"The Sisterhood of Sweetness and Light": Gender Production in American Acting Styles and Theatre Historiography

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In 1891, Benjamin Orange Flower, editor of *Arena*, announced: "The era of Woman has dawned, bearing the unmistakable prophecy of a far higher civilization than humanity has ever known." He joined the chorus of voices rising up from the dominant culture with encomiums to "Our Womanhood"—"Pure and Progressive," "Cultured," "World-Conquering and Enlightened." (Beer 57-58) As national aspirations to greatness increasingly found expression in this gender ideology, representational media conspired to iconize it, fixing a presiding notion of ideal femininity indelibly in collective consciousness. Monumental sculptors like Daniel Chester French produced *The Republic*, *America*, and *Alma Mater*, while commercial illustrators like Charles Dana Gibson and Howard Chandler Christy proliferated images of the American Girl, a youthful, WASP, middle- to upper-middle-class construct with facial and corporeal features of pristine, neoclassic regularity.[1] This was feminine perfection wrested from raw nature and Old World corruption, the supreme signifier of heroic victory in the wilderness and the moral righteousness of the American Experiment (Christy 15-16, 69-70).

A primary cultural site of ideological and iconographic production, the nineteenth-century American theatre participated in the manufacture of virtuous Womanhood.[2] Instead of a denizen of depravity where ladies of virtue dare not tread, the legitimate stage, especially following Anna Cora Mowatt's 1845 production of *Fashion*, increasingly came to be seen as a showcase for paragons of ideal femininity (Barlow xi; Hewitt 134-141). Certainly if "Our World-Conquering and Enlightened Womanhood" could purify the home, society, politics, the frontier, and benighted, regressive civilizations everywhere, she could purify the theatre. Industry potentates like Augustin Daly and Charles Frohman cashed in on this prospect and made the display of feminine purity central to their enterprises. With the theatrical ascendancy of a codified feminine ideal, performance conventions of role playing to succeed in the male-dominant

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entertainment industry became paradigmatic for women's appearance and deportment offstage as well as on.[3]

Paramount among conventions constructing Womanhood was acting style, the period-fashionable mode of performance through which actors impersonate particular types of characters across a given repertoire. In his well-known text, *A History of American Acting* (1966), Garff Wilson postulates that the dominant acting style for female performers at the turn of the century was the "Personality School" whose leading exponents—Ada Rehan, Maude Adams, Julia Marlowe, and Viola Allen—comprised a "Sisterhood of Sweetness and Light." According to Wilson, the Personality School traded on "the appeal of the personality of the individual player . . . and, moreover, on a particular kind of appeal: that of womanly loveliness and feminine virtue unsullied by coarseness or passion" (140-141).

Given the prevailing gender ideology of the period, Wilson's definition subverts his terminology and points to the crux of my argument. Rather than validating individual personality, the effect of this acting style was precisely the opposite—to suffuse differences among individuals in the luminescence and virtuosity of the dominant feminine ideal. In so far as the ideology of world-superior virtuous Womanhood has continued to censor diversity in the representation of women throughout the twentieth century, and in so far as Wilson's text remains the standard historical work on American acting styles, the Sisterhood of Sweetness and Light warrants deconstruction both as an historical phenomenon and as a fabrication of white patriarchal theatre historiography.

Accordingly, I propose a two-pronged feminist historical critique of the Sisterhood to unmask modes of ideological production converging on Wilson's text. By way of critiquing the Sisterhood as an historical phenomenon, I will emphasize the role of the patriarchal ideology of heroic frontier conquest in constructing the femininity of iconic actresses around the turn of the century. To critique the Sisterhood as historiographical fabrication, I will suggest how the record of selected actresses' careers set forth in *A History of American Acting* has further reified and catapulted this gender ideology into the late twentieth century. Interweaving these two lines of argument, the paper proceeds first with an examination of the ideology inscribed in Wilson's formulation of stylistic categories and implicit in his major source materials, reports of leading white male reviewers. The discussion then exposes how "personality," which Wilson essentializes as endemic to the performers' own natures, was in significant measure an image constructed by market forces and powerful producing organizations.

Wilson formulates the Personality School as a stylistic category largely by means of contrast with another formulation, the Emotionalistic School. Both

schools, Wilson argues, emerge as a result of the huge demographic and industrial expansion of the United States throughout the nineteenth century and especially following the Civil War. This expansion was reflected in the spread of legitimate playhouses with Westward settlement and a shift in repertoire to include works of more popular and less literary appeal, such as imported domestic melodramas and romantic and sentimental pieces (105-110). These developments called for less formal acting styles than the traditional Classic School of Edwin Booth and Charlotte Cushman. A brief comparison of the resultant Emotionalistic and Personality Schools from a feminist perspective will illuminate the workings of dominant gender ideology.

