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## 1. Recovering a Romantic Realist

- 1 Harriet Elizabeth Prescott Spofford often responded to the requests of many editors to anonymously contribute stories to Boston "family" story-papers in the late fifties, well aware that it was not "her first inclination to write in a hasty, commercial manner" (Salmonson xviii). Few of those stories bore her name and, in producing them, she apparently seemed to follow Henry James's patronizing advice to abandon "the ideal descriptive style" and "study the canon of the so-called realist school," because "the public taste [had] changed" (James, "rev. of Harriet Prescott Spofford," 269, 272). Later in the century, as an author of local color sketches, Spofford managed to preserve her penchant for the romantic while relying on the financial success of New England stories "realistically" inspired by historical architecture.<sup>1</sup> Whenever pressed by necessity to write in the marketable regional style more attuned to the popular taste, she fictionalized colonial legends like "Priscilla"s, doggedly working on celebrative sketches for hours until, as Salmonson recalls, her hands were cramped and got swollen for the effort, and she saw her "reputation faded among critics."<sup>2</sup>
- 2 That "hurryscurry" production would slowly dissolve in the realism of the Reconstruction era and these texts were wrongly neglected though they were not mere pot-boilers devoid of literary value. Ranging from romance to Gothic thrillers, from fantastic tales to ghost stories, Spofford's neglected production for a wider audience includes, in an increasingly less dramatic and sensational mode, the fictionalization of "Priscilla" as an old legend of the American wilderness which explicitly adapts the epic and lyrical poem, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in dactylic hexameters and published in 1858.<sup>3</sup>
- 3 Like other emergent popular writers, whose Romantic vein and keen interest in the uncanny and the ghostly were equally stigmatized by young James, Spofford tried to

meet the readers' tastes by creating regional tales which were very popular in the late nineteenth century. "Priscilla" is shaped as a romanticized chronicle of early American (hi)story and stands as a truly remarkable narrative retelling of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's classic which already continued Hawthorne's transcendentalist process of turning American myths into an accessible prose naturally filled with lyricism. In her revision of Longfellow's epic poem, Spofford managed to reconcile a Romantic subject matter with the public's realistic preference for a simpler style. The growing domestic sensibility made of local color and of the diffuse sentimental culture a successful narrative formula likely to meet the tastes and expectations of a wide readership.<sup>4</sup> While referring to her tales later collected in *The Elder's People* (1920), Spofford clarified her positions in a letter addressed to Fred Lewis Pattee: "But although I like to write realistic stories like these last, yet I cannot say that I am entirely in sympathy with any realism that excludes the poetic and romantic" (unpublished letter dated 19 Oct. 1914, Penn State University). In such a style, Spofford proved to be a versatile professional writer not merely devoted to the Gothic style in which she naturally excelled but, as her times required, also able to meet her readers' demand for "village tales" sustained by a very innovative use of dialect.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 No less than the coeval illustrated histories composed by Margaret Deland, Rose Terry Cooke and Mary Wilkins Freeman, Spofford's rendition of the colonial past is based upon the long literary legacy of illustrated historical novels reinforced by the success of the American editions of Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels and of *Old Mortality* (1816), and also of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Legends of the Province-House" (1838-39) which featured, as mementos, the engravings of old American dwellings and of architectural landmarks of the colonial and revolutionary past.<sup>6</sup> In the intertextual cluster produced by Spofford's fictionalised recollection of that heroic past, it is inevitable to allude to the generative role played by the popular genre of the American almanac adopted by Hawthorne himself to circulate in an abridged narrative significant elements of Western history and native myths which sustained the transcendentalist project to consolidate the indigenous cultural growth and an independent literary tradition in America.<sup>7</sup> The New England heroines' tales collected in the volume which includes "Priscilla" are indeed American emblems located at the same "corner-stone of a nation" ("Priscilla" 48).<sup>8</sup> More specifically, Spofford's homage to the hesitant and mild-mannered John Alden celebrates Longfellow's noble, maternal genealogy of "Saxon complexion" and of "delicate lineaments" ("Priscilla" 32) which two American presidents would inherit.<sup>9</sup> As Hawthorne did in the *Peter Parley's* series, Spofford demonstrates the inventive power of folktales and the ability of a nineteenth-century writer to reshape the oral history of the first American colony into popular fiction. By developing their fabulistic potential in the popular style of *Peter Parley's*, Spofford re-laborated the symbols, icons and horrors related to the vessel named Mayflower which notably carried the first Puritan pilgrims to the most famous rock in the New World. By continuing in fiction what Longfellow had initiated in poetry, Spofford disseminated erudite traces of the Western literary classics in the abridged form which Hawthorne himself, as a former Peter Parley ghost-writer, mastered in similar narrative forms. Suspended between the celebration of Great Books from the Western tradition and the profane legacy of the early American folklore which played such an important role at the beginning of Hawthorne's literary career, Spofford's tale draws precious fragments from a classic of world literature such as Dante's *Commedia*, placing them side by side with the distinctively New England focus of American pioneers

