

# Marietta Holley and Mark Twain: Cultural-Gender Politics and Literary Reputation

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Marietta Holley (1836-1926) and Mark Twain (1835-1910) were contemporaries with remarkable similarities. They were not only highly popular writers of comedy in the tradition of the crackerbarrel philosopher, but they also had the same publisher, the same illustrator, and were marketed in the same way—by subscription—to the same public in upstate New York and elsewhere. So comparable were their reputations in their own lifetimes that Twain was reportedly jealous of Holley (Winter 135). Roughly three quarters of a century after their deaths, their posthumous reputations could hardly be more dissimilar. Mark Twain's name and even his image may be known to more Americans than that of any other writer except William Shakespeare while Holley's name was lost to public memory until recently.

Holley, the author of twenty-one best-selling novels (plus many short stories) from 1873 to 1914, was unknown for decades until her work was rediscovered by feminists in the 1980s. Yet in the late nineteenth century she had been a writer of comparable standing to Twain. The following statement, written about Holley during her lifetime, could, with a change of names, describe Twain's reputation today:

'Josiah Allen's Wife,' as Miss Holley is widely known, has written some of the most mirth-provoking books that have ever been given to the public, and her books have found a warm welcome with all classes and are read in nearly every civilized country of the globe, having been translated into a number of

languages. From Africa and Japan have come messages of warm appreciation, and the foreign press has been quite as appreciative as the American (*National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* 278).

Ellis Parker Butler thought Holley's appeal was even broader than Twain's:

Literally hundreds of thousands enjoyed her writings who could see nothing funny in Bill Nye, or any of the professional humorists, not even Mark Twain (13).

But ten years after Holley's death, B. M. Fullerton's evaluation in the *Selective Bibliography of American Literature* reveals how completely Holley's work was dismissed in some quarters:

Miss Holley, a native of Jefferson County, Mo., [*sic*, she was born in New York] and a resident of upper New York State, began her literary labors as a contributor to the *Christian Union*, and found a productive vein in a crude and blundering type of humor. Her work was extremely popular, but quite without distinction (142).

The contrasting histories of the reputations of Holley and Twain make possible interesting case studies because of their remarkable similarities and their insuperable differences—the latter related preeminently to gender. Holley and Twain were known first as humorists. They were also known as critics of their culture, but Twain also came to be a figure through whom Americans were able to represent their culture to themselves and in that way to embody certain values that it was impossible for a woman to embody in a patriarchal culture. Twain came to represent American individualism, an ideology Holley was disqualified from representing because of her gender. In fact, the central impulse of her work was to extend the ideology of individualism to women, to claim for women political rights and personal autonomy that men took for granted. Women writers of humor in the late nineteenth century repudiated the contemporary stereotype of women as dependent, emotional, and weaker than men in mind and body. But Holley's eligibility for the role of bearer of universal themes was mediated by nineteenth- and twentieth-century institutions, and we will see how her gender put her at a disadvantage while Twain's gender ensured his suitability for such a role. Indeed, as I will suggest, Holley's identification with female autonomy may well have exacerbated her marginalization as the white males who controlled academic institutions, feeling threatened by the burgeoning of literary productions by women and minority writers, excluded these writers from the canon.

While discrete evaluations are matters of individual choice and taste (however dependent on the individual reader's social and cultural identity), literary

reputation involves individuals operating in conjunction with institutions and with shifting aesthetic criteria and responsiveness to social change. Literary reputation is indeed a political matter since it is inseparable from ideological beliefs and issues of power within society and its institutions. Literary reputations are made, but they can also be unmade, or completely transformed, as aesthetic and ideological values and literary fashions change and as individuals with cultural authority work through institutions to effect such change.

