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Writing for Immortality

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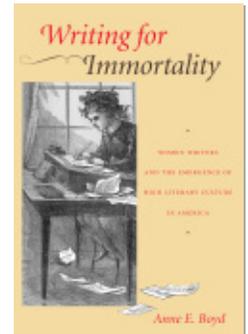
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New Ambitions

In her article “The Transitional American Woman,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1880, Kate Wells paints a critical portrait of the new generation of women who were leaving their homes in great numbers to engage in self-directed pursuits. In their decision to emphasize their own development rather than live only for others, these postbellum American women were making a major break with the past. “Formerly, to be a good housekeeper, an anxious mother, an obedient wife, was the *ne plus ultra* of female endeavor, — to be all this for others’ sakes. Now it is to be more than one is, for one’s own sake,” she complains. Wells portrays a radical transformation in the way women viewed their lives as they became doctors, women’s rights activists, or simply unmarried women. What united them, Wells observes, was their “ambition”: “Women do not care for their home as they did; it is no longer the focus of all their endeavors. . . . Daughters must have art studios outside of their home; [and] authoresses must have a study near by.”¹ As she suggests, women’s new ambitions were prominently visible in the areas of art and literature, and many other commentators of the era also focused on women’s participation in the literary world as marking a radical departure from previous gender norms. Wells’s article was part of the forefront of what

would become a common cultural lament about the advent of the “New Woman.” But the seeds of this shift had already been planted in the 1860s and 1870s. In fact, during and after the Civil War, a convergence of cultural factors led some women — primarily white, middle class, and from the Northeast — to envision a place for themselves in the high literary culture that began to emerge in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* and elsewhere.

What did it mean for postbellum women to look to the field of literature to realize their ambitions? Certainly many women had already become famous as authors. In fact, the realm of literature was deemed by many male critics and writers to be dominated by women, who had extended their powerful roles as wives and mothers into the public sphere. The prominent female authors of the antebellum era generally had subscribed to the idea that being a good wife and mother was, as Wells indicated, “the *ne plus ultra*” of their existence. And even those women writers who weren’t married viewed their authorial identities as secondary to their roles as women. As Catharine Maria Sedgwick insisted, “My *author* existence has always seemed something accidental, extraneous, and independent of my inner self.” She claimed that her life was “so woven into the fabric of others that I seem to have had no separate, individual existence.”²

During and after the Civil War, however, some women writers began to view authorship much differently, namely as a central part of their identities, leading to the development of new ambitions as they sought to fulfill their potential as artists. They lived and wrote not only for others but “for one’s own sake,” in Wells’s words. For example, Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840–94) claimed, “The best of me goes into my writing,” conveying comfort with her devotion to her work. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844–1911) similarly declared her commitment to literary pursuits: “my time and vitality have always been distinctly the property of my ideals of literary art.” Another marker of this generation’s dedication to art was their high ambitions. While revising her novel *Moods*, Louisa May Alcott (1832–88) wrote in her journal that she was “‘living for immortality.’” And Elizabeth Stoddard (1823–1902) confessed that she desired to be “compare[d] . . . with Shakespeare, Milton[,] Dante & Co.”³ As each of these brief quotes suggests, alternative conceptions of authorship were becoming available to women. These four authors, who form the focus of this study, were part of a new generation of women writers who committed themselves to lives as artists and exhibited the highest aims available to them, dreaming of immortality as members of America’s emerging high literary culture.

Antebellum women writers such as Sedgwick, Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher

Stowe, and Lydia Sigourney had established authorship as a respectable profession for women. They had claimed the authority to contribute to discussions of national importance and had written some of the most popular works of the century, participating in the formation of a national conscience and identity and thereby expanding the range of acceptable roles for women. Some of their writings also challenged or revised traditional concepts of womanhood. But such authors, who broadened the scope of what was thought to be appropriate subject matter for women writers, were also essentially united in their acceptance of the taboo against women openly expressing or even harboring ambitions as artists. They wrote for God, family, or society and often thought of themselves — and were thought of by their culture — as “scribblers” (a term that signifies modest literary aims and implies that writing is a pastime rather than an artistic endeavor). They generally adhered to a republican model of authorship and viewed their roles as those of educators and moral inculcators, adopting authorial stances that some male authors — such as Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper — had begun to abandon as early as the 1810s and 1820s in favor of a democratic ideal of the individualistic author. This democratic model, influenced by European romanticism, remained culturally unavailable to women, who continued to be viewed and to view themselves as representatives of their sex rather than as unique individuals. Creative women writers of the antebellum era were united in their adherence to an ideal of duty to others, which was culturally sanctioned for them as women and also meshed with the republican model of authorship. This cultural mantra of self-sacrifice for women, which most women deeply internalized, prevented them from adopting the democratic model of individualistic authorship and from seeing themselves as potential “artists.” Of course, the altruistic ideals of republican or domestic authorship remained potent for many women writers throughout the nineteenth century, but during the antebellum years these were the primary models available to women as public authors. It wasn’t until the 1860s and 1870s that the competing model of the woman artist, which had been born in France and England, became accessible to American women writers.

