NOT IN SISTERHOOD

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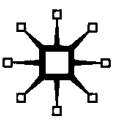

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Not in Sisterhood

For my grandmothers,
Dora and Judith,
and for Great-aunt Zara,
the suffragist

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Contents

Introduction

"Strangled with a Petticoat"

It is a serious disadvantage to be a lady author, wrote Willa Cather to a friend in 1931, and anyone who thinks otherwise is just foolish.[1] Surprisingly, Cather was at the peak of her literary career when she wrote this: a best-selling, highly paid, well-respected author who had been awarded a Pulitzer prize, several honorary degrees from prestigious universities, and membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters. But these successes did not alter her belief that being a woman writer presented significant difficulties, a belief she shared with her contemporary Edith Wharton. Like Cather, Wharton tended to dismiss other women writers as unrealistic romantics, shrill social activists, or followers of literary fads: Wharton characterized Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett as the wearers of "rose colored spectacles" (1002) and described Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mrs. Gaskell as the "pleaders of special causes" who produced "that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose" (175). Wharton and Cather are commonly considered hostile to other women writers, an attitude that has come to be seen as an integral aspect of each writer's personality.

One of my primary aims is to examine their hostility, which I argue is a deliberate strategy, a professional decision that had profound implications for both writers' careers and for their status in literary history. Wharton's and Cather's choice to remain publicly aloof from their female peers—a shared refusal that ironically yokes them together—becomes apparent when their careers are juxtaposed with the career of their literary friend and peer, Zona Gale. Gale's feminism, and her strong sense of female literary community, demonstrates that literary power and cultural authority could be achieved with strategies very different from those used by Wharton and Cather. Gale—herself a Pulitzer-prize winner, and a

popular and critical success—did not find being a "lady author" a disadvantage, but her feminist fictions have not preserved a place for her in literary history.

The careers of these three writers highlight a transitional moment in the history of female authorship and the literary marketplace in the United States: the uneasy shift from nineteenth-century models of female authorship to some new but as-yet undefined twentieth-century alternative. Nineteenth-century writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth had wielded tremendous cultural authority at the peak of their careers, but by the turn of the century they were seen as gentle and genteel amateurs writing flowery and repetitive fictions that could be of only passing interest to a modern audience. [2] Cather, Wharton, and Gale were interested in distancing themselves from this tradition, which they all perceived as limiting the possibilities for female literary achievement. While these nineteenth-century women writers were commercially successful, their popularity made them suspect; they were not regarded seriously as artists and were not accorded the same respect in the marketplace as their male counterparts.

As Wharton, Cather, and Gale moved into the literary marketplace, they were working against what they saw as a tradition of women's writing that itself made no claim to be "art" and that was taken less seriously than men's writing. Elsa Nettels points out that between 1880 and 1889, *Harper's Magazine* published 263 works of fiction, including nineteen serialized novels, and that half—132—were known to be by women, or to appear under a woman's name (1). From similar figures in *Scribner's* and *Century,* Nettels concludes that "women writers enjoyed equal opportunity, even an advantage, in the world of commercial publishing." This commercial "equal opportunity" is contradicted, however, by the articles, reviews, and essays that ran alongside this fiction, which expressed opinions "that cast women as inferior to men, defined their difference from male writers as deviations from an approved standard, and satirized or belittled qualities labeled 'feminine'" (2). Nettels claims that individually none of this misogynistic writing made an impact, but that all together, "the mass of articles and reviews is important; the magazines, described by one observer as 'the recognized gateway to the literary public,' disseminated ideas and shaped and reflected public taste and belief" (2).[3] Thus by the time that Wharton, Cather, and Gale began their careers the role of moral guide and inspirational leader played by many nineteenth-century women writers—even those who conducted their literary business with consummate professionalism—was neither marketable nor desirable.

Wharton, Cather, and Gale considered themselves professional writers, but they also wanted to be seen—and wanted others to see them—as literary artists. Claiming the role of artist for themselves marks a significant departure from the tradition of nineteenth-century female authorship and contributes to their individual conceptions of literary authority. A writer can be considered a "professional," according to William Charvat, when her writing "provides a living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer; that it is produced with the hope of extended sale in the open market, like any article of commerce; and that it is written with reference to buyers' taste and habits." Charvat goes on to explain that "the problem of the professional writer is not identical with that of the literary artist; but when a literary artist is also a professional writer, he cannot solve the problems of the one function without reference to the other" (3).[4] Wharton, Cather, and Gale used different methods to achieve their commercial and critical successes, but all three writers believed that women should be taken seriously as artists.