Northrup Frye dismisses discussion of reputation as “leisure class gossip,” believing that it can contribute nothing to the building up of a “systematic structure of knowledge” (18) of literature. But for those whose concern is with the writers who have been relegated to the margins, a study of literary reputation that is attentive to particular cultural, historical and institutional contexts is far more meaningful than the type of codification that Frye engaged in or than the explication of the monuments of an inherited canon. For students of literary reputation the interesting question is why some literature survives its own day while some is forgotten. Why did Holley’s reputation fall (and why has it risen again in recent years)? To answer this question it is crucial that we understand that “literary reputations are made, not born” (xii), as John Rodden suggests in *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of “St. George” Orwell*. “Reputations,” wrote Rodden, “are invariably ‘political,’ enmeshed in ideological beliefs and emergent from within concrete forms of social and institutional life” (xii).<sup>1</sup>

Holley’s humor emerged during a time of agitation for women’s rights. Pointing out that the humorist as truth-teller occupies a position of authority and that few women have claimed such a position for themselves, Nancy Walker suggests that the support of a national movement probably accounts for Holley’s straightforward feminist stance (*A Very Serious Thing* 121). Among the reasons that Holley’s work disappeared from the literary scene was very likely the belief that women’s rights issues were outmoded after women obtained the vote. We may note that the vote for women was secured at roughly the same time as the end of Holley’s career. Feminists who have been instrumental in recuperating Holley’s reputation have focused almost exclusively on Holley’s concern for equal rights and have emphasized her mockery of patriarchal authority and her satirical dismissal of the doctrine of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood. To fully understand the contexts of Holley’s reputation in her own time, however, we must locate her at the center of a number of social reform movements, preeminently temperance, but also enlarging women’s role in church government, ameliorating the plight of freed slaves and mediating between capital and labor. Holley’s home in upper New York state was in the area referred to as the “burnt over district” because it was so often touched by the fires of reform. To understand Holley’s reputation in her own day, we must understand how that reputation was encouraged and supported by a social context that made possible Holley’s literary prominence. To understand the decline of her reputa-

tion at the close of Holley's life, we must pay attention to the role played by institutions in carrying a writer's reputation beyond his or her lifetime or in exerting influences that precipitate a decline in reputation or even a fall into oblivion.

All of the Holley novels feature a persona named Samantha Allen, a simple country woman who speaks in the comic dialect of the Phunny Phellows, as the personae of dialect humor were called,<sup>2</sup> and mixes comedy meant solely to amuse with other material that contains a satirical edge. Holley carried on the tradition of the other crackerbarrel philosophers, but she adds a new element to the mix: she is a feminist, whose conviction that women need greater political power stems directly from her common sense.

Holley joined other women humorists of the nineteenth century in repudiating the sentimentality that was the hallmark of women's literature and of the image of literary women at the time. In her character Betsey Bobbet, Holley satirizes the woman who prides herself on her emotionalism, her frailty, her penchant for writing sentimental poetry, and her insistence that women need to cling to a strong male. Such characteristics were consistent with the genteel values of the nineteenth century, but Holley and her character Samantha despised such a notion of gentility as foolish, as well as destructive of female authority and autonomy. In "Wit, Sentimentality, and the Image of Women in the Nineteenth Century," Nancy Walker points out that Holley and other women used humor and wit to bespeak female strength and to expose the insulting nature of the stereotype of the woman as clinging vine.

Samantha refutes the notion of female weakness by consistently displaying a stronger head than Josiah as well as by accomplishing heroic tasks as a farm wife. Samantha is fully aware of the hypocrisy of men who demand great efforts of their women in private but deny the legitimacy of any public role for women on the grounds of their "delicacy." At one point an exasperated Samantha remarks:

You can go into any neighborhood you please, and if there is a family in it, where the wife has to set up leeches, make soap, cut her own kindlin' wood, build fires in winter, set up stove pipes, dround kittens, hang out clothes lines, cord beds, cut up pork, skin calves, and hatchel flax with a baby lashed to her side—I haint afraid to bet you a ten cent bill, that that woman's husband thinks that wimmin are too feeble and delicate to go to the pole (*Opinions* 93).

Exposure of the self-serving nature of male support of the cult of the lady is one of the main purposes of Holley's work. If women are kept out of the public sphere, men can have all of its rewards (tangible and intangible) for themselves.

Samantha's views were attractive to the feminists of her day, and sound very contemporary. These views include (along with commitment to the franchise for

women) support of equal pay for equal work, disavowal of marriage as the only role for women, rejection of any form of double standard, criticism of a church controlled by and for men, and repudiation of sexist language.<sup>3</sup> Samantha's staunch support of the family may well be attractive to much current feminism, which faults the past generation of feminists, intent on securing the right to follow careers, with paying inadequate attention to women's needs for social and family support in child rearing.

