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Stéphanie Durrans

- 1 Throughout the nineteenth century, as underlined by Nancy Cott in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, “the central convention of domesticity was the contrast between the home and the world” (64). The tension between private and public no doubt informs most of Harriet Prescott Spofford’s work and will be addressed from many different angles by the contributors to this special issue.¹ As a middle-class white woman who lived with her husband and extended family on the beautiful premises of Deer Island, Massachusetts, and had a reputation as a remarkable hostess,² Spofford could be expected to define herself solely in relation to home and family. And yet for all that, while making domesticity a central concern in her work, she also explored its intricate connections with both national issues and the world of the wilderness in stories that often take on a disturbing edge. Elsdon has shown how domesticity encapsulates a wide range of meanings “as a concept of state, as a thematics of the home, and as a tamed status in which wildness has been curtailed” (xi), all of which are perhaps given most prominence in Spofford’s widely anthologized short story, “Circumstance,” a haunting tale in which a woman who has been captured by a panther and carried away to the top branches of a tree manages to stop the beast from devouring her by singing through the night.
- 2 “Circumstance” plunges the reader into a world where “Distinctions between home and wilderness are blurred and uncertain” (Logan 121). It can hardly be denied that Spofford sets about destabilizing our most common assumptions. This is a story that features a woman on the move, a woman undertaking a journey to the heart of darkness while her husband is waiting for her at home, playing the violin and looking after their child; the home itself is subject to a renegotiation of its boundaries when the forest inspires a “sweet home feeling” (156) in her; the Indians are not where they would be expected to be in a traditional captivity narrative—not in the wilderness but

on its edges where they lay waste to the small community of settlers; the spectral apparition that should have left the poor woman in a state of terror is dismissed by the pragmatic, no-nonsense protagonist as a mere product of “circumstance,” not even as a figment of her imagination (something she is utterly deprived of, says the narrator). The final twist clinches this series of reversals. Just as we expected order to be restored with the heroic husband saving his wife and the meek woman now following in her husband’s footsteps, the frame is once more destabilized by the destruction of the home to which a safe return could be expected after this rite of passage.

- 3 The young woman who wrote “Circumstance” (published in 1860) had only just risen to fame thanks to the publication of another story (“In a Cellar”) that she had sent to the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859, a story that was deemed so good and that evinced such knowledge of Parisian life that the editor, James Russell Lowell, could hardly believe it came from the pen of a demure young lady who had never set foot in France. The late 1850s and early 1860s were years of intense struggle as Harriet Prescott found herself under pressure to write hundreds of stories to support her ailing parents as well as her younger siblings. In the process, she ventured into literary genres traditionally coded as “male” and questioned the stability that “home” was supposed to offer. Most of the stories she wrote in those days unfortunately remain uncollected and even unidentified, waiting for future scholars to sift through the dusty archives where they are lying. Her newly-found fame and her marriage with Boston lawyer Richard Spofford in 1865 marked the end of a period of dire financial circumstances, though she remained a highly prolific writer to the end of her life in 1921. Her work had by then largely fallen into oblivion, partly because of Spofford’s natural affinity for romanticism which made it difficult for her to negotiate the transition towards realism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most of this work thus remained unacknowledged until the early 1980s, when a handful of scholars including Thelma J. Shinn, Barton Levi St. Armand, Alfred Bendixen, and Anne Dalke initiated the pioneering work of literary recovery that has brought Spofford to the attention of modern readers. Since then, a number of critics have further contributed to establishing Spofford’s literary significance, though with a near exclusive focus on “Circumstance” whose intriguing implications are still being teased out by contemporary scholarship, as shown by the two essays featured in the third part of this collection. Our primary concern, however, was also to uncover less familiar facets of this amazing writer who tried her hand at so many different genres (detective fiction, sentimental fiction, local color fiction, science fiction, tales of adventure, ghost stories, etc.) and to show the relevance of her work to modern-day readers. Taken collectively, the essays that follow show how Spofford’s work grows out of a desire to position herself with respect to her literary predecessors (e.g. Poe and Longfellow), how it interacts with the work of her fellow contemporary writers (e.g. Dickinson and Gilman) and how it prefigures later developments and even strangely resonates in today’s society (how to express sexual trauma? how to integrate foreign elements in the American “home”?). Another major asset of this collection lies in its capacity to expand the traditional Spofford canon by including studies of her non-fiction and by drawing from some of her other writings (poetry, essays, non-fiction) to throw light on her creative process.
- 4 The opening section, entitled “History, Her-Story,” focuses on Spofford’s approach to historical material in two very different genres. In “Charlestown,” a historical sketch published in 1871, she looks back on a dramatic episode of US history (the invasion,

