Women Past and Present:
Biographic and Multidisciplinary Studies

Edited by

Maria Zina Gonçalves de Abreu
and Steve Fleetwood

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CHAPTER FIVE

ELIZA BUCKMINSTER LEE'S *DELUSION OR THE WITCH OF NEW ENGLAND* (1839): (RE)MEMORY OF THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

INÊS TADEU GONÇALVES
UNIVERSITY OF MADEIRA, PORTUGAL
DRATADEU@UMA.PT

Industrialization changed the print culture in early nineteenth-century America (Golden 2003, 4). Indeed, for the first time Americans began to encounter mass reading through the proliferation of books, magazines, pamphlets and tracts. Reading thenceforth significantly contributed to the formation of individual, communal, and national identity. It became recurrent – directly or by implication – in the vehicles of an emerging culture of public discourse, a concern with reading and its association to issues of identity, morality, aesthetics and power (Machor 2011, 3).

This new slot opened by print allowed many American women to publish a great amount of diverse writing. The number of American women authors grew steadily and authorship began to develop and became a better means of survival for women, rather than school teaching or needlework. These writers were mostly New England women with Anglo-Protestant, middle-class or upper-class backgrounds who needed money and whose achievements in education permitted writing books. Some of these female writers were single, others widowed or deserted. Others were married but had to support themselves, their families and their sick, bankrupt, or church minister husbands (Baym 1993, 30). Despite their pursuit of intellectual betterment and literary production, in Victorian America, these were to be carried out almost exclusively within the "context of traditional domesticity" (Golden 2003, 1). The growing emphasis on the importance of women's social-economical roles in the new developing nation encouraged women to embrace a literary career as another means of financial independence, social empowerment and pleasure, at a

time when "no other professional options were available to them" (Baym 1993, xi).

The gradual professionalization of American female authors occurred between the 1790's and the 1840's. A rather large body of nineteenth-century New England fiction, written mainly between 1820 and 1870, were novels written by women, and primarily addressed to women. Most importantly, they depicted American women as heroines of their very particular stories (Baym 1993, 11). As such, this "[p]articipation in the literary sphere, made women both the subjects and objects of debate, thus forever altering men's perception of women and woman's perceptions of themselves" (Dale and Gould 2001, 33).

This is also relevant if one considers that: "Readers of the period read mimetically; women readers often perceived literature as a reflection of life and fictional characters as role models" (Golden 2003, 9). These American female-authored historical writings were permeated by contemporary thematic and antiquarian interests, and expressed a variety of proto-feminist opinions, namely of a political nature (Baym 1995, 154). Hence, the historical fiction by American women writers of the nineteenth century also contributed to the (re)configuration of the American national identity, especially in what concerns colonial New England and the early Puritan American culture. For, indeed,

> [T]he reconstruction of 'American Puritanism' will be upon the historical memory of early nineteenth-century New England. It was at this time that the crosscurrents in attitudes toward the Puritan heritage became most acute and arguably important. Tenth generation descendants of the founding families of 1620 and 1630 needed to make sense of their heritage. In particular they needed to find the providential connections between the three eras of greatest significance to the presumed advance of protestant virtue: the plantations of 1620 and 1630, New England's Times of Troubles from 1675 to 1700, and New England's early leadership of the Revolution that would form the American Republic. (McWilliams 2004, 4)

The "imaginative representations of Puritan history penned" (McKanan 2002, 13) by many American women, between the birth of the nation and the inception of the Civil War, appeared in various genres and contexts, targeting various audiences, serving dissimilar purposes, and determined by multiple motives[1]. American women's interest in the reading of history

[1] On the subject of the use of historical fiction to re-create New England's "Puritan Ancestry" see also Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chap. 8.

emerged very early. In fact, many references to reading history or planning to read it, as well as familiar allusions to historical characters and events, abound in these historical writings. Consequently, the long-established assertion that most historical fiction in *antebellum* America was male-authored is quite misleading. The several female-authored prose collections that include historical fiction and the numerous uncollected historical works published in the periodical press during this period, testify otherwise[2] (Baym 1995, 153-5).

