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Stéphanie Durrans

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Of Women, Wine and Salt: Revisioning the Home in Harriet Prescott Spofford's Detective Fiction

Stéphanie Durrans

- ¹ “In a Cellar,” published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1859, was the story that turned an unknown 24-year-old woman into a celebrity overnight, thus establishing Spofford as a name to be reckoned with in the field of detective fiction. As underlined by Rita Bode, “[Spofford’s] detective stories emerge as early, ‘fully-fledged,’ and distinct contributions to the genre. Moreover, they may very well constitute the earliest stories of detective fiction authored by a woman” (2). These detective stories were all penned in the space of ten years, between 1858 and 1868, whereupon Spofford appears to have given up the genre to diversify her range even further through Gothic fiction, children’s literature, poetry, psychological studies, and local color fiction. I agree with Bode, however, that “many of Spofford’s stories demonstrate an abiding interest in detection, utilizing, for instance, the slow, timely revelation of significant events through an observant, analytic narrator and focusing on such related subjects as crime and madness” (1). We can thus wonder to what extent Spofford, far from abandoning the detective genre altogether, might have used it as the foundation for works in which suspense, sudden revelations and unexpected final twists serve her investigation of various social ills, especially those affecting the place and condition of women in the society of her times. In her brilliant analysis of gender and vision in Spofford’s fiction, Spengler examines how Spofford “conveys the instability of traditional gender roles as the instability of scopic relations between the sexes and shows the importance of the gaze in determining gender relations” (72). While Spengler focuses on Spofford’s interest in technological innovations and visual practices to explore her representation of female characters, I would argue that Spofford’s interest in questions of vision leads her also to play with language, signs and metaphors to suggest different ways of looking at reality and reaching the truth of the matter. Jeffrey Weinstock’s analysis of Spofford’s Gothic fiction also yields fascinating insights into her first novel, *Sir Rohan’s Ghost* (published in 1860, at the outset of her career), which can be viewed, he argues, as

“a transition of sorts ... from an emphasis on the terror of the unknown, associated with Gothic works by male writers, to the terror of the known, in which what frightens women the most is not the supernatural, but the dangers of everyday life attendant on being a woman in a male-dominated culture” (28). Building on these critics’ groundbreaking work on Spofford, I would like to reflect on this issue by focusing on what could be called the “detective trilogy” in Spofford’s career, i.e. the triptych formed by “In the Cellar” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1859), “Mr. Furbush” (*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, July 1865), and “In the Maguerriwock” (*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, August 1868). The patterns of convergence that can be traced between these three tales will lead us to highlight Spofford’s vision of the home as a highly unstable ground whose shaky foundations are best reflected through the metaphor of the cellar.

1. Speaking in Metaphors: The Birth of the Detective in “In the Cellar”

- 2 “In the Cellar” caused quite a stir in literary circles at the time of its publication as publishers found it hard to believe that such a well-crafted, sophisticated intrigue had actually been elaborated by a demure young woman who had never set foot in France and had no knowledge of the Parisian aristocratic circles that formed the background of her plot. The story retraces the investigation of a self-styled detective after a diamond was stolen from the safe where it had been deposited. His quest for clues eventually leads him to hide in a cellar where he was hoping to find the stolen gem after overhearing a conversation between two suspects:

Having been provided with keys, early on the following evening I entered the wine-cellar, and, concealed in an empty cask that would have held a dozen of me, waited for something to turn up. Really, when I think of myself, a diplomate [*sic*], a courtier, a man-about-town, *curled* in a dusty, musty wine-barrel, I am moved with vexation and laughter. (14, emphasis mine)

