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Kate Chopin's Scribbling Women and the American Literary Marketplace

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Notes

1. For Chopin's May 4, 1894, diary entry and her June 7, 1899, letter to Herbert S. Stone, see Per Seyersted, ed., *A Kate Chopin Miscellany* (Natchitoches: Northwestern State Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 89 and 137. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CM*. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the American Literature II Section, "Doing a 'Man's' Job: Women and the Professions in American Realism" at the MMLA conference, November 1991; my thanks to Tom Quirk for suggestions for revision.
2. Hawthorne's complete remark was "America is now wholly given over to a d___d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed." For his January 19, 1855, letter from Liverpool to William Ticknor, see *The Letters, 1853-1856*, ed. Thomas Woodson, James A. Rubino, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson, in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Vol. 17 (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987), p. 304.
3. Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 189.
4. Susan Coultrop-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 198.
5. Of the two short stories, only "Miss Witherwell's Mistake" appeared during Chopin's lifetime; it was not included in either of her story collections, *Bayou Folk* (1894) or *A Night in Acadie* (1897). For the bulk of Chopin's fiction, essays, and poetry, see *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1984), hereafter cited parenthetically as *CW*.
6. Barbara Ewell, *Kate Chopin* (New York: Ungar, 1986), p. 47.
7. Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 4-5. See also Dieter Schulz, "Notes Toward a *fin-de-siècle* Reading of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *ALR*, 25 (Spring 1993), 69-76.
8. Bernice Slote, ed., *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 409.
9. Signed "Sibert" [Cather], "Books and Magazines," *Pittsburgh Leader*, July 8, 1899, p. 6; reprinted in Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 153.
10. According to Chopin's records, the story was rejected by five other publishers before its appearance in *Fashion and Fancy*; hence Chopin might have revised the story along the way. Her two log books (1888-1902), which date her literary compositions, submissions, rejections, acceptances, and earnings, are at the Missouri Historical Society Archives in St. Louis.
11. Kelley, p. 190.
12. Reprinted in Ann Douglas Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *Hidden Hands: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1790-1870*, ed. Lucy M. Freibert and Barbara A. White, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988), p. 363.
13. Anonymous, "To Mrs. -----, of St. Louis," *St. Louis Life*, 2 (November 22, 1890), 9.
14. Of the six translations recorded in Chopin's log books, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* printed "The

Shape of the Head," January 25, 1891; "Revival of Wrestling," March 8, 1891, signed "C"; and "How to Make Manikins" ("Cut-Papier Figures"), April 5, 1891. If the other three were published, they have not been located. See *CM*, p. 204.

15. Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 68.

16. Barbara Solomon, "Characters as Foils to Edna," in *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*, ed. Bernard Koloski (New York: Modern Language Association, 1988), pp. 114-19.

17. Chopin had published two stories herself under the pseudonym "La Tour": "Miss McEnders," completed March 7, 1892, and published March 6, 1897, in the St. Louis *Criterion* (*CW*, p. 1011) and "Fedora," completed November 19, 1895, and published February 20, 1897, also in the *Criterion* (*CW*, p. 1026...

KATE CHOPIN'S SCRIBBLING WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY MARKETPLACE

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"I want the book to succeed." Kate Chopin wrote in an 1894 diary entry about her first short story collection, *Bayou Folk*. Five years later—despite disappointing reviews of her novel, *The Awakening*—she nonetheless queried her publisher, Herbert Stone, "What are the prospects for the book?"¹ Chopin's private and public writings confirm that she considered herself a professional writer. But her sense of herself as a woman writer, her comprehension of women's literary tradition, and her relationship with her literary foremothers—that "d____d mob of scribbling women" Hawthorne lamented in the 1850s—are other, perhaps more interesting, questions.²

In *Private Woman, Public Stage*, Mary Kelley documents the publishing travails of mid-nineteenth-century scribbling women, the "literary domestics" whose professional identities were upstaged by "their primary self-identification as private domestic women."³ And in *Doing Literary Business*, Susan Coultrop-McQuin finds that Chopin's literary foremothers, despite formidable success and devout career commitment, "still had to contend with limiting stereotypes of women."⁴ Thus it seems surprising that Chopin, who inherited these stereotypes when she began writing in the 1890s, would also propagate them. In three career-spanning works—"Miss Witherwell's Mistake," *The Awakening*, and "Elizabeth Stock's One Story"—Chopin satirizes women writers in ways that strongly imply she wished to dissociate herself from the traditional female "litterateur."⁵ These caricatures provide insight not only into Chopin's own career but also into the status of the female professional writer in late nineteenth-century America.

Chopin specifically ridiculed women writers in only three works, but as Barbara Ewell notes, even her first novel *At Fault* (1890) managed to "manipulate effectively the techniques of romance [read women's popular fiction] to mock its conventions."⁶ Elizabeth Ammons has proposed that Chopin belonged to a group of writers in the 1890s who desired to be "artists" as well as professionals. Breaking with the past, these women assailed "the territory of high art traditionally posted in Western culture as the exclusive property of privileged white men."⁷



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