The fact that antebellum women writers did not conceive of themselves as artists has been recognized by many scholars, such as Nina Baym, who writes in *Woman’s Fiction* that they “conceptualized authorship as a profession rather than a calling, as work and not art.” Even Judith Fetterley, who asserts that midcentury women’s writing often displays “self-consciousness and self-confidence,” argues that the “comfort these women felt in the act of writing derives from the fact that

they did not . . . think of themselves primarily as artists.”⁴ A few scholars have also alluded in passing to the radical change in women writers’ perceptions of themselves that would occur after the Civil War. Baym observes that “[w]omen authors tended not to think of themselves as artists or justify themselves in the language of art until the 1870s and after.” Elaine Showalter refers to postbellum women writers beginning to feel “free to present themselves as artists.” And Joanne Dobson notes, “The 1870s saw the beginnings of a new and often quite divergent ethos in women’s writing,” as writers such as Phelps and Woolson were “more self-consciously artistic in their literary endeavors.”⁵ But no one has yet examined how and why this alternative model of authorship became available to women. This, therefore, is my primary objective in this book.

In order to sketch the main outlines of this cultural and literary development, I examine the lives and works of four representatives of this generation: Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson. Only by considering them as a group can we fully comprehend the ways in which women seized upon this era’s opportunities to contribute to America’s burgeoning high culture. For example, studies of these authors individually have noted Charlotte Brontë’s influence on both Alcott and Stoddard, as well as George Eliot’s impact on both Phelps and Woolson. By recognizing the connections between the ambitions and models adopted by these contemporaries, we can see such phenomena not as discrete and isolated happenings but as symptomatic of broader changes in the perspectives of American women writers.

Examining these authors together brings some striking crosscurrents into focus, such as feelings of difference from other women, the intertextuality of their works with those of European women writers, high artistic ambitions, fears of being rejected because of those ambitions, belief in the sufferings of genius, and conflicted relationships with their male peers and mentors. However, these four authors did not form a tight-knit network of writers. Although they shared some mutual friends and knew about each other, they did not regularly read and comment on each other’s works; neither did they correspond nor directly support each other. But they were products of their age, deriving inspiration from similar sources. Most importantly, they all felt that there would be room for women writers to participate in the realm of high literature beginning to form in America. They believed that they were part of an unprecedented historical moment on the cusp of women’s realization of their full potential, and they recognized their difficulties in realizing their ambitions as ones that they shared with each other and other women of their generation. For example, after a visit with Stoddard,

Woolson wrote to their mutual friend, Edmund Clarence Stedman, “Why do literary women break down so?” And when Alcott’s sister (a visual artist) embarked on a new “adventure” as a wife, Alcott wrote to a friend that she hoped May would “prove ‘Avis’ in the wrong,” referring to Phelps’s novel *The Story of Avis*, which depicts an artist heroine whose career is nullified by her duties as a wife and mother.⁶ Both Woolson and Alcott understood that they shared with their sister writers and artists many experiences, such as physical and mental hardships and the choice between matrimony and art, prominent themes in their works. These perceived similarities make it obvious that Woolson and Alcott knew their experiences and ambitions were not isolated phenomena. Their stories counter Elizabeth Ammons’s assertion that there were only “scattered individuals” who “struggled with . . . issues of gender and art” before the 1890s.⁷ Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson struggled with those issues beginning in the 1860s and extending through the 1880s and 1890s, and they were aware of themselves as belonging to a generation of women attempting to enter the field of high literature at a specific historical moment and suffering the same dilemmas and difficulties as a result.

