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Writing for Immortality

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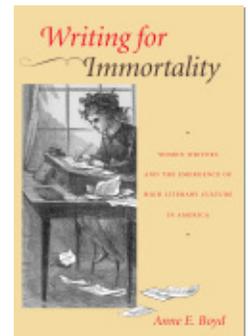
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The Question of Immortality

Although Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson had been accorded at one time or another some of the highest praise of any women writers of their generation, each of them was sooner or later relegated to literary obscurity. What happened from their deaths until the national establishment of the American literary canon in the 1920s and in the years thereafter to ensure that they would be so entirely eclipsed? A number of factors converged, including the masculinization of literary tastes, the derogation of the “ideal” and moral aspects of literature, and the institutionalization of American literary study in university English departments. While all of these factors cannot be thoroughly explored here, an overview of the early assessments of these writers’ legacies and the formation of the all-male canon of American literature gives some indications of why all four writers — as well as their female contemporaries — were erased from the literary map. Each of these authors, despite the tremendous differences in their works, suffered the same fate. Even Woolson, a close friend of Henry James and widely considered to be the best woman writer of her generation (perhaps next to Jewett), would not be remembered. In fact, there was so little consensus on matters of literary excellence during this period that the perceived quality of their work, running the

gamut from the highest to the lowest rank, was the least significant factor in determining the fate of their literary reputations. Instead, the growing bias of the male literary elite against women writers and the masculinization of high literature were arguably the main reasons their reputations declined so precipitously.

Early Assessments

Nearly all women writers of this generation who were at one time considered worthy of high praise experienced a decline in their reputations. Helen Hunt Jackson, according to Susan Coultrap-McQuin, was never able to solidify her considerable literary status owing to her use of multiple pseudonyms and anonymity. When she died in 1885, therefore, her popular novel *Ramona* (1884) and her report of wrongs committed against Native Americans, *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), both of which she claimed with her real name, were foremost among her legacy. As a result, any high cultural status she achieved through her association with the *Atlantic Monthly* became overshadowed by her commitment to this social reform. Similarly, Emma Lazarus was remembered after her death in 1887 as a crusader for Jewish causes, to which she devoted herself in the last five years of her life. Her sister memorialized her in the introduction to her posthumous selected poems as “too distinctly feminine to wish to be exceptional or to stand alone and apart,” a view adopted by almost all subsequent biographers. Interestingly, however, she gained perhaps more lasting recognition than any other writer of her generation because lines from her sonnet “The New Colossus,” inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, entered into the national consciousness: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses . . .”¹

Part of the problem for many writers was their varied output, especially when it appeared in less serious venues. Both Harriet Prescott Spofford and Rebecca Harding Davis, who had been so closely aligned with the *Atlantic Monthly* in its early years, were harmed by their popularity. Alfred Bendixen explains, “During her final years, Spofford seems to have accepted her position as a popular writer of magazine fiction, whose early romantic tales had once been acclaimed.” Never having completely abandoned romanticism, Spofford nonetheless became a (minor) figure among local colorists, who were the primary producers of popular stories for the magazines in the 1890s. Well into the next century, Rebecca Harding Davis continued to produce works that combined stark realism with the idealistic purpose of transforming society, but in her last years critics and readers remembered only “Life in the Iron Mills” (1861), suggesting that her career had

peaked at that early date and that she had left nothing else of significance behind. Upon her death in 1910, as Sharon Harris has determined, she was less widely eulogized than her husband had been six years earlier, and, according to Tillie Olsen, “No literary journal noted her passing.” In one of the few notices of her death, she was identified only as the “widow of L. Clarke Davis” and not as an author in her own right. Similarly, the *New York Times* announced, “Mother of Richard Harding Davis Dies.” Her career was eclipsed by her famous author son, who, despite his lack of association with the realists, was more widely remembered among literary critics and scholars than his mother, the pioneering realist.²

