

“We Have Become Too Tender-Hearted”: The Language of Gender in the Public Library, 1880-1920

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Gender in library history has customarily been conflated with the battle between men and women over wages, professional advancement, and employment discrimination. Clearly, women both endured discrimination and made important contributions to the library. A valuable social history has begun to emerge that restores women's contributions to library service by demonstrating that women both resisted and accommodated library politics. Yet gender was a component of library history not only as a “battle of the sexes,” but also as a linguistic code in the institution's past. As a potent rhetorical strategy, gender was consistently employed by librarians in debates over the library's nature and role in American culture. As such, gender became a critical mechanism of complex negotiation not merely related to biological circumstance. The questions of interest to historians are thus not simply “how did men feel about women?” or “what did women accomplish despite job discrimination?” but rather, how was gender employed—consciously or not—to construct the politics and future of the library? What did the presence of “female” signal in the library, space at once public *and* private? How did concepts of gender provide an interpretive framework for defining the meaning of the public library? The idea of “uplift” evident in primary sources demonstrates that the development of the public library was a class issue, but gender was also a central factor.

The library, along with other organizations and institutions emerging in the late nineteenth century, reflected profound changes in American society. Its search for ways to express anxieties about those changes resulted, significantly, in a discourse that utilized gender, a dominant trope of the time. The way in

which the institution engaged gender deserves attention because it reveals gender as a cultural rather than merely biological fact of library life, thus enhancing our understanding of the library's nature. Discussions about "female" in library history are more richly understood at a metaphoric level, for it was on that level—rather than through explicit conflict—that gender became an important vehicle to define the library's ideology, plan its future, defend its funding requirements, consider its functions, and establish its institutional credibility.¹

Between the 1880s and 1920 the library's official forum, the *Library Journal*, engaged in gender politics by utilizing rhetoric that reinforced gender norms, reflecting the low status of librarians in American culture.² In fact, however, the story was not quite that simple. The library's language reinforced gender norms, but it also mirrored deep, culture-wide ambivalence about gender. When the library is viewed in the gendered terms of its own debate, an essential tension becomes evident: women were desirable as librarians to enhance institutional claims to authority at precisely the same moment gender language was used to express fear that female influence would compromise those claims. The concern about "female" expressed in the debate represents an important and neglected, if minority, opinion among early library leaders.

The Library and Women

Situated in the broader context of a burgeoning nationwide organizational matrix, democratized education, and a heightened interest in scientific expertise, the public library was "up for grabs" between 1880 and 1920, caught among competing visions of its proper role in American culture. If, as many librarians envisioned, the library were to take its place as a powerful institution, it needed to reflect assumed "male" values such as strength and serious intellectual pursuit. If, on the other hand, the library should offer leadership in cultural matters, the library should exhibit "female" traits such as morality and virtue. For many librarians, some combination of the two was ideal; that is, the library could and should evidence institutional characteristics associated with "maleness," and others associated with female identity.

Such thinking reflected the way in which gender assumptions evolved in America throughout the nineteenth century. Gender jurisdiction, particularly in middle-class culture, was frequently divided into "spheres," associating private with female and public with male. Well-defined and broadly accepted, these differences limited women's access to formal political life and prescribed the circumstances of their civic engagement, particularly during the antebellum years.³

On closer inspection, however, the simplicity of this trope obscures a highly complicated gender dynamic in American social life. The construction of spheres, in fact, should be understood less literally than as a metaphoric infrastructure of complex negotiation. Far from being confined to their homes in any literal sense, women participated substantially in organizational activity and entered profes-

sions such as teaching and social work in increasing numbers. As the end of the century approached, the "spheres" seemed less apt than ever since gender relations, now in a pronounced state of flux, were hardly as tidy as the concept implied. The workplace thus became a logical and primary site of gender negotiation, but the process by no means led to the abandonment of notions about what constituted women's proper work. Women were admitted to education and social work, for example, because those professions had the welfare of children and families as their primary focus and, thus, did not challenge accepted gender norms.⁴ Typically, women who rejected these options and pursued non-traditional careers faced formidable social disapproval. In addition, women continued to labor under multiple, and sometimes contradictory, cultural expectations; the demand for "submissive helpmates" and "pillars of strength" sent an uncertain message to women about their role in American culture.⁵

Whether or not "spheres" accurately reflected gender relations, however, the notion retained its appeal for the middle class because it simultaneously engaged the concept of space.⁶ Although the distinction between public and private space existed before the middle of the nineteenth century, it carried special significance by the latter half, representative of power and success in a complex world.⁷ Both literally and symbolically, space became increasingly associated with distinct functions, consistent with the modern notion that specialization confirmed progress.⁸ If specialized space was proof of progress, then, by implication, so were specialized tasks. As professional tasks were defined, gender was prominently situated on the cultural fault line.

Space and specialization achieved this level of importance, in part, from nagging anxieties about modern life, including a perceived loss of moral and intellectual fortitude. During the 1880s, those anxieties coincided with the appearance of the New Woman, a new phenomenon on the American social scene. In profile, the New Woman was less often married and aspired to greater educational and economic opportunities than did her mother or grandmother. Gradually, she inhabited public, male space traditionally off-limits to her while retaining claims to typically female space within genteel middle-class society.⁹ Her emergence not only contributed to a sense of social upheaval but also resulted in allegations of cultural feminization. Gender thus served as a flashpoint for a middle-class critique of modern life, regarded by some as an age of uncertainty, moral and otherwise.¹⁰ As old beliefs were disrupted, torn from their traditional moorings by rapid social, industrial, and economic change, many worried that authentic experience had been the cost of modern conveniences.¹¹ Perceiving themselves to be in a crisis of authority, such individuals sought to establish institutions that would uphold and reinforce traditional social and cultural beliefs.¹² Gender was therefore intimately connected to questions of authority and, unsurprisingly, the library engaged with gender when considering those questions.