The favouring of historical fiction, more specifically romantic historicals,[3] by nineteenth-century women writers was by no means arbitrary. Transcendentalism[4] – the American romantic reform – thrived in America between the years of 1830 and 1860, mainly in New England, at a time when European Romanticism was already in decline. While most American writers were still strongly under the influence of the European forms, themes and literary language, most American women writers managed to, at the very least, deviate in their choice of theme and setting. Choosing to write about New England's Puritan history, therefore, put them in the path of a truly American literature, as the natural and historical American landscape and its culture were inseparable (Phillips 2006, 20). Indeed, "The historical romance's fixation on national identity was also a product of the romanticism which gave birth to the form itself" (Crane 2007, 37).

Hawthorne, with his unique literary aesthetics and romantic views, influenced his contemporary women authors.[5] "[T]he Manichean shape of

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[2] See, for example, the list of "Historical works by American Women" in Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History*: *1790-1860* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp.265-79.

[3] As a sub-genre of the Historical Romance, according to Ramsdell and Dekker, in Romantic Historicals the actual historical events and characters are essential to the plot. In other words, the love relationship is determined by the historical events of the period, and the actual Romantic interest is centred on a main fictional character or characters who, for the sake of historical verisimilitude, render(s) anachronistic attitudes in relation to the present, and behave(s) authentically in conformity with his/her/their particular place and time. Thus, the people and events involved in the story should be easily identified by the reader as being historical figures and/or events. See also Chase (1980), Shaw (1983) and Crane (2007).

[4] On Transcendentalism and American women's history see Tiffany K. Wayne, *Woman Thinking: Feminism and Transcendentalism in Nineteenth-century America* (UK: Lexington Books, 2008).

[5] Hawthorne "(…) accepted the Calvinist doctrine of original sin – the human propensity for evil. Consequently [he] was deeply suspicious of the perfectionist schemes of utopian reformers and Transcendentalists. He was a romantic/ transcendentalist but a critical one, who was "inspired by the neo-Calvinist ideas of

Hawthorne's shadow" (Coale 1985, 3) and the inescapable relevance of historical background seemingly overcasts the romantic historical novels by his contemporary fellow female writers. The battle between the Puritan orthodox views on evil and witchcraft, and the regional theme of the 1692 Salem Witch Trials – in which innocent and good natured men and women were accused of witchery – is an on-going, ever present reality. However, quite differently from this reality, the witch heroines – a contradiction in terms because, as a character, the witch is persistently the villain[6] – arise victorious and unblemished, even in death. Indeed, as Samuel Coale puts it, implicitly or explicitly:

> The ironies of the romance form as created by Hawthorne fuel further Manichean dilemmas. He originally created his "neutral territory" to evade or transcend that very Manichean world of impenetrable imprisoning matter which he experienced and perceived. And yet the romance he created reflected entirely that world and all its dualistic antagonism, in effect reproducing the very Manichean world he had attempted to surmount. This irony, I think embodies that great American theme of escape from submission to that world of fact that appears again and again. (Coale 1985, 21)

In consequence, and particularly after the 1830s, female authors also turned to "the cultivation of local history [since the] larger national themes had been exploited, and there followed a tendency to use more limited geographical regions" (Leisy 1950, 11). The exploration of the romantic potential of dramatic episodes of colonial American history such as the Salem Witch Hunts became widely recurrent. These romantic historicals, set against a Puritan New England background, are often gender specific. Their protagonists are heroines characterized by a prodigious and peculiar capacity to endure adversity. Though faced with various hardships, these misfortuned women end up revealing their heightened qualities of intelligence, willpower, resourcefulness and courage to overcome the said hardships (Baym 1993, 22). Such is the case of Edith Grafton, the witch-heroine in *Delusion or*

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divine mystery and damnation" (Phillips and Ladd 2006, 58). Hawthorne was in fact more concerned with the human nature of fallibility, in which good and evil are always and forever intertwined – and here one must also underline his Gothic streak, for just as Crow states: "Within a Gothic work, there is usually a confusion of good and evil (…). [The] character [often] combines and blurs the roles of hero and villain (…). The Gothic is [then] a work of opposition" (Crow 2013, 1-2).

