

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

9-1-2005

Review [of *Managing Literacy, Mothering America: Women's Narratives on Reading and Writing in the Nineteenth Century* by Sarah Robbins]

Sarah Wadsworth

Marquette University, sarah.wadsworth@marquette.edu

Published version. *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (September 2005): 471-473. [Publisher Link](#). © 2005 Massachusetts University of Technology Press. Used with permission.

Surprisingly, Boyd's readings generate little excitement for these four authors' writings as literature that is worth attention for its own sake. Focusing primarily on the new perspectives Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson open onto American literary history, Boyd is well into the second chapter before offering close looks at any of their works, and her book lacks a much-needed compendium of their writings. Still, Boyd's elegant prose, grounded in theory and yet free of its jargon, makes *Writing for Immortality* a pleasure to read. Its analysis of American women writers' predicaments and achievements offers an important corrective to our understanding of the development of literary culture in the United States.

Nancy Sweet is a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at Columbia University. Her dissertation, "Chaste Rebellion: The Disobedient Daughter in Antebellum Literature," examines writings by Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, James Fenimore Cooper, Harriet Jacobs, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Managing Literacy, Mothering America: Women's Narratives on Reading and Writing in the Nineteenth Century. By Sarah Robbins. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. Pp. x, 326. \$39.95.)

For nineteenth-century readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the most cherished scenes in the book was a poignant cameo of little Eva, the child "evangelist," reading the Bible with Uncle Tom. The scene is one of several depictions in the novel of "domestic literacy management," a once prevalent practice that, as Sarah Robbins demonstrates, gave rise to a vital genre that flourished in nineteenth-century America: the domestic literacy narrative. With *Managing Literacy, Mothering America*, Robbins joins in the feminist project of recovering women's writing by chronicling, analyzing, and contextualizing this nearly extinct genre.

Managing Literacy, Mothering America is a heavily theorized study that offers insightful applications of historical materialist standpoint theory, discourse analysis, genre theory, and Jane Tompkins's "cultural work" model. The chapters provide rigorously historicized intertextual readings that consider selected domestic literacy narratives alongside private letters, conduct books, journals, biographies, autobiographies, journalistic accounts, government reports, literacy statis-

tics, illustrations, and elements of folk culture. Although the prose is hampered in places by obtrusive jargon, Robbins deftly manages her often unwieldy material.

Robbins conceives of the domestic literacy narrative as a flexible narrative form constructed around a recurring motif or plot: "maternal figures teaching young Americans to read, write, and learn about the world through oral and written language, thereby giving them an idealized moral character to benefit their national community" (p. 2). In revealing the genre's gendered political dimensions—its emphasis on the "nation-building agenda" of a "maternally managed" literacy guidance that promoted civic engagement—*Managing Literacy, Mothering America* situates the domestic literacy narrative within a larger literary and cultural tradition. The genre's history begins with early American adaptations of the English writer Anna Laetitia Barbauld's didactic primer *Lessons for Children*, builds on the ideology of Republican motherhood, and extends to politicized writing such as abolitionist and other reform-oriented texts. Robbins meticulously traces the genre's development from its British urtext, through works by Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Lydia Sigourney, to its later incarnations in turn-of-the-century missionary narratives. In a brief conclusion, she examines its recent revivals and residual traces and their implications for current American culture.

As Robbins ably demonstrates, the domestic literacy narrative responded quickly to shifting sociopolitical perspectives and objectives. Moreover, as a genre, it had an unusual capacity for shaping literacy practices and molding society because it depicted and promoted a version of literacy that readers could reenact for themselves through shared reading, writing, and discussion. From the private home, in which mothers "managed" the literacy development of their own children, the genre gradually extended into the public sphere, becoming a powerful tool for advocating a particular type of feminized pedagogy in institutional contexts ranging from primary schools to foreign missions. Along with the quintessential form of the domestic literacy narrative, exemplified by Sedgwick, Sigourney, and Child, Robbins examines several subgenres, including those addressing education, racial uplift, and cross-cultural literacy (the "missionary-mother biography"). While such an approach risks reducing complex narratives to decontextualized sequences of representative scenes, Robbins's precisely focused analysis is illuminating rather than limiting. Robbins sees *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, as a hybrid text, one dimension

of which constitutes the pinnacle of the domestic literacy narrative's development. Robbins shows how this perspective can give today's readers greater insight into the novel's significance and radicalism in the nineteenth century. Similarly, by reading Frances Harper's fiction against Reconstruction-era government reports on black literacy, Robbins demonstrates that Harper's domestic literacy narratives pointedly revised the official discourse to correct damaging stereotyped portrayals and to advocate a race-inflected model of maternal literacy management.

Robbins is to be commended for scrutinizing both the "empowering vision" and the "troubling limits" of domestic literacy narratives (p. 5). Asking, "Is it possible for writers and readers to use this flexible narrative form to claim social influence without constraining others?" (p. 9), she relentlessly analyzes the mechanisms whereby the domestic literacy narrative specifically (and print culture more broadly) privileged white, middle-class women. "The ideology of maternal domestic literacy management," Robbins contends, "caused social power to accrue to middle-class (primarily white) women at the expense of others, while claiming to serve the national welfare" (p. 4). Thus, in a chapter on cross-class teaching, Robbins investigates ways in which mainstream domestic literacy narratives simultaneously disseminated and restricted access to literacy among lower-class learners, thereby safeguarding the social position of the privileged teaching class.

While she rigorously critiques the genre's classist and racist biases in the nineteenth century, Robbins suggests that twenty-first-century politicians, educators, and the general public have much to gain from shifting away from relatively narrow approaches to literacy as a package of skills to a more holistic, gendered approach that stresses the kinds of shared, interactive reading practices promoted by nineteenth-century domestic literacy narratives. This suggestion may ring of nostalgia for an era when parents were less willing to outsource their children's literacy instruction. Nevertheless, *Managing Literacy, Mothering America* aptly conveys the merits, along with the limits, of the traditional pedagogical practices that engendered the domestic literacy narrative in nineteenth-century America.

Sarah A. Wadsworth is Assistant Professor of English at Marquette University, where she specializes in nineteenth-century American literature and early American print culture.