



Nancy Glazener. *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*

Nancy Glazener. *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xii, 332p. ISBN 9780199390137. US \$65.

Early in her engaging new book, Nancy Glazener describes literature as both a “collective invention” and an “institution” (3). In this way, she attempts to argue for its status as a construct – created collaboratively and refined over time – even as she suggests that literature also has a settled monolithic quality propped up by libraries, schools, publishing houses, and other large seemingly-static forces. Glazener’s aim is to plumb both these avenues, investigating the flexibility with which the category of literature emerged and the rigidity through which it subsequently reigned.

Her especial concern is literature’s lineage in public culture. Before it was ossified in university settings and disciplinary frameworks, literary study flourished in a variety of public venues, including clubs, lectures, readings, and theatrical performances. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century, academic literary culture was merely a subdivision of a larger public literary culture, not the defining juggernaut it has since become. Glazener sets her sights on this early period – before credentialed experts defined what counts as literature – both because it has been under-studied and because it is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. Public literary culture is alive and well in the age of the Internet and Web 2.0, so it behooves us to know its background and methodologies.

Glazener arranges her narrative as a history, beginning with the emergence of a particular understanding of literature in late eighteenth-century America. Prior to this moment, literature was understood as learned works – a capacious category that included poetry but also political treatises and scientific disquisitions. Starting in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the category of literature narrowed as it began to be associated with a specific set of imaginative genres and canons. Chapters one and two trace that narrowing as a slow and uneven process. While these chapters are nuanced and informative, the heart of Glazener’s project is located in the middle two chapters of the book, which outline in fascinating detail the public literary culture of the long nineteenth century. Shakespeare looms large in this period for a broad cross-section of Americans; in formal and informal educational settings, they examined, shared, and recited passages long before universities began to standardize the study of Shakespeare’s plays.

Especially absorbing is Glazener’s account of the Baconians, a group that mistakenly



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attributed Shakespeare's plays to Francis Bacon. Their misstep reveals a democratizing impulse in American public literary culture, a desire on the part of public intellectuals to put their own imprint on Shakespeare's plays. In Glazener's words, "Hence the paradox: a number of proponents of Francis Bacon, the aristocrat, rather than William Shakespeare, the glover's son, were populist in sensibility because their real target was not Shakespeare but rather control of 'Shakespeare,' the author-function, by a cadre of experts" (135).

In her final two chapters, Glazener charts the rise of this cadre and the losses entailed for public literary culture. With academic professionalization, the objects and methods of literary study constrict. Gone are the emphases on appreciation, elocution, and performance as well as generic range (since plays and popular poetry become displaced by the novel). In this way, literature was increasingly removed from the realm of embodied emotion, everyday life, and ordinary people. Citing Bliss Perry, Glazener embraces "the amateur" as a corrective - he who possesses "unquenched ardor for the best things, . . . a many-sided responsiveness that shall keep a man from hardening into a mere high-gear machine" (216).

There is, of course, an irony in Glazener's beautifully written and thoughtful study: in celebrating amateurism she has made a memorable contribution to professionalized academic culture.

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