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Melissa J. Homestead

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mhomestead2@Unl.edu

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## Did a Woman Write "The Great American Novel"? Judging Women's Fiction in the Nineteenth Century and Today

Melissa J. Homestead  
*University of Nebraska*

*A JURY OF HER PEERS: AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS FROM ANNE BRADSTREET TO ANNIE PROULX*, by Elaine Showalter. New York: Knopf, 2009. 608 pp. \$30.00 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

In the fall of 2009, as I was preparing to teach a senior capstone course for English majors on the nineteenth-century American novel and questions of literary value and the canon, I went trolling for suggestions of recent secondary readings about canonicity. The response came back loud and clear: "The canon wars are over. We all teach whatever we want to teach, and everything is fine." My experiences with students suggest that, at least in American literary studies before 1900, the canon wars are not over, or, perhaps, they have entered a new stage. Most of my students had heard of James Fenimore Cooper, and a few had read him, but none (with the exception of one student who had previously taken an early American novel class with me) had even heard of his contemporary Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Most had heard of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and a few had previously read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Although some aspiring fiction writers initially objected to what they felt was an overly intrusive narrator, I succeeded in persuading the class to read Stowe's novel with respectful attention. All of them had heard of Mark Twain, and all but a tiny minority had read his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Those who had read the novel professed their admiration for the novel as one of the greatest ever written and certainly a prime candidate for the Great American Novel. When I asked them to read Jane Smiley's infamous essay "Say It Ain't So, Huck: Second Thoughts on Mark Twain's 'Masterpiece,'" in which she suggests that *Huckleberry Finn* was not that great and perhaps *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was better, something curious happened.<sup>1</sup> Not only did they defend Twain's novel, but many abruptly turned on Stowe's. In a radical reversal of their attitudes just a few weeks earlier, many now dismissed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as simplistic, racist, and sub-literary.

This chain of events in my classroom represents fairly, I believe, the understanding of American literary history before 1900 that prevails out-

side of our scholarship and classrooms. Canonical male authors and their texts (and in the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, what Jonathan Arac calls a “hyper-canonical” text<sup>2</sup>) have visibility in the culture, and because these male-authored texts come prejudged, readers approach them with respect. However, women authors (with the exceptions of Emily Dickinson and, as a children’s author, Louisa May Alcott) remain largely invisible. When women authors and their texts do rise to visibility, they are still vulnerable to attack or dismissal.

In a recent issue of *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* dedicated to the journal’s twenty-fifth anniversary, participants in a roundtable were asked to consider whether recovery work focused on American women’s writing is “complete? Obsolete? In need of revision?”<sup>3</sup> Even if American women’s writing before 1900 was proportionally represented in published scholarship and undergraduate classrooms (which it is not), as long as most general readers assume that pre-1900 American women’s texts either do not exist or do exist but are so bad they are not worth reading, the work of recovery is far from “complete” or “obsolete.” If recovery is not complete or obsolete, perhaps the next, “revised” stage of recovery would be popularization?

It is within this context that I picked up Elaine Showalter’s *A Jury of Her Peers: Celebrating American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. A trade book published by a commercial publisher (first in hardback and now in mass-market paperback), Showalter’s book, unlike the typical academic monograph, has been widely reviewed in newspapers and placed on shelves in the front of bookstores. “Showalter may have written the perfect book-group book,” enthuses the *Columbus Dispatch* in a review excerpted in the front matter for the paperback, “Not only is it fascinating on its own, but it also opens up possibilities for decades of further reading.” Book clubs are, notably, dominated by women. What would happen if thousands of twenty-first-century women read *A Jury of Her Peers* together, learned about American women’s writing before 1900, and based on what they learned, sought out (in the accessible reprints scholars have labored to produce) books they read about in *A Jury of Her Peers*? Could book clubs be the next frontier of feminist recovery work?<sup>4</sup>