- 3 Evoking as it does the fetal position, the word “curled” might suggest that we are witnessing the actual birth of the detective in Spofford’s fiction, a detective-narrator whose benefit of hindsight leads him to reflect with self-mockery on the twists of fate that have put him into such a ridiculous posture. Instead of finding information about the coveted diamond, the narrator becomes the witness to a secret conclave gathering some of the most highly respected people in Paris: “men the loyalest in estimation, ministers and senators, millionnaires who had no reason for discontent, dandies whose reason was supposed to be devoted to their tailors, poets and artists of generous aspiration and suspected tendencies, and one woman,—Delphine de St. Cyr” (15). The wine-cellar then turns into a hotbed of rebellion threatening to disrupt the established social order. In one of her conversations with the narrator and the Baron Stahl, Delphine de St. Cyr unexpectedly brings up the topic of architecture as she states that:

‘We all build our own houses ... and then complain that they cramp us here, and the wind blows in there, while the fault is not in the order, but in us, who increase here and shrink there without reason.’

‘You speak in metaphors,’ said the Baron.

‘Precisely. A truth is often more visible veiled than nude.’ (22)

- 4 Like the oracle at Delphi that her name evokes, the young woman seems to be endowed with the power to deliver prophetic truths shrouded in mystery. Bainard Cowan has argued that Melville foreshadowed the development of Walter Benjamin’s thought

when utilizing allegory “to express the historical experience of loss and decay,” especially so “at moments of crisis ... when a text central to a people’s identity can neither command belief any longer nor be entirely abandoned” (7). In Spofford’s fiction, this “text central to people’s identity” is the home, and allegory becomes a natural vehicle to “speak differently”¹ about it. Patterns of indirection proliferate in a text whose narrator confesses that he cannot “tell a straight story” (3), and finding out where the diamond is hidden takes us indeed on a circuitous route that is brought to an abrupt end around the dinner table, when the narrator suddenly realizes that the “cellar” where the diamond has been placed is none other than the saltcellar in front of him. The metaphorical value of the lost diamond is also made clear earlier in the story when the narrator emphatically declares: “One saw clearly that the Oriental superstition of the sex of stones was no fable; this was essentially *the female of diamonds*, the queen herself, the principle of life, the rejoicing receptive force” (9, emphasis mine).

- 5 We also learn right from the beginning that “the outline of her features had a keen regular precision, *as if cut in a gem*” (1, emphasis mine). The whole story eventually appears to be built on this double level of perception that takes us from the subterranean depths of the wine-cellar to the illuminated living-rooms of high society, from the vagaries of a stolen diamond to a beautiful young woman’s quest for liberty and power, from a mere detective story to a reflection upon women’s position and search for empowerment. This duplicity might account for the reactions of some of Spofford’s early critics who sensed the underlying presence of something disquieting in her work: “It has been said of Miss Prescott’s work by certain objecting critics that she does not write with a definite moral purpose; that the stern rectitude of the New England character is not exploited in her stories” (Cooke 533) wrote her friend and fellow writer Rose Terry Cooke in a book devoted to *Our Famous Women*. One would be hard pressed, indeed, to identify any such “moral purpose” in the underground connections that bring the narrator face to face with the reality of Delphine’s rebellious, imperious nature,² only to provide an unexpected link with the “saltcellar” on the domestic table. In the end, the interest of the story lies not so much in the narrator’s attempts to locate the stolen gem as in his attempts to grasp the true nature of Delphine: does she belong to the old regime which her mother so perfectly incarnates or to a new, more subversive one? Does she belong in the home (together with the saltcellar) or in the darker, more disturbing depths of the wine-cellar? “She was, after all, like a draught of rich old wine,” states the narrator on the opening page. Spofford’s later detective figures would similarly have to draw connections between the domestic sphere associated with women and the public sphere of male dominance in order to uncover the dark secrets of criminals or mere suspects.

2. “Mr. Furbush”: Spofford’s Allegory of the Cave?

