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A Different Feminist Scholarship

Research Challenges in Eighteenth-Century America

As someone whose scholarly interests place her with one foot in the eighteenth century and one foot in the nineteenth century, I feel drawn to respond to whether feminist scholarship produced by early Americanists is different from that produced by scholars of later eras. My answer to this question is both no—and yes. I say no because many feminist critics share my cross-period interests, and we tend to apply similar methodologies to the authors and texts we study, regardless of period. Yet undoubtedly the different research challenges early Americanists face shape the kinds of scholarship we produce and the questions we can answer.

While the original challenge for feminist scholars of the nineteenth century was to make space for women writers and their sometimes differing concerns and discourses in a field dominated by Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, and in which the masculine and the heterosexual were defined as normative, the challenges for early Americanists today are somewhat different. We certainly have our own towering male figures with which to contend: Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Brockden Brown, to name just a few. But the greater challenges, at least for me, have been presented by the historical structure of the publishing industry in the colonial and early national periods, as publishing moved from a few small regional presses to the still-small-in-size-but-increasing-in-number presses of the eighteenth century, and then to the large, consolidated, highly capitalized presses of the antebellum United States. The limited availability of early publishing records, coupled with the historical tradition of anonymous publication, makes exploring the experiences of earlier women writers decidedly more challenging.

Nowhere was this difference made more stark than when I worked simultaneously on projects on Sara Payson Willis Parton, who published

pseudonymously in the mid-nineteenth century as Fanny Fern, and Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood, who published four novels pseudonymously in the early national period as “A Lady of Massachusetts.” I began by asking similar sets of questions about each writer’s experiences with the publishing industry, but the results were quite different, in no small part because of different attitudes toward authorship itself, particularly by women. Libraries and archives are overflowing with information about Fanny Fern and original copies of her publications. Joyce Warren’s excellent biography—*Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (1992)—is an indispensable resource and guide to further information about Fern. And Fern’s own writings, both public and private, are filled with information about her experiences with the publishing industry.

But the case for Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood is quite different. Asking the same sets of questions led me in different directions. I had long been intrigued by how this rural, rather retiring woman managed to publish four novels with three different publishers from 1800 to 1804. Publishing in the first decade of the nineteenth century was dominated by small printers who produced small print runs. Relatively few of their records survive—nothing like, say, the extensive nineteenth-century archives of Ticknor and Fields or Harper Brothers. Without hard numbers for print runs, estimating something seemingly simple, such as the popularity of any given novel, requires one to ask a series of other questions: Are subscription lists extant? (Certainly the digitization of *Early American Imprints, First and Second Series*, and *Early American Newspapers* has allowed us to make tremendous progress in tracking the publications, reviews, and sales of works by early American women writers, but we’re limited by what others have decided is important enough to film; subscription lists frequently were not filmed, which entails travel to archives to examine original texts.) Where was a text advertised? Where was it reviewed? Is it listed in any published library catalogs, and if so, in what regions? In five minutes, I was able to establish how many copies of *Ruth Hall* were printed (in excess of 70,000),¹ but several weeks researching the novels of Sally Wood in the Maine Women Writers Collection at the University of New England left me with few definitive answers and many new and intriguing questions. My best guess is that Wood’s *Dorval* (1801), the novel in which I am most interested, had a print run of at least 600 copies, which would have