The four writers examined in this study experienced varying degrees of recognition upon their deaths, but, like their sister authors, they were forgotten almost completely by the time the American literary canon was solidified in the twentieth century. Alcott, the first of the group to die, was also the least respected by literary critics. The obituaries marking her death in 1888 stressed her popularity as a children’s author, her enormous income from her books (estimated at \$100,000), and her devotion to her family, especially her infirm father. In fact, having died two days apart, they were often eulogized together, and their pathetic last days were recounted as evidence that Alcott was the dutiful daughter even in death. None of the obituaries mentioned her early work in the *Atlantic*, and most neglected to mention her serious novels for adults. Instead, they focused on the lasting impression made by *Little Women*.³ In response to the many laudatory obituaries, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who had once encouraged Alcott, wrote an article for *Harper’s Bazar* warning the “young girls” who revered her. “Her muse was domestic, simple, and sociable,” he argued; “the instinct of art she never had: it is difficult to imagine her as pondering a situation deeply, still less as concerning herself about phrase or diction.” She should not be a model for young writers, he cautioned, “if they are moved by a profound passion for the art of literature itself; if they wish to reach an audience remoter than that of to-day; if they wish to do something that shall add to the lasting treasure of the great literature on which they have fed.” Higginson claimed that she was nothing more than a popular author who dashed off copy with no thought for “the art of literature.”⁴

In the ensuing decades, Alcott was almost always remembered as the “children’s friend,” as Ednah D. Cheney memorialized her, and as the daughter of her Transcendentalist father. Her work came to be associated with the sentimental literature widely viewed by male critics to have debased American literature. G. K. Chesterton wrote in the *Nation* that he believed she had anticipated realism

by twenty to thirty years, yet he could not place, analyze, or even “understand” her works because they belonged exclusively to women. He took up Alcott in order to explore her enduring popularity and ended by dismissing her as outside of the purview of a male critic. Thomas Beer, in his work on the 1890s, *The Mauve Decade* (1926), claimed she represented the genteel womanhood in American letters that young male writers were battling. He discussed her in his chapter “The Titaness,” which refers to the prudish woman reader who holds Alcott as the apotheosis of good and tasteful literature. In essence, he blamed Alcott for creating an effeminate, emasculated literature that had to be overcome by a new generation of male writers.⁵ Given the fact that Alcott had primarily devoted herself to writing children’s literature, these assessments are not too surprising. But it is important to remember that her publication of *Work* in 1872 and her republication of the revised *Moods* in 1882 were completely eclipsed by her works for children. Her legacy would be one of tremendous popular influence, particularly on children and female readers, but not one of artistic achievement.

In contrast, Woolson, despite the varied response to her works during her lifetime, was accorded great respect as an artist upon her death in 1894. As *Harper’s* argued, “to the last her standard was not popular favor, but her own high conception of her office as a writer. . . . This patience in creative genius is not common.” Most of the other notices joined Margaret Sangster in commenting on her industry and high standards: “Her work was performed with the utmost sincerity, never slurred over or hastened, and into it she put the best of herself—her finest thought.” Woolson could have quickly produced abundant publishable copy, Henry Mills Alden wrote in *Harper’s Weekly*, but “like a true artist, she sought difficulty.” Many commented on her “genius” and her high rank as an author. The *Critic* quoted Edmund Clarence Stedman as declaring her “one of the leading women in American literature of the century.” The *Dial* noted, “By the death of Miss Constance Fenimore Woolson . . . America lost one of the best of its fiction writers.” And the *New York Times* claimed that the publication of her first novel had “placed her at once in the front rank of prose writers.” The efforts of her publisher, Harper and Brothers, to keep her fame alive included a promotional page in the back of her last (posthumously published) book, *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (1895), containing the following statement from the *Boston Globe*: “Constance Fenimore Woolson may easily become the novelist laureate.”⁶ The consensus was that Woolson was one of the foremost writers of her generation.

But this estimation of her very high rank was short-lived. The new literary

histories had relatively little to say about her place in American literature. In *American Literature, A Text-Book* (1892), Julian Hawthorne and Leonard Lemon gave her work a token four lines, placing her among the “analytic novelists [who] take their cue from James and Howells,” the true “Innovators.” In *Introduction to American Literature* (1897), F. V. N. Painter mentioned her briefly among sixty-one “Prominent Writers” of the “Second National Period.” In *American Writers of To-Day* (1894), Henry C. Vedder ignored her, as did Fred Lewis Pattee in his *History of American Literature* (1896). But Pattee remembered her in his *History of American Literature since 1870* (1917): “During the eighties Miss Woolson was regarded as the most promising of the younger writers,” with *Castle Nowhere* “ranking as a pioneer book in a new field [regionalism].” And he quoted Stedman as saying, “No woman of rarer personal qualities, or with more decided gifts as a novelist, figured in her own generation of American writers.’ But,” Pattee concluded, “time has not sustained this contemporary verdict. . . . She must take her place as one of the pioneers of the period who discovered a field and prepared an audience for writers who were to follow.” He repeated this verdict in his *Development of the American Short Story* (1923), again calling her a “pioneer” who did not live up to expectations. Pattee set the tone for his successors, such as Vernon Louis Parrington, who also called her a “pioneer,” and John Dwight Kern, who published an entire study of her work titled *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Literary Pioneer* (1934).⁷ Within the four decades after her death, Woolson had gone from “novelist laureate” to an author who had not fully realized her promise.

