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Critical Analysis Essay

January – March 1884

Martha McMillan, born Martha Murdock, was born in 1844 to Irish immigrants, Elizabeth Richards and Robert Murdock. In 1857, Martha's family moved from her birth-place of Clinton County, Ohio to Cedarville, Ohio. It is there that Martha Murdock married James McMillan, a wealthy farmer, on January 26, 1867. On her wedding day, Martha began what would be a daily habit of journal-keeping, what scholars term life writing. Through these journal entries that span from 1867 to 1913, Martha McMillan would recount the story of her life; she would go on to raise children, take care of a house and farm, involve herself in politics, engage in social activities, and commit herself to religious teaching ("Martha McMillan Chronology"). Martha's text connects with her biography because it is a part of her biography- it is the written down account of her day and the day of others- it is a habitual, dedicated affair that provides insight into a woman's thoughts. Reading Martha's text is influential in learning about nineteenth- century American women, especially as evidence for rejecting the concept of "separate spheres".

Life writing is a form of literature that has existed in America for over three centuries. While men utilized life writing since the dawn of America, usually with little critique, women clung to life writing in the nineteenth century. The genre allows for the expression of "virtually every aspect" of a life often seemingly undiscovered (Culley xi). Life writing, also referred to as

diary or journal writing, has changed based on America's societal context. Women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, were primarily focused on being the historians for the family. For example, these women would record matters of faith, family health, travels, and agriculture. As the centuries passed and the emergence of the "self" began, women's life writing followed the pull towards inward thoughts and feelings. Margo Culley notes how "we can chart the changes from diarist as family and social historian to the modern diarist whose principal subject is the self" (Culley 4). While the focus of women's life writing has changed tremendously throughout the years, one timeless feature is that "the diary is always in process, always in some sense of fragment", representing a "continuous present" (Culley 19, 20). Another scholar argues that "diaries and journals document the experiences of Midwestern American women--ordinary women whose daily lives passed unnoticed and whose texts now stand, for the most part, as the only extant records of their lives" (Bunkers 16). Life writing allows for historically unnoticed women to be discovered and respected as dedicated, flexible, and intelligent individuals.

Martha's journals conform to stated literary conventions, the first example being the structure of each journal. Life writing often resembles some form of cyclical rhythm, and as one scholar argues, "the calendar year provides the structural rhythms of many diaries" (Culley 20). The beginning and end of each year provided Martha with a chance to pause and reflect on her pains of the past and hopes for the future. Furthermore, Martha begins a new journal at the start of each calendar year, marks her anniversaries and family birthdays, and notes the date of every sermon. The cyclical nature of Martha's life, even the daily rising and setting of the sun or the changing of calendar year, produces a text which includes shortcuts, or roadmaps, to certain types of information.

Martha begins the 1884 journal with the following sentiments: “New Years-Day. 1884. Today the New Year has spread before us- What is history; What shall its lessons be?” (McMillan 1884). A commitment to structure and its consequential time for reflection directly relates to the stated literary conventions of life writing. The conformity to genre directs the reader on where to first read for an overview of Martha’s thoughts. Since Martha’s journals conform to the life writing genre of eighteenth and nineteenth century women, a researcher may search her texts for important historical information. For example, on January 2nd, Martha notes the death and burial of a “Mr. John”, who was “born in Chester District South Carolina Aug 12th 1820 and died in Xenia Ohio Dec 30th 1883 aged 63 years” (McMillan 1884). As Culley has argued in her text, the life writer has taken on the role of family and town historian, especially reliable regarding milestones and deaths in the community (Culley 6).

Further examples of Martha’s conformity to genre from the four months of the 1884 journal include information regarding the economic state of the farm, Martha’s religious observations, and keeping track of the family and visitors. On February 17th, 1884 Martha writes, “Mr Mc and I at church- Mr Mortons text ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every Creature’. This afternoon spent with the children After night Bible reading and Catechism” (McMillan 1884). Martha’s commitment to religion as a family matter conforms to the genre of life writing prevalent during her time period. Women wrote about the state of faith in their homes and communities, often adding their own applications to the sermons preached. Women’s life writing includes an abundance of historical information, especially regarding the state of faith in a community, that other documents may not provide.

