

## REVIEW



MAIRE MULLINS, ED. *Hannah Whitman Heyde: The Complete Correspondence*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2022. xviii + 208 pp.

This heartbreaking volume sheds new light on Walt Whitman's family and the life of his sister, a four-decade survivor of domestic abuse. In *Hannah Whitman Heyde: The Complete Correspondence*, Maire Mullins collects the sixty-three extant letters of Hannah Louisa Whitman Heyde (1823-1908). Hannah was Walt's youngest sister and the fourth of the nine children of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman and Walter Whitman, Sr. Although she's typically a passing detail in Whitman biographies, more than one Whitman biographer has noted that Hannah was a favorite sister, much beloved by Walt and the rest of the family. At least one scholar has admitted to not understanding why Walt and the others loved her so much, but these letters and Mullins's introduction make it clear that Hannah was intelligent, kind, cheerful, and life loving. She liked school and enjoyed sewing, fashion, and clothes. She adored her family as much as they adored her.

Hannah's life changed dramatically, however, on March 16, 1852, when she married a modestly successful landscape painter named Charles Louis Heyde, whom she refers to as Charlie in her letters. Five months after their marriage in New York, the couple moved to Vermont, where they lived in an itinerant fashion in hotels and boardinghouses until settling in Burlington, Vermont, in 1856. Some biographers have said that Hannah and Charlie were a happy couple in the initial years of the marriage, but the letters collected by Mullins reveal that Hannah was frequently miserable from the moment she left New York: "I have not been happy I could not be, because Charlie has not been kind perhaps he will be better I know he cannot be more unkind than he has been almost ever since I have been in the country" (59). Any happiness expressed in the earliest letters was infrequent and qualified: "when Charlie is kind to me I am perfectly contented and happy" (54). More characteristic were expressions of anxiety and homesickness as well as depictions of Charlie as controlling and abusive. He withheld pen, ink, and paper from her, and he would not let her have money to buy clothes or make small personal purchases. Hannah began to

self-censor in response to his prying and reading of her correspondence. He was “flighty,” and “he gets so violent . . . at mere nothings” (64). He hit, pushed, and choked Hannah in addition to the harrowing verbal abuse she endured. As the years passed, his abusive behavior grew worse. He threw and broke objects like still-lit candles and mirrors. He knocked over furniture with Hannah still in it, tore apart books, and stole a volume of *Leaves of Grass* that Walt had sent her. He seems to have had affairs with other women and to have started drinking heavily, and his fits of rage grew more intense. In one letter, from 1861, for example, Hannah invited Charlie to go to bed, and he responded by saying, “shut up your god dam[n]ed jaw you mean stinking wretch” (121), and then he proceeded to choke her in their bed. This pattern of behavior persisted for the length of their marriage, until 1892, when Charlie was committed to the State Hospital in Waterburg, Vermont, and died five days later.

Health issues compounded the misery that Hannah endured as the victim of domestic abuse. Mullins proposes that the illness and pain Hannah described in her letters would be consistent with a contemporary diagnosis of endometriosis, a uterine disease marked by lingering fatigue and chronic pelvic, abdominal, and lower back pain. Such an identification of Hannah’s health issues makes sense of the symptoms she describes, and it helps explain her limited mobility and chronic unwellness. Moreover, as historians of medicine have documented, endometriosis was and sometimes still is a condition often dismissed as more imagined than physiological, often associated with hysteria, female complaining, and even demonic possession. Charlie seemed to think her illness was more mental than physical—and a host of twentieth-century Whitman biographers took up this suggestion to diagnose Hannah as whiney, neurotic, hypochondriacal, hysterical, and worse. Mullins’s complete edition of the letters in chronological order, along with its introduction and editorial apparatus, make such a perspective seem deeply wrong. Perhaps, one might argue, previous scholars made such mistakes because they simply did not have Mullins’s edition and its resources at hand to better understand what was happening to this young woman. But why would so many scholars for so many years treat the unreliable and derogatory insinuations of a violent, gaslighting abuser as if they were a credible way to approach Hannah’s marriage, personality, and suffering? The rest of Hannah’s family knew that Charlie was an abusive liar, which was made clear by their letters. This volume will make these kinds of erroneous and sexist perspectives on Hannah seem not only implausible and unkind but preposterous.

While this volume dispels the notion that Hannah was neurotic or

psychotic, it does help scholars see plainly the nature of Hannah’s mental health struggles. As someone who suffered with chronic illness and pain, who endured regular physical and verbal abuse from a domestic partner, and as a sibling and daughter deeply attached to her family but physically isolated from them in rural Vermont—Hannah was depressed and anxious. These letters poignantly disclose the depths of her homesickness and loneliness as well as her desire to see or to hear from her family, particularly her mother, Louisa, and her brother, Walt.

*Hannah Whitman Heyde: The Complete Correspondence* will become an indispensable resource for future Whitman scholars. It is an important addition to the lineup of scholarly editions of letters written by Walt Whitman’s family and friends, such as Jerome Loving’s edition of the *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*; Dennis Berthold and Kenneth Price’s *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman*; and Charley Shively’s two collections of letters from Whitman’s friends and lovers, *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman’s Working Class Camerados* and *Drum Beats: Walt Whitman’s Civil War Boy Lovers*. Expanding the work Mullins did in her digital humanities project for *Scholarly Editing* in 2016 (“The Selected Letters of Hannah Whitman Heyde”), this volume includes all of Hannah’s existing letters. This scholarly edition corroborates some of what we already know about Walt Whitman’s life and times and family, but it also provides a fresh perspective. Walt appears in these letters as loving, kind, and empathetic. “I never in my life see anybody so good,” Hannah wrote to her mother about Walt, “I [dont] know what makes him so good.” She then added, “its the kindness I care for” (145). After the death of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, Walt became Hannah’s primary correspondent, and he continued his practice of sending her new editions of his work and small sums of money, realizing that Charlie allowed her few clothes, personal items, or money. He also wanted Hannah’s experience to be documented, not by her violent and dishonest husband, but by herself. He deliberately saved her letters and passed them along to Horace Traubel years later, saying about the letters “I want you to be in possession of data which will equip you after I am gone for making statements . . . . I can talk with you and give you the documentary evidence” (4).

Nevertheless, as important as this edition will be to Whitman scholars, Mullins’s work might be even more important to historians of domestic violence. It is a mistake to see women like Hannah Whitman Heyde as simply passive victims of violence—a perspective that ignores their agency and survival strategies, the ways they became “Heroes of Their Own Lives,” to quote the title of

Linda Gordon’s classic in the field. Nevertheless, those who endure domestic violence do not often have the chance to tell their own stories in their own words. As Charlie Heyde’s example suggests, survivors are threatened and gaslit into saying nothing, and when—or if—they do say something, they are either dismissed and ignored or accused of being irrational, insane, or abusive themselves. Because Hannah wrote her story slowly over years in these letters, and because Walt preserved what he could, Mullins has been able to contextualize and carefully reconstruct Hannah’s sad story in her own words. For those trying to write the histories of domestic abuse in the U.S., Hannah’s “documentary evidence” will be invaluable.

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