In her blurb on the back cover of the paperback, Joyce Carol Oates proclaims *A Jury of Her Peers* to be “required reading for all who have an interest in American literary history.” Before I return to the question of general readers, however, let me be clear: *A Jury of Her Peers* may be appropriate for those “interested” in American literary history, but it is unlikely to be useful to practicing literary historians, especially those of us whose teaching and research focus on American women’s writing. In her introduction, Showalter references scholarly “debates about whether literary history in general is theoretically possible or intellectually valid”

(p. xiv). She also reflects on her own temerity in undertaking the first comprehensive literary history of American women when “their papers and manuscripts [are] scattered in so many libraries” (p. xiv). Her footnotes reveal, however, that *A Jury of Her Peers* is synthesis history, not an archival project: it relies nearly exclusively on modern biographies, scholarly monographs, journal articles, and modern editions of literary texts. As a result, the table of contents covering the period up to about 1875 reads like a typical syllabus for a course on American women’s writing: Anne Bradstreet, Mary Rowlandson, Phillis Wheatley, Judith Sargent Murray, Mercy Otis Warren, Susanna Rowson, Catharine Sedgwick, Lydia Maria Child, Caroline Kirkland, Lydia Sigourney, Margaret Fuller, Julia Ward Howe, Susan Warner, E. D. E. N. Southworth, “Fanny Fern,” Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frances Harper, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, “Hannah Crafts,” Emily Dickinson, Louisa May Alcott, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Augusta Jane Evans. Works by all of these women are (or recently have been) in print. Actress, memoirist, and playwright Anna Cora Mowatt is a bit of a surprise, as is “Marion Harland” (pseudonym of Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune), who was included in several influential surveys of women novelists but whose works have never been brought back into print.<sup>5</sup>

Uncharacteristically for a modern literary history, Showalter’s book consists primarily of brief biographies of these authors and others through the twentieth century with each biographical sketch ranging in length from a scant paragraph to several pages. In length and approach, many of these biographical sketches resemble the headnotes that introduce an author’s work(s) in an anthology. Certainly, the sheer amount of reading required to produce this synthesis was stupendous; Showalter read hundreds of novels, plays, and books of poetry as well as nearly as many biographies, published collections of letters, scholarly monographs, and journal articles. Even as a biographical compendium, however, the book is of limited usefulness for scholars, who will want to follow Showalter’s footnotes to her sources rather than rely on *A Jury of Her Peers* itself because many errors are introduced in the process of synthesis. Some of these errors are small and inconsequential for most purposes. For instance, Showalter mysteriously relocates Bowdoin College, where Stowe’s husband had a faculty appointment while she was writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, from Brunswick to Portland, Maine, and even more confusingly, she puts Stowe in Maine in 1842 when Stowe and her family were still living in Ohio (the move to Maine did not come until 1850).<sup>6</sup> Other errors are more significant. Showalter has Fanny Fern divorce her husband rather than her husband divorce her in absentia; considering the centrality of marriage to Fern’s career and her works, such a reversal is consequential (p. 103).<sup>7</sup> Without any documentation, Showalter also makes the astonishing claim that Catharine Sedgwick “earned more than sixty thousand dollars” in royalties

from her fiction in the 1830s (p. 41). This claim likely earned Sedgwick a place on the back cover of the paperback as “the little known . . . early American bestselling novelist Catharine Sedgwick.” I have not seen such a number cited in print for Sedgwick, and although the manuscript evidence is incomplete, the extant evidence (including Sedgwick’s correspondence with various editors and publishers and her contracts with Harper and Brothers) lends no credence to Showalter’s claim. Certainly, Sedgwick was commercially and critically successful in the 1830s, but all American novelists (except perhaps Cooper) had to wait until the 1850s to see such sales and profits.

