PROJECT MUSE®

Sharon Harris: Scholar, Mentor, Friend

Susan Belasco

Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers, Volume 31, Number 2,
2014, pp. 149-154 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/562496>

TRIBUTES TO SHARON M. HARRIS

On the occasion of her retirement from the University of Connecticut, we at *Legacy* would like to thank Sharon M. Harris for her long and generous career and to recognize her for her many achievements. Sherry was editor of *Legacy* from 1996 to 2004 and has continued to serve as a consulting editor since that time. She founded and was the first president of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, *Legacy's* affiliated author society. Her contributions to the field of American women's writing are as diverse as they are numerous. We wish her well in this new phase of her career, look forward to her continuing scholarly work, and express our deep gratitude for all she has done for the journal, the society, and the field.

Sharon Harris: Scholar, Mentor, Friend

SUSAN BELASCO

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

As I contemplate the state of higher education these days, I frequently find myself thinking that a news item I read or an event I attend somehow marks the end of an era. On my campus, books are being relocated to make way for a coffee bar at the library. A parking garage replaces an old building. A longtime colleague moves on to another job. Change happens, of course. But I confess: when I learned that Sharon Harris would retire from her position as professor of English and director of the Humanities Institute at the University of Connecticut this year, it was quite clear to me that it is indeed the end of an era.

Sherry earned her BA and MA degrees in English from Portland State University and her PhD from the University of Washington in 1988. In the twenty-six years since she earned her degree and took her first faculty position at Temple University, she has become a distinguished scholar in nineteenth-century American literature and culture, women's studies, and literature and medicine. Sherry is one of those academics who has truly made a difference in her field and in the lives of countless colleagues and students. For years, I have

regarded her as among the most talented scholars in American literature today. Her wide-ranging work in early and nineteenth-century American women writers has been highly significant and broadly influential. Her recent work in literature and medicine has been groundbreaking. She is well known as an outstanding teacher and mentor to young faculty members and graduate students; I can think of dozens of scholars who have benefited from her personal involvement in their work. At conferences, I have watched her introduce herself to young scholars, put them at ease, and inquire about their work—all with her characteristic genuine interest in people and in scholarship. Sherry has also generously undertaken significant administrative service experience at the national and international levels. She was the founder and first president of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers and president and founding executive coordinator of the Society of Early Americanists. She has served on a number of MLA committees and on the editorial boards of *American Literature*, *Early American Literature*, and the University of Nebraska Press. She also has a long record of institutional service at the four universities where she has served as a faculty member: Temple University, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Texas Christian University, and the University of Connecticut.

I first met Sherry in 1992, when we were both participants from different universities at the MLA/FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) Curriculum Review Conference in Dallas, Texas. Attended by departmental representatives from about two dozen institutions, this conference was designed to assist departments in undertaking curriculum reviews in primarily undergraduate education. At the time, I was on the faculty at California State University, Los Angeles, and my colleagues and I were asked to work with the group from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where Sherry was then a faculty member. I was struck by her sensible and intelligent comments about undergraduate curricula in English departments and the humanities in general. I knew that she was a person I wanted to know. Later, I introduced myself to her after a session in order to ask her some questions about her department and the structure of their English major. Absorbed by the immediate concerns of the conference, I suddenly realized that I had known and admired her work on Rebecca Harding Davis and early American women writers. I was more than a little taken aback to realize that I had just introduced myself to one of my scholarly role models. From that initial meeting in Dallas, we have enjoyed a warm association and a strong friendship—our relationship has been among the most important of my professional career.

Over the years, Sherry has steadily amassed a considerable record of research and publication. An active academic with an international reputation, she has made significant contributions to the field of American litera-

ture. Her first book, *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, provided a new direction for our understanding of the shift from romanticism to realism in literature of the later nineteenth century. Her study established Davis as an important figure in this movement. Judging from the considerable attention that Davis now receives, I would say that Sherry's work paved the way for this important reassessment. Her later projects continue to build on the foundation she established. I was particularly impressed with her work on *Rebecca Harding Davis: Writing Cultural Autobiography*, which is an edition of Davis's autobiography and includes a perceptive and engaging introduction written with a coauthor, Janice Lasseter. Her coedited collection *Rebecca Harding Davis's Stories of the Civil War Era* continues her work on making Davis accessible to the modern reader. The stories that Sherry collected in this volume provide a fascinating new angle on the Civil War and show how a woman writer dealt with the conflicts and complexities of her time. That she is now working on a biography of Davis is welcome news for scholars of American women writers and American literature generally.

But Sherry is also well known for her work in other areas of American literature. Early American literature, for example, is a period that has greatly benefited by her insights. Her essay "Early American Women's Self-Creating Acts" is the best one I know on this topic. She has produced a series of excellent contributions to scholarship. Her anthology for Oxford University Press, *American Women Writers to 1800*, is an invaluable contribution to the still relatively small number of texts available for the teaching of early American women writers. This collection has been widely and enthusiastically reviewed and is in use in a variety of courses across the country. Sherry has also made significant contributions to the field of American periodical scholarship. The overarching argument of her collection *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands: Women Editing Periodicals, 1830–1910* is that scholars have overlooked the work of women editors in the "long nineteenth century." In that sense, the collection is a restoration project, and an important one at that. For too long, the history of women writers in periodicals has been available only in brief footnotes of histories of male writers, and the position of women as editors has especially suffered from neglect. Another contribution to this field is her coedited volume *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth-Century America*, which covers the development of the periodical press during the colonial period of American history through the aftermath of the American Revolution. Active in conferences and seminars, Sherry has established herself as an important part of the scholarly world devoted to the development of print culture in the United States.