Other women writers who began to write and/or publish in the 1860s and 1870s also wrestled with the taboo against women developing ambitions as artists. Although not all proclaimed the same high ambitions as Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson, their careers exhibit many similarities with the group under examination here. Rebecca Harding Davis (1831–1910) is a good example. Her stories about women artists tend to reflect the belief that women who pursue genius for its own sake are selfish and foolish. However, many aspects of her life and her works further amplify women’s changing authorial identities. She had one of the highest literary reputations of any American woman writer of her day and examined the difficulties of women’s pursuit of artistry in her works. Other contemporary figures who were inspired by the emerging model of the woman artist and/or participated in America’s high literary culture include Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–85), Emily Dickinson (1830–86), Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835–1921), Charlotte Forten Grimké (1837–1914), Sarah Piatt (1836–1919), Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909), Emma Lazarus (1849–87), and Sherwood Bonner (1849–83). In short, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson do not form an exclusive group; rather their lives and works are indicative of broader phenomena.

However, this longer list of writers is, in some respects, exclusive. For example, it suggests that the emerging model of female artistry was available almost exclusively to white women. Grimké is the only person of color among them, and

her access to high literary culture, while facilitated by some powerful white men, was quite limited. In terms of ethnicity, these writers are also quite uniform, with the additional exception of Lazarus, who was Jewish. However, the fact that these two women harbored high ambitions for literary fame suggests the reach of this new idea of the woman writer across social barriers. Indeed, many of these women were well outside the circles of cultural privilege that established America's early high literary culture, namely the elite literati in Boston and New York. Regionally they are a fairly diverse group: Piatt and Bonner were from the deep South; Davis grew up in what is now West Virginia; Woolson grew up in Ohio; while Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, Spofford, Dickinson, Grimké, and Jewett all were raised in the Northeast. One thing that clearly unites all of these women, however, is middle-class or genteel cultural status. Although some came from very wealthy backgrounds — as did Lazarus, Dickinson, and Jewett — and some struggled for at least part of their lives to obtain financial security — as did Alcott, Grimké, Jackson, Phelps, Bonner, and Woolson — they all would be considered privileged in terms of class. None of them struggled up from the kind of impoverished background that, say, Frederick Douglass or Walt Whitman did. Not to diminish these men's achievements, but the kind of self-education and self-support that they practiced was even more difficult for women to obtain. A certain degree of privilege in terms of education and exposure to literature and the arts was necessary in order for women to formulate serious ambitions. They had to be aware of the successes of George Sand and Charlotte Brontë, or be exposed to the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the European romantics, or read high cultural periodicals like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. And they had to be free from hard labor, inside or outside the home, in order to find time to write. Such things, of course, were granted primarily to women of the white middle class in New England, although it is important to recognize the deviations from this rule that would become even more pronounced in succeeding generations.⁸

My decision to concentrate on four authors was driven first and foremost by my desire to combine an analysis of the crosscurrents among women writers of this generation with in-depth analyses of their careers and works. I chose to focus primarily on Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson because significant groundwork had been laid by previous scholars, helping me to recognize some of the interconnections between them;⁹ republication of their texts was under way, particularly their works about women and artistry;¹⁰ they offered striking similarities *and* differences, allowing for a complex composite portrait; and these four

seemed particularly deserving of (re)examination. When I began this project, Alcott was viewed primarily as a children's author or a writer of protofeminist sensation stories. It is still the case that little attention has been paid to her artistic ambitions. The same is true of Phelps. And although Stoddard and Woolson are undergoing a modest renaissance, their extraordinarily accomplished works remain on the margins of American literary scholarship. Most importantly, none of these four writers has been significantly examined in the context of their contemporaries and the cultural debates about women and genius of the last half of the nineteenth century.

There are surely other women writers of this generation who possessed high ambitions but who remain unknown because they were not successful at gaining the attention of editors, publishers, critics, or the reading public. And given the taboos against women's ambitions, others may remain unknown simply because they did not publish or did not act on their desires for literary recognition or achievement. Two women who certainly belong to the category of apprehensive yet clearly very accomplished women of genius are Dickinson and Alice James, sister of Henry and William James. Both women cultivated very remarkable literary lives, which they kept secret owing to their reluctance to be known publicly (or even to their families) as authors. Their discomfort with combining the identities of woman and artist suggest how many women continued to internalize cultural strictures against literary ambitions at the same time that some women were finding ways to overcome or circumvent such taboos.