Stoddard, who had been so highly regarded by influential critics like Julian Hawthorne in the 1880s and 1890s, lived to see her reputation sink once again into obscurity. Upon her death in 1902, she was the least recognized of the four, and, like Davis and Alcott, she was overshadowed by a male relative, her husband. The only lengthy obituary she received was in the *New York Times*. It had little to say about her writings, although Stedman was quoted as saying that her novels found “many readers who valued them above most other American novels.” Three months after her death, the *Bookman* published a tribute to her work by Mary Moss, which reads more like an apology. While ostensibly making a claim for the lasting recognition of Stoddard’s novels, Moss repeatedly points out her faults. “[S]he had genius of a high order, but totally undisciplined, with scant capacity for taking pains.” Besides these two pieces, Stoddard appears to have passed almost completely unnoticed. Even the *Critic*, which had published lengthy tributes to her husband, did not mark her death. Instead, it only men-

tioned her death two months later in a short passage that focused on Richard Henry Stoddard's newly solitary life.⁸

Stoddard also received the least attention from early literary scholars. Pattee recalled her in *A History of American Literature*, in his section on her husband, but he had forgotten her or set her aside by the time he wrote *A History of American Literature since 1870* and *The Development of the American Short Story*. In *American Literature*, however, Julian Hawthorne once again championed her. In a two-and-a-half-page entry on her, he and Lemmon declared, "Few men have written stories more original and powerful than [hers]." Vedder, writing in 1894, shortly after her novels had been republished, discussed her briefly in the chapter on her husband, commenting, "It is really one of the curiosities of literature that her books have not known a wider recognition." And he predicted that "tardy fame is about to overtake Mrs. Stoddard." But of the later scholars, only Van Wyck Brooks acknowledged her work. In his book *New England: Indian Summer, 1865–1915* (1940), he mentioned her, along with Stowe and Cooke, as a precursor to Howells, James, Jewett, and Freeman.⁹ While the rekindling of her literary fame had coincided with the first significant literary histories, she would, like Woolson, be either forgotten or considered an incomplete artist whose promise had been unfulfilled.

Phelps's prolific literary output, long life, and continued popularity ensured that she would not be as easily dismissed or forgotten. The early assessments of her work, while she was still alive, indicate that many literary historians considered her an artist of high rank. Vedder wrote that the success of *The Gates Ajar* was "of the first magnitude," although *Avis* was the "favorite" of most of her readers. Although he deemed her "didactic," he felt that she had not sacrificed "artistic purpose and method." He concluded his lengthy discussion of her with the observation: "Of all our American women of letters, Miss Phelps impresses one as the most intense, the most high-purposed, the most conscientious in her art." Painter listed Phelps among five female writers "who have achieved eminence" and have "exploded" the "old theory of the intellectual inferiority of woman." In 1896, Pattee concluded that "No one of the group [of New England women writers] has written stronger or more finished work than Elizabeth Stuart Phelps." The one dissenting opinion was that of Hawthorne and Lemmon, who wrote a very negative appraisal of her work, although they featured her prominently in their textbook, even including her portrait. "She is vividly emotional, — at times almost hysterical," they wrote. In the end, the "merits and beauties [of her work] cannot, like their faults, be analyzed."¹⁰

When Phelps died in 1911, the verdict was more mixed. Only the religious periodical the *Independent* ranked her “at the head of our women writers.” The *New York Times* declared her to be “the well-known authoress of several spiritual romances,” hardly a claim to lasting fame. And the *Dial* argued that her books “always maintained the same high ethical and religious level, impressing their lessons indeed with some straining of incident, some undue shrillness in the note struck,” although it also found “her work . . . not unworthy of comparison with the best of the good old New England school to which she properly belonged.” As these obituaries suggest, Phelps’s brand of literature by then had fallen out of style. She was deemed old-fashioned. The *Independent* even believed her to have “led the elder generation of women authors who were contemporary with Mrs. Stowe.” (Stowe was born in 1811, thirty-three years before Phelps.) As Susan Coultrap-McQuin notes, Phelps’s obituaries stressed the ethical aspect of her fiction, and, “[w]hile laudatory, these appraisals were actually the last hurrah for a fading literary reputation in a culture that no longer emphasized the ethical imperative in literature.”¹¹