No essentialist, Samantha believes that women are intrinsically no better or worse than men and does not overlook the faults of her own gender. Samantha has little patience with feminism that features man-hating as its first principle. She is highly critical of women's rights lecturers who begin every sentence with the phrase "Tyrant man" (*Opinions* 343), explaining that the problems women face have to do with the system: "One class was never at the mercy of another, in any respect, without that power bein' abused in some instances" (*Opinions* 344). An astute analyst of power relations, Samantha connects women's issues to larger issues of power. She sees that both men and women may be victimized by the abuse of power. As the common woman who speaks a vernacular dialect, Samantha also embodies a rebuke to the women's rights lecturers, who, of a higher class than she, are blind to their complicity in class oppression, and in a novel about the sufferings of the freed slaves (*Samantha on the Race Problem*), she reveals that she has an awareness of the imbrications of not only class and gender, but also race.

As we examine the social dynamics that placed Holley in a prominent position in her day, we may note the importance of Holley's role in advocating social reform. The causes of temperance and women's rights were especially dear to her heart, but she also wrote about American imperialism, the relations of capital and labor, racial conflict, and white slave traffic. The violence and political corruption that were the aftermath of the civil war shocked and horrified the common man and woman, many of whom shared Holley's religious and moral values. Kate Winter's biography of Holley makes clear how closely Holley was associated with important social movements of her day. That she had a vast audience in social movement communities is seen in the series of invitations extended to her (which she refused because of shyness) to speak at women's rights congresses and Women's Christian Temperance Union meetings. Holley, who became a friend of Clara Barton, was also popular with the feminist leaders of her time, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton from Holley's own upper New York state. A number of women urged Holley to take a public role in the women's movement, and Anthony tried to get her to write for suffragist publications, urging her to send "any of the things too good, that is, too decidedly woman suffrage for the popular press" (Winter 66). Anthony also frequently sent her clippings, saying about one such offering, "Samantha may have a comment to make on it" (Blyley 18). Men involved in reform movements also solicited Holley's help. Winter tells of Holley's decision to write *Samantha*

*On the Race Problem* after she was approached separately by several clergymen requesting that she address the problem of black suffrage (113). That Holley was approached by many prominent people soliciting support for progressive causes is further evidence of how wide was her readership.

Special attention should be paid to Holley's connection with the cause of temperance. While the temperance theme appears intermittently throughout her work, some novels, such as *Sweet Cecily*, are constructed around a temperance theme and thus participate in the genre of the temperance novel. Holley's serious convictions did not prevent her from dealing with the theme in a comic way, as we see in an episode from *Sweet Cecily*, in which Samantha inquires about an acquaintance, Susan Clapsaddle, and is told she is in the poorhouse. Samantha, who knows the woman was well off when she married, is duly shocked and inquires where all the property has gone. She receives this reply:

I can tell you where all the property has gone. It has gone down Philemon Clapsaddle's throat. Look down that man's throat and you will see 150 acres of land, a good house and barns, 20 sheep and 40 head of cattle . . . You will see four mules, and a span of horses, two buggies, a double sleigh, and three buffalo-robos. He has drunk 'em all up—and 2 horse rakes, a cultivator and a thrashin' machine (Curry, *Samantha Rastles* 146-47).

The quotation illustrates the WCTU theme of powerless and abused womanhood, with the drunken husband, a symbol of a callous patriarchy. The abuse of alcohol was a serious problem in the nineteenth century, and the fate of Susan Clapsaddle was not an exaggeration. Holley, a Baptist, had deep religious convictions and was thoroughly in tune with the WCTU, which came out of nineteenth-century evangelism. She corresponded with WCTU president Frances Willard.

