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Writing for Immortality

Anne E. Boyd

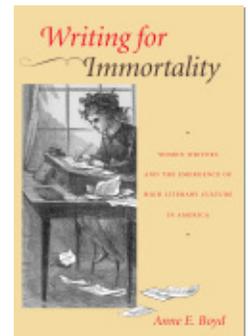
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“*Recognition* is the thing”

Seeking the Status of Artist

In her essay “A Literary Whim” (1871), Elizabeth Stoddard described herself as “a member of the literary race,” craving acclaim and appreciation from peers and critics. “*Recognition* is the thing; for praise I labor as well as money,” she wrote. “The crumbs which fall from my pampered critic’s table I swallow thankfully, even though I gain a dreadful indigestion thereby. It inflates my pride when I meet the distinguished of my class, and hear them say I am not unknown to them.” The serious attention and appreciation proffered by esteemed and powerful critics and writers was central to her understanding of herself as an author. As she explained in a private letter, she wanted the “respect of the intellectuals . . . — common praise I do not care a copper for — . . . I want that which gives me faith in myself.”¹

For Stoddard and her sister authors, the ultimate evidence of artistic achievement was receiving the respect of the literary elite. They measured success not only in terms of sales but also in terms of critical praise. Acceptance by the reading public (made up mostly of middle- and upper-class women who possessed the leisure to read fiction) was not enough. Like their artist heroines, they also wanted acceptance by the men who ruled and policed the emerging realm of

“high” literature. Rather than consider themselves part of a separate literary sphere for women, they befriended powerful literary men, enlisted their aid, and hoped that these associations would open the door to literary recognition. They understood that these men exerted a powerful influence over what Americans believed was serious, important literature worthy of being added to the cultural treasury.

In the eyes of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson, serious recognition did not necessarily preclude acceptance by the reading public and the financial security that accompanied it. Success still entailed the attainment of modest popularity among the reading public *and* the approbation of the critics. As Nina Baym argues, “the realms of high, low, and middle culture” were not “distinct . . . for most of the nineteenth century . . . [and a] writer, especially a novelist, might realistically hope for conjoint critical and popular success.”²² However, by the 1850s and 1860s, critics were beginning to establish themselves as authorities who would have the final say on what authors and books comprised “American literature.” Literary critics often revealed their confusion over the public’s preference for books like Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World* and began to announce their disdain for the literary tastes of the masses. Richard Stoddard displayed such antagonism when he wrote to his friend Edmund Clarence Stedman that he would look anxiously for Stedman’s review of his wife’s *Morgesons* (1862), “not on my own account, for I have no doubt of its merit, but for its influence on that eternal Donkey, the Public.”²³ In addition, high cultural magazines, such as the *Atlantic Monthly* (founded in 1857), were beginning to establish themselves with the express purpose of publishing literature of a higher rank than the popular novels of the day. Alcott, Stoddard, Phelps, and Woolson came of age as authors during the period in which “the *Atlantic* group” was solidifying the delineation between literature for “the ‘masses’” and literature for “the ‘classes.’”²⁴ They were greatly influenced by the authority of these magazines, and they witnessed the birth of a high American literature in their pages and longed to be a part of it.

But as they made their bid for inclusion in the emerging high literary culture, they encountered serious obstacles. One of the most significant problems was that the critics, almost all men, tended not to take women writers seriously. Critics increasingly came to understand themselves as a class threatened by the popularity of female authors. Their efforts to lay claim to literary authority, therefore, often took on a gendered cast. But Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson tried to prove themselves to be exceptions — woman authors capable of genius. However, their attempts to form friendships with powerful literary men,

to break into the pages of the nation's most esteemed literary magazines, and to gain critical favor from reviewers who tended to disdain women's literary efforts were met with limited encouragement, resistance, and even at times hostility. While Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson received enough encouragement early on from powerful literary men to raise their hopes and expectations and fuel their ambitions as artists, all of them eventually suffered disabling discouragement as they gradually discovered that the men controlling the emerging high literary culture could see them only as writers ineluctably marked by their gender and therefore as part of a separate class.

Making Friends with the Male Literary Elite

Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson each hoped to gain from their friendships with literary men varying degrees of advice, encouragement, help in getting published, favorable reviews, assistance with payments from publishers, camaraderie, and a less tangible quality—a sense of belonging to “the literary race.” They wanted above all to be taken seriously. One way to achieve this was to befriend some of the nation's foremost male literary figures, as many women writers of their generation did. The most famous example, of course, is Emily Dickinson's relationship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whose *Atlantic* essay “Letters to a Young Contributor” conveyed his willingness to help unknown women writers. His generous encouragement in his position as an editorial assistant at the magazine and as a key figure in the emerging high literary culture was extended to Alcott, Phelps, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Helen Hunt Jackson, and many others. Jackson called him “my mentor—my teacher—the one man to whom & to whose style, I chiefly owe what little I have done in literature.” It was also not uncommon for women writers to view their male mentors as father figures. John Greenleaf Whittier, who also used his ties to the *Atlantic* hierarchy to help young women writers get published and to give them the confidence they needed to pursue serious literary careers, was a fatherly mentor to Phelps, Sarah Orne Jewett, Lucy Larcom, and Celia Thaxter. Jewett, for instance, thought of herself as Whittier's “honorary daughter,”⁵ just as Emma Lazarus and Alcott thought of themselves as Emerson's. Likewise, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was an advocate of many talented women writers, including Phelps and Sherwood Bonner, and Stedman proved to be one of the literary men most generous in lending his aid to struggling women writers, providing inestimable encouragement and aid to Stoddard and Woolson, as well as Lazarus.

Most often, these literary friendships originated in the men's overtures, but on occasion they were initiated by the women themselves, who approached their idols in the hopes of finding a literary mentor or companion. Such was the case not only between Dickinson and Higginson but also between Bonner and Longfellow, Woolson and Henry James, and Lazarus and Emerson. It also was not unheard of for women writers to send their publications to the most esteemed male writers, just as Walt Whitman famously had done when he sent his *Leaves of Grass* to Emerson. Lazarus sent her first book of poems to Emerson, Stoddard sent *The Morgesons* to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Rebecca Harding Davis sent her first story, "Life in the Iron Mills," to Hawthorne as well.

Despite the tremendous encouragement that many struggling women writers received from established literary men, their relationships reveal that they were always on unequal footing. Many women writers stood in awe of the more experienced and more successful male authors and editors whose attention they courted. They often approached such men with servile gratitude for any notice they received and with self-deprecating comments about their own meager abilities. An example of this attitude of inferiority is visible in a letter that Alcott wrote to Higginson's wife: "Please give him my hearty thanks for the compliment; also for the many helpful & encouraging words which his busy & gifted pen finds time to write so kindly to the young beginners who sit on the lowest seats in the great school where he is one of the best & friendliest teachers." As Alcott's words indicate, the relationships between male and female writers were likely to be that of teacher and pupil. Dickinson, who frequently sought out male "Masters," "preceptors," and "tutors," wrote letters to Higginson, which also convey the self-abasement of the student:

Would you have the time to be the "friend" you should think I need? I have a little shape — it would not crowd your desk — nor make much racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries —

If I might bring you what I do — not so frequent to trouble you — and ask you if I told it clear — 'twould be control, to me — . . .

But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr. Higginson?⁶

Phelps's many relationships with powerful literary men particularly illuminate the support based on the implicit barriers to equality that marked most of these friendships. Early in her career, Phelps received letters of congratulations from Higginson and Whittier for her first story in the *Atlantic Monthly*, signaling a new beginning for her as a serious author. She went on to become a member of the

circle of *Atlantic* authors who congregated at James and Annie Fields's house on Charles Street in Boston, where she cultivated friendships with many of the preeminent writers she admired. Chief among them were Whittier, Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, all older men who essentially served as paternal substitutes. She carried on a long-term correspondence with each of these men that reveals her great admiration for them. Because they were older and already recognized as foremost among America's poets, it was inevitable that her relationships with them would be unequal. She often sent her work to them and solicited their advice, many times receiving well-meaning but nonetheless condescending responses. Longfellow, for example, told her that a poem she sent him was "simple and sweet," and Holmes wrote to her that her collection of stories (probably *Men, Women, and Ghosts*) was written from "your true woman's heart," describing "emotional complications" that only women could understand, suggesting his inability to appreciate her stories. Often he and Longfellow drew attention to her sex when addressing her or responding to her work, offering comments that pointed out the barrier between them. In her letters to them, as well, the inequality was palpable, as her following comment to Longfellow reveals: "It was more than kind in you [to write] — with your lame arm; which is almost as antagonistic to letter-writing as my lame brain."⁷

Phelps's relationship with Whittier, however, was more equitable. "Dr. Holmes and Mr. Longfellow have been very kind to me," she once wrote to him. "But no one is just like you." His appreciation of her work meant more to her than anyone else's, "except my father." His praise for one of her books "made me feel as if I hadn't lived or worked in vain." But Phelps at times also wrote to him in tones suggesting that he could never be a comrade or peer. When she asked him for his picture and sent hers to him, she wrote, "My picture will be of small interest to you, but yours will be an inspiration to me, like the measure of a Hebrew prophet. . . . that especial picture of you that I [request] looks as if 'you could not sin' — 'because you were born of God.' Forgive me for saying so much about it."⁸

Despite her humility and deference to Holmes, Longfellow, and Whittier, Phelps was not shy about telling the world she was friends with these luminaries. Chapter 8 of her autobiography focuses on her reminiscences about them. "Of our great pentarchy of poets, one — Lowell — I never met; and of another — Emerson — my personal knowledge, as I have said, was but of the slightest." But, she exulted in writing, "With the remaining three I had differing degrees of friendship; and to speak of them is still a privilege full of affectionate sadness."

She recalled a luncheon with Holmes and Whittier at which she was so awed she was unable to open her mouth. “[M]y speech seemed a piece of intrusion on the society of larger planets, or a higher race than ours,” she claimed, indicating the extent of the disparity she felt between their world and hers. Phelps also publicized her relationships with these men in magazine articles, perhaps at least partially out of a desire to gain recognition by connecting herself in the public’s mind with some of America’s leading authors, as Susan Coultrap-McQuin has argued.⁹

Interestingly, Phelps had no such reverence for her male contemporaries, as is evidenced by the critique of William Dean Howells’s theories of literature in her autobiography and the scathing attack on Henry James’s biography of Hawthorne that she wrote for the *Independent*. In this latter piece, she charged that “[t]o defend our great novelist against our little teller of tales were a Quixotic waste of knight-errantry. The critic’s imperfect appreciation of a nature and a work so foreign in h[e]ight, breadth, and depth to his own, is a small matter.”¹⁰ It is rare, indeed, to see a woman writer of this period venting such vituperation on a male writer. In her relationships with three of America’s already canonized poets and in her defense of Hawthorne, we can see Phelps’s reverence for the “select few” who had established America’s high literature. But as her generation came of age as authors, Phelps was ready to compete in the marketplace and in the critical realm with younger male writers. Howells and James were not established masters but peers with whom she felt emboldened to do battle.

In stark contrast to Phelps’s distinction between towering older masters and younger rivals, Woolson sought out and nourished relationships with the up-and-coming male writers of her day, particularly Stedman, Howells, and James. Her highest esteem was reserved for James, with whom she had a notoriously complicated relationship. While Woolson admired James as ardently as Phelps did Whittier, she also, at least initially, hoped for a literary friendship based on mutual respect and equality. Her deep reverence for him, however, did not preclude feelings of competitiveness. Her three stories that grew out of her relationship with James — “Street of the Hyacinth,” “At the Château of Corinne,” and “‘Miss Grief’ ” — offer the most striking literary exploration by any woman writer of this period of the obstacles women faced as they sought men’s acceptance as peers in the literary world.

Woolson and James met in late April 1880 and remained friends until her death in 1894. Unfortunately, from what may have been a voluminous correspondence, only four letters have survived, all written by Woolson. As a result,

efforts to understand the nature of their friendship have been largely speculative. For decades, the most popular depiction of the James-Woolson relationship came from James's foremost biographer, Leon Edel, who argued that Woolson harbored a deep desire for intimacy with James that was not reciprocated. Edel portrays Woolson as a "flirt" who "clung to [James] in a kind of pathetic dependency" and as someone who competed with him, possessing "a certain exalted notion of her own literary powers."¹¹ Recent feminist scholars have objected to Edel's portrayal of Woolson as a love-starved spinster pursuing the reluctant James all over Europe, insisting instead that she possessed a strong sense of herself as an author and sought out James for literary companionship and support, not love. "Miss Grief" (1880) offers a particularly rich fund of evidence to support the latter view. And if read in light of the time in which it was written, the story strongly suggests that Woolson had serious doubts about the ability of James, a writer whom she admired above all others, to provide the literary and personal support she craved at a pivotal point in her life as she moved to Europe, alone after her mother's death. In addition, the story reveals that even before they became friends she felt compelled to challenge his critically acclaimed constructions of women.

Having spent a decade perfecting the regional sketch and writing her first novel, in 1879 Woolson was ready to take on an international project, perhaps inspired by the European writing of Henry James. She had written two anonymous reviews of James's *Europeans* for the *Atlantic* in 1879, one of which declared: "There is a great satisfaction in seeing a thing well done, and both in the substance and in the style of his books, Mr. James always offers an intellectual treat to appreciative readers; of course it is obvious that he writes only for the cultivated minority." In her review, Woolson claims membership in this minority, granting herself the status of an authoritative reader of James.¹² Their subsequent personal relationship, mirroring those between many other male and female writers, was marked by her attempts to prove herself one of the "cultivated minority" for whom James was writing.

Less than a week after she arrived (with her sister and niece) in London, this relatively reclusive woman went to Henry James's door with a letter of introduction from his cousin. But James was in Paris, and he returned just as Woolson left for the Riviera in search of a warmer climate. They would not meet until five months later (late April 1880), in Florence. It is very possible that Woolson wrote "Miss Grief" during this interval between her first attempt to introduce herself to James and their eventual meeting, but she may have written it even before she

left for Europe. In either case, the characters and subject matter make clear that the story was written in anticipation of meeting the great writer.

