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## “It Is Difficult to Disengage a Single Thread from the Living Web of a Nation’s Literature”

Sarah Piatt and the Construction of Literary History

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In 1889, Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson published six poems by Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt (1836–1919) in the ninth volume of their *A Library of American Literature*. However, as Hutchinson wrote in an undated letter to Stedman, she underappreciated Piatt’s poetry:

Mrs. Piatt’s “Poetry”! Oh, oh! ’Tis the kind of poetry that makes me feel that I adore prose. I never did like Mrs. Browning’s soul-butter, heretical as that may seem; and when one comes to Mrs. Piatt’s oleomargarine—well!!

Am in a hurry.

Adios, Señor. (“For E.C.S.”)

Irreverent, dismissive, and hurried, Hutchinson posits that, especially in comparison to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s rich “soul-butter,” Piatt’s poetry is best categorized as “oleomargarine,” or artificial butter. In other words, one is a poor substitute for the other. Hutchinson seemingly cared little for Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poems, and she liked Piatt’s even less.

Hutchinson’s reaction to Piatt was not atypical. According to Paula Bernat Bennett, in her introduction to *Palace-Burner*, “Piatt’s reviews were typically mixed—when, that is, they were not downright hostile” (xxviii). But the inclusion of Piatt’s poetry in *A Library of American Literature*, despite Hutchinson saying that she had a renewed love of prose after reading it, suggests more about Hutchinson’s commitment to literary history than it does about her opinion

of this particular poet. As advertising for the *Library* suggests, Stedman and Hutchinson offered their late nineteenth-century readers something new—“a complete literary history of America” (“A Library of American Literature” 480). Piatt’s inclusion in the eleven-volume *Library* collection thus marks her place in American literary history.

In this essay, I use Piatt as a case study to investigate the very history of American literary histories, with their putative late nineteenth-century origins. In order to overturn the notion of late nineteenth-century literary historians as intrinsically conservative—an artificial construct generally employed to distinguish modernism as a twentieth-century phenomena—I use the term “literary history” in its most rudimentary sense: as a narrative of past events and participants in literature through an examination of selected authors and texts. Kermit Vanderbilt posits that dozens of literary historians were working in the final decades of the nineteenth century (122). To date, however, scant attention has been paid to the female literary historians of the era. If, as this volume proposes, literature from the turn into the twentieth century is often marginalized, then female literary historians of the era are even more so, with their impact on the field of American literature largely ignored or overlooked.

Drawing on *A Library of American Literature* and *The Critic*, the first New York periodical devoted primarily to literature,<sup>1</sup> this essay identifies two of the many female literary historians of the era, Ellen Mackay Hutchinson and Jeanette Leonard Gilder, and posits that understanding their respective interventions in American literary history demands the type of close attention to historical continuities across the century’s long turn proposed by Melanie V. Dawson and Meredith L. Goldsmith in their introduction. By focusing on continuities between centuries rather than imposing a sharp chronological divide between them, we not only gain a better appreciation of the turn of the century’s tumultuousness and upheaval but also of the emergence of female literary historians and how the methods they employed to provide some sense of order to the growing wealth of American literary production differed from those of their male counterparts. As the case of Piatt suggests, female literary historians like Hutchinson and Gilder impacted the shape of American literature—before it became the purview of academics—through their work of identifying, collecting, and preserving an American literary tradition.

Little known today, Hutchinson and Gilder were once celebrated by readers in New York City (where both of them worked), throughout the United States, and abroad. Both seized professional opportunities created in the latter half of

the nineteenth century, when more efficient printing and distribution methods combined with the demands of a rapidly expanding reading populace to create not only new publication outlets but also a wider array of career options for women. In her discussion of the late nineteenth-century literary climate, Nancy Glazener posits that “democratic discourses of American genius and individualism, Transcendentalism, and European romanticism, combined with the examples of female geniuses in Europe and opportunities for literary professionalization in America, helped to create an atmosphere of potential and possibility for women writers” (15).

Where Glazener’s work documents the historical rise and recognition of women authors, this chapter highlights similar efforts and achievements by female literary historians. Inspired by the transcendentalist rhetoric of self-transformation (aimed largely at men but embraced by women), emboldened by access to better educational opportunities, and empowered by a wider array of employment options, women like Hutchinson and Gilder helped democratize the arena of literary history. Best known as literary editor of the *New-York Tribune*, Hutchinson coedited the *Library* in her spare time, demanding—and receiving—equal billing on the project. At the same time, Gilder jointly founded and edited *The Critic* with her brother Joseph Benson Gilder before eventually assuming sole editorial control.

Throughout the 1880s and early 1890s, *The Critic* engaged its readers in identifying a national academy of living American authors. In 1890, during a write-in election entitled “The Twenty Immortelles,” the magazine published a list of 125 notable American women writers that included Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt. A hundred years later, at the height of the so-called canon wars, *Legacy* reprinted this list as an example of the periodical’s impact on the study of women writers (“From *The Critic*”). Like Hutchinson, who privately repudiated Piatt’s poetry but still included her in the *Library*, Gilder did not always especially care for the aesthetics of the authors whose texts she was recording for future generations. Unpacking Hutchinson’s and Gilder’s respective attitudes toward other women authors—attitudes that range from disdain to ambivalence to admiration—helps us see how their positioning of Piatt and her poetry simultaneously established and bolstered their reputations as writers, editors, and literary historians.