In *Woman's World, Woman's Empire: The Women's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective 1880-1930*, Ian Tyrrell has shown that the work of the WCTU went far beyond temperance. The first women's mass movement, it became an important force in the drive for suffrage when Frances Willard took the organization with her in support of enfranchisement, arguing that a "home protection ballot" was needed to empower women. The WCTU was active in many reform causes, and, interestingly, Samatha takes up these same causes. It seems reasonable to assume that Holley was a reader of the WCTU publication, *The Union Signal*, since so many of her causes were espoused by that publication, including criticism of American imperialism, support for workers (especially women), equal pay for equal work, rejection of a sexual double standard, reform of prostitution, and rejection of sexist language. In fact, it appears that all the aspects of reform that Holley supported were also WCTU causes.<sup>4</sup> In the example of Holley and her readers, we have a particularly striking

case of readers and writers creating each other. Among the many women who made pilgrimages to Holley's home during her lifetime were very likely many who shared her temperance and reform convictions. The support of the WCTU, which exists in public memory today only in caricature, was unlikely to aid Holley's ultimate literary reputation.

Holley's popularity, however, went beyond reform-minded readers. In *Notable American Women*, Margaret Wyman Langworthy attributes much of the popularity of Holley's books to "their comic treatment of domestic incident and masculine presumptions in a way that endeared Samantha to many a wifely heart" (203). Holley continued to write after the other major crackerbarrel philosophers died or ceased writing and thus was probably welcomed by a number of old-fashioned readers who were not attracted to the urban and ethnic humor that was replacing Yankee dialect humor. Her books became best sellers partly through the support of a male audience, many of whom must have enjoyed her simply in her manifestation as literary comedian. "If it was not the argument that won her readers," Winter suggests, "it may have been the good-humored vision of rural life with its quirky customs and manners" (61). There was a persistent rumor that the writer of the Samantha novels was a man. Winter tells the story of one male reader who said of a Holley work that "he had a high opinion of the man who wrote that book," and upon being told that the author was a woman insisted again "that book was written by a man" (79). The political satire that was a staple of the crackerbarrel philosopher was also an important element in Holley's popularity. Sometimes Holley wrote something closer to comedy of manners, as in the best-selling *Samantha at Saratoga*, subtitled "Racin' after Fashion."

Holley's work offered a wealth of pleasures, and her readers could pick and choose among them. Likewise, Holley's modern readers have foregrounded certain parts of her works. Most certainly, they have backgrounded some parts—the occasional Victorian indulgence in sentiment (which Twain has also been accused of), the persistent temperance message and some of the dated humor, e.g., the sketches that cast Samantha as the rube on visits to the city.

This study of Holley's reputation illustrates how a work of literature is variably constituted by various readers in different historical periods (or indeed by different readers in the same historical moment). Individual readers value literature that suits their own needs and interests, works that appeal to them for reasons of ideology or that they can relate to experientially. The constituting of Holley's texts in particular ways today is surely a function of the needs, interests, and beliefs of her current readers and may differ from the ways the text was constituted by her past readers. A work of literature may be "remade" many times as it is passed on from one generation to another, but the important thing is that it has the institutional support that is a prerequisite for its being passed on.<sup>5</sup>

Elisha Bliss published Holley's first novel, *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* (1873), at his own risk, as he had Twain's *Innocents Abroad*. *Opinions* was an immediate success and made Holley a popular author; *Innocents Abroad* played

a similar role for Twain. Bliss had his finger on the pulse of the popular book market and used to his advantage the system of selling novels by subscription, sending his canvassers to rural areas where Holley's appeal was great. Holley's first novel went through five editions in its first year, and her 1887 novel, *Samantha at Saratoga*, was among the best sellers for the decade 1880-1889. Indeed, Holley appears to have had as many readers as Twain (Winter 6).

Why did Holley's great fame evaporate? One significant factor was that Holley did not attract the interest and support of the literary establishment. No matter how much the general public or individual admirers backed Holley, without institutional support her humor could not survive to the next generation. Holley's work is largely unknown today because she failed to attract the support of the (male) literary establishment both in her lifetime and after her death. The self-effacing Holley did little to help her cause with posterity. Mark Twain, on the other hand, with his zeal for self-promotion on the lecture circuit, was able to ally himself with institutions that would keep his name alive. (This point is discussed more fully below.)