Although the story must have been written before Woolson met James (it appeared in the May 1880 issue of *Lippincott's*, two or three weeks after they first met), there are unmistakable similarities between James and the male writer who is the narrator of the story. The unnamed male author has inherited money as James had and does not need to depend solely on income from his writings; he writes “delightful little studies of society,” as James did; and he claims, “I model myself a little on Balzac,” as James’s 1875 essay “Honoré de Balzac” indicated James did. Moreover, the male writer mentions two of his stories, “Old Gold” and “The Buried God,” which featured antiquities and artifacts, as did James’s “Last of the Valerii” (1874). And in the opening sentences of “‘Miss Grief’” the male narrator describes himself as a “literary success,” which James had recently become with the sensational publication of “Daisy Miller.” But these are all qualities that Woolson could have known from James’s works and reputation as well as from their mutual friends Howells and John Hay.¹³

The fact that the narrator is not based on the actual James she personally came to know becomes even clearer when this earlier Jamesian character is contrasted with those versions Woolson created afterward in “Street” and “Château.” In these later stories we are introduced to male figures who more closely resemble the kind of cool, detached, even arrogant personality James appears to have possessed. Raymond Noel and John Ford, who convince Ettie and Katherine that they have neither talent nor the right to pursue careers as artists, were modeled on the man with whom she had developed an intense relationship and who, she learned, had a more inflexible position on women writers than she had imagined. In contrast, the male writer featured in “‘Miss Grief,’” while reluctant to admit an “authoress” into his home, nonetheless admires her genius; he may be wary, but he never denies her talent or insists on the incompatibility of womanhood and art.

Although there are also similarities between the woman writer in the story and Woolson, there are also important differences. Chief among them is that Aaronna Moncrief, who goes by Miss Crief, is impoverished and unpublished and needs the narrator’s assistance in launching her career, whereas Woolson had become well known in America as a writer of short stories and poetry and had just finished writing her first novel, slated for publication by Harper and Brothers. Therefore, rather than being simply an autobiographical projection, this story allowed Woolson to experiment with themes that reflect her anxiety about

meeting James. More than anything else, Miss Crief represents Woolson's ideas about James's biases toward "authoresses."

In "Miss Grief," Woolson depicts the efforts of a forlorn female author to gain the help of a successful male writer in publishing her work. As in "Street" and "Château," his perspective is privileged, but here it dominates to an even greater extent, for he is the narrator, speaking directly to the reader without the intervention of a limited omniscient narrator as in the other two stories. However, Woolson still finds ways to undercut his authority. The title itself, "Miss Grief," is the name the male writer chooses for her. But the quotation marks Woolson places around the name call his perspective into question. This story is clearly his version of events, which may be distorted. The fact that the story is told through his eyes again distances the reader from the woman's experience and neutralizes her anger. As many critics have noted, this story in particular points a damning finger at the male literary world for its neglect of women writers. For Woolson to raise her voice and point that finger directly would have been too provocative, especially as she prepared to meet James, the current darling of the literary world. So, instead of directly telling her story of betrayal and exclusion, Miss Crief remains relatively silent. We experience her grief primarily through the male narrator, who at virtually every turn belittles and ridicules her in his own mind.

Initially, the male writer is put off by Miss Crief's tenacity in seeking an interview. But her ragged, impoverished appearance gains his pity. From the beginning, he believes she is "mad" (254) and insists on calling her "Miss Grief," using the name to suggest the grief she seems to cause him; however, the name most potently conveys the grief that she herself is experiencing, for her suffering pales in comparison to his. Contributing to her grief is his inability to recognize her as a peer. Instead of accepting her as a fellow writer, he constantly contrasts her with Isabel Abercrombie, the highly desirable, conventional woman he is courting. Whereas Isabel is young and attractive, Miss Crief is her exact opposite: "shabby, unattractive, and more than middle-aged" (251). When Miss Crief seeks entrance to the house, the narrator suspects she is some sort of saleswoman who wants to sell him antiques. But she slowly reveals that she has come for another purpose. "I am your friend," she insists. "I have read every word you have written." And she begins to demonstrate her admiration for him by reciting a passage from his work that happens to be the narrator's favorite. Here, like Woolson herself, she displays a deeper understanding and appreciation for his work than did the general public, who "had never noticed the higher purpose of this little

shaft, aimed not at the balconies and lighted windows of society, but straight up toward the distant stars." Indeed, he admits that she "understood me almost better than I had understood myself" (252). By showing a genuine appreciation for his work, she gains his attention, and he agrees to read some of her work, including a drama, "Armor," the title of which signifies her need to protect herself from the blows of the male-dominated literary world and, by extension, perhaps even his own response to her work. Fortunately, he admires the drama and agrees to help her.

When he delivers his judgment of her work as "full of original power," Miss Crief begins to cry, "her whole frame shaken by the strength of her emotion" (257). Hanging over the side of the chair, she seems to have nearly lost consciousness, and the narrator fortifies her with wine and biscuit. What truly revives her, however, is his continued praise. Like Mary Hathorne in Phelps's "Rejected Manuscript," Miss Crief has been, essentially, dying of critical neglect. With no one to appreciate her work, she has lost the will and the means to live. As she tells the narrator, "My life was at a low ebb: if your sentence had been against me, it would have been my end. . . . I should have destroyed myself" (258). His praise alone, however, proves to be insufficient to sustain her. She will receive no thousand-dollar check, as Mary does, another key to the woman writer's survival. For her works prove to be unpublishable. Despite "the divine spark of genius" that he believes her works possess (257), he sees "faults" that must be corrected to gain the acceptance of an editor or publisher (258). "To me originality and force are everything," he tells her, echoing Ettie Macks in "Street," "but the world at large will not overlook as I do your absolutely barbarous shortcomings on account of them" (259). The "world at large," namely the male literary elite, demands the kind of training and adherence to forms and rules that also prohibit Ettie from entering the art world.

However, Miss Crief refuses to acknowledge any faults in her work or allow the narrator to make any changes. Exasperated by her "obstinacy," he gives up and decides to pass her works on to some of his friends in publishing, convinced that, flaws notwithstanding, they possess "originality and force" (259). But the pieces are rejected. The writer, therefore, decides on his own to revise them, but he soon discovers he cannot "'improve' Miss Grief" (265). Shortly thereafter, he learns that she is dying of poverty and starvation. Her aunt, a powerless protector, expresses the anger that Miss Crief is herself incapable of voicing: "Your patronizing face shows that you have no good news," the aunt tells him, "and you shall not rack and stab her any more on *this* earth." He is confused and wonders of

whom she is speaking. “I say you, *you*, — you literary men!” she replies. “Vampires! you take her ideas and fatten on them, and leave her to starve” (265–266). After this speech, the male writer’s guilt compels him to tell Miss Crief that some of her work has been accepted for publication. Thus deluded, she makes the writer her literary executor and asks him to bury the rest of her unpublished work with her, which he does. Before she dies, she tells him, “Did you wonder why I came to you? It was the contrast. You were young — strong — rich — praised — loved — successful: all that I was not. I wanted to look at you — and imagine how it would feel. You had success — but I had the greater power” (268). As the story closes, he reflects on his own “good fortune,” for he has succeeded not only in his career but in his personal life by winning Isabel as his wife.

Why was the injustice done to women writers at the hands of the male literary world on Woolson’s mind as she anticipated meeting James for the first time? For one, she knew that James received favors and recognition that women writers rarely did. As she wrote to Paul Hamilton Hayne, “Mr Hurd, of Hurd & Houghton [the publishers of the *Atlantic*] . . . has let out that Howells [editor of the *Atlantic*] has ‘favorites.’ Chief among them at present, Henry James, Jr. I suspect there is a strong current of favoritism up there.” More telling is what she wrote many years later to James himself: “I don’t think you appreciated, over there, among the chimney pots, the laudation your books received in America as they came out one by one. (We little fish did! We little fish became worn to skeletons owing to the constant admonitions we received to regard the beauty, the grace, the incomparable perfection of all sorts and kinds of the proud salmon of the pond; we ended by hating that salmon.)”¹⁴ There is an unmistakable strain of envy in this passage, as there is in “‘Miss Grief.’” These comments and Miss Crief’s insistence that she possessed “the greater power” also suggest that the envy arose from the feeling that she was eclipsed by more established but not necessarily more talented male writers.

Edel’s argument that as Woolson began her friendship with James she “felt herself, on some strange deep level, to be competing” with him is on the mark, although Edel fails to understand the context for this competition. It is likely that Woolson detected the rivalry in James’s own writings before she ever met him. As Alfred Habegger points out in *Henry James and the “Woman Business,”* James was himself competing with women writers in general by adopting the themes of women’s fiction and in a sense “correct[ing]” and “answer[ing]” them. As Habegger puts it, “James’s own narratives have all along professed great authority on the subject of women.” In a letter to James in 1882, Woolson accused him of treading

on her literary territory. "How did you ever dare write a portrait of a lady," she remonstrated. "Fancy any woman's attempting a portrait of a gentleman! Wouldn't there be a storm of ridicule!"¹⁵ At this time her first novel, *Anne*, and James's novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, were being issued as books, both having been published serially in periodicals almost simultaneously from the late 1880 through 1881, and both dealing with the attempts of young women to find their place in the world.

But even when she wrote "'Miss Grief,'" Woolson seems to have felt that James's work was competing with, perhaps even exploiting, women's fiction, including her own, and achieving recognition at the expense of women authors. To her, the failure of women writers like herself to achieve James's stature was primarily due to the contemporary conventional attitudes toward women writers and not the quality or subjects of their work. For example, James had recently become wildly popular in both Britain and the United States as the author of "Daisy Miller." Edel reflects the prevailing nineteenth-century response to the story when he writes, "James had discovered nothing less than 'the American girl' — as a social phenomenon, a fact, a type."¹⁶ No doubt Woolson was aware that a generation of women writers before James, legitimate claimants to this achievement, never received the recognition that he now did. The aunt's accusation to the male narrator that he, as a male writer, is part of a class of "vampires" that "take her [Miss Crief's] ideas and fatten on them, and leave her to starve" (266) makes more sense when read in this context.

On the other hand, Woolson also indicated her deep appreciation for James's writings: "they voice for me — as nothing else ever has — my own feelings; those that are so deep — so a part of me, that I cannot express them, and do not try to. . . . they are my true country, my real home," she wrote to him in 1883.¹⁷ Her sentiment that James possessed a greater power than herself to voice her own emotions is reminiscent of the male narrator's view in "'Miss Grief'" that Miss Crief understood his work better than he himself did. Woolson felt such a deep affinity for James's writing that she seemed to have hoped for some reciprocity of understanding, a sort of meeting of the minds hinted at, indeed longed for, by Miss Crief. But Woolson's male narrator, while recognizing Miss Crief's "greater power," fails to comprehend the nature of her achievement, hoping instead to fix her work. The male writer's desire to "improve" Miss Crief indicates the real doubts Woolson had about James's ability to view her as an intellectual equal deserving of respect and admiration rather than paternalistic correction.

This lack of appreciation is revealed in the narrator's prejudices against women

writers and his constant comparison of Miss Grief to Isabel Abercrombie. From the beginning of the story, he tries to make Miss Grief conform to his preconceptions of her, fearing that she may possess a supernatural power to control him. But this irrational fear is undercut by his own observations of her. Shortly after she reveals that she is an author looking for his assistance, he begins to perceive her as a threat: “‘She is mad,’ I thought. *But she did not look so, and she had spoken quietly, even gently.* ‘Sit down,’ I said, moving away from her. I felt as if I had been magnetized; *but it was only the nearness of her eyes to mine, and their intensity*” (254; italics added). Just as he forms an opinion of her, he contradicts himself, suggesting that his impressions are based on prejudice rather than on facts. This passage reveals not only the narrator’s unwarranted fear of the power the mysterious woman might have over him but also his inability to overcome his preconceived notions of women. Shortly thereafter, when confronted by Isabel’s unpredictability, he is incapable of comprehending her as well, and he comes home confused about himself and her: “it was foggy without, and very foggy within. What Isabel really was, now that she had broken through my elaborately built theories, I was not able to decide” (255). Furthermore, he has already found a scapegoat as his excuse: when he sees Miss Grief’s name on her manuscript, “A. Grief,” he thinks, “A Grief . . . and so she is. I positively believe she has brought all this trouble upon me: she has the evil eye” (253). She too is part of his “elaborately built theories.” To his relief, though, his temporary uncertainty about Isabel’s true nature wanes, and he sees her again as the “sweet” (269), simple woman who knows her place.

The narrator of “‘Miss Grief’” here strongly resembles some of James’s early male characters, most notably Winterbourne in “Daisy Miller” and Rowland Mallet in *Roderick Hudson*. For these men, as Priscilla L. Walton says about *Roderick Hudson*, “women function as the Other, the ‘unknowable.’” All try, without much success, to understand enigmatic young American women. Just as Winterbourne in “Daisy Miller” is irritated when he learns that Daisy is spending much time with an Italian would-be suitor, so the male writer in “‘Miss Grief’” is upset when Isabel presumably flirts with “a certain young Englishman” (255). At issue are the “true” feelings of these women. The same is the case in *Roderick Hudson*, as Rowland attempts to deduce Christina’s intentions with respect to his friend Roderick. Are these women displaying their “real” selves, or are they, as Christina is accused of being, merely superb actresses? Are they displaying, as Rowland muses about Christina, “touching sincerity or unfathomable coquetry?” The answer to this question was of the utmost importance be-

cause it indicated on which side of the fault line between angel and prostitute — between “safe and unsafe,” as Rowland says — these women would come down.¹⁸ Understanding these mysterious women, therefore, was a way of classifying and containing them. Once they were understood, they could be controlled.

