

*LANGUAGE
AND
GENDER
IN
AMERICAN FICTION*

*HOWELLS, JAMES,
WHARTON AND CATHER*



ELSA NETTELS



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LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN
AMERICAN FICTION

Also by Elsa Nettels

JAMES AND CONRAD
LANGUAGE, RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS IN HOWELLS'S
AMERICA

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List of Abbreviations

Chapter 1

| | |
|-----|--------------------------------|
| MMW | <i>The Man-Made World</i> |
| RW | <i>The Revolution in Words</i> |
| WJ | <i>Woman's Journal</i> |

Chapter 2

| | |
|-----|--|
| AH | <i>April Hopes</i> |
| MC | <i>The Minister's Charge</i> |
| RSL | <i>The Rise of Silas Lapham</i> |
| CP | <i>The Complete Plays of W. D. Howells</i> |
| VK | <i>The Vacation of the Kelwyns</i> |
| AK | <i>Annie Kilburn</i> |
| SRL | <i>The Son of Royal Langbrith</i> |
| HNF | <i>A Hazard of New Fortunes</i> |
| MF | <i>Mrs Farrell</i> |
| LLH | <i>The Landlord at Lion's Head</i> |
| DBP | <i>Doctor Breen's Practice</i> |
| SP | <i>The Story of a Play</i> |
| LA | <i>The Lady of the Aroostook</i> |

Chapter 3

| | |
|-----|---|
| NN | <i>Notes on Novelists</i> |
| NR | <i>Notes and Reviews</i> |
| LRE | <i>Literary Reviews and Essays</i> |
| PP | <i>Partial Portraits</i> |
| FPN | <i>French Poets and Novelists</i> |
| ELE | <i>Essays in London and Elsewhere</i> |
| WW | <i>Watch and Ward</i> |
| CT | <i>The Collected Tales of Henry James</i> |
| E | <i>The Europeans</i> |
| B | <i>The Bostonians</i> |

Chapter 4

| | |
|----|----------------------------------|
| BG | <i>A Backward Glance</i> |
| CC | <i>The Custom of the Country</i> |

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|
| AI | <i>The Age of Innocence</i> |
| TS | <i>Twilight Sleep</i> |
| HM | <i>The House of Mirth</i> |
| C | <i>The Children</i> |
| GM | <i>The Glimpses of the Moon</i> |
| SF | <i>A Son at the Front</i> |
| MR | <i>The Mother's Recompense</i> |
| HRB | <i>Hudson River Bracketed</i> |
| GA | <i>The Gods Arrive</i> |
| FWM | <i>French Ways and Their Meaning</i> |
| B | <i>The Buccaneers</i> |

Chapter 5

| | |
|-----|---|
| KA | <i>The Kingdom of Art</i> |
| WP | <i>The World and the Parish</i> |
| SL | <i>The Song of the Lark</i> |
| UV | <i>Uncle Valentine and Other Stories</i> |
| CSF | <i>Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction</i> |
| MA | <i>My Antonia</i> |
| PH | <i>The Professor's House</i> |
| MME | <i>My Mortal Enemy</i> |
| SSG | <i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i> |

Chapter 6

| | |
|-----|-------------------------------|
| LB | <i>Looking Backward</i> |
| E | <i>Equality</i> |
| AR | <i>The Altrurian Romances</i> |
| GA | <i>The Gates Ajar</i> |
| GB | <i>The Gates Between</i> |
| BG | <i>Beyond the Gates</i> |
| CL | <i>Chapters from a Life</i> |
| H | <i>Herland</i> |
| WHO | <i>With Her in Ourland</i> |
| M | <i>Mizora</i> |
| UPR | <i>Unveiling a Parallel</i> |
| SS | <i>San Salvador</i> |
| AL | <i>Al-Modad</i> |

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Introduction

Between January 1880 and December 1889, *Harper's Monthly Magazine* published 263 works of fiction, including 19 serialized novels. Of the total, more than half, 132 novels and stories, are known to be by women or appear under a woman's name.¹ Four of the writers – George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, William Dean Howells and Henry James – have remained dominant figures in American and English literary history. Several others, including Sarah Orne Jewett, Thomas Nelson Page and Mary E. Wilkins, retained their status as regionalists. The majority, male and female, quickly passed into oblivion and have remained forgotten, their books long since out of print.

What is noteworthy is the near-parity of male and female writers. The contents of the *Century* and *Scribner's Magazine* show a similar balance. Judging by the popular mass-circulation magazines, women writers enjoyed equal opportunity, even an advantage, in the world of commercial publishing. But until the 1970s, the producers of reference works, literary histories, encyclopedia articles, and high school and college curricula made 'American literature' almost synonymous with male authorship. In the post-Civil War era, women could get their stories published; they wrote bestsellers and won prizes, but with few exceptions, the institutions that keep writers and their reputations alive did not choose to sustain them. The publication in recent years of monumental works such as *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) and *The Oxford Companion to Writing by Women* (1994) testifies to the long eclipse of scores of women writers.