[6] Regarding the cumulative concept of the literary witch-hag in English and American cultural representations see Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic and Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

The Witch of New England (1839), authored by one of the less-known *antebellum* women writers − Eliza Buckminster Lee.[7]

Lee is acknowledged as one of the "women publishing politically and historically informed writing directed toward contemporary public issues whom Hawthorne knew to some extent" (Idol Jr., and Ponder 1999, 28). However, by contemporary standards she was neither a scholar nor a writer of noticeable creative ability; nor had she a proficient command of the English language. Her prose style is simple and engaging though perhaps slightly flawed by her overuse of similes and metaphors. Her little aptitude for the literary art is copiously compensated not only by her keen dedication to it but most importantly by her piercing proto-feminist criticism. In her fictional work – mostly romantic historicals – she warns her readers of the dangers of amplified fear and suspicion, suggesting that these lead to senseless acts of persecution. An assertive liberal-Unitarian revisionist and adherent of Transcendentalism, she made a point in turning away from New England's Orthodox Calvinist traditions. Thus, she lashes out at the hypocritical masses that blindly follow prevailing dogmas, and stresses the benefits of an open mindedness combined with the ideals of Christianity. For people who believe in a violent God are more likely to be

[7] Born *circa* 1788, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Eliza was the daughter of Sara Stevens and the Unitarian Minister Joseph Buckminster. Her mother died when she was of a very tender age and she was brought up, along with her older brother, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, in a clergyman's family. Her domestic duties were numerous and she was expected to be, at all times, agreeable and subordinate, trained to excel in motherhood, housekeeping, hosting, and blindly loving and obedient to her future husband. Her father was a liberal committed to literature and he is recognized as one of the forerunners of Transcendentalism, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson's brother, the Reverend William Emerson. Despite the Reverend Buckminster's efforts to establish better schools for girls at that time, Eliza was home-schooled in Classical education both by her father and brother. In July 1827, at the age of 39, Eliza married Thomas Lee, nine years her senior and a moderately wealthy resident of Brookline Massachusetts, who retired early and devoted himself to landscape and gardening. She then pursued her studies and devoted herself to literature. A decade later, she began her career as a writer with her first publication entitled *Sketches of a New England Village* (1838). Several titles followed: *Delusion or The Witch of New England* (1839); *Life of Jean Paul Richter* (1840) – a translation of his autobiography to which she appended a biographical sketch; *Naomi or Boston Two Hundred Years Ago* (1848); *Memoirs of Rev. Joseph Buckminster, d.d. and of his Son, Rev. Joseph Stevens Buckminster* (1849) – one of her best known works; *Florence the Parish Orphan* (1852), *Parthenia or the Last Days of Paganism* (1858); and several translations of works by Richter, Auerbach and other German authors. After spending most of her life in Boston, she died on June 22, 1864.

violent and promote violence themselves. As Dan McKanan aptly notes, Lee:

> [S]uggested that orthodoxy produced not just arrogant perpetrators of genocide but also passive parents, sinners too depressed to reform, and spectators of violence too timid to intervene. She focused on the doctrines of total depravity, which led people to distrust their own best affections, and reprobation, which led people to despair rather than repentance and conversation. (McKanan 2002, 28)

Eliza Buckminster Lee also believed in the purging of differences between the sexes and vindicated respect and reverence for women. Underlining the theme of early New England's antipathy for superior females, Edith in *Delusion* "although superior to the age in which she lived, could not but be influenced by its particularities" (Lee 1839, 109). She is an example of Lee's romantic heroines. They are morally and intellectually gifted and show courage in conviction and action, often sacrificing personal safety for the sake of pursuing a morally pure life, and they are always set within a social context offering much explicit and implicit social and historical commentary.