celebrated by Longfellow's generative poem. The aura of those pioneers was confirmed, in Spofford's fictional adaptation, by a series of well-wrought engravings featuring homes and sites directly related to her exemplary colonial heroine. Such a verbal-visual arrangement, so carefully planned to arouse in her readers a historical and cultural awareness of their American roots, constitutes a significant interplay of word and image which testifies to the accurate strategy of graphic and sculptural design that sustained the transcendentalist project of the Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony in America. No wonder that, in this illustrated edition of twice-told stories of pioneer womanhood that Spofford's tale inaugurates, the very last word is left to E. H. Garrett who sketched "oldtime scenes" ("Priscilla" 139) and old houses which, without his drawings, "[would] soon have passed away" ("Priscilla" 139). His notes therefore conclude a triptych which, both textually and visually, recovers the *genius loci* and the lure of a time gone by. As I will demonstrate, Spofford's domestic and humanized version of Miles Standish's myth delineates a decided shift in taste from the Romantic sensibility of the American transcendentalists.

## 2. Old Buildings: Female Variations on a (Hi)story Repeated

- 5 Following the great success of the engraved editions of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels illustrated by Joseph Mallord William Turner, the picturesque style, which conventionally selected and sketched rural vistas and old properties representative of the past, was suitable to convey the growing nostalgia of nineteenth-century America for colonial art and architecture. It also served to exorcise, in a persisting national spirit, the menace of land-grabbing and wilderness-taming which had also been a concern of Romantic landscape painters (Rainey 1994). Such a resistance of the New England artists and writers to the destructive and commercial inclinations of Jacksonian America pervades the local color revived by Spofford's tale, in its site-specific memorial commitment to the celebration of regional landmarks. Without sacrificing the subtle lyricism of Longfellow's *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, her fictional version of "Priscilla" is far more than an abridged, narrative paraphrase of that epic poem. It offers a distillation of Longfellow's portraits of his colonial ancestors, in the lineage of the Hawthornian tales of the past which, in their educational purposes, adapted to the American contexts the successful formula of the illustrated historical fiction introduced by Walter Scott in England. In this intermedial frame, Longfellow's edifying verse on his forerunners assumes a new, homely dimension with the emergence, in Spofford's tale, of Priscilla—a domestic heroine who challenges the restrictions of her Puritan community and evokes proto-feminist attitudes of exemplary female figures who could "correct the turmoil of the present, or suggest the possibility of a new order" (Cagidemetro 55).
- 6 In this re-writing of Longfellow's epic poem, Spofford's specific focus on the character of Priscilla served the double purpose of paying homage to New England's colonial culture while offering a female model of domestic values that the growing number of Victorian women readers could easily identify with. Furthermore, her tale provides a feminist critique of the brutal practice of colonial marriages hastily arranged from the Old World to secure the social stability and the demographic growth of the British colonies in America. The marriage question widely debated by Victorian domestic

feminists might have induced Spofford to turn the epic of the authoritarian courtship of Miles Standish (whose Latin name defines a soldier "not (of) deep affections," "Priscilla" 20) into the story of a woman whose love is based on consent, foreshadowing a more tolerant time in which women stood against the disheartening realities of the mismatched couples schemed in colonial America to gratify the army leaders who had distinguished themselves in their military campaigns. By contrast, Spofford's narrative replaced the myth of Miles Standish with the one of Priscilla and of her unassuming lover, whose half-suppressed emotions unexpectedly prove more seductive than the heroic deeds which boosted his more acclaimed rival. In illuminating this private subplot drawn from Longfellow's epic, Spofford responds to the native legend of the British army hero with the domestic celebration of a heroine who dominates the scene as the "not so very gentle" ("Priscilla" 30-31) pioneer woman who dared challenge in love the unquestioned emblem of a colonial system that Longfellow could not help revere, despite the visible decline of his belligerent aura. While writing in reformed tones which suited her female contemporaries who opposed the rising Evangelical order to the Puritan restrictive codes, Spofford made of Priscilla a character who embodies the "feminized" era to come,<sup>10</sup> bestowing upon her the honorary title which Longfellow had dutifully given to Standish. In this central position, Priscilla becomes the real protagonist of the legend and, in this place of honor, produces a decided shift in tone and gender in the generative colonial myth, democratizing the original source at the intersection of history, fiction and poetry and addressing a reassuring circulation of nineteenth-century female values likely to dispel the threatening legacy of Puritan violence and guilt.