Throughout *A Jury of Her Peers*, Showalter sets herself in opposition to what she sees as a wrong-headed mode of academic literary history and criticism. She writes in her introduction:

Rather than risk creating hierarchies among women writers, judging them as “major” or “minor,” many feminist scholars preferred to abolish literary history altogether. They emphasized cultural importance rather than aesthetic distinction, and moved away from literary judgment or comparison towards social history. (p. xv)

As a result, Showalter takes as one of her primary tasks the making of aesthetic distinctions and the issuing of aesthetic judgments. These aesthetic decrees often appear as explicit correctives to ideological readings by other scholars. Her treatment of Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) is a case in point. This instance is one of the few in which Showalter surveys multiple critical interpretations of a single text over time as opposed to selecting a single example of a previous scholarly judgment. Late twentieth-century scholarly debates about women’s literary regionalism by way of Jewett’s text were complex and contentious. In hindsight, some positions taken may be easy to caricature, but the questions about gender, race, class, and nation in regionalism were (and are) serious and important. After summarizing these debates in a paragraph, however, Showalter proclaims, “I would prefer to see a criticism based on aesthetic principles rather than such time-bound reflections of political sensitivities” (pp. 194-95). She then offers her own position: that the “limitations” of Jewett’s novel come from “problems” with Jewett’s narrative technique and in particular her failure to properly integrate her frame narrator (a summer visitor to a Maine coastal village) with the tales she tells about the people of the village (p. 195).

But where do the rules about what constitutes “good” narrative technique come from? Are these rules any less “time-bound” than questions about race and nation? And has feminist literary history really been grounded, as Showalter claims, in a refusal to make aesthetic distinctions, or has it often recovered the *history* of aesthetic judgment? Jane Tompkins,

for instance, influentially introduced the concept of “cultural work” to nineteenth-century American literary studies (in relation to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, no less), and this kind of work would seem to be the kind of work that Showalter dismisses.<sup>8</sup> However, Tompkins also traced a history of the variability of aesthetic judgments about nineteenth-century American fiction using the works of Susan Warner and Nathaniel Hawthorne as a case study.<sup>9</sup>

How might general readers, as opposed to scholarly ones, respond to Showalter’s confident aesthetic judgments about nineteenth-century American women’s texts? Laura Miller’s review of *A Jury of Her Peers* on Salon.com demonstrates, I fear, the problematic effects of Showalter’s approach for such an audience.<sup>10</sup> Titling her review “Why Can’t a Woman Write the Great American Novel?,” Miller applauds Showalter’s advocacy of aesthetics over the “pixelated theorizing of poststructuralists hellbent on overturning the very idea of ‘greatness.’” Significantly she cites Showalter’s redaction of the Jewett debates as “a textbook case of the absurdities of ideological criticism in the late 20th century.” In relation to Jewett’s American female predecessors, Miller latches on to Showalter’s biographical narratives as an explanation for their failures to achieve greatness.

The fuel for Miller’s conclusion about the aesthetic failures of nineteenth-century American women comes from a common thread through many of Showalter’s analyses of American authors’ lives and works; she repeatedly compares their works to works by British authors (particularly “major” British women novelists such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot) and deduces influence. Thus Sedgwick’s *A New-England Tale* (1822) is “structured . . . closely in imitation of Jane Austen” (p. 36), most mid-nineteenth-century novels were “influenced by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*” (p. 72), and Showalter’s chapter about novelists of the 1870s presents a group of novelists as “American Eliots” (p. 172). Showalter’s scholarly work has focused primarily—if not exclusively—on nineteenth-century British women authors, so these comparisons are not surprising. Furthermore, they are in line with a move away from a nationalist or American exceptionalist mode of literary history towards a transatlantic and more broadly transnational one.

In her review, however, Miller picks up on Showalter’s claims about uni-directional transatlantic influence and makes explicit what is largely implicit in Showalter’s comparative moves: that British women did, according to genuine aesthetic criteria, write great novels, while their American “imitators” did not. Miller wonders, “Why . . . did Britain produce several women novelists of genius during the 19th century—Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontës, as well as accomplished lesser artists like Elizabeth Gaskell—while America did not?” She finds a “plausible, practical cause” in *A Jury of Her Peers*, to wit, Showalter’s claim that “While