Martha McMillan’s life writing functions within a limited historical context in which women, contrary to some scholarship, were not bound to the private sphere. Martha was a

woman active both inside and outside the home, as evidenced through her textual references to going on calls, teaching Sunday school, traveling, and giving speeches. However, many readers would consider her a restrained, domestic housewife based on their preconceived notions that nineteenth-century women operated within the concept of “separate spheres”. In order to recognize Martha as a woman not constrained to the myth of “separate spheres”, one must understand that this term is often considered factual to those researching nineteenth-century women. In fact, in her preface to the special addition in *American Literature*, Kathy N. Davidson labels the ‘separate spheres’ concept a “retrospective construction that has had the effect of recreating a binary gender division among contemporary critics that influences what books we write, read, teach, and cite in our own work” (Davidson 443). Since the binary-thinking is so prevalent in academic circles, a proper discussion of this development is needed before critically analyzing Martha’s text.

The idea of “separate spheres” is appealing due to its exclusivity, its binary nature, and its suggestion that women chose the world of the sentimental, domestic, and private space. Therefore, the binary influences scholars to conceptualize the entirety of the nineteenth century in this same separatist manner, “according to this metaphor, nineteenth-century America was neatly divided up according to an occupational, social, and affective geography of gender” (Davidson 444). While compartmentalizing is seductive, this habit leads to incorrect assumptions about the daily lives and works of nineteenth century women writers like Martha. “Separate spheres” further leads scholars to misconstrue women as individuals incapable of writing “important” texts or of having influence outside the home, unlike men who would represent the public realm. Rather than accept the notion of “separate spheres”, scholars should analyze the discourse surrounding feminine domesticity in the nineteenth century. The results of this analysis

are that women were extremely influential both inside and outside the home, and that their texts provide historical insights and emotional connections similar to the capabilities of male writers.

Kathleen McHugh's *American Domesticity: From How-To Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* analyzes two influential writers of nineteenth-century American domesticity: Lydia Child and Catharine Beecher. When referencing Child's work, Hugh explains "her text demonstrates in microcosm the contradictory economic underpinnings and social ambivalences that domesticity ultimately contains and manages, contradictions that would be resolved in Beecher's much more systematic ideological construction" (McHugh 17). Child and Beecher were influential in the discourse surrounding domesticity, and both suggested domesticity was important to the formation of the family, home, and public. Housekeeping and domestic femininity placed importance on women like Martha McMillan, and allowed her to start from the home to influence the world. Domesticity, or "women's work", as Catharine Beecher suggests, "lays the very foundation of democracy" (McHugh 48). If domestic discourses provided the power for women to influence society outside of the private realm, then women surely bought into the discourse and practiced spiritual, bodily, and educational tasks for the future of American democracy (McHugh 45, 48, 50).

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, domestic femininity "provided for the invention via triangulation of a sentimentalized relation to property (domesticity), a gender identity (womanhood), and a moralized authenticity ("true") as the measure of both" (McHugh 58). McHugh argues that the cult of domesticity existed so prevalently that women were the bodies to the following elements, "a sentimentalized and morally based sexuality and maternal function, an innate affiliation with the domestic, a subjectivity limited to "personal" life, a sense of power constrained to interpersonal influence, and finally a tendency for the object "woman" to override

other social and material differences” (Davidson 58). While the list seems negative and oppressive, women like Martha McMillan could utilize their affiliations with the domestic and personal to educate children, connect with fellow citizens over matters of religion and morality, and override culturally ingrained differences.

Catharine Beecher’s *Treatise* presented women as the keepers of the home and the creators of democracy: “both of these concerns- the character and function of domestic space and the housewife’s role in the development of future American citizens- necessitate the housewife’s absence from both public life and citizenship. Thus the discipline of domesticity produces femininity as paradoxically subordinate and privileged” (McHugh 43). However, as I will argue through Martha’s text, women were, in fact, influential *and* present in public life. Instead, women used their domestic influence outside the home to mold and shape the future of democracy.

Lora Romero’s *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* addresses how the “study of nineteenth-century culture seems to have consistently organized itself around binarisms (dominant/marginal, conservative/countercultural, unconscious/self-reflexive, active/passive” (Romero 5). If the prevalent binaries appear in scholarship, then the image of the nineteenth century should be reassessed for assumption and error. A primary way to accomplish this reassessment and “puncture the separate spheres” is through “a little research”, most easily through the first-hand accounts of life writing (Davidson 460). Martha McMillan’s journal becomes the research in which scholars can reassess their preconceived notions of domesticity and womanhood in the 1800s.

