

wit, sentimentality and the image of women in the nineteenth century

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In two articles in *The Critic* in 1884, Alice Wellington Rollins attempted to counter the conventional notion that a sense of humor was “that rarest of qualities in woman,” as Richard Grant White had written earlier in the same publication. Though she acknowledged that “as we have had no feminine Artemus Ward, so we have had no woman novelist in whose work humor has even so prominent a part as it has in Dickens,” she insisted that in conversation as well as in writing women had great talent for humor.¹ But Twain’s portrait of Emmeline Grangerford in *Huck Finn* the following year seems to have solidified the image of the nineteenth-century female writer as a wan poet obsessed with morbidity. However, in the same year that *Huck Finn* was published, Kate Sanborn followed Alice Rollins’ lead and published an anthology called *The Wit of Women*.² Sanborn did not adhere to a rigid definition of “wit” in her comments or in her selections, which range from an eighteenth-century poem by Mercy Warren (whom Sanborn calls “a satirist quite in the strain of Juvenal”) to the dialect humor of Harriet Beecher Stowe and “Grace Greenwood,” and include parodies, poems for children and bits of witty conversation overheard at dinner parties. Frances Whicher’s *Widow Bedott Papers* she deems too popular to require a selection—“every one who enjoys that style of humor knows them by heart”—but she did include excerpts from Caroline Kirkland, Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett and many others.

Despite the grab-bag nature of her anthology, Sanborn was both acknowledging and participating in a trend which ran counter to the prevailing sentimentality of women’s literature in the 19th century. At the same time as the image of the literary woman, as well as that of the educated, middle-class woman in general, increasingly partook of the

characteristics which Twain ascribed to Emmeline—frailty, emotionalism, a consummate uselessness—the female humorists of the century waged a little-recognized but persistent war against that figure. In their own work, the “witty women”—“Fanny Fern,” Caroline Kirkland, Frances Whicher, “Gail Hamilton” and Marietta Holley—consistently satirized the woman who wrote pious, sentimental prose and poetry. Their efforts to demote this figure from the high status accorded her by genteel society were part of their rebellion against widely-held notions of woman’s “proper” role in American culture.

In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas argues persuasively that an unstructured but potent coalition of Protestant ministers and middle-class, Northern women led to the sentimentalization of American popular literature between 1820 and 1880. Douglas asserts that just as liberal Protestant clergymen lost authority through the disestablishment of religion in the early 19th century and the concurrent rise to prominence of more evangelical sects such as the Methodists and the Baptists, so women lost status by virtue of the shift from a home-based to a factory-based economy. The home, “formerly an important part of a communal productive process under her direction, . . . had become a place where her children stayed before they began to work and where her husband rested after the strain of labor.”³ The woman became “influence” rather than producer, and the nature of her influence was defined by the conventions of Christianity. Both ministers and women turned to literature as a means of promoting their own, strikingly similar values. “They inevitably confused theology with religiosity, religiosity with literature, and literature with self-justification.”⁴ A sentimental literature, according to Douglas, was the inevitable result. “Sentimentalism is a complex phenomenon. It asserts that the values a society’s activity denies are precisely the ones it cherishes; it attempts to deal with the phenomenon of cultural bifurcation by the manipulation of nostalgia. Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated.”⁵

If sentimentality in literature is a result of powerlessness, wit may be seen as its opposite: an expression of confidence and power. The word remains closely associated with its Old English origin in *wita*, “one who knows.” Long before it acquired the connotation of amusement, wit was connected with knowledge, understanding, perception. Sentimentality exerts a passive, often subversive power; wit, on the other hand, is a direct and open expression of perceptions, taking for granted a position of strength and insight. It was this confident stance which both Alice Rollins and Kate Sanborn admired in the women humorists they praised in the 1880’s. Humor functioned as an antidote to the pious religiosity of the sentimental novel and poem.

Among major authors of the nineteenth century, the foremost “witty woman,” as Constance Rourke pointed out long ago, is Emily

Dickinson, who “contrived to see a changing universe within that acceptant view which is comic in its profoundest sense, which is part reconciliation, part knowledge of eternal disparity.”⁶ It is ironic that Dickinson’s reclusiveness and eccentricity have caused her to remain, at least in the popular imagination, an embodiment of conventional femininity, a retiring New England spinster with her eyes fixed on the next world. In sharp contrast to this image, Dickinson’s humor emerges from her lyrics precisely as moments of insight; she is the “one who knows,” and her wit denies sentimentality, even—or especially—when the subject is death, that favorite subject of Emmeline Grangerford and other satiric representations of the female writer. For Emily Dickinson, wit was a natural mode; but for the more popular women writers of the 19th century, sentimentality was a constant temptation, and had to be dealt with in satire.

