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Review of *Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist* and *Maria Mitchell and the Sexing of Science: An Astronomer among the American Romantics*

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Book Reviews

Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist, by Gary Scharnhorst. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008; xiv, 306 pp. \$27.95.

Maria Mitchell and the Sexing of Science: An Astronomer among the American Romantics, by Renée Bergland. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008; xviii, 300 pp. \$29.95.

Literary historians writing biographies have increasingly shifted from critical biography (the author's life as a means to interpret his or her literary works) to cultural biography (an author's life and works in various cultural contexts). As literary historians whose biographical subjects (both nineteenth-century American women) are not primarily literary figures, Bergland and Scharnhorst represent a further step away from critical biography.

As a journalist (and popular lecturer, advocate of reform, playwright, and actress), Kate Field is a more literary figure than astronomer Maria Mitchell, but Scharnhorst has produced neither a critical nor a cultural biography. Instead, he presents a chronological march through Field's life from beginning to end (her sudden death from pneumonia while returning from an investigative trip to Hawaii). Scharnhorst has meticulously researched Field's life, drawing particularly on newspaper accounts of her presence in the public eye, but the dizzying array of dates, names, and places sometimes reads more like a bibliography than a biography. Field passed through and sometimes deeply engaged places and questions that have received ample scholarly attention recently. She was a feminist, advocating for women's independence and mobility (practicing what she preached while traveling as a lecturer and journalist and remaining unmarried), but she advocated against women's suffrage. She investigated Mormonism in the Utah territory and advocated against statehood. Her final trip was, despite its veneer of investigative journalism, a propaganda excursion in support of U.S. interests in Hawaii. However, Scharnhorst does not use scholarship on these questions to illuminate Field's life or

vice versa. Literary historians may find useful information in Scharnhorst's biography, packed as it is with references to the literary figures with whom Field crossed paths, including Charles Dickens, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Henry James (who modeled Henrietta Stackpole in *Portrait of a Lady* on Field), Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They will find little, however, on the meaning and significance of Field's life and works. In his preface, Scharnhorst catalogs statements by Field's nineteenth-century contemporaries about her fame and importance, and he ends by claiming, "More than any other American woman of her generation, Kate Field heeded her calling, spread her gospel of noble deeds, and deserves to be resurrected from the footnote" (249). But why does she, rather than other figures in the footnotes, deserve that resurrection?

The title of Bergland's biography of Mitchell answers this question up front—Mitchell's life teaches us about the gendering of science in the nineteenth-century United States. Such a claim may sound unpromising to literary historians, but I highly recommend this compelling biography to anyone interested in gender and U.S. culture during this period. In the best mode of cultural biography, Bergland focuses more on Mitchell's significance than on cataloging names and dates, richly interpreting Mitchell's life by drawing on scholarship in the history of science, education, gender, and sexuality. Bergland's organizing trope is the movement of the planet Venus as it appears in the night sky. Hired by the U.S. government to calculate Venus's movements, Mitchell became one of America's first professional astronomers. Notably, however, Venus appears, at times, to move backwards—in retrograde—and Bergland analogizes this retrograde motion to the history of women in science in the nineteenth-century United States. That is, women had more opportunities early in the nineteenth century to pursue science than in the later century (or, indeed, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). How could a girl who grew up on the isolated island of Nantucket and who had little access to formal education become not just one of America's first professional astronomers but also a key figure in a move away from observational astronomy to the mathematically based discipline of astrophysics? Befitting Mitchell's vocation, Bergland's chapters on Mitchell's early Nantucket years are luminous, reconstructing what is both magical and perfectly ordinary, a girl committing herself to science under the tutelage of her supportive father. Because Mitchell established herself as a scientist before the Civil War and lived to see opportunities dwindle for the young women she later taught at Vassar College, the second half of the book is sometimes heartbreaking.

Literature never takes center stage in Bergland's account, although as she repeatedly reminds us, humanistic and scientific inquiry were not so far apart for most of the nineteenth century as they seem today, perhaps

because the culture had not yet so firmly gendered science as male. Indeed, Mitchell was an avocational poet her entire life, and Bergland effectively uses the poems to illuminate Mitchell's understanding of her own life as a woman scientist. The most rewarding chapter for literary historians appears right in the center of Bergland's narrative, at the midpoint of Mitchell's life. On a trip to Europe undertaken for the purposes of both scientific and cultural enrichment, Mitchell spent considerable time with Nathaniel and Sophia Peabody Hawthorne in Rome. All three privately reflected on their joint encounters with U.S. sculptor Harriet Hosmer, and explicitly and implicitly contemplated the specter of Margaret Fuller. The constraints of trade biography do not allow Bergland to engage the vast body of scholarship on Hawthorne, Fuller, and Italy. Nevertheless, her juxtaposition of the reflections of Mitchell and both Hawthornes as they contemplate the problem of "the woman of genius" is rewarding. It is also poignant, as it marks the beginning of the turn into retrograde motion in the later century not just in science but for women in the arts as well. Bergland does not break new ground in recovering the facts of Mitchell's life, her contributions to science, or even the gendering of science in the nineteenth century, but her deeply imaginative synthesis through the figure of Mitchell points to the potential for recovering what American culture lost when it exiled women from science and divorced science from the humanities.

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