized the rise of the "public" as a masculine site of sociability and intellectual exchange. "By omitting any mention of the childrearer role," Nancy Fraser has argued, "and by failing to thematize the gender subtext underlying the roles of worker and consumer, Habermas fails to understand precisely how the capitalist workplace is linked to the modern, restricted, male-headed, nuclear family" ("What's Critical About Critical Theory?," 45). How much was (and is) childrearing really a public role, and not merely domesticated "influence"?

These theoretical alterations made upon the "public" simultaneously suggest ways to rethink the "home." Critics now argue that, instead of being a haven, the home that nineteenth-century women's writing constitutes was never an uncontested site: either as a reflection of the market economy (as Gillian Brown argues) or as a place of violence and aggression (as Shirley Samuels suggests in this volume). For Lora Romero, this may involve the mingling of the gothic with the familiar, while for Amy Kaplan domesticity provides the ideological site of legitimating nineteenth-century American imperialism. One genre that certainly illustrates this spatial complexity is women's historical writing. For example, Elizabeth Ellet's *The Women of the American Revolution* (1848–50) dramatizes the British (and perhaps her reader's) inability to interpret creatively American women and their homes. This occurs when Nancy Hart (a woman "ignorant of all the conventional

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civilities of life, but a zealous lover of liberty") hides a fugitive patriot in her home and sends him out the back door when the British arrive: "Presently some tories rode up to the bars, calling vociferously for her. She muffled up her head and face, and opening the door, inquired why they disturbed a sick, lone woman. They said they had traced a man they wanted to catch near to her house" (227, 229). In this case Ellet demonstrates the linkage between the stereotypes of passive "womanhood" and the "home." The scene depends upon the necessity of interpretive conventions: the line is imperfectly "traced" because its patriarchal readers refuse to acknowledge the merging of public and private spaces.

Ellet's history-writing also touches on a third area of critical reappraisal involving the meanings of gender in the nineteenth century. Between the American Revolution and the antebellum era, as Ruth Bloch has argued, the meaning of "virtue" gradually underwent a process of cultural feminization which associated this key word with the sentimental affections. Throughout the eighteenth century, both men and women could be hailed as "virtuous citizens," although there was often a good deal of rhetorical ambiguity about just what the epithet actually meant. This process certainly helped to produce what Jeanne Boydston calls the "plasticity" of gender in early American literature. Such gender fluidity occurs in Lydia Maria Child's characterization of the heroic Native American in *Hobomok* (1824), Margaret Fuller's theory of "Muse" and "Minerva" for female identity, Rebecca Harding Davis's symbol of the korl woman in "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), *The Lamplighter*'s depiction of Willie Sullivan, Louisa May Alcott's complex personae, and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). The list goes on, but the point is that gender was always more flexible than fixed.

This volume not only demonstrates contemporary critical trends, but also articulates theoretical and methodological concerns that continue to challenge the scholarly field. One recurring critical issue concerns the category of "cultural work" itself. Why do we read women's writing primarily for its advocacy of social change? The very paradigm of "cultural work" might be read as a legacy of one strain of Enlightenment thinking that privileges reason, order, and utilitarian function. On its surface, the new significance of sentimentality in critical discourse appears to be a move *away* from the traditionally masculine norm of reason (a norm associated in recent theoretical movements with the fallacy of "logocentric" thinking). Perhaps the new interest in the suprarational corrects the long-standing fixation on male voices in American literary studies; perhaps the move beyond rationality into the cultural life of emotions can be linked to the examination of a political

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ideology which has been too long repressed. But if many American women writers offer a vision of emotions every bit as culturally efficacious as that of rationality and individuality, the explanatory power of "cultural work" answers to the *rational* need to describe literature's "function." The traditional question "Is it any good?" has been translated into "What good does it do?"