- 7 While in Longfellow's epic the legend of the colonial hero emphasized the Indians' cruelty as the darkest menace in the Plymouth colony, Spofford's more accessible prose stressed, instead, from Priscilla's female perspective, the untenable enslavement of colonial marriages which were the tyrannical prerogative of army leaders like Miles Standish. According to a new private sense of self-determination which "could not endure grief, and must needs arm" itself "with forgetfulness and a new love" ("Priscilla" 23), Spofford enacts the decline of the colonial convention which led a brave captain like Standish to consider his sister-in-law an automatic substitute for his dead wife, in line with the stingy tradition of frugality and gloomy disaffection aimed to the mere survival and reproduction of the Puritan settlements. The slaughters of the colonial wars originated a knightly and male-centered sensibility "which made sentimental consideration of less value than practical ones" ("Priscilla" 23). In Spofford's prose, however, the modernity of Priscilla's private concerns undermines the epic deeds of the unsurpassed warrior.
- 8 Standish's emotional indifference and his attention to the colony's bare necessities can hardly match the psychological subtlety of Priscilla Mullins, backed up in her female claims by her sensitive suitor, John Alden, that is, by Longfellow's colonial ancestor who, even in the poet's lyrical celebration, silently resisted the private horrors of the colonial order, so indifferent to the feminized, private ethos which later emerged in the nineteenth-century culture of sentiment (Samuels). As part of this homely world, "Priscilla" programmatically shifts the focus of the American legend from the courtship of the glorious Miles to his object of desire, who finally turns him down to privilege the loyal but disempowered squire whom she had secretly fallen for. As Standish's appointed go-between, John partakes, no less than Priscilla, of that domestic sphere of affections cherished by Victorians, as a human being "camped in the midst of

demigods" ("Priscilla" 19), but destined to write the history of post-colonial America. And since "something of the blame is due to the condition of the colony" ("Priscilla" 23), Miles never achieves an affective reciprocity but, with little grief and a pragmatic, ineffable "swiftness," he "had consoled himself after the death of Rose, his wife." Spofford opposes an alternative system of relationships to the rough manners of the colony's army leader "that failed to find incarnations among the captains and pirates of the great Elizabeth's time, the Raleighs and Drakes and Frobishers, and who, coming along a hundred years too late, did his best to repair the mistake" ("Priscilla" 19). And even if "there were not a great many young girls in the little company" ("Priscilla" 24), and Priscilla Mullins was among the few pioneer women available to him, the new protagonist of the "twice-told tale" chose not to serve as his dead wife's proxy, claiming a depth of feelings in private matters which firmly located her ahead of her primitive society and of the stern "condition of the colony" ("Priscilla" 23).

- 9 What truly matters to fully appreciate the intertextual density of Spofford's tale and its reformed spirit is that Priscilla imposes the truth of her heart in the face of war and scarcity. Her poetic act was already enacted in Longfellow's epic but it is more fully developed by his fellow woman writer, in her nineteenth-century awareness of affective comforts which turns an obscure ancestor of the American bard into a pioneer model of sentimental justice and a staunch advocate of the marriage question ahead of time.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, the feminist ideas add an additional affective level to Longfellow's documentary celebration of colonial America, from the vantage point of Victorian times which publicly embraced Christian and non utilitarian values, along with the reforming spirit of a feminine sensibility able to amend cruel colonial practices such as unwanted marriages. This feminized perspective made it natural for Spofford to revise the colonial legend popularized by Longfellow by expanding upon a woman's theme which met the favor of a vast female audience, and challenging the restrictive Puritanism of her forerunners with the provocative and daring interrogations of an obscure pioneer woman.

### 3. Plymouth Revisited: Feminizing Colonial America

- 10 "Priscilla" tells how two colonial soldiers of British descent—the elder, "whose God was a man of war" ("Priscilla" 28), being Standish—prove their courage in the Indian wars and, within the Plymouth colony, vie for the affections of the beautiful Priscilla Mullins. Allied in war and rival in love, the gentle and lower-ranked John Alden hesitates to contrast Miles's courtship and dutifully serves his Captain as a messenger boy on his behalf, like crossdressed Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. However, his loyal submission to his master of "fire and spirit" ("Priscilla" 30) is subverted by the ineffable laws of desire and he is the one to conquer the independent-minded Priscilla, who ignores military hierarchies and, in her spontaneous and authentic love, eventually cherishes the respectful and self-conscious John ("There is a touching quality in the modest feeling of the soldier; he is still a young man, not at all grizzled, or old, or gray, as the poet paints him,—perhaps thirty-five or thirty-six years old," 31). Therefore, Miles's arrogance is gradually disarmed by a sentiment which can hardly be negotiated by social rules, even in a time in which pioneer women were required to submit to social necessities. Though listed among the few marriageable maids in the colony, Priscilla's daring gesture makes of her the female protagonist of a legend previously

dominated by the acclaimed Miles Standish, in an act of female independence already sketched by Longfellow himself when, as early as December 1857, he planned to name his epic project just "Priscilla." However, while the poet's tone is lofty and edifying, as his choice of the classical meter imposed, Spofford's heroine came forward to provide a more grounded, female recollection of that part of colonial history, countering the prepossessing, patriarchal view which regulated the life of Puritan America in the wilderness, mostly aimed to secure the bare survival of that community. In privileging all the emotional aspects already present but not sufficiently highlighted in Longfellow's epic poem, Spofford decided to expand "a scene within the scene" ("Priscilla" 31), that is, the subplot of the private act of rebellion of a woman who claimed authentic love in a war scene, with the support of a gentle, disempowered squire. After all, in the era of Reconstruction, the rising suffragism overtly advocated for desire and freedom in love relations, letting the importance of private affection prevail over the sovereignty of reproduction. Compared to the frugal and sacrificial conditions of early pioneers, Priscilla's courage speaks for the new women who were to follow.

