

BOOK REVIEW

Handwriting in America: A Cultural History, by Tamara Plakins Thornton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv, 248. Illustrations. \$30.00.

Tamara Plakins Thornton offers a thoughtful and stimulating cultural study of handwriting in America from the colonial period through the 20th century. Thornton argues that handwriting is worthy of study because it "mattered to people in the past, in ways deeply embedded in their cultures," and above all because it "embodied, regulated, and generated notions of the self" (p. x). Scholars have heretofore devoted their attention primarily to the history of literacy, reading, the book, and print. Thornton resourcefully applies their parallel insights to give handwriting a distinct history. Her book traces changing pedagogies of penmanship across three centuries, as well as the development of handwriting analysis, autograph collecting and other popular fascination with penmanship.

At the heart of Thornton's investigation are shifting cultural assumptions about the relationship between handwriting and selfhood. With the steady ascendancy of print culture beginning in the 18th century, Americans endowed handwriting with greater symbolic meaning. If print was defined as an impersonal medium, a way to conceal the self, then handwriting was increasingly seen as a personal medium, a way to reveal the self, whether willfully or not. Selfhood is the leading motif of Thornton's book, and renders her book useful far beyond its treatment of handwriting. Indeed, given its chronological span and ambitious scope, Thornton's book would profit scholars concerned with American cultural life in either the 18th, 19th, or 20th century. The book is organized chronologically so that scholars committed to a particular time period may mine a stimulating chapter or two, while scholars interested in longer trajectories of cultural change would find the entire book rewarding.

Chapter one covers the colonial period when the ability to write was supposed to reflect one's social position, and style of script was supposed to match one's social identity. The skill of writing was entirely withheld from certain groups like black slaves and non-elite women, for whom it was deemed useless, and was most encouraged for learned or commercial white men, for whom it was deemed essential. Handwriting was compartmentalized into an array of scripts, each one intended to match one's gender and status.

Chapter two covers the Victorian period when writing literacy approached 100% among white Americans. By the 1830s, handwriting was no longer treated as an advanced skill primarily for boys, but became an elementary skill taught at common schools for both sexes, although girls and boys were taught different scripts. Whereas 18th-century pedagogues had concentrated on passive imitation, 19th century pedagogues focused on active control. Men like Platt Rogers Spencer advocated the regimentation of script style, under the assumption that handwriting could only be mastered by exerting conscious will. Later in the century, faced with the invention of the typewriter, Austin Palmer advocated the regimentation of arm movement, under the assumption that handwriting could only be mastered by developing

unconscious habits. Palmer sought to remasculinize the "muscular" skill of writing, even as women usurped the clerical profession from men.

Chapters three through five move away from penmanship pedagogy and toward the development of handwriting analysis, or graphology, which became increasingly popular after the Civil War and into the twentieth century. Earlier in the nineteenth century, graphology had appealed to Romantic literary figures like Edgar Allan Poe who celebrated the unique handwriting of supposed geniuses. In the 1870s, however, handwriting analysis began to appeal to ordinary people seeking to expose tricksters. Rather than measuring



23. The woman behind the penman, from *Theory of Spencerian Penmanship*, 1874.

From *Handwriting in America. A Cultural History*, by Tamara Plakins Thornton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 67.

one's ability to conform to cultural standards, or to conjure up genius, handwriting became a measure of widespread individuality, of one's true self lurking beneath a deceptive exterior. At the same time, autograph collecting became increasingly popular with the American public, another reflection of rising interest in individuality. By the early 20th century, graphology had become such a fixture in popular culture that Americans could buy cheap paperbacks helping them to appraise prospective romantic partners via handwriting analysis. While American pedagogues continued to emphasize standardized penmanship deemed suitable for an increasingly corporate economy, and necessary for an increasingly pluralistic society, ordinary Americans hungered instead for signs of individuality, whether via handwriting analysis, or autograph collecting, or fancy calligraphy.

Such a broad overview cannot capture the many nuances of evidence and argument found throughout Thornton's book. Minor objections can be raised. Thornton's research strategy provides considerably more insight into the preferences of pedagogues than the choices of ordinary Americans. Indeed, we meet many more authors than ordinary people in

the book. Thornton's argument tends toward the instrumentalism characteristic of much new cultural history, where authors of prescriptive and popular literature seem to know precisely what would advance the interests of dominant social groups. For instance, we meet pedagogues who use standardized handwriting to neutralize the urban Catholic poor, but we do not encounter the corollary perspective of such marginal social groups. Thornton's book captures the dominant pedagogical and popular representation of handwriting, rather than its diverse social practice. Ultimately, these theoretical quibbles do not obscure the ambitious scope, the broad-ranging usefulness, and the careful nuance of Thornton's impressive study.

