DORRI BEAM


Reviewed by Laura Laffrado.

Dorri Beam’s feminist literary study opens engagingly with a clearly stated and unembellished description of its (very) embellished literary subject: “This book argues for the aesthetic pleasures and feminist politics of ornament, profusion, and verbosity in nineteenth-century America by recovering a sensuous and extravagant style of writing by women that reviewers often termed 'highly wrought’” (1). Beam’s critical investigation asks us “what is at stake in heightened style in fiction by women of the period” and it seeks to initiate “a conversation on how style operated within texts, in the literary field, and in constructions of gender” (3). Style, Gender, and Fantasy, which is the most recent entry in the Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture series, examines in detail writings of a diverse range of authors such as Margaret Fuller, Ann Stephens, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Margaret Sweat, Mary Clemmer, Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Pauline Hopkins. Through her analysis of such women’s writings, Beam aims to “rechart the imaginative life of both black and white women to show that aesthetic experiment, literary ambition, adventure, and fantasy were the province of women as well as men in nineteenth-century America” (8).

The book’s in-depth introduction carefully situates Beam’s study in the extensive critical dialogue that has been conducted in recent years by important literary scholars such as Nina Baym, Monika Elbert, Susan K. Harris, Eliza Richards, Cindy Weinstein, and many others. Beam wishes to advance that valuable dialogue by “revealing
women’s integral participation in and gendered recasting of literary romanticism, rather than arguing for men’s investment in literary sentimentalism” (8). This book, Beam writes, shows how “the use of such style allowed women writers to generate alternative models of gendered self and desire. Rather than positioning these women writers as writing in a separate generic tradition, [she seeks] to demonstrate the centrality of highly wrought writing to a variety of debates at the crux of romantic literary production” (2).

Throughout the introduction, Beam stresses the larger implications of her project. “I use the archive,” she writes, “to rethink the position of women in the literary field through the historical and textual archaeology of an overlooked aesthetic mode and then bring that mode to bear on previously separate field formations. I return to the archives . . . to fundamentally reconstitute in deeply historical terms, the nature of literary endeavor, values, and forms for the nineteenth century” (8). Beam takes the extravagant style of some women’s writings of the period as a vantage point from which to survey a wide range of nineteenth-century male as well as female writers, texts, and practices and to (re) incorporate women’s highly stylized writings into that heady (but not currently perceived as florid) cultural mix.

In her introduction, Beam briefly notes much literary criticism in the field of nineteenth-century United States studies. Citing, for instance, the foundational separate-spheres work of scholars such as Ann Douglas, Jane Tompkins, and Barbara Welter, she also acknowledges more recent critiques of the separate-spheres model in work by Monika Elbert, Amy Kaplan, and Mary Loeffelholz. Beam’s chief contribution to this critical dialogue is to locate the extravagant writing of certain female writers of the period in the canonical romantic tradition. For Beam, these writings are not forms of
heightened eloquence to be dismissed or slighted; they are rather “the form [taken by] women’s romantic vision” (14). As such they also offer a valuable critique of romanticism from within its borders. Beam’s project, then, is to make these texts participate in our conception of romanticism and by this means to further challenge the notion that men and women writers of nineteenth-century America worked in separate spheres.

Manifesting her detailed knowledge of the period and the writings under discussion, Beam’s introduction and the four chapters that follow make numerous connections large and small to nineteenth-century primary texts as well as to critical studies of them and their period. The introduction also prepares readers for the acts of textual recovery that will be performed in the rest of the book. Though Beam clearly states that her critical project should not be viewed as “recall[ing] forgotten authors for the sake of a rote representational politics” (8), she nonetheless reveals the value of a number of lesser-known authors and texts.

In the first chapter, Beam considers the intersections of language, alterity, and Orientalism in works such as Margaret Fuller’s travel memoir *Summer on the Lakes* and Ann Stephens’s popular novel *Mary Derwent*. Linking florid language to the then-popular language of flowers, this chapter treats flower language as a “woman’s language” and also shows how Orientalist styles of ornament intersect with assumptions of Western femininity. The second chapter examines feminism, mesmerism, and the sensuous in Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s *Shadow Land; or The Seer*, Mary Clemmer’s novel *Victoire*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*. Here Beam buttresses her overall
argument by considering the alternative spaces that these writers sought to construct, spaces that allowed different ways of imagining feminism and agency. Chapters Three and Four track florid writing across the color line. After examining aesthetics, highly wrought language, and ornament in the writings of Harriet Prescott Spofford and Edgar Allan Poe, Beam finds the African-American Pauline Hopkins using the highly wrought writing style more often employed by white women writers; probing Hopkins’ *Winona*, Beam sifts this style while also examining generic form, romantic interiors, and female subjectivity. Finally, Beam briefly treats gender, ornament, and the influences of these earlier women writers on the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton.

Beam is at her best when she investigates the literary aims and resonances of specific works. “In recovering these works my goal is . . . to learn to read a forgotten mode, one that is integral to understanding women writers’ gendered relations to canonical romanticism and to an enhanced, more inclusive picture of American romanticism itself, not simply because such a picture includes women but because it accommodates a body of works that presented a contemporaneous challenge from within romanticism’s ranks” (195). As Beam reconstructs it, that challenge was delivered by florid women’s writing—operating within canonical romanticism—to writings in different and less florid styles by men. In her concluding argument, Beam provocatively extends her felicitously stated desire “to learn to read a forgotten mode” to our own contemporary responses to such mixes of the feminine and the florid. “Highly wrought writing,” she contends, “presents a challenge today as well, especially if the reason these texts are forgotten may have much to do with our own aesthetic and political (especially feminist) recoil from floridity and its related register of femininity. When we
pause to attend to the way highly wrought texts defamiliarize without disowning either floridity or associations with the feminine, we are instructed in new ways of reading that our political and aesthetic dispositions could neither predict not project” (195). This final line from Beam’s book suggests the further work that could be done to restore the relations between the political and the aesthetic in what Beam suggests are our sometimes still negative or dismissive responses to the highly wrought writings of women.

This book still retains some generic markers of the doctoral dissertation. For instance, it sometimes foregoes further discussion and analysis of the subjects at hand (which would be very welcome) in favor of regular re/iterations of overly nuanced declarations of what the book is/is not attempting to accomplish. Additionally, Cambridge University Press’s use of small, dense type unattractively crowds the book’s pages in a way that is, ironically enough in light of its topic, neither ornamental nor aesthetically pleasing.

Nevertheless, this book offers an important contribution to scholarship on American literature of the nineteenth century. Beam’s book successfully makes the case that the explicitly florid style of women’s writing in nineteenth-century America—long trivialized, diminished, or dismissed—rightly belongs in our scholarly considerations and understandings of canonical romanticism. Laura Laffrado is Professor of English at Western Washington University and most recently the author of Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women’s Writing (2009).