The novel's plot is quite simple. Edith lost her mother at a very early age. She is the only child of Mr Grafton. He is a Calvinist minister and a scholar of Classical Studies. She meets Seymore, her father's disciple, with whom, little by little, she forges a strong appropriate platonic romantic attachment. Being the village Minister's daughter, she is very much beloved by all, and continues to be so after her father's death. She is also very committed to meeting the village's social needs. For several years, she keeps a close watch on Nanny, an old, sick and socially ostracized woman and her little wild granddaughter Phoebe. After the death of the old lady, Edith does not hesitate in taking care of Phoebe, who never quite warms up to Edith. Phoebe ends up accusing Edith of being the witch who haunts and torments her. She is arrested and while awaiting trial, Seymore visits her and tries to convince her to save herself through false confession by pleading guilty. Disappointed with his weakness of resolve, she turns him away. Finally, Edith gives in to the pleas of her faithful, recently freed slave, Dinah, and resorting to an elaborate ruse, she escapes prison leaving Dinah in her place. The ending of the story is left open as the reader is left without knowing what happens to Edith, except that she secludes herself in the same shack outside the village where Nanny, the old hag, used to live. In short, Edith, a suitable pious young lady, falls in love but also falls prey to New England's "[t]ime of troubles" (McWilliams 2004, 102). She is unjustly accused and condemned for the

crime of witchcraft. She is deserted by all her associates and ends up with a broken heart, as the object of her affection turns out to be "a cowardly divinity student" (Baym 1995, 166), who does not stick around.

Highlighting the opposition between what Lee deems as Puritan violence and religious superstition, and scientific rationality, she purposely explores this episode of Puritan New England and American women's history, which she finds to be a "Delusion that passed through our country in 1692 [and] has left a dark chapter in the history of New England" (Lee 1839, 111). Indeed, as Dan McKanan puts it: "Lee elaborated this point in her writings about witchcraft, in which she juxtaposed an enlightened liberal view of witchcraft to Puritan beliefs" (2002, 30). Nonetheless, Lee does drop a kind word in defense of the Puritan clergy's actions:

> It has been the fashion, of late, to depreciate the clergymen among our Puritan fathers. It is true they erred, but their errors belonged to the time and the circumstance that placed in their hands unusual power. (Lee 1839, 76)

She further suggests that the Salem witch craze was the result of the malicious deceptions of the "afflicted girls", whose afflictions seems to:

> [H]ave begun in the wicked fancies of some nervous or really diseased children, who were permitted (…) to accuse and persecute persons who were remarkable for goodness or intellect, and especially females who were distinguished for any excellence of mind or person. (Lee 1839, 111-112)

Lee depicts Phoebe as the afflicted child-accuser who suffers "most strange and unnatural contortions, and writhings of the body, startings and tremblings, turning up her eyes and distorting her mouth" (Lee 1839, 113). And yet, at first, her behaviour is dismissed by both Edith and the narrator as "[Edith being] deluded by her own consciousness of innocence [believing that] fanaticism itself could not attach a suspicion to harmlessness like hers" (Lee 1839, 117).

The deliberate choice of the episode of the Salem Witchcraft trials of 1692 in colonial New England, more than merely serving as a backdrop to Lee's novel, also determines its events and the failure of the romantic attachment between Edith and Seymore. In her Preface, Lee informs her readers that:

> The scenes and characters of this little tale are wholly fictitious. It will be found that the tragic interest that belongs to the history of the year 1692 has been very much softened in the following pages. The object of the

> author has not been to write a tale of witchcraft, but to show how circumstances may unfold the inward strength of a timid woman so that she may at last be willing to die rather than yield to the delusion that would have preserved her life (…) against the overwhelming power of the delusion[8] of the period.

Lee is also seemingly aware of the transatlanticism of New England's witchcraft phenomenon, that is, the way whereby the Protestant belief in the covenant between humans and the devil, along with the English folk beliefs in magic and witchcraft, have migrated to the New World and survived as part of the cultural memory the Puritan settlers brought from Old England:

> There are many ready to believe that [a witch] has ridden through the air on a broomstick, or gone to sea in an egg-shell. [But] it was not alone in New England that this fearful delusion influenced the minds and actions of men. It was believed all over Europe, in the seventeenth century, that evil mingled in the concerns of mortals, and that compacts were made with them, and sealed with the blood of many of the most eminent persons of the age. The desire to penetrate the mysteries of the spiritual natures (…) has taken different forms in different states of society. (Lee 1839, 99, 111)

Moreover, she is mindful that witchcraft is also a social and gender biased crime. This is denoted, for instance, in her portrayal of Nanny: "The old woman at the cliff" is depicted as "a virago [whose] expression was very wild [and] malignant". Yet, "she was quite harmless". She "earned scanty living by picking berries, fishing, and helping those who were not quite as poor as herself". Nonetheless, the "old woman [was] feared and hated by the scattered inhabitants [and] called a witch". When having fallen ill, she was "deserted [in] her sick bed [as] she had lived disliked by her neighbors". Even Edith, in her prayers, trusts "God will take [Nanny] from the world before she is seized for a witch [for] Persons in any way distinguished for any peculiarity were most likely to be accused" (Lee 1839, 60-61, 70, 99, 101, 106, 113).