English women novelists, even those as poor as the Brontës, had servants, American women were expected to clean, cook and sew; even in the South, white women in slaveholding families were trained in the domestic arts" (p. 85).<sup>11</sup> Certainly, middle-class American women had fewer household servants than their British peers and were more likely to work alongside their servants than merely to manage them. However, the picture Showalter paints here of women authors laboring entirely without servants is amply contradicted by biographical evidence (such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's letters about her domestic arrangements while writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and by the domestic novels nineteenth-century American women wrote in which middle-class homes generally feature multiple servants (even if they often labor quietly in the background). Nevertheless, Miller blames the domestic imperative as Showalter describes it for the failure of American women to write the Great American Novel. Because American women authors were in the kitchen (and because they wrote out of economic necessity), Miller says, they did not "seize their share of those big canvases" occupied by *Huckleberry Finn* or Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), while British women, she claims, were "perfectly at home with the capacious novel of ideas; after all, George Eliot practically invented the thing."<sup>12</sup>

Miller's claims about the comparative aesthetic merits of texts authored by British versus American women return us to the question of changing standards of aesthetic judgment over time. Showalter characterizes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "an American masterpiece" and Stowe herself as "a great writer, a daring and forceful architect of narrative, a gifted painter of character, and a sophisticated manager of symbolism, irony, and allegory" (pp. 108-09). She prefaces this judgment with an acknowledgment of how twentieth-century critics dismissed Stowe's work both on aesthetic and political grounds. She subsequently (in the chapter of which Stowe is the center) tackles nineteenth-century responses to the novel. However, Showalter focuses on the responses to Stowe's representations of the politics of slavery—including "anti-Tom" novels—rather than responses to the aesthetic dimensions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In her review of Showalter, Miller misses this distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century judgments of Stowe, characterizing Stowe only as a "socially influential" writer (not a great one or a master) who was "sniffed at by the critical establishment." Miller, it seems, happily adopts Showalter's position that the primary work of literary history is making aesthetic judgments, but she glosses over Showalter's judgment that Stowe's work is, indeed, "great." Instead, Miller adopts part of Showalter's logic—her dismissal of the works of most nineteenth-century American women as minor and of primarily "social" interest—lumping Stowe and her novel into to this mass of minor writing. A lack of direct knowledge of antebellum women's fiction may

be a source of the ease with which Miller dismisses it. Nothing in Miller's review suggests that she has read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or fiction by the other nineteenth-century women novelists Showalter includes although it does seem likely that Miller has read Austen, the Brontës, and Eliot, who unlike their American counterparts, have been firmly ensconced in the university classroom canon since the mid-twentieth century.

What both Miller and Showalter miss in their framings of Stowe as an example is a moment in the nineteenth century when Stowe's most famous novel was taken seriously on aesthetic grounds. Indeed, Stowe and her novel can be found at the very origin point of the Great American Novel fantasy: an anonymous essay by novelist John William DeForest in *The Nation* in 1868.<sup>13</sup> DeForest believed that he himself had just published the first true Great American Novel, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), a Civil War novel largely forgotten by literary history but championed by some as a pioneering work of realism. In his essay, entitled "The Great American Novel," DeForest does not directly toot his own horn. Instead, he surveys the record up to his time, looking for "the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" in a novel with breadth and scope equivalent to that of William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1855) or Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) (p. 27). Cooper he dismisses as too narrow because of his focus on unrealistic Indians and idealized backwoodsmen. He praises Hawthorne as "the greatest of American imaginations" but discounts his novels as too regionally narrow and as lacking "sympathy with this eager and laborious people [of the United States], which takes so many newspapers, builds so many railroads, does the most business on a given capital, wages the biggest war in proportion to its population, believes in the physically impossible and does some of it" (p. 28). What of *Moby Dick*?—Melville and his novel are invisible, not even worth calling up to dismiss. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, DeForest characterizes as "the nearest approach to the desired phenomenon" (p. 28). DeForest points to what he considers faults in plot and characterization, but he praises "a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling" (p. 28). Stowe claimed to have written many of the serial installments of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in her kitchen in the midst of domestic chores, but DeForest rightly credits her with, to use Laura Miller's early twenty-first-century conceit, seizing a big canvas.