The recurrent satire on the sentimental female author in 19th century women’s humor may therefore be seen as having a different and more pointed motive than does Twain’s portrait of Emmeline. Twain’s description is part of his more comprehensive attack, in *Huck Finn* and elsewhere, on Victorian tastelessness and lack of refinement. It is of a piece with his depiction of the vulgarities of household adornment and the behavior of the crowds who witness the debased versions of Shakespearean plays presented by the Duke and the Dauphin. The systematic attack on the sentimental female author—her person as well as her product—in the works in Kirkland, Whicher, Holley and other 19th century female humorists, however, is an attempt to deny the image of woman as a weak, frail vessel of Christian piety, and to posit instead an image of the “witty” woman: one who sees through sham and stereotype, for whom courage and strength of mind are positive virtues.

“Fanny Fern” (Sara Willis Parton) must figure prominently in any discussion of both witty and sentimental women writers in the 19th century because of her mastery of both styles. F.L. Pattee calls her “the most tearful and convulsingly ‘female’ moralizer of the whole modern blue-stocking school,”⁷ and Sanborn refers to her “talent for humorous composition,” and says her style “was thought very amusing.”⁸ Both are correct.

Sara Willis Parton was born in 1811 and grew up in the Calvinistic atmosphere which also influenced Harriet Beecher Stowe (her father was a friend of Lyman Beecher, and she attended Catharine Beecher’s Female Seminary). After two marriages, one ending in death and the other in divorce, she turned to writing to support herself. When her sketches were rejected by her brother, Nathaniel Parker Willis, editor of the *Home Journal*, her career was championed by James Parton, who became her third husband. The first series of *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio* (1853) consists of both extremely sentimental and sharply satiric pieces, and the contemporary reviewer for *Putnam’s Magazine* described them quite accurately:

They are acute, crisp, sprightly, knowing, and, though sometimes rude, evince much genuine and original talent, a keen power of observation, lively fancy, and humorous as well as pathetic sensibilities.⁹

In Parton's own preface to the book, she announces that "some of the articles are sad, some are gay,"¹⁰ and the first three-quarters of the book consists chiefly of the former, with titles such as "The Widow's Trial," "A Night-Watch with a Dead Infant," and "The Invalid Wife." Death and loss are the major themes, and the style is pious and overblown in the manner of the sentimental novel. Even in this section, however, Parton's wit and her objective distance from such sentimentality are apparent. The selection "A Chapter on Literary Women" consists of a dialogue between Colonel Van Zandt, who has a "perfect horror of satirical women," and Minnie, who introduces him to the woman he marries—who turns out to be a writer. The Colonel is finally forced to acknowledge that "a woman may be literary, and yet feminine and lovable."¹¹

Parton's awareness that she is merely following fashion by writing sentimental sketches is amply demonstrated in the brief essay "Borrowed Light," in which she sarcastically advises beginning authors to imitate the work of popular writers:

Borrow whole sentences, if you like, taking care to transpose the words a little. Baptize all your heroes and heroines at the same font;—be facetious, sentimental, pathetic, terse, or diffuse, just like your leader.

And she mocks her own choice of a pseudonym when she advises:

In choosing your signature, bear in mind that nothing goes down, now-a-days, but *alliteration*. For instance, Delia Daisy, Fanny Foxglove, Harriet Honeysuckle, Lily Laburnam, Paulena Poppy, Minnie Mignonette, Julia Jonquil, Seraphina Sunflower, etc., etc.¹²

The selections in Part II of *Fern Leaves*, in which this essay appears, are as satiric as those in Part I are sentimental. Using a tone of ironic sarcasm, Parton comments on the vanity of women, the helplessness of men, the problems of ministers and the hypocrisy of editors. The sane, sprightly satire and the curt, pithy style are the direct opposite of the sentimental prose in the first part of the book. In "The Model Widow" she presents a husband-hunter who anticipates the Widow Bedott, and in "Bachelor Housekeeping" she satirizes the helplessness of men as Florence Guy Seabury would many years later in "The Delicatessen Husband." After quoting a scene in which a man, in answer to his servant's announcement that there is no bread for his breakfast, says, "No bread! then bring me some toast," Parton begins:

I think I see him! Ragged dressing-gown; beard two days old; depressed dickey; scowling face; out at elbow, out of sorts,

and — out of “toast!” Poor thing! Don’t the sight make my heart ache? How should he be expected to know that bread was the forerunner of toast, without a wife to tell him?¹³

The humor of this and other pieces, such as “Aunt Hetty on Matrimony,” bespeaks a sincerity completely lacking in the sentimental sketches and stories. This is the real “Fanny Fern” — or rather, this is Sara Willis Parton — following no stereotypical pattern of “feminine” writing, but taking a brisk, analytical look at manners and values.

