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The Hidden Hand; or, Sharon Harris, Editor

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If Sherry Harris's retirement marks the end of an era, her assuming the editorship (with Karen Dandurand) of *Legacy* in 1996 marked the beginning of a new era in the journal's history. Her advent was a characteristically quiet one, unheralded by even an editor's note. Her accomplishments were largely unremarked, as if they had been effected by a hidden hand, a metaphor that links her to the work she loved and to Adam Smith's economic theories of an apparently self-regulating and non-coercive market. In this brief tribute, I want to expose Sharon Harris's fingerprints as they have touched our own marketplace, this network of scholarly publication and affiliation that apparently functions seamlessly and effortlessly.

In 1984 *Legacy* began as a newsletter produced by three graduate students, Martha Ackmann, Karen Dandurand, and Joanne Dobson. By 1996, when Sherry's name began to appear on the masthead, it had grown into a handsome perfect-bound quarterly journal published by the Pennsylvania State University Press. As Martha and Joanne withdrew from the editorship and Sherry joined Karen as editor, they made a wise division of labor. Karen became the bridge between the journal's founding era and a period of exciting growth, in which *Legacy* became the center of a group of scholars who gathered in conferences and professional associations, and who produced a remarkable body of scholarship that made visible the cultural productions crafted by the hidden hands of earlier American women writers. Between 1996 and 2004, Sherry expanded the reach of *Legacy*, brought it an increased scholarly legitimacy, and provided a point around which those interested in recovery work, archival research, literary analysis, and cultural studies could find common ground.

Even readers unfamiliar with Sherry will see her fingerprints in the redesigned format, design, and content of *Legacy* shortly after she became editor. These were not merely cosmetic touches but symptoms of the journal's emerging identity as a source of pathbreaking scholarship that honored the literary-

historical, biographical, and bibliographic work from which it stemmed. *Legacy* had formerly published a maximum of three scholarly essays; it now contained five or six. It revitalized features that earlier editors had envisioned and added others that are now familiar. For example, “Conversations,” inaugurated by Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman, Elizabeth Engelhardt, Frances Smith Foster, and Laura Micham, produced an “Archive Survival Guide” that is still a foundational reading for graduate training.¹ “*Legacy* Reprints” introduced readers to brief primary texts, once published but long forgotten. “From the Archives” printed unpublished primary sources enhanced by scholarly commentary linking them to the worlds and work of women writers.

Such changes are, as I’ve suggested, traces indicating that activity has taken place but only barely suggesting the amount of labor that brought them about. Since so much of scholarly editing is occluded work, let me, for a moment, play Pudd’nhead Wilson and explicate what these fingerprints imply about the editor’s hidden hand. The journal’s physical transformation signaled a change largely invisible to readers. Early in Sherry’s tenure, *Legacy* changed publishers from the Pennsylvania State University Press to the University of Nebraska Press. Terminating the relationship with one press while arranging for another to sponsor a journal is a process tantamount to selling a home or changing academic jobs. Timing is crucial. Tact and skill in business negotiations with both the former and future affiliates is absolutely necessary. It entails writing articulate proposals supported by hard numbers; it involves skills of gentle persuasion and rhetorical deftness, both qualities Sherry has in abundance. She represented the journal’s interests to the University of Nebraska Press, the journal’s home since she signed the contract in 1999. At Nebraska *Legacy* has been fortunate to find editors with high standards who are eager to promote our interests, publicize our work, and explore ways to make our publication economically feasible even in these times of digital omnivorousness.

While the contract with Nebraska allowed *Legacy* to continue to publish more essays, it was no simple matter just to include more of them in any given issue. First, one must have a reserve fund of strong essays from which to choose. The increase in number of essays published required that the mechanisms for reviewing, evaluating, and responding to submissions be equal to the task of furnishing substantive critique and generous feedback to prospective contributors. Sherry and others worked to establish a network of respected scholars who would agree to read, comment on, and evaluate manuscripts without remuneration. It meant, as well, roughly a 30 percent increase in invisible editorial labors. As Sarah Blackwood has recently written, “Excellent editing erases itself. . . . Unless an author calls attention to it, a reader should never know” of interventions that include detailed—sometimes sentence-by-

sentence, even word-by-word—advice for revision, checking facts, reading subsequent drafts, copyediting, and proofreading—to name a few of the processes that move a piece of work from initial submission to its place on the page. Additionally, because of their importance as bibliographical referents, the new features, as well as “Profiles” and the “*Legacy* Bookshelf,” demanded even more labor-intensive recruitment, editing, and fact-checking.²

While the increase in the number of published essays was a superb indicator that the study of American women writers had matured and that new scholars were choosing this as their field of specialization, it also suggests that Sherry, Karen, and the members of the journal’s editorial board were actively cultivating sources by attending conferences, listening to presentations, inviting contributions, planning thematically centered issues, and making the journal visible as a place for publication. In all, to borrow a metaphor from Alan Rauch, an essay or an issue of a journal “is an avatar that elides an enormously complex series of events, orchestrated by an editor, that ultimately result[s]” in a finished scholarly publication.