As these writers were creating new models for female literary authority, the publishing business was changing from a genteel occupation in which agreements were sealed with handshakes to a consumer-driven professional industry in which both the book and the author's own image became products. This transformation alarmed the publishing world's old guard, as Henry Holt makes clear in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1905): "Books are not bricks . . . the more authors seek publishers solely with reference to what they will pay in the day's market, the more publishers bid against one another . . . and the more they market their wares as the soulless articles of ordinary commerce are marketed, the more books tend to become soulless things" (578). Holt's fears notwithstanding, books did become more like bricks as the century progressed, and writers like Wharton, Cather, and Gale had to participate in this "soulless" endeavor if they wanted their work to be read.

Surviving and succeeding as women writers, however, presented another set of difficulties. Even as women writers created huge profits for editors, publishers, literary agents—and themselves—the literary marketplace, dominated by men, was at best ambivalent, if not hostile, about the presence of women. The novelist Joseph Hergesheimer, speaking for many male writers, complained in *The Yale Review* (1921) that literature in the United States was "being strangled with a petticoat" (718). Robert Herrick's 1929 essay, "A Feline World," echoes Hergesheimer's ideas in a subtler manner, claiming that "we have moved further along toward feminization. . . . Women know the neurotic sides of sex, which do not eventuate in either marriage or maternity, as well as what was once called

(with a hush) the perverted side, the wooing of one's own sex. A disturbing number of recent stories by women deal with this taboo topic . . . [which] we must assume interests many of their readers" (3,4). The woman writer has "dared . . . to paint the slut to life," which she does very well, in Herrick's opinion, because she "understands her heroine . . . and is not crudely denunciatory of a character that . . . she perhaps realizes [that] many of her sisters share with her" (4). Women, according to Herrick, share a sororal relationship with sluts, which is why they portray them so vividly in their novels. Hergesheimer fears that women writers will silence men, and Herrick worries that they will create a perverse and sluttish literary world that ignores men altogether: "now [man] must give up the delusion that women are really interested in the things he cares about most, hunting and sporting, money-making and love-making" (2). These comments by Holt, Hergesheimer, and Herrick represent the upheavals about commercialization and feminization (which is really an anxiety about feminism) roiling the literary marketplace during the years that Wharton, Cather, and Gale established themselves as professional literary artists: both commercial success and female authorship are suspect, dangerous. The tactics used by Wharton, Cather, and Gale to negotiate the complex terrain of the marketplace and to establish their literary authority reveal the intricate intersections of literary and social politics that shaped their world.

In bringing Wharton, Cather, and Gale together, I have several concerns, including reassessing Gale's place in literary history. This book examines the ways in which gender and marketplace considerations shaped the literary careers of these three writers, all of whom were successful businesswomen who manipulated the market to their advantage, even when reviewers refused to recognize their achievements. Their similar perceptions of the marketplace led Wharton and Cather to separate themselves from other women writers, but Gale's career illustrates that literary success and wide readership did not depend on such a separation. Ultimately, however, Wharton's and Cather's rejection of public literary sisterhood was instrumental in their achieving canonical status, while Gale, who celebrated community, collaboration, and sisterhood, has been forgotten. Wharton and Cather appropriated the model of the Romantic artist—isolated, independent, solitary—developed in Europe and England a century earlier by Keats, Shelley, Goethe, and others. In *The American Adam* (1955), R.W.B. Lewis recontextualizes this image in the American grain, drawing on such writers as Cooper, Thoreau, and Hawthorne to make his point. Andreas Huyssen points out that this same model of the artist can be seen in the writings of Nietzsche, who situates the "artist-philosopher-hero, the suffering loner . . . in irreconcilable op-

position to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture" (51). For Nietzsche and other turn-of-the-century male intellectuals, women were identified with the inauthenticities of mass culture, an association that Wharton and Cather were—to some degree—able to defy by inscribing themselves within the culturally ingrained and masculinized vision of the artist. As a result, I argue, Wharton and Cather were "safe" choices for feminist revision in the early 1970s and 1980s, while Gale remained obscure. Thus feminist literary critics have, perhaps subconsciously, replicated Wharton's and Cather's belief that literary authority is at odds with literary sisterhood.[5]