The Library and Print Culture

By the time the American Library Association was created in 1876, print was fast becoming a critical technology for many Americans. This gave a new degree of power to print.¹³ As America's "primary social currency," words offered a perfect basis for the library's claims to authority, adding new and urgent legitimacy to the institution. As an obvious broker of words, the library could logically anticipate the realization of its goal to become one of America's premier cultural institutions.¹⁴ Along with the support of benefactors like Andrew Carnegie, space had been made available by increased municipal funding. Together with the acknowledged power of print, the library seemed fortuitously poised for success. But several obstacles stood between the library and the authority it desired. Its voluntary nature, the presence of amateur librarians, the institution's inability to offer academic degrees, and challenges to the library's traditional texts upon which its authority historically rested, all complicated the acquisition of authority.¹⁵

To circumvent such obstacles, library leaders employed several strategies, including myth creation about the importance of such things as literacy, to persuade the reading public of the library's indispensability. Readers, the library insisted, were more "civilized" and stood a better chance at upward social mobility than nonreaders.¹⁶ Moreover, one of the library's most powerful early myths portrayed the library as essential for civic-minded citizens interested in serious self-education, thereby linking intellectual development to active citizenship.¹⁷ Time and again, enthusiastic library advocates assured the American reading public that the fulfillment of democratic ideals could be achieved by utilizing library resources. Democratic reading was potentially a "vital part of civic life, essential for complete public as well as private development."¹⁸ Its overarching goal was community building, and librarians often spoke proudly of inspiring and encouraging citizens' use of the library to create a "reading democracy," providing an indispensable foundation for citizenship, because books were believed to humanize and civilize readers.¹⁹ If "weeded" of sentimentality (understood to be a female trait) the "rich soil" of books would surely create better people.²⁰ "We want citizens," one contributor to the *Library Journal* quipped, "and the public school and the public library are the places where citizens are made. . . . If this were an absolute monarchy, and we had a peasant class, [the public library] would not be necessary. But it is not a monarchy, and we have no peasant class."²¹ Samuel Thurber, a high school principal in Massachusetts, praised the library, noting that "our teachers and pupils throng the Library, and there acquire the habit of investigation, and of independent, well-grounded opinion on a multitude of subjects of the utmost importance to citizens in a republican State. . . . Without the Library, the desire for knowledge constantly awakened in the school would have to go unsatisfied."²²

The library's connection to and support for republican ideology is further evidence of its strategies for coping with cultural crisis and with gender. Ongo-

ing predictions that republics eventually succumb to "an irresponsible leisure class and a vicious urban mob" served as a cautionary tale of the consequences of loss of intellectual rigor and vigorous political involvement ("maleness").²³ The powerful, intimate link between the library and formal political participation, from which women, at the time, remained largely disconnected, constituted a *de facto* claim concerning the nature of library space: its most fundamental aspects would be, by definition, "male."²⁴

Ironically, however, librarianship was rapidly feminizing at the precise moment that the library advertised itself as the appropriate space for developing mental and political skills. Only two years after the ALA was founded, two-thirds of the nation's librarians were women. By 1910, the percentage had risen to 78.5 percent; by 1920, fully 90 percent of America's librarians were women.²⁵

The astounding pace of feminization in librarianship suggests that women were granted admission to the profession unchallenged.²⁶ Solid reasons existed for allowing women into the field. Chronic labor shortages and modest library funding made it difficult to refuse female applicants who would work for less in the rapidly growing number of public libraries. Of equal or greater importance, however, was the widespread belief in the innate moral superiority of women, an invaluable asset to an institution whose self-determined mission was tied to supervising the integrity of the public's reading taste.²⁷ The editor Montrose Moses compared the library to a "temple of treasures," wherein the librarian functioned as the "high priestess."²⁸ To most librarians, women made perfectly appropriate guardians of the public's reading selections insofar as the library wished to exert moral influence over those selections.

But the rush to embrace women into librarianship did not occur without misgivings.²⁹ While the presence of women may have been relatively uncontested, the presence of "female" was not. Women might be willing to work for less pay, and they were acceptable cultural guardians. But what was the consequence of too much female influence in public space? To the extent that the modern library stood for serious learning, civic duty, or democratic opportunity, the library continued to be "male" space, and the individuals who staffed it should exemplify those attributes and beliefs. Moral influence and smaller paychecks, while desirable, were insufficient to induce library leaders to embrace women unreservedly. Librarians would have to be educated, thoroughly knowledgeable about books, and prepared to respond to patrons' needs and questions. Americans increasingly looked to experts as signposts of explanation in the modern world, but few women at the time had the kind of broad education that its founders saw as important to assist the library in its goal of achieving cultural authority.³⁰

To bring "female" qualities (morality and good character) and "male" qualities (discipline, education, strength) into proper balance, the trend was inexorably toward formal library training. Such training, it was hoped, would mitigate women's assumed tendencies to nurture and sentimentalize, qualities that might

signal to the public that the library had become too “female.”³¹ Professionalization thus became critical to the library’s development, and a powerful authority-gaining strategy. Because space and words were key ingredients in the acquisition of legitimate authority, the library, as specialized space, was now obliged to develop a professional culture that included specialized training, a body of expert knowledge, and defined standards.³²

The ALA, therefore, placed consistent emphasis on professional education. By 1902, for example, the New York State Library School, then located in Albany, was placed on a graduate footing, requiring all applicants to have completed a course of study at colleges registered by the University of the State of New York. James Wyer, president of the school when he wrote its history in 1926, recalled this decision as a “pioneer step” for librarianship.³³ Employment success derived from formal training, he argued, and explained the high demand for Albany graduates throughout the country. Wyer boasted that Albany graduates directed roughly half the libraries in American cities with populations exceeding 100,000; headed libraries at thirty colleges, including thirteen state university systems; were state librarians in California, Ohio, and New Hampshire; furnished five presidents to the ALA; and directed or were on the faculty of twenty library schools.³⁴ Education, he reassuringly reported, paid off for librarians.