Contemporary reviews of Holley's work suggest a fair amount of condescension from the literary elite. The *Independent* for January 26, 1905, refers to Samantha's "weakly witty garrulity (212); the *Critic* for September, 1906, finds "genuine humor" in *Samantha vs. Josiah* but recommends small doses: "To one who picks it up from time to time, it should make a genuine appeal" (286); the *Critic* for February 20, 1886, finds "good and genuinely humorous points" in *Sweet Cecily* but hastens to add that the kind of humor found in Holley's work is "not destined to be immortal" (93). The *Literary World* for March 20, 1886, finds the novel *Sweet Cecily* "wearisome" and "at least a hundred pages" too long. The reviewer is not interested in Samantha's feminist arguments ("she raves about women's rights"), but does agree with what he calls Samantha's views on "public affairs," e.g., her comments on the copyright law (102). In a favorable review of *Samantha at the St. Louis Exposition*, the reviewer calls Holley's humor "homely but nonetheless attractive to thousands of readers" and states that Holley "has entertained as large an audience, I should say, as has been entertained by the humor of Mark Twain" (6). The most positive review I found of any Holley work appeared, not in a literary magazine, but in a newspaper, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* (December 13, 1885), which refers to the "infinite variety of her wit and genius" (8).

Most telling is the review of *Samantha Among the Brethren* in the *Critic* for January 17, 1891. This novel, about the role of women in the church, the only Holley work currently in print (included in a series of reprints of works in the tradition of women in American Protestantism), is praised by Holley's recent admirers and is the work from which a selection was made for the Heath anthology. The contemporary reviewer quotes Samantha's statement in her preface that she is working in the "Cause of Eternal Justice," and comments:



No doubt the Cause of Eternal Justice gets very much the worst of it as does the cause of orthography. The two have always seemed to us to suffer together at the hands of humorists of the Marietta Holley sort. It is to be hoped that the humorists will be worsted in their turn and disappear . . . to the Limbo of vain things (28).

Humor has always had to fight for respect, and Holley's humor was doubly vulnerable as it fell victim to a turn-of-the-century move toward gentility. Blair and Hill suggest that humor based on fracturing the English sentence and wrecking havoc with English spelling arose as a reaction to the cultural emphasis on proper spelling in the nineteenth century (276). As the more elite literary magazines spread the gospel of gentility at the turn of the century, the humor of the literary comedians fell victim. The comments of W. D. Nesbit in the *Independent* (May 29, 1902) represent the turn-of-the-century disdain for old-fashioned dialect humor. In an article entitled "The Humor of Today," Nesbit refers to "the host of misguided writers who seem to think that poor spelling is the hall mark of real humor" (1300).

Given the values of the literary elite, it was unlikely that Holley's work would be passed on as part of the American literature canon. Canons reflect the values of those who create them, and in America the literary canon reflects the masculine values of the men who created it. It is not surprising that male values should dominate in any literary canon, since men have long had a disproportionate share of cultural authority, but in America those influential in establishing the American literature canon felt a particular imperative to enshrine masculine values. Paul Lauter describes the process, beginning in the 1920s, that led to the elimination of women as well as black and working-class writers from the literary canon as American academics, a white, male, and socially elite group, undertook the project of making American literature a respectable field of study in the university. To those involved in this project, the banishment of women writers appeared to be a necessity. The university came to be the primary mediator of literary value, replacing a more diverse literary establishment consisting of literary clubs (where women had some influence) and magazines. Thus the professionalization of the study of American literature worked to exclude women. Besides, it was felt that feminization had been a problem with American literature for some time.

Elizabeth Ammons makes an analysis similar to Lauter's in "Men of Color, Women, and Uppity Art at the Turn of the Century." She argues that the low status of the turn of the century as a literary period can be connected with the abundance of women and minority writers flourishing at that time and their repudiation by academic canonizers. Ammons refers to "an incredible twentieth-century project in repression" (21) caused by fear of female self-determination and minority self-assertion:

To permit people other than straight white men to tell their own stories and tell them on their own terms constitutes a serious threat to fundamental, hegemonous, white male construction of and rules about sex, race, gender, culture, order and disorder, and subservience and dominance in the United States (22).