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Reading Daughters' Fictions 1709-1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth, by Caroline Gonda. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. 287. \$54.95.

From its preface and introduction, Caroline Gonda's book *Reading Daughters' Fictions* appears ideally suited for an audience interested in the history of reading. Gonda thus describes her purpose:

I argue that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fictional representations of father-daughter relationships participate in the construction of . . . female heterosexuality, that novels, as much as tracts or conduct-books, served an ideological function . . . Contemporary diatribes about novels and their evil influence on young women maintained that women learned from fiction and followed its example in ways which made them unsatisfactory daughters or wives (or worse). I suggest that much of what the reading daughters learned from 'daughters' fictions--heroine-centred novels of family life, courtship and marriage--might bolster rather than undermine familial and social order. (p. xvi)

This description seems to promise a book that will focus on the cultural work of fiction, the role that eighteenth-century British novels played in turning their female readers into "virtuous women" (p. 35). The first part of Gonda's book does elaborate on this "ideological function" of eighteenth-century novels, the process by which novels disciplined their female readers rather than causing them to rebel specifically through these novels' representations of father-daughter relationships.¹ Such representations changed during the eighteenth century from tyrannical fathers who controlled their daughters through fear to affectionate fathers who governed through love to--at the end of the century--a collapse in paternal authority altogether. Throughout the century, novelistic depictions of father-daughter relationships mostly helped to teach "reading daughters" their proper function in society, which was to marry a man of their fathers' choosing and bear that man's children.

This book thus seems worthwhile for historians of reading as well as feminist literary critics. But the actual chapters disappoint somewhat. These chapters, which focus on a particular author (such as Frances Burney), theme (such as father-daughter incest), or novelistic subgenre (such as the Gothic) are clearly written and interesting, and their arguments often stand on their own terms. In particular, I admired Gonda's fascinating critique of another feminist critic, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, who in Gonda's view misreads Maria Edgeworth's novels in her own book on eighteenth-century fathers and daughters.² Gonda's subtle and detailed explication of Edgeworth's novels made me eager to read them, while her attack on Kowaleski-Wallace exposes the dangers of being blinded by one's own ideological framework: "[i]f any woman who puts pen to paper in a novel becomes equally a figure for the woman writer, and if all women's writing is metaphorically endowed with the same 'explosive power' because inherently subversive and a threat to the patriarchy, the effect is, ironically, to minimize any sense of actual women writers' artistic and political achievements" (p. 233). In other words, by equating the journals or letters of Edgeworth's fictional characters with her actual publications, Kowaleski-Wallace undervalues those publications. All this may be true, but to what end? Gonda sometimes examines "writing daughters" like Edgeworth, but her "reading daughter," the figure at whom she claims eighteenth-century novels are directed, mostly disappears in her actual chapters, usurped by discussions of father-daughter plots.

As the book loses sight of the process by which novels turned eighteenth-century "reading daughters" into wives and mothers, it loses some of its coherence as well. With one major exception--Gonda's chapter on Samuel Richardson (a novelist who worked throughout his career to create his own context)--her chapters concentrate largely on plot details or on an individual novelist's biography to the virtual exclusion of reception history. As a result, the book reads too often as a series of arguments about different portrayals of father-daughter relationships rather than as a comprehensive portrait of the connection between eighteenth-century literature and life.

While Gonda does a good job of mapping out the changes in the *novelistic* representations of fathers and daughters, we lose sight of these novels' larger cultural function, their role in creating proper female readers. A symptom of this problem occurs in Gonda's chapter on the Gothic. In this chapter, she describes *The Heroine*, Eaton Stannard Barrett's 1813 parody of Gothic fiction, as "a tale of female quixotism" (p. 161), in this case the story of a young woman negatively affected by Gothic novels. But rather than elaborating on the implications of this theme for her claim that eighteenth-century novels had mostly positive consequences for their female readers, she focuses exclusively on the novel's representations of family, the way in which "Cherubina's sins against the father move her into a genuinely Gothic plot" (p. 161). Gonda's book becomes too much about her own (albeit interesting) readings of daughters' fictions and not enough about those reading daughters that the novel allegedly sought to control.

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