Not everyone was pleased with the ALA’s educational initiatives. In 1891 the *New York Sun*, for example, expressed indignation over the NYS Library School’s educational plan by engaging gender directly.

The subject of cooking is a great deal more important to the community at large than this new science of Mr. Melvil Dewey’s; and the Regents of the University might just as properly establish a State cooking school at Albany, and confer degrees in that important branch of knowledge. . . . The scheme is nonsensical and the degrees originating in this manner and proceeding from such a source will be ridiculous.³⁵

Given the contemporary animus against female professionalism, the overwhelming presence of women in the school—now potential candidates for advanced educational opportunities—undoubtedly served as the catalyst for such complaints. In any event, critics of the library’s plan to accumulate cultural authority by educating rank and file librarians made use of gender language by comparing librarianship and food preparation, traditionally among the most basic of female occupations.

The Library and Fiction

While the ALA struggled to persuade the public of its usefulness in creating citizens, and to develop a staff of competent professionals, some library

leaders feared that the growing presence of fiction on library shelves threatened to undermine the library's authority. Deeply rooted in Puritan anxieties about recreation and books that were not "true," such concerns centered specifically on the dilution of the library's function by luring patrons to books for pleasure rather than for civic duty or self-education. Worse, the growing desire for fiction suggested to some an emasculated reading public suffering from a loss of independence; bookish individuals were increasingly associated with effeminate qualities.³⁶ Not all fiction was "bad," but tolerance of it frequently represented the hope that it would be a steppingstone to improved reading selections.³⁷

The well-known, protracted debate over fiction among librarians offers excellent examples of the ways in which gendered language was used to negotiate the meaning of the library. The fiction question has often been interpreted as a class issue: i.e., the "better" sort of people encouraged the "lower" sort of people to appreciate the "better" sort of books. But the fiction question may also be understood metaphorically, wherein fiction was associated with "female" traits that library leaders preferred to minimize.³⁸ That the majority of librarians were women obviously connected fiction with female because librarians stocked the library's fiction. Consistent attempts to persuade librarians to reduce the amount of fiction on their shelves produced mixed results.³⁹ Women, however, not only stocked fiction, they were assumed to be its major consumers. Publishers, for example, took it as a matter of course that reading taste was driven by gender. The lack of factual data to support this assumption did not deter publishers from targeting markets by gender as early as the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁰ Finally, the didactic and sentimental fiction characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century, often (though by no means exclusively) written by women, had fallen precipitously from grace.

Fiction, therefore, was historically and intimately connected with "female" on the surface of the debate, but discussions about it were gendered on a deeper level as well, and related to questions of institutional authority. In 1916, Henry N. Sanborn, secretary for the public library commission of Indiana, complained that "our public libraries are far from interesting men as we should like. . . . Too many of our libraries select their books...almost wholly for women and children. . . ." ⁴¹ Sanborn urged librarians to stock their shelves with more books appealing to "the masculine mind."⁴²

women are more emotional, certainly more sentimental, than men. . . . We naturally expect women to read more...fiction, more poetry, and more literature devoted to alleviating undesirable social conditions. But some librarian says: 'It is the women and not the men in my town who want books on eugenics, world politics, history, economics, industrial education.' . . . The average woman—not the specially college

trained woman—reads these books because her club is studying the subject or because she feels she should know something of these subjects to attain her desired goal of intellectual breadth and culture. A man . . . reads these books . . . because the subject itself interests him . . . a man gets information because he loves the subject, but a woman gets information because she loves to have information. . . .⁴³

Sanborn explicitly connected fiction (substandard reading) with “female” traits.

Women are more interested in mental vivisection than are men, at least in psychological studies that tend to the morbid, the abnormal, or the degenerate. . . . Men do not object to psychology if it depicts men and women who are optimistic, and morally on the upward path in life. The characters may be criminals, degenerates, or undesirables of any kind, as long as the chief interest is in their strong, good, healthy characteristics. Nothing can do more to convince the men of a town that the library is something more than a *feminized institution* than to have material which will be of use to them. . . . As a general statement, it can be safely said that men will read heavier and more serious books than women. . . . Sentimental stories are for women . . .⁴⁴ (italics mine)

This passage associates “female” with emotionalism, sentimentality, and fiction. Sanborn’s references to morbidity, abnormality, and degeneracy reflected his attention to the new field of psychology. As traditional frameworks of meaning weakened, the vacuum was filled with a therapeutic orientation, the primary vehicle of which was introspection. This obsessive self-scrutiny, sometimes regarded as the prime characteristic of the modern age, produced a preoccupation with self considered by some to be “morbid.”⁴⁵ Neurasthenia, the new psychic malady of the late-nineteenth century, was generally understood to be rooted in fear, and neurasthenics the pale offspring of hardy ancestors.⁴⁶ While neurasthenia affected both men and women, the condition was nonetheless frequently associated with women attempting to escape their responsibilities.⁴⁷ At the same time, behaviorists like G. Stanley Hall and John B. Watson warned Americans of the effect of excessive female influence. As an intellectual trend, therefore, psychology tended to encourage privatization (associated with “female”) perceived to endanger republican civic-mindedness (associated with “male”).