Drawing on Victorian conventions, James often had his heroes classify light and dark women: the former asexual and a potential wife, the latter sexual and not marriageable. The female sex, therefore, is divided into those who can be married and those who must be shunned.¹⁹ The narrator of “Miss Grief” clearly evaluates Aaronna in these terms and is confused by her: “A woman — yes, a lady — but shabby, unattractive, and more than middle-aged” (251). In other words, she is not marriageable, but she is respectable. The problem the narrator faces is how to understand this woman who nonetheless has “sacrificed her womanly claims” by persistently coming to see him (250). He confronts the same kind of problem that Noel will in the later “Street” in trying to understand the motives of the forward Ettie. As in that work, Woolson was aware that forward women forfeited men’s esteem. The task for the woman writer was to stake out a new territory, to be taken for neither prospective wife nor sexually free woman, rather as fellow author. Woolson critiques the angel/whore dichotomy by creating a heroine who fits in neither category despite the narrator’s attempts to classify her as a dangerous, “evil” woman. By portraying Aaronna with nothing to offer the man who is drawn to women for their ornamental function, Woolson declares that the woman writer does not desire the kind of attention beautiful young women receive. She tries to get the male writer to accept her as a *writer*, not as a *woman*. For if he views her as a woman, then any understanding between the two as writers is forever lost, as Noel’s insistence on viewing Ettie as a woman precludes any relationship between them as artists.

Even more indicative of the narrator’s unwillingness to accept women as writers is his clear preference for Isabel Abercrombie and the type of womanhood she assumes in his imagination. For instance, he is “glad” that Isabel neither likes nor understands Miss Crief’s poetry, because it points to the contrast between the two women. Miss Crief’s poetry is “unrestrained, large, vast, like the skies or the wind. Isabel was bounded on all sides, like a violet in a garden bed. And I liked her so” (265). Interestingly, his description of Miss Crief’s poems resembles the ambition he had harbored for his own sketch that Miss Crief admiringly recited to him on her first visit. Like the narrator, Miss Crief’s writing indicates that she too is reaching for “the distant stars” rather than the general public (252), a sign of their competition with each other. Such an ambition, he assumes, is not

desirable in a woman. Instead, he prefers the woman happy in the “bounded” world Isabel inhabits, the woman who neither competes with him nor challenges his perception of her, just as Oswald preferred Lucille to Corinne and John Ford preferred Sylvia to Katherine.

Most male authors, Woolson perceived, were probably not ready to accept someone like her as an equal, in terms of ambition and serious devotion to literature. She would have to tread carefully, then, as she approached James. Indeed, she did not, as she later wrote to him, “come in as a literary woman at all, but as a sort of—of admiring aunt,” despite being only three years older than he.²⁰ Having by then apparently given up on the possibility of a mutually supportive literary friendship with him, she limited herself to trying to be his ideal reader. But Woolson allowed Miss Grief to be what she did not dare herself: Miss Grief did not humble herself before the master, and she refused to let him correct or appropriate her art. In this way, then, she resembles Dickinson, who would not let Higginson alter her verse, no matter how much she admired his expertise. Ultimately, though, Miss Grief fails to interest the narrator in herself as a writer, displaying the deep ambivalence Woolson harbored about James’s ability to look past her gender and receive her as a literary companion and equal. For while the male writer senses Miss Grief’s “greater power,” he also perceives her presence in his life as a “grief,” and he is more than happy to bury her work with her when she dies, indicating how dangerous he thinks her writings are. Isabel’s inability to understand Miss Grief’s poetry is a great relief, and he hides the rest of her works from view, eager to extinguish the latent power that lurks within them.

In contrast to Edel’s depictions of Woolson’s amorous motives for seeking out a friendship with James, “‘Miss Grief’” suggests that Woolson hoped for (although she did not expect) his understanding of and respect for her literary work and perhaps even some recognition of her genius. In 1884, Woolson wrote to the writer John Hay of her eagerness to find a kindred literary spirit and how rare such an occurrence had been in her life: “I shd. be so glad to have some talks with you . . . I am terribly alone in my literary work. There seems to be no one for me to turn to. It is true that there are only two or three to whom I wd. turn!” That Henry James was by that time one of the few with whom she would have liked to form a literary friendship is certain, but the meaning of the sentence is clear: he was not what she had hoped he would be; there is “no one” with whom to share her literary life. Even more telling are her 1883 letters to James in which she admonishes him for his inability to respond directly to her questions and carry on a real conversation, even about his work. She does not bother to ask him to

respond to her work. Her August 30, 1882, letter to him remarks that in his brief replies to her very long letters there is “no allusion to anything I have said,” indicating that her involved, carefully crafted responses to *The Portrait of a Lady* in her previous letter have gone unnoticed by him and, therefore, that James refused to reply to her as an appreciative and discerning reader. He would not allow theirs to be a writers’ friendship based on the free exchange of opinions concerning their art, despite her clear desire to establish such a relationship.²¹

Woolson’s predictions in “‘Miss Grief’” of how James would view her as a woman writer were correct. His destruction of many of her personal effects and letters after her death is eerily anticipated by the male narrator’s burial of Miss Grief’s writings, indicating that Woolson was aware of how dangerous men perceived the woman writer’s words to be. Her extant letters to him and his essay “Miss Woolson,” in which he assesses her work as “essentially conservative,” indicate that she was correct in doubting his ability to accept her as a writer and a woman.²² In her depictions of Jamesian men in “Street” and “Château,” she wrestled with the problem of his potential power to extinguish her creative life. That she was able to overcome his judgment of women authors is a testament to her strong identity as a writer. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the lack of appreciation and understanding she received from him contributed not only to her own personal and vocational grief but also to her marginalization at a time when the canon of American literature was taking shape. In “‘Miss Grief’” she uncannily forecast her fate and those of her female contemporaries: misunderstanding by male writers and rejection by the cultural forces of posterity. In addition, “‘Miss Grief’” expresses the anxiety that many women writers of her generation felt about approaching and befriending their male cohorts as well as their disbelief in men’s ability to consider them equals in the literary world.

While Woolson seems largely to have accepted the terms James offered her in order to remain his friend, Stoddard was much more demanding of her male author friends; she was not afraid even to break off relationships with them when they refused to acknowledge her worth as a peer. It was primarily from the circle of her husband’s friends that she sought appreciation and help, believing that these men would be her passport to a significant literary reputation. As she later wrote, “I have been made the little that I am, by my association with literary men.” These associations introduced her to the ideal of the sanctity of the author’s profession, and she was inspired by their seriousness. This is probably why she dedicated her first novel to “My Three Friends, the three poets, Richard, Bayard, George” (her husband, Bayard Taylor, and George Boker). Her desire to

“prove to you males that I [am] your comrade” drove much of her early ambition.²³ She yearned for the fellowship of an experienced and successful author whom she could admire and from whom she could learn. But most of the male authors she met did not live up to her expectations.

At the beginning of Stoddard’s writing career, two of the chief obstacles to her success, she felt, were “the contemptuous silence of [my] husband [and] the incredulity of all [my] male acquaintances.” She had particularly rocky relationships with Boker and Taylor. She wanted their help in building up her reputation, and she asked them to write reviews for her, but she was not always happy with the results. And while they initially tried to support her budding “genius,” her lack of respect for them and their condescending criticisms of her work led to great conflicts. When Taylor criticized *The Morgesons* (in a private letter to her), and she wrote to him scathingly in return, he protested that he was “a friend who loves you, who appreciates your genius.” Nonetheless, he and Taylor resented her strong-willed, outspoken nature, and they made her gender an integral part of their attacks on her, calling her behind her back “the Pythoness” and “the Sybil,” and in one dispute with her and Richard assuming that “E.D.B.S is at the bottom of this witches [*sic*] cauldron, stirring up her old hell-broth.”²⁴

Taylor, especially, tried to put Stoddard in her place: “[I now see] the intensely *feminine* character of your mind,” he wrote her. “With all your power and daring — with an intimate knowledge of the nature of men which few women attain — you are *woman* to the smallest fibre of your brain.” In this attack, Taylor gave her the greatest insult he could muster. Knowing that she was desperately trying to distinguish herself as an exceptional woman writer, he told her that she would always be beneath him and all other men, that she could never escape her sex and hence her inferiority. By doing so, he denied her any individuality and any distinction as an author. As she later wrote to Stedman, “He said what Caliban might have said, had he been an American author, to Miranda, when he got mad with her, and had the male vanity of wishing to crush her. . . . All I ever did against him — was to decry his immense vanity — to say that he was not a great writer.” Years later she would confide to a friend that “[n]o person in this world has ever hurt and wounded us [her and her husband] individually as BT.”²⁵

The writer she most admired, Nathaniel Hawthorne, died shortly after the publication of her first novel. She had dared to send him a copy of *The Morgesons* and was delighted to receive an approving letter in return. He told her that he was “very glad to hear that you are writing another novel, and [I] do not doubt that something good and true will come of it.” This letter was the “one immortal

feather in my cap," she later wrote, the one sign of recognition that she had received from the powers on high. To prove her worth to her fellows who so neglected her, she included portions of the letter in her preface to *The Morgesons* when it was republished in 1901. However, Hawthorne had not lived long enough to be a sustaining influence on her career.²⁶

In the 1870s and after it was Stedman who proved to be Stoddard's greatest supporter. He was a poet, critic, and editor who was coming into his own during this decade. He went on to become a very influential force in the New York literary world. It was to him that Stoddard owed "it all," she believed, when her reputation was recuperated in the 1890s. Although Stedman participated in some of the sniping about Elizabeth behind her back, and although she was unhappy with an early review he wrote of *The Morgesons*, she grew to feel that he believed in her more than any of her other peers. She also respected him as an author more than the other men she met and had a strong "ambition to please" him in verse, which she did. He wrote in his diary, "Read Mrs. Stoddard's poems. Have seen nothing so good from an American woman." He also felt strongly about her novels, writing to James Russell Lowell that he thought *Two Men* "artistic and powerful" and full of "genius." Most importantly, though, he did not belittle her or condescend to her. He respected her ambition, and she informed him, "it is a true comfort to have you understand and appreciate me as *no other bas*." While Richard had given "up hope," Stedman's faith in her never waned, she believed.²⁷ In the late 1880s and the 1890s, when Stedman helped her to republish her novels, he proved to be the kind of friend and mentor Miss Crief had looked for. He wrote a laudatory introduction to the republication of *Two Men* in 1888, which helped bring it to the attention of reviewers. And when he published *An American Anthology, 1787-1900* (1900), he included eight of Stoddard's poems, representing her prominently among the important American poets.²⁸

Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson all felt that they needed the help of powerful men to advance their careers and reputations. But just as Alcott's *Diana and Persis* leaves the question open of whether Diana and her new supporter, Stafford, develop a romantic relationship, the issue of romance was always the subtext in friendships between single male and female writers. Woolson knew this in her relationship with James, and she tried to defuse the issue by assuring him that she felt herself to be a "sort of . . . admiring aunt" to him, and nothing more. This may also be why Phelps felt most comfortable approaching older men who would be surrogate fathers rather than potential husbands. As the only married woman, Stoddard probably was more successful at gaining the support

of one of her male peers because personal intimacy was less of an issue. Because he was a friend of her husband as well, Stedman could give her advice, praise her writing, and work on her behalf without the appearance of impropriety.

Gaining Entrance to the *Atlantic Monthly*

One of the main goals of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson in their friendships with literary men was not simply comradeship but, as in the case of Miss Crief, help gaining entrance to the literary world those men controlled. These women often asked for men's help or advice with publishers and editors, always conscious of the varying degrees of prestige associated with certain publishing houses and magazines. At the top of the ladder was the *Atlantic Monthly*. Gaining entrance to its pages was their dearest goal. As Ellery Sedgwick writes, the magazine was associated with "cultural accomplishment" for subscribers in remote areas cut off from the eastern centers of culture. For Howells as a young man in Ohio, "[r]eading the magazine and discussing it with friends led [him] to begin imagining a literary career."²⁹ The same was true for women writers, who even if they did live in the East, felt particularly removed from the centers of culture and privilege. Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were all far outside the Hub of Boston and the elite literary circles (Woolson perhaps to the greatest degree). But the *Atlantic* connected them to that world, and, like Howells, they felt they could be a part of it by publishing in its pages, which all four did early in their careers.