Gale's outspoken opinions about progressive politics and feminism are quite different from Wharton's and Cather's less vocal attitudes, but their three careers are quite similar. Like Cather, Gale was formally educated at a large university, and both were part of the New York publishing world for a number of years, Gale as a journalist and freelance reporter, Cather as managing editor of *McClure's Magazine.* Like Wharton, Gale had a lifelong interest in writing for the stage, and both lived most of their adult lives outside the American mainstream—Wharton in France and Gale in Portage, Wisconsin. They all published in the same magazines, won the same prizes and awards in consecutive years, and shared publishers, editors, and literary agents. Wharton won the Pulitzer in 1920 for *The Age of Innocence;* Gale for her stage adaptation of *Miss Lulu Bett* in 1921; Cather in 1922 for *One of Ours.* Wharton and Cather were admitted to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and were awarded gold medals from that institution; Wharton published with Appleton and was friends with Appleton's editor, Rutger Jewett, who also published and was friends with Gale. In 1929, Gale switched from Appleton to Knopf, which had been publishing Cather's work since 1920.

In addition to the parallels in their careers, the three writers shared a long correspondence: Gale corresponded with both Wharton and Cather for many years. Gale met with Cather whenever they were both in New York, and she was repeatedly invited by Wharton to join her in France. Long overlooked in studies of all three writers, these letters shed light on how the writers viewed themselves and their literary worlds. The letters between Gale and Wharton, and Gale and Cather, reveal that Wharton's and Cather's disdain for literary female companionship had more to do with their public postures than with their private desires. In their private letters to Gale, both Wharton and Cather claim her as a literary sister who shares what Wharton calls the "community of spirit," which can be inhabited only by women of letters. This correspondence demonstrates that Wharton and Cather wanted privately what they refused publicly—literary sisterhood—and highlights

the fact that Wharton's and Cather's detachment from their female contemporaries did not happen incidentally but deliberately, as a plan for survival and success in the literary world.[6]

Wharton's and Cather's public refusal of sisterhood—and any other form of affiliative politics—is central to their creation of public authorial personae, images that emerged in response to the increasing demand for celebrity as a way to sell books. Literary history has followed their "spin": the two authors are almost never studied in conjunction with other women writers and are rarely contextualized within the literary marketplace where each experienced critical and financial success.[7] Gale also created a public persona for herself, but she did not separate her public from her private life as rigidly as did Wharton and Cather.

I am interested in how both their work and their public images participate in the cultural and political conflicts that mark the first decades of the twentieth century: arguments about women's roles in the public arena, about militarism and globalization, about an increasingly professionalized and technologized marketplace, about the growing gap between rich and poor. The attempts to resolve these conflicts through government intervention set the tone of the Progressive Era, from 1890 to 1924, the year that Robert La Follette, a close friend of Gale's, was defeated in his presidential bid on the Progressive ticket. Gale's lifelong involvement with social politics makes her career both the most similar to the model of nineteenth-century lady authorship and the most radical departure from it. Like her female predecessors, Gale merged her moral views with her fiction, hoping that her work would contribute to positive social change: she fought for pacifism, labor rights, racial equality, and ethnic tolerance. Unlike these earlier writers, however, Gale sought political parity for women and was not content to be thought of as just a "good influence." Moreover, Gale, like Wharton and Cather, thought of and presented herself as a literary artist. Gale's art directly engages almost all of the political and social issues of her day, but she was first and foremost a feminist.

The struggle over women's suffrage was a profound and pervasive debate in the United States from the turn of the century until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, and even then, the discussion about women's roles continued, albeit in different terms.[8] The fact that Wharton and Cather are seldom examined in the context of the suffrage debate demonstrates how powerfully Wharton's and Cather's own self-presentations have shaped critical understanding of their careers.[9] The struggle over suffrage was so much a part the culture of the early twentieth century that ignoring it would have been almost impossible; it was something about which everyone, particularly public figures, were ex-

pected to take a stand. Through such organizations as the International Council of Women and the more aggressive International Woman Suffrage Alliance, suffrage became a global struggle; they helped labor organizers to plan strikes (like the 1909 strike of women workers organized in New York by the Women's Trade Union League) and held rallies, parades, and pageants to promote their cause. Cather's silence about suffrage seems particularly suspect, given the strength of the New York state suffrage organization and the fact that New York was the first eastern state to enfranchise women. Several of the largest suffrage parades, in fact, marched only a few blocks from Cather's Bank Street apartment.