Lee's historical dimension, in opposition to her creative license, seems primarily more indebted to the family history than to her in depth study of seventeenth-century materials. Nevertheless, indications of her having

[8] Lee, like many of her contemporary authors, uses the term "delusion" repeatedly. This term was widely divulged in connection with the episode of the Salem witch trials by Charles Wentworth Upham, the author of the first significant history to organize its scattered records into a coherent narrative entitled *Lectures on Witchcraft Comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem in 1692* (1831).

done some added research on the matter emerge in the narrative, as one can see by the extent of the details in the description of Edith's prosecutorial hearings:

> Two men entered (…) [they were] the officials in all occasions of this nature. (…) [Edith] asked who were her accusers and demanded the right of being confronted with them. The men informed that she would be taken to the meeting-house for examination (…). After breakfast (…) the same two persons who had visited her the night before came to conduct Edith to the meeting-house, the place of examination. The house was nearly full; and among that crowd there was scarcely one to whom Edith had not been a friend and a benefactor (…). But now every eye was averted, or turned on her with suspicion and terror (…). [Edith's] inability to weep was regarded as an infallible proof of her guilt. (…) The afflicted – that is, the accuser – was now called in. Edith (…) with grief and astonishment, (…) saw her little Phoebe [who] when almost close to her, utter[ed] a piercing cry, and [fell] down in violent convulsions. She started forward to assist and raise her, but the men drew her rudely back. [Later], when the child appeared, Edith held out her hand (…) but, the moment the child saw her, she began again to act her part and throw her body and limbs into violent contortions. [However, naively,] Edith was not alarmed (…). [She] was [later] guarded in one of the rooms of the deacon's house who had been so active in her accusation (…). When the deacon visited her in the morning [and found her] decided and unmoved (…) he began to urge her to confess − to do as others had done, and save her life by acknowledging the crime. (…) [I]t was the day of her trial [and after all that] mad delusion [she would be] dragged before angry men, and, with irons on [her] hands and ankles, (…) [she would be] lifted on the scaffold, and there before hundreds of angry faces turned [she would] die alone! (Lee 1839, 117, 123-28, 132-33, 158-59)

All in all, Lee's *Delusion* illustrates the manner in which romantic historicals are the product of "different modes of remembering in culture" since "[t]he past is not given, but must instead continually be re-constructed and re-presented" (Erll and Nünning 2008, 7). In the case of our brief study:

> [T]he literary construction of specifically American cultural memories' [was quite inflated] especially after the foundation of the U.S.-American Republic, the impulse to construct historiographical sites of memory for the sake of ideological control and cultural containment continued to remain productive. (…) [This is the case in the] nineteenth century, and especially in the time period between the British-American War of 1812-15 and the Civil War of 1861-65, [when] the publication of innumerous historical novels (...) acted as literary sites of memory (…) in the

> processes of establishing and maintaining a national U.S.-American culture and identity. (Erll and Nünning 2008, 49)

The historical fictions of most of the nineteenth-century American female writers, such as Eliza Buckminster Lee, also "responded to the collective desire for fictional commemorations of earlier stages of colonial and national U.S.-American history" (Erll and Nünning 2008, 49). Indeed, they were literary representations of collective memory or "fictions of memory" which:

> [T]urn[ed] out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to the current needs. Such conceptual and ideological fictions of memory consist of predispositions, biases, and values, which provide agreed-upon codes for understanding the past and present and which find their most succinct expression in literary plot-lines and myths. (Erll and Nünning 2008, 334)

To be sure, Lee believed that women and "their natural timidity forbidding them to publish their thoughts to the world, [prevented] their conquests from being known" (Lee 1848, 42). We find then that, in *Delusion*, Eliza Buckminster Lee did effectively endeavour to redeem the memory of the colonial New England woman.

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