

Thy Truth Then Be Thy Dowry



Thy Truth Then Be Thy Dowry:  
Questions of Inheritance  
in American Women's Literature

Edited by

Stéphanie Durrans

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Questions of Inheritance in American Women's Literature,  
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To Elisabeth Béranger and Ginette Castro,  
whose enduring legacy will live on among generations of scholars.



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## INTRODUCTION

Despite significant progress in women's rights, women are still victims of inheritance loss or usurpation in many countries across the world, as in India, where the 1956 Hindu Succession Act granting women equal rights to inherit and dispose of their property was not actually enforced for a long time,<sup>1</sup> or in some African countries where such practices as "widow inheritance" (i.e. forcing a widow to marry her late husband's brother or another male relative in order to make sure the property stays within the family) are still widespread nowadays. The fight for equal inheritance rights was even at the heart of recent debates in the British Parliament and House of Lords, resulting in new provisions that brought to an end the laws of succession according to which a son should have precedence over a first-born daughter in the line of succession to the throne.

Land, blood and lineage have been used to define the social status of the individual for centuries. Despite its will to break free from the Old World's political institutions, the United States has found it difficult to dispense with the spirit (if not the actual practice) of ancient inheritance laws. The birth of the United States certainly marked the advent of a new, modern world in which tradition and inherited customs were not considered prime determinants in the formation of the self. However, the new Americans would never cease to grapple with the contradictions inherent in their dual position as heirs of a Promised Land to which God had guided their destinies and pioneers in charge of building a new world, away from the corruption of the old one. The Puritans themselves conceived of inheritance more as a burden, or even a curse, for all the descendants of such sinners as Adam and Eve from whose tainted legacy men should try to set themselves free.

In Article Three of the Constitution, the founding fathers were instrumental in "[freeing] future generations from the wrongdoing as well as the prosperity of their forebears by declaring that culpability for treason against the United States would not carry forward to the next generation."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A recent amendment to the 1956 Act (the 2005 Hindu Succession Act) ensured that daughters would benefit from the same rights as sons.

<sup>2</sup> Holly Jackson, "The Transformation of American Family Property in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, vol. 56, no. 3

Such politicians as Thomas Jefferson sought to establish “a system by which every fibre would be eradicated of antient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican.”<sup>3</sup> The abolition of entails and primogeniture was the cornerstone of this new political vision. From then on, individual achievement was given prominence over inherited social status. As pointed out by Holly Jackson, however, the rise of individualism that resulted from such inheritance laws soon came to threaten the institution of family itself, thus forcing Americans to confront one more contradiction in their desire to preserve both their democratic ideals and the mainstay of social stability represented by the family. Jackson notes how Alexis de Tocqueville insightfully captured the dynamics at work as early as 1835 when he wrote: “Among nations whose law of descent is founded upon the right of primogeniture landed estates often pass from generation to generation without undergoing division, the consequence of which is that family feeling is to a certain degree incorporated with the estate. The family represents the estate, the estate the family.”<sup>4</sup> He foresaw the ensuing decline of the family while acknowledging that inheritance reforms were absolutely vital to the promotion of the ideals that underpinned the new nation: “Thus not only does the law of partible inheritance render it difficult for families to preserve their ancestral domains entire, but it deprives them of the inclination to attempt it, and compels them in some measure to co-operate with the law in their own extinction.”<sup>5</sup>

The inheritance crisis that marked the dawn of the young nation is one that left its stamp on American literature from the early years of its history. While a veritable fascination with historiography was growing in nineteenth-century European intellectual circles, American thinkers and artists were seeking to break free from the burden of the past and to blaze new trails that would herald the birth of a national consciousness. In many ways, the theme of inheritance can actually be seen to undermine the very foundation of the American Dream. Not only does it run counter to the ideal of the self-made man and to the Protestant work ethics popularized by Benjamin Franklin in the course of the eighteenth century; it also invalidates Emerson’s principles of self-reliance by emphasizing man’s dependence upon the dictates of fate and family connections. The many

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(2010), 271.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, 12 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1904-1905), 1:77.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [1835] (New York: Bantam, 2000), 54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

tales narrating the extraordinary ascent of poor waifs from rags to riches all hinge upon similar *dei ex machinae* devices including the loss, appropriation, or discovery of a fabulous heritage. The growing popularity of such a theme in the latter half of the nineteenth century could thus be interpreted as the telltale sign of the demise of the American Dream in an increasingly stratified capitalistic society that leaves little hope for upward mobility. In such circumstances, the unexpected windfall naturally became the only possibility of achieving success and making it to the top of the social ladder. As we will see, however, women's treatment of inheritance in the literary field occasionally veers away from such beaten paths to suggest other forms of inheritance as a way of reaching self-fulfilment.

Though Jules Zanger never specifically tackles the issue of women's tales of inheritance, his essay on the inheritance theme in American literature lays the groundwork for our exploration into the subject.<sup>6</sup> Zanger correctly identifies fantasies of inheritance as a counterpoint to the decline of the American Dream in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He traces the obsession with such tales back to the earliest times of American colonization and underlines that "Puritanism established an emotional and intellectual atmosphere that emphasized the continuous working presence of the past in the present."<sup>7</sup> His contention is that literary appropriations of the theme deviate from the Calvinist emphasis on the guilt associated with inheritance towards a more Renaissance-inspired conception of "history as a rich benison to be re-grasped, rather than as a curse to be labored under."<sup>8</sup> Zanger goes on to liken inheritance narratives with the doctrine of Special Grace, in sharp contrast with such typically American ideals as "Jeffersonian aristocracy of energy, intellect, and virtue, the Protestant work ethic, and Emersonian self-reliance."<sup>9</sup> A wealth of contradictions consequently tend to crystallize around this singular American conception of inheritance which presents an analogue both with classic fairy-tale structures and with what Zanger boldly calls "a pornography of achievement."<sup>10</sup> The inherent plot of female victimization underlying such

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<sup>6</sup> See Jules Zanger, "Consider the Lilies of the Field: The Inheritance Theme in American Literature," *The Antioch Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, autumn 1983, 480-487.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>10</sup> Zanger justifies such a simile on the grounds that "[like] pornography, [inheritance literature] speaks directly to desire without socially sanctioned mediating fictions, offering, instead, an alternative set of fictions, equally fantastic. Like pornography, it offers solitary rather than social gratification. Like pornography, its roots are in adolescent longing and in adolescent innocence" (*Ibid.*, 487).

tales inevitably raises a number of questions: how do women authors position themselves with respect to the constraints of the fairy-tale plot? How can they empower themselves to claim their share of inheritance? How do women who have long been denied the right to inherit cope with their new status as heiresses?

Studies of testamentary behavior like the one conducted by Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon and Michel Dahlin have shown that American women did benefit from conditions that their counterparts in the Old World would have found most enviable. For instance, “state intestacy laws gave daughters precedence over collateral male kin”<sup>11</sup> and “there was, by contemporary English standards, a definite generosity toward wives in the wills of early colonial settlers.”<sup>12</sup> Over time, though, notable differences could be observed and, by the end of the eighteenth century, “the colonists [had] reverted to the patterns that had emerged earlier in England. More and more male testators prevented their widows from owning property absolutely and excluded them from executrixship.”<sup>13</sup> Of course, regional variations should also be taken into account and the authors note, for instance, that the wives of migrants on the East Coast were much more likely to inherit large portions of estate and to be named executrices than the wives of established settlers on the West Coast. Quite significantly, however, property law reform was one of the very first causes championed by the women’s movement that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century.

There is no denying that approaching the theme of inheritance from women’s point of view further complicates the issue. While men’s relationship to inheritance has always been tainted with ambiguity, women’s position in the social and literary world is probably even more paradoxical. Indeed, when trying to claim recognition in the world of literature, women were simultaneously subjected to a legacy of male masters and denied the right to claim such inheritance as their own if it meant asserting equal standards for the quality of their works. While some women writers struggled to gain the status of rightful heiresses to the masters they longed to equal, others sought to break free from imposed patterns of inheritance that served to entrap them and relegate them in the shadows of the master. Cut off as they often were from a long line of inheritance that could have given them authority and social status, women

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<sup>11</sup> Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 207.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

had no choice but to strike out on their own, which actually made them fitting exponents of such American ideals as self-reliance.

The permanence of such a theme in literary women's imagination shows in Louisa May Alcott's first novel, the manuscript of which was kept for many decades at Harvard University before being recently edited and published. The heroine of this highly sentimental romance entitled *The Inheritance* is Edith Adelon, a poor Italian orphan who was taken under the wings of wealthy English patrons and became the companion of the family's two children. In a novel whose plot developments are quite predictable right from the title, Alcott adds an unusual twist to the narrative when she has Edith relinquish her rightful inheritance to express her heartfelt gratitude to the family who has always given her love and protection. In the last lines, Alcott praises the higher claims of the true inheritance Edith can now enjoy: "I need no richer dowry than the love of such a heart," says Lord Percy to the young girl to whom he has just proposed, "And though I take you without earthly wealth, still in the tender reverence and fadeless gratitude of those you bless, surely, dearest, you have won a nobler Inheritance."<sup>14</sup> The novel ironically encapsulates the only choices left for women at the time: becoming a rich heiress would have led Edith to throw her benefactors into disgrace by depriving them of the rank and property that they had always assumed to be theirs; by relinquishing her personal claims on this property, Edith gains the "true" inheritance of a family and secures the love of a man who will provide her with similar riches through marriage. The subtext of the novel highlights women's predicament in a world that deprives them of the possibility to capitalize on inherited wealth to further any other aim than marriage and procreation. Interestingly enough, Edith's name itself encapsulates the problematic nature of inheritance in women's lives since its etymology reflects both the major theme at stake and the inner conflict that she will have to confront before renouncing her inheritance. Henry James's Isabel Archer (*The Portrait of a Lady*) epitomizes the other alternative when she unexpectedly inherits her uncle's fortune and tries to use it in the service of spiritual and artistic growth. In the end, her aspirations to freedom and self-fulfillment inevitably come up against the reality of her condition as a woman—bound to sacrifice her free-thinking on the altar of matrimony.

Although many tales of inheritance can be found in nineteenth-century women's fiction, one must admit that not all writers chose to tap the subversive vein of protest against women's condition. I would argue, however, that many such tales can be read as a thinly veiled thrust against the patriarchal society of the times. Kate Chopin's "Dead Men's Shoes" is

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<sup>14</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *The Inheritance* (London: Penguin, 1998), 147.

a good case in point. Chopin's personal experience had probably left a bitter taste since it took her months to pay off the debts her husband had contracted before his death and she was not even immediately recognized as the legal guardian of her six children since Louisiana law provided that children should be left in the care of their fathers' relatives until their mothers had successfully petitioned to secure the title of "tutrix" of their own offspring.<sup>15</sup> "Dead Men's Shoes" (1897) seems to hinge upon a classic inheritance plot. Upon the death of old Gamiche, nineteen-year-old Gilma (an orphan who had found food and shelter there many years ago) is about to be thrown out of the house by the old man's nephew, Septime, who even denies him the right to keep the horse that the old man had given him. When, in a sudden reversal of fortune, Gilma turns out to be the sole inheritor of Gamiche's property, the young man is initially overjoyed by the news, but he eventually can't cope with his new status and chooses to forsake the inheritance rather than to step into "dead men's shoes." The true nature of the American Dream is emphasized in the last lines of the story, when Gilma chooses to hit the road and leave behind the material property that would have made him a prisoner of the past: "As he rode out of the gate, mounted upon his well-beloved 'Jupe,' the faithful dog following, Gilma felt as if he had awakened from an intoxicating but depressing dream."<sup>16</sup> Toth briefly mentions the story as one in which Chopin tackles the subject of young male characters trying "very hard to avoid adult emotions"<sup>17</sup> and she explicitly contrasts it with others in which Chopin dealt with the topic of women's awakenings. However, below the surface of a text that can be seen as a traditional ode to individualism in the true spirit of transcendentalism, Chopin's play on onomastics leads the observant reader to detect more feminist overtones. Anyone aware of Chopin's attention to details and strict economy of words can't help being puzzled by her choice of the horse as the one object Gilma is willing to accept as an heirloom, not to mention the anecdotal story about how the animal came to be called "Jupe." Though old Gamiche<sup>18</sup> had chosen to call it Jupiter (at the root of which we find a combination of God and the father), Gilma soon shortened it to "Jupe," a name that would have been

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<sup>15</sup> Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 94.

<sup>16</sup> Kate Chopin, "Dead Men's Shoes," *Chopin: Complete Novels and Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: The Library of America, 2002), 474.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Toth, *op. cit.*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> A name in which one might detect hints at the old man's secret parentage with Gilma if we consider the root of the word ("gamic, requiring fertilization to reproduce").



pronounced like the French word “jupe” (meaning “skirt”) in the French-speaking environment of Louisiana. To the old man’s invocation of patriarchal institutions, Gilma (who happens to bear a name more traditionally feminine than masculine) consequently opposes the freedom to be found in disregarding the laws of inheritance. Under the guise of a male hero, Gilma actually points forward to some of Chopin’s most “spirited” women characters, and one is not surprised to learn that “[the] horse was a spirited animal of great value.”<sup>19</sup> Inversely, the debilitating effect of inheritance is epitomized by the acquisitive nephew, Septime, “a cripple, so horribly afflicted that it was distressing to look at him”<sup>20</sup> and thus the right sort of person to inherit such a fortune, surmises Gilma at the end. Interestingly enough, the first person Gilma turns to in his desperate quest for recognition of his claims upon the horse is the old slave Halifax, in whom one might be tempted to see the embodiment of a natural form of authority if we consider the meaning of her name (Halifax being derived from “holy fields”), the fact that she appears to be dressed “in the deshabelle of the fields”, and the name of the mule that she fears to lose should Septime take a fancy to it: Policy. Though initially providing some kind of comfort, this mother figure is however complicit in turning Gilma into a prisoner of the past, and the young man eventually turns away from her. Such patterns foreshadow Chopin’s delineation of the community of mother women who, in *The Awakening*, seem to preside over Grand Isle only to assert the ultimate authority of patriarchal rule in the face of dissent.

At the other end of the spectrum, Edith Wharton broaches the theme of inheritance from an altogether different point of view. Her privileged position as a member of a nearly extinct wealthy aristocratic elite whose ancestry could be traced back to the early Anglo-Dutch settlers of New York led this devoted “student of inheritance”<sup>21</sup> to devote most of her fictional work to the preservation of her heritage as recorded in novelistic form. *The Custom of the Country* (1913) most strikingly traces the circulation of heirlooms that come to be acquired by the nouveaux riches in their attempt to assert equal standards with the old aristocracy. In the process, though, these objects gradually become meaningless as their new owners have no sense of the “inherited obligations”<sup>22</sup> that had so far been

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<sup>19</sup> Kate Chopin, *op. cit.*, 468.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>21</sup> See Sara Elizabeth Quay, “Edith Wharton’s Narrative of Inheritance,” *American Literary Realism*, vol. 29, no. 3 (spring 1997): 26-48.

<sup>22</sup> Edith Wharton, Letter to Dr. Morgan Dix, December 5 [1905], rpt. in Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons, Norton Critical Edition

handed down from one generation to the next. In her essay on the subject, Sara Elizabeth Quay interestingly focuses on the dynamics that led Wharton to compromise with the forces of the marketplace and the invasion of new mercenary values. She argues that “throughout her writing [Wharton] strove to counter the debasement of material objects by advocating a philosophy in which the tangible world corresponded to intangible values” and she eventually presents the realist novel as an “heirloom” through which Wharton could “bequeath the original narrative”<sup>23</sup> of old New York and its inherited values. However penetrating and challenging they are, such discussions of inheritance in Wharton’s fiction eschew the question of a specifically female line of inheritance through which to apprehend her work. Such a gap in scholarship can probably be put down partly to the author’s own emphasis on her father’s library as a sanctuary and a revelation for the young child whose reading fare was yet to be strictly supervised by her conservative mother, and partly to Wharton’s later literary and personal friendship with Henry James, under whose overpowering influence she would strain for many years. Elaine Showalter reminds us that Wharton repeatedly expressed her reluctance to associate with any sort of female tradition although she eventually “realized that at best she combined a masculine and intellectual approach to fiction with a feminine attention to detail and feeling.”<sup>24</sup> Quite significantly, the only heirloom Wharton mentions in connection with the women in the family in her autobiography is ambiguously dismissed as “no more than the faded flowers between the leaves of a great-grandmother’s Bible,”<sup>25</sup> a statement in which one might detect either a wish to belittle the significance of her ancestor’s legacy<sup>26</sup> or, maybe, a sharp awareness that, in a world where women were not in a position to bequeath any material property, “faded flowers” pressed between the leaves of the Bible encapsulate only too well the only wisdom that a grandmother can pass down to her granddaughter—like a cautionary tale hinting at the fate of beautiful women like Lily Bart or Ellen Olenska, women who will be crushed by the dictates of a patriarchal society that remains the ultimate source of authority.

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(New York and London: Norton, 1990), 263.

<sup>23</sup> Sara Elizabeth Quay, *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers: Celebrating American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 271.

<sup>25</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (London: Century, 1987), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Especially when compared with the “pair of fine gilt andirons crowned with Napoleonic eagles” (*Ibid.*, 14) that the little girl inherited from her grandfather.

Although specific authors like Edith Wharton have been subjected to the scrutiny of various critics, no extensive study of the topic of inheritance in American women's fiction has yet been made available. The present collection of essays does not purport to fill such a gap in scholarship but to bring together a number of stimulating analyses that could at least open up new avenues of reflection on the subject. While quite a few major literary figures are given due consideration in this study, most of the contributors chose to explore the theme of inheritance in the works of lesser-known writers, some of whom fought long—or are still struggling—to gain recognition in the tradition of American letters. The nature of the American experience will be approached from multiple angles in an attempt to encompass diverse facets of the “American” woman writer—whether she is an American Indian, a Chicana, the descendant of black slaves or of Puritan settlers. Two interwoven strands can be identified in the works under study:

- The tension between the home and the land inevitably lies at the heart of women's reflection upon questions of inheritance. Most of these essays directly or indirectly interrogate how women authors' new conceptions of inheritance inevitably reflect upon or proceed from revisionary attitudes towards the land. Indeed, while questions of inheritance often revolve around the transfer of property and personal belongings, American women writers tended for a long time to focus their attention on an arena of experience from which they had long been excluded, confined as they were to the domestic sphere over which they were supposed to preside.

- Deeply enmeshed in the questioning upon inheritance and genealogy is the intertextual dimension of the literary work, which is also at stake in most of the essays in this collection. Intertextuality can be regarded as a starting-point for a reflection upon the nature of the self in its relationship with the past, the point of which is not so much the quest for literary masters or models as the questioning that is involved in such an investigation. One can thus wonder if women writers deliberately position themselves in the lineage of male masters or if they invest an altogether different space of creativity by turning to other models, possibly unearthing their literary foremothers in the process.

The first cluster of essays examines the way in which women writers deal with the weight of the past, laboring under the curse of national or personal inheritance as they attempt to blaze new trails in the literary world. Drawing upon Werner Sollors's critical terminology of “consent,” “descent” and “dissent,” Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau offers an intertextual

reading of Dickinson's poetry according to which the poet's Shakespearean heritage ultimately undermines the Puritan foundations of her work, especially in her descriptions of the New England countryside. After arguing that the dramatization of language allows Dickinson to subvert the Puritan typological conception of the world, Chevrier-Bosseau focuses on the Americans' willingness to situate themselves in a Shakespearean tradition. Recent scholarship has made much of women writers' appropriation and subversion of Shakespeare's legacy in a feminist perspective<sup>27</sup> but Chevrier-Bosseau inversely suggests that the bard's influence was "quite liberating," providing Dickinson with bold erotic metaphors while allowing her to experiment with the lyric form. The Shakespearean connection leads Chevrier-Bosseau to probe the inbetween state in which Dickinson situates herself when she claims to be writing "from the center of dissolution," in this interval of silence and emptiness that separates two performances on stage.

Audrey Fogels opens her study of Elizabeth Stoddard's fiction with a similar trope as she underlines that Stoddard fell "through the critical cracks" on account of the resistance of her work to clear categorization, thus making her a literary orphan. However, Fogels argues that, standing as it is as a veritable site of convergence between diverse traditions, Stoddard's work forces literary scholars to adopt a new epistemological approach to their field of study, establishing "links and continuities where one used to see clear interruptions." As in Dickinson's poetry, the New England that serves as a setting for "Collected by a Valetudinarian" appears to be haunted by the nation's past, though the region has now been deserted by intrepid adventurers and is only inhabited by women and sickly, weak men. This spiritual wasteland will precisely be the stage for the heroine's recovery of a tradition and inheritance of her own. The journal bequeathed by Alicia to Mrs. Hobson who in turn hands it down to Eliza functions as a mirror reflection of Stoddard's own work, characterized as it is by the same generic instability and deliberately shying away from traditional plots. Away from the stifling influence of the nation's past, both "Alicia's house and her personal narrative knit ties with distant heritages and territories." Stoddard emphasizes both the primacy of female figures in the story of inheritance and the creative potential that lies in accommodating multiple inheritances in the space of one single text or person.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (eds.), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1980) and Marianne Novy, *Women's Re-visions of Shakespeare* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

“When you live a long way out you make your own fun,” concludes the narrator of “55 Miles to the Gas Pump.”<sup>28</sup> This statement also resonates on a metafictional level and takes on a paradigmatic value. Indeed, Annie Proulx’s work exhibits such a consciousness of writing from the margins and sets about playfully deconstructing national mythologies. I have examined elsewhere the dialectic between determinism and “possibilism”<sup>29</sup> that underlies all of Proulx’s works and also throws light on the dire situation of Proulx’s female characters. In her study of Proulx’s Wyoming stories, Bénédicte Meillon unveils the dark side of inheritance for women who are trapped in a bleak, constricting environment from which there seems to be no escape. On the other hand, she also explores the ways in which Proulx salvages whatever she can from the wasteland of myth, fantasy, and fairy-tales before turning it into artistic material.

The second part of this volume gathers essays that explore American women writers’ troubled relationships with the father figure as they seek to break away from its authority. The weight of patriarchal inheritance hangs heavy on the mind of Caroline Gordon whose Southern Belles usually end up condemned to insanity or inertia. The four short stories that come under the scrutiny of Françoise Buisson span forty years in Gordon’s career and reveal “an increasingly conservative trend” in her approach to the subject. When comparing the two versions of the same tale rewritten forty years apart, she highlights Gordon’s “increasing reliance on Greek classics, that is to say on her male literary heritage.” Buisson contends that in all these stories “women’s attitude towards their heritage, whether in the ‘garden’ or ‘forest’ of the South, in the domestic or literary sphere, generates some tension which ultimately leads Gordon to take comfort in her fathers’ legacy.” Whether they choose to rebel against or to comply with the rules of patriarchal inheritance, Gordon’s characters may end up running the risk of petrification. Such an ambivalent attitude to her own heritage may ultimately suggest that, in Gordon’s opinion, women should no more reject tradition than they should embrace it wholeheartedly. Her own use of intertextuality, indeed, shows how she tried to negotiate her

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<sup>28</sup> Annie Proulx, *Close Range* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 252.

<sup>29</sup> See Stéphanie Durrans, “The Influence of the *Annales* School on Annie Proulx’s Geographical Imagination,” *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, ed. Alex Hunt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 17. The term “possibilism” is now widely used in reference to the French *Annales* historian Paul Vidal de la Blache’s belief that “Man could indeed respond to his environment, adapt to his milieu and alter his physical surroundings in a number of ways, thus being both active and passive” (*ibid.*, 17).

way into the literary world by investing the space of freedom granted her by the interplay of multiple traditions that occasionally come to clash, collide, interact, resonate or contradict one another.

Anaïs Nin's "Journal of a Possessed" documents both her attempts to situate herself within a male literary tradition (Whitman, James, Dostoyevsky, Proust, etc.) and the anxiety generated by the loss of all father figures. A diary is key to unraveling the intricacies of Nin's self, lost between two continents, two cultures and two languages. Simon Dubois Boucheraud proceeds to examine Nin's conflictual relationship with the Catholic religion and its omnipotent father figure as she was seeking to fashion an independent self of her own that she could bequeath to other women, women who she emphatically wished she could "see [...] creating their own language, and claiming their own heritage."

Joan Williams had to take up such a challenge as she was grappling with the overpowering influence of William Faulkner, her friend and mentor under whose shadow critics have been all too willing to subsume her. Gérald Préher's article aims to deconstruct familiar readings of Williams's work by focusing instead on the female line of inheritance that can be traced through her fiction, be it Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty or Katherine Anne Porter. His analysis of the story "Daylight Come" shows how the confrontation with her reflection in the mirror leads the heroine—an African-American cleaning lady—to initiate the quest for her true self and free herself from her past. "Vistas" more specifically highlights the protagonist's efforts to situate herself in an economy of inheritance by successively trying to bequeath something to her son—in vain—and reestablishing contact with her own mother. "No Love for the Lonely" further probes into the predicament of southern women by dramatizing the way in which the male character—Cotter—copes with his sister's death, trying to hear the echo of her voice in the silence that oppresses him whereas he had mostly neglected her while she was alive. One can wonder to what extent Williams might have used each of these female characters as projections of her own self as a woman artist struggling to make her voice heard in a male-dominated literary world.

Considering women's age-old relegation to the domestic sphere, it is no surprise that the house should crystallize all the tensions attendant upon questions of inheritance. The next three essays explore such issues while seeking to delineate possible ways of escape from the strictures of the past. Ellen Glasgow's Gothic story "The Shadowy Third" prominently features a house and a garden that have been bequeathed to Mrs. Maradick by her mother and which she was hoping to bequeath to her own daughter—a

house which Mrs. Maradick's second husband translates in financial terms only as he focuses on its real estate value at the expense of any personal attachment. Brigitte Zaugg shows how Dr. Maradick's devious means of appropriating both the property and the money of his wife eventually come up against a coalition of forces embodied by the ghost of the little girl, the spirit of the mother and the timely intervention of the narrator, a nurse employed in Dr. Maradick's service to look after his ailing wife. Glasgow consequently suggests that "acknowledging the past helps to construct and shape the self, that the legacy of one's ancestors is not necessarily a burden but can be a treasure, and that human beings have the possibility of writing a different ending for themselves—if only they choose to."

In *Bellefleur*, Joyce Carol Oates revisits the classic trope of the Gothic mansion as a metaphor for the burden of family inheritance. Under the weight of family secrets that progressively reveal its shaky foundations, the Bellefleur manor comes to the same untimely end as Poe's House of Usher in a novel that is also full of inconsistencies and presents itself very much like a crazy quilt in its treatment of time and history. Tanya Tromble suggests that "much of Oates's fiction [...] can be read as an exploration of the destructive power of the family." Interestingly enough, though, Oates lets one of her characters—Germaine—survive the destruction of the house; and Germaine happens to be the one character who "obstinately refuses to choose sides." "Her father saves her so she might retain this innocence, this hybridity, this equal attachment to both of her parents which is symbolized at her birth by the young infant's equally discernible male *and* female body parts." Tromble convincingly argues that this concept of hybridity also informs Oates's treatment of inheritance, following Nodelman's perception of the novel as one in which "Oates revitalizes the masculine form not by abandoning it completely but rather by combining it with a more feminine conception of time."

In the article she devotes to a study of Toni Morrison's *Love*, Valérie Croisille investigates the complex interaction between family and national inheritance for a wealthy black family. The dreams and hopes generated by the Civil Rights movement have turned sour in this narrative retracing the bitter fight of two women over a dead man's inheritance. Both Cossey's young wife and granddaughter cling to an idealized figure of the old man, and even strangers find in his portrait a source of solace and guidance in life, blissfully unaware of his actual ambivalence and perversity. Morrison thus "deconstructs the conclusions of the 1965 Moynihan Report, which argued that the matriarchal structure of the black family emasculated black males by denying them any chance to stand as authority figures." Further than that, though, she turns Bill Cossey into a representative of both black

and white exploitation of women by implicitly comparing him with a Godlike figure of authority and exposing the fallacious nature of his black Eden. In a most ironical narrative twist, we eventually learn that the old man had actually bequeathed all his property to the prostitute he would not even let into his house in his lifetime. The latter's name (Celestial) points to a possible allegorical reading of the novel if we choose to read Cosey's sexual achievements as a stand-in for the white man's conquest of a virgin land later to be despoiled. Celestial could thus point to the old man's hypocritical flirting with Christian values which significantly elude him till the end since his true legatee would never have set foot in his house, even after his death. Morrison thus skillfully plays with the Biblical intertext to debunk both the black and white inheritance that spoiled the lives of Heed and Christine in the novel.

The last series of essays focuses on contemporary women writers in whose work the consciousness of writing from the margins is exacerbated as their claim to inheritance has been invalidated by national perceptions. Following on the recurrent motif of the car as a stand-in for American values and lifestyle, the metaphor of the blind spot in the mirror conveniently reflects the position of these women, relegated in the dead zone of a tradition from which they have long been excluded. If looking back in the rearview mirror is a prerequisite to safe driving, exactly as consciousness of the past allows one to move forward to reach one's destination in life, being situated in the blind spot puts these women in a disabling position by negating their visibility in the long line of claimants to national or literary inheritance.

The question of land inheritance is particularly tricky for American Indians whose connection to the land informs their whole lifestyle, culture, and ancestral memories. In her analysis of Fleur Pillager's odyssey in two novels by Louise Erdrich, Joëlle Bonnevin shows how the loss and recovery of her land serves as a driving force behind the protagonist's quest. Bonnevin examines the clash between two conceptions of land ownership and inheritance in the light of historical data, ultimately underlining that "[if] this new system [of tribal allotments] made it possible for [Ojibwe] to inherit land in the Euro-American sense, it also proved very successful at making them lose the land they had just inherited." Like Germaine in Oates's *Bellefleur*, Fleur Pillager is endowed with both male and female characteristics that make her a fitting heroine, survivor, and trickster figure. *Four Souls* most significantly reverses the typical rags-to-riches story the conventions of which it yet appears to abide by, and Fleur's eventual empowerment testifies to Erdrich's staunch



belief in the possible revitalization of their inheritance by Native Americans.

Carmen Tafolla's story "Inheritance" appropriately concludes with a shift in focalization that gives us a view of the final scene through the eyes of strangers passing by in a car. Despite their compassionate stance, these strangers significantly remain oblivious to the actual nature of the scene before their eyes, that is the transfer of power and energy from one generation of women to another. The claim for inheritance has been at the heart of Mexican-Americans' fight for recognition in the vast area of land that was annexed by the United States in 1848 in accordance with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Tafolla's investigation of this issue leads her to probe as far back as the earliest times of colonization as she appropriates the story of the first Mexican woman to have been dispossessed of her right to inherit: Malinche. Positioning herself as an heiress to this iconic figure, Tafolla proceeds to revise official American history in tales and poems that foreground the power to be found for Chicanos in recovering their true dual inheritance. In the process, she also subverts Walt Whitman's legacy by countering both his conception of the poet's role and his vision of foreign tongues as a way to buttress the supremacy of the English language on American territory.

Sarah Dufaure explores the inbetween zone of the southern Appalachian region through the lens of one of its contemporary writers, Meredith Sue Willis. The region was long considered to be mired in the past and Old World traditions, which excluded it *de facto* from the national ambition to fashion specifically American models. Dufaure argues that "[t]he necessity to transcend the curse of historical and geographical heritage was probably two-fold for women" who were both held in check by the region's exclusion and by the prevalence of prescriptive gender roles. Willis's novel *Oradell at Sea* features a heroine who has to grapple with the contradictions of her new status as the heiress of an immense wealth that she had coveted for a long time and the burden of her spiritual heritage that comes back to haunt her as she wallows in luxury and indifference to others.<sup>30</sup> The fallacy of the American Dream is exposed through scathing criticism of the work ethics as the heroine points out that material inheritance is the prerequisite to any success in the entrepreneurial world, which negates any chance of upward mobility for those who fail to inherit the necessary money to launch into business. *Oradell's* split self may reflect the inner contradictions of an American society whose dreams

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<sup>30</sup> Her name significantly encapsulates this tension by foregrounding both the thirst for gold that motivates her escape from Appalachia and the quiet dell to which she longs to return in later years.

spring from a singular blend of idealism and fierce materialism. As Oradell eventually comes into her own by acting in accordance with the idealistic, social vision inculcated in her during her younger years, Dufaure suggests that “the tension between material inheritance and spiritual heritage can finally be regarded as subservient to a celebration of Appalachian political and social values.” Willis’s choice of a cruise ship as a setting for her heroine’s tribulations reinforces her rejection of traditional American patterns. Far from hitting the road on the way to self-fulfillment, Oradell chooses to remain literally “at sea,” in a space of fluctuating identities that allows for regression as well as progression.

This blind spot, or interstitial space, eventually gives room for the reinvention of the woman writer’s self between the main signposts of a male-dominated literary tradition. Whether it is expressed through images of void, dissolution and silence (Dickinson), in the use of interlanguage as a linguistic strategy (Tafolla), or in the hybrid nature of heroines (and narratives) shying away from gender-based definitions (Oates, Erdrich),<sup>31</sup> the blank space where women have been relegated over the centuries has eventually been reclaimed as a powerful site of resistance from which new forms can emerge and in which women can refashion their own selves away from a confining social environment.

As exemplified by Kate Chopin’s “Dead Men’s Shoes,” being cut off from the direct line of inheritance can also prove to be a blessing in disguise by forcing one to reconsider the self independently from constricting inherited models and patterns. Historical factors have sharpened women’s sensitivity to such issues, with the result that women writers’ contribution to the narrative of inheritance possibly yields significant insights into the true nature of inheritance. In her parable-like post-apocalyptic novel, *The Not Yet*, contemporary Louisiana writer Moira Crone envisions a world dominated by a new caste of supreme beings who have discovered the secret of immortality and who call themselves “heirs.” In such a world, however, the possibility of living forever has led to a radical break with the past. What is the need for memories when eternal youth has become a reality? Significantly, though, some of these heirs end up being overwhelmed by the burden of their repressed memories, to the

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<sup>31</sup> Elaine Showalter underlines the extent to which “the androgynous mind is, finally, a utopian projection of the ideal artist” (*A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, London: Virago, 1977, 289). Like Virginia Woolf, indeed, Oates and Erdrich use androgynous figures as a way of transcending the constraints of tradition while turning this fallow ground into fertile terrain for their creativity.

point of committing suicide or wasting away while foraging in the remains of history—submerged by the murky waters of a post-apocalyptic New Orleans—to seek answers to one’s existential dilemma. The elusive nature of such “inheritance” is made clear in the revelation that those who have been allowed to touch, or even carry, an heir realized how light they are, light as a feather, as if they were made of “air.”<sup>32</sup> The women writers whose works are subjected to the scrutiny of our contributors show such a consciousness of inheritance as meaningless, sterile and even deadly if it is only regarded as a way of tracing a line of continuity with the past without any possibility of projection into the future. Inheriting implies duties towards future generations, as Anaïs Nin aptly put it when she hoped her work would serve as an “inheritance for others.” No-one probably captured the spirit of such dynamics better than Anne Bradstreet—one of the early founders of the nation—when she gave a slightly subversive twist to the Scriptures and aphoristically expressed that “wisdom with an inheritance is good, but wisdom without an inheritance is better than an inheritance without wisdom.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Moira Crone, *The Not Yet* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2012), 132.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Bradstreet, Meditation 28. See *The Poems of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) Together with her Prose Remains* ([archive.org/stream/cu31924020766345/cu31924020766345\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/cu31924020766345/cu31924020766345_djvu.txt)). The original line from Ecclesiastes reads as follows: “Wisdom is good with an inheritance: and by it there is profit to them that see the sun” (Ecclesiastes 7:11).

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**PART I:**

**GRAPPLING WITH THE CURSE  
OF INHERITANCE**