My decision not to focus on Dickinson or Jewett but to limit my discussion of them to occasional points of comparison or contrast warrants further explanation. No doubt, some readers will feel that one or both of these writers deserves a prominent place in a study of nineteenth-century women's literary ambitions. The most significant factor that sets Dickinson apart is, of course, her decision not to publish and participate fully in the literary world of her day. As a result, she avoided many of the obstacles that other female authors encountered as they attempted to establish themselves as highly regarded literary artists. So although Dickinson's view of herself as a poet certainly reflects the reformulation of women writers' identities, for the most part she does not fit the picture I am drawing. Jewett, however, participated in many of the conversations discussed in this book, but I want to emphasize that a whole generation of women writers was redefining the possibilities for women authors and, in some cases, articulating much higher ambitions than she did. She was not the "single historical exhibit" Richard Brodhead claims her to be, nor did she alone "establish . . . the normative

model for women's high-artistic literary identity in America."¹¹ Therefore, my choice not to place Dickinson or Jewett in the foreground rests primarily on the fact that they have been more widely accepted and recognized as "artists" than have any other nineteenth-century American women writers, overshadowing the contributions of others. In fact, one or the other has often been held up as the sole example of the serious woman writer in America. Such myopia has certainly fueled the perception that American women writers did not adopt serious artistic aims on the same scale that their European sisters did or that only a few, exceptional female authors deserve serious scrutiny.

The critical emphasis on Dickinson and Jewett has also left the impression that American high literary culture had no place for women and that women believed it was off-limits to them. The examples of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson offer much evidence to the contrary. In fact, recognizing the efforts of this era of women writers to make room for themselves in the emerging high literary culture can help us to envision women's participation in American literature beyond the separate spheres model, which assumes differentiated realms of male and female authors. More recently, challengers have begun to break down the private/public dichotomy in nineteenth-century American literary culture. One strategy has been to show the social and intellectual engagement of antebellum women's writings. Beginning with Jane Tompkins's idea of "cultural work," scholars have developed the argument that women writers, in Baym's words, "were demolishing whatever imaginative and intellectual boundaries their culture may have been trying to maintain between domestic and public worlds." The writers Baym surveys in *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860* "were claiming on behalf of all women the rights to know and opine on the world outside the home, as well as to circulate their knowledge and opinions among the public." Scholars have therefore reclaimed many nineteenth-century women writers working outside the realm of domestic fiction and advice literature and contributing more overtly to a national literary culture. Thus scholars are more and more attempting to "understand how men and women lived in the same historical moment," in the words of Monika M. Elbert, making it "more productive to see where and how their roles converged and how their interactions created a national culture in flux rather than . . . dwell[ing] on a separatist notion of the genders living apart or without interaction."¹²

However, despite these productive developments in critical thinking about American literary culture, one important aspect of the separate spheres model has not been adequately overturned, namely the assumption that the realm of

high literature was always an exclusively male preserve defined in opposition to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "damned mob of scribbling women." Even some of the most discerning studies destabilizing the boundaries between private and public, domestic and canonical, tend to presuppose the existence of a "homosocial high culture," as Lora Romero does in *Home Fronts*. Michael Newbury, in *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, makes a powerful argument for the injection of class and race concerns into the separate spheres debate but does not challenge the association of women's literature with mass production, which Hawthorne and other male writers used to "damn it to a kind of subliterary or even antiliterary status."¹³ In such studies, female writers continue to represent middlebrow domestic literature while male writers represent high literature, however much cross-influence between the two groups may be exhibited. In most studies, women writers before the 1890s continue to be figured as domestic or professional and as indubitably cut off from the realm of "high" literature. However, a reconstruction of the cultural matrix out of which nineteenth-century high culture grew reveals that competing visions of American authorship and genius were diverse enough to allow some women to develop the ambition to be included in this more elite sphere of literature. Essentially, a two-tiered high literary culture was conceived, with the top rank reserved for the most accomplished male writers, such as Hawthorne and Emerson, who could claim the distinction of an "American Shakespeare," and just below them a broader stratum of authors clustered around the high literary magazines emerging in the 1860s–1880s. It was to this latter group that women writers were provisionally admitted before the backlash against women writers at the turn of the century.