pillaging, and burning of a Catholic convent by a Protestant mob in 1834) that she denounces as an attack on the principles of freedom upheld by the American nation. In the process, she undermines dominant views of the event by playing on perspectives, collapsing the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, and eventually developing a participatory model of reading in which Kot sees the expression of a Protestant aesthetic. Spofford emerges from this finely nuanced appraisal as a “cultural theorist” (Kot) whose textual response to such outrageous acts reveals a high degree of political awareness. This is followed by an essay in which Daniela Daniele examines Spofford’s retelling of a colonial legend set against a historical background, one in which Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had also found poetical inspiration for his long narrative poem “The Courtship of Miles Standish” (1858). Spofford’s “Priscilla” is one of three tales (the other two written by Alice Brown and Louise Imogen Guiney) collected under the title *Three Heroines of New England Romance; Their True Stories Herein Set Forth* and published in 1894. While obviously participating in a wider project aiming to bolster a sense of national identity through the retrieval of historical foundations, “Priscilla” affords Spofford the opportunity to transform a domestic heroine into a proto-feminist by giving fuller development to the spirit of resistance and rebellion already intimated by Longfellow and adopting the perspective of the young woman herself. In doing so, Spofford gives an interesting twist to the book’s ambition to tell a “true” story since, as shown by Daniele, what Priscilla imposes instead is “the truth of her heart.” As was the case in “Charlestown,” historical material once more fuels her discursive efforts to envision a better state at home while developing a critique of patriarchal abuses.

- 5 This reformist agenda also transpires in the various texts examined in the second set of essays included here. Spofford once wrote to William Hayes Ward, the editor of *The Independent* that she had been “an ardent antislavery person, and woman suffragette from [her] fourteenth year” (unpublished letter, 31 Oct. 1896, U of FL, qtd in Bendixen xvii). Both my own essay on Spofford’s detective fiction and Sirpa Salenius’s on “Her Story” show how skilled she was at manipulating imagery and stereotype, transgressing domestic boundaries to further her feminist projects. There is no doubt that Spofford’s deft handling of complex female characters challenges the gender ideology of her times by undermining simplistic nineteenth-century constructions of womanhood and domesticity. While “Her Story” has been regarded by Bendixen as a rewriting of “The Amber Gods” “from the point of view of the virtuous woman victim” (xxx), Salenius argues that Spofford goes beyond such binaries as “Angel in the House / Femme Fatale.” She portrays the nameless protagonist/narrator of “Her Story” as a frustrated mother and wife with artistic pursuits and sexual desires of her own who ends up suffering from exhaustion as she assumes more and more of her husband’s professional responsibilities beside her own. In many ways, the heroine prefigures the development of the New Woman at the turn of the century and “her story” could also be regarded as that of many modern-day women trying to balance work and family life in an endless quest for self-fulfilment. At the same time, argues Salenius, the story—that takes the form of an asylum confession—“contributes to the national discussion about mental illness and asylums that reached its peak around the 1850s” and suggests that depriving women of their rights and freedom amounted to treating them no better than lunatics. Significantly, another “madwoman” is given the last words in the story that completes what can be regarded as Spofford’s detective trilogy—“In a Cellar” (1859), “Mr. Furbush” (1865) and “In the Maguerriwock” (1868). My study of these three

stories examines the successes and failures of Spofford's serial detective, Mr. Furbush, and of his early prototype, the diplomat-cum-detective-cum narrator of "In a Cellar" who comes to realize the vital importance of establishing connections between the domestic and the public spheres. Following Delphine's cue in that later story that "a truth is often more visible veiled than nude (22), this essay seeks to uncover Spofford's contribution to the women's cause through an analysis of patterns of indirection, of the power of silence and of linguistic wordplay.