The recent flap over Jonathan Franzen's sprawling novel of Midwestern family life *Freedom* (2010) speaks to the ongoing relevance of these questions of authorship, aesthetic ambition, and gender. On Slate.com, poet and critic Meghan O'Rourke suggests that there is a "deeper question raised by the debate" about the instant acclaim *Freedom* received: "why women are so infrequently heralded as great novelists."<sup>14</sup> Her powerfully

persuasive answer is that “unconscious gender bias” prevents people (both men and women) from “ascrib[ing] literary authority as freely to women as men, and our models of literary greatness remain primarily male (and white).” She also, however, wonders whether “women end up writing less ambitious books” because these cultural preconceptions prevent them from being selfish enough to seize the privacy and authority necessary for ambition.

So does Stowe’s lack of privacy and authority in the nineteenth century account for the resistance to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or does the fault lie with the unconscious gender bias of twenty-first-century readers? Paula Feldman’s analysis of gender and the anonymous publication of poetry during the British romantic era is illuminating here. What, she asks, is the origin of the entrenched notion that the typical female poet was necessarily anonymous, “toiling away in obscurity, fearful of putting her name before the public”?<sup>15</sup> Labeling this “familiar portrait” a “fiction,” she argues that the myth arose, in part, because “scholars have found it difficult to acknowledge that the mid- to late twentieth-century obscurity of some of the major women poets of the romantic era has been due not to silencing in their own time but largely to their erasure by literary historians, critics, and anthologists of the early part of the twentieth century” (p. 284). Adapting Feldman, I would suggest that the exclusion of women’s voices from the ever-changing canon of the nineteenth-century American novel says more, in many ways, about the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than about the nineteenth.

What would happen to debates about the quality and importance of nineteenth-century American women’s novels if the general public—and twenty-first-century women authors—fully understood that nineteenth-century women like Stowe wrote big, ambitious novels that were praised as such by their contemporaries? Certainly, as Nina Baym proved some time ago, nineteenth-century critics paid attention to gender and read men and women differently.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, mid-nineteenth-century critics were more willing to grant literary authority to women authors than many early twenty-first-century critics are.

Persuading contemporary readers to read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and scores of other women’s novels of the period is a necessary first step to challenging the myth of the nineteenth-century American woman novelist as fatally confined by domesticity to the “small canvas.” My experience with my students demonstrates, however, that such a textual encounter, while necessary, is not sufficient to overthrowing the myth. They read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well as DeForest’s nineteenth-century “Great American Novel” essay and Jane Tompkins’s late twentieth-century recuperation of the novel. So why did reading Jane Smiley un-persuade them? The debate over Franzen’s *Freedom* is again suggestive. Many have scoffed at Jennifer

Weiner and Jodi Picoult for publicly criticizing the instant valorization of the greatness of Franzen's novel because both women are the best-selling authors of "chick lit" (I save for another day the question of why high quality, accessible fiction about women's lives by two women who both earned their bachelor's degrees in English from Princeton is dismissed as "chick lit"). Jane Smiley, in contrast, has acquired all of the marks of seriousness and cultural authority that Weiner and Picoult lack—the Pulitzer Prize for *A Thousand Acres* (1991), membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature. None of my students had read Smiley's novels or were aware of her reputation as a serious novelist, however, so perhaps it is unsurprising that few were willing to grant this unknown woman the authority to critique Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn*. One of O'Rourke's most powerful proofs of how unconscious gender bias has operated in the arts comes from the world of classical music: when orchestras began doing blind auditions, with instrumental musicians playing behind a screen to make their genders indiscernible, "the percentage of female players soared almost tenfold." There is no way to put Mark Twain behind a screen so that twenty-first-century students can read *Huckleberry Finn* free of gendered preconceptions about its author (as I write this, a new edition of his *Autobiography* is hitting the bestseller lists). Nevertheless, as I look back on my fall 2009 semester, I idly daydream about presenting "Say it ain't so, Huck" and perhaps even *Uncle Tom's Cabin* without author's names, or as written by John Smiley and Harold Beecher Stowe.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jane Smiley, "Say It Ain't So, Huck: Second Thoughts on Mark Twain's 'Masterpiece,'" *Harper's*, January 1996, 61-67.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Arac, "*Huckleberry Finn*" as *Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer S. Tuttle, ed., "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Two *Legacy* Roundtable Discussions," *Legacy*, 26 (2009), 228.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it would seem that Showalter and her publishers have targeted book clubs with their own primary text follow up, *The Vintage Book of American Women Writers* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Terhune appears in Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Elizabeth Moss, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). The prominence of Terhune and her works in Showalter's study seems to arise from Charlotte Brontë's influence on Terhune; see below for the prominence Showalter gives to such claims of influence and imitation.