Significantly, Wilson identifies both schools virtually exclusively with female performers. He notes the gender- specificity of Emotionalistic acting but does not analyze it beyond what he considers an obvious point: ". . . the simple reason that emotionalistic roles were not often written for men. It would have been unthinkable," he says, "for a male, in the American theatre with its Puritan, Anglo-Saxon background, to exhibit the kind of emotionalistic behavior which seemed probable and acceptable when coming from a lady in distress." (110) That no Personality roles exhibiting "womanly loveliness and virtue" were written for men is a point he lets go without comment.

In addition to the changing demographics and repertoire Wilson cites, the gender-specificity of these schools reflects patriarchal expectations of Womanhood under circumstances of Westward settlement. Utilized in the portrayal of the virginal heroines of contemporary melodramas and romances, Emotionalistic and Personality acting functioned primarily to display feminine virtue. In discussing the appeal of these performance styles, Wilson refers exclusively to the male spectator, setting up a hero/heroine relation between audience and performer: "Beauty and magnetism are needed [in the heroine] to charm the eye and touch the heart of the spectator so that he suspends his critical faculties while he revels in the personal spell of the player." (112) This performance dynamic, exacerbated by the gender-bias of his historiography, perpetuated the dominant gender ideology of the frontier myth in which the efforts of the conquering hero were rewarded by and signified in the virgin trophy.[4]

Where Emotionalistic and Personality acting differed, according to Wilson's analysis, was chiefly in the manner of display of feminine virtue. Specializing in the damsels in distress of melodrama, Emotionalistic actresses—like Clara Morris, Fanny Davenport, and Mrs. Leslie Carter—were called upon to convey the suspense and horror of virtue imperiled. According to Wilson, "The actress of this school actually experienced the feelings and passions of her role and surrendered herself to these emotions. She did not simulate but actively

participated in the agonies of the mimicked character" (110). This description implies that the emotionalism of the representation was endemic to the actress, a primordial force coursing through her to which she surrendered instead of subdued through reason and technique. Wilson adds: "Her performance was marked by sobs, tears, screams, shudders, heavings, writhings, pantings, growlings, tremblings, and all manner of physical manifestations" (110-111). By implying that these outward physical manifestations were the "natural" result of Woman's unbridled inner emotion, his analysis suffuses the constructed nature of the display in feminine essentialism.

Moreover, such "emotional pyrotechnics," in so far as they occurred on stage, also fueled the ethos of frontier conquest; the more manifestly imperiled the heroine's virtue, the more extreme the measures required on the part of the hero to preserve it, all of which made for a thrilling, action-packed spectacle. Thus, given the hero/heroine relationship Wilson's historiography posits between spectator and performer, the Emotionalistic School not only reified myths of Woman's inherent emotionalism but tacitly justified the violent excesses of Westward progress.

If Emotionalistic acting manifested virtue's imperilment and justified heroic violence, Personality acting celebrated virtue's intactness and rewarded heroic victory. In this respect, the two schools can be seen as necessary complements of each other which together served frontier mythology. Rather than yielding to the wild viscissitudes of unbridled passion, the Personality actress, according to Wilson's formulation, tamed Womanly emotion through training and technique. While in her apprenticeship she may have played roles of broader emotional range, "in her maturity," he notes, "she confined herself to roles which were sweet, wholesome, and refined, like the actress herself. . . . [She] aimed to charm her spectators with her feminine loveliness and to uplift and ennoble them by the moral appeal of her personal character and the wholesome effect of the role she was acting" (141).

As he did with the Emotionalistic School, Wilson suffuses the constructed nature of the Personality performance in feminine essentialism. But the effect in this case is to elevate feminine virtue to more pristine and radiant heights, as though the Personality display represented a higher phase in Woman's evolution upward from the primordial chaos of raw nature. Indeed, by the turn of the century, some critics were reading excesses of emotional display as unseemly distortions of facial and corporeal features, signifying deterioration from physiognomical—and, by implication, moral—perfection.[5] For these critics the Sisters of Sweetness and Light, who remained poised and technically controlled, were more appropriate icons of national supremacy than, say, that notable figure of the Emotionalistic pantheon, Clara Morris, "Queen of Spasms."