been a relatively large print run for a pseudonymous novel published by a small press—and in New Hampshire, no less. Yet infinitely more satisfying than that figure are the other things I learned: Judith Sargent Murray was a close personal friend of Wood’s mother, Sally Barrell, dating back to their girlhood; the Murray and Barrell families were frequent visitors and correspondents; Sally Wood’s mother developed an extensive plan of education for women (lost, alas) that may have influenced Murray’s own ideas about women’s education; Wood dedicated her first novel, *Julia*, to “Constantia,” and Murray in turn speaks lovingly of Wood in her letters to her mother; and, finally, the extended Barrell family served as patrons of Murray (or so she describes them in her letters) and helped garner subscriptions for her works in the small coastal cities of Maine—then a district of Massachusetts—just as Murray sought subscribers for Wood’s novels.² Perhaps most intriguing is the vigorous, passionate debate over women’s rights in which Murray and Wood engaged, but that is the subject of another essay. Cumulatively, these small discoveries have illustrated to me that living in a rural area outside the salon culture of the colonial cities did not entail isolation. Merchant families like those of Sally Wood—even those living in remote areas—were well informed and culturally sophisticated, in large part because of their extensive correspondence networks.³ While it was initially exasperating not to be able to find a simple answer to my query about the popularity of Sally Wood’s novels, it was ultimately much more fun and satisfying to pursue these other, unpredictable lines of inquiry and to begin to speculate about how networks of women writers may have supported one another toward publication.

This leads me to the area in which I think that scholarship on early American writers lags in comparison with the scholarship on nineteenth-century women writers, and that is in comprehensive study of collaborative authorship in all its facets, ranging from actual coauthorship to editorial relationships to ghostwriting. Certainly, there has been excellent work done exploring the authorship and publication process for individual authors, such as Mary Rowlandson or Annis Boudinot Stockton.⁴ Another brilliant example would be the 1997 publication by Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin Wulf of *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book*, which opens up to scholarly consideration a network of eighteenth-century women authors, most of whose works circulated privately. But we have yet to see, in studies

of early American women's writing, anything like the flurry of scholarship on collaborative practices in the transatlantic nineteenth century, resulting in Shirley Marchalonis's *Patrons and Protégées* (1988), Bette London's *Writing Double* (1999), Holly Laird's *Women Coauthors* (2000), Lorraine York's *Rethinking Women's Collaborative Writing* (2002), and Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson's *Literary Couplings* (2006), to name just a few studies. Indeed, this is an area that I hope early Americanists will pursue, for such study will also advance our understanding of the complex negotiations by which persons of less privilege—whether female, poor, enslaved, incarcerated, of color, and so on—participated in publishing.

NOTES

1. Both Joyce Warren and Susan Belasco Smith cite this figure, relying in part on advertisements and extravagant claims for popularity that Mason Brothers made in the publicity campaign for *Ruth Hall*. See Warren 123; Smith xxxiv.
2. Information about the friendship between Murray and the extended Barrell family is scattered throughout archives and scholarly work. Murray's letter books are held at the Mississippi Department of History and Archives in Jackson, Mississippi; this collection has been microfilmed. Murray provided tangible assistance to Wood, speaking in her letter of 25 Nov. 1800 about her efforts to garner subscribers for Wood's novels. Although only a small number of Murray's vast archive of letters have been published, *The Letters I Left Behind: Judith Sargent Murray Papers: Letter Book 10* includes copies of three important letters to the Barrell family seeking their help in raising subscriptions. See letter 586, to Sally Sayward Barrell, dated 31 Oct. 1796; letter 626, to Joseph Barrell, dated 6 Mar. 1797; and letter 710, to Sally Sayward Barrell, dated 31 Jan. 1798. For a broader overview of Murray's correspondence with the extended Barrell family, see Kasraie. Most copies of *Dorval*—including the copy owned by the American Antiquarian Society, which was filmed for *Early American Imprints, Second Series*—do not include the subscription list. The copies owned by the Brick Store Museum in Kennebunk, Maine, and the Maine State Library do, however, include the subscription list; this list includes Murray and one of her nieces.
3. One of the most common refrains in the Barrell and Wood family correspondence is a request for current books and periodicals from relatives in Boston. The largest such collection of correspondence is owned by the Maine Historical Society; see the Barrell Family Collection, coll. 2129, 1740–1936. I am indebted to John Mayer for helping me access this correspondence.
4. See, for example, Derounian, and Mulford.

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