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In 1879, at the age of thirty-nine, James Fenimore Cooper’s grandniece Constance Fenimore Woolson set foot in Europe, where she remained until her death in 1894. Although she had acquired a taste for travelling at an early age, it was only after her mother’s death that she crossed the Atlantic for the first time. In so doing, she abandoned the idea of a permanent home for a nomadic way of life. Like her close friend Henry James whom she met in Florence, Woolson became an acute observer of the conflicts unique to late nineteenth-century transitional cultures, including tensions surrounding gender and sexuality. An ambitious writer herself, she became increasingly frustrated by the social and artistic prejudice women of the period were forced to endure. Like many “lady novelists” in the nineteenth century, her efforts to be
acknowledged as a serious writer were repeatedly complicated by what Elaine Showalter describes as the era’s “trivialization of women writers and bias against female ambition.” Yet, despite the popularity of her novels during her lifetime, the pioneering nature and originality of her local color fiction and travel writing, and her success in securing an exclusive contract with prestigious publisher Harper & Brothers, Woolson’s reputation has since declined. Today, she is known less for her work than for her intimate relationship with Henry James. Indeed, until very recently, scholars interpreted even her death after falling from her third-story window in Venice solely in terms of her unrequited love for him.

Although there have being important studies of Woolson’s work in the 1980s and 1990s, and several of her short stories (most notably, “Miss Grief”) have been included in undergraduate anthologies, attempts to study Woolson’s life and literary oeuvre in its entirety remain notably absent. Anne Boyd Rioux’s book-length biography, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, seeks to fill a significant gap in the literature on this pioneering female author and recover her importance in American letters and history. The author of *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture*, Rioux is well versed in the subject of female authorship in mid-19th century America. Here, she succeeds in reviving a whole world around her subject by focusing specifically on Woolson’s personal correspondence as well as her fiction and non-fiction. From Roux’s meticulous examination of the cultural context within which Woolson operated emerges a woman who is full of energy and curiosity, ambitious for literary recognition but also shy and reserved, generous and devoted but also private and independent. Above all, she was a woman artist as “committed to her writing” as James was—and for Rioux, understanding how Woolson “ended up dying alone, in the cold street behind her home in Venice” requires shifting attention away from her relationship to James. Where critics and biographers have historically seen Rioux through James’s eyes, Rioux argues that we instead “loo[k] at her life through *her* eyes” (emphasis added).

The book is divided into five parts ordered chronologically, each of which deals with a period in Woolson’s life. Following a brief introduction providing an overview of the socio-historical context from which Woolson emerged, Part One examines her youth, from her
birth in 1840 and childhood in New England to her adolescence in Cleveland. Rioux successfully depicts Woolson’s family’s misfortunes, the early deaths of five of her seven siblings, and the household’s financial insecurity. These material conditions, Rioux notes, did not preclude Woolson from receiving a decent education, although it was certainly inferior to that of the men of her generation.

Part Two, “An Education in Authorship,” describes the beginning of Woolson’s career as a female author after the death of her father in 1870. Of particular note is the financial impetus underlying her initial pursuit of a writing career: having lost her father, it fell to Woolson to provide for her invalid mother. Rioux eloquently articulates the scarcity of female professions after the Civil War: this uncertainty caused Woolson permanent anxiety and contributed to her life-long depression. This period saw Woolson’s first glimmers of success. Her name began to appear frequently in contemporary magazines thanks to her realist depictions of the Great Lakes and, later, the South (where she relocated due to her mother’s health, which required warm climates), as well as to her connection to James Fenimore Cooper. Soon she would make her mark as an accomplished short-story writer with one bestselling book (Anne) and prolific contributions to the leading literary magazines.

“A European Experiment” takes the reader to the other side of the Atlantic, depicting the years between 1879 and 1886, during which Woolson became a familiar figure in American expatriate circles in England, Italy and Switzerland. She was at her most self-confident in this period, deliberately attempting to compete with leading figures of the male literary status quo including William Dean Howells and Henry James. Her acquaintance with James (1880) marked the beginning of a troubled relationship between the two, which ended with Woolson’s death fourteen years later. Rioux handles this aspect of Woolson’s life admirably well. Woolson and James’s mutual agreement to burn their correspondence renders a detailed account of their liaison impossible, but Rioux resists embellishing the narrative with biofictional speculation.

Part Four encompasses the Bellosguardo years, which was arguably the happiest period of Woolson’s life, during which she rented the homonymous villa and lived in close proximity to friends who respected her privacy as well as her work. One of these was painter Lizzie Boott, who
postponed marriage until her late 30s in order to pursue her artistic career. Boot’s untimely death devastated Woolson, for whom she was both a close female friend and a testament to the compatibility of love and career. Through a chapter appropriately titled “Arcadia Lost,” Rioux hints that it is the loss of Boot, and not of potential-husband James, that plunged Woolson into her final period of depression.

“The Final [four] Years” that comprise Part Five are an exploration of Woolson’s nomadic period towards the end of her life. During these years, Woolson was constantly on the move, searching for a place that felt like home. After spending the Christmas of 1889 in Corfu, she spent three months in Egypt, followed by a period in England, and then Venice. Her ultimate aim during this period was to earn enough money through her writing to purchase a house in Florida. Unfortunately, she never made it back to the USA: suffering from increasing deafness, subdued by financial concerns and worries about her literary future, she may have committed suicide, jumping out of the window of her 3rd floor apartment.

Rioux’s biography of Woolson concludes with a reflective assessment of her legacy. True, Woolson was “forgotten and ignored” by her peers (James) and successors (Wharton and Cather) despite having been heralded during her lifetime as one of the most promising American writers of her generation. However, Rioux’s rich analysis of the writer’s character and writings, her intimate friendships, and wider cultural context, make up a comprehensive critical study that calls for a fresh readership, among specialist and non-specialist readers alike. Contextualisation of these multiple strands within a broader framework of nineteenth century American Literature is perhaps the book’s greatest strengths. Indeed, Portrait of a Lady Novelist is of great benefit in its attention to under-studied and under-researched areas of Woolson’s life and art and a valuable contribution to American Studies.
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