“Borrowed Light” is the closest Parton came to satirizing the sentimental female writer, but the tradition of such satire had begun some years before in Caroline Kirkland’s *A New Home—Who’ll Follow?* (1839). A native of New York City, Kirkland spent seven years in frontier Michigan with her husband William, a schoolteacher turned town-builder, and wrote about this experience with candor and much satiric humor in *A New Home* and the later *Forest Life* (1842). The chapter epigraphs — quotations from Rochefoucault, Bacon, Pope, Byron and Shakespeare — testify to Kirkland’s education, but are oddly at variance with her straightforward, somewhat understated style, which purports to be that of her *persona*, Mary Clavers. Mary Clavers is from the civilized East, but she is not a snob; instead she seems honestly bewildered by the actual crudeness of frontier life, and copes as well as she can with the privations of western settlement.¹⁴

Into this frontier community comes the female poet, Miss Eloise Fidler, for a visit of some months, and Kirkland uses the occasion for some of her most delicate yet most barbed wit. Here, as in other female humorists’ portraits of this figure, the satire is directed as much to the personality of the sentimental writer as to the quality of her writing. In fact, one of the evidences of her uselessness in society is that she produces very little. In comparison with Marietta Holley’s Betsey Bobbet, later in the century, Miss Fidler is young, but “at least at mateable years; neither married, nor particularly likely to be married”:

Her age was at a stand; but I could never discover exactly where, for this point proved an exception to the general communicativeness of her disposition. I guessed it at eight-and-twenty; but perhaps she would have judged this uncharitable, so I will not insist.

Miss Fidler has an album in which she encourages her friends to write verses; Kirkland admits to having kept the book for three months without being able to think of anything to write which will match the overblown style of the entries already there. One assumes that Miss Fidler’s own poetry resembles that of her friends; Kirkland is more concerned to present a picture of the artist at work:

It was unfortunate that she could not walk out much on account of her shoes. She was obliged to make out with diluted

inspiration. The nearest approach she usually made to the study of Nature, was to sit on the woodpile, under a girdled tree, and there, with her gold pencil in hand, and her "eyne, grey as glas," rolled upwards, poefy by the hour.

Miss Fidler's desire to marry comes not so much from romantic notions of marriage as from the fact that she hates her maiden name, and "the grand study of her life had been to sink this hated cognomen in one more congenial to her taste." She fixes her attention on a store clerk whose name she supposes to be Edward Dacre; when she discovers that it is actually the less euphonious "Edkins Daker," she is temporarily disenchanted, but ultimately marries him despite this fault.

It is worth noting that the occasion of Daker's entrance into the story is a debate regarding the "comparative mental capacity of the sexes," at the conclusion of which the young clerk prevails with the opinion that:

if the natural and social disadvantages under which women labored and must ever continue to labor, could be removed; if their education could be entirely different, and their position in society the reverse of what it is at present, they would be very nearly, if not quite, equal to the nobler sex, in all but strength of mind, in which very useful quality it was his opinion that men would still have the advantage.¹⁵

The "strength of mind" which Kirkland mentions here is a concomitant of wit, and a quality which Emily Dickinson possessed in abundance. The fact that Miss Fidler has neither is what qualifies her as the object of Kirkland's satire.

Shortly after Kirkland's first book was published, Frances M. Whicher¹⁶ began writing in the dialect of rural New York state in the "Widow Bedott" sketches and other work, published in the Albany *Argus*, *Neal's Saturday Gazette* and *Godey's Lady's Book*. None of her work was collected in book form until after her death in 1852. In 1856 Alice B. Neal, widow of the editor of *Neal's Saturday Gazette*, published a collection of the "Widow Bedott" and "Aunt Maguire" pieces, and in 1867 Whicher's earlier pieces were published in a volume titled *Widow Spriggins, Mary Elmer and Other Sketches*. Extremely publicity-shy, Whicher refused for a time to reveal her identity even to editor Neal, and replied to a request for information about herself with a flippant poem in which she described herself as having:

Hands and feet
of respectable size
Mud-colored hair,
And dubious eyes.¹⁷

Part of her desire for anonymity seems to have come from a genuine retiring nature and a lack of confidence in her own abilities. Soon after she began writing the "Widow Bedott" sketches for Neal, she ap-

parently considered giving up the series, which prompted a letter from Neal that testifies to the popularity of the sketches:

All the world is full of Bedott. Our readers talk of nothing else, and almost despise "Neal" if the Widow be not there. An excellent critic in these matters, said to me the other day, that he regarded them as the best Yankee papers yet written, and such is indeed the general sentiment. I know for instance, of a lady who for several days after reading one of them, was continually, and often, at moments the most inopportune, bursting forth into fits of violent laughter, and believe me that you, gifted with such power, ought not to speak disparagingly of the gift which thus brings wholesome satire home to every reader.¹⁸

Though Whicher continued to write for *Neal's* and later for *Godey's*, her shunning of the public eye was no doubt due in part to what Neal calls her "wholesome satire," but which was not so kindly regarded by some of her targets. In a letter to Alice Neal, Whicher testifies that her satiric talent was a mixed blessing from the beginning:

I received, at my birth, the undesirable gift of a remarkably strong sense of the ridiculous. I can scarcely remember the time when the neighbors were not afraid that I would "make fun of them." I was scolded at home, and wept over and prayed with, by certain well-meaning old maids in the neighborhood; but all to no purpose.¹⁹

As the wife of a clergyman, Whicher ran particular risks as a satirist, and her husband's congregation in Elmira, New York, finally decided that they could do without his services after one parishioner threatened a lawsuit, claiming he recognized his wife in one of Whicher's comic portraits. It is probably not necessary to speculate on this gentleman's opinion of his own wife; suffice it to say that most of Whicher's portraits of women are far less than flattering.

