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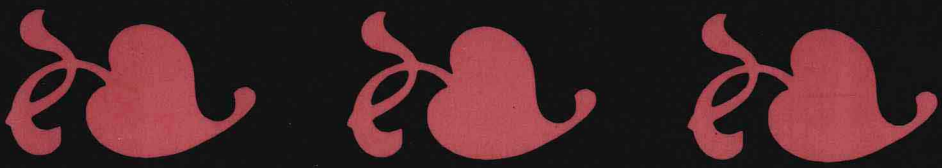
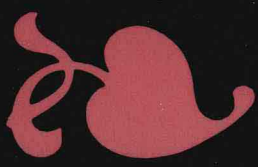


A Reader from 19th-Century American Women

Edited with an Introduction
and Critical Commentary by
JUDITH FETTERLEY



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BY

Judith Fetterley

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PROVISIONS

EVERYWOMAN

Studies in History, Literature, and Culture

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Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff-Wilson

TO

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Ellen Mindel

Joan Schulz

WSS 210, "Introduction to Feminism"
1976–1978

Thespian Feminists
1978–1983

PROVISIONS

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INTRODUCTION

When I first began to read extensively in the prose literature of nineteenth-century American women, I was primarily curious. In four years of undergraduate and five years of graduate training, I had not been asked to read, much less study, a single piece of this literature. Once, in graduate school, a professor had suggested that, if I had the time, I might want to take a look at *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* I read it and then I wrote an essay on it for the local NAACP chapter newsletter. Obviously, the book interested me, but, also obviously, I could not find a place for that interest in my life as a graduate student with a specialization in nineteenth-century American literature; I could only find a place for it in my life as a civil rights activist. I was, of course, aware when I began this project of the critical attitude toward this material, of the scorn and contempt conveyed in the adjectives usually applied to it: sentimental, silly, soft, senseless, feminine, florid, frivolous. But, as a feminist with what I believed was a fairly clear understanding of the sexual politics of aesthetic judgments as they operate to shape literary history, I was not impressed by these adjectives nor convinced of their accuracy. So I began my reading, curious as to what I might find. And curious also to understand in the specific rather than the general why this material had been so thoroughly eliminated from the map of nineteenth-century American literature.

By the end of my first eight months of extensive reading, I had discovered that there was in fact an extraordinarily rich, diverse, and interesting body of prose literature written in the nineteenth century by American women. But I had also discovered that the desire to write a

critical book on this material was for me at least premature. Without access to the primary texts, there could be no community of readers, and without such a community there could be, as I saw it, no finally intelligent criticism. Clearly, then, the first task of the reader-critic committed to this material was to get it into print. Furthermore, getting this material into print appeared a necessary first stage in the struggle to put this literature on the map of American literary history. For it had become increasingly clear to me during my first eight months of reading that the attempt to integrate the work of nineteenth-century American women into the definition of American literature would provide a good testing ground for the relationship between sexual politics and literary judgment. Having made these discoveries, I then proceeded to redesign my project. The result is the book you have before you: a critical anthology of the prose literature written by American women between 1830 and 1865.

In 1971, Ann Douglas [Wood] published an essay in the *American Quarterly* entitled "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote." In this essay, Douglas describes the context within which mid-nineteenth-century American women writers worked. This context was created by male critics and by women following their lead. These men and women undertook to define the nature of female writing and then, in somewhat contradictory fashion, they exhorted women to write only in the mode that was "natural" to them. According to Douglas, this context had major consequences for the work produced by women during this period. One of these consequences was reflected in the posture of authorial innocence adopted by many writers. Paradoxically, Douglas argues, these women presented themselves as writing unconsciously and she offers the example of Caroline Lee Hentz in *Ernest Linwood,* a novel published in 1856:

> Book! Am I writing a book? No, indeed! This is only a record of my heart's life, written at random and carelessly thrown aside, sheet after sheet, sibylline leaves from the great book of fate. The wind may blow them away, a spark consume them. I may myself commit them to the flames. I am tempted to do so at this moment.