- 6 With “Mr. Furbush,” published six years later, Spofford takes her readers from the aristocratic salons of Parisian high society to the drawing-rooms of well-to-do Americans. The story tells how detective Furbush took an interest in the unsolved mystery of Agatha More’s murder after coincidentally finding himself in a photographer’s shop situated opposite the hotel where the young woman had been murdered a few months before. Jewels are once again given pride of place as the

enlarged photograph that is the only silent witness to the crime ends up revealing the shape of a murderous left hand with a five-pointed ring on one of its fingers. The whole story hinges on a series of most improbable coincidences, such as when the photographer produces a picture that was taken by chance on the day of the murder or when Mr. Furbush later comes across a lady bearing the ring that he has spent so many months looking for in vain. As detective fiction, the story somehow frustrates the reader's expectations and fails to rise to the levels of complexity that can be found in Poe's Dupin stories, for instance. But its interest probably lies elsewhere, as one can sense at the end of the story when the detective who has just pointed an accusing finger at Mrs. Denbigh causes her to collapse from a heart attack caused by the shock:

A long shudder shook her from head to foot. Iron nerve gave way, the white lips parted, she threw her head back and gasped; with one wild look toward her husband she turned from him as if she would have fled and fell dead upon the floor. 'Hunt's up,' said Mr. Furbush to his subordinate, coming out an hour or two later Mr. Furbush made a night of it; but never soul longed for daylight as he did, he had a notion that he had scarcely less than murdered—himself; and good fellow as he must needs be abroad that night, indoors the next day he put his household in sackcloth and ashes.

- 7 The visual blank separating “murdered” and “himself” creates a certain ambiguity by suggesting two possible interpretations: should we take it to mean that Mr. Furbush feels that he has become a murderer himself or that what he has killed is himself, which suggests that the criminal also serves as a double for the detective, for the evil side of his own nature. Whichever way we interpret it, there is no doubt that, as underlined by Bode, “The crime has a disturbing indeterminacy, and for Spofford’s detective, identifying the criminal is not the whole story” (6). Spengler interprets the detective’s final qualms as the sign of “a profound ambivalence about the possibilities and consequences of new visual technology that lie at the heart of the story” (69) and she goes on to remark upon the inconsistencies of his behavior when he appears to have “sickened of the business” (Spofford, “Mr. Furbush”) and thus decides to quit his job while, at the same time, he still “yields to his fascination with the possibilities of photography by opening up a photo studio” (Spengler 70). It seems to me that Furbush’s qualms can be accounted for by his intuitive knowledge that Mrs. Denbigh is not the only culprit. However, her sudden, unexpected death now prevents him from investigating the case any further. Indeed, Mrs. Denbigh’s motives for killing the young woman who was her husband’s ward will henceforth remain shrouded in mystery, possibly allowing the true criminal to get away with it. Bode evokes a number of possibilities, like a “self-serving act of jealousy to eliminate the beautiful young woman who was her husband’s beloved ward,” unless Mrs. Denbigh

was trying to protect someone? But who? Perhaps there is some truth in the accusation brought by Miss More’s rejected lover that Mr. Denbigh had “sinister intentions” of his own toward the beautiful young Agatha? Was Agatha on the verge of revealing them? Or was Mrs. Denbigh’s violent act a perverse means of protecting the young woman from her predatory guardian whom she nonetheless loves? (Bode 7-8)

- 8 Spofford leaves it up to her reader to tie up the loose ends, put the clues together and imagine possible scenarios: how can Mrs. Denbigh have strangled Agatha without her husband’s complicity since “the terrible action was thought to have been committed” while husband and wife were driving out of the city? How can we account for the fact that Agatha “had been a little out of health” since they had come back from a tour in

Europe after Mr. and Mrs. Denbigh's wedding, and for the fact that she appeared to suffer "from the great exhaustion and weakness of severe seasickness, [though Mr. Denbigh] had been unremitting in his endeavors to promote her comfort and happiness"? Is it possible that, like her illustrious namesake, the third-century martyr Agatha, she had to fend off the advances of a man of power (her own guardian) who engineered her murder either out of spite or to protect his own reputation if his ward happened to be with child?³

- 9 Coming as it does from a Greek word that means "good," Agatha's first name delineates a sharp contrast between the young woman and the evil embodied by her stepmother (and possibly her own guardian). Agatha's qualities turn her into the perfect angel in the house—an angel who is quite fittingly already dead when the story opens and who already carried the germs of death in her family name ("More" as in the French "mort," i.e. "dead" "or "death"). Although one might be tempted to trace out the influence of Snow White, it is worth noting that in Spofford's rewriting, it is most likely the evil father figure who arranges to have the young woman murdered by the evil stepmother while the part of the hunter is ironically played by the detective who seems to derive satisfaction from the fact that "Hunt's up," as he asserts after Mrs. Denbigh's death. Spofford skillfully reshuffles the cards as she exposes the weight of the patriarchal structures that led Mrs. Denbigh to commit the murder.
- 10 The story is also based on a contrast between the "broad daylight" in which the crime was committed and the dark room of both the photographer's shop and the city mansion where the detective finally discloses the identity of the culprit (described as a "rather somber room"). In so doing, Spofford plays on effects of reversal as the truth of the matter can only be uncovered in the inner recesses of such dark chambers of the mind. Though Mr. Furbush's final decision to withdraw from his profession in order to set up a photographer's shop of his own has been interpreted as stemming from a desire to "embrac[e] the light" (Bode 8), one could also see it as a retreat into a cave of sorts—the dark room of his own mind where he now has to cope with a guilty conscience that could not bring itself to "compound [the] felony" of pursuing the other criminal in the case.⁴ American writer Joseph Wood Krutch famously said that "Poe invented the detective story in order that he might not go mad" (qtd. in Nickerson 6), which implies that the detective story "neutralizes terror and horror by demonstrating how the intellect can identify and control evil" (Nickerson 6). In Poe's stories, indeed, the quest for truth is a highly intellectual pursuit. Spofford's take on the issue is more disturbing; we can see that her detective's soul is not fully at rest by the end of the story and that pangs of remorse are still tormenting him. Determined not to let her detective rest in peace, however, Spofford was going to drag him once more out of his comfort zone by taking him to the far reaches of civilization, all the way to a shabby farmhouse on the edge of the wilderness that was going to be the setting for her last detective story, "In the Maguerriwock."

3. "In the Maguerriwock": Reading and Decoding the Home

- 11 We learn at the story's outset that Mr. Furbush has now settled into the routine of an easy life in a big city somewhere on the East coast. The opening lines make it clear that he has resumed his activities as a detective, though his investigative practices are

circumscribed in “the pleasant purlieu of the city and [involve] no greater hardships than attendance at the opera-houses and in the drawing-rooms of fashionable ladies.” Money alone will bring the ageing detective to relinquish his creature comforts as he agrees to take up the case which his visitor urges him to elucidate. Spofford’s desire to direct her reader’s attention to the title figure of her detective in “Mr. Furbush” is confirmed by the space she now devotes to his introspective moods and self-examination of his mercenary motives. Smugness, complacency, and acquisitiveness characterize the man who plays hard to get to increase the amount of his fees while hiding from his client his intimate conviction that he has already pretty much solved the case in hand. Once more it will not take him long to identify the murderer of the unfortunate peddler who decided to cross the Maguerriwock; but the interest of the story lies elsewhere, both in the chain of circumstances that will allow Furbush to find the evidence he needs and in the criminal’s terrible treatment of his demented wife. After retracing the peddler’s itinerary and pinning down as a likely culprit the suspicious owner of a flourishing farm, Mr. Furbush corners the farmer into inviting him down in his cellar for a sip of home-brewed cider. His attention was previously drawn to the cellar by the senseless mutterings of the farmer’s wife, a poor creature sitting before the hearth in the company of her demented ten-year-old little girl, Semantha: “Three men went down cellar, and only two came up,” she keeps repeating. Mr. Furbush’s first exploration of the cellar gives him sufficient inkling into the location of the peddler’s body to allow him and the sheriff to fetch a search warrant and come back the following day, only to find out that the clever farmer, Mr. Craven, has lost no time in disposing of the body by moving it to another place during the night. Moved by a perverse impulse, the farmer insists on giving his helpless, unwelcome guests another sip of his cider before they take their leave, which alerts Mr. Furbush as to the possibility that the body might have been hidden in one of the casks:

[Craven] drew the glass full and offered it to Mr. Furbush ‘Pungent!’ said Mr. Craven. ‘That’s the word. A drink fit for the gods!’

