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Review of *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850-1900*

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Susan S. Williams. *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850-1900*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 255pp. ISBN 978-0812239423. \$59.95.

Like Naomi Z. Sofer's *Making the "America of Art"* (2005) and Anne E. Boyd's *Writing for Immortality* (2004), Susan Williams *Reclaiming Authorship* seeks to recreate and analyze how American women authors in the second half of the nineteenth century understood their own authorship. All three include Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Constance Fenimore Woolson as subjects, but Williams includes authors who did not conceive of their authorship in a high cultural mode (Maria Cummins, Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Abigail Dodge), and she traverses the careers of Alcott and Phelps so as to emphasize their movements in and out of high cultural authorship.

In her preface, introduction, and first chapter, Williams makes a number of sharp and sophisticated theoretical maneuvers, persuasively setting a new agenda for understanding and interpreting women's authorship. She criticizes "oppositional" modes of scholarship that define authorial practices in binaristic or developmental terms — e.g. authors write *either* from economic necessity *or* for art's sake, or they "progress" from the "lower" market-driven practice to the more autonomous one. Instead, she asks scholars to recognize the flexibility and variety of positions that authors assumed over the course of their careers. Drawing on nineteenth-century fiction, non-fiction commentaries on authorship, and women authors' letters and journals, she describes a trajectory of female authorship that begins in manuscript production and the domestic space of the parlor but that does not

end there. Instead, the women who have successfully crossed over to print and have acquired expertise exercise become "disciplinary gatekeepers" who advise aspirants about the innate talent and hard work required to move *out* of the parlor; they "make clear that although writing was a 'universal' middle-class act, authorship was an earned privilege." Although such professionalized authors serve a disciplinary function, they were not alienated from or antagonistic toward the social world. Instead, they had long and satisfying careers that they understood to be socially useful.

After this methodological grounding, Williams analyzes Cummins's successful cross-over at the beginning of her career from parlor authorship to print with the publication of her first novel *The Lamplighter* (1854); Alcott's development of a realistic aesthetic in response to the Civil War; the fight by Keckley and Dodge for what Williams calls "contractual authorship"; and Phelps's working through and rejecting several authorial modes on her way to developing her theory of "ethical realism." The book closes with a meditation on Woolson's late century story "Miss Grief" as a fantasy of return to amateur parlor authorship.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu and Michele Foucault, Williams draws a useful distinction between authorship as enacted through material practices and authorship as a "functional [discursive] principle," a distinction that allows her to illuminate the difference between Cummins's behind-the-scenes dealings with her publisher and that publisher's deployment of the figure of the (anonymous) author in advertising. However, when she excavates novels and short stories for traces of authorship as a discursive principle in long close readings of them as allegories of authorship, she is less persuasive. This is one of the great challenges of *History of the Book* scholarship for literary historians: can — or should — such scholarship produce extended readings of literary texts? This book ultimately testifies to both the considerable payoffs and the continuing challenges of the *History of the Book* for literary historians.

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