When they saw their stories in the *Atlantic* next to works by such illustrious authors as Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Holmes, Stowe, and Whittier, they felt that they had arrived as authors. Phelps wrote in her autobiography about her early career: "I shared the general awe of the magazine at that time prevailing in New England, and, having, possibly, more than my share of personal pride, did not very early venture to intrude my little risk upon that fearful lottery." When her first story was accepted by the *Atlantic* in 1868, her friends voiced for her the amazement she felt at being placed in the company of established writers she so admired: "What! Has she got into the '*Atlantic*'?" Her welcome reception at the magazine awakened new ambitions in her, as it did in Alcott, who wrote in her journal in 1858, as she was beginning to feel confidence as a writer, "I even think of trying the '*Atlantic*.' There's ambition for you! . . . If Mr. L. [James Russell Lowell, the editor] takes the one Father carried him, I shall think I can do something." Lowell did accept her story, giving her the encourage-

ment she needed to devote herself to literature, a service he also provided for Stoddard. When he gave Stoddard advice and finally published one of her first stories in 1860, he “saved me,” she later wrote. “[B]ut for him I should probably never have written prose again.” Voicing the feelings of many women writers of her generation, Woolson wrote to editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich, “I have always had an especial regard for the magazine, — in fact I have never outgrown the reverential respect with which I used to read it when I lived in Ohio. And those of my sketches which have come out in its pages since then, have always had the air to me of having been presented at court.” Valuing recognition from the literary elite over the larger payments made by other magazines, women writers time and again chose to publish in the *Atlantic*. Davis accepted less pay to appear in the *Atlantic* because, as she wrote to James T. Fields, “I am *in earnest* when I write and I find the audience I like in the Atlantic readers.” Jackson insisted, “I am always glad to have papers in the Atlantic at less rate of pay than I get elsewhere, because I consider having them read by the Atlantic audience part of the pay.” Like male writers, these women were “eager to ally their names with the great memories and presences on its roll of fame” and to be recognized by their peers, who were a significant part of the magazine’s audience.³⁰

The *Atlantic Monthly* offered a tremendous opportunity for women writers, giving them the impression that the realm of serious literature would not be off-limits to them, but from the beginning it also was clear that they would not be granted the same status as the men affiliated with the magazine. The Saturday Club, which started the magazine, was an exclusively male club (and remained so well into the twentieth century), as was its offshoot, the *Atlantic Club*. In fact, as Joan Hedrick writes, “Boston society was organized around a series of overlapping men’s clubs, and the *Atlantic* was grafted onto this structure.” Well after the magazine’s formation in 1857, the decisions that charted its course continued to be made at club dinners from which women were excluded. As early as 1859, one disastrous attempt was made to include women at one of the *Atlantic*’s dinners. Although four women (Stowe, Spofford, Rose Terry Cooke, and Julia Ward Howe, the most valued female contributors in the early years) were invited, only Stowe and Spofford attended. Stowe, concerned about “the character of the gathering,” requested that no wine be served. This created tension among the men, who felt that their genial gathering was being transformed by the presence of women. The men ended up drinking anyway. Spofford, who had only recently received attention after her first stories were published in the magazine, appears to have felt exceedingly awkward at the dinner. In letters to his mother,

Higginson mused paternalistically about his affiliation with “men and women of the ‘Atlantic Monthly’” who “will one day be regarded as demi-gods” and about his induction of “little Harriet Prescott [Spofford] into that high company.” He contemplated how Spofford must have felt as one of the two women in attendance: “Nothing would have tempted my little damsel into such a position, I knew; but now she was in for it.” She was even seated next to the formidable Oliver Wendell Holmes — “think of the ordeal for a humble maiden at her first dinner party!”³¹ Apparently, few of the other men in attendance shared Higginson’s delight in the company of women at these hallowed events, for women were never again invited to an *Atlantic* Club dinner.

When the *Atlantic* commemorated its twentieth year in 1877 and honored one of its chief male contributors, Whittier, it invited not a single woman (contributor or otherwise) to the celebration. Fifty-seven men attended, including the illustrious Boston Brahmins who had started the magazine and a younger generation of men who, it was hoped, would carry on their legacy—Howells, Twain, Stedman, and Higginson, among others. As the after-dinner speeches commenced, “the women who were staying in the hotel filled the entrances and were favored with seats even between the tables,” according to a newspaper account. Who these women were is not clear, but none had been formally invited. Within the next few days, angry responses from excluded women writers were published in eastern and western newspapers. In a letter that appeared in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, the writer contrasted the equality of women and men in “the republic of Letters,” where, she believed, “woman is a citizen,” with the scene at the *Atlantic* dinner, where the “brilliant women” who contributed to the *Atlantic* were “conspicuous only for their absence!” Most upsetting to this letter writer, however, was the complete lack of any mention of the magazine’s female contributors. She clearly recognized the fact that women’s exclusion from the event meant that women writers could just as easily be exiled from the “republic of Letters.” For, as Richard Lowry makes clear, the Whittier dinner was more than a chummy gathering of club men; it was a highly publicized step toward canonizing the principal (male) contributors to the *Atlantic*. In the words of the *New York Evening Post*, this very public neglect of women writers reminded many

that the Atlantic Monthly’s staff of writers is much more largely masculine than is that of any other magazine in the country. It is, in a certain sense, our masculine magazine, and has always been so. A bigoted bachelor insists that this is because the Atlantic Monthly confines itself more wholly than any other magazine does to

literature in the strict sense of the term, neglecting all the little prettinesses of household interests and all the gushing sentimentality which . . . women mistake for literature.

Although, as the *Post* writer notes, “there are women contributors named in its index whose fame is country wide,” the *Atlantic*, as the fountainhead of America’s “literature,” was seen by many to be essentially a man’s magazine.³²

Two years later, when Holmes was honored on his seventieth birthday, one hundred guests attended the event, and this time women were among them. “The presence of ladies was something to be accounted for,” Arthur Gilman noted in his reminiscences on the *Atlantic* dinners, “and Mr. Houghton said that they had always been wanted, but that the publishers had been ‘too bashful’ to invite them up to that time.” The failed attempt in 1859 to include women in *Atlantic* dinners suggests, however, that the primary motivation for excluding them was not bashfulness but the feeling that the events themselves would be restricted, diluted, even ruined by the presence of women. Gilman lamented the changed quality of the later dinners to which women were invited: “The enlargement of the borders was like adding water to a cup of tea. There was a suggestion of the old times, but the strength of comradeship had been weakened.”³³ In other words, the elite male club meetings, with their “intimacies,” alcoholic drinks, and prestigious exclusivity had been transformed into more formal gatherings in order to accommodate women, who could not be “comrades.” In 1882, Stowe became the first and only woman to receive the honor of an *Atlantic* party, this time a luncheon, to celebrate her seventieth birthday.

Despite these very public exclusions, women writers were quite visible in the pages of the magazine. More important, however, is the fact that their work was often viewed in a way that distinguished it from the serious literature the magazine supported. While the magazine’s editors were known for cultivating an impressive list of female contributors and encouraging some of them to write fiction of a more “serious” bent, the publication of many of their works was viewed as a lowering of standards by some readers as well as the editors themselves. Stowe, the magazine’s foremost female contributor, was never granted the kind of respect that the magazine’s highest-ranked male contributors were. While she is occasionally cited among the inner circle of those authors who “made” the magazine in its early years, and although she was the only woman author to receive the recognition of a birthday party, it is clear that she was not accepted as one of the magazine’s literary greats. Nor did she see herself that way.

In her biography of Stowe, Hedrick suggests that the *Atlantic's* hegemony had the power to make women writers invisible to themselves, convincing even the most highly respected and prominent American female author that she did not belong in the male canon the magazine would consecrate.³⁴

Lowell, editor of the *Atlantic* from 1857 to 1861, seems to have valued women's writing for its popularity with the reading public. He encouraged women such as Stoddard and Alcott and gave them the confidence they needed to take themselves seriously as authors.³⁵ Nonetheless, he and his assistant, Howard Ticknor, knew that the magazine depended on light stories of romance and domestic concerns, primarily contributed by women, to keep its subscription rates at an economically viable level, and Lowell received criticism from the Boston intellectual elite for publishing such stories. "The contemptuous Thoreau and the scholarly [Charles Eliot] Norton had their doubts about *Atlantic* fiction, especially that written by women," according to Ellery Sedgwick in his history of the magazine. "Norton warned Lowell that he heard the *Atlantic* roundly abused in some academic circles for publishing second-rate love stories." The male literary elite's opinions about such stories often influenced its perception of women writers as a whole. These men believed that the economically expedient decision to include women among the *Atlantic's* contributors and readership compromised the magazine's mission to provide a belletristic, intellectual forum that could be found nowhere else in America, except in the *North American Review*, which was struggling to stay afloat.³⁶

It was essentially these two groups—scholarly, elite men and the general (female) reader—that the *Atlantic* tried, in a delicate balancing act, to please over the years. The magazine's blatant attempts to attract female readers with work that it considered below its standards indicate that from the outset writing by and for women (most of it fiction) was viewed as a separate category from the magazine's primary content—the writings of the Fireside poets and essays by Boston scholars. And by publishing and perhaps even soliciting this kind of work from women, editors made it more difficult for women writers to be viewed as serious artists by the magazine's readers, reviewers, and editors, who were inclined to view such stories as typical of women's fiction in general. Alcott's and Stoddard's reception at the magazine was very much colored by Lowell's and Ticknor's perceptions about what type of women's fiction they wished to publish. Lowell was responsible for bringing both Stoddard and Alcott on board, but his encouragement did not lead to lasting relationships with the magazine for either writer.

Stoddard approached Lowell when the magazine was still in its infancy. Al-

though she had published one of her early poems in the *Atlantic*, in 1858 she was eager to establish herself as a fiction writer. Her husband sent to Lowell, who had published many of his own poems, one of her first stories, "My Own Story." When Lowell did not respond in a timely manner, Stoddard took over the correspondence, asking for his advice and telling him, "although I am an old woman I am a young writer," signaling her willingness to play pupil to his tutor. When Lowell responded with suggestions for making the story more "respectable," Stoddard, as she reported in her next letter, followed his advice in hopes of pleasing him with her revisions. When the story was published in May 1860, she thanked Lowell for his "setting up of my story, and for the name also." What pleased her most was, "My friends speak well of the story, and say they think I am 'promising.'" With Lowell's guidance, she had gained entrance into the hallowed halls of high literature, and people were taking notice of her as a serious author for the first time. She also hoped to fulfill her "promise" by cementing her relationship with the magazine. "I hope that when I come along side with my small stores you will have stourage [*sic*] for me," she told Lowell.³⁷

After the publication of her story, Stoddard continued to seek out Lowell's mentorship, although he clearly did not understand or fully appreciate her writing. At this time, though, she was less sure of herself and looked to him as an authority whose judgment must be sound. "Your warning strikes me seriously," she wrote to him, "am I indeed all wrong, and are you all right about 'going too near the edge' business? Must I create from whose, on what standard? . . . Do I disturb your artistic sense by my want of refinement?" She challenged his judgment that she "failed utterly" in a sketch she had published in the *Saturday Press*, but she could not help desiring to please him. "Your kindness and interest surprise me. You seem so much farther along in work than the men I know best — your experience and readiness give your works so firm a resistance, that I feel all you say very much." She also felt the inequity of their relationship, as disclosed in comments such as, "I hope I have not bored you." And she hoped that her next story "will not have the faults you have spoken of."³⁸ Undoubtedly, she wanted to send him this story for the *Atlantic*, but no other story of hers appeared in its pages.

In the spring of 1861, Lowell turned over the editorship to Fields. It is likely that Fields was not as indulgent toward Stoddard's frankness and that he was not receptive to her work. He hoped to keep the magazine genteel and respectable, two adjectives that, as perceived by the literary establishment at that time, did not characterize Stoddard's writing, which tended to be more romantic and passion-

ate. When *The Morgesons* was published the following year, she ardently desired to have it noticed in the *Atlantic*, but Fields would not print the review that E. P. Whipple had offered to write because, Stoddard later wrote, “I had slandered one of the most respectable families in Essex County,” a family related to both herself and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Although Hawthorne wrote to her personally of his admiration for her novel, it is possible that Fields, who, as his publisher, had made him famous, wanted to protect the author’s reputation. Stoddard had (perhaps unwittingly) trodden on the sacred preserve of the male literary elite by portraying the Forresters of Salem as degenerate drunkards. What Whipple thought and perhaps wrote of the novel has not survived. And the *Atlantic* did not review her other two novels when they were first published. Only when her reputation was resuscitated decades later did the magazine take notice of her. In 1889, when all three of her novels were republished, a review of *Temple House*, considered representative of her work, appeared. The reviewer found the novel descriptive of “only a single dimension” and “intense, provoking, startling, and nightmarish.” Despite some praise for certain “vigorous” passages, the critic found the book enigmatic and the author not “human” enough. Stoddard was very unsatisfied with this review and undoubtedly disappointed that her newfound recognition by other critics did not extend to the esteem of the *Atlantic*. But in 1901, when her novels were again republished, a more appreciative review appeared. The critic called her books “truly remarkable, though never widely read” and “strange and powerful.” But the review is mostly an attempt to explain the strain of New England anti-Puritanism in her novels. There is little actual criticism. Nonetheless, Stoddard wrote then-editor Bliss Perry, “It was a sort of aged triumph, that review in the *Atlantic*.”³⁹ This belated recognition, however, coming only one year before her death, did not reverse her earlier failure to be established as one of America’s foremost female authors.

When Alcott broke into the early *Atlantic* with Lowell’s help, she got the same kind of response from her friends and acquaintances as Stoddard had. “Hurrah!” she wrote in her journal in November 1859. “My story was accepted; and Lowell asked if it was not a translation from the German, it was so unlike most tales. I felt much set up.” Like Spofford, whose first *Atlantic* story was so original and unusual for a woman writer that the editors assumed it must be a translation, Alcott received the ultimate compliment of being deemed above ordinary women writers. It was as if, after “pegging away all these years,” she had finally arrived as an author. “People seem to think it is a great thing to get into the ‘Atlantic,’” she wrote, and she foresaw having “books and publishers and a fortune of my own” as

a result of her first “[s]uccess.” In the “Notes and Memoranda” in her journal, she marked her *Atlantic* stories with a plus sign, denoting their importance to her not simply for their remuneration but for their prestige. As her mother wrote in her own diary when “Love and Self-Love,” Alcott’s first story in the *Atlantic*, was published, “She has reason to be encouraged for the Censorship of the ‘Atlantic’ is of no mean order.”⁴⁰

The *Atlantic* published two of Alcott’s stories in 1860, although it also rejected an antislavery tale, “M.L.,” which she had submitted shortly after the acceptance of “Love and Self-Love,” a Gothic tale about a self-absorbed man who learns to love selflessly from his angelic young ward, who becomes his wife. Howard Ticknor, the assistant editor, wrote to Alcott that he was “disappointed” by “M.L.,” which was not “pleasant.” Furthermore, “the higher powers think that the majority of our hundred thousand readers wouldn’t fancy it, either.” He was referring to the antislavery stance of the piece. As Alcott wrote in her journal, she believed that the editors rejected the story because “the dear South must not be offended.” To her, this was a great disappointment. For a magazine that was founded on antislavery principles and that had published many essays criticizing the southern institution, this decision appeared to be hypocritical. Instead of stories that addressed such unpleasant themes, Ticknor tried to steer Alcott in a different, more appropriate direction, presumably because the fiction needed to be lighter than the essays. His advice resulted in her writing of “A Modern Cinderella,” as discussed in Chapter 3. After this, Alcott began to emphasize in her journal the money she received from the magazine and her ability to pay her bills rather than her high ambitions.⁴¹ Instead of being raised up to a new level in America’s literary landscape, Alcott found that the price for recognition she received for her *Atlantic* stories was being relegated to a proper sphere of domestic writing.

