

“Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's Advocacy for Women's Homeownership in 19th-century America through Her Writings”

Abstract

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1922) was a ground-breaking nineteenth-century woman in many fields, which were not limited to her literary skills. While she received the well-deserved acclaim and recognition as an exceptional author, with a remarkable body of work encompassing over fifty books, hundreds of articles, poems, and short stories published in prestigious magazines, she has gradually been marginalized in the study of American literature. This is unfair — as acknowledged by esteemed scholars like Mary Angela Bennet as far back as 1939—, from her tireless efforts to promote gender equality across various aspects of women's lives, a cause that was far less common during her time than it is today. This phenomenon was indeed of such magnitude that one of her main biographers, Carol Farley Kessler, begins her book with this assertion: “Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was a writer with a central cause: women.”

From the many aspects related to the “woman question” that she addressed with immense interest, for the present proposal, the focus will be particularly on her advocacy for women's ownership of their own homes, a proposition that sharply contradicted the prevailing feminine ideal of her era. In her autobiography, she overtly recommended this uncommon “experiment at home-making” and especially to unmarried women (*Chapters*, 192) and she put into practice one of her firm beliefs, “that women should own the houses they lived in” (Kessler 1982, 58).

Nevertheless, writing about this was not very profitable at a time when editors and reviewers promoted instead literary works that portrayed heroines who incarnated the role of the True Woman (Coultrap-McQuin 12), who was supposed to be what Virginia Woolf called the “Angel in the House”, but not as its owner or possessor.

In previous studies, I have concentrated on how Elizabeth Stuart Phelps not only defended, but also portrayed with her own example her conviction of the benefits derived from the ownership of their own houses by women. In the current one, my objective is to illustrate how she reflected it also in her writings. In this present work, my objective is to demonstrate how she conveyed these ideals through her writings. To achieve this goal, I will employ a qualitative analysis of Phelps' literary works where this subject is most effectively explored, employing a Feminist Critical Approach. My ultimate goal is to contribute to situate Elizabeth Stuart Phelps among a wider range of nineteenth-century American women writers whose efforts to become both successful artists and reformers have already been recognised worldwide.

(412 words)

References (maximum 150 words) (Chicago style)

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