When Phelps was mentioned in scholarly studies after her death, commentators followed Hawthorne’s and Lemmon’s lead in viewing her as an overly emotional female writer. Many still considered her prominent among women writers, but she represented, like Alcott, all that needed to be discredited in order to solidify America’s literary reputation. As Parrington wrote in *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), her novel *The Silent Partner* (1871) was “sticky with sentiment” and “belongs to the emotional fifties” rather than to the “Beginnings of Critical Realism” he was chronicling. In *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature* (1933), Granville Hicks called Phelps “that arch romanticist and sentimentalist,” ignoring her contributions to the realist movement. Brooks found her work “too consciously righteous” in its “missionary spirit,” and he launched from a discussion of her work into lamentations about “the feminization of literature.” Pattee changed his tune about her in 1917, criticizing her preachiness: “she has pleaded rather than created,” and “[t]he artist within her was dominated ever by the preacher; the novelist by the Puritan.” In 1923, he saw her as a “pioneer in New England *genre* fiction,” although he focused on “the emotional” in her stories. He also declared, “She was a realist because of the limitations of her imagination”; she was “not intentionally . . . an innovator.”¹² Whether Phelps was classified as a romanticist, a sentimentalist, or a realist, her work was identified as lacking in aesthetic accomplishment because of its “feminine” qualities, making it emotional, didactic, or lacking in imagination. All of

these labels were increasingly used to condemn women's writings as not only of lesser value but also completely outside the realm of "art."

As the early assessments of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, Woolson, and other women writers of their generation make clear, there was little concrete consensus on where these authors fit and why they did not belong on the map of American literature these critics were drawing. Alcott and Phelps were deemed to be either part of an outmoded school of literature or simply not literary artists. Stoddard seemed to disappear for similar reasons. Although not associated as much with a feminized literary culture, she was, however, part of an earlier literary age, despite her originality. She simply didn't belong in any convenient grouping. And Woolson was dismissed as not belonging to the later literary movement of regionalism. Woolson's relatively early death and Stoddard's early literary retirement also left critics, many of whom saw in their works "genius," with the impression that they had not fully realized their potential or had left their careers unfinished. In addition, there was little consensus on the quality or significance of these authors' works, and in some cases, earlier high appraisals were forgotten, weakening any claim that objective aesthetic standards determined the fate of their literary reputations. Much more contingent factors were at work.

Some important works of early American literary history did not mention them at all,¹³ and when they were mentioned, it was usually in connection with other women writers, who were, as a class, considered minor. They were relegated, because of their gender, to the margins of American literature. The distinct cleavage between major male authors and minor female authors became solidified in the decades when the question of these writers' literary immortality was decided. Therefore, their erasure from the literary map cannot be explained merely by the fact that literary tastes were changing. A sea change was under way that would erase all but a few male authors.

The Formation of the American Literary Canon

As the careers of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson came to a close, the project of defining the American pantheon gained urgency. The old masters (Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, and others) were passing away, and the question of who would take up their mantle was unresolved. Many lamented that while several authors showed promise, none rose above the rest. Whereas mid-century discussions about American literature had focused on its future and the coming master "genius," at the end of the century attention was focused on

America's literary past and defining the American pantheon. Like earlier discussions of "genius," there were competing visions of what shape this group should take.

Authors of some of the early anthologies and literary histories, especially, presented an inclusive view of America's literary past. For example, from 1883 to 1890 Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson edited an eleven-volume anthology titled *A Library of American Literature from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*. This exhaustive collection contained selections from more than fifteen hundred authors, many of them unknown today and many of them women. Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were all well represented with prose selections and poems, and Stoddard and Woolson were both honored with prominent portraits. In the final volume the editors looked back on their series and concluded, "we have respected our title, which is neither a 'Thesaurus' nor a 'Valhalla,' but 'A Library' of American literature, and thus denotes a compilation varied in subject, treatment, and merit, and above all—inclusive. . . . It is not confined to masterpieces." Had they chosen to compile an "exclusive miscellany," they surmised, "less than fifty authors" would have been represented.¹⁴ Some of the early literary histories published by the new scholars of American literature also made room for a wide variety of authors, usually considered minor, in addition to the major male authors. Examples include the four-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1913–21), Charles F. Richardson's influential *American Literature, 1607–1885* (1886–88), F. V. N. Painter's *Introduction to American Literature* (1897), Walter Bronson's *Short History of American Literature* (1908), and, much later, Granville Hicks's *Great Tradition* (1933).¹⁵

