

Public Abstract

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Title:NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERARY WOMEN AND THE TEMPERANCE TRADITION:
TEMPERANCE RHETORIC IN THE FICTION OF LYDIA SIGOURNEY, FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS
HARPER, REBECCA HARDING DAVIS AND ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

In American literary circles the nineteenth-century temperance movement may sometimes be viewed as a lesser movement in a century characterized by other weighty national reforms, such as abolition, women's rights and class concerns. And yet, recent scholarship suggests that the women's temperance movement functioned as a means of coalescing women for important cultural work not only in the area of alcohol reform, but also in the creation and promotion of a powerful feminine voice to be used for articulating a particularly female political perspective on a wide range of public concerns. Thus, women involved in temperance reform are often the same women actively participating in these other important reform movements. The intersection of temperance with reforms such as abolition or suffrage in the private lives of key temperance figures mirrors the intersection of temperance with other significant political concerns in temperance fiction by the same women. Because temperance was one of the few political questions deemed appropriate for women, many women used temperance as a means of gaining political currency that they were then able to use in other areas of public concern. In this dissertation I explore the methods of female temperance authors as they utilize temperance fiction as a genre for investigating other pertinent social and cultural issues. By enlarging the boundaries of temperance fiction beyond those of specifically temperance themes, these women were able to voice distinctly political and sometimes controversial opinions on questions as diverse as race, industrialization, capitalism and class. Just as the women's temperance movement as a whole has suffered from critical neglect, so too have the literary productions of Lydia Sigourney, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. In this work, I analyze how--despite the characteristic sentimental, generic stereotypes often associated with this literature--these authors did in fact utilize this genre to respond to a wide array of social and political concerns.