The humor in Whicher's sketches arises in part from stock comic devices of the 1840's: humorous names for people and places (the "Rev. Sniffles," "Wiggletown," "Scrabble Hill," etc.), broadly phonetic spelling and ludicrous situations. But underlying this humorous surface is telling satire on human characteristics—in particular, vanity, foolishness and false pride. The Widow Bedott, who became a popular stage character in the 1880's, embodies several of the characteristics which are most commonly found in satiric sketches of women in the 19th century. She is a gossip, a man-chaser—and a "scribbling woman." But Whicher goes a step further than the usual satiric portrait. In Kirkland's descriptions of Miss Fidler, as well as in Holley's later characterization of Betsey Bobbet, the *persona* of the sensible, reasonable narrator provides contrast and distance to the humorous character. The character, in other words, is at two removes from the reader, eliciting laughter but little sympathy. Whicher, however, uses

the technique of Josh Billings and Artemus Ward: the Widow Bedott tells her own story in her own dialect, and thus seemingly unwittingly reveals her flaws as she earnestly pursues her interests.

Whicher increases the humorous potential by having the Widow criticize the very characteristics which she herself embodies. Having set her cap for Mr. Crane the instant she hears he has been widowed, she immediately assesses the competition for his interest, one Polly Bingham Jenkins:

Now I shouldn't wonder if she should set tew and try tew ketch Mr. Crane when he comes back, should you? I'll bet forty great apples she'll dew it, she's been ravin' distracted to git married ever since she was a widder, but I ruther guess Timothy Crane ain't a man to be took in by such a great fat, humbly, slander-in' old butter tub. She's as gray as a rat, tew, that are hair o' hern's false. . . . I think 't would be a good idear for some friendly person to warn Mr. Crane against Poll Jenkins as soon as he gits here, don't you?²⁰

The "friendly person" is, of course, the Widow herself, who writes a poem for Mr. Crane in which she purports to describe his feelings



Full forty dollars would I give,
If we'd continnerd apart,
For though he's made my sperrit live,
He's surely bust my heart.

PAGE 17E.

FIGURE ONE: The Widow courts the reverend . . . From *The Widow Bedott Papers*, by Frances M. Whitcher (New York, 1869), 24.



Says he to me, says he, "Silly." I says to him, says I, "what?" He says to me, says he, "we'er all poor critters!"—PAGE 25.

FIGURE TWO: ... and succeeds in winning his hand. From *The Widow Bedott Papers*, by Frances M. Whitcher (New York, 1869), 174.

upon losing his wife. Like most of the Widow's poetry, it is a spoof of the sentimental poem, with contrived rhymes, awkward grammar, and ludicrous emotional excess. Titled "Mr. Crane's Lamentations on the Death of His Companion," the poem reads in part:

I used to fraquently grumble at my fate
 And be afered I was a gwine to suffer sorrer —
 But since you died my trouble is so great
 I hain't got no occasion for to borrrer.²¹

Perhaps the best example of Whicher's satire on the sentimental poem itself is the one which the Widow writes to Rev. Sniffles during her ultimately successful pursuit of his hand in marriage. Not only does the Widow manage to rhyme "frenzy" and "influenzy," but the poem also contains the following bit of self-serving "comfort" for the widower:

Then mourn not for yer pardner's death,
 But to submit endever;
 For s'posen she hadent a died so soon,
 She couldent a lived forever.²²

The most direct satire on the sentimental female writer in *The*

Widow Bedott Papers occurs as the Widow and Aunt Maguire discuss Sally Huggle, who writes poetry for the “Scrabble Hill Luminary,” a local newspaper. Sally Huggle, a spinster, also pursues the Rev. Sniffles, and thus is a double rival of the Widow. Aunt Maguire describes her poetry:

She generally calls 'em “*sunnets*”—Jeff [Aunt Maguire's son] says they ought to be called *moonets*, cause they're always full o' stuff about the moon and stars, and so on. She's always groanin' away about her *inward griefs*, and *unknown miseries*. I don't know what to make on't. Sally Huggle never had no partickler trouble as I know on—without 't was her not bein able to ketch a husband.

Aunt Maguire recites several stanzas of one of Sally Huggle's poems, which is almost identical to the Widow's efforts, but the Widow asserts that she could “make better poitry 'n that by throwin' an inkstand at a sheet o' paper.”²³ The composite picture of the single female—widow or spinster—who writes poetry for the local paper is one which involves extremes of vanity, petty competition and an appalling lack of sophistication. The satire, in fact, seems directed as much to low editorial standards for “literature” as to the individual perpetrators of execrable verse.

