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## Review of The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual.* By Ann Romines. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992. Introduction, afterword, notes, index. 319 pp. \$45.00 cloth. \$15.95 paper.

In entitling her book *The Home Plot*, Ann Romines refers not to a literal territory or the locus of domesticity, nor even to the Aristotelian, linear movement toward a denouement. "Plot," in the sense in which Romines uses it, is rather an on-going process akin to the daily routine of domestic ritual. The "home plot" is the rhythmic movement of the fiction as it is inspired by the nonprogressive, static, repetitive, non-linear domestic rituals of women's traditional lives. The term "domestic ritual," then, is especially significant because "*Ritual* implies repetition because the repeated act has or creates meaning, which becomes tradition through its continuance. *Domestic* implies an enclosure, somehow sacralized, which is both the house and the perceiving self" (p. 29).

Romines' work focuses on women writing after 1870 because she notes that while the men of the nineteenth century presented domestic ritual as "a paradigm of triviality and limitation" (p. 13), the women writers, perhaps influenced by movements in American realism and local color that focused on the particularities in everyday life, inscribed their fiction with the language and rhythms of housekeeping and domestic culture by which the meaning of women's lives is questioned and made.

Romines begins her book with a discussion of Welty's short story "Circe" in which the title character confronts her greatest predicament: "By her prowess at domestic ritual, each woman has made herself a goddess, exalted for extraordinary powers and placed above the realm of commonplace human feeling. But at the same time she is a woman—capable of pregnancy, frustration, tears—stingingly aware of the finite limits of her faculty" (pp. 5-6). Circe's domestic dilemma—the tension between the immortality domestic ritual suggests and the confinement it offers—is the key to unlocking the significance of housekeeping in the fiction of Stowe, Jewett, Freeman, Welty, and, of particular interest to readers of this journal, Willa Cather. For example, Romines calls Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* "the American ur-text of domestic ritual" (p. 48), and she challenges the notion that Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* is a novel in which "nothing much happens" by noting Cécile's conclusion that with the tools of the household, "one made . . . life itself."

Informed by Romines' readings in feminism and women's poetics (Donovan, Cixous, Irigaray, Fetterley, and Showalter, to name a few), this study offers an intimate dialogue on domesticity among the five authors, and true to her subject matter, Romines' own style is as graceful and personal as her argument is sound.

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