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## Review of *Our Sisters' Keepers: Nineteenth-Century Benevolence Literature by American Women*

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*Our Sisters' Keepers: Nineteenth-Century Benevolence Literature by American Women.* Edited by Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005. x + 299 pp.

This volume of essays joins a small but growing body of work attempting to recuperate "benevolence" as an important concept for nineteenth-century American literary history. As Susan Ryan observes in *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race & the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*, although sentimentality and benevolence are interrelated, the recent critical focus on sentimentality has tended to obscure the importance of benevolence as a nineteenth-century cultural category. While Ryan focuses on gender in addition to race, most of her primary literary figures are, nevertheless, male. The essays in this volume thus usefully supplement Ryan's volume, bringing another (and often crucially different) set of literary texts to the conversation.

The collected essays have a broad range, both in critical approaches and in primary texts, although the collection leans heavily toward the post-Civil War era. In the first section, "The Genre of Benevolence," Karen Tracey analyzes representations of the poor house in late nineteenth-century short fiction published in a variety of magazines, arguing that such writers as Mary Wilkins Freeman and Octave Thanet interrogated the panoptic structures of the poorhouse and benevolent work that were established in the antebellum era. Lori Merish focuses on "the sentimental seamstress" figure in the antebellum era, arguing that representations of the seamstress as helpless, dependent, and tragic served to "translate" the growing class differences produced by industrial capitalism into naturalized gender differences. Her essay concludes with an analysis of *Stray Leaves from a Seamstress*, sketches serialized in the feminist periodical *The Una* and written from the perspective of a seamstress that seek to undo the authority of moral reformers, an authority which depends upon the existence of the sentimental seamstress as an object of their reformist project. Mary Templin examines a genre she calls "panic fiction," written by authors such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee,

and Eliza Lee Cabot in response to the panic of 1837. Templin persuasively argues that representations of middle-class women engaged in benevolence in these fictions allowed the authors “to imagin[e] an enhanced economic role for women that would protect their middle-class identity even in the face of loss” (80), while also imagining and arguing for a new “domesticated economy” presided over by women that would restore prosperity to both individual families and to the nation (83). Whitney Womack focuses on Rebecca Harding Davis’s novel *Margaret Howth*, arguing that Davis’s novel about a woman working as a clerk at a factory was not *sui generis* but was instead part of a trans-Atlantic conversation with British women authors writing in the genre of the industrial novel, particularly Elizabeth Gaskell, author of *North and South*.

In the second section, “Negotating the Female American Self through Benevolence,” Debra Bernardi intriguingly situates Mary Wilkins Freeman’s representations of poor women and their claims to space and privacy in the context of the development of the legal theory of the right to privacy in the late nineteenth century. She argues that Freeman’s stories articulate a paradoxical theory of poor relief: that the poor are entitled to space and to privacy, but that private *property* is not essential to such privacy. Indeed, *private* property claims potentially undermine the ability of the poor to claim a “private share” of communal property. Monika Elbert argues that Sarah Orne Jewett’s representations of women’s spontaneous, individual charitable acts to other women serve to critique the late-century “scientific philanthropy” movement. Jill Bergman similarly traces a gendered form of benevolence—what she calls “motherly benevolence”—in the life and works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. However, as her analysis of Phelps’s novel *Hedged In* demonstrates, middle-class women who took the position of “benevolent mother” in relation to poor women ended up reinscribing the class differences their maternal care initially seemed to erase. Terry D. Novak makes some rather obvious observations about Frances Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and the ways that the eponymous heroine seeks to do good for fellow members of her African American community. The concluding two essays focus on Jane Addams. Sarah Chinn reads the “text” of the Hull-House Labor Museum, which put older immigrants on display practicing old-world handicrafts. Chinn argues that the museum did not seek to present “backward” immigrant craft workers to privileged others as potential objects of benevolence, but that Addams designed the museum to address an audience of immigrant teenage girls, teaching them to respect their old-world mothers “using the vocabularies of labor as a common language” (245). Finally, focusing on both *Twenty Years at Hull House* and *Democracy and Social Ethics*, James Salazar argues that Addams undermined the project of “character building” that underwrote most social reform and the charitable practice of “Friendly Visiting” (in which

middle-class women visited the homes of the poor to present a model of good character for emulation), substituting instead a more democratic model of intercultural exchange.

Most of these essays are well researched and clearly argued, and the editors obviously asked the authors to read each others' essays in order to emphasize connections between them, a model that more editors of such multi-author, thematically focused essay collections should follow. However, like many such volumes, the individual parts do not add up to the whole described in the editors' introduction, in which Bernardi and Bergman make two broad claims. First, they claim to have identified a new literary genre, which they call "benevolence literature." Second, they claim that by writing texts in this genre, women authors "have done nothing less than re-envision the American individual" (1). They continue, "In the face of an ethos of individualism and self-reliance, nineteenth-century women saw the value of and need for connection with others. Hence, they imagined the self as a dynamic entity that seeks a balance between selfish and selfless pursuits, between concerns with the individual self and with that self that is created in relation to another" (1).

The essays do not bear out the claim to have identified a literary genre—about half of the literary texts analyzed have in common representations of women dispensing forms of charitable relief (representations that would seem to be a defining feature of the claimed genre), but others engage benevolence quite differently. Furthermore, despite the introduction's invocation of Emersonian self-reliance as the bogey against which the "relational" (female) benevolent self is defined, the essays only infrequently place female benevolent texts in opposition to male-authored texts or represent women's benevolence in the terms claimed by the editors. Indeed, Bergman's and Bernardi's own very fine essays ultimately (and rightly) focus on class differences between women potentially reinforced *through* benevolence rather than on a benevolent sororal ideal in opposition to a dominant masculine agonistic ethos.

Finally, the collection's authors do not share a clear understanding of what "benevolence" means, if they use the word "benevolence" at all. Instead, the authors deploy an array of variously defined terms—charity, philanthropy, poor relief, social reform. Indeed, several essays present breakneck surveys of the history of the development of benevolence (or charity, or reform) over the course of the nineteenth century as contexts for reading late-nineteenth-century texts, and these histories both repeat and contradict one another. The most satisfying essays are those that situate their texts and authors in relation to their more narrowly construed historical moment, exploring how women as benevolent agents or objects of benevolence did cultural work in relation to immediate social conflicts. Still, these criticisms speak more to the nascent status of this critical con-

versation about benevolence and the perils of the thematic essay collection as a form than to the faults of the editors and authors. The collection raises interesting questions and suggests the need for and promise of further research.

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#### Work Cited

Ryan, Susan. *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003.