‘Stay a minute,’ said Mr. Furbush, gently pushing back the proffered nectar. ‘Sheriff, I should be sorry to spill good spirit, but there’s some that’s better out than in. Break up that barrel.’

....

And there was only one hesitating moment before Mr. Craven was whirled away and held by as strong hands as those that were holding his raging and writhing son; the hoops had been knocked off the barrel, the staves had fallen apart from side to side with the fury of the outpouring liquor—and there lay the ghastly skull, the arms, the half-bleached skeleton of the murdered man they sought.

They stood around the dreadful and disgusting sight in a horrified silence. The two men saw that there was no escape. ‘Well,’ said the elder, in the wolfish audacity of his confession, ‘I suppose you know what that sound upstairs means now?’ And listening they could hear the words of the woman on the dismal hearth above, as she rocked herself feebly to and fro, and made her moan: ‘Three men went down cellar, and only two came up!’ (“In the Maguerriwock”)

- 12 While Spofford’s very first detective was figuratively born in a cellar, his avatar Mr. Furbush finishes his literary career in another one. Her fascination with cellars can be studied from a phenomenological angle as stemming from a desire to explore “the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths” (Bachelard 18). As a consequence, states Bode, “Spofford’s cellars suggest that detecting involves the recognition, acknowledgment, and indeed even the embracing of the irrational.” She

goes on to underline that “[the] association of cellars with burials and annihilation, as generally in the Gothic, and specifically in Poe’s tales of terror, forms part of Spofford’s stories, but she also turns her cellars into sites of discovery” (Bode 8). From a more practical point of view, Spofford was very much aware of the importance of cellars in directing the course of a family’s destiny and she advised housewives to take even better care of their cellars than of their parlors (“The condition of the cellar is far more important than that of the parlor,” *Stepping-Stones to Happiness* 218). She developed those ideas in *Stepping-Stones to Happiness*, a domestic help book designed to advise housewives about matters of health, hygiene and domestic care, and she maintained that a number of diseases and infections plaguing family life might well be the result of a neglected care of the cellar: “underlying as it does ... the whole life of the house, [the cellar is] capable of sending, from its position in the substructure, bane or blessing, pure air or fetid, through every crevice of the dwelling” (219). Unlike the first two stories in which the narrator provided an epilogue of sorts and thus established some kind of narrative distance from the text, the end of this tale leaves the characters (and the reader) at a loss, stranded in the dark depths of the crime scene with only one possible exit towards the light of day—the steps leading up to the madwoman sitting by the fireplace.

- 13 This brings us back to the first story under consideration and to a strange detail related by the narrator in the last pages of his narrative: after he returns the diamond to its rightful owner, the latter allows the detective to keep the accompanying chain inset with tiny gems as a reward for his services. The narrator, in his turn, offers the chain to Delphine who, he later learns, only had to wear it to impose her will and get her husband, the Baron Stahl, to let her have her own ways. As in the other two stories, the male characters appear to be chained in the circumscribed world of their ignorance while looking up toward a mysterious female character who can only “speak in metaphors” (like Delphine, of whom the narrator says in the closing lines: “She has read me a riddle—Delphine is my Sphinx,” 23), take her secrets along with her in the hereafter (Agatha; Mrs. Denbigh) or deliver the truth in cryptic form (Mrs. Craven).
- 14 As underlined by Rita Bode, “Spofford’s own madwoman ... is not to be found in an attic; Spofford firmly stations her by the home fires, turning the female figure on the hearth, the nineteenth-century’s idealistic symbol of domestic blessing, into a mockery. The woman on the hearth is ineffectual. She is dominated by the subterranean forces of the dark cellar” (12). Once more, Spofford’s double-voiced discourse allows her to drape her denunciation of the dominant patriarchal ideology in the folds of a mere detective story. This time, however, she uses the sheriff as a foil to her mercenary detective: as they are making their way back into town after their first visit to the farm, the sheriff expresses his qualms about arresting a man who is “doing so well,” seems “to have reformed” and is “doing so much to improve the country;” he even goes as far as to intimate that the crime is now under prescription and that he would rather let the criminal get off scot free. To Furbush’s protestation that crime must be duly punished, the law officer feebly retorts: “I don’t know I couldn’t say of myself that he abused anybody but his wife. And a judge in Illinois decided lately that that was nothing—the wife must adopt more conciliating conduct,” to which Furbush ironically replies: “Mrs Craven isn’t very conciliating, is she? I should be exasperated myself if she kept on informing me for ten years, since the day I made her and her child idiots with horror, that three men went down cellar, and only two came up!” As emphasized by her name,

Semantha, the child forms part of the web of signs that point to another reading of the text.⁵ As a buffoon or jester type, she points to the truth that no one is willing to hear⁶ and brings the detective one step closer to this border zone between savagery and civilization that Spofford wanted him to confront far from the more sophisticated, plush atmosphere of his usual city haunts. She plays with the plates that her father has just laid on the table for his guests' supper and spins them "like a top," as if to ridicule her father's efforts to keep up domestic appearances. The whole house itself turns into a space of resistance to patriarchal authority as the detective's attention is drawn to the blatant discrepancy between its unkempt, shabby-looking appearance and the luxuriance of the fields that surround it.

- 15 Spofford's revisionary stance on Plato's allegory of the cave implies that one should set about exploring the dark depths of the cave instead of reaching for the upper world of ideas. The Chinese god holding a head in a sling might convey a similar message: the detective's heart is more likely to guide him to the truth than mere intellectual ratiocinations.⁷ The crisis in seeing that characterized nineteenth-century artistic and cultural evolution is reflected in the works of all those writers who started taking an interest in the development of criminology and in the various ways of uncovering the truth. Spofford's stories are predictably replete with references to visual perception that guide the detective in his quest for clues, but the modes of seeing that she foregrounds do suggest an attempt to move away from mere externals towards a more intimate or intuitive perception of the environment, i.e. through the heart, an organ that has traditionally been associated with women according to the gendered binaries that prevailed in Victorian culture.

4. Conclusion

- 16 Spofford's detective fiction explores the idea that the home cannot be apprehended without taking into account the foundations on which it rests, the dark, subterranean reality that permeates its whole structure and influences the daily lives of its inhabitants. This is the sum of the investigations carried out by Mr. Furbush, a character who has been identified as the first serial detective in American women's writing⁸ (Bode 2) and whose discoveries adequately throw light upon a whole range of female experiences that a lot of other writers, like the sheriff of "In the Maguerriwock," would rather have kept cloaked in a shroud of silence.
- 17 The narrator of "In the Cellar" states at one point 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). The cellar is one such "*point d'appui*" for the house lying above it. Spofford's use of the cellar in these three stories might have been intended as a comment or revision of "The Cask of Amontillado," in which Poe presents such an isolated man entombed in a cave that bears no connection to its upper structure.⁹ She thus gives a voice and a narrative presence to "opposites," reinstating the oppressed female's narrative by weaving it into the man's tale. In the last story of the series, poor Mrs. Craven has the last word and Spofford's play on perspectives turns her into a denizen of the higher spheres of knowledge while the horrified men downstairs appear to be stuck to the underground place on account of their inability to fathom the depths of Craven's evil nature—a man who did not hesitate to hide the

remains of his victim in the cask of home-brewed cider that he serves on his table. Ultimately, these three stories testify to Spofford's skill in collapsing the boundaries between the wine-cellar and the salt-cellar, between the netherworld of human nature and the upper world of social appearances, and also between the supposedly male preserve of the detective story and the more feminine genre of the domestic or sentimental tale.