When I began to read this literature for myself, I was struck by the difference between what I saw and what Douglas had described. This is not to argue that Douglas is wrong but rather to argue that the material at issue is more various than her thesis would suggest. For, as I read, what I discovered was not "innocence" but awareness. Indeed, many of the women whose work I read exhibited a considerable degree of self-consciousness about writing and a serious, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, engagement with the issues raised by the conjunction of woman and writer. For example, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Angel Over The Right Shoulder* (1852) is essentially self-reflexive; a story written by a

woman, its subject is women and writing. More striking, perhaps, because earlier, is Catharine Sedgwick's "Cacoethes Scribendi," first published in 1830. Twenty-five years before Hawthorne's infamous and endlessly quoted jibe against the "d----d mob of scribbling women" who dominated the American literary scene at mid-century and prevented, according to Hawthorne, his own chances for commercial success, Sedgwick analyzes the origins, implications, and consequences of the female "itch to scribble." In this story about a woman who determines on a career of letters after reading one of the latest instances of the periodic inundation of annuals and discovering in it the work of her female friends, Sedgwick evinces a clear understanding of the connections between women and writing and developments in the economics of publishing. Annuals became an item on the American scene in the late 1820s. Issued, as their name implies, once a year, many of them early adopted a policy of accepting American materials only. Thus they provided a major new market for the work of American writers, a category that of course included women. Sedgwick's Mrs. Courland is literally smitten by opportunity. Indeed, the motives Sedgwick assigns her would-be woman writer differ significantly from those presented by Douglas as the only ones women could legitimately claim. Mrs. Courland does not write because she is poor, nor because she is the sole support of husband and children; nor does she write in response to the pressure of male relatives, nor because she is possessed of a force that she can neither understand nor control. Nor does she write from the feminine urge to bring the values of the home into the world of the market place. Mrs. Courland writes because the opportunity is there and she enjoys doing it. A story about writing for annuals, itself written for and published in one of the first examples of the genre, "Cacoethes Scribendi" reflects the self-consciousness of its author. Inevitably, it raises the question, what is the difference between the writing of Sedgwick and the writing of Mrs. Courland? Obviously, Sedgwick's self-presentation is a far cry from Hentz's "Book! Am I writing a Book? No, indeed!"

Another early writer who self-consciously draws attention to herself as a woman writing is Caroline Kirkland. In *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* (1839), Kirkland insists on the twin facts of her authorship and her femaleness. Her preface, though filled with conventional apologies for the book's limitations, nevertheless defines her aesthetic principles; yet Kirkland concludes this preface with a "curtsey." Throughout the book Kirkland evinces authorial self-consciousness: "I trust the importance of [my subject] will be enhanced in the reader's estimation by the variety of figures I have been compelled to use in describing it." Equally, she indicates awareness of the current assumptions about "feminine" writing, and engages them with an ironic playfulness that exposes their absurdity. Declaring at one point to have discovered that "the bent of my genius is altogether towards digression," she continues with a parody of the twin

assumptions that women have no will power and therefore can not write "serious," that is, logical and linear, literature: "Association leads me like a Will-o'-the-Wisp. I can no more resist following a new train of thought, than a coquette the encouraging of a new lover. . . ." In an essay entitled "Literary Women," published in *A Book for the Home Circle* (1853), Kirkland engages even more directly and sharply the conventional assumptions about women's writing. Playing with the posture of a literary woman about to defend literary women in a context that makes such defense impossible since such defense requires a self-consciousness and logic of which women are by definition incapable, Kirkland ironically delivers the required disclaimer: "we shall take care to deal with the subject after the desultory, unsystematic, and feminine manner. We repudiate learning; we disclaim accuracy; we abjure logic. We shall aim only at the pretty prattle which is conceded to our sex as a right, and admired as a charm."

Like Sedgwick in "Cacoethes Scribendi," Kirkland in *A New Home* seeks to seize the initiative in defining who is to represent the woman writer. To this end, she creates the character of Eloise Fidler, exemplar of the "female poetess," the figure conventionally asserted as the type of true female "genius." In parodying, exposing, and rewriting this figure, Kirkland distinguishes between herself and her character and thus implicitly argues for a different idea of the woman writer from that embodied in Eloise. In *A New Home*, Kirkland also argues implicitly for a broader definition of women's writing. In between realistic sketches designed to describe the facts of life on the Michigan frontier, Kirkland inserts stories more closely associated with the contemporary assumptions about the nature of women's writing. These stories contain conventional women's subjects—romantic love, courtship, marriage—treated in a relatively conventional fashion. Although there is a definite sense of play in the handling of these insert stories, Kirkland's intent is not to disavow this mode of writing, but rather, by containing it within the framework of a different kind of writing, to suggest that women can write successfully in more than this one mode.