The essentialist agenda of Wilson's historiography is further borne out by his discussion of youth and beauty as key attributes for exponents of both acting schools. For the Emotionalistic player, Wilson explains that in addition to "beauty and magnetism," youth was "necessary to ensure the actress an abundance of fresh and vigorous emotion, for with advancing age, the wellsprings of passion appear to dry up" (112). What was probably more likely to "dry up" within the dominant culture was male desire for women after they reached a certain age or failed in some way to match the prescribed physiognomical model. This is a revealing example of how the patriarchal historian, like the generic male spectator he posits, attributes to women's essential nature qualities which are chiefly products of dominant ideology.

For the Personality player, Wilson does not specifically analyze the importance of culturally defined youth and beauty, except to note that the actress "was assisted in her appeal by a lovely face and figure" (141). How the actress was assisted by these attributes can be deduced from the cultural construction of Womanhood around which this stylistic category is conceived. Whereas Emotionalistic actresses displayed their appearance in what he calls "sexy melodramas," such as those of Sardou, Personality actresses did so in more "wholesome" vehicles of much narrower emotional range, like *The Christian*, *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, and *Peter Pan*. The word "wholesome" in this context connotes "intact," "fully formed," "most highly evolved," "most healthful for American civilization." "Wholesome" roles suppressed but by no means negated sexuality; feminine virtue became most legible both on and off stage when it was maintained against great potential for defilement. Such potential, of course, increased in direct proportion to the woman's desirability. It was by rendering her supreme virtue and "wholesomeness" more legible, then, that youth and beauty "assisted [the Personality player] in her appeal."

On a more symbolic level, youth and beauty were indispensable to Personality actresses as emblems of heroic conquest of the frontier. In so far as "Our Progressive, Cultured, World-Conquering and Enlightened Womanhood" signified feminine purity and victory over the savage wilderness, her body could not be ravaged by the inexorable natural forces of time and gravity. Significantly, Peter Pan, in many ways the apotheosis of Personality roles by Wilson's definition, expressly defies these two forces. Cast as the prepubescent boy who refuses to grow up and becomes airborne at will, Maude Adams became so pure as to transcend not only nature but femininity itself.

Along with attributes of endemic purity and "wholesomeness," Wilson tacitly ascribes to individual Personality actresses the primary power in shaping their own on- and off-stage images. In so doing, he further essentializes femininity and naturalizes the workings of dominant gender ideology. He writes:

"[The typical actress of the Personality School] was a deft and artful performer with unusual personal magnetism who used the stage as a means of projecting her feminine charms to inspire her audience with a feeling of purity and optimism." (141) Wilson derives this generalization primarily from a synthesis of reports by leading white male reviewers who witnessed performances. In the "General Introduction," he opens with a caveat about the necessarily second-hand nature of evidence pertaining to acting style (1). But, in his discussion of this group of performers, the historian ignores the extreme subjectivity of reviewers like William Winter, Lewis Strang, David Gray, and J. Rankin Towse whose own views were heavily cloaked in prevailing gender stereotypes and who themselves were more than capable of "suspend[ing] [their] critical faculties" and "revel[ling] in the personal spell of the player." Witness Lewis Strang's paean to Maude Adams as Lady Babbie:

> [She] was to us some dear friend, a cherished companion, whom we loved very much, whom we wished always with us, whose happiness was our greatest pleasure, whose sorrows awoke in us keenest sympathy; a friend whom we felt that we could trust to the end of time, who never disappointed or wounded us, who never fell from our ideal, who returned sentiment for sentiment, who inspired us to look up and seek beyond, whose sympathy was rich, full, and complete, whose influence was ennobling, purifying, and broadening. (147)

Without acknowledging what this shamelessly enraptured reviewer may have been supplying out of culturally imposed expectations of perfect Womanhood, Wilson offers this comment as testimony to the actress's sweet, wholesome essence.

Neither does Wilson acknowledge prevailing market forces or the role of the dictatorial white male producers and directors who tyrannized the industry and personally managed actresses' careers. His historiograpy proceeds from the assertion that the Sisters were successful because they used the stage to display qualities intrinsic to their natures from birth. However, all four leading members of the Sisterhood named by Wilson—Ada Rehan, Maude Adams, Viola Allen, and Julia Marlowe—can instead be seen as both victims and perpetrators of self-conscious image construction and manipulation.

For twenty years, Ada Rehan worