
Appropriating Europe: Harriet Prescott Spofford's Armchair Creativity

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Abstract

When the twenty-three year old aspiring New England writer Harriet Prescott (Spofford) submitted a short story entitled "In a Cellar" to the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858, editor James Russell Lowell was so impressed that he doubted the story's authenticity and demanded proof that it was not a translation from the French. While some critics suggest that the story looks back to Poe, its originality, as Lowell recognized, lies in its assured, authoritative command of Paris, French manners and customs and, as early Spofford biographer Elizabeth K. Halbeisen points out, "European diplomacy" (53). This is all the more startling when we consider that in 1858, Prescott Spofford had never been anywhere abroad. Spofford's long and prolific career includes New England tales that practise the local color regionalism favoured by several of her contemporaries. But in the forty plus years between the Atlantic publication and her first transatlantic voyage, which did not occur until 1903, Spofford, through various strategies, often includes a vibrant European presence in her stories. This paper explores the nature and implications of Spofford's knowledge and handling of transatlantic invocations. Acknowledging the scholarship that explores Spofford's ornate style (Beam, Cody), it proposes that her work neither rejects the "courtly muses of Europe," nor attempts an American outsider's analysis of European traditions. Spofford's European perspectives show both the challenges and the enrichment in the coming together of cultures. Through selected short stories (for example, "The Amber Gods;" "Old Madame," "The Godmothers"), the paper argues that Spofford looks to and creates hybrid possibilities of identity, both individual and national, proposing another way to consider, in Alfred Bendixen's words, "Spofford's considerable literary importance" (Introduction" xxiv) in American letters.

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