Holley was out of the canon on many grounds: as a woman, a feminist, a humorist, and a writer of what came to be seen as a crude and old-fashioned form of comedy. Like other women and minority writers at the turn of the century, she was a special target of hostility by the male academic canonizers. As late as 1978, after her work had begun to attract the attention of some feminist scholars, she was dismissed in two sentences by Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill in *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury*:

Ms. Holley, a feminist, satirized religious hypocrisy, political skulduggery, and male chauvinism. But she was an unschooled rustic with sound mare's sense, a Christian, a loving-wife and a model housekeeper, and therefore could never have become as popular today as she did during her lifetime (496).

This question-begging account, which confuses the unmarried Holley with her artistic creation, is indicative of the gender biases, past and present, that pervade the thinking of the cultural authorities who create canons.

It is only in recent times that many scholars are able to consider a writer like Holley as having literary merit. Ideological shifts, realignment of cultural power, and changing literary tastes have given Holley a visibility and a position of prominence for a certain group of readers. In our day, Holley's humor is funny again, an illustration of the truth that the only universal of literary value is its mutability.

Without the increasing institutional influence of feminists within academia, Holley's reputation would not be where it is today. Beginning in the 1970s, articles about Holley began to appear in feminist journals. Holley's work has also been included in recent histories and anthologies of women's humor. Since, as we know, anthologies tend to establish boundaries and fix canons, a significant milestone was achieved when a selection of one of Holley's novels was included in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. In 1996 Holley became the subject of a volume in the Twayne series, authored by Jane Curry. Up until her recent partial rehabilitation by feminists, Holley was regularly omitted from books about humor and anthologies of humor.<sup>6</sup>

Mark Twain's rise to prominence is instructive in explaining the role of gender as a contextual factor in the creation of the American literature canon. Twain's critical reception was mixed during his lifetime. He had, however, one consistent advantage over Holley. While the diffident and reclusive Holley refused all invitations to appear on a public platform, Twain was an avid self-

promoter with a knack—perhaps acquired through his education as a journalist—for marketing himself. Inventing “Mark Twain” as a public personality, he called attention to himself through his lectures, by cultivating journalists, and by using a host of props and public relations devices, of which the best known is the white suit (Budd, “Talent” 90-93). The hard work of self-promotion paid off, and, even during his lifetime, the man was better known than his work, as Louis J. Budd suggests.<sup>7</sup> Of special importance is his friendship with the influential literary promoter, William Dean Howells.

Twain’s reputation was also threatened by the decline of dialect humor as well as by the low opinion of the humorist generally. Those who wanted to facilitate Twain’s assimilation to the category “Man of Letters” had to bring about a kind of metamorphosis. This feat was accomplished by redescribing him as a moralist and philosopher, a keen observer of the world and a man with insight into human character. Henry Nash Smith sees this move taking place in the speeches given at the dinner to honor Twain on his seventieth birthday. Those with the authority to reconstruct Twain as a moralist and philosopher were, of course, professors and other members of the literary elite, e.g., Professor Brander Matthews of Columbia and Joel Chandler Harris.<sup>8</sup>

Twain’s immediate posthumous reputation was influenced by Harper’s pushing the Author’s National Edition after his death.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Twain’s reputation was at a low point after he died (always the dangerous moment for a reputation), as indicated by his omission from Norman Foerster’s *The Chief American Prose Writers* in 1916 (Hubbell 113-14). During these years, some reservations were expressed about the quality of Twain’s work. A comment by Fred Louis Pattee in 1928 is a case in point:

Mark Twain must be rated a thwarted creator like Melville, one hamstrung by his times and his temperament. He must go down in posterity as a collection of glorious fragments, as an enrichment to anthologies rather than as a maker of rounded masterpieces (82).

Twain’s name was kept alive, however, by a series of debates over the merit of his work,<sup>10</sup> and by the end of the 1930s his reputation was established, and it continued to grow firmer thereafter (Hubbell 133-44, 169-87, 235-67). Twain was eventually elevated to the rank of literary genius, author of masterpieces. Critics found interpretive strategies that allowed them to view him as a great writer. Stanley Brodwin argues, for example, that Twain could be seen as great when read in the shadow of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

We should consider, however, an underlying reason that may account for Twain’s “greatness.” Twain filled the need for a truly American author, someone who could represent our national character and our history. Alan Gribben comments:

If the historical figure of Mark Twain had never been born in Missouri, had never achieved his international fame, and had never left behind his legend as a cultural symbol, would it not have been necessary for the United States to discover a comparable author? More to the point, are we not continually reinventing and refining his image to meet our contemporary needs and anxieties about our national character and the history of our literature (“Autobiography,” 42)?