For explanation of this phenomenon one need look no further than the pages of the magazines such as *Harper's*, so hospitable to fiction by women. Side by side with stories by Sarah Orne Jewett, Rebecca Harding Davis, Rose Terry Cooke and Constance Fenimore Woolson were articles and reviews expressing opinions of women's speech and language that cast women as inferior to men, defined their differences from male writers as deviations from an approved standard, and satirized or belittled qualities labelled

'feminine'. Most of this magazine journalism is of no literary consequence. But taken all together, the mass of articles and reviews is important; the magazines, described by one observer as 'the recognized gateway to the literary public',² disseminated ideas and shaped and reflected public taste and belief.

As the first chapter of this study seeks to show, the influence of the magazines was powerfully reinforced by others engaged in the construction of gender: grammarians, linguists, philologists, sociologists, writers on manners and etiquette. Personally undistinguished though many of them were, together they constituted a potent authority by which no writer or reader could remain untouched.

The chapters on William Dean Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather examine the ways that these dominant figures of the literary establishment helped perpetuate or subvert their culture's ideology of language and gender. To see how these four writers defined *masculine* and *feminine*, how they characterized women's speech and language, how they distinguished male and female discourse, where they invested authority in matters of usage, is to gauge their response to the pervasive assumptions set forth in the magazines that published their fiction.

Several facts dictated the choice of the four writers placed at the centre of the study. All four had long careers of half a century or more. Each produced a formidable body of work: together they published more than 80 novels. Each writer wrote literary criticism setting forth ideas and assumptions which can be compared with the representations of language and gender in their fiction.

All four novelists were literary realists in that they assumed the office of the historian as James defined it in *The Art of Fiction*: 'to represent and illustrate the past', to produce 'the illusion of life', to 'catch the color, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle'.³ None of the writers can be confined by the label 'novelist of manners' but as realists they represented the culture of particular societies including the language and habits of speech of men and women. None of the four proposed to create a new language or attacked conventions perpetuating gender bias in American English (for example the generic pronoun *he*, the feminine suffixes). But all four directly addressed issues exposing vital connections between language and gender. The reader may study the interactions of gender bias and social class in the novels of Howells and Wharton; the association with women of colloquial

speech and oral narration in Cather's novels; the embodiment of linguistic authority in male characters of Howells and James; the representation of women as the preservers of culture in James's four-part essay 'The Speech of American Women'. All four novelists created first-person narrators of both sexes – diarists, letter-writers, storytellers, public speakers – thereby revealing their conceptions of the way men and women speak and write.

Finally, all four writers had lifelong connections to the dominant institutions of book and magazine publication in the United States. All four published their fiction and criticism in the leading periodicals – *Harper's Magazine*, the *Atlantic*, *Scribner's Magazine* and the *Century*. Howells and Cather were editors who, in choosing manuscripts and advising contributors, influenced the direction of other writers' careers and helped to shape public taste. All four writers had long-term close professional relationships with the most influential editors and publishers of the time.

The utopian novels treated in the final chapter offer another perspective on the realist fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Did visions of societies socially and politically reformed dictate changes in language as well? Did the power of language to construct gender, to promote division and to circumscribe the lives of both men and women concern the authors of utopian fiction and their characters? Answering these questions we gain a measure by which to judge the potency of a culture's ideology and the capacity of writers of all persuasions to analyse its effects.

1

Language and Gender in Victorian America

I

The historian of issues debated in modern feminist criticism finds in American writing of the nineteenth century much that anticipates the discussions of scholars and critics today. In particular, the relation of literary style to gender became of increasing interest to Americans as women writers became ever more prominent in Victorian America. Reviewers and essayists of the post-Civil War years did not use modern terms such as 'patriarchal language', 'androgynous ideal' and 'phallogocentric reading', but they debated questions to which critics and theorists today are seeking answers: Are there differences between the language of men and of women? Are there qualities of style that distinguish women's writing from men's? If there are differences, are they the result of cultural ideals and codes that are learned, or are they the result of inherent biological differences? Does literary style reflect mental processes or psychological traits that are distinctively feminine or masculine? In the most influential magazines of the late nineteenth century, such as *Harper's*, *Century*, *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, writers directly or implicitly gave answers to these questions, answers which often reflect widely held views of the relation of the sexes and of the proper roles or spheres of men and women.