- 11 When she daringly shakes her secret suitor from his submissive obedience to his master ("Why don't you speak for yourself, John Alden?" 35), the candor of that interrogation haunts the man's conscience in a moment in which he is resigned to plead for his master's request. In opposing his unnatural immolation, Priscilla foreshadows a new model of equality in relations. In manifesting her sentiments and claiming Alden as her choice together with her right to love "him equally" (32), Priscilla rejects the submission of the sexually enslaved females of her community, whose reproductive responsibilities were strictly related to the demographic growth of the colony.
- 12 Moreover, Spofford contributes to redefining the collective memory of the colonial Miles Gloriosus whose ridicule was also a feature of Longfellow's epic.<sup>12</sup> Priscilla's compelling question, which was already present in Longfellow's closing lines of the third chapter of his epic poem, brings to the fore the centrality of her subjective position within a fragile community constantly urged to acclaim its military defense over its strictly private concerns. Thus, in Spofford's treatment, a legend of the colonial epic becomes a modern domestic narrative which significantly shifts its original focus from the pompous Captain to the intimacy and private affections of a delicate romance more likely to satisfy the expectations of the female Victorian readership. The "Priscilla" who proudly stands out in Spofford's title reflects modern instances of female emancipation which go well beyond the entertaining purposes of a celebrative recollection of the Plymouth colony and a harmless amusement for genteel readers fond of local color.
- 13 Finally released from the sacrificial impositions bestowed by Puritan families upon their female components, Spofford's fictional adaptation is "a disimprisoned epic" (Cumming) which goes well beyond a fictionalised presentation of the surviving properties from New England's colonial past. By assuming the feminized attitude typical of a Victorian, domestic heroine, Spofford's "Priscilla" claims no heroic deeds for herself but rather reclaims a cozy and solid affective shelter against the overwhelming menace coming from the untamed wilderness which apparently required a male-oriented military society.<sup>13</sup> By taking seriously the original plans of Longfellow to rename his acclaimed epic poem "Priscilla," Spofford demonstrates that

even a popular genre like a colonial legend which she apparently fictionalised only to make some profit could actually enhance the narrative possibilities of an American myth meant to reverberate across the centuries.

#### 4. Beyond the Male Colonial Epic: Homely Tunes in the Wilderness

- <sup>14</sup> Worthy of note is the fact that the title character of Spofford's "Priscilla" had previously made a significant appearance in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Such a re-enactment of an old anecdote, initiated by Longfellow shortly after his mother's death, demonstrates how a colonial legend could narratively develop through love triangles and the other emotional complications of modern times. In her long literary career, Spofford herself kept re-configuring the figure of Priscilla as a female icon of a generative, Puritan past reshaped according to the needs of her emancipated readers in a modernised revision which went far beyond the reverential praise of the colonial army, to further access the human implications of a private world history which Longfellow started hinting at but mostly left to his fellow women writers to explore. And since old legends, like oral myths and fairy tales, are meant to be endlessly retold and reactualized, Spofford kept re-elaborating Longfellow's private epic in four later narratives—*New England Legends* (1871), *Priscilla's Love Story* (1898), *The Maid He Married* (1899) and *Old Washington* (1906)—as if to emphasize the affective resonance of that exemplary colonial heroine even in the contexts of modern America. More explicitly, in the novel entitled *Priscilla's Love Story*, the narrator keeps wondering about a new, Victorian incarnation of Mrs. Alden: "Why had she not waited to be wooed before she was won? Why, why?" (Spofford 1898, 5). Here, the protagonist's explicit revelation of her female desire, although re-uttered in Victorian times, still threatens to dishonor both the woman and the man she is involved with. In this twice-told story which never stops repeating itself, Priscilla's self-determination becomes even more perceptible. As the scene gets reset in the author's writing present, she is portrayed as a music teacher unhappily married and "more restless than the wind" (125) who discusses her "premature love-affair" (16) with a penniless student who learns counterpoint from her. Transforming old stories and native histories into modern narratives of female emancipation certainly kept enhancing the respect for women's desire and true romance in new, popular forms, according to the reforming intentions of the Transcendentalists.
- <sup>15</sup> All these modern incarnations of Longfellow's foremother add a subtler psychological layer to the definition of the humble maid whose private resistance demonstrated the unstoppable decline of the Puritan system, founded on the doctrine of the depravity of man and on repressed desire. The material unveiling of Hawthorne's Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance* already foreshadowed a new society freed from those restrictive norms, in which veiled ladies with the oracular powers usually attributed to talented women feel increasingly ill at ease with colonial and Victorian plots of women's imprisonment and dependence on tyrannical tutors and guardians.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Spofford's feminized re-elaboration is very Hawthornean in spirit in seeking a way out of Puritan censorship and intolerance which she herself could not help reframing in nocturnal circumstances whose Gothic shadows she dispelled only later in her career.