But the tendency in many textbooks, anthologies, and scholarly studies was toward a radically reduced representation of authors. The desire to delineate a "Valhalla" won out over the perceived need to provide a "Library." As the *Atlantic's* review of Stedman's and Hutchinson's *Library* opined, "The reputation of a nation for letters must depend upon its eminent authors, and arises rather from quality than quantity." A few "eminent authors" rather than a multitude of voices must be selected in order to establish an American literary tradition.¹⁶ As a result, the authorities—increasingly university-affiliated scholars—trimmed down the list of significant American authors considerably, resulting in a selective group from which women writers and writers of color were excluded. For example, in *The Chief American Prose Authors* (1916), Norman Foerster represented all of American literature by nine (white male) authors. Richard Burton's *Literary Leaders of America* also represents this tendency. Between "The Earlier Period"

and “The Present Day” are individual chapters on twelve authors, all white males. Edwin W. Bowen’s *Makers of American Literature: A Class-Book on American Literature* (1908) covers fourteen white male authors. And Horace E. Scudder’s *American Prose* (1885) presents Hawthorne, Irving, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, Thoreau, and Emerson as the sole representatives of American prose “literature.”¹⁷

This trend toward exclusivity in large part reflected the desires of male scholars, authors, and critics to create a more masculine national literature. As Charlene Avallone has forcefully explicated, the discourse of an “American Renaissance,” which emerged in the 1880s, sought to legitimize an American literary tradition by linking it to classical conceptions of art and the Anglo-Saxon race, excluding African Americans, immigrants, and women. In addition, from the 1890s to the 1920s, the literary establishment that had given birth to America’s high literature and that had partially and provisionally included Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson (and, much earlier, Alcott) lost much of its clout. As Nancy Glazener explains, “the *Atlantic* group” of magazines was under fire for its promotion of “genteel” realism and middle-class culture. As William Dean Howells, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Richard Henry Stoddard, and others were cast by George Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, Frank Norris, and H. H. Boyeson as members of an effeminate, bourgeois literary elite that had to be usurped, it is no wonder that Alcott and Phelps were dismissed out of hand for their sentimental tendencies, and that Stoddard and Woolson became tainted by their association with the genteel literary establishment. In the battles over literary turf at the turn of the century, critics, in Glazener’s words, resorted to “feminization as a way of discrediting an ideological opponent,” leading to “women’s being blamed for the establishment’s taboos.”¹⁸

An illuminating example of how the prejudices of the literary establishment affected the institutionalization of a white male literary canon can be found in the pages of the *Critic*. On April 12, 1884, the magazine announced the results of a readers’ poll under the title “Our ‘Forty Immortals.’” Readers had been asked to elect authors to “membership in a possible American Academy, formed on the same general principle as the famous French literary institution.” At the moment, it was assumed, no authoritative institution existed that could establish the American pantheon for which critics, authors, and editors had been longing. The proposed academy could be such an institution. The results of the ostensibly democratic election read like a who’s who of the literary elite. Holmes, Lowell, and Whittier were the top three choices. Howells ranked fifth, James thirteenth,

and Samuel Clemens fourteenth. (Only living authors were considered, hence the exclusion of Hawthorne, Emerson, and Longfellow.) The editors also listed the names of every individual who received at least one vote. Of these “at least three hundred candidates,” not one was a woman, the editors having stipulated that to be eligible, authors must be “of the sterner sex.” But this did not stop some readers from sending in the names of women. The most frequently mentioned were listed separately. Stowe, of course, led the list. Phelps and Woolson were also mentioned, as were Jackson and Spofford.¹⁹ Notwithstanding the devotion of readers who wrote in these “ineligible” names, in the eyes of the *Critic*, women could not be considered “immortal.” The very idea of an academy of the greatest authors (like the notion of the “artist” or “genius” on an individual scale) was irrevocably male. Therefore, when readers requested that a parallel poll of the “‘Forty Immortals’ of the gentler sex” be conducted, the *Critic’s* editors did not take the idea seriously. Two weeks later, the following explanation appeared: “this would never do. The embarrassment of riches is too great. To hold all the American women worthy of membership in such an institution, the Academy would have to be composed of four hundred, rather than of forty, ladies.” The implication was that ranking women writers was futile. Virtually any woman who wrote books or articles would have to be included because none was better or more worthy of lasting recognition than another. Such a view is corroborated in a piece on “American Women of Letters” published the previous year in the *Literary World*. The anonymous author, claiming the authority of the literary establishment, declared that no American women were worthy of the designation “women of letters.” “American men of letters we certainly have — or have had, men worthy to stand by the side of any but the very chief of the men of letters across the sea; but where in America can we find a George Eliot or a Mrs. Browning?” Stoddard’s complaint, written in 1855, remained, according to this critic. No American woman exhibited enough “masculinity in her composition” to join “our Pantheon.”²⁰