<sup>6</sup> See p. 110; Showalter refers to and quotes from Stowe's letters as included in Joan Hedrick's Pulitzer-Prize-winning biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), where these facts are correct.

<sup>7</sup> For analyses of the circumstances of Fern's divorce, see Joyce Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 202-03; and Melissa J. Homestead, *American Women Authors and Literary Property, 1822-1869* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 180-83.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," *Glyph*, 2 (1978), 80-102; also in revised form as chapter five in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122-46.

<sup>9</sup> Tompkins, "Masterpiece Theater: The Politics of Hawthorne's Literary Reputation," in *Sensational Designs*, 3-39.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Miller, "Why Can't a Woman Write the Great American Novel?," review of *A Jury of Her Peers*, by Showalter, *Salon.com*, 24 February 2009, [http://www.salon.com/books/review/2009/02/24/elaine\\_showalter](http://www.salon.com/books/review/2009/02/24/elaine_showalter). This review was packaged with the review copy of Showalter's book—Showalter and her editor evidently agree with Miller.

<sup>11</sup> For the centrality of domestic servants—paid and unpaid—to the American nineteenth-century literary and cultural imagination, see Barbara Ryan, *Love, Wages, Slavery: The Literature of Servitude in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Another reviewer makes Showalter's dubious claim about servants central to her review. Meghan O'Rourke writes, "The sheer amount of domestic drudgery chronicled here helps explain why, unlike Britain, the United States produced no great female novelist in the 18th or 19th centuries. And those women who were writing, Showalter shows, were usually doing so to pay the bills rather than to fulfill artistic ambition"; see "'Her Peers' Engenders Debate," review of *A Jury of Her Peers*, by Showalter, *Washington Post*, 14 March 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/13/AR2009031303420.html>. In the context of advancing this claim, O'Rourke quotes Showalter quoting Fanny Fern, dismissively tagging Fern "a flowery novelist and columnist." Sometimes Fern was flowery and sentimental, but she was just as often an acerbic and ironic feminist wit. That O'Rourke comes away from reading *A Jury of Her Peers* with such stereotypical notions about "flowery" and dismissible nineteenth-century women intact is disheartening. Showalter does focus predominantly on fiction and particularly the novel, but she also addresses nineteenth-century women's poetry, and her treatment of poetry may make many feminist literary historians cringe. Although Showalter finds the lives of some poets interesting, she dismisses their poetry as entirely conventional. "In women's poetry," she writes, "brooks are limpid, trees are lofty, a ship is a bark, a wave is a billow (and it is foaming), hair is tresses" (p. 61), while Emily Dickinson is the sole exception, her "poems . . . unmistakable, while the verses of virtually all of her female contemporaries are interchangeable" (p. 151). For a more complex view of nineteenth-century American women's poetry, see, for example, Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century*

*American Women's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Janet Gray, *Race and Time: American Women's Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> [John W. DeForest], "The Great American Novel," *Nation*, 9 January 1868, 27. For a brief history of the "Great American Novel" concept, see Lawrence Buell, "The Rise and 'Fall' of the Great American Novel," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 104 (1994), 261-84. See also Buell specifically on Stowe: "Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Dream of the Great American Novel," in *Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Cindy Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190-202. Subsequent references to DeForest will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>14</sup> O'Rourke, "Can a Woman be a 'Great American Novelist'?", *Slate.com*, 14 September 2010, <http://www.slate.com/id/2267184>.

<sup>15</sup> Paula R. Feldman, "Women Poets and Anonymity in the Romantic Era," *New Literary History*, 33 (2002), 279. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); see especially chapter twelve, "Authors."