- 6 These are also running concerns in Rita Bode's re-reading of "Circumstance" in the next section of this collection. While this tale has given rise to an ever-growing body of allegorical interpretations over the last decades, using anti-allegory as a point of entry might yield interesting insights into Spofford's achievements. Anti-allegory has been defined as a major romantic form that is based on "concentrically expanding and contracting connotations" instead of "analogical meanings" (Weisbuch 53). In his study of Dickinson's poetry, Weisbuch notes that anti-allegories "force the reader to seek out causal implications. The reader looks to see where the language points, to which authoritative orders. In fact, he may find in the poem many gestures toward such orders, but finally he is forced back to a holistic description of the poem's pattern in terms of nothing but itself" (48). "Nothing but itself" might indeed be the best way to apprehend such a fascinating, puzzling story. Bode's cogent analysis invites us to look at the female protagonist's horrendous experience as an actual rape—something which all critics have identified but which they have somehow glossed over to the benefit of more allegorical interpretations.³ Bode contends that Spofford's oblique approach allowed her to circumvent editorial pressures that stopped women from explicitly engaging with sexual topics. At the same time, though, the enigmatic title can be interpreted as pointing to the "circumstantial evidence" that the reader has to put together to prove rape, "circumstantial evidence" that Bode herself carefully collects in an in-depth study that also leads her to explore the intertextual dialogue between Spofford and Dickinson. These connections are delved into more fully in the essay that follows, though from a different angle since Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau focuses on the monstrous feline as "an alter ego of the woman writer." Chevrier-Bosseau argues that, in both writers' works, "a specular inversion between the self and the feline brings the creator to reflect upon her status as a female writer in nineteenth-century America" and she shows how ambiguous and disturbing such dynamics of identification with the feline can be. These two essays offer new insights into Spofford's eeriest tale and thus contribute to the critical debates surrounding it. "Circumstance" does indeed result from a strange combination of visionary and revisionary impulses. The spectral vision that marks the woman's entrance into the wilderness can be related to the visionary politics that is inseparable from the Romantic aesthetic. It does foreshadow an impending apocalypse but the actual apocalypse that is under way is not the one we would expect: it has nothing to do with the destruction of the settlement when the husband and wife return to civilization; it is a veritable revolution in our ways of seeing and approaching women, nature, wild beasts and the place of women in a postlapsarian world, and in this respect the final lines open up new vistas onto a world of unlimited possibilities, a post-apocalyptic world in which men and women can "choose" to follow an entirely different path and establish different relationships with each other and their environment: "the world was all before them, where to choose" (Spofford, "Circumstance" 172).