Twain, who was identified with the South, the West, the Midwest, and the East, was ideal for the purpose of representing America to itself (Krauth). Twain could be seen as embodying much of the American myth—the settlement of the West, Mississippi River piloting, and mining in Nevada and California. In the mid-twentieth century, under the influence of nostalgia for a vanished past, Twain’s stature increased at a monumental rate. Twain is also important to a notion of American identity. Richard Schickel says that Hal Holbrook’s Mark Twain “reminds us of what our national character is ideally supposed to be and rarely is—-independent, skeptical, rational, humorous, plagued by demons but coping” (159).

The master needed a masterpiece, and *Huck Finn*, which was labelled a children’s book when it first appeared (Hill 297), was found to fit the bill. *Huck Finn* was seen to embody the major American themes and, when the need arose, to contain the dark vision preferred in the latter twentieth century. The character Huck became a mirror into which the interpreter gazed. Eric Soloman describes him as the quintessential American: “alone even among others, a first-person narrator who is at home in nature and, like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, at a loss in towns, yet as able to cope with the venality and evil of knaves as any Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler version of the Scout” (248). He was, at one time, the symbol for the democratic spirit, and later, an alienated character living in a nightmare world (Hill 298). *Huck* became the basis for much American literature—Hemingway could say that modern American literature began with *Huck Finn*. The novel began to perform the function of creating culture described by Herrnstein Smith in *Contingencies of Value*:

The canonical work begins increasingly not merely to *survive within* but to *shape and create* the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing. Nothing endures like endurance (50).

After World War II, Twain was increasingly assigned in schools as a result of federal budget support for the study of American literature (Budd, *Our Mark Twain* 236). His prominence in the secondary school curriculum indicates that he

has become a cultural monument and helps to insure that he will continue to be.<sup>11</sup>

As these examples illustrate, maintaining a work or author in a position of prominence necessitates the expenditure of enormous cultural energy, not only by the academic community but also by the culture as a whole. Scholars and teachers have had powerful allies among those who have kept Twain's popular reputation alive, among them Hal Holbrook, whose performances impersonating Mark Twain, continuing over thirty years, have been noted as a significant factor in keeping Twain before the public eye.<sup>12</sup>

Jane Curry has performed for years in a one-woman show in which she impersonates the Samantha character. While her performances before university and community groups have been well-received, Curry is not in a position to do what Hollywood's Hal Holbrook could do for Twain. (See Curry's description of her performances in *Marietta Holley*, 84-85.)<sup>13</sup>

Given the mechanisms by which canons are established, it seems impossible that Holley could have become a canonical author of the status that Twain enjoyed. I am suggesting however, that what placed Twain—and, in like manner, others—on the list of great American writers is not the inevitability that genius will carry all before it or the objective wisdom of a “test of time.” Similarly, what caused Holley to become victim of a politics of neglect has little to do with ability or inability to write works of “good” or “great” literature—since good or great are terms which have meaning only in relation to particular audiences. Holley and Twain were both judged to be gifted writers by their contemporaries, or certain constituencies among their contemporaries, because they had value for those readers based on their needs, beliefs and interests, including their preferences for certain literary styles. But because of her gender Holley could not meet certain cultural needs or fill certain cultural roles that Twain, as a male, was eligible and qualified to fill. Even though Holley's Samantha was a strong character with firm personal convictions, how could she, a woman, represent individualism to a culture in which women were only marginally individuals? How could a character who espoused a feminist ideology so critical of patriarchal structures and viewpoints have found broad acceptance in a patriarchal culture? How could Holley be made a representative of the comic spirit of a nation that shared the view of Charles Godfrey Leland, who asserted in 1904 that “Though more given to merriment and fun than man, there has never yet appeared in literature a single, original female Humorist” (11)? In the view of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the canon has “equated the progress of elite white men with the rise and triumph of civilization and sanctified their position as its elect representatives and interpreters” (172). Though in her own day Holley claimed individualism for women and as a female individualist was able to provide a cultural critique that spoke to the most profound responses the reform-minded had to their society, the male literary elite of a later generation—those who had the authority to create, perpetuate, or reproduce reputation—could not see in Holley a writer able to represent America to itself.

