

MLA 2021: 19th-Century Women Writers and Archives

Paper Title: “Transcendental Women Losing Their Religion”

Abstract:

That the women affiliated with nineteenth-century New England transcendentalism were as implicated as men in the spread of its regional influence may seem obvious today. But, as pertains to the controversies that transcendentalism precipitated with respect to religion, the women involved in the circulation of the so-called “New Views” have been largely eclipsed by men in both the contemporary and historical accounts of this watershed cultural moment.

Hence the irony that the most recent revisionist work on transcendentalism should have served, in part, to bracket women inside a “separate” historical sphere. In their edited collection *Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism* (2014), Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole have invited scholars from an array of academic disciplines to demonstrate the extent to which the “Newness” was a product of the contributions made by women. In making this assertion, however, the editors advance what might be construed as an essentializing claim for the qualitative difference of transcendental women’s expectations, dispositions, and needs. Like many a transcendental man, the editors’ women were, they write, seeking “alternative communities of literacy, spiritual seeking, and ethical commitment” (10). But their subjects are also credited, “as women of vision,” with “substantially different perspectives” than those of their male counterparts (17).

It has been left to us to trace those “perspectives” to the archives. For such renowned women transcendentalists as Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody, the circulating medium of print was an option for openly professing such religion as they had to profess. For the women to whom reliable access to print was denied, the regular upkeep of private correspondence, journals, and diaries (the very stuff of transcendental women’s archival collections) served to make these mediums not only a preferred channel of communication; their maintenance came to qualify as a legitimate religious practice in its own right, albeit one without the attendant exposure of publication. With respect to its relation to women’s transcendental religion, then, the archive has thus functioned in contrary ways at once. On the one hand, the comparative quiet concealment of women’s religious questioning had the unintended effect of protecting them from the glare of public exposure suffered by their male counterparts, not a few of whom achieved notoriety as a result of breaking with religious convention. On the other hand, women continue to be denied their rightful place in the story of a transcendental religion that would have looked decidedly different without them.

Biography:

David Faflik is Professor of English at the University of Rhode Island. His essays have appeared in such journals as *American Literature*, *J19*, *New England Quarterly*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and *Book History*. He is the author, most recently, of *Transcendental Heresies: Harvard and the Modern American Practice of Unbelief* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2020) and *Urban Formalism: The Work of City Reading* (Fordham University Press, 2020).