Though the Widow's nickname is “Silly” (short for “Priscilla”), she can hardly compete in silliness with her predecessor, the Widow Spriggins. Whicher wrote the Widow Spriggins letters for the *Albany Argus*, and they were later collected in the 1867 volume of her work. The humor lacks the depth and complexity of the Widow Bedott and Aunt Maguire sketches, but the Widow Spriggins letters are interesting as a different sort of satire on the “scribbling women.” Sprinkled with malapropisms, the Spriggins letters tell of the courtship of Permilly Ruggles and Jabez Spriggins from the point of view of Permilly, whose romantic notions of behavior are derived from the sentimental novel.²⁴ In anticipation of Tom Sawyer following the dictates of romantic fiction for setting Jim free at the end of *Huck Finn*, Permilly imitates her fictional heroine Amanda at every turn, and insists that her suitor does likewise, to the extent of requiring that he draw a small sketch of himself that she can pretend is a daguerrotype to keep when they are parted. A brief exchange between two of Permilly's sisters captures the essence of the satire. Permilly has uttered a long, derivative lament, ending by calling herself “the most onfortunate of creturs”:

“How much she talks like a book,” says Ketury.
“How much she talks like a fool,” says Mirtilly, and
off she went to bed.²⁵

The Widow Spriggins is even more a figure of ridicule than is the Widow Bedott, but she was undoubtedly a model for Whicher's later

creation. At the conclusion of the Spriggins letters is a note to the “eddyter” saying that these sketches have been written during her widowhood after fifteen years of marriage to Spriggins, and she would be happy to tell the story of her second marriage:

So if you ever git run ashore for stuff to put in yer paper, jest let me know, and if I ain’t too much occerpied with my domestic abberations, Ile be happy to giv ye sum account of my “second love.”²⁶

Despite the sincerity one detects in Whicher’s satire, it seems clear that she wrote humor because of the ready market for it rather than from a commitment to the mode. Near the end of her short life she wrote to Alice Neal: “I am heartily sick of Bedotting and Maguiring, and only wish I could be as well paid for more sensible matter.” She was at this point at work on *Mary Elmer*, a novel which was incomplete at the time of her death. Though serious, *Mary Elmer* lacks the flowery sentimentality of some of “Fanny Fern’s” work. Whicher was afraid the writing was “too plain and homely,” and in a letter to her publisher she explains both her style in the work and her attitude toward the sentimental female writer:

I have been so anxious to avoid the grandiloquent style of many of our female story writers, that I may have gone too far the other way. I have become so entirely disgusted with that sort of composition, applied to the commonest and most trifling subjects, as well as to those more important, that I never have patience to get through an article of that description.²⁷

It is fortunate for today’s readers that economic necessity forced Whicher to devote herself to humor. *Mary Elmer* is conventional; but the Widow Spriggins, the Widow Bedott and Aunt Maguire are unforgettable characters in American humor, ranking with Jack Downing and Colonel Sellers. *The Widow Bedott Papers* was a very popular book; the first edition sold more than 100,000 copies,²⁸ and it remains livelier and less dated than much of the dialect humor of its era.

Far removed from the rural New York of Frances Whicher was the work of “Gail Hamilton” (Mary Abigail Dodge), whose career as a journalist and social commentator began about the time of Whicher’s death and lasted until her own death in 1896. Though not a humorist in the popular mold of Whicher and Holley, Gail Hamilton was a witty observer of the political and social scenes, writing columns for the *National Era* and essays and stories for *The Atlantic Monthly*. Kate Sanborn mentions Gail Hamilton in *The Wit of Women*, though she does not include a selection from her work, and Hamilton is one of Alice Wellington Rollins’ proofs that women have a sense of humor:

In the lighter department of descriptive writing, we may fairly match against Charles Dudley Warner’s “Summer in a Garden” Gail Hamilton’s experience with Halicarnassus in taking

a country place for the summer; and if it is objected that we have only one Gail Hamilton, we may remark that the world is not overburdened with Charles Dudley Warners.²⁹

The comparison with Warner is an apt one. Both authors use a subtle humor which sneaks out of apparently serious passages. Gail Hamilton's writing ranged over a variety of subjects, including three books on the role and status of women.³⁰ Though she was sometimes equivocal about women's participation in the "male" world of politics, she ultimately rejected female suffrage on the grounds that voting would make women "aggressive, pugnacious, self-centered";³¹ but she argued strongly that women should be self-reliant and powerful, and her writing testifies to the intellectual self-assurance which is basic to wit.

Hamilton's book *Wool-Gathering* (1867), about her travels to various parts of the country, is quite similar in style and approach to Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home*, as well as reminiscent of the journals of Sarah Kemble Knight. Hamilton writes, as do Kirkland and Knight, as an outsider who is alternately perplexed and delighted by what she encounters. Her descriptions of Minnesota recall Kirkland's more extensive ones of Michigan; but Hamilton is a traveler, not a settler, and she declares that "the worst thing about Minnesota is, that it is fifteen hundred miles from Boston!"³² Like Kirkland, she does not romanticize the West nor the journey to get there. There are mice in hotel rooms, unpleasant traveling companions and sometimes actual dangers. Although she holds the unusually enlightened view for her day that the violence of the Indians was the result of white injustice in dealing with them, she asserts that "the last place in the world to be sentimental over Indians is Minnesota":