Given the intensity of the national debate over women's roles, the fact that Cather, Wharton, and Gale were *women* writers had a decisive influence on the shape of their careers, in terms of both the critical reception of their work and their own presentation of self to the marketplace. Although neither Wharton nor Cather made any public statement about suffrage, their silence should not be read as a lack of awareness or interest in the issue. After all, if critics and reviewers agreed that literature was being "strangled by petticoats," then someone who *wore* a petticoat needed to think about how her petticoats might influence her readers, editors, publishers, reviewers, and peers.

Not in Sisterhood begins with a discussion of the Gale-Wharton-Cather correspondence in order to establish each writer's ideas about the literary marketplace and her position within that world, particularly her attitudes about literary sisterhood and literary authority. Although Wharton never mentioned Cather in her letters or essays, and Cather publicly mentioned Wharton only once, their letters to Gale make clear that they saw the literary world in similar terms. In Chapter Two, I examine the trajectory of Gale's career, which demonstrates that success as a "serious" literary figure could be linked to working within a communal, political network composed almost entirely of women. In Chapters Three and Four, I consider these writers in the context of the two central conflicts of the early twentieth century: World War I and the struggle for woman suffrage. Because the fight for suffrage overlapped with World War I, there is not a neat chronological ordering to the work that I discuss in these chapters; instead I move back and forth along the span of each writer's career to examine how these conflicts are synthesized by the fiction. Using the suffrage debates as a context for all three writers, I examine the ways that their work intersects with pervasive questions about women's roles. Never as outspoken as Gale, Cather and Wharton nevertheless demonstrate their interest in questions of female autonomy and female authority throughout their careers, even in work that appears to be, on the surface, either utterly removed from such issues or highly pessimistic about the possibility of

change. Despite Wharton's and Cather's pessimism, however, their novels do offer the possibility of escape from patriarchal society.

I discuss these alternatives in Chapter Three, which argues that in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *My Ántonia* (1918), powerful feminist alternatives are deliberately positioned at the margins of both novels, rather than at center stage, thus allowing the writers to challenge social hierarchies without being labeled as feminists. Both novels were successful, but these "breakthrough" successes were more than matched by Gale's outspoken feminist parable, *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920), which was a smash hit as both a novel and a play and demonstrates that feminist politics and literary success are not necessarily at odds. These three novels, with their very different portrayals of feminist alternatives to traditional feminine domesticity, thus link feminism with the instantiation of female literary authority.

In addition to her belief in feminism, Gale was a devout pacifist, and both beliefs fueled the writing she did about World War I, which Wharton and Cather addressed in a more conventional manner. Drawing on previous critical successes, each writer felt compelled to tackle the subject of World War I and, as a result, collided with the rigidly gendered expectations about what "war writing" should be and who had the authority to write about it. In Chapter Four, I discuss the questions about gender and authority that arise when women write about war and the consequences of Wharton's, Cather's, and Gale's traversing the gender–genre boundary, a boundary that was being patrolled ever more vigilantly by the (mostly male) critical establishment. Although Gale writes about pacifism, and Wharton and Cather write about the war itself, all three received mostly poor reviews for their war fiction, reviews that either explicitly or implicitly blame the failure of the work on the fact that the writers are women, as if to suggest that when it comes to war it is impossible to escape gendered perspectives. Whether writing about pacifism at home or soldiers on the front lines, however, writing about the war fueled each writer's postwar career and enabled her to move into new areas.

The concluding chapter examines how the institutionalization of American modernism shaped Wharton's and Cather's careers and helped to "disappear" Gale altogether. This chapter also ties together a thread that runs through the entire book: the ongoing problem of popularity. Writing popular fiction implied a lack of seriousness, an absence of artistic integrity, particularly if the writer was a woman. A 1921 *Vanity Fair* photo spread, for instance, included Cather and Wharton as examples of "American novelists who have set art above popularity . . . authors who have consistently stood out against philistia" (55). Wharton and Cather are the only two women writers in the article, which