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NOTES

1. From the Greek “allos” (other) and “agoreuein” (to speak differently).
2. In the rest of the discussion upon architecture, Delphine is clearly associated with the Doric (22), an order traditionally regarded as masculine since Antiquity (Summerson 14-15). While reinforcing her links with Greek culture, such a detail also contributes to destabilizing gender roles in the story.
3. Saint Agatha was a young woman born to wealthy parents in Sicily. She had vowed to remain chaste and pure but her beauty and wealth drew the attention of a Roman official who tortured and killed her when she persisted in spurning his advances. A similar fate awaits the young gypsy woman rejected by Sir Rohan in Spofford's first novel, which testifies to Spofford's interest in stories of joint crime and incest in the domestic realm. In *Sir Rohan's Ghost*, however, the victimized woman is split into two characters, mother and daughter. After the mother has been murdered by Sir Rohan who refused to marry her, the child grows into a beautiful young lady, brought up by caring but ineffectual foster parents, and almost ends up marrying her own father who, ignorant of her true identity, fell under her charm.
4. In this regard, I would differ from Bode who delineates a sharp contrast between “Dupin's inclination for his darkened rooms” (4) and Mr. Furbush who “both actively and metaphorically, seeks the light” (5).
5. This uncommon variation on the name “Samantha” draws attention to its Greek roots, “semantikos” (“significant”), deriving from the verb “semainein” meaning “to show by sign,” “to signify,” and from the noun “sema” (a sign, a mark, a token, but also an omen, a portent, or a grave). Like Yone, the narrator of “The Amber Gods” who actually delivers her story after death, these female figures appear to be speaking from beyond the grave.
6. Apart from God, if we consider that “God heard” is one of the most common interpretations of the name.
7. This Chinese God appears on a button of carved wood that Mr. Furbush finds on the floor of the cellar and to which his attention had already been drawn by the last person who saw the peddler alive before he left the town to cross the Maguerriwock.
8. See Lucy Sussex's “The First American Woman to Write Detective Fiction?” and Bode's “A Case for the Re-covered Writer,” for instance.
9. Poe's influence on Spofford's work has been repeatedly acknowledged by her critics. As noted by Bode, however, “her detective stories are not simple Poe imitations. Her detectives and their methods of detecting sometimes diverge from Poe's assumptions, and these distinctions make Spofford's detective stories remarkably forward looking” (Bode 4).

ABSTRACTS

Although Harriet Prescott Spofford appears to have given up the genre of detective fiction in the late 1860s, she actually used it as the foundation for works in which suspense, sudden revelations and unexpected final twists serve her investigation of various social ills, especially those affecting the place and condition of women in the society of her times. This paper examines three detective stories written by Spofford between 1859 and 1868 in an attempt to retrace the

birth and development of her chief detective figure, from the wine cellar in which he is figuratively born to the dark depths of the cellar where he is left stranded at the end of the last tale. The patterns of convergence that can be traced between these three tales highlight Spofford's vision of the home as a highly unstable ground whose shaky foundations are best reflected through the metaphor of the cellar.

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Keywords: Harriet Prescott Spofford, detective fiction, gender roles, home, cellars

AUTHOR

STÉPHANIE DURRANS

Stéphanie Durrans is Professor of American Literature at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France. She is the author of *The Influence of French Culture on Willa Cather: Intertextual References and Resonances* (2007) and of *Willa Cather's My Ántonia: A Winter's Journey* (2016). She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers, with a special focus on questions of intertextuality and transatlantic literary relationships.