When the National Institute of Arts and Letters was formed in 1898, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters followed six years later, these institutions carried out the formerly hypothetical process of selecting “Forty Immortals” and put into practice the exclusive cultural hierarchy of the *Critic’s* imaginary academy. As Thomas Bender writes, many of the men who belonged to these organizations “were united by a commitment to Anglo-Saxonism in literature and life; they were deeply worried about democracy, immigration, and modernism.” Their concern over New Women and the suffrage movement certainly also

played a significant role. And when the two organizations held a joint convention in 1911, a photo of their chief members appeared in the *Book News Monthly* under the heading “Group of Immortals.”²¹ Once again, immortality was reserved exclusively for white males.

The *Atlantic’s* publishers and editors also played a large role in these conservative canonizing efforts at the end of the century. Even though the literary establishment led by the magazine was losing cultural authority in favor of the universities, they still had a tremendous impact on canon formation, and while they had once included women in their project of creating a national high literature, those same women were now out of the picture. During the 1880s and 1890s, the *Atlantic*, which helped establish Hawthorne, Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell as the representatives of America’s unique literary legacy, returned to its roots in Brahmin culture. The ghosts of the *Atlantic’s* illustrious past loomed large in its pages, as is evidenced by the numerous poems and essays in the 1880s paying tribute to its founding fathers. Meanwhile, Horace Scudder, the magazine’s most prolific reviewer and its editor during the 1890s, published a number of anthologies and reviews of the Old Guard’s works and lobbied for their inclusion in school curricula.²² From 1881 to 1896, Houghton, Mifflin, the publisher of the *Atlantic*, produced the *American Men of Letters* series, which featured only one woman, Margaret Fuller, and no people of color. This series, as Scott E. Casper writes, “established the ground on which future scholars built.” And the growing textbook market for secondary schools, led by Houghton, Mifflin, also reflected the conservative tendencies of canon formation in focusing on the elite authors promoted by the *Atlantic*.²³

Women writers’ exclusion from the canon that the *Atlantic* helped to create reflected much more than shifting literary tastes. It also was the result of the male establishment’s conservative reaction against the pluralist culture of which women were a prominent part. The biases against female authors and the “feminine” in literature were reinforced as the literary elite feared that a diverse culture was set to replace the one in which privileged Anglo-Saxon males had a monopoly on cultural power. The growing consensus that American literature should be masculine and therefore grounded in manly realism and naturalism was part of the reaction of male elites against the new factions whose voices were clamoring for recognition. As African American males gained the ballot, Irish immigrants took over the political machines of northern cities, workers staged strikes, and women demanded with increasing intensity the right to vote, the Old Guard and the younger men who saw themselves as their inheritors felt that their authority

as the creators and monitors of America's culture was threatened. Fearing these cultural and political changes, male critics and scholars decried what they perceived as the feminine domination of American letters and attacked ambitious women writers, establishing themselves as "cultural custodians," as authorities who knew better than the (feminine) multitudes what should constitute the American literary pantheon. The hegemony these men had enjoyed was threatened on many fronts, but they were determined to maintain their hold on American letters and high culture. Meanwhile, many women and African Americans focused their attention on gaining social and political rights, which they deemed of the greatest importance.

Echoing the conservative desire at the turn of the century for social stability in the face of upheaval, American literary discourse tended toward the nostalgic and homogeneous. Canonization itself was essentially an attempt of the "genteel" forces in American letters to create an American literary tradition that was largely uniform and stable rather than diffuse and disorganized. The desire for a select canon of American literature was by its very nature exclusionary rather than anthological and effectively suppressed the impulses toward a democratic national literature, which had competed with elitist tendencies throughout the century. By the 1880s and 1890s, a sharp division between high and low literature had displaced the pluralistic model that would potentially include women writers in a tier just below the lords of American literature. Whereas the names of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson previously had been uttered in the same breath as Hawthorne, Emerson, James, Brontë, and Eliot, such comparisons between male and female writers or between American and British were no longer possible.