In a country where, until lately, a woman might stand frying doughnuts at her kitchen fire, and look up to see a dark, dreadful face in the gathering twilight pressed against the window-pane, watching the process, and receive for her ostensibly hospitable, but really affrighted greeting, only a non-committal grunt, it is just as well not to rhapsodize over the noble savage. When, in addition to this, the noble savage yells out a war-whoop, whips out his tomahawk, and takes off your scalp, it is all over with the poetry of the thing.³³

Gail Hamilton was equally unsentimental about the writing of fiction. In the middle of an otherwise straightforward and serious story published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, she pauses to comment on the romantic novel. Noting that her reader will have guessed that the couple she has introduced will eventually get married, she says, "Of course they will. Is there any reason why they should not? . . . Scoff as you may, love is the one vital principle in romance." She then protests that in comparison to the novels the "professional novel-reader" may be accustomed to, her story may seem "threadbare." However:

Please to remember that I am not writing about a princess of the blood, nor of the days of the bold barons, but only the life of a quiet little girl in a quiet little town in the eastern part of Massachusetts; and so far as my experience and observation go, men and women in the eastern part of Massachusetts are not given to thrilling adventures, hairbreadth escapes, wonderful concatenations of circumstances, and blood and thunder generally, — but pursue the even tenor of their way, and of their love, with a sober and delightful equanimity.³⁴

In the early 1870's Marietta Holley launched the most comprehensive satire on the sentimental female poet in *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* (1873) with a preface in which she declares herself unqualified to write a book:

I don't know no underground dungeons. I haint acquainted with no haunted houses, I never see a hero suspended over a abyss by his gallusses, I never beheld a heroine swoon away, I never see a Injun tommy hawked, nor a ghost; I never had any of these advantages; I cant write a book.

In other words, she cannot write a romantic novel. But a "voice" inside her mind keeps telling her to write a book about "the great subject of Wimmen's Rites," and she has a "cast iron resolution" to do just that.³⁵ The "voice" was in reality the American Publishing Company, which had published several of Twain's books and which had commissioned Holley's first book after seeing a dialect piece she had written for *Peterson's Magazine*.³⁶

My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's, like the twenty "Samantha" books which followed it, is dialect humor of the "Widow Bedott" variety. Holley's *persona*, Samantha, makes it plain that she "never went to school much and don't know nothin' about grammer, and I never could spell worth a cent,"³⁷ and Holley, like Whicher, was from rural New York state, which was the basic setting for her works. By the time her last books were published on the eve of the women's suffrage amendment, the rustic style and settings were out of fashion, but her books consistently sold well, and at the turn of the century her name was as well known, some say, as that of Mark Twain. Since the vogue of dialect humor had begun to wane at this point, we must seek other reasons for her continued popularity. For some, the appeal lay in Samantha's championing of women's equality while she remained a devoted wife and homemaker; the marriage of the conventional role and the liberal philosophy would have made her views palatable to those who were threatened by more radical feminist positions. For others, the attraction was the travel format she frequently used, that of Twain's *Innocents Abroad* and Margaret Halsey's later *With Malice Toward Some*; the "wise innocent" had its greatest durability as an observer of notable places. Holley's Samantha traveled to Saratoga, the World's Fair, the St. Louis Exposition and Europe,³⁸ and her commentary served to reinforce middle America's belief in traditional

values of moderation and common sense (one of Samantha's favorite words is "megum" [medium]).

More importantly, Holley's work is delightfully comic. The mixture of broad caricature and delicate, ironic wit remains lively even though some of its targets have an old-fashioned ring.³⁹ Like Whicher, Holley exposed human failings traditionally associated with women—vanity, nosiness, sentimentality—but her range of subjects was much wider, including racial conflict, political and social ethics and especially sexual equality. Samantha's implacable logic is the source of much of the humor, contrasted as it is with the illogicality of sentiment or prejudice, and the homely metaphor serves here, as in much of Emily Dickinson's poetry, to reinforce common sense. In *Samantha on the Race Problem* (1892), Samantha visits her son and his family in Georgia and runs head-on into a racial prejudice which rural New York has not prepared her for:

The colored men and wimmen they [white Southerners] seemed to look upon about as Josiah and me looked onto our dairy, though mebbly not quite so favorably, for there wuz one young yearlin' heifer and one three-year-old Jersey that I always said knew enough to vote.⁴⁰

In London she and Josiah compare the crowded conditions in the House of Commons to those in their hen-house back home, and Samantha concludes that "there both on em kep' in too clost quarters to do well."⁴¹ Tied to their rural domesticity, Samantha and Josiah are to some extent stock comic characters: the nagging wife with tongue or rolling pin always at the ready, and the stubborn, somewhat lazy hen-pecked husband who fears neither her bark nor her bite.