Significantly, her opinion of the *Atlantic* fell precipitously after the approbation she received for “A Modern Cinderella.” The next story she submitted, “Debby’s Début,” was accepted in December 1860. In April of the following year, she wrote to a friend, “being sure of my \$75 or 100 I fold my hands & wait, thinking meantime as you will do when you read it that it dont [*sic*] take much brains to satisfy the Atlantic critics. They like that flat sort of tale so I send it as I should a blood & thunder one if they ordered it for money is my end & aim just now.” Gone were the pride and ambition she had felt when her first story was accepted. After her initial enthusiasm for having an original story like “Love and Self-Love” accepted and mistaken for a German translation, and her disillusion-

ment when the *Atlantic* didn't accept "M.L.," she faced the fact that the magazine didn't want inventive and powerful stories from her after all. When the editors then lost her "Debby's Début," Alcott became even more discouraged, because, "I cant [*sic*] send another till [it] is well out of the way." In December, Ticknor wrote to Alcott that he had found the story but that he was "led to believe that the tale should have been returned to you long ago." Alcott had to remind him that he had already accepted it and paid her for it, upon which he agreed to "send the MS to the printer." It wasn't published until August 1863, almost three years later.⁴²

When Fields took over the editorship in 1861, he, as both publisher and editor, was eager to bolster the magazine's subscription rates. The way to do this, he believed, was by shortening the length of the heavy essays and by providing short, light pieces — such as stories and articles from popular women writers like Stowe and Gail Hamilton — which would counterbalance the magazine's more serious offerings. Under his editorship, fiction, much of it by women, briefly became a more prominent feature of the magazine. However, in the mid-1860s, the percentage of contributions of fiction by women dropped significantly from 90–100 percent of the total fiction featured in the first seven years of the magazine to only 30–40 percent. A growing number of men were moving into the area of fiction, and by the time Fields's editorship ended in 1871, men virtually dominated this department. Richard Brodhead claims that the *Atlantic* "underwent a palpable stiffening of its selection criteria" during this period, and Kenneth Lynn notes that the magazine "was in a state of transition in the mid-1860s." Lynn attributes the shift to the changing literary marketplace: "the New England literary wave had actually crested a decade before and was now beginning to break," and the *Atlantic* "had begun to feel the hot breath of the New York competition," primarily from *Harper's Weekly*.⁴³ In addition, two new competitors arrived on the scene: the *Galaxy*, which began publishing in 1866, and *Lippincott's*, which began in 1868.

This competition created an even more pressing need for Fields to differentiate the *Atlantic* from the new upstarts, and its stiffening of standards, most likely a reaction to a diversifying market, had a profound effect on the presence of female authors in the magazine's pages. It seems that, fearing the scales had tipped too far in the direction of the mass-market magazines, the *Atlantic* strengthened its elitist position in part by publishing less fiction by women. Thus, the magazine cultivated a niche for itself in the market based on its reputation as the home of the most respected American authors: Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes,

Hawthorne, and Whittier. Fields began the intense promotion of these authors, advertising their association with the magazine and marketing their portraits as special incentives to new subscribers. Whereas fiction in general had previously been relegated to an inferior position vis-à-vis serious prose, the *Atlantic* now began to distinguish between high and low fiction, favoring work by Henry James and John W. DeForest to the stories of romance and domestic concerns by women, work that had been popular in the late 1850s and early 1860s.⁴⁴ As literary tastes tended more toward realism, the kind of stories that many women were contributing were deemed less important. Stoddard's stories, which were intensely romantic in their depiction of passion and the female psyche, were not wanted. Whereas Lowell "object[ed] strongly to the realistic tone of our present literature," Stoddard informed Stedman, Fields would become a proponent of the new school. But even Davis's stories, which were early examples of realism, were turned down by Fields. Despite the success of "Life in the Iron Mills" and her novel *Margaret Howth*, Fields dropped her from the list of contributors in 1868 when she published her novel *Waiting for the Verdict* in the *Galaxy*.⁴⁵

In 1862, Fields had given Alcott the message that she was no longer welcome at the *Atlantic*, giving her the biggest blow of her career. Despite the fact that he and his wife, Annie, who was a distant cousin of Alcott's, had taken her into their home, Fields made it clear to Alcott that he did not think her worthy of induction into the exclusive club to which Lowell had admitted her. "Debby's Début" had been accepted while the *Atlantic* was still under Lowell's watch, and as soon as Fields took over, the story was no longer wanted. In January 1862, Fields gave her forty dollars to start a kindergarten and told her, according to Alcott, "Stick to your teaching; you can't write." Alcott accepted his bargain and perhaps his opinion as well, but she didn't last long as a teacher. "I went back to my writing," she wrote in her journal, "which pays much better. . . . Being wilful [*sic*], I said, 'I won't teach; and I can write, and I'll prove it.'" ⁴⁶ It is quite likely that Fields based his opinion of Alcott's worth on the two stories Lowell had encouraged her to write and that she herself felt were inferior. Had he read "M.L.," his opinion might have been different, for the story foreshadows some of her Civil War stories, which Fields would later praise.

During her stint as a teacher, Alcott stayed in Boston with the Fieldses and met many of the *Atlantic's* luminaries, including Stowe, Holmes, and Longfellow. This must have been a painful period for her. But she did get the opportunity to prove to Fields that he was wrong. In 1863 she had her big break with "Hospital Sketches," which was published in the *Commonwealth*. She received universal

praise for her depiction of her wartime experience as a nurse and managed to catch Fields's attention. As the sketches first began to appear, Fields accepted her poem "Thoreau's Flute," which commemorated the man she had grown up admiring. It was not she, however, who had approached Fields with the poem. Bronson Alcott had brought the verses to Sophia Hawthorne, who, Louisa wrote, "without telling me their destination sent them to sit in high places where they hardly belong." Annie Fields also helped Alcott edit the poem, and it was with this support that she was brought back into the fold. When the poem was published, it was "praised & glorified," and she was bestowed "the honor of being 'a new star' & 'a literary celebrity.'"⁴⁷

In August 1863, Alcott ventured to send a new story to Fields, this time a story about the war, "The Brothers." Fields's acceptance of the story appears to have been predicated on the newfound respect he had for her because of "Hospital Sketches." The story features a nurse reminiscent of the narrator of "Hospital Sketches," establishing a clear link between this tale and the sketches. But Alcott remained skeptical about the *Atlantic*. She wrote to James Redpath, who published "Hospital Sketches" in book form, that she planned to publish more stories in the *Atlantic* and she hoped to collect them in a volume, "when a good variety has stood the Atlantic test (which by the way I dont [*sic*] value two straws except as far as others are influenced)." No longer holding the illusion that the *Atlantic* was the ultimate measure of a writer's worth, she nonetheless knew that most people perceived it that way, and she still wanted to make a name for herself as an important author.⁴⁸

At this time, Fields proposed to Alcott that she go to Port Royal, North Carolina, "to teach contrabands" and that she write about her experiences for the *Atlantic*. Clearly, Fields wanted something along the lines of her "Hospital Sketches." According to Bronson Alcott, they were to be called "Plantation Sketches." Alcott desired greatly to go, but as a young, single woman, she was forbidden to by "Mr Philbrey," presumably the director of the enterprise.⁴⁹ In the meantime, Fields asked if she didn't have a book that he might be interested in publishing. She wrote in her journal, "Father spoke of 'Moods' & the great James desired to see it. So I fell to work & finished it off, thinking the world must be coming to an end & all my dreams getting fulfilled in a most amazing way. . . . There is a sudden hoist for a meek and lowly scribbler who was told to 'stick to her teaching,' & never had a literary friend to lend a helping hand!" It appeared as if she would finally become the successful and well-respected author she dreamed of becoming through her association with the *Atlantic* and the house

of Ticknor and Fields, the most respected publishing firm. But it was not to be. She discovered that “it would be a breach of contract to give [*Moods*] to Fields,” so she had to give it to Redpath. Subsequently, Fields rejected her new story, “On Picket Duty,” and a year later, in November 1864, Ticknor rejected “An Hour.” “As I thought it good,” she confided in her journal, “was pretty sure they would n’t [*sic*] take it.” (Alcott promptly sent it to the *Commonwealth*, where “it was considered *excellent*.”) She was also convinced that the *Atlantic* rejected both stories because they were about slavery.⁵⁰ But the former was a war story, and it appears that Fields’s interest in such timely fiction was now tempered by the need to provide a distraction for readers from news of the war.

Alcott never again published a story in the *Atlantic*. At the time Ticknor rejected “An Hour,” however, he also accepted a “fairy tale,” “Nelly’s Hospital,” for Ticknor and Fields’s children’s magazine, *Our Young Folks*. He also asked for more, which she gave him. Ticknor wanted to publish the new fairy tale as a book, but then he began to hedge, reminiscent of how he had treated “Debby’s Début.” He told Alcott the manuscript was lost, initiating a protracted negotiation between author and editor that was never resolved to Alcott’s satisfaction. Meanwhile, he also rejected a volume of verses. Two years later, in 1867, he paid Alcott for what had been the anticipated sales of the book and closed the matter. In 1869, Alcott wrote to Lucy Larcom, coeditor of *Our Young Folks*, hoping still to recover the manuscript. She indicated that Ticknor lost the manuscript twice (the second time after she had rewritten it) and the blocks as well. “I shall be very grateful for the kindness,” she wrote Larcom, “as my own researches only end in wrath & vexation of spirit.” With these words one could sum up Alcott’s relationship with the *Atlantic*.⁵¹

When Alcott’s first novel, *Moods*, appeared in 1864, the *Atlantic* did not review it, even though Fields had recently been so interested in her work. In the years that followed, her career went in the direction that Ticknor had suggested. Instead of becoming an author known for her realistic stories of slavery or women’s experiences of war, with the publication of *Little Women* in 1868 she became a children’s author. This was how the *Atlantic* would view her ever after. In 1870, it condescendingly reviewed her children’s book *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, opining that it possessed “some poor writing, and some bad grammar,” but “pleasing the little book remains . . . and nobody can be the worse for it.” In 1878, the “Contributors’ Club,” in a column on “the real secret of literary hits,” commented on “Miss Alcott’s books,” referring only to her children’s books but citing them as among the age’s most popular. Little did the *Atlantic* know that it had in the

previous year very favorably reviewed her adult novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, which was published anonymously. George P. Lathrop was convinced that it came from the pen of Julian Hawthorne, an assumption deemed a “compliment to his powers.” In stark contrast to the belittling tone the magazine took toward *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, it saw this novel as possessing “signal force” and “vigorous and clear” language.⁵² The Alcott who had been pigeonholed by the *Atlantic* as a children’s writer had continued to exercise her inventiveness and considerable creative abilities, albeit anonymously.

After her death, the *Atlantic* reviewed the volume of her letters and journals published by Ednah Cheney, concluding that “[h]ere was a strong, affectionate nature with powers half understood, restlessly beating against the cage, . . . the power was used recklessly, and yet it was a power.” Especially noteworthy is the reviewer’s conclusion: “One cannot escape the conviction that great possibilities were lost in Miss Alcott’s career.”⁵³ This writer apparently knew nothing of the disappointments and rejections she had suffered at the hands of Ticknor and Fields that shut off the very “possibilities” that might have given her a very different legacy. The *Atlantic* certainly had the power and opportunities to make a name for Alcott as one of its foremost contributors. Instead, it pushed her in the direction of children’s literature, for which it afforded her little respect.