Making a Place in the Canon

The reconfiguration in the late-twentieth and the early-twenty-first centuries of the white, all-male canon to include women and people of color has meant, to some extent, that the works of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson have been revalued as important contributions to America's literary heritage. But the positions of these writers are not secure for some of the same reasons that their works were not canonized in the nineteenth century. Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were deemed to be "pioneers" who participated in a turn toward realism and local color without actually being influential members of those movements. Today they still don't seem to belong to a single identifiable period;

rather, they are viewed as products of a transitional period in American literary history and as authors who wrote a great variety of works, making it difficult to fit them into current literary categories. These four writers don't belong to the so-called women's categories of domestic literature or local color, nor to the so-called men's movements of romanticism and realism; rather, they straddled male and female literary realms, breaking down the classification of women's writing as low- or middlebrow literature and the idea that high literature was reserved exclusively for men. As a result, they posed a serious threat to the male literary elite, which was trying to establish America's literary reputation on the world stage and which would do so, in part, by erasing these writers from the literary map altogether. When their works have been considered, they have seemed to exist in a barren middle ground between the "feminine fifties" and the local color 1890s. As Mary Moss wrote of Stoddard in 1902, "her books form no link in the chain of literature, since she exerted no influence."²⁴ This image has persisted about all four writers and is essentially accurate. They were quickly neglected not only by scholars and critics but also by subsequent writers. The same is true of Davis, Spofford, Lazarus, and Jackson. Charlotte Forten Grimké and Sherwood Bonner, despite their early ambitions, did not live long enough or publish enough to have an impact on the critics of their day, so were doomed more completely to obscurity.

Another force that helped to erase this link of the postbellum generation of women writers in the chain of American literature was subsequent female authors themselves. Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, who have loomed large in the discussions of women writers adopting identities as serious artists, tried to establish themselves by participating in an increasingly masculine literary world. Therefore, they did not recognize Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, Woolson, or any of the others as their literary ancestors. Cather's relation to Jewett, however, helped to secure the latter's reputation. If, as Sharon Dean has suggested, Wharton was influenced by Woolson,²⁵ this connection remained hidden during Wharton's lifetime, and so her recognition did not extend to her literary foremother. In fact, Wharton ignored the earlier generation altogether. Donna M. Campbell reflects Wharton's view of her predecessors when she writes, "Identifying local colorists Jewett and Freeman rather than the previous generation of sentimentalists as her 'predecessors,' Wharton defines herself as a rebel against the tradition of women's local color fiction rather than as a practitioner of it." By dismissing the earlier sentimentalists and distinguishing herself from the later local colorists, she helped to obscure the innovations of the intervening generation of women

writers. To a significant extent, Wharton's and Cather's erasure of postbellum women writers has led scholars to assume that women's literature before the 1890s was only sentimental or domestic, as Deborah Lindsay Williams does when she writes of Wharton and Cather: "Claiming the role of artist for themselves marks a significant departure from the tradition of nineteenth-century female authorship," represented in Williams's study by the antebellum writers Stowe, Fanny Fern, and E. D. E. N. Southworth. Similarly, Amy Kaplan declares, "By pitting professional authorship against domesticity, Wharton defines herself against an earlier generation of American women novelists, known as the sentimental or domestic novelists."²⁶ If we let Wharton and Cather dictate our understanding of women's literary tradition, the postbellum generation disappears.

It also seems appropriate to return to the question of Jewett's importance. As I mentioned at the outset and have tried to convey throughout, she can be viewed as participating in many of the developments I chart here. She certainly devoted herself to her art and received recognition from the literary elite. She wrestled with her early ambitions and found a way to modify them in order to gain access to the high culture periodicals. And she, in essence, achieved what Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson could not—immortality as an artist. However, it is fair to say that the fact that she did not challenge the male literary elite helped to facilitate her lasting reputation. She represented for them a nonthreatening woman writer who knew her place, so to speak. She gained their respect by not asking for inclusion in their pantheon. Her work did not exhibit the kind of ambitions visible in some of Alcott's, Phelps's, Stoddard's, and Woolson's works. It is important to note that many recent scholars have argued against the "minor" or "small" status of Jewett's fiction, seeing much larger implications for nation building and feminizing American culture in her work, particularly *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.²⁷ However, my concern here is with how Jewett has been viewed since the late nineteenth century and on what terms she had been granted a place in the canon.