Through her journal, Martha provides a rejection of the separate spheres concept. Instead of remaining in the home, often considered the “domestic” or “private” sphere, she utilized the

concept of domesticity in the public sphere. Her reality was, in fact, quite the opposite to what some scholars suggest. Martha influenced her family and community in numerous ways, especially outside of the home through interpersonal relations and education. Martha's journals, specifically January through March 1884, suggest that domesticity may not be what scholars often perceive it to be. I wish to posit that Martha appears in three specific manners throughout her text: as an educator, as a traveler, and as a knowledgeable citizen.

First, Martha educates not only her children in the home, but children and adults at church or via her notes and letters. Martha does not function within a separate sphere from the rest of society, nor do her words remain in private. Rather, Martha utilizes the idea of the domestic woman as educator, as explained by Beecher, as a means to converge with the public. Furthermore, Martha educates in religious manners, thus reflecting Beecher's theory that a domestic woman should meet spiritual needs, both metaphysically and physically (McHugh 45). The examples of education from the months of January, February, and March 1884 are abundant.

On the 30th of January, Martha references a prayer meeting at her home, evidence of a communal aspect to religious education (McMillan 1884). On March 23rd she writes, "Mr Mc and I at church- Mr Mortons text. 'And in this mountain Shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the leaf, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the leaf well refined.' Our friend Mrs S- and Fannie Sloan S- at church- they bid us good by- they go away in the morning. This afternoon Fannie and I read to the children. This eve Bible reading and catechism." (McMillan 1884). Martha functions as a religious and domestic educator training Fannie to read to the children- the children she will possibly mother one day. In this way, Martha is ingraining religious practices as a habitual affair into the future generation, a

concept of domesticity that grants the woman-as-educator tremendous power and influence in society.

Martha's life writing contains references to her act of sending sermon notes to an ill community member, Georgia Bronegan, on February 25th, March 3rd, 10th, and 24th (McMillan 1884). Unlike the "separate spheres" concept, Martha has the authority to send religious texts outside her home in order to educate a fellow citizen. Furthermore, Martha recalls sermons throughout her journals and on February 3rd invites Londoners off the pike into her home—educating these strangers about American domesticity (McMillan 1884).

Martha also functions as a traveler- a contrast to the idea of a housewife as restrained to the home. On January 28th, she makes a few calls— Martha is not bound to the home, she is a moving force that visits people in their spaces. On February 21, she "calls" on Georgia Bronegan and spends two hours with her (McMillan 1884). Martha's journal entry on March 14 provides insight into the reality of nineteenth century women: "At eight O clock Mr Mc and I left Fannie and Mary Caldwell in charge and left for Springfield- We met Silas and Mollie there according to appointment. We took dinner together - the principle business to day in S- was a cloak and a Suit- of clothes for Mr Mc at Jason Philips establishment- To complete there we will go back next week- We came home by way of C- this eve and stopped to speak to sister Jeannette." (McMillan, 1884). Not only is Martha traveling, but she is traveling for a purpose that she is well-aware of and prepared for, as evidenced through leaving two individuals "in charge" to complete this "principle business" (McMillan 1884). Life writing allows for a better understanding of which sphere women resided in, the answer being both. Thus, the binary of the "separate spheres" does not hold true when placed alongside Martha's journals.

Finally, Martha's journals evidence that she was a knowledgeable citizen- not a woman bound to the home or incapable of creating a worthy, informed text. Three instances from January-March 1884 discredit the "separate spheres" argument. The first instance is Martha's reference to the Great Cincinnati Flood from February 9-12, a natural disaster that devastated the area (McMillan 1884). Through her journals it becomes obvious that Martha is knowledgeable of public happenings, even those hours away. The second reference to a public situation is the murder trials of Harris and Haymoth that Martha notes on March 11th (McMillan 1884). In her journal, Martha is careful to name those who attended the trial and what the final verdict was- more evidence that a woman could function knowledgeably with information from the public sphere. The third instance in Martha's journal is the Cincinnati Court House riot that she references on March 31st saying, "The daily paper full of the account of the riot in Cincinnati Saturday and yesterday- over one hundred killed." (McMillan 1884). Not only is Martha aware of public events, but she is also capable of journaling the facts in order for future readers to better understand history.

Martha McMillan's journals should be considered through the appropriate lens: one which is not confined to the notion of "separate spheres". In reality, both the text and life behind the text utilize the discourses surrounding domesticity to influence society. Just as Martha McMillan was not separated from public life, her text should not be hidden under misconstructions surrounding women's life writing.

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