That so many of Sherry's publications have been produced in association with others is a sign of her extraordinary commitment to scholarship as a col-

lective enterprise. Her collaborations include coeditorships with colleagues such as Theresa Strouth Gaul, Linda K. Hughes, Mark Kamrath, Jeffrey Richards, Robin L. Cadwallader, and Janice Lasseter. As the series editor of "Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers" for the University of Nebraska Press, Sherry oversaw the publication of eleven titles (as well as selecting for publication an additional three), meticulously edited by a distinguished list of American literary scholars. Sherry's name also appears in the acknowledgments of dozens of books and articles. She is a sensitive, generous reviewer, eager to promote the work of others and provide mentorship and direction. As one more example, Sherry serves on the advisory board of the *Bedford Anthology of American Literature*, which I coedit with Linck Johnson. Sherry was our first choice as a consultant to assist us in the development of the first volume. As usual, she gave us detailed, constructive, and timely feedback. Later, when we had an opportunity to serve as the general editors of a new series of novels to accompany the anthology, we invited her to edit *The Awakening*. Her edition is a model of scholarship, and we have been delighted to have her associated with the *Bedford Anthology*.

Perhaps the most impressive example of Sherry's commitment to collaboration and the promotion of the scholarship of others is her work as a major force behind the journal *Legacy*. Founded in 1984, *Legacy* began as a small journal devoted to nineteenth-century American women writers. From the beginning, the editors of *Legacy* saw their mission as providing not only a place for the publication of scholarly essays about women writers but also as a resource for the reprinting of rare and out-of-print primary texts and useful "profile" articles on women writers. Largely because of Sherry's leadership, *Legacy* expanded the journal to include women writers from the seventeenth century through the early twentieth century. Throughout her tenure as editor, Sherry worked hard to make *Legacy* an excellent journal.

In addition to her contributions to the development of that major journal, Sherry was the founding president of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, now an organization of nearly five hundred members. She recruited me to help her organize its first conference, held in San Antonio in 2001. What many of our members did not understand at the time is that hotels have many requirements for organizations who want to sponsor conferences, and as first-timers we had nothing: no credit history, no references, no institutional home, and no real idea of how many people might attend. In the fall of 2000, Sherry and I met in San Antonio to talk with the management of the St. Anthony Hotel and plead our case. I have always thought that they were willing to take us on because Sherry was in complete command of the situation and the facts (at least as far as we imagined them). And frankly, who would

say no to Sherry? As the conference director, I worked closely with her and had many opportunities to observe her leadership—in that early meeting in San Antonio and on many other occasions. I was impressed with her organization, attention to details, and insistence on high quality and fair standards—so much so that I found myself agreeing to direct the second conference in 2003. I repeat: Who would say no to Sherry? Thanks to Sherry's early vision and strong leadership, the SSAWW has become an influential organization, devoted not only to the work of American women writers but also to the *development* of scholarship on the topic. Countless articles and books have emerged from the presentations that members gave at these early conferences. It's rare that one can point to a single figure who had such an impact on an entire field of literary scholarship, but in this case, Sharon Harris is the person who imagined a space for the study of American women writers and was therefore instrumental in establishing its infrastructure.

In recent years, Sherry has been absorbed in the field of literature and medicine. The major accomplishment of this period is a biography, *Dr. Mary Edwards Walker: An American Radical*. As she points out in her introduction, we have no comprehensive history and analysis of women, medicine, and literature. Walker, among the best-known women of her day, was a leading figure in women's rights, and as one of the few women physicians in the United States she was a pioneer in establishing opportunities in medical education for women. In addition to her activism on behalf of women, Walker wrote widely on politics and explored human sexuality. Her *Unmasked; or The Science of Immorality* (1878) is a remarkable examination of sex roles in the late nineteenth century, including hermaphroditism. Walker courageously unmasked many issues that were of serious concern to women in the late nineteenth century. As Sherry explains, scholarship has largely ignored these writings and focused on Walker's less controversial works. The archival work undertaken by Sherry as well as her analysis of literary texts make this book unique and one that is certain to alter our notions of the women who pioneered vocations in medicine and the writers who imagined the possibilities of such career paths. Sherry's interests in examining the crossover between medicine and literature have substantially added to new efforts to redraw the traditional boundary between science and the humanities.

In addition to her impressive scholarly and professional achievements, Sherry is very funny and terrifically good company. Although we have never taught on the same campus (she left Nebraska the year before I was hired), I have worked so closely with her on so many projects and in so many organizations that I have always had to remind myself that we weren't in the same department. I think of her as my colleague in the larger world—through our

e-mail exchanges, conversations, letters (at least in the early days), and professional committee work. I have also gotten to know several of her former graduate students and have been very impressed with the ways she works to promote their careers and foster their work. And she has also been quick to promote my students and colleagues. We have often joked that we sometimes function as a two-person old-girls' network.

I don't have to remind *Legacy* readers that Sharon Harris is well known for her warmth, graciousness, strong support, diplomacy, and lively personality. She is a colleague's colleague—and, I am happy and honored to say, my dear and valued friend. Throughout her long career, Sherry has consistently combined a keen intelligence with a rare sense of fairness and balance. While her retirement from the University of Connecticut may mark the end of one era for her, trust me: she is busily planning her next.