In *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862), Harriet Beecher Stowe uses a similar technique to define the premises of her fiction and to distinguish implicitly between her text and the conventional assumptions about women's stories. Stowe, however, takes the issue further than Kirkland. Implicitly, she argues that the so-called woman's story is in fact a story written by men about men and for men. In *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, Stowe enfolds a lengthy narrative written by one male character and directed to another. This narrative tells of the fate of Dolores, mother of Moses, the book's male hero, who died while Moses was still a boy. In contrast to the text that surrounds it, the insert story presents as its heroine a male-identified woman—a woman whose only idea of life is romantic love; a woman thoroughly subject to male domination and

completely dependent on men for identity, direction, and rescue; and a woman helpless and vulnerable. In his narrative, the male writer recounts his love for Dolores, his ineffectual efforts to save her, and her ultimate fate. Never marrying, he has remained true to this love, a love that seems inextricably connected to Dolores's vulnerability and doom. Through this artistically self-conscious technique of a tale within a tale, Stowe identifies the "love story" as men's work and defines the woman's story as something else.

In sum, then, I suggest that the work of many nineteenth-century American women writers before 1865 (and I could, of course, have discussed other writers in this context, most notably Alice Cary, Rose Terry Cooke, Rebecca Harding Davis, Gail Hamilton, Charlotte Forten Grimké) reflects a considerable degree of self-consciousness toward the act of writing. Furthermore, this self-consciousness is not of the kind implicit in the posture Douglas describes, which denies any intention of writing while in fact engaged in the act of writing, but is rather direct, straightforward, and often in conscious tension with the posture of "innocence." To take the issue a step further, I did not find in the work of the women included in this anthology (there are, of course, exceptions to this generalization) that same "anxiety of authorship" that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) so eloquently describe as infecting the work of nineteenth-century English women writers, and that Mary Kelley in *Private Woman, Public Stage* (1984) perceives as informing the work of the nineteenth-century American "literary domestics," a group composed primarily of novelists. On the contrary, many of the writers I read seemed to manifest a considerable degree of comfort with the act of writing and with the presentation of themselves as writers and relatively little sense of disjunctiveness between "woman" and "pen." Indeed, I would suggest that mid-nineteenth-century American women writers were more comfortable with the idea of writing than were their male counterparts and that Gilbert and Gubar's analysis in "Toward A Feminist Poetics" more accurately interprets the work of Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville than it does the work of nineteenth-century American women.

Women were early and significantly on the scene of American letters. According to Helen Papashvily, of the two-hundred-odd works of fiction produced by Americans between 1779 and 1829, "better than a third were written for or by women." Among the most popular of these fictions were two books written by women, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), and one written by a man but attributed in the nineteenth century to a woman, William Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789). In the 1820s and early 1830s, Sedgwick wrote a series of novels that received significant critical and popular acclaim and established for her contemporaries the right of women to the territory of American fiction. The 1830s and 1840s saw the

rise of annuals, gift books, and women's magazines with the consequences for women and writing that Sedgwick recognized in "Cacoethes Scribendi." And in 1850, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* created the category of "best seller" and gave it a uniquely feminine signature. Thus, in mid-nineteenth-century America, although "women" and "writing" were not synonymous, neither were they dichotomous, and the woman who picked up her pen on this side of the Atlantic may have felt that she was occupying essentially feminine territory. Conversely, the American male who picked up the pen may well have felt contaminated by an instrument peculiarly female and consequently engaged in an act both eccentric and illegitimate. To view the fiction of American men as written in a context of and in reaction to, on the one hand, the association in nineteenth-century America of culture with the feminine, and, on the other hand, the visibility of women as American writers may well provide us with a new understanding of the origins of those particular features of form and content that we currently associate with our "classic" literature.

But, one might argue that the comfort these women felt in the act of writing derives from the fact that they did not, unlike perhaps their English counterparts, think of themselves primarily as artists. Nina Baym, discussing nineteenth-century American women novelists in *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870* (1978), argues that these women, in contrast to the later generation of regionalists, "saw themselves not as 'artists' but as professional writers with work to do and a living to be made from satisfactory fulfillment of an obligation to their audience." And in "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America 1865–1914" (1972), Douglas makes essentially the same point about the "first" generation of American women novelists, claiming that "women in America started to write in large numbers precisely at that time (the turn of the nineteenth century) when a wide and competitive literary market was becoming a reality. . . . In short, American women were drawn to writing just when it became a possible business, and they were among the first to sense and develop its business potential." Although these comments are based on the careers of nineteenth-century American women novelists, they may have an equal and even more pointed reference to the self-concept of women who chose to write primarily in other modes. As the more traditional, conventional and "big" form for nineteenth-century fiction, the novel was also the most literary and artistic. Thus, to write an essay, a sketch, or a letter may have compounded the differentiation between woman and artist that Baym and Douglas describe. Aiming at less than art and lower than immortality, the women represented by this anthology may have avoided some of the psychic trauma that afflicted those who aimed higher. In an essay entitled "On American Literature" (1846), Margaret Fuller, anticipating the rise of a truly American artistic genius, presents for a model "the great Latins of simple masculine minds

seizing upon life with unbroken power." It is rather doubtful, given this description, that any of the women I discuss would have presented themselves as candidates for the position of American artist.