- 7 The kind of revisionary strategy based on specular inversions that Chevrier-Bosseau identifies in Spofford's and Dickinson's works is also at play in the last three stories being examined here. These are stories in which woman's voice might indeed appear to be speaking from "the centre of Dissolution" (Dickinson, L685 to Mrs. Holland, January 1881) or, to put it in Elaine Showalter's terms, from a "wild zone" of female consciousness, some kind of Dark Continent inaccessible to men. Crucial to women's attempts to claim their subject positions in a patriarchal culture are the questions of visibility and invisibility that Asun López-Varela investigates in her study of "The Ray of Displacement," a science fiction tale published in 1903. Spofford's work is set against a rich literary, philosophical and scientific background which López-Varela uses to throw light on the highly ambiguous figure of St. Angel and on the crisis of masculinity informing her depiction of the other two male characters. Processes of metamorphosis, displacement and hybridity are given pride of place as Spofford points up "the liberating blurring of gender differences" as well as "the disintegration and atomization of pathological social boundaries" (López-Varela). Although the woman's voice is just as muted in "Desert Sands" (1863) and "The Moonstone Mass" (1868), the male narrators' attempts to impose their control and authority eventually fail to hide the cracks that threaten to undermine the stability of their narratives. In a challenging new reading of "Desert Sands," H.J.E. Champion probes beneath the surface of the text to uncover invisible layers of meaning that complicate conventional interpretations of the love triangle between the three main characters, i.e. a male artist torn between his angelic "pale phantom of a [wife]" ("Desert Sands" 191) and the alluring, predatory dark woman who appears to seduce him—or her. Champion uses queer theory to deconstruct binary readings of the story; she reinstates Eos as a full-fledged artist whose paintings express "underlying homosexual erotic desires" (Champion), emphasizes Sydney's androgyny, and offers a radically new interpretation of the battle in the desert that stands out as a climax preceding Eos's death and Sydney's losing his sight. "The Moonstone Mass" takes us on a different type of adventure altogether, away from the Eastern deserts in search of a Northwest Passage that would facilitate trade across the Arctic. Unlike Eos, though, the narrator's wife remains tied to the domestic arena and does not follow him into this "wilderness" where he hopes to make a fortune by inheriting his uncle's money. Other critics have interpreted the story as "a rejection of the male quest for power ... in favour of the world of feminine love and contentment" (Bendixen xxx), along the lines of "a binary opposition between masculine and feminine worlds" which leads Spofford to "[privilege] the latter, associated with home, family, and heterosexuality, over the former, correlated with capitalistic imperialism and conquest" (Weinstock 12). Verena Laschinger focuses instead on the dissolution of binaries as she examines "The Moonstone Mass" from the vantage point of a poem published almost thirty years later ("The Story of the Iceberg," 1898). Her compelling analysis of the tale emphasizes the primacy of relational thinking, fluidity and dissolution as a way to counteract stasis in a story that testifies to Spofford's fascination with alchemy and processes of metamorphosis a long time before she wrote "The Ray of Displacement." Last but not least, she uses these considerations to illuminate the metatextual dimension of a story in which Spofford possibly reflects upon her own problematic positioning within contemporary print culture, more particularly upon the commodification of storytelling as she tries "to find and navigate a passageway transitioning from Romanticism to Realism" (Laschinger).

- 8 When the narrator of “In a Cellar” emphatically states that “we are nothing without our opposites, our fellows, our lights and shadows, colors, relations, combinations, our *point d’appui*, and our angle of sight. An isolated man is immensurable; he is also unpicturesque, unnatural, untrue” (2), he emphasizes what appears to be Spofford’s own perception of truth as hinging upon a play on perspectives. Truth is indeed to be found in the relationships we establish with our surroundings, with all the “circumstances” of our life. This modern approach likely to destabilize the certainties and principles that sustained Spofford’s Victorian society in the second half of the nineteenth century informs the critical inquiry carried out by all the contributors to this issue. Not only do these essays demand that we reassess Spofford’s place within the ranks of nineteenth-century American women writers, they also ask for a renewed appreciation of her interest in the political development of the young American nation through the study of fictional and non-fictional pieces that blur the boundaries between the home and the more public sphere of male experience and activism. From her quiet retreat on Deer Island, Spofford stands out as a major figure whose voice should definitely be heeded and whose contribution to the literary developments of the time is worth revaluing.

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NOTES

1. Most of the essays gathered in this special issue proceed from papers that were previously delivered on the occasion of the EAAS 2016 Conference in Constanta, Romania, and of the tenth international meeting of the EAAS Study Group of Nineteenth-Century American Literature that was held in Bordeaux (Université Bordeaux Montaigne) in October 2016.
2. See Bendixen’s introduction to *The Amber Gods and Other Stories*. For a more comprehensive overview of Spofford’s life, see Halbeisen’s biography of the author.
3. See, for instance, how Bendixen manages to deviate from any “suggestion” of an actual sexual violation: “the imagery shifts from the harsh, violent suggestion of sexual rape toward the expression of divine and natural love” (xxviii).

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