On the other hand, Sanborn equated “male” with optimism, strength, goodness, health, and serious study. His deeper worry was that feminization would result in diminished status and compromised potential for the library as an American cultural institution. Traditional assumptions about gender provided

Sanborn both with an ideological basis and the metaphoric language for his concern.

The Library and Work with Children

By 1900, debates about the nature and role of the library had produced significant changes within the ALA. After a long struggle, several outspoken women members had finally succeeded in convincing the organization to provide formal support for children's work in public libraries. Support for work with children stemmed partially from middle-class concern over the consequences of recent social trends: industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. But support also drew on a belief in children as unique individuals requiring special care (and special space) in libraries.⁴⁸ Just as the child-centeredness of teaching and social work placed those professions securely in the hands of women, library work with children provided women with an especially acceptable point of entry into professional authority. Since women were already acknowledged experts on the subject of children, children could become the legitimate concern of women in library service.

The organization's support for children's work contained many layers, some intended to benefit adults as much as children. Segregating children from adults conveniently confined them to a particular space in the library, leaving adult spaces free for serious study. Whatever the motivations, age segregation represented a sharp break with the previous literary training of American children, who traditionally had been encouraged to read adult literature as early as possible. In any case, all agreed that women were the logical choice to supervise children in public space of the library, just as they did in the private space of the home. It was conventional wisdom that "a sympathetic and sane-minded woman . . . will have a strong, fine far-reaching influence over children's lives."⁴⁹

Thus, children's space became women's space in the public library. Indeed, supervisors of children's work like Anne Carroll Moore (New York Public Library) and Alice Jordan (Boston Public Library) infused space devoted to children in their libraries with soft ambiance—pastel wall colors, soothing art work, and exhibits of interest to children—all of which succeeded in encouraging children to come to the library. Emphasis was placed on hands-on activities, offering children a visceral experience with books.⁵⁰ For children's librarians, reading represented a "near-sacred communion between reader and text."⁵¹ Story hours, poetry readings, and special celebrations, heretofore unknown in the public library, became stock in trade for children's librarians after the turn of the century.⁵²

The response of children to these efforts was impressive. By 1911, NYPL alone circulated over two-and-a-half-million books in its children's rooms.⁵³ But while acknowledging responsibility for supporting this work, library boards did not wish to be misunderstood: the primary purpose of the library, even for children, was education and citizenship. In 1895, for example, the Examining

Committee at the Boston Public Library declared that the children's room "should be the most important place in the city for the training of those readers without whom the Library is a mere ornament . . . instead of the nursery of good citizenship which it was meant to be."⁵⁴ In its statement, the Committee recognized the contribution of "female" influence (nursery) to the "male" outcome (citizenship). Library administrators like Arthur Bostwick genuinely supported this work (and the feminized milieu that resulted), but support was not always unqualified. Bostwick worried that children's rooms would become overly feminized, failing to represent "the masculine point of view," and urged measures designed to offset maternalizing temptations.⁵⁵ Discipline was routinely recommended. As Bostwick put it, "assistants who are 'fond of children' are often the very worst person to do work in a children's room."⁵⁶ The message, if not always the method, was clear: supervise children without suffocating them with motherly attention that might rob them (particularly boys) of natural curiosity and independence.⁵⁷

But nurturing curiosity was not intended to conflict with reality-based learning. Fiction was bad enough, but outright fantasy—talking animals or dancing flowers—pushed the limit of tolerance for some library leaders who accused children's librarians of using fantasy to shield children from the realities of life.⁵⁸ As with fiction, gender became the mechanism and language to express concern. Helen Haines claimed that

children's work is a cult apart . . . producing a sort of sentimentalized, devitalized mind-training . . . turning away from literature . . . with strong moral or dramatic appeal. . . . Delicately fanciful stories of baby bees and friendly flowers, will not satisfy a child's sturdy common-sense. You remember the children's librarians whose story-hour dealt with the coming of spring. She told of the pretty little birds chirping, and the pretty little sunbeams beaming, and the joyous little breezes frolicking about the passers-by. . . . [A boy] unconsciously demands something for his mind and his intelligence to grow upon [rather than] thin-spun, super-feminized fancies. . . . Our best hope lies in our work with children, provided it . . . inspir[es] strength as well as sweetness.⁵⁹

The passage opens by comparing children's work to a cult, suggesting first that women were susceptible to bizarre fringe beliefs stemming from emotionalism. That being the case, women supervising children in special space outside the mainstream of the library's business might lose perspective about the serious purpose of the library. Haines' portrayal of the children's librarian as "female" was, as already noted, accurate. Her portrayal of the child in search of mind development as "male," however, is more revealing, resting on gender assumptions consistent with those of other librarians. The librarian was realistically

assumed to be female, while the reality-oriented patron who wisely insisted on mental development was male. In this scenario, the young boy had a more solid grasp on the purpose of the library than the adult female librarian. Obviously, the use of plural pronouns could have avoided gender altogether, but those notwithstanding, "super-feminized fancies" threatened to devitalize the boy's mind, just as fiction threatened to devitalize the library.