- 16 As she turns the domineering courtship of Miles Standish into a female apologue on reciprocal love, Spofford operates a distinctive shift in genre and tone from Longfellow's lofty epic to a more democratic prose which re-orientates in a gendered direction the legend of the wilderness about the modest maid who refused to marry an army leader in mere tribute to his military authority. As she decides not to submit to that enslaving obligation, the colonial plot radically changes focus: Standish successfully leads his colonial army but not the story line, and the mythopoietic power of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow becomes the starting point of further stories of unrequited love which cast a subjective, female view on the Mayflower pilgrims who landed in Plymouth in 1620.
- 17 In the epic poem composed by Longfellow, after his wife's death, Captain Miles Standish urges an instant replacement "out of hand" ("Priscilla" 22), but the maid who carries the sparkling name of Priscilla steps back and unexpectedly takes over a prominent role in that gloomy order, along with Mary Chilton—"the daring and spirited girl who must be the first to spring ashore when the boat touched land" ("Priscilla" 25)—and "the noble and serene Anne Hutchinson" ("Priscilla" 24), the dissident theologian of British descent charged with blasphemy and obscenity for preaching tolerance in the American colony in front of a mixed audience of women and men, demonstrating conversational skills which certainly inspired her eloquent descendant, Margaret Fuller.
- 18 Hutchinson's slaughter by Mohicans—notably echoed by Spofford in "Circumstance" when her heroine attempts to endure a fierce attack thanks to her female piety—is an episode which magnetized Dickinson herself and also pervades *The Courtship of Miles Standish* through Longfellow's emphasis on the dark Indian menace. In "Priscilla," Spofford chose, instead, to undermine the impact of the Indian wars in order to stress the domestic enslavement of unwanted marriages forced upon pioneer women. Starting from this private perspective, the woman writer leaves the residual violence of the old legend to the belligerent Captain, who lingers with his heroic deeds in the background, until he appears diminished if not slightly ridiculed in his primitivism and brutality of manners.
- 19 As his object of desire becomes the new focus of the colonial legend, Priscilla starts her private defense of her true love for the sensitive John Alden, who eventually becomes her mate. She becomes an early advocate of the mid-nineteenth-century culture of sentiment, and of women's free choice of their partners for life, independently from the imperatives of social hierarchies. In other words, Spofford's concern for the private needs uttered by her literary foremothers, who sailed in great numbers to the New World, results in a decided step away from the heartless utilitarianism and pragmatism of the colonial system. That thrifty regime doggedly matched its women with perfect strangers selected by others for them for the sake of their community.<sup>15</sup> Denouncing this abusive matrimonial policy, Spofford's prose proved disimprisoning for her female readers, whose favorite fiction also questioned the gruesome circumstances produced by the disaffected, Puritan adjustment to the hardships of colonial America. In celebrating his maternal ancestors, Longfellow already included in his epic a private subplot of unrequited love, as a tribute to a new family system aimed to reform the rigid mores and manners of the Mayflower pilgrims. In this regard, Spofford's narrative version of his poem might be received as a derivative contribution addressing a wider audience, in simpler and more prosaic forms. However, on closer inspection, Spofford

achieved much more than this, since her times were mature enough to stress the domestic alienation of Plymouth's belligerent past. Accordingly, her reactualization of the Priscilla figure more decidedly reverses the gender hierarchy of the colonial order by placing an obscure pioneer woman in a central position in her story. By gaining authority, Priscilla can refuse the emotionally obtuse "man of war" assigned to her, and her resolution anticipates a new reformed family which cherished the inner contentment of each individual member, whose feelings were considered superfluous and potentially corrupt by Puritans. Therefore, Spofford's narrative adaptation "found some human beings camped in the midst of demigods" ("Priscilla" 16) and enormously benefits from the intertextual reverberations produced by the previous literary incarnations of her heroine, letting her sacrificial veil drop like in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, until she is finally released from the grip of all her male patrons who tried to take advantage of her as a disposable commodity in the marriage marketplace. Spofford's fictional embodiment of Priscilla refuses to be traded and, in her outspoken claim for sentimental freedom, distances herself from the frugal, colonial economy which Dickinson also depicted as a submissive system, ruled by a high respect of God and little respect for humanity ("God is a distant—stately Lover," J357).

- 20 Stepping forward in this Victorian revision of the old legend, Priscilla Alden wisely learns to wait until news comes of the Captain's sudden death, which instantly exempts her from sacrificing herself for the sake of her colony. As a matter of fact, there is no account of Standish's death in the chronicles of colonial America, since, in real life, the glorious Captain simply "married elsewhere" ("Priscilla" 56). Longfellow's decision to force the events is apparently only a fictional device to let Priscilla and her beloved John free to elope and fulfill their mutual desire. Writing from the vantage point of Priscilla's state of mind, Spofford quotes Anne Whitney to embrace the alternative strategy of liberation of the two lovers, who might cautiously wait until Miles Standish found another companion before getting married.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, "Priscilla"'s final scene foreshadows a more tolerant future compared to the purgatorial, "barren beaches" ("Priscilla" 36) which the Aldens restlessly tread, before achieving their sentimental freedom, the latter being a fragile and adamant value for these two non-aggressive characters, ready to wait lest they violate the rules of friendship which bind the respectful squire John to his Captain Standish. Even in the sternest conditions of the Plymouth colony, Spofford mimics Longfellow's poetic license of the Captain's fatal disappearance, which providentially allows her not to "impair the friendship of the lovers with the impetuous Captain Standish" ("Priscilla" 54). After all, their betrothal smoothly encountered the Victorian readers' uncompromised appreciation of the Aldens' private happiness, stressed by the Dantesque image of the two souls free to float with lifted spirits over the flames that the divine laws reserved for adulterers.
- 21 Once again, the well-read Spofford elegantly paraphrases another classic of World Literature by evoking the airy vision of the star-crossed lovers in the Fifth Canto of the *Inferno*, captured in "that period of bliss now dawned which makes most lovers feel themselves lifted into a region just above the earth and when they tread on air" ("Priscilla" 44). In this weightless representation of an authentic love miraculously sprung like a "may-flower" in the wilderness ("Priscilla" 48), we cannot miss another one of Spofford's deliberate tributes to Longfellow. As a renowned translator of Dante, Longfellow did not hesitate to adopt for the Aldens' passion the blissful image of Paolo and Francesca whose sentiments appear utterly immune to the acute sufferings and

- agonies of the *Inferno* just as Spofford's characters are immune to the "horror and impending famine" ("Priscilla" 39) which periodically threaten their colony.
- 22 Even the seraphic resistance to adversities of the Aldens' delicate romance is representative of a paradigmatic shift in culture, as Spofford adamantly suggests: "for lovers will be lovers still, although the whole body of Calvinism be behind them" ("Priscilla" 50). The floating image of the couple testifies, in its aloofness and passion, to their indifference to the infernal punishment inflicted upon them. As the two secret lovers rejoice in flight in Dante's *Inferno*, the squareness of the Puritan Captain is removed to a glorious but distant background, like an American embodiment of the *Gianciotto* in the *Commedia*, ready to intrude upon their enviable, intimate moments, but this time not to kill them.
- 23 It is John's dilemma of choosing between his love for Priscilla and his loyalty to his master which acutely troubles the man, torn as he is between two sentiments of different quality but equal importance whose transgression risks alienating him from the favor of his beloved, on one side, and of his "impetuous" ("Priscilla" 54) master, on the other. However, such an occurrence is spared in both Longfellow's and Spofford's romantic treatment of the Aldens, by skilfully postponing the fulfillment of the Aldens' desire, so that the image of the two absorbed lovers whose feet do not touch ground does not anticipate the tragic end of Paolo and Francesca.
- 24 Priscilla eventually overcomes the barriers erected by John Alden's respect of military hierarchy and by his stoic effort to resist his feelings for her. The only limits of the brave soldier Alden are indeed his loyalty to Captain Standish. He is "torn between duty and passion, and doubtless pale with suffering" especially when he is sent to "suit before Mr. Mullins" ("Priscilla" 53) on the captain's behalf, that is, before Priscilla's father, "who replied favorably" to Miles Standish's proposal. Such a dilemma triggers the final, provocative interrogation of Priscilla, which, in its liberating effects, marks the decline of the knightly values of loyalty typical of the colonial order, soon to be replaced with a feminized, home-centered ethos in which emotions mattered more than heroic deeds. Therefore, when John appears to Priscilla as Miles Standish's messenger boy sent to her father to plead for her hand, the brave foremother of Longfellow—and also of the New Women to come—urges him to take a determined step forward for himself and unveil his true feelings instead of shying away for fear of thwarting his captain's plans.
- 25 Spofford skilfully dramatizes his hesitation, as he "shrank from telling a girl that she had fired his inflammable heart" ("Priscilla" 31-32), and once again borrows Longfellow's compelling formula: "Why dont you speak for yourself, John?" ("Priscilla" 35). With the enormous relief of the reserved soldier, in betraying her feelings while encouraging John to expose his own, Priscilla subverts the gender-based rules of courtship, running the risk of dishonoring "herself in his eyes" ("Priscilla" 39). The cathartic scene makes Priscilla overcome any constraints imposed by her times and circumstances and reproduces, in the American setting of the New England wilderness, the Shakespearean denouement of *Twelfth Night*, in which the cross-dressed, ancillary Viola finally reveals her feelings to her master whom she had secretly loved while serving him as a love messenger on behalf of a lady. Spofford foresees in Priscilla's resolution a new way of conceiving love relationships in terms of reciprocity rather than subalternity, in a decided shift from the sacrificial rigor of the Puritan community to the comforts of a warmer, Victorian domesticity that Longfellow already inhabited.