But Holley's humor is more complex and delicate than this stereotypical portrait would suggest. Samantha Allen is—underneath her dialectical locutions—a woman of intelligence and wit, and this is nowhere more apparent than in her arguments about "wimmen's rites." As a committed feminist, Holley was well aware of the major arguments against female suffrage. On the one hand, women were too fragile to endure the demands of the political process; on the other, they were destined—biologically and socially—to fulfill the "higher calling" of wife and motherhood, which presumably did not place such a strain on their delicate minds and bodies. The contradiction inherent in this stance does not escape Samantha, who is capable of launching into irate, sarcastic monologues when provoked—usually by Josiah, who, after fourteen years of marriage, continues to trot out the same arguments, as when he says:

"If wimmin know when they are well off, they will let poles and 'lections boxes alone, it is too wearin for the fair sect."

"Josiah Allen," says I, "you think that for a woman to stand up straight on her feet, under a blazin' sun, and lift both her arms above her head, and pick seven bushels of hops, mingled

with worms and spiders, into a gigantic box, day in, and day out, is awful healthy, so strenthenin' and stimulat'in' to women, but when it comes to droppin' a little slip of clean paper into a small seven by nine box, once a year in a shady room, you are afraid it is goin' to break down a woman's constitution to once."⁴²



BETSEY BOBBET.

FIGURE THREE: from *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* by Marietta Holley (Hartford, Connecticut, 1873), 27.

And when Samantha's friend Betsey Bobbet insists that it is woman's "greatest privilege" to be "a sort of poultice to the noble, manly breast when it is torn with the cares of life," Samantha snaps, "Am I a poultice, Betsey Bobbet, do I look like one?"⁴³

From her alliterative name—reminiscent of "Fanny Fern" and others—to her desire to be a "clinging vine," Betsey Bobbet is a full-blown caricature of the sentimental spinster who writes mournful verse. Samantha comments that "of all the sentimental creeters I ever did see Betsey Bobbet is the sentimentalist, you couldn't squeeze a laugh out of her with a cheeze press."⁴⁴ Betsey is pretentious about her grammar, which is often incorrect: she says "I have saw" instead of "I have seen," and thinks it vulgar to pronounce final "r" sounds, saying "deah" for "dear." As Samantha observes, "I don't know much about grammer, but common sense goes a ways."

But Betsey Bobbet is not merely a set-piece borrowed from other 19th century humorists. *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* is an extended allegory, pitting common sense against sentiment, with Samantha Allen as the primary representative of the former (one of her favorite statements is "I love to see folks use reason") and Betsey as one of the embodiments of the latter. In this allegorical framework, marriage as "woman's sphere" (or "spear," as Samantha spells it, fully conscious of the pun) is part of the anti-suffrage argument, and singlehood is as unnatural as voting. Samantha several times attacks the illogicality of this stance. One of her arguments is that it takes two to make a marriage: "As our laws are at present no woman can marry unless she has a man to marry to," she says to Elder Minkly, and then challenges him:

Which had you rather do, Elder, let Betsey Bobbet vote, or cling to you? She is fairly achin' to make a runnin' vine of herself, and says I, in slow, deep, awful tones, are you willin' to be a tree?

Elder Minkly, like other men to whom Samantha puts the same question, cannot answer, and takes the first opportunity to change the subject.⁴⁵ If the situation provokes Samantha to logical argument, it provokes Betsey to poetry, the composition of a “song” for the “glorious cause of wimmen’s only true speah,” one stanza of which reads:

Oh, do not be discouraged, when
You find your hopes brought down;
And when you meet unwilling men,
Heed not their gloomy frown;
Yield not to wild despaih;
Press on and give no quartah,
In battle all is faih;
We’ll win for we had orteh.⁴⁶

And Betsey does “win,” in the sense that she eventually gets married. But it is a hollow victory, for Holley’s final thrust is to have her marry a lazy drunkard with several children, and our final view of Betsey shows a woman worn with care and hard work. Her “clinging vine” has found a spindly tree which will not bear its weight, and Betsey is left defending a position which has become as pathetic as it once was ludicrous.

Marietta Holley went further than most of her fellow humorists in demolishing the image of the sentimental female writer, but the fact that so many female humorists in the 19th century satirized sentimentality argues persuasively that the popular image of the woman writer as soggy sentimentalist was considered as an insult by women of wit. The figure of the sentimental female poet was much more than a stock comic character. In the work of women humorists, it became the embodiment of all that these women knew themselves *not* to be: weak, dependent, illogical. With varying degrees of acidity, they mocked the notion that women were humorless creatures, incapable of the insight and perspective which underlay the witty utterance. Almost every nineteenth-century female humorist felt the need to create and demolish this image as if exorcising a demon which would have prevented her from writing humor.