Sherry joined *Legacy* as an editor shortly following the first national conference on women writers, “Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers in the Twenty-First Century,” jointly sponsored in 1996 by Trinity College, the Stowe Center, and the Northeast Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers Study Group. Recognizing the importance of that gathering as a signal of the genuine and enthusiastic interest in this field of research, with the intent of ensuring that the conference could be dependably repeated, and with University of Nebraska Press’s encouragement, in 1998 Sherry founded a professional association, the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, which she envisioned as a “mechanism to sustain the work that has been done and to build on that work, rather than see it slipping away once again” (Harris ix). The SSAWW has guaranteed that research on American women writers is now a regular feature of major conferences such as those of the Modern Language Association, American Literature Association, and American Studies Association. The group has also coordinated subsequent conferences on American women writers—in San Antonio in 2001, in Fort Worth in 2003, in Philadelphia in 2006 and 2009, and in Denver in 2012, with another to come in Philadelphia in 2015. Under Sherry’s leadership, *Legacy* became the journal of record for the SSAWW; she also ensured that the society published a newsletter and maintained a listserv and a website.

Sherry intended the SSAWW to be “a vehicle that serves the needs of scholars in the field, at every level of the profession” (Harris xi). The society also exemplifies another impress of her hidden hand. Jennifer Putzi, whose graduate work was supervised by Sherry, affirmed that that goal had been accom-

plished, praising her mentor's ability to "develop relationships" and her commitment to making it possible for scholars in our field to "ally [themselves] with people who share [their] passion"—mentors, teachers, students, or other scholars in the field—who "can sustain you and your work."

One of the major spurs to the study of American women writers in the 1980s was the marvelous Rutgers University Press American Women Writers series, coordinated by Rutgers editor Leslie Mitchner, a publishing initiative dedicated to providing affordable and scholarly classroom editions of works that had long been out of print. But in 1992, after publishing fifteen such books, Rutgers closed the series, long before it could be claimed that all—or even many—of the works we would have liked to see in print would be available. Sherry took up the challenge, and in 2002 she began consulting with Karen Dandurand about a way to revive such a project. Serving on the advisory board of the University of Nebraska Press, she was in an ideal position to advocate for such a series (and to promote books about women writers generally). In 2004 the press launched its Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers series, which Sherry edited until 2012, when Theresa Strouth Gaul succeeded her. Although this series has also recently ended, it brought forth fourteen volumes of carefully edited works to join the Rutgers editions as anchors of our scholarship and pedagogy.

Such accomplishments require an incalculable combination of stamina, vision, tact, and attention to detail and would in themselves comprise a substantial professional career. Perhaps because it cannot be quantified, editorial work is routinely effaced, assumed to be one of the invisible forces that sustain the scholarly marketplace. It registers not as scholarship but as service in the vitae that "[purchase] tenure and promotion for an individual scholar" (Rauch). Thus it is even more important to note that while performing the above feats, Sherry maintained a sustained and highly productive program of research and publishing—so well summarized by Susan Belasco in her tribute. As I routinely emphasize when I write letters of support for colleagues' promotion and tenure, the two activities cannot be separated. As Rauch writes, "An editor must . . . be an arbiter of knowledge, an expert in the broad topic areas that define the scholarship of a journal, and a tireless tracker of disciplinary changes." A good editor also knows how her field connects with others, as evidenced by Sherry's part in founding the Society of Early Americanists in 1997, now a vibrant and thriving professional association. Furthermore, a good editor can represent the importance of her discipline to the community at large, as Sherry recently did in her NBC news interview about Dr. Mary Walker. Equally adept at scholarly discourse and accessible explication, she has helped bring our work into larger scholarly and public arenas. Most important, of course,

is the fact that Sherry's work for *Legacy* has informed such publications as her recent three-volume *Feminist Reader: A History of Feminist Thought from Sappho to Satrapi*, coedited with Linda K. Hughes; conversely, her publications such as *Executing Race: Early Women's Narratives of Race, Society, and the Law* have engendered a body of subsequent scholarly work, some of which has appeared in *Legacy*.

When the final installment of *The Hidden Hand* ran in the *New York Ledger*, Southworth bade farewell to her fans, saying she was leaving for England "to recruit." She wrote, "Now, dear reader, my pleasant task is ended. Day and night have I wrought at it, cheered by your appreciation and by the goodness of the best publisher I have ever had" (6). Robert Bonner, of course, took the last word, adding a bracketed comment to reassure readers that "We have in our drawer the manuscript of another beautiful tale by Mrs. Southworth, the publication of which we shall shortly commence." In retirement Sharon Harris may also "recruit," leaving behind the quotidian pressures of academia. But, like Bonner, we await those other "beautiful" works wrought by her hand.

NOTES

1. The "Archive Survival Guide" invited readers to "continue [the] conversation, adding their own thoughts, inquiries, and recommendations" via what was then a very new technological tool, the ssaww listserv (230).

2. In 2010 *Legacy* decided to discontinue publishing the "Legacy Bookshelf" because the number of essays and books about American women writers had become too large to present in a twice-yearly bibliographic list.

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