- 26 In an era which staged more domestic trials than war scenes, Spofford rewrote the legendary history of a British soldier from the point of view of a woman whose natural destination was to serve as his well-deserved trophy and makes, instead, a timid squire dispel the public rituals of the colonial military saga. The edifying tones of Longfellow's verse give way to more intimate ones in a Victorian domestic tale in which every character finds the right mate and Miles Standish does not have to die in battle to let the Aldens secure the private victory which they mutely cherished. As Priscilla's legend shifts from the epic and lyrical mode to a prosaic form better equipped to investigate its potential for romance, the Plymouth myth is made more intriguing through the warm sensibility of a nineteenth-century woman writer who perused
- annals of the gentle Pilgrims and the sterner Puritans for any pages where one may find muffled for a moment the strain of high emprise which wins our awe and our praise, but not so surely our love, and gain access on their more human side to the men and women who lived the noblest romance in all history. ("Priscilla" 15-16)
- 27 In this respect, in all her many lyrical and narrative impersonations, Priscilla never stops seducing her modern admirers, drawing from the Pilgrims' experience the reassuring germs of a more humane and secure world which Spofford's generation consolidated in her praise of sentimental and private contentment.

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## NOTES

1. One of her models in this attempt was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Our Old Home: A Series of English Sketches* (Boston: Ticknor, 1863).
2. As summoned in Spofford's "Memories," "When the financial crisis was over, and she had the leisure to write well, she found 'something had escaped into the air. I could never get it back .... There have been times when it made me sick to my very soul'" (Harriet Prescott Spofford, "Memories of Mrs. Spofford," in *The Bookman*, Nov. 1925, 317, cited in Salmonson's "Introduction" to *The Moonstone Mass*, xix).
3. In a letter to Charles Sumner of June, 3, 1858, Longfellow announced: "I have just finished a Poem of some length, an Idyl of the Old Colony times—a bunch of May-flowers from the Plymouth woods. The title is 'The Courtship of Miles Standish.'" (letter no. 1671 in *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Andrew Hilen, 82).

4. As Bendixen points out, "Spofford deserves some attention as an able practitioner of the realistic sketch—the literary mode that attracted the talents of many of the finest women writers in America during the second half of the nineteenth century. Her best realistic pieces show considerable interest and skill in the delineation of character. The strongest of these stories focus on the lives of elderly women in a New England village, and their handling is marked by both sympathy and humor" ("Introduction" to Harriet Prescott Spofford's *The Amber Gods, and Other Stories*, xix-xx).

5. "[S]he did not have the same ear for Realism. New England writers were *expected* to write village tales, whether quaint and religious in the manner of Annie Trumbull Slosson, or tragic and confrontational in the manner of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. So Harriet wrote increasingly in the regional mode, and became an exceedingly popular writer by pandering in this way" (Salmonson xviii). Gianna Carroni examined the vernacular aspects of Spofford's local tales in her translation thesis discussed at the University of Udine in the academic year 2015-16.

6. *The Courtship of Miles Standish* was also illustrated by the New York artist, John Whetten Ehninger, whose eight scenes contributed to the book's success and became the main topic of Longfellow's discussion with his correspondents. The drawings were photographed by Matthew Brady and, as the poet points out in his letter of Nov. 21, 1858, "published *incessantly*" by the firm Rudd & Carleton (letter no. 1694 to Charles Sumner, in Hilen's *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, 102). In a letter to the illustrator, Longfellow especially praised his rendition of the figure of Priscilla which he found "particularly charming." To his eyes, however, the "lower part of Standish's armour seems unnecessarily cumbersome" (letter no. 1697 to John Whetten Ehninger, 103-104).

7. By offering an acute and well-wrought compendium of history and myths, the almanac style introduced by Goodrich in the *Peter Parley's* series with the complicity of a young Nathaniel Hawthorne who ghostwrote many of those volumes gave the classics of Western literature and the early American myths the form of a fable for the delight and educational support of the dispersed Anglo-Saxon colonies which the American writers contributed to making part of one and the same English-speaking nation.