Phelps was much more warmly received by Fields than Alcott was, leading to a lifelong relationship with the *Atlantic* and its publishers, even though her reputation with the magazine’s editors declined steadily over the years. Her status rested primarily on her popularity with the reading public rather than on the magazine’s critical approval. On Annie Fields’s advice, James Fields published Phelps’s first novel, *The Gates Ajar* (1868). Owing to its success, Phelps became one of the publishing house’s most prominent authors. Throughout her career, the same firms that published the *Atlantic* published all of her books. But it was her contributions to the magazine that had critical currency. Although *The Gates Ajar* had made her a household name, it was “The Tenth of January” (1868), one of her first stories in the *Atlantic*, that “distinctly marked for me the first recognition I received from literary people,” she wrote in her autobiography. Higginson and Whittier sent her letters of praise, giving her faith in herself. “Both these distinguished men,” she explained, “said the pleasant thing which goes so far towards keeping the courage of young writers above the sinking point, and which, to a self-distrustful nature, may be little less than a life-preserver.” It is to these two men that Phelps credited her courage to strive for artistry and serious recog-

dition, just as Stoddard had claimed that Lowell's acceptance had "saved" her. Phelps also recalled "the pleasant, the hopeful, the appreciative words with which [Fields] stimulated my courage and my work." James and Annie Fields made Phelps feel welcome at the *Atlantic* and in their home when she was still "a frightened young author." She read her works in progress to them, including *The Story of Avis*, and respected their judgment. She viewed James as the ideal man and editor, believing that "[h]is fastidious and cultivated literary taste was sensitive to the position of women in letters. He was incapable of that literary snobishness which undervalues a woman's work because it is a woman's."⁵⁴

Unfortunately, Phelps's relationship with Fields's successors was not as unproblematic. As Susan Coultrap-McQuin has shown, the number of pieces she published in the *Atlantic* declined over the years. And Phelps herself was increasingly aware of the magazine's less than enthusiastic response to her work in the 1880s and after. The publisher Henry Houghton, for one, did not meet the standard of the "gentleman publisher" that Fields had set, and she seems to have felt that he didn't value women's writing as highly as Fields did. "I feel more than sorry to see the 'women' left out of your 'Men of Letters' series," she wrote to him. "Surely, as Mr. Fields said, it is too late for that." She also had differences with Howells. In 1871, his first year as editor, when he rejected one of her stories, Phelps complained to then-publisher James R. Osgood, "Mr. Fields never returned me a story—since I was a school-girl." She recognized that she differed widely "from his [Howells's] views of the province of art in fiction" because he "never does nor ever will like, an 'unpleasant' story," and she asked that Mary Livermore review *The Silent Partner* instead of Howells because he "would never feel interested in 'my style.'"⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter, Phelps insisted to Osgood that "I must go where I am most wanted, and best paid," signaling that she did not feel valued by the *Atlantic*. In 1874, she told Howells that if he wished to receive stories from her, he would have to wait in line behind four other magazines that she considered "more faithful and generous friends." Her relationship with Howells was always rocky. She bristled under his criticism of her poetry and raised objections when he wished to cut an installment of her novel *Friends: A Duet* to accommodate Henry James. "It is the most important climax in the book," she insisted. "The very fact that there is so much of Mr. James makes it more important to me that my story should have its fair artistic effect." Just as Woolson suspected, Howells was privileging James's work over that of lesser-valued women writers. In 1876, when Osgood was very slow in responding to

Phelps's letters about two books she was publishing with his firm, she wrote to him of her "sense of neglect and general injury," summing up her relationship with the *Atlantic* during this decade.⁵⁶

In the 1880s and 1890s, Phelps became increasingly aware that her work was even less welcome at the *Atlantic* than it had been under Howells's editorship, which ended in 1881. To Aldrich she wrote, "I shall not overburden your pages with either my 'gloom' or my theology," apparently quoting his criticisms of her work. And she also knew that Horace Scudder, one of the magazine's most prominent reviewers and editorial assistants, did not like her work. In fact, she refused to send him her submissions, routing them through Houghton, who continued to desire to publish her books, undoubtedly because of her high sales. It was a shrewd business decision on her part to exploit her relationship with the publisher in order to gain further exposure in the *Atlantic*. Coultrap-McQuin suspects, for instance, that Houghton made Scudder publish her novel *A Singular Life*, about a Christian reformer, in the *Atlantic* despite the latter's dislike for it, in order "to promote book sales."⁵⁷

In addition to much behind-the-scenes ill will, Phelps's reputation also declined very visibly over the years in the *Atlantic*'s pages. The first review in the *Atlantic* of any of her novels bestowed the highest praise she would receive from the magazine's critics. *Hedged In* (1870) was hailed as "a work of art." There is nothing but admiration in this review, which declares that "in power [the novel] exceeds anything else which the author has written." More specifically, Phelps is praised for her "hopeful look at the worst side of things." The reviewer finds no fault with the Christian theology of the novel, respects her earnestness, and insists that "there is nothing acrid in her moral judgments." In fact, she is seen as rising above the "effeminate culture which sickens at the world as it is" and demonstrating a "faith in its destiny" that is refreshing. But when the next review of her work appeared in 1875, Howells declared of *Poetic Studies*, "we blame the poet's unwilling — it seems unwilling rather than inadequate — art, because in the inferior pieces here collected we have so often the darkness without the fascination." He then goes on to associate the work's weakness with the author's gender: "the effect is oddly marred at times by the author's inability to let well alone — by a certain feminine desire to get yet one sigh or one gasp more out of expression."⁵⁸ Howells shows his distaste for her work by aligning her with feminine sentimentalism.

The *Atlantic* reviewer Harriet Preston took an even more decided stance against *The Story of Avis*, viewing it as representative of all that was deemed to be inferior or even dangerous in women's writing. Preston took issue with the novel

on the basis of “what we believe to be a wholly erroneous theory of womanhood . . . that marriage is not a woman’s best and highest destiny.” The review contains an extended discussion of the merits of marriage, even declaring that only married women have “achieved the highest order of distinction.” But Preston’s strongest objections to the novel are to its “frantic” and “overwrought” emotions and its overt moralizing, especially by a “Boston woman” (and, the implication is, an unmarried one). Preston concludes, “One is sometimes tempted to wish that she had never written prose at all, but only poetry. . . . Surely she might then have been better than an exceedingly popular writer, not only to-day but tomorrow. Possibly she never would have swerved from her highest line if she had not become the prey of a stringent set of ‘reformatory’ ideas.” Phelps’s attempt to engage issues concerning the status of women lowered her in the eyes of the *Atlantic’s* critics, despite the earlier praise for *Hedged In*, a novel decidedly driven by “reformatory ideas.” Preton’s review provoked a lively discussion in the *Atlantic* “Contributors’ Club,” one protracted enough to elicit the following quip in the March 1879 Club, almost a year after the review’s first appearance: “There was getting to be an apprehension — I might say almost an anxiety — in the public mind . . . lest there was to be no more about Avis in the Contributors’ Club; this was happily relieved by the February number.” Contributors had been remarking on various aspects of the book and the review, many defending Phelps against attacks by Preston and other critics. “I read Avis, and gave thanks,” wrote one. “Its feverish intensity and occasionally vicious rhetoric did not escape me, but the brave, clear intent of the book was so all-engrossing to me . . . that I was utterly bewildered by the hue and cry of the critics.” Another insisted that the unknown reviewer was wrong about matrimony’s being a precondition for women to create great art, and that *The Story of Avis* did not deserve the “brittle statements” that “newspaper men” echoed in the belief that they were serving “the public good.”⁵⁹ Despite her defenders, though, those in power at the *Atlantic* continued to classify her as a “feminine,” “overwrought” writer unworthy of a serious reputation. In fact, serious treatment of her publications dwindled over the years so that when Horace Scudder wrote about her novel *Beyond the Gates* (1883) in an article on depictions of heaven, only a plot summary was provided.⁶⁰ It is likely that the *Atlantic’s* reviewers were told to tone down their criticism of an author whom the magazine’s publisher valued very much. Therefore, she remained one of their most visible contributors, but she was on very uncertain footing with those who had power to grant her inclusion among the literary elite.

Woolson’s relationship with the *Atlantic* was more encouraging but also more

limited, owing to Woolson's stronger relationship with Harper and Brothers, her main publisher. During Howells's editorship in the 1870s, the *Atlantic* had begun to gather a promising new crop of contributors, and Woolson was among them. In the early years of his tenure, Howells was most concerned with maintaining the magazine's reputation and pleasing his Brahmin mentors by continuing to publish and favorably review the Boston literary lions who had made the magazine. But he was also keenly interested in promoting realism and the new writers who were producing it. Many of these were women, and in the 1870s the percentage of stories by women increased to about 70 percent.⁶¹ But Howells was incorrect when he surmised that "there were more women than men" among the new contributors he brought to the *Atlantic*. (His list of the best young writers he introduced to the magazine's readers — fifty-nine in all — included only nineteen women.)⁶² Nevertheless, Howells supported many of the women local colorists.

Woolson found her regionalist stories appreciated by Howells, and in the fall of 1874 she wrote to him, "It has given me great pleasure to enter within the 'Atlantic' circle." In 1877, Howells brought her farther into the inner circle by including her in his new "Contributors' Club." Late that year she sent him a piece "for the 'Club'" and told him, "I am much pleased to be put into the Atlantic announcements for 1878."⁶³ She was developing a professional relationship with Howells that began with an acquaintanceship in St. Augustine, Florida, a favorite vacation spot.

Initially, at least, Woolson might have felt that she was included among Howells's favorites. While writers like her friend Paul Hamilton Hayne were trying to get Howells's notice, she was accomplishing that. Howells's review of her first book, the collection of stories titled *Castle Nowhere* (1875), was cautiously encouraging. He found three of the stories (those that had been published in the *Atlantic*) to be a "triumph" and a "success," although he criticized the romanticism of the title story. Thomas Sargeant Perry reviewed her next book, *Rodman the Keeper* (1880), and found many of her characters to "read like what one finds oftener in poor novels than in real life," although he believed that she could "do good work if she will keep 'closer to the record.'" But when her novel *Anne* (1882) appeared, the review was one of the most laudatory that had appeared in the *Atlantic*'s pages. The reviewer, Horace Scudder, was optimistic about her future success and compared her favorably to James and Howells. Her abilities, he wrote, hint "at a power which may possibly give her singular success." Significantly, however, he began his reflections on her work by invoking the memory of two of the *Atlantic*'s most prestigious legacies. "We shall remember when Long-

fellow and Emerson died and were buried,” he writes, “can it be possible that we were then reading the works of men and women who now have an enduring fame, and did not recognize how surely they were in the succession of literature?” Scudder’s remarkable suggestion is that he foresees such an eminent place in the succession for Woolson, a place, if not directly next to Emerson and Longfellow, then at least in the canon of America’s high literature. The assumption is that their successors would be women as well as men and that Woolson was foremost among the women writers of her day and most likely to attain such an eminent position. However, Scudder goes on to cite evidence of the “immaturity of the book” and asserts that *Anne* will be remembered “chiefly as a marking stage in the author’s development.” Despite the author’s promise, he implies, she has not yet arrived, and she must carefully heed his advice if she desires to do so.⁶⁴

By the time this review appeared, Woolson had already published her last piece in the *Atlantic*. Although the editor, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, asked her to contribute a serial work, a sign of great respect for her, she declined, claiming previous obligations. “It gratified me much to be asked,” she told him, because of her “especial regard for the magazine,”⁶⁵ but she had allied herself with her publishers, the Harpers. All of her novels after 1883 appeared first in the pages of their magazine and then in book form under their firm’s name. As a highly respected firm with a first-rate magazine, the Harpers offered Woolson a certain level of prestige that could compete with that offered by the more austere *Atlantic* and could pay her a great deal more, which was a significant consideration for Woolson and most women writers of her day.

However, the *Atlantic* continued to review her work, expressing great disappointment with how she developed as an author. When Woolson’s second novel, *For the Major* (1883), was published, Scudder reverted to a paternalistic stance, foregrounding her gender and its influences on her novel. Acknowledging that “[w]e took up Miss Woolson’s little book with special interest, from a desire to know what effect Anne had upon her,” he was disappointed in his earlier predictions for her, and he now treated Woolson with considerably less regard. He especially criticized the “artificial” “construction” of the story, concluding, “We noticed in Anne something of the same tendency . . . and we hope that it will not increase in her work.” In his review of her third novel, *East Angels* (1886), Scudder was once again put off by the “excess of invention,” claiming that the major characters are not “true” and that she “presses too hard” the technique of contrast. Gone are the comparisons with Howells and James. Scudder claimed that the novel is “immensely clever in its separate passages” but disappointing “as

a whole.” Again he closed with advice, this time that she use her “power” in a “swiftly accomplished tale” with “quickness of movement” rather than in a novel concerned with “subtlety of motive.”⁶⁶ He obviously did not appreciate her attempts to rise above current popular tales into the realm of psychological realism. It seems likely that she was not meeting his expectations of a woman writer.

In the case of all four writers, but particularly Phelps and Woolson, initial successes with the *Atlantic’s* editors and critics did not lead to lasting reputations. Their associations with the magazine are indicative of its general treatment of women writers. While Lowell, Fields, and Howells each can be credited with welcoming young women writers to the magazine, they and the reviewers made it clear that female authors would not achieve the stature of male luminaries. The overall tendency of the magazine in the 1880s was to exclude women as it canonized its great male authors, a trend visible in the critical treatment of post-bellum women writers in the literary world generally.

In the Hands of the Critics

The ambitions of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson are most visible in their desires to gain the attention of the nation’s growing cadre of critics — most of whom were men — rather than only the reading public. As Woolson explained, she envisioned a clear hierarchy in the reading world: “‘the Mass,’” which she called “ordinary readers,” existed “below the region of the critics and the few really cultivated people we have in this new country of ours.” Like Stoddard, she did “not care a copper” for “common praise.” Instead, she rested her hopes on receiving the approbation of the critics, who, she wrote to Howells in 1875, “seem to hold my life in their hands,” suggesting the extent to which she may have identified with her creation Miss Crief. Woolson and many of her contemporaries — such as Stoddard, who believed that Lowell had “saved” her; Phelps, who claimed that Higginson’s and Whittier’s praise was a “life-preserver”; and Dickinson, who wrote to Higginson, “you saved my Life”⁶⁷ — felt as if the male literary elite could make or break not only their careers but also their very lives. These quotes indicate the extent to which, for this generation of serious women writers, authorial and personal identities could not be disentangled. They thought of the nation’s critics as omnipotent, and they felt particularly at their mercy. However, there was little they could do to disabuse most critics of the assumption that women writers were not worthy of serious recognition, a factor contributing significantly to their personal and professional grief.

Although Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson did not expect to completely elude the gender bias of male reviewers, they did hope to be treated fairly and to be considered worthy contributors to America's high literature. However, they had to contend with the general critical attitude, which was dismissive of female writers, as is conveyed in an 1853 article in the *United States Review*: "Where is American genius? Where are the original, the brilliant, the noble works, in whose publication we might take a lasting and national pride . . . ? Where are the men to write them? . . . American authors, be men and heroes! . . . Do not leave [American] literature in the hands of a few industrious females."⁶⁸ When Stoddard called for an American Brontë or Sand "to offer to our enemies, the critics," she registered her disdain for the attitude expressed by this reviewer.⁶⁹ Stoddard was calling for the model of female genius to prove that women were capable of contributing to the national high literature for which such critics were clamoring. As the critic's statement reveals, though, he will not be looking to women, but exclusively to men, for evidence of "American genius." In fact, he will not take women's writings seriously at all.