Pointing to a deeper reality in women’s humor of the 19th century is the fact that in the works of these humorists the sentimental female writer is inevitably single, and just as inevitably would rather be married. In the popular imagination the witty woman was not attractive, not feminine; she was considered too strong, too threatening, too “masculine.” It is accurate, though somehow too pat, to point out that Mary Abigail Dodge (“Gail Hamilton”) and Marietta Holley never married, and that Frances Whicher spoke with regret of her gift for satire. There is no necessary and simple correlation between a writer’s life and her subject matter. What is clear is that these writers caricatured the sentimental female writer not on the sole basis of her style of writing, but also because of her habits and personality—her

unwillingness or inability to be strong and self-reliant. They laughed at her because she was unable to laugh at herself. The issue was not that she preferred marriage to "single blessedness," but that she equated femininity with weak-minded dependence and sentimentality. For humor, as Dorothy Parker said, "There must be courage."⁴⁷

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notes

1. "Woman's Sense of Humor," *The Critic and Good Literature*, 1 (new series), no. 13 (29 March 1884), 145-46. This was followed by "The Humor of Women," 1, no. 26 (28 June 1884), 301-302.
2. 2nd edition (New York, 1885). The second and third "editions" of this book are actually reprintings.
3. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977), 48.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (Garden City, New York, 1931), 211.
7. Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties* (New York, 1940), 110.
8. *The Wit of Women*, 54-55.
9. Quoted in Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties*, 118.
10. "Fanny Fern" [Sara Willis Parton], *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (n.p., [1853]), vi.
11. *Ibid.*, 175-79.
12. *Ibid.*, 231-32.
13. *Ibid.*, 329.
14. One wonders what Pattee was thinking of when he wrote that Kirkland "romanticized the new Western settlements" (*Feminine Fifties*, 63).
15. Mrs. Mary Clavers [Caroline Matilda Kirkland], *A New Home—Who'll Follow? Glimpses of Western Life*, ed. William S. Osborne (1839; rpt. New Haven, Conn., 1965), 87, 109, 136-44.
16. This is the spelling on the title page of the 1856 edition of *The Widow Bedott Papers*, but the name is spelled Whitcher in the 1867 *Widow Spriggins, Mary Elmer and Other Sketches*. I have used the earlier spelling.
17. Alice B. Neal, "Introductory," *The Widow Bedott Papers* (New York, 1856), xv.
18. *Ibid.*, x.
19. Mrs. M. L. Ward Whitcher, "Biographical Introduction," *Widow Spriggins, Mary Elmer and Other Sketches* (New York, 1867), 15.
20. *Widow Bedott Papers*, 38.
21. *Ibid.*, 45.
22. *Ibid.*, 137.
23. *Ibid.*, 130-31.
24. Whitcher refers to an actual novel here: *The Children of the Abbey*, by Regina Maria Roche (1798), which was a best-seller according to Frank Luther Mott's formula. See Mott's *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1947), 64. This is also the novel to which "Gail Hamilton" refers in "The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties."
25. *Widow Spriggins*, 44.
26. *Ibid.*, 140.
27. "Biographical Introduction," *Widow Spriggins*, 32, 34.
28. See Walter Blair, *Native American Humor*, 44, and F. L. Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties*, 232-38.
29. "Woman's Sense of Humor," 146.
30. *A New Atmosphere* (Boston, 1865); *Woman's Wrongs: A Counter-Irritant* (Boston, 1868); *Woman's Worth and Worthlessness* (New York, 1872).
31. *Woman's Worth and Worthlessness*, 275.
32. "Gail Hamilton" [Mary Abigail Dodge], *Wool-Gathering* (Boston, 1867), 96.
33. *Ibid.*, 158-59.
34. "The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties," *Atlantic Tales: A Collection of Stories from The Atlantic Monthly*, 5th ed. (Boston, 1869), 111-13.
35. Josiah Allen's Wife [Marietta Holley], *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* (Hartford, 1874), v-vii.
36. May Lamberton Becker, ed. *The Home Book of Laughter* (New York, 1948), 225.
37. *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's*, v.

38. Much of this travel, however, was imaginary. Holley often worked from guidebooks and other materials without stirring from her home in New York. This mild duplicity seems not to have disturbed her readers, who apparently remained unaware of it.

39. Not all critics agree. In explaining his selections for a 1947 anthology of American humor, James Aswell says that Holley "most particularly . . . didn't amuse me." (*Native American Humor* [New York, 1947], xiii). C. Carroll Hollis describes some of her work as "of interest to historians, not citizens" ("Rural Humor of the Late Nineteenth Century," *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin [New Brunswick, N.J., 1973], 174). Most recently, Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill say that Holley "could never have become as popular today as she did during her lifetime." (*America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* [New York, 1978], 496). However, the rediscovery of America's women writers and the current woman's movement have caused many to find her work both amusing and relevant. See especially Jane Curry, "Samantha 'Rastles' the Woman Question," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 8, no. 4 (Spring 1975), 805-24.

40. Josiah Allen's Wife [Marietta Holley], *Samantha on the Race Problem* (New York, 1892), 259.

41. Josiah Allen's Wife [Marietta Holley], *Samantha in Europe* (New York, 1896), 417.

42. *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's*, 92.

43. *Ibid.*, 62.

44. *Ibid.*, 27.

45. *Ibid.*, 135.

46. *Ibid.*, 185.

47. Introduction to *The Most of S. J. Perelman* (New York, 1958), xii.