The critical move away from formalism in the name of ideology still leaves us with the larger issue of the nature – and role – of aesthetics in women's writing. As Joanne Dobson has argued, we need to understand sentimentalism as an aesthetic language, or collection of languages, that enables us to read, for example, Ellen Montgomery's incessant tears in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* in ways that do not immediately resort to arguments about its mawkishness or gender politics. The issue of aesthetics is connected to the crucial question of audience. Who were the contemporaneous readers of American women's writing? Cathy Davidson, Janice Radway, and Nina Baym have all offered sociologies of reading, specifically the reconstruction of the world of "female readers." Whereas Davidson posits the feminist identification of female readers and the early American novel, Baym suggests that these readers intuited a critical difference between fictional heroines and their own lives – the difference that the protagonist of Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801) *cannot* discern. But the larger questions about literacy – who had access to education, who achieved "community" by virtue of reading – are crucial. Who, where, and what one could read provide key historical contexts for the formal and thematic features of texts themselves. Indeed, one might consider the structural changes in bourgeois homes, which facilitated the possibility of greater privacy, as part of the historical and interpretive matrix for the female "self" (see Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*).

Two related questions also appear in this volume: first, the history of reception in particular and print culture in general and, second, the integration of studying women's writing in relation to other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. What did women read, and what was easily or freely available to them? The growth of newspapers and syndicated columns in the 1880s and 1890s (after the popularity of Jennie June's fashion columns and Fanny Fern's humor pieces in antebellum America) brought an important site of women's advancement as writers into greater focus. Moreover, syndicated fictions brought regionalist writers to the fore and interested more women readers than ever before. How did the varying markets for women authors change the production of texts?

Scholarly work on American women's writing is striving constantly to keep up with the calls for interdisciplinary work in American studies and

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cultural studies. This raises important disciplinary – or rather interdisciplinary – questions about critical methods. Should our methodologies broaden, even as our fields of interest seem to become more focused? Or should we widen our scope of inquiry at the same time that we utilize the methods and bodies of knowledge in other, related scholarly disciplines? The latter possibility raises the specter of trying to tackle too much, especially in light of the fact that the field continually tries to recover and discover new writers and texts. And this of course involves the question of national borders. Nineteenth-century American women's writing might be read most productively from a comparatist perspective – that is, transatlantically, bringing Stowe, for example, into dialogue with the Brontës or continental European writers. Can we extend such a methodology to Latin American women's work, or third world cultural contacts? As Carolyn Porter argues, "what we know that we don't know" is how common, cross-culturally, the patterns of US women's writing appear in South American fiction or in Canadian literature.

The first part of this *Companion* accordingly provides historical and theoretical backgrounds to nineteenth-century American women's writing. In "The Postcolonial Culture of Early American Women's Writing," Rosemarie Zagarri discusses the gradual professionalization of women's writing in the context of the social and cultural changes informing women's lives between the 1790s and 1840s. As Zagarri notes, the cultural emergence of "republican womanhood," whereby middle-class women were partly responsible for the moral character of the American republic, invested greater importance in women's education and literacy. If such change was rooted partly in Scottish Enlightenment philosophy about human moral growth, it also helped to shape changes in the meanings of "virtue" in American culture. Dana D. Nelson's "Women in Public" analyzes the cultural legacy of republican womanhood, specifically the enabling tensions it produces between women's private and public responsibilities. By tracing the history of the concept of "separate spheres" in modern criticism, Nelson gives it the literary–critical attention that Kerber had initiated in the field of women's history.

Nowhere better are these tensions captured than in the "texts" of women's dress, a subject that Stephanie A. Smith takes up in "Antebellum Politics and Women's Writing." Smith offers an expansive account of the cultural politics of women's fashion through the specific history of "bloomers" (named after the innovation by the temperance advocate Amelia Jenks Bloomer in the 1850s), which symbolically questioned contemporary gendered assumptions about the "nature" of "woman." Like the changing meanings of "virtue," there was the semantic change from "Bloomers" to "bloomers," revealing the depoliticization of the term over the course of the nineteenth century.

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