Another critic for the *North American Review* explained in 1851 how the critics generally dealt with women writers: "It is the custom to praise lady authors. . . . [T]o throw a damper upon harmless vanity, by pointing out an exuberance to be restrained, or a more vigorous tone of thought to be wrought for, is hardly worth the while. And thus the enterprises of full-fledged ambition among the scribbling fair, are dealt with by good-natured critics." Stoddard was well aware of this practice, as she wrote in 1854: "No criticism assails [women writers]. Men are polite to the woman, and contemptuous to the intellect. They do not allow woman to enter their intellectual arena to do battle with them." Eighteen years later, after her own bouts with the critics, Stoddard continued her attack on men who "sneer" at the efforts of women artists. In her article on the artist Rosa Bonheur, she declared that "there is certainly much in such a story as hers to . . . rebuke the supercilious critic, who stands ready to sneer at every woman who aspires to make use of the talents with which God intended her to adorn the walks of literature or art."⁷⁰ Woolson also took on male critics who belittled women writers in an anonymous review of Alice Perry's *Esther Pennefather* in the *Atlantic's* "Contributors' Club." Although the novel, she admitted, was "the most utterly ridiculous book of the season," she thought it showed "originality" and "promise." She continued, "I have observed that the critics who have noticed it all have politely advanced the supposition that the author was very young, and then, hiding their smiles behind their tall hats, have hastily retired." Undoubtedly, Woolson sympathized with the

young author who had suffered the “laughter” of male critics and wanted to give her some reassurance, taking her seriously in a way that they would not.⁷¹

Unfortunately, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were themselves unable to escape such ridicule. For instance, *The Literary World's* review of Woolson's *Jupiter Lights* concluded, “Paul Tennant is one of those curious ‘women’s-men’ at whom the masculine critic can only smile. We should have thought Miss Woolson superior to such crudity of portraiture, and to the melodrama of the last chapter — as absurd in its way.” Likewise, *The Critic* wrote about Woolson's *Anne* that when the novel concluded with “melodramatic clap-trap of the cheapest variety . . . the artistic mistake is so colossal, so incongruous, so incredible, that we are not merely disappointed; we laugh.”⁷² These are only the most blatant examples of how male critics put these women authors in their place. But critics also found other, more subtle ways to tell them that their faults were due to their gender. In his review of Alcott's *Moods*, James claimed, “The two most striking facts with regard to ‘Moods’ are the author's ignorance of human nature, and her self-confidence in spite of this ignorance. Miss Alcott doubtless knows men and women well enough to deal successfully with their every-day virtues and temptations, but not well enough to handle great dramatic passions.” Her “ignorance of human nature,” he implies, is due to the fact that she is single and hence could know little about men. In fact, one of his greatest critiques is reserved for the hero, Adam Warwick, who, he suggests, is not realistic but is a product of a schoolgirl's romantic imagination. “Miss Alcott has probably mused upon Warwick so long and so lovingly that she has lost all sense of his proportions,” he writes, and he likens Warwick to the “impossible heroes” of “lady novelists” generally.⁷³ Phelps received similar criticism for *The Story of Avis* from the *New York Times*. The reviewer declared that although “Miss Phelps does understand something about women before marriage,” her male characters were “unnatural” and “her notions of the married state” were “singular.” The result was that her novel should not be regarded as “a literary work.”⁷⁴ Women authors, these men insinuated, were limited in their ability to create works of art because they could not move beyond their circumscribed experiences. Therefore, single women were unable to truthfully depict marriage and women generally were unfit to depict men. The *Nation's* reviewer said as much about Stoddard's *Temple House*:

The chief figure in “Temple House” is Argus Gates, a man of the sort which female novelists, considered as intellectual beings, have been for a long time asking us to admire. Next is Sebastian Ford, a man of the sort which female novelists, considered

as creatures of sentiment and poetic passion, depict as all but irresistible. Then we have John Carfield, who addresses himself to the animal side of female novelists.

All of these men are types that “female novelists” have invented and that the reviewer finds predictable.⁷⁵ The *Nation* similarly judged Woolson’s fiction as marred by its femininity: “she solved the emotional problems of life in the clear-eyed, American-maiden way—a way that is often more entertaining than convincing to the rest of the world.” Phelps’s short story collection *Men, Women, and Ghosts* was also criticized in a manner that was meant to point out the limitations of women writers. Although the “nervous energy” the stories displayed was the cause of her popularity, “The critic, however, will be apt to observe, that while this nervous power exceeds the ordinary feminine limit, it is still limited by feminine weakness, and can never be mistaken for continuous masculine strength,” the latter of which is no doubt preferable.⁷⁶ The *Nation*’s reviewer offered similar opinions about Phelps’s *Hedged In*, classing her as one of “our American authoresses,” most of whom display “an uncontrolled tendency to dwell upon what is morbid and painful in life.” The review of *The Story of Avis* in the *New York Times* summed up the general response to her work: “There are persons to whom *The Gates Ajar* [her first and most popular novel] is a standard to which they refer books they admire intensely, and there are others who use the same volume as a measure of their contempt for trashy, overstrained ‘feminine’ literature. The same thing is likely to befall this latest novel by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.”⁷⁷ The reviewer implies that the first group of readers were of the popular sort, and the latter were no doubt of the masculine and critical sort. In each case, the reviewer established his (most likely) authority by stressing the femininity and hence the inferiority of Phelps’s works.

Even when reviewers did not view the female gender of these authors as a liability, they often grouped them with other women writers, suggesting that they belonged to a literary class based on gender. For example, the reviewer for the *New York Times* saw Woolson as “the most promising of our women novelists.” The *Literary World* considered her “one of the most vigorous woman writers of this country” and declared, “If *Anne* placed the author in the highest rank among women writers of today, *For the Major* gives further proof of her right to be there.” But the *Critic* offered perhaps the most interesting opinion about Woolson’s place in American letters:

If Miss Woolson has stood easily at the head of American women novelists, it is less because she has given us the best, than because she has given us little but the best. In

Miss Phelps we have to forgive some superfluous sentiment; in Rebecca Harding Davis, an extreme degree of the uncanny element; in Mrs. Burnett, the impossible refinement of her "lower class" characters; in Harriet Prescott Spofford, a Disraelish tendency to mother-of-pearl bedsteads and diamond-studded thimbles. Miss Woolson makes no demands of this sort upon our clemency.

As this review makes clear, women writers were usually judged in the company of other American women writers. While Woolson's work warranted comparison to James's as much as, if not more than, to George Eliot's (and certainly more than to Phelps's and Davis's), such a comparison was rarely made. Even James himself, who wrote an essay on her for *Harper's Weekly*, considered her chiefly as a *female* author, viewing her as a "striking illustration" of his principle that women's private lives lend themselves particularly well to the pursuit of literature.⁷⁸ In a similar vein, Howells considered Stoddard's *Two Men* to be "one of the most original books written by an American woman." The "peculiar charm" of Alcott's *Work* was due in part to "the summer cheerfulness infused through all of its pages by the glow of a woman's bright, trusting, and loving heart." Her *Hospital Sketches* "shows, with genuine feeling, all a woman's sympathy for suffering, and all a woman's tact in relieving it," and, according to another reviewer, "no lover of woman, should delay reading" this book. About Phelps's *Story of Avis*, the *Literary World's* reviewer wrote, "only a woman could have written it," and the *Independent's* obituary after her death declared Phelps "at the head of our women writers."⁷⁹

The highest praise these authors received, though, was not to be ranked highly among other American women writers but to be considered, essentially, masculine writers who could compete with male authors. Of the four, Stoddard was most often characterized as "masculine," an adjective meant to be thoroughly positive. George Parsons Lathrop wrote that her works exhibit "a woman writing with that sort of vigor which, for want of a more searching and pliable term, we call masculine." Then he explained that her writing was "masculine" because she was able to "rise out of this little individuality [dictated by convention] into the larger one of a free, observant, independent mind." This, he admitted, was unusual for a woman, but "[i]f this privilege is to be denied to women, it is clear that their function as authors must be seriously limited." The "privilege," of course, belonged to men, and whether or not it would be granted to women remained uncertain. Julian Hawthorne, who deeply admired Stoddard, addressed the individuality of her works in an equally suggestive manner:

“Most women novelists try to write like men,” he wrote. “Mrs. Stoddard writes like nobody else.” While Lathrop considered her originality “masculine,” Hawthorne was not quite sure how to label it: “there is no aping of the masculine voice: yet the virility, austerity, and . . . taciturnity of her style still less recall the conventional feminine tone. She is, in fact, the artist pure and simple.” Hawthorne thus paid Stoddard the highest of compliments, equating her ability to avoid the conventionally feminine with a gender-neutral artistry.⁸⁰ Phelps was also deemed above her sex on at least one occasion: the *Philadelphia Press* wrote of *Friends: A Duet*, “The book is marked by that strength of touch — at times almost masculine — observable in all the works of this author.” Interestingly, the *Literary World* claimed Woolson to be “one of the most vigorous woman writers of this country,” raising her above her sex and comparing her to other female authors at the same time.⁸¹

Perhaps even more noteworthy, though, were the occasional assessments ranking them highly among authors generally or in comparison to male authors who had themselves achieved the highest stature. For example, the *Literary World* wrote of Phelps’s *Story of Avis*, “in intellectual power, in loftiness of tone, in pureness and yet passionateness of feeling, in depth of experiences described, in subtlety of psychical analysis, and in mere superficial finish, this is the most notable American product of its class in many years, and in our judgment easily lifts its author to a place among the masters of modern fiction.” *Harper’s Weekly* wrote of Alcott’s *Moods*, “After Hawthorne we recall no American love-story of equal power.” Julian Hawthorne thought *The Morgesons* “one of the best novels ever written by a woman, and superior to all but a very few produced before or since by any American author.” And the reviewer for the *Literary World* wrote of Woolson, “Some of the finest work in America has been done by her hand.”⁸²

However, even as these passages suggest that Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were at one time or another considered to be among the highest-ranking American authors, such voices were in the minority. When these writers weren’t being judged against others of their sex, they were deemed in various ways to have fallen short of the bar set by critics—the accurate portrayal of “truth.” Predictably, critics did not agree on what “truth” was nor on how successful these writers were at depicting it. Some applauded these four writers for their adherence to “reality,” while others did not recognize their characters as “real.” Some appreciated their willingness to tackle tough subjects—such as passion or poverty—although others criticized them for addressing such unseemly or “gloomy” topics. Ultimately, though, none of these authors achieved

the level of prestige she desired. None were accepted by the critics as an American Eliot or Brontë or a female Hawthorne. Even though they were given much encouragement early in their careers, reviewers were inclined to withhold full acceptance. This was a common chord struck by the critics as they reviewed “promising” women writers. Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were all acknowledged as important candidates for the coming vanguard of American literature, but the critics were careful to point out the faults that must be eliminated in order for their predictions to come true. Much like the male writer in “‘Miss Grief,’” male critics routinely found flaws (usually attributed to inexperience or the author’s sex) that they believed would preclude widespread respect for their work. What we see in these reviews is little consensus about what constitutes good literature, which befits this period in which literary tastes were in flux. The inability of any of the four writers to gain immortality as serious artists has as much to do with their gender as with the fact that they wrote during this transitional period. None of them was as staunchly or consistently a realist as Henry James was or as much a romanticist as Nathaniel Hawthorne was. The critics’ disagreement about them, therefore, reflects the fact that they cannot be firmly placed in a literary camp, making their reputations even more tenuous.

Phelps and Alcott were judged very similarly by critics, attacked for their critical depictions of marriage in *Avis* and *Moods* and either praised or considered second-rate for the moral purpose of their works. They were even lumped together, in retrospect, by a reviewer for the *Nation*, who wrote in 1909 that Phelps’s fiction “belongs to the same school” as Alcott’s, “and we may fairly say, to the same period of unabashed sensibility.”⁸³ By that time they were permanently removed from the category of high literature, which was then firmly associated with realism, and their early contributions to that movement were suppressed as they were categorized with other women writers as sentimentalists. During their day, however, the critical verdict was much more equivocal.

Alcott’s foremost bid for immortality, her novel *Moods*, was both highly praised and considered “dangerous” for its ideas about marriage. Unfortunately, *Moods* came out just after *Emily Chester*, another novel dealing with unhappiness in marriage, and many reviewers discussed the two novels together, assailing the “dangerous nonsense” and “excessively unhealthy influence” they had on readers, even arguing that such novels contributed to divorce. As one reviewer wrote, “it is high time that the critical world should begin to consider [novels’] moral bearing as well as their literary execution.” Alcott was dismayed by this focus on her work’s moral implications and by what she felt was a serious misrepresentation of her

views. She wrote to a friend, "I find myself accused of Spiritualism, Free Love, Affinities & all sorts of horrors that I know very little about & dont [*sic*] believe in."⁸⁴ She felt that she had failed to deliver her message about the importance of choosing a mate carefully. However, Alcott did manage with *Moods* to please a great many critics, who felt, as one wrote, that although here was "a lady whose brilliant abilities are rapidly winning for her a first place among the best writers of the time," she was "capable of something better than this work." Although much of Henry James's review in the *North American Review* was condescending, his final paragraph was full of praise and encouragement:

there is no reason why Miss Alcott should not write a very good novel, provided she will be satisfied to describe only that which she has seen. When such a novel comes, as we doubt not it eventually will, we shall be among the first to welcome it. With the exception of two or three celebrated names, we know not, indeed, to whom, in this country, unless to Miss Alcott, we are to look for a novel above the average.