8. Beside Priscilla Alden, the other legendary colonial heroines featured in the collective volume *Three Heroines of New England Romance* are the tavern maid Agnes Surriage, depicted in caricatural terms by Alice Brown, and Lady Martha Hilton, the former kitchen maid reconsidered by Louise I. Guiney, and previously represented in Longfellow's *Tales of the Wayside Inn* (1863-73). In these two American versions of Richardson's *Pamela*, Surriage becomes the wealthy wife of a baronet after bravely pulling him out of the wreckage during Lisbon's earthquake, and Martha Hilton, the former cook who becomes Lady Wentworth of the Hall, also passes "from rags-to-riches" in another twice-told tale about social elevation based on the American folklore.

9. "[T]he greatness of nature that may have belonged to the ancestor of two of our Presidents" ("Priscilla" 32). Longfellow acknowledged his descentance from John Alden "by the mother's side" in his letter of Nov. 21, 1862 to Georgia A. Alden, who was apparently pleased with his "Miles Standish" (letter no. 1974, 303).

10. My reference to a feminized culture is an homage to Ann Douglas's classic, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) which skilfully detects the rise of a female-oriented, domestic culture which was crucial in Victorian America in marking the transition from the Puritan ethos which sustained colonial America to the Evangelical sensibility whose main ministers were popular women writers.

11. Spofford explicitly intervened on the "marriage question" in a debate which also involved Louisa May Alcott, Rebecca Harding Davis, Lucy Stone, Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, Helen Campbell, Julia C. R. Dorr, Eunice White Beecher, Mary L. Booth, Elizabeth Peabody, and Adeline D. T. Whitney. In the article "The Marriage Question" also signed by Frances E. Willard, she refers

to young women by arguing that "the father and the mother should have respect paid to their personal preference in the matter" (62).

12. As biographer Charles C. Calhoun points out: "*The Courtship of Miles Standish*, a romantic, in places even comic, 'epic' of life of the early Plymouth Colony [...] was able to satirize the blustery and vainglorious ways of the Pilgrims' military leader, Captain Standish, a *miles gloriosus* in the tradition of Renaissance comedy" (198).

13. Even in "Circumstance" (Spofford's most anthologized tale, first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in May 1860), the old hymn tunes sung by the pioneer woman to subdue the beastly creature who assaults her in the wilds of Maine is a lovely invocation of household happiness aimed to exorcise colonial terrors. A similar female confrontation with the wilderness—which constitutes, according to Kate Watson, "a feminine reworking of an episode in Brockden Brown's pioneer Gothic novel, *Edgar Huntly*, where Huntly kills a panther in a cavern with a tomahawk and then eats its carcass and drinks its blood" (80)— was also dramatized by Nathaniel Hawthorne in "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832), an early colonial tale in which Dorcas equally sings aloud in the attempt to inhabit "the one little spot of *homely* comfort, in the desolate heart of Nature," in the very instants in which her husband tragically shoots their son, mistaking him for a deer.

14. I refer to Priscilla's legend but also to later fictions of female containment such as Henry James's *Watch and Ward* (first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1871) and Louisa May Alcott's thrillers such as "A Whisper in the Dark" (which appeared in *The Flag of Our Union* in 1863), which inspired him.

15. Kathryn Bigelow effectively portrays them in the opening scene of *The Weight of Water* (2000), in which ugly, old men on deck wait for the arrival of their young and often beautiful prospective wives, resigned to follow them out of duty.

16. In this densely intertextual tale which, in a typically Victorian fashion, keeps hinting at other narratives and poems, Spofford cites Anne Whitney's poem "Bertha" about two lovers' procrastinated desire, which, in many respects, reflects *Princesse de Clèves's* and Duke Nemours's enamoured abeyance in Madame de la Fayette's 1678 masterpiece. Like many other Victorian writers of her times, Spofford closes her modern rendition of that particular episode of American colonial history with a long citation from Longfellow's homage to the mythical Mayflower's crew: "she ... felt as if love and youth and joy and innocence had invented a flower for them alone,—the deeply rosy and ineffably fragrant mayflower that blooms only in the Plymouth woods in its pink perfection, and whose breath must have seemed like a breath blown out of the open doors of the new life awaiting them together" ("Priscilla" 46-47).

## ABSTRACTS

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem, *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858) puts in dactylic hexameters a Romantic legend of the wilderness on unrequited love among the pilgrims set in Plymouth in 1620. In 1894, Harriet Prescott Spofford parodically replied to that colonial legend with a new love triangle written from the point of view of a pioneer woman who rejected the enslavement of a marriage arranged by others. By shifting her focus from the celebration of the army leader Miles to the disempowered Priscilla who stubbornly claims her freedom in love,

Spofford points to the private horrors of colonization in an exemplary feminist apologue filled with domestic sentiments which partakes of what Alide Cagidemetro defines as a "usable past."

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Harriet Prescott Spofford, William Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Courtship of Miles Standing*, colonial legends, Priscilla Alden, Dante, Victorian parodies

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