Like their predecessors, nineteenth-century critics and reviewers – most of whom were men – constructed literary gender by borrowing the grammarians' terms: *masculine* and *feminine* – 'perhaps the most culturally biased words in the language', according to the linguists Casey Miller and Kate Swift.¹ By the nineteenth century these words had already acquired powerful connotations sustained for several centuries. From the time of Edmund Spenser, *masculine* had signified the strong, the dominant, the superior; *feminine* the weak, the submissive, the inferior. Thus nineteenth-century writers called prose 'masculine' when they wished to praise it for strength,

vigour, precision and directness. James Russell Lowell, for instance, cited the Gettysburg Address – ‘of a truly masculine English’ – to identify Lincoln as a ‘master’ among writers.² A reviewer in *Harper’s Magazine* recommended Whateley’s *Elements of Rhetoric* for its precision, lucidity, and ‘masculine good sense’.³

Strength and vigour combined with moral qualities such as courage, candour and self-restraint produced a style to which Victorians gave their word of highest praise – *manly*. Thomas Wentworth Higginson found in nineteenth-century English prose ‘an admirable vigour and heartiness, a direct and manly tone’.⁴ George William Curtis, the first occupant of the ‘Editor’s Easy Chair’ of *Harper’s Magazine*, valued a ‘manly reticence and restraint’ in both conduct and art and preferred Tennyson’s later to his earlier poetry as being ‘more manly’ in style.⁵ William Dean Howells also liked a ‘candid and manly style’, praised the poetry of Robert Frost for its ‘manly power’, and approved the ‘manly humanity’ of Jacob Gould Schurman’s speech opposing the war in the Philippines.⁶

The most desirable elements that made a style *feminine* were grace, delicacy, fastidiousness and ideality. A writer on ‘Some Recent Women Poets’ in *Scribner’s Magazine* (1875) found women’s poetry ‘sensitive’, ‘exquisitely spiritual’, ‘graceful’ and ‘mystical’, notable for an ‘intense, indefinable aroma which could not have been exhaled from any masculine mind’.⁷ ‘Purely feminine the voice is’, Howells said of Rose Hawthorne Lathrop’s ‘pretty book’ of poems, ‘with an appealing, haunting quality that lingers, and that thrills to heart-break’.⁸ He did not use the word *feminine* in analysing the ‘rarity’ and ‘singular worth’ of Emily Dickinson’s poetry but he detected ‘something of the perfervid feminine flutter in the emotional passages’ of Mrs Humphry Ward’s otherwise admirable novel, *Robert Elsmere*.⁹

To nineteenth-century critics *masculine* and *feminine* not only connoted qualities differentiating the sexes but also signified realities immutable as night and day, more definitively bounded than heat and cold or youth and age, as natural as the operation of the heart and lungs by which Emerson in ‘Compensation’ illustrated the ‘inevitable dualism bisect[ing] nature’.¹⁰ In ‘Two Principles in Recent American Fiction’, for instance, the popular writer of genteel romances, James Lane Allen, subsumed all literature under the rubric of gender, expanding the polarity into a series of matching elements – the *masculine*: virility, strength, massiveness, large-

ness, obviousness and instinctive action, opposing the *feminine*: refinement, delicacy, grace, smallness, rarity and tact. When the masculine degenerates, he maintained, it becomes coarse, vulgar, and violent; when the feminine degenerates it becomes trivial, bloodless and decadent. These were timeless polarities 'whose history lies revealed as drawn unbrokenly across many centuries'.¹¹ Allen's classification anticipates Philip Rahv's well-known class-based division of American writers into 'two polar types': Palefaces, patrician and highbrow, identified by sensibility, 'philosophical depth' and refinement; and Redskins, plebeian and lowbrow, exhibiting energy, 'natural power' and 'gross riotous naturalism'.¹²

Nineteenth-century reviewers perceived that women writers did not all write alike, that the style of Mrs Southworth, described by Sarah J. Hale as 'wild and extravagant', was different from that of Mary Wilkins Freeman, commended for her 'short economical sentences'.¹³ But reviewers generalized more readily than they discriminated, and so deeply ingrained was the masculine-feminine polarity that they attributed qualities of one sex to the other rather than dispense with the categories. Instead of allowing *feminine* to modify strength and vigour in a woman's style, they praised it for its *masculine* (but not manly) virtues. Mary Noailles Murfree, who wrote under the name 'Charles Egbert Craddock', was praised by one male reviewer for depicting 'with masculine force the minute, daily life of a scant civilization', by another for producing in her serial 'Where the Battle was Fought' a 'full-fledged novel of masculine strength'.¹⁴ To the reviewer of Anne Douglas Sedgwick's novel *A Fountain Sealed*, the fineness of detail marked the book as that of a 'well-bred woman with a heritage of culture', but her use of extended metaphor seemed a 'point of excellence especially masculine'.¹⁵ Julian Hawthorne praised Elizabeth Stoddard for not 'aping the masculine voice' in *The Morgesons* but found the 'virility, austerity, and . . . taciturnity' of her style even less suggestive of 'the conventional feminine tone'.¹⁶