In short, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson did not confine themselves as writers to a so-called woman's sphere. They were clearly adopting models of authorship that previously had been considered available only to men, at least in the United States. While they did not attempt to transcend gender completely, and they always perceived of themselves as *women* artists, they did dare to tread on what historically has been perceived as a male preserve of high literature. In fact, as the realm of high literature began to take shape in America in the 1860s and 1870s, it was not at all clear that women would be excluded from its construction. Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson came of age as authors during a particular moment of opportunity for female authors, when the idealistic impulses of the post-Jacksonian era and of romantic thought made it possible for them to feel that achieving the status of artist was within their province as American women. Ultimately, though, the dynamics of cultural exclusion that solidified

the gendered split in the literary world, particularly by the 1890s, eclipsed the ambitions and achievements of postbellum women writers. I therefore agree with Elbert, in her introduction to *Separate Spheres No More*, where she allows that, even though her aim is to show the intersections between men's and women's spheres, "the concept of separate spheres still applies to nineteenth-century literature to some degree." It is important that we recognize both the power of separate spheres ideology *and* its inadequacy to explain the whole of women's and men's lives in the nineteenth century.¹⁴

As I claim that women desired entrance into America's high literature, the question that has troubled scholars resurrecting women's neglected literary traditions inevitably arises — "is it any good?"¹⁵ Discussing my project with various colleagues over the years, one of the most frequent questions I received was, now that you have established these women's ambitions to be recognized on a par with the Brontës or Hawthorne, will you also argue that their works deserve to be valued as highly as those of such widely regarded authors? Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell did so for Elizabeth Stoddard, writing that "next to Melville and Hawthorne, [hers] was the most strikingly original voice in the mid-nineteenth-century American novel."¹⁶ But few other scholars have been so bold in declaring the artistic achievements of these four authors. While I agree with Buell and Zagarell's assessment and would like to extend it to other women writers' works, that is not one of my main goals. In fact, I consciously have avoided overtly making any such claims because they rest on the assumption that such worth is deducible by comparison to previously and presumably universally acknowledged "masters." Therefore, if I shy away from declaring that I have "unearthed a forgotten Jane Austen or George Eliot, or hit upon [works] . . . I would propose to set alongside *The Scarlet Letter*," as Baym definitively avowed she had not when she first wrote *Woman's Fiction*,¹⁷ it is not because I believe these women's works to be of less literary value than those of "major" authors. Rather, it is because I question the basis on which such judgments are often made. My goal first and foremost is to understand these women's lives, careers, and writings about gender and genius in their historical context, which does not exclude aesthetic considerations. I have tried my best to historicize such issues rather than approach them from a contemporary perspective.

One of my aims, therefore, is to reconstruct the context of literary value and vocation that allowed postbellum women writers to glimpse the possibility of contributing to America's emerging high literature. Of course, my hope is that by acknowledging and appreciating their efforts to make such a contribution and by

examining their rich texts, which exhibit such ambitions, we can learn to value their works anew for their boldness, their individuality, their participation in the tradition of women's artist narratives (which has been largely perceived as a product of French and English writers), and their participation in the cult of "great" works (which has been deemed the province of male writers). Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson each displayed their own serious intent as artists by taking as the subject of their writings the production of high art, exploring the ways women artists develop and pursue their ambitions, and creating artist heroines who exhibit and gain recognition for their genius. They also trespassed on the masculine realm of high art by writing within and against the romantic tradition and participating in the emergence of realism, two subjects that I have been unable to fully explore here. As I explain in the Conclusion, this important subject must wait for my next study.

In Chapter 1 I lay the groundwork for the book by exploring the particular cultural moment in which Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson developed their ambitions, focusing on the cultural/literary factors and the influences in their personal lives that combined to provide an opportunity for these women to view themselves as potential participants in the emerging high literary culture. Chapter 2 examines the difficulties ambitious women writers encountered in combining the identities of woman and artist, which became a rich theme for their writings, paying special attention to their narratives of women's artistry and the ways in which these works contribute to the European women's *Künstlerroman* tradition. In Chapter 3 I examine how Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson constructed their identities as artists, confronting their culture's taboos against women's ambitions and beliefs about female genius; and in Chapter 4, I investigate their desires for serious recognition from the literary elite and their relationships with the men who controlled the high literary world. In the Conclusion, I turn to the question of their lasting reputations and the issue of how we can reconfigure the literary canon to recognize this long-submerged generation of pioneering female literary artists.