I do not wish to discredit Jewett's contribution to American literature or suggest that her work is of less value than that of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, or Woolson. On the contrary, if Jewett is worthy of serious attention, as she certainly is, then other women writers of her generation are equally deserving of the prestige that has been primarily or even solely granted to Jewett. My desire is that Jewett will no longer be seen as the single figure representing postbellum women writers, in part because she does not represent the full scope of their growing ambitions and participation in America's emerging high literary culture. By con-

tinuing to focus on Jewett and the local color writers of the 1890s, scholars perpetuate the notion of a separate sphere for women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century. When we expand our horizon to include the emerging artists of the 1860s–80s, divisions between a male and a female American literature begin to dissolve.

In addition, the writings of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson challenge the dominant image of the American woman literary artist as essentially “private,” “hidden,” and “reticent,” an image encapsulated by Emily Dickinson.²⁸ Often taken as the most accomplished woman writer of the nineteenth century, Dickinson has come to represent the impossibility of any female author openly subverting taboos against women’s devotion to art. While the careers of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, Woolson, and many of their female contemporaries exhibit strategies to deflect criticism of their ambitions, they certainly do not display the degree of reticence that Dickinson did. Again, it is important that we begin to reconfigure our understanding of American women writers and literary traditions in order to move beyond the kind of stereotype created by viewing Dickinson as *the* model of the nineteenth-century American female literary artist.

The careers of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson make clear that our understanding of American women’s literary history as advancing from sentimentalism to domestic literature to local color to modernism obscures the value of many women writers who do not fit neatly into any of those categories. We create the wrong impression when we teach students the Fuller-Stowe-Dickinson-Jewett-Chopin line of women writers’ development and hold up a few shining examples of women’s authorship without illuminating the diversity of women’s voices and ambitions that flourished in the nineteenth century, particularly in the postbellum period. Such a paradigm reifies what Avallone describes as late-nineteenth-century scholars’ attempts to contain female authors as “a series of exceptional individuals, not affiliated in literary traditions with one another or with men but, rather, assigned successively to a subordinate women’s ‘position.’”²⁹ Additionally, by constructing a pattern of women’s writing that advances from sentimentalism to domestic fiction to local color, scholars have created a parallel to the romanticism–realism–naturalism model that has governed our understanding of mainstream (men’s) American literary history. Few writers fit neatly into such narrow classifications, and by perpetuating them in scholarship and in the classroom as the dominant model of the nation’s literary past, we also perpetuate the narrow view of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century canonizers who sought to elevate a few writers above all others.

The conventional model of separate literary traditions for men and women also propagates the theory popular in the nineteenth century among advocates of women's "special genius" that women's writings are essentially different from men's. Our understanding of this period's construction of a national literature should be much more complex and multifaceted than it has been, and we should resist resurrecting old hierarchies. Of course, even as Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson sought entrance to high literary culture, they also understood themselves as different from male writers. But their writings and careers show us that difference does not necessarily mean entirely separate. Julia Ward Howe's view of a separate literary firmament for George Sand, or Phelps's depiction of the hierarchy of male and female writers at Holmes's breakfast, suggest how this generation of writers envisioned literary immortality for women writers and a place in the high literary culture, albeit distinct from the highest level, inhabited by the major male writers. This two-tiered view of the literary pantheon is much more inclusive than the all-male canon that prevailed, and therefore should be recognized as a competing model of a national literature. However, such a distinction should not be replicated today as we restructure the canon. For inherent in it is the assumption that women's writings are essentially different and inferior. It is important to recognize the potency of this belief when studying the literature of this period, but we must find alternative paradigms to govern our reconstruction of the American literary map.

As we do so, we should pay much more attention to Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, Woolson, and their contemporaries and no longer view them as isolated figures, disconnected from each other and from male writers. An important next step is to more fully consider how women writers of this generation participated in and challenged the major literary movements of the nineteenth century, particularly romanticism and realism, both of which scholars today still construct as composed almost exclusively of male authors. Many postbellum women writers produced texts displaying their serious engagement with the hotly contested issues that arose from their period's shifting literary aesthetics and solidifying artistic standards. In my next project, an extension of this one, I will consider how Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, Woolson, and other postbellum women writers formulated their theories of literary art and put them into practice. I will argue that by adopting the aim of the artist as "truth-teller," they were engaged in the most central literary issues of their day, confronting the obstacles to women writers within romanticism and realism and making serious efforts to find room for women in America's emerging high literary culture.