In nineteenth-century criticism, the connotations of *masculine* were rarely negative, whereas *effeminacy* was always bad and *feminine* was at best graceful and delicate, at worst perfervid and shrill. Reviewers who found feminine qualities in the work of men they wished to praise usually qualified their statements. For instance, writers in the *North American Review* felt an 'almost feminine spitefulness' in Max Müller's criticism, saw in Howells's fiction 'the

more than masculine, almost feminine touch', and wondered if 'feminine aid and counsel' might account for 'a delicacy of touch which does not belong to man'.¹⁷

Even when critics insisted on the presence of both the male and female principles in the greatest creative minds, they usually asserted the primacy of the male principle in the androgynous union. George Parsons Lathrop, in an essay on 'Audacity in Women Novelists' (1890), argued that 'every imaginative mind of the best and strongest sort must unite some of the elements of both sexes', but he accepted the traditional categories, implying that male strength was superior to female tenderness, sentiment and intuition. These feminine elements in Browning, for instance, 'do not for a moment hide the masculine nature of his mental action, the close-grained, robust muscularity of thought, which is one of his greatest traits'.¹⁸ The novelist and essayist Grant Allen, who believed that 'the males are the race; the females are merely the sex told off to recruit and reproduce it', stated in an essay on 'Women's Intuition' (1890) that 'in the highest minds' the 'feminine element' commingles with 'the masculine element of pure reason' but only as 'a certain undercurrent' in genius which is essentially 'virile', as exemplified by his list of painters, musicians, statesmen and inventors, all of whom are men.¹⁹ James Lane Allen attributed the stylistic excellence of American prose to the operation of the Feminine Principle but saw in the historical pattern of action and reaction a recurrent triumph for the Masculine Principle, not the Feminine, which 'the human spirit' has repeatedly rejected, 'having tried it and found it wanting'.²⁰

A small minority of writers opposed the idea of innate differences which relegate men and women to separate spheres of mental activity. In response to Grant Allen's essay on 'Women's Intuition', the sociologist Lester F. Ward agreed that men have surpassed women in the arts but argued that men owe their success not to superior creative power but to a breadth of knowledge denied to women: 'man has displayed more genius than woman; largely because he has been in possession of a wider range of facts, a greater supply of the only material out of which genius can construct and create'.²¹ James S. Metcalfe, in 'The Silent Revolution' (1890), attributed what he called 'the weaker characteristics of women' not to biology but to 'the errors of the centuries' which have perpetuated the belief that woman is inferior to man. No one can be certain, he declared, that once women are freed from the

forces that compel their submission they will not be able to 'think and act with the vigour and force of man'.²²

All the writers quoted above judged women's accomplishments inferior to men's and held 'the vigour and force of man' as the ideal. A few writers anticipated certain modern feminist critics when they argued that the experiences, values and creative powers of women are essentially different from those of men but are of equal or greater value and importance. Women should therefore reject the standards promoted by men and assert the primacy of their own ideals. The essayist and novelist Helen H. Gardner implicitly urged women to become resisting readers and writers when she argued in 'The Immoral Influence of Women in Literature' (1890) that no novelists had represented life from women's standpoint, that 'even the woman character in fiction is what men fancy she is or ought to be'. Women writers had yet to free themselves from the 'established male critics' position' so powerful that even when literature portrays women, 'the *basis* of its morals, its standard of action and its motive, have remained masculine in conception and requirement'.²³ Her analysis counters the kind of argument made by a critic who opposed the special exhibit of books by women at the World's Fair in 1893, on the grounds that literary success depends on 'intrinsic merit', that only 'the genius of the writer' and 'the understanding of the people' will keep a book alive – as if 'merit', 'genius' and 'understanding' were universal ahistorical entities existing apart from human time-bound judgements.²⁴

Those who believed that the creative powers of men and women were not essentially different likewise argued against classifying writers by sex. For instance, Helen Gray Cone, in an article on 'Woman in American Literature' (1890), urged that writers be categorized by 'method, local background, or any other basis of arrangement which is artistic rather than personal'. Arguing that faults described as 'womanish' are common to writers of both sexes, she rejected 'classification based upon sex' as 'necessarily misleading and inexact'. To her, the 'completely deceptive' mask of Charles Egbert Craddock proved the absurdity of 'the notion of ordained, invariable, and discernible differences between the literary work of men and that of women'.²⁵

Implications of the premises in all these articles were explored by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Man-Made World; or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), the most comprehensive criticism of traditional concepts of gender to appear in America at that time. Rejecting the