Like Hutchinson and Gilder, Piatt was known to readers of her day; she was, at the time she was anthologized in the *Library*, midway through a long poetic career. Born Sarah Morgan Bryan near Lexington, Kentucky, in 1836, to Talbot

and Mary Ann [Spiers] Bryan, Piatt published over 150 poems in the *Louisville Journal* and the *New York Ledger* before her 1861 marriage to John James Piatt. Though Bennett identifies many of Piatt's early poems as juvenilia, they do evidence her prolificacy and her early success. According to one biographical dictionary, "by 1860 she was a popular and well-known poet in Kentucky, the South, and throughout the United States" (Colvert 63). Piatt's poetry "enriched the literature associated with America's coming of age," concludes Jean Allen Hanawalt, though not through her magazine poems, which primarily appealed to middle class readers seeking affirmation for their Victorian-era values (3, 13). Furthermore, her "popular distribution and critical affirmation" was contemporaneously evidenced by the publication of her poetry in prestigious literary journals and by the volumes collected by her husband, who served as her literary agent (Hanawalt 187).

Her fame increased in 1882, when she moved to Ireland, where her husband had received an appointment as U.S. consul and where she had more time to devote to poetic pursuits. In Ireland, Piatt wrote some of her "best work," and developed an international reputation earning "high praise" from notable English, Irish, and American critics (Colvert 64). By the time of her death on December 22, 1919, Piatt's poetry had appeared in dozens of periodicals and anthologies, in addition to being collected in seventeen volumes (including two with her husband), though her rate of publication markedly waned after the turn of the century. Her wide range of topics, forms, and tones notwithstanding, Piatt was recognized throughout her poetic career, according to Jess Roberts, as a conventional "female" poet (174–75). But indications of her literary longevity can be discerned historically. As Hanawalt discusses, though "Sarah saw her work compared to that of other 'women-poets,' whose writing was not expected to reach the level achieved by men," she also, "more than once, found herself nominated as the foremost woman-poet among her American female contemporaries" (177). Often likened by critics to her English counterparts, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Piatt's popularity would not win her uninterrupted fame. Literary histories of the twentieth century that lionize male poets at the expense of their female counterparts treat her as a "minor poet," when they do not ignore her altogether. As Matthew Giordano notes, "Brushed aside by modernists and New Critics as simply another sentimental poetess, she was erased from the dominant narratives of American poetic history" (24).

Ironically, Piatt's poetry about children, which initially received wide ac-

claim, may have hastened her ultimate poetic devaluation. “Child-poem,” a term commonly used by nineteenth-century critics to describe this particular—and popular—genre, “may refer to poems about and for children, but it also describes poems where children and childhood are the topic and adults the audience” (Hanawalt 181). In *Children in American Poetry*, Bert Roller locates Piatt as part of the post-Civil War “fruition period of American poetry on childhood” (184). Read through anthologized poems like “After Wings” and “The Witch in the Glass” (both included in the *Library*), Roller writes, Piatt demonstrates “an engaging daintiness in her references to children, although, even here, she seems to be thinking of the lessons she is to teach” (135). Those lessons had far-reaching implications, as both social and cultural values were transmitted through the memorization and performance of poetry (Sorby xvii).

By the end of the long nineteenth century, poetry was a pedagogical staple, so popularized for classroom use through the ubiquitous McGuffey Readers series that, as Angela Sorby argues, “the so-called ‘schoolroom poets’ were the best-known literary figures in the nation” (xii). Hanawalt discusses Piatt’s child-poetry, saying that her poems like “Hiding the Baby” and “Five and Two” highlight the fragility of children and infants without insisting, as did many of her poetic contemporaries, “that childhood is better than adulthood” (186). Piatt’s canonization in the classroom is best evidenced by her inclusion, in 1879, in two McGuffey volumes: the *Fourth Eclectic Reader* and the *Fifth Eclectic Reader*. But, as Kelly Larson succinctly observes, even the popular “School Room Poets” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and William Cullen Bryant), suffered poetic losses when they became institutionalized in the classroom, as “this canonization had a deleterious effect on the aesthetic standing of these poets and of their aesthetic since they came to be so associated with children, pedagogy, and the enforced consumption of poetry” (31).

In his *Thoughts and Experiences In and Out of School*, John B. Peaslee, former superintendent of Cincinnati’s public schools, hints toward the pedagogical usefulness of Piatt’s poetry by recording Piatt’s inclusion in a public tribute to American authorship. Peaslee, an educator who emphasized the memorization and recitation of literary works and contended for the study of American, and not English authors, organized an 1882 Arbor Day celebration to plant an “Author’s Grove” in Cincinnati’s Eden Park. That year, some 17,000 school children planted six acres of trees, each eventually accompanied by an eight-inch square granite marker honoring a particular author. In 1883, both Sarah and John J.