The Library and Progressivism

Enthusiasm for Progressive reform translated into expanded activities for children's librarians. Refusing to remain confined to traditional tasks in formal library space—"irksome minutiae" that NYPL Director Edwin Andersen compared to "crochet work"—librarians embraced activities like home, hospital, and settlement house visitation.⁶⁰ While these activities undoubtedly carried the usual multivalent, overlapping, and sometimes confusing ambitions often associated with Progressivism, they nonetheless became a significant part of the librarian's routine. One of the first orders of business for a new librarian was to familiarize herself with the neighborhood in which the library was situated, often by contacting organizations with whom she could establish cooperative working relationships. Cities were often divided into territories, assigning them to branch librarians for investigation about community life—schools, clubs, associations, churches, hospitals, factories, and ethnic composition—in short, whatever might affect the community's social life. Librarians at the Logan branch of the Minneapolis Public Library, for example, sometimes went shopping with children, recommended books containing medical advice, assisted with finding jobs for homeless individuals, provided instruction on mothering skills, attended PTA meetings, advised wives about intemperate husbands, counseled children about their spiritual lives, and even offered fashion advice.⁶¹

Such street networking represented not only an expansion but also the feminization of the library. Unwilling to wait for readers to come to the dignified halls of the library, women librarians were out and about in the very ordinariness of America's city streets, expanding the definition of library space in ways that were distinctly "female," strengthening both the library's connection to the home and librarians' connection to readers. This behavior permanently altered the library's image. In 1903, for example, the *Library Journal* had declared that, unlike teachers, librarians could never hope to have "a personal interest and knowledge of each child."⁶² Only ten years later, Arthur Bostwick spoke easily of "personal relations between librarian and reader."⁶³

Nowhere in the library world were women more visible and more powerful than in children's rooms. Judson Jennings, in the 1924 ALA presidential address, alluded to activities in children's rooms to complain about the feminization of the public library.

We have secured books and money for our libraries thru pink teas and lotteries, by concerts, picnics, plays and exhibitions, somewhat as funds are raised for missionary work. . . . Meeting these difficulties and overcoming these handicaps has developed in librarians something of a spirit of the missionary. . . . In going about my own library, I have at different times found exhibits of dolls, or embroidery, or bird houses or even a collection of dead birds. . . . We are all interested in music. . . . But why stop here, we have said. Why not buy and lend music scores. . . . And so we buy scores . . . then we add music rolls and phonograph records. . . . And next we install pianos and victrolas in order that Mrs. Music Lover may test one of Harry Lauder's masterpieces before she makes the mistake of taking it home. . . . Then again we have supplied Mrs. Jones with a book on the care of the baby and we have lent Mrs. Jones a book on vegetable gardening. It is only a step further actually to assist in caring for the baby or the garden. And in these ways we have acquired the attitude of the welfare worker. We have taken a motherly interest in our readers. . . . We have become too tender-hearted. . . . It is partly because of this missionary spirit . . . that a number of . . . features have been gradually grafted on to library work. . . . Perhaps we have gone too far. . . . Since our libraries lend cook books, should we not provide cook stoves in order that the anxious young housewife may test Mrs. Farmer's recipes?"⁶⁴

Jennings made it clear that he did not view the library as an appropriate place for dolls, embroidery, motherly interest, tender-heartedness, welfare work, missionaries, or anxious young housewives—all allusions to female interests and occupations that compromised the potential of the library for the more valuable work of citizenship training and civic responsibility. In short, he employed gendered language to complain about the library's actual or potential loss of authority.

It has been suggested that librarianship rapidly diminished by mimicking the traditional sphere of women's influence.⁶⁵ This is true, in a sense. Women's activities in the library did assume "homelike" qualities. But this passage reveals that, in reality, some library leaders feared that the library had expanded too far. Women did not merely take home to work, passively and uncritically accepting their assigned roles, or simply transfer their domestic responsibilities to the workplace. Instead, women used traditional skills and authority already established in the private sphere as a point of entry in their search for professional identity and satisfaction. This search constituted a new awareness of "female" on the part of women who intended to become upwardly mobile.⁶⁶

The Library and the First World War

As America prepared for war in 1917, so did the public library. The war was, in fact, a "watershed event" in its development.⁶⁷ So long as the war remained a European affair, librarians generally complied with Woodrow Wilson's request for neutrality.⁶⁸ Following the declaration of war in April 1917, the library, along with other institutions, responded with enthusiastic patriotism.⁶⁹ The library, anxious to be of service to the state, supported the supposedly selfless aim of securing democratic process for the rest of the world,⁷⁰ engaging in a variety of activities, including dissemination of government information about the war, Liberty Bond drive support, book collection, and food conservation campaigns.⁷¹ Women met in libraries to knit for soldiers and to rehearse patriotic community celebrations. The library was a drop-off point for canned goods, nurses were recruited there, and clothes for war orphans were sewn on the premises.⁷² Such response to the war reflected not only eagerness to enhance its image in the eyes of the public (thus strengthening its influence) but also opportunity to fulfill some of its oldest and most cherished goals: serious study and civic participation. Demand for nonfiction titles was up; Americans were now interested in military science and organizations, map reading, and drill manuals.⁷³

The organization viewed the war as a service opportunity to America's armed forces as well, since "these armies of this world war are reading men."⁷⁴ Even fighting men would want to read, the ALA assumed, and developed an initiative to provide books for them, both in camps and hospitals on the homefront as well as overseas. At the request of the War Department, the ALA began book collection drives that, during the eighteen months of war, resulted in the donation of five million dollars and three million books.⁷⁵ And what would soldiers like to read? "Some thoughtful, simple devotional books," suggested the *Journal*, "forward movements in social welfare and civic betterment. . . . Books on citizenship, patriotism and thrift are well to include."⁷⁶

But the ALA intended to send librarians as well as books to America's troops. During the summer of 1918, the *Journal* ran a series of articles aimed at preparing librarians for war work. They also revealed the continued use of gender as an interpretive framework, reminding librarians to conduct themselves with "certain traits of character," enumerated as dignity, maturity, and loyalty. After all, one contributor remarked, "we women were not invited to enter this world of men and if we do intrude we must bear ourselves as good soldiers and not complain of hard beds, soiled table linen, lack of bathrooms, suffocating heat and dust in summers, freezing cold in winter, and tobacco smoke all the time."⁷⁷ Librarians, therefore, were admonished to behave in "male" (soldierly) ways, guarding against "petty jealousies, gossip, scandal, and quarrels . . . [and] able to take orders and accept a reprimand in a soldierly spirit. . . . The common soldier is not supposed to think for himself but he is trained to obey orders. . . .