## NOTES

1. See Templin, *Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation: The Example of Erica Jong*.
2. Holley participated in a tradition that lasted from 1855 to 1895 and included scores of writers, including Charles Farrar Browne (Artemus Ward), Henry Wheeler Shaw (Josh Billings), David Ross Locke (Petroleum Nasby), and Charles Henry Smith (Bill Arp). The crackerbarrel philosopher, who presented his material (often time-worn observations about human nature but also frequently political satire) decked out in homely metaphors and bad spelling, captured a huge audience. Blair and Hill list forty names and indicate there are dozens more (289). Holley was unique for her feminist stance. Most frequently these humorists satirized suffragists.
3. See, for example, the heated discussion by Samantha and her husband in *Samantha Among the Brethren* about whether the Methodist meeting house should be called "he" or "she," and, in the same novel, Samantha's exposure of the pseudo-generic nature of the word "layman."
4. See Ian Tyrrell's *Woman's World, Woman's Empire: The Women's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective 1880 - 1930* for general study of WCTU causes. Winter mentions the WCTU only briefly and does not comment on the minute parallelism of Holley's causes and WCTU causes.
5. I am indebted to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* for my understanding of the ideas expressed in this paragraph.
6. The concern about the feminization of American literature is discussed in Lauter's article, 447-49.
7. Articles appearing in the 1970s and 1980s include those by Graulich and Armitage. In the Heath anthology, Holley is included in a section called "Issues and Visions in Post-Civil War America," along with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Adams, and others. No other nineteenth-century humorist except Twain is included in the anthology. Holley is also included in Walker and Dresner's *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980's*. Jane Curry's anthology of selections from Holley's work is entitled *Samantha Rastles the Woman Question*. Among the works on American humor that Holley is left out of are Constance Rourke's *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931), Enid Veron's *Humor in America* (1976), and Stephen Leacock's *The Greatest Pages of American Humor* (1936). The three latter books include others from the tradition of the crackerbarrel philosopher, e.g., Petroleum Nasby, Josh Billings, Artemus Ward.
8. In "A 'Talent for Posturing,'" Budd says that Twain's "fame ran wider and deeper than literature, that it rode on adulation among millions who had not read through one of his books" (88).
9. Henry Nash Smith describes the speeches, which had a distinct note of condescension to Twain, the humorist, and could only praise him by describing him as something more than a mere humorist. See especially pp. 61-64.
10. As an indication of where Twain's reputation stood at the turn of the century, see F. L. Ford's article in *Munsey's* in 1901. Ford praises Twain but grants higher laurels to Oliver Wendell Holmes, who is called "perhaps the greatest humorist this country has produced" (486). See also Howells' 1917 article in *Harper's*, which praises Twain but ranks James Russell Lowell higher. Let us note here that both Twain and Holley are seen as having produced little of value in their late years. Holley's works after 1990 were derivative of her earlier works; Twain's late works have always had a low critical estimate (Davis, "Introduction," xviii).
11. Many figures were involved in these debates. Among the most important were Brooks and DeVoto.
12. As an example of the various and multiple activities by which the value of Twain's work continues to be reproduced, I offer a survey of references to Twain in my local newspaper. In my midwestern city, Mark Twain's name and image, and carefully selected quotations from his works have been used to sell real estate, adult education programs, and power tools; and his name appears regularly in the daily newspapers in various contexts. Twain's name figured in stories in the *Indianapolis Star* and the *Indianapolis News* about thirty times in eighteen months in 1990-91. Some of these stories explore Twain's oeuvre or his biography. Other stories merely invoke his name.
13. Leslie Hanscom describes the Twain boom of the late fifties and early sixties and conjectures that Hal Holbrook may have had as much to do with the boom as anybody except Twain (127).

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