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Review of *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth-Century Sciences: Styles of Affiliation* by Nina Baym

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## REVIEWS

Baym, Nina. *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth-Century Sciences: Styles of Affiliation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2002. xii + 265 pp. Cloth: \$60.00. Paper: \$22.00.

As in her previous books on nineteenth-century American women writers, Baym's most recent book presents an impressive survey and synthesis of women cultural producers and their products. Even though nineteenth-century American women had neither the education nor the opportunities to be research scientists in the modern sense (a sense that was only beginning to be formulated and institutionalized), Baym contends that they nevertheless "affiliated" themselves with the sciences and used print culture to promote science and (male) scientists to America as essential to its national identity. "Ceding most of the doing of science—the production of new scientific knowledge in the field, laboratory, or study—to men, they allotted tasks like disseminating, popularizing, appreciating, and consuming it to women, thereby linking the genders in a constructive division of labors" (14). This synthesis was both progressive and conservative, progressive because women affiliates insisted that women had the intellectual capacity to understand science but conservative because they conceded that women could not produce science and should not leave the domestic sphere to attempt it. In each of her eleven chapters, Baym defines a "style of affiliation" through case studies of particular women: Almira Phelps writing popular botany textbooks for children, Sarah Hale promoting scientific education and knowledge for women and providing the means of that education through publication of scientific articles in *Godey's Lady's Book*, Elizabeth Carey Agassiz ghost-writing for her husband and promoting his legacy as his biographer, Catharine Beecher defining and promoting "domestic science," Susan Fenimore Cooper promoting botany and natural history as appropriate genteel pursuits for country "ladies," and so forth.

Baym's strongest influence as a scholar has been in the field of fiction. *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* is still a touchstone in Hawthorne scholarship, and her *Nineteenth-Century American Woman's Fiction* set the agenda for the project of recovering women's novels from the period. Even *American Women Writers and the Work of History* included substantial analyses of women as writers of historical fiction as well as writers of history proper. Oddly enough, she spends a considerable amount of time in this book explaining why portrayals of women engaged in scientific pursuits are almost entirely absent from women's fiction. Her most developed analysis of a single literary figure is a chapter on Emily Dickinson, whom she reads as skeptical of the synthesis of science and orthodox faith promoted by Amherst college's

curriculum (and, of course, by refusing to publish, Dickinson also elected not to engage in the public work of scientific affiliation as practiced by other women). In her chapter on “The Sciences in Women’s Novels,” Almira Phelps’ children’s novel *Caroline Westerley; or, The Young Traveler from Ohio* and Susan Warner’s *The Wide Wide World* stand as the only examples of novels that programmatically engage their heroines in scientific inquiry as part of their educations. Augusta Jane Evans’ *Macaria* features a heroine who spends every night observing the stars through a telescope and making astronomical calculations, but Baym ultimately argues that Irene Huntington engages in astronomy as “a form of private worship, a playing at research, not the real thing” (165). In short, she is *not* Maria Mitchell, the astronomer, the one American woman recognized as a “real scientist” because she discovered a comet.

Baym’s thesis as to why female heroines do not engage in scientific pursuits is provocative but developed primarily through assertion. “Fiction by women,” she writes, “tended to an esthetic approach to female subjectivity” (153). Such an esthetic approach and the concomitant “feminization of belles lettres came about in historical conjunction with ideas of women as more intuitive, emotional, and imaginative than men” (153). As the “rational heroine” of the antebellum “conduct novel” was replaced by the subjective heroine of “the art novel,” science as subject matter lost its tenuous foothold in women’s literature (154). “The baroque rhetoric of women’s fiction and poetry enunciated a specifically female perception of imaginative reality, whose imaginary opposite was utilitarian, earth-bound science” (154). She demonstrates this sweeping claim about the course of literary history through an analysis of a single novel, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Story of Avis* (1877), an analysis that depends *a priori* on Baym’s thesis. Despite the density of scientific allusion by the narrator in *Avis*, “Esthetic discourse permeates virtually every page of the novel, enclosing its geology, its astronomy, and its chemistry within its own superior forms of representation” (169). Baym claims that the novel is “a conflicted antiscience salvo” that “proposes that esthetics is superior to science, so that women are superior to men” (169). Her book closes with chapters on women as doctors and women and “spiritual science,” both chapters demonstrating, with slightly different emphases, the *dis*-affiliation of women from science at the century’s end, a disaffiliation that clearly dismays Baym, who seems to wish that the rational heroine of the antebellum woman’s novel had persisted rather than be displaced by emotional, subjective heroines. Baym even reads Phelps’ *Doctor Zay* and Sarah Orne Jewett’s *A Country Doctor* as anti-science in their portrayal of medicine as a divine, empathetic calling for women rather than as a scientifically engaged profession.

My criticism of her claims about women writers and estheticism is ultimately a form of praise—as a scholar of fiction, I wanted *more* about fiction, a whole book about the rise of the woman’s art novel rather than a chapter about the absence of the woman’s science novel. Still, those interested in

women's fiction and in 19th-century American literature and culture more broadly will find Baym's latest book stimulating and informative reading.

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Bramen, Carrie Tirado. *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000. 380 pp. Cloth: \$48.95.

*The Uses of Variety* is an accomplished book; its attention to detail, its careful scholarship, and its commitment to the complexity of its thesis across a range of cultural sites give it a rare combination of depth and scope. A study of the turn of the century's fascination with the ideas of diversity, variety, and heterogeneity in the United States, the book is a welcome addition to American studies as well as to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on questions of multiculturalism. In her introduction, Bramen asserts that she has two audiences in mind for *The Uses of Variety*. To the first audience of literary and cultural historians of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she provides a thick, integrated cultural history of how the ideas of variety and diversity became central to often-contradictory ideas of the American nation. To the second audience of theorists of multiculturalism, she offers an intellectual genealogy of some of the late twentieth century's most cherished, if uninterrogated, assumptions about the value and political uses of diversity and culture. Her address to specialists and non-specialists alike may be what is most engaging about Bramen's work, for while it is extremely useful to scholars in her field, it is also a sharp but balanced intervention into current debates about difference, debates that she ably shows are too often constituted by platitudes and soothing political maxims. *The Uses of Variety* is directed, even in the midst of its most detailed local arguments, at the larger question of how a history of ideas matters, how recovering the terms of earlier debates about social and ethnic difference can give nuance and texture to contemporary liberal theory.

Bramen's thesis, most broadly stated, is that the pressing issues of representation addressed by multiculturalists are not contemporary inventions. Under the sign of William James's pragmatic evaluation of variety, philosophers, political theorists, racial spokespersons, and creative writers, among others, were able to imagine ways to synthesize the nation and cultural difference without subordinating one to the other. Bramen argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, legal and social representation for individuals and for ethnic and racial groups was a pressing issue, and that the charge to integrate groups while preserving something of their distinctiveness underwrote that era's best (and least) known writing. Beginning