[The librarian] must not be sensitive and she must not be sentimental. Sympathy the boys want, but how they do hate to be wept over!"⁷⁸

Aside from observing decorum, the librarian was encouraged to "sing, draw, paint, play games, get up impromptu entertainments on rainy days or dull evenings" to make herself a "treasure." Such ability, claimed the *Journal*, was actually more important than formal library training.⁷⁹ Further, librarians were informed that men in hospitals wanted "detective and 'wild West' stories, adventure, romance and poetry when they are sick . . . [later] they demand books on gas engines, turbines, radio and wireless, trigonometries, all sorts of things a woman knows little about."⁸⁰

Miriam E. Carey was even more direct. In a paper delivered to the ALA conference at Saratoga in July 1918, she informed librarians that

the doctors say that there is nothing really the matter with most of the sick soldiers except sheer homesickness. What does a home-sick man choose for his reading? Probably what he craves is an old-fashioned love story . . . *the man who is sick is more like his mother than his father.*"⁸¹ (italics mine)

Carey used gender to create a continuum of convalescence, where the reading selections of soldiers evolved from "female" (fiction) to "male" (nonfiction); the closer the soldier to recovery, the more "male" (healthy) his reading tastes became. Carey was not as interested in criticizing the reading habits of women as in communicating realistic expectations to inexperienced librarians by employing rhetorical strategies comparing male/female to health/illness.

Summary

Space, gender, and language converged in the public library in ways that both reinforced and challenged prevalent cultural beliefs during the early years of its development. Differences between word and deed—what the library *said* and what it *did*—created unique tensions, making the library an important agency of culture between 1880 and 1920. By using gender as a linguistic code, the library expressed misgivings about "female," reinforcing cultural norms by reaffirming the notion that men and women were essentially dissimilar and that excessive female influence endangered public space. Its official rhetoric rested on the broadly accepted belief that women presided over a cultural/moral/private domain while men presided over an intellectual/civic participatory/public domain.

At the same time, the library did not simply reflect and perpetuate gender norms wholesale. The admission of women to librarianship in substantial numbers—whatever the motives—placed the library in the advance guard of the lengthy process to alter those norms. The increased visibility of women in libraries—public and professional space—blurred and, gradually, helped to un-

hinge the connection between public/private and male/female. The shift in urban "sexual geography," however, did not signal fairness in the work place because allowing women in public space was not, by itself, equivalent to granting them power.⁸² Still, at a time when only one percent of the nation's lawyers and six percent of the nation's physicians were female⁸³, those professions that feminized early are noteworthy for the cultural change they both portended and affected by their overall institutional behavior, if not their words. The consequence of *not* recognizing the importance of gender as metaphor in the library is to regard the library as an abstract, disembodied concept distant from society in a moment of dynamic social change, rather than as an active shaper of those changes. In this sense, at least, the library indeed accomplished its goal of becoming one of America's leading cultural institutions.

Notes

1. In *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), Joan Wallach Scott argues that gender is a "deep structure" of history. Beneath the surface of "what happened" lies a critical sub-structure of rhetorical devices that serve as shorthand for expressing cultural attitudes. Certain characteristics—say, strength or courage—have traditionally been "male," while others—like sentimentalism or nurturing—have been associated with "female." In *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985) Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that the battle of the sexes cannot be understood until the language surrounding it is decoded. Sexual language, she suggests, "functions as political metaphor," converting "flesh-and-blood creature[s] into a condensed symbol of disorder and rebellion" (246-247). See especially the chapter "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis 1870-1936."

2. As Wayne Wiegand has noted, the American Library Association never claimed a majority of librarians as members. See for example, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876-1917* (Westport, Conn., 1986). This article, however, is less concerned with *Library Journal* circulation figures than with the status and influence it enjoyed as the profession's official journal. As such, it is a critical site of professional discourse.

3. As Linda Kerber and other historians have noted, the distinction between public and private and its link to gender is not uniquely American but predates Western culture. See "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" in *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

4. In *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977), Ann Douglas argues that women used the home to "sanction rather than limit" the search for professional identity as part of a "new self-conscious sense of upward mobility" (78).

5. T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1981), 16. "Separate spheres" requires qualification. Historians have debated its meaning since the 1960s, historiographically outlined by Linda Kerber in "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." In brief, early interpretations of separate spheres were essentially attempts at giving the concept a central location in women's historical experience. By the late-1970s, historians' views of separate spheres had become more complex, including claims for a distinct woman's culture in the nineteenth century (Smith-Rosenberg) as well as viewing the spheres as a necessary precondition for modern feminism (Cott). Historians of female labor (Kessler-Harris, Blewett, Levine, Milkman, Buhle, Stansell) suggest that the labor market is segregated by gender, but that the patterns of segregation are constantly renegotiated.

6. Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976), 56. Bledstein argues that space was actually one of the Victorians' most fundamental concepts.

7. *Ibid.*, 56.

8. *Ibid.*, 61-64.

9. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 245.

10. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 4-5, 46. See also Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*.

11. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 303.

12. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 53. For discussions of the importance of gender politics in America, see also, Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender*

Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars (New Haven, 1998) and Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995).

13. Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border* (Amherst, Mass., 2001): 6,7. For a discussion of the early years of the ALA, see Wiegand, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession*.

14. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 70. Joan Shelley Rubin argues that the spread of print "could subvert as well as consolidate . . . authority . . . by grabbing up 'trash.'" *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1992): 18.

15. Wayne A. Wiegand, "An Active Instrument for Propaganda": *The American Public Library During World War I* (New York, 1989): 3.

16. Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 7.

17. Phyllis Dain, *The New York Public Library: A History of Its Founding and Early Years* (New York, 1972): 32. Republican themes, of course, were not new. I connect this rhetoric to the library as "myth" only insofar as the library insisted on its centrality to the fulfillment of republican ideals.

18. Jessie Carson, "The Children's Share in a Public Library," *Library Journal*, 37, (May 1912): 254.

19. Montrose Moses, *Children's Books and Reading* (New York, 1907): 5,8. As Christine Pawley (*Reading on the Middle Border*) has pointed out, librarians frequently stressed the "civilizing" effects of reading. By extension, then, the library was a "civilizing" institution. The idea of "civilized" is complex. Part of the critique of modern life, as Bledstein notes, was precisely that life had become overly civilized. The library, therefore walked a fine line between "civilizing" and "overcivilization." See also Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* for a discussion of this topic.

20. Carson, "The Children's Share," 256.

21. Winston Churchill, *Library Journal*, 28, (March 1903): 115-116.

22. S.S. Green, "The Relation of the Public Library to the Public School," *Library Journal*, 5: 9-10, (September-October, 1880): 238.

23. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 27.

24. While women remained largely disenfranchised from electoral politics, large numbers were, as already noted, actively engaged in various aspects of political life, including reform movements and the campaign for suffrage. In some states and territories, limited suffrage was granted to women.

25. Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York, 1979): 173. In *Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the American West, 1900-1917* (Albuquerque, 1994) Joanne Passet shows that in terms of wages, librarians at the turn of the century earned roughly \$700 a year for a 42.5 hour work week. By 1913, wages were up approximately 36 percent to \$1,100 per year at a time when subsistence wages were \$400-520 per year. Librarians' wages were generally in keeping with those of public health nurses, who earned \$600-\$1,020 per year, while teachers' earnings remained less than \$600. Women librarians were less likely to marry than women in other professions. Garrison reports that as late as 1920, only 7.4 percent of librarians married. Only stenographers and typists had a lower marriage rate.

26. In *Apostles of Culture*, Garrison argues that male librarians offered "no opposition" to the feminization of librarianship (174).

27. Rubin, *Middlebrow Culture*, 17. Rubin identifies a genteel "ideology of culture," which throughout the nineteenth century increasingly linked "culture" to character and moral stature rather than to financial means or social status. The "democratization of gentility" had as its goal the greatest exposure of individuals to culture, "spreading the 'best' throughout society," often by establishing standards. In the library, this translated into what has been called "the library faith," that is, getting the "best" books to the greatest number of people. Recommended reading lists were frequently the institution's method of standard setting.

28. Moses, *Children's Books*, 5.

29. Among those misgivings was a concern over women's supposedly fragile health. One argument against allowing women into professions was that it would result in race suicide, that is, that women would sacrifice their reproductive abilities by taxing their physical and mental energies. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne."

30. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 78. Ironically, according to Bledstein, the very abundance of the printed word became a contributing factor to the anxiety and confusion of modern life, necessitating experts to mediate.

31. See, for example, Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979): 161.

32. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 57, 79.

33. James Wyer, *New York State Library School, 1887-1920* (New York, 1926).

34. *Ibid.*

35. *New York Sun*, reprinted in the *Library Journal*, 16, (March 1891): 9.

"We Have Become Too Tender-Hearted" 171

36. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 104.

37. One method for coping with the public's taste for fiction was to limit the amount of fiction a patron could borrow at one time. By 1915, only one of the four books allowed to be charged at the New York Public Library could be fiction (Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 286).

38. In *Reading on the Middle Border*, Pawley challenges the validity of claims that reading was as gendered as librarians assumed. Her study of library records of the Sage Library in Osage, Iowa during the late-nineteenth century indicates that fiction reading was much more equally distributed between men and women than librarians assumed. This finding makes an understanding of gender as a linguistic code all the more important in order to appreciate why fiction was so persistently associated with "female."

39. It is important to note that while rank and file librarians were often treated to anti-fiction rhetoric, they continued to place book orders for their libraries that included a significant amount of fiction. According to Douglas (*The Feminization of American Culture*) only 3 percent of American books were fiction in the 1680s (108). By the end of the nineteenth century, the percentage was closer to fifty percent. Librarians who actually did the book ordering in towns and cities across the nation responded to library patrons by stocking books they knew would draw readers to the library. Christine Pawley's findings in *Reading on the Middle Border* reinforce the idea that librarians continued to stock fiction in large numbers, often to facilitate the absorption of middle-class values by immigrant and working class populations (78). In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984), Janice Radway suggests that fiction reading might be construed as oppositional or as a "female ritual" by which women "explore the consequences of their common social conditions" (212, 220). She observes that explanations for the increase in fiction consumption are technological as well as sociological; advances in print technology made mass book production possible (19-20). Likewise, the development of formulaic fiction enhanced fiction sales by establishing a "permanent conduit" between publishers and readers (24).

40. Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 106.

41. Henry N. Sanborn, "Books for Men," *Library Journal*, 41, (March 1916): 165.

42. *Ibid.*, 166.

43. *Ibid.*, 166-69.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 49.

46. *Ibid.*, 50.

47. *Ibid.*, 51. See also Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 46-49. In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas notes that women "talked about ill health more than they experienced it in order to palliate not only their failures in society, but their successes. Feminine modesty, broadly conceived, was an apology for new strength. It assured its public that its possessors, if they had come so far, would come no further" (93). Men were also affected by neurasthenia. See, for example, George Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher* (Baltimore, 1990).

48. By the end of the nineteenth century, childhood was recognized as a distinct time of life. The romantic attitude toward children, according to Anne Scott MacLeod, altered the relationships between children and adults, prompting culture-wide efforts to protect the innocence of children. As MacLeod puts it, "children's innocence, emotionality, and imagination became qualities to be preserved rather than overcome; a child's sojourn in childhood was to be protected, not hastened." *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Athens, Georgia, 1994): 156. Christine Jenkins, "Precepts and Practices," *Horn Book* (September/October 1999): 549. Jenkins describes children's work as a "religion" whose tenets of faith included a belief in the primacy and uniqueness of the individual child; a belief in the critical importance of individual choice in young people's reading; a belief in the strength and resilience of young people; a perception of the children's room as an egalitarian republic of readers; a belief in literature as a positive force for understanding not only between individuals, but also between groups, and nations; a friendly and unsentimental older sister's attitude toward children; and an assumption that children's librarians would inevitably face and prevail over adversity in the performance of their professional work. In domesticating the workplace, Ann Douglas contends that women were "making the best of a bad situation" (*The Feminization of Culture*, 78).

49. Carson, "The Children's Share," 253.

50. Frances Clarke Sayers, *Anne Carroll Moore: A Biography* (New York, 1972): 72.

51. Jenkins, "Precepts and Practices," 551.

52. Douglas argues that "barred from the manifest spoils...of office, women understandably sought less legitimate rewards for their very real energies: psychological, emotional, what they called 'moral' or 'religious' control over the minds of their actual or symbolic offspring" (*The Feminization of American Culture*, 76).

53. Carson, "The Children's Share," 256.

54. Dianne Farrell, notes, Robb Lecture (May 24, 1989), Alice Mabel Jordan Box, Archives and Special Collections, Boston Public Library.

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55. Arthur Elmore Bostwick, *The American Public Library* (New York, 1929): 91.
56. *Ibid.*, 93.
57. Bostwick's support for children's work is made clear in an open letter to NYPL's staff on the occasion of Moore's twenty-fifth anniversary with the library. Despite whatever ambivalence Bostwick may have had about feminized space in the library, he wanted it remembered that developing children's services at NYPL had been his idea. Arthur Bostwick to ACM, letter, 10/10/31, Box 1, Anne Carroll Moore Papers, Special Collections, New York Public Library.
58. Somewhat later, the so-called "fairy tale wars" emerged between those who advocated stories that indulged children's imaginations and those who favored a more reality-based children's literature. Anne Carroll Moore would serve as an example of the former, and Lucy Sprague Mitchell (the "Here and Now" books) as an example of the latter. See Christine Jenkins, "Precepts and Practices."
59. Helen Haines, "A Commentary on Catchwords," *Library Journal*, 42, (December 1917): 941.
60. Edwin Andersen, "Training for Library Service," *Library Journal*, 49, (May 15, 1924): 464.
61. Raymond L. Walkley, "All in the Day's Work," *Library Journal*, 43, (March 1918): 159-163.
62. "Library Institute Held at Plainfield, NJ," *Library Journal*, 28, (March 1903): 120.
63. Arthur Bostwick, "Library Circulation at Long Range," *Library Journal*, 38, (July 1913): 392.
64. Joanne Passet has observed that librarianship at this time shifted from a "collection oriented to a client oriented" outlook. (*Cultural Crusaders*, xiii).
65. Judson Jennings, "Sticking to Our Last," *Library Journal*, 49, (July 1924): 614.
66. Garrison, *Apostles of Culture*, 176.
66. Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, 78. Smith-Rosenberg argues that women created power and legitimacy from their Progressive reform efforts (*Disorderly Conduct*, 256).
67. Wiegand, "An Active Instrument For Propaganda," 1. See also Arthur Young, *Books for Sammies: The American Library Association and the First World War* (Pittsburgh, 1981).
68. *Ibid.*, 8.
69. *Ibid.*, 31.
70. *Ibid.*, 30.
71. *Ibid.*, 5.
72. *Ibid.*, 38-41.
73. *Ibid.*, 35-36.
74. Edith Kathleen Jones, "What a Base Hospital Librarian Should Know—Outline of a Course of Training," *Library Journal*, 43, (August 1918): 568.
75. Wiegand, *An Active Instrument For Propaganda*, 62-64.
76. "Plans for War Service by the ALA," *Library Journal*, 42, (August 1918): 566.
77. Jones, "What a Base Hospital Librarian Should Know," 570.
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*, 570-571.
80. *Ibid.*, 571.
81. Miriam E. Carey, "What A Man Reads In Hospital," *Library Journal*, 43, (August 1918): 566.
82. Sarah Deutsch, *Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York, 2000): 12, 26. Deutsch explores the ways in which Boston women confronted gender ideology in that city. See also Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990) and *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1997).
83. Passet, *Cultural Crusades*, 2.