Finally, I might note that my comments are based primarily on the texts I have chosen for inclusion in this anthology. Kelley in *Private Woman, Public Stage* has clearly identified the considerable degree of conflict that the "literary domestics" experienced between the privacy of woman and the publicity of writer. And although it may indeed be the case that further research into the letters, journals, and other published writings of the women represented in this anthology will reveal a similar pattern of conflict, this would not, I think, change my essential perception. For I would argue for a distinction between the cumulative voice derived from multiple sources and the particular voice developed for a specific text. For example, Kelley includes both Sedgwick and Sara Parton (Fanny Fern) in the category of "literary domestics" and analyzes them in terms of the conflict between private woman and public stage. Yet the voice that speaks to us in "Cacoethes Scribendi" and in the pieces by Fanny Fern is strong, clear, confident, unconflicted; it is a voice comfortable with the authority of the public forum, the written word. For such women, the text may have provided a temporary "world elsewhere" away from and outside of the general conflict.

If I was struck by the degree of self-consciousness and self-confidence that many mid-nineteenth-century American women writers exhibited in their writing, I was equally struck by the apparent ease with which they chose to write about women and their lives—or, in other words, with which they chose to write about themselves. Coming to the work of nineteenth-century American women from familiarity only with the work of nineteenth-century American men, I was understandably unprepared to find women inhabiting American texts. Yet the writers I read apparently did not feel that in writing about women they were being un-American. Perhaps because they did not see themselves as "artists" and did not aspire to fill the role of the American genius who would produce a uniquely American literature, these women were free to explore that other, "lesser" world of women. Or perhaps that fusion between "Americanness" and masculinity that has informed the twentieth-century interpretation of American literature was not in mid-nineteenth-century America so firmly fixed; thus nineteenth-century American women writers could consider themselves American artists and still write about women. A useful context for this question may be provided by the texts themselves. To what degree do the texts that these women produced suggest that they freely chose to write about women because the lives of women interested them and the woman's point of view struck them as significantly human? And, conversely, to what degree do these texts suggest that their authors felt they could only write about women? Among

the writers included in this anthology, Davis is notable for her decision to focus on the lives of men. One could, I think, argue that some of her stylistic difficulties in "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), the occasionally heavy, even clumsy quality of her prose, the sense it conveys of repression more than expression, derive from a discomfort with her subject matter, a conviction that the lives of men, even working-class men, do not constitute an appropriate subject for a woman writer. Yet there are other writers whose texts describe the focus on women as a choice freely made, not culturally enforced. In *The Angel Over The Right Shoulder,* for example, Phelps, though describing the woman's life as a restricted life, does not present herself as restricted by her choice of subject. She indicates no desire to follow Mr. James downtown and no interest in treating the "business" so important to him as to justify in his eyes the sacrifice of his wife's efforts to get time for herself. Rather Phelps's interest lies in the life thus sacrificed and for her subject she is willing to stay home. In *The Pearl of Orr's Island,* Stowe presents her preference in even more dramatic fashion. Although to Moses, his life is both story and history, Stowe drops him from her text when he sets out to sea; his masculine adventures take place off a stage occupied instead by the women who remain at home.

Much of the pleasure that the contemporary reader takes in this literature stems from its ratification of women as significant subjects. The focus of these writers provides an experience missing from most of our "classic" American fiction. But the fiction of nineteenth-century American women differs in other ways as well from that of nineteenth-century American men. One such additional difference may indeed be connected to the decision to focus on the lives of women. For most of the writers represented in this anthology, accurate and detailed recording of the realities of women's lives leads inevitably to an interest in social texture and settings. This interest in turn leads to a fiction of manners shaped by the perspective of realism. In "A Few Observations on American Fiction, 1851–1875" (1955), Lyle Wright laments the subjects that our early writers of fiction "missed": "They lived in the days of the masted schooners and flying clippers, stagecoaches and the early development of the railroads. . . . The frontier pushing westward was a throbbing movement of humanity bent on finding new homes and a new way of life. Trails were being blazed to the Pacific by the fur trappers and exploring parties, and marauding bands of Indians provided additional news." But if little of this "dash and daring on land and sea" can be found in their work, nevertheless, claims Wright, "a great deal can be learned about the way of life of the people, the clothes they wore, the food they ate, and their daily gossip." The gender bias implicit in Wright's definition of the truly interesting subject is obvious, but his comments are still useful in directing our attention to what women were actually doing. In *Woman's Fiction,* Baym contends that "if critics ever permit the woman's novel to join the main