Similarly, the *Harper's Weekly* critic praised *Moods* for its "freshness and self-reliance," predicting "remarkable works hereafter."⁸⁵

Published after Alcott had become known as a children's author, her other serious adult novel, *Work* (1873), received mostly negative reviews. The *Literary World's* was the most positive, claiming that the characters were "life-like" and seeing no conflict in calling it "a very well-written work" that "will come very near doing positive good." Others, however, objected to its engagement with social issues. The *Nation* declared it "a contribution to the literature of the 'labor question' and the 'woman question,' . . . under the veil of fiction," making it ultimately "nothing as a work of art." *Appletons'* pointed out the "inartistic indication of . . . its moral," and *Harper's* objected that it "is not a novel at all, but a serious didactic essay on the subject of woman's work," "impair[ing] it as a work of art."⁸⁶

Similar critiques were leveled at many of Phelps's novels. For instance, the *Nation's* critics wrote about *Avis*, "Under the guise of fiction the book is really a protest against marriage." However, some of her critics did not object to her ethical realism, finding that the moral and "art" were not mutually exclusive categories in her hands. *Harper's* thought that *The Silent Partner* (1871) taught "a terribly needed lesson," while praising it for being "more effective and artistic" than her last novel. The *Literary World* wrote about the same novel that it showed "evidence of true creative genius" and that "her pictures of work-life, the home-life, and the street-life of mill-operatives, have all the realism of photographs." At

the same time, “As a revelation of the wrongs and sufferings of the manufacturing population of New England, ‘The Silent Partner’ will command general attention, and will do much to arouse public sentiment to insist upon needed reforms.”⁸⁷ However, Phelps appears to have been most successful with the critics when she leaned more toward objective realism and away from the ethical, which could, some believe, veer toward the sentimental. About *Hedged In* (1870), the *Nation’s* reviewer wrote, “the chief impression that it makes is that there must be those who love to indulge themselves in wanton grieving and who enjoy a laceration of the heart more or less real.” The critics’ general assessment of Phelps’s work was that she overindulged in sentimentality.⁸⁸

As their careers progressed, however, Phelps and Alcott paid less and less attention to the critics. Having found her niche as a children’s writer, Alcott did not have to seek their favor anymore. After the publication of *The Gates Ajar* (1868), Phelps had vowed no longer to pay attention to the critics’ opinions of her work, although she knew “in a general way . . . if some important pen has shown a comprehension of what [I] meant to do . . . or has spattered venom.” Actually, though, Phelps must have paid some attention, as her autobiography clearly implies: “I sometimes think, good brother critics, that I have had my share of the attentions of poisoned weapons.” But she contended that she did not heed their criticisms — “they stab at the summer air.” When she learned that George Eliot also ignored her critics, she “felt reinforced by this great example.” Eliot’s letter to Phelps on this subject reveals how potent the critics’ views could be to the woman writer struggling to be an artist. “I adopted this rule [of not reading reviews] many years ago,” Eliot wrote her, “as a necessary preservative against influences that would have ended by nullifying my power of writing.”⁸⁹ Only by ignoring the critics could women writers maintain power over themselves and their art. But they weren’t always successful at doing this.

Despite her protestations that she didn’t listen to the critics, Phelps did take their “abuse” and “misapprehension” to heart in the case of *The Story of Avis*. She called it a “woman’s book, hoping for small hospitality at the hands of men,” but the harsh attacks it generated for its style and theme disheartened her. The *Harper’s* reviewer declared that Phelps had heeded previous criticism — “There are no careless passages in it, no marks of haste, no writing for the market, no hurry-scurry to catch the fall trade” — but ultimately felt the novel was “sometimes perhaps too finely finished, as though the language of passionate feeling had been fashioned with too great a thought of artistic perfection.” Most other reviewers also criticized its style; however, they reserved their greatest venom for

the novel's critique of marriage. So widespread was the disapproval that one reviewer, wishing to praise the novel, wrote, "its faults having been already so thoroughly discussed by almost all critics, it is unnecessary here to restate them."⁹⁰ Having invested more of herself, her time, and her ambition in trying to gain serious recognition with *Avis* than she had with any previous work, she did not do so again. After this experience, she seems to have closed her eyes almost completely to reviews of her work. Like Alcott, she learned to focus more of her attention on her many appreciative readers rather than on critics who could not be satisfied with her work because of its dark themes, sometimes exuberant style, and concern with social reform.

Woolson was also very sensitive to criticism about her writings, especially when she first started to publish in book form. When her friend Hayne gave her a positive "notice" of her short story "Castle Nowhere," she wrote to him, "when I had finished [the story] I said 'it is my best.' But as no one else said so, I began to doubt my own judgment; a very unsettling state of mind, don't you think? Now comes your letter, the clouds part, and I take courage again." She was upset about Howells's review of the collection *Castle Nowhere* (1875) in the *Atlantic*, especially his comments about the title story. When the review appeared, she wrote to Hayne about it, explaining that "I had been abused so for writing such deadly 'real' stories, that I did branch out, in that one, into the realm of imagination." She had tried to please her critics with a more romantic atmosphere and ideal construction in "Castle Nowhere," but Howells found it to be the "least satisfactory of the stories." While many magazine men still clung to romanticism, Howells was articulating a new critical aesthetic, leaving Woolson perhaps a bit confused about how best to please reviewers. Of this story, Howells complained, "one is harassed from beginning to end by a disagreeable fantasticality." Although the rest of the review was, as she wrote to him, "very high praise" and gave her "much delightful encouragement for the future," these criticisms stayed with her. "I am, shall I say unfortunately, excessively sensitive to praise and to blame; these critics seem to hold my life in their hands. I go sleepless, often, after reading what they say, whether for good or for ill." However, she continued, "Your friend Miss Phelps is above all that."⁹¹ While Phelps for the most part ignored the critics' prescriptions for her work, Woolson could not. As in "Miss Grief," the male critic's judgment had the power to "nullify" her, in Eliot's phrase.

But Howells's praise elsewhere in the review was also encouraging, especially where he wrote that her tendencies to be both "poetically realistic" and "poeti-

cally fanciful . . . rest upon the same solid basis — truth to human nature.” In fact, most of her early reviews were encouraging. As the *Appletons’* reviewer wrote about *Castle Nowhere*, “The promise of the early work that she has done here is of more than [the] ordinary sort; her literary future looks very bright indeed.” The *Literary World*, in its review of her second book, *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* (1880), called her a “genuine artist” and credited her with “virile force.”⁹² When *Anne* was published, most reviewers agreed, however, that it was exquisite in its description and details, but that the “sensational scenes” that closed the book were a disappointment. The *Literary World* suggested that such scenes should be left to the likes of Wilkie Collins, but the reviewer proceeded to equate this failing with her sex: “We should wish for a writer of her force and growing influence a diminished acquaintance with or interest in the trick[er]y of her own sex.”⁹³ Critics were ultimately divided, though, on how to classify her. The *Century* believed that “she carries out the picture with the utmost particularity as to details until the scene stands before one as if in a photograph” and that “Miss Woolson adds to her observation of scenes and localities an unusual insight into the human heart,” concluding that she was inheriting “the mantle of George Eliot.” However, the *Literary World* declared that she had “such sympathy with the tropical currents of life.” “With all Miss Woolson’s realism and searching wit she was a romanticist,” the reviewer maintained. And Charles Dudley Warner wrote after her death, “Her pictures are real, but they are painted with the ideality inseparable from the high-bred literary artist.”⁹⁴ However, Woolson ultimately did not fare well, as all idealism in literature was viewed with increasing suspicion and she was relegated to the margins with other women writers.

Stoddard was probably the most sensitive about her critical reception as well as the most highly praised, managing to ride the waves of both romanticism in the 1860s and realism in the 1890s. When her novels first appeared in the 1860s, many reviews praised her “genius” and placed her in the company of Charlotte Brontë and Nathaniel Hawthorne, although most criticized her abrupt, enigmatic style and saw it as a sign of her inexperience as an author and a blemish that she must correct in order to achieve the “more prominent rank” the *Round Table* believed was possible in her case.⁹⁵ George Ripley of the *New York Tribune* was her most consistent and ardent admirer. He praised *The Morgesons* for its “original invention” and saw it as evidence of “a far more profound genius, as well as a higher artistic gift, than the literal narrative which consists of mere photographic copies of one’s acquaintance.” In this review of *Two Men* he raised her above other women writers: “In a day of exuberant demonstration, and reckless imag-

ery, especially among popular female writers, it is a refreshment to find a woman self-possessed as the Sybil, and as impassive and reticent." Similarly, he wrote, "No weak womanly sentiment impairs the effect of the keen, merciless dissection of passion and motives which awaken an almost morbid curiosity in the reader." This was exactly the kind of response Stoddard had hoped for from male critics. She wrote to Howells that it was "the truest review yet I guess. I write things as I see and feel them, . . . The writer has found out my mind there is no doubt of that." Interestingly, Howells had already written his review of the novel for the *Nation*. In this review we see Howells developing his realistic theories, praising the novel for "objective processes" and comparing it favorably to *The Scarlet Letter*; a representative romance: "The author seldom vouchsafes a word of comment or explanation on anything that her people do or say; and yet, from their brief speeches and dramatic action, you have the same knowledge of motive which you acquire from the philosophization of some such subjective romance as 'The Scarlet Letter.' We think this admirable." This is very high praise, indeed, for Howells. Above all, he finds Stoddard an original author and *Two Men* "one of the most original books written by an American woman."⁹⁶

However, reviews of *Temple House* (1867) were discouraging, particularly because she believed that she had done her best work in this novel. Reviewers continued to see unfulfilled promise. *Putnam's* reviewer recognized "the power of an artist," but the review ends, characteristically, with two jabs about the novel's "too compact structure, and too sudden conclusion," and the statement, "We are confident that she will do much better next time." But there would not be a next time. Stoddard had come to the conclusion that her novels would not meet with an appreciative audience among her contemporaries, and she wrote no more. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote to her husband in 1878, "if her writings have not found that swift recognition which they merit, I hope it will not discourage her. Often the best things win their way slowly, but are pretty sure of being found out sooner or later."⁹⁷

Stoddard's talent was "found out" when her work was republished in the late 1880s. The republication had been spurred by the rediscovery of her novels by Julian Hawthorne and Junius Browne and the support of her old friend Stedman, who was now a prominent literary critic. *Two Men* was republished first, with a laudatory preface by Stedman, in which he wrote that she had been "before her time." Her books, he continued, are "additions not merely to the bulk of reading, but to literature itself; as distinct in their kind as *Wuthering Heights*." Excitement from the press greeted the first reprinted volume, as critics were eager to see if

Stedman's claims were justified. In fact, many critics lamented that her work had not been received as it should have been when it was first published and that the author had since ceased to write novels. George Parsons Lathrop, who would write a significant appreciation of her in a *North American Review* essay, wrote to her, "Why, what has the world been about, all these years — & where have I been? — not to know more about this book & you? . . . Oh, why did you not just curse the world, & go on writing?" He assures her that she possesses "the most surprising, the most penetrating genius I have known in an American woman."⁹⁸

The time had come at last, it seemed, for her novels to receive the recognition she had long believed they deserved. The trend toward realism gave her a more appreciative audience; for the stark depiction of the bleak New England of her youth and the uncompromising individuality of her characters were not so strange to readers as they once had been. Now, reviewers could look back and see how ahead of her time she had been. Undoubtedly, the proliferation of literary periodicals and the greater numbers of men (and a few women) making their living by writing reviews for them also created a larger circle of appreciative readers for her. Reviews of her republished novels appeared in the *Nation*, the *Independent*, the *Literary World*, *Lippincott's*, the *New York Times*, *Harper's*, the *Critic*, and the *Atlantic*. The tenor of the initial reviews of the first edition of her republished novels in 1888–89 was similar to the best reviews she had received in the 1860s, and they reflected the widening split between intellectual readers and the general reading public. Reviewers agreed that her genius, while somewhat raw, was of a sort that would not be recognized by the general public, only the cultivated few.⁹⁹ When the first novel to be republished appeared, Stoddard was "astonished," she wrote to Julia Dorr, "at the way in which the book has been taken by men, authors who compare me to Balzac and George Meredith!" It was precisely to these "men," authors and intellectuals, that she had all along tried to prove she was their peer. But while earlier reviews had predicted a bright future (always putting off the achievement of success until the publication of the next novel), these looked back and speculated about what might have been had she not given up writing novels. The *Nation* struck what must have been an agonizing note for Stoddard: "It is impossible not to regret that destiny silenced Mrs. Stoddard's pen many years ago, impossible not to believe that work as great as this is impressive might have crowned a persistent practice."¹⁰⁰ As much as she was being feted now, how much more would she have been celebrated if she had continued to write?

The triumph of her resurrected fame, however, was short-lived. As each of her

novels was republished, the reviews became more negative. When the final novel to be republished, *The Morgesons*, came out, hardly anyone noticed it. In 1896, her brief glimpse of immortality was already over. "I am attempting once more to write a story," she wrote to Dorr, "but I am so snubbed, so ignored — [m]y name left out of every passing thing written that I haven't much faith in myself."¹⁰¹ The absence of her name in the numerous assessments of the nation's and women's literature that were appearing during these years silenced her once and for all.

Stoddard, whose ambitions were perhaps the highest, had more difficulty redirecting her goals as an author or shutting her eyes to the critics' words. Pinning all of her feelings of worth as a writer on the prospect of recognition from literary men, Stoddard left only a small body of brilliant work behind. While personal factors also played a role, it is clear that critical neglect, especially in the absence of popular acclaim, stifled her. Had she been embraced by the public, even in the absence of unequivocal critical acclaim, as Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson were, she undoubtedly would have been less likely to give up her writing.

Although it is difficult to sum up the diverse critical response to all four writers, one thing is clear: each was judged as ultimately limited by her sex in the production of great art. None of them could escape reviewers' biases toward women as writers and their expectations for women's fiction. Although Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson did succeed at gaining the attention of some important critics who gave them some of the highest praise received by any women writers of their generation, such glimpses of serious recognition were not sustained or prominent enough to counter the trend toward creating an exclusive canon of male stars. While each was perceived as possessing much promise, and reviewers were on occasion willing to recognize female authors as participating in the emerging high literary culture, any provisional entrance they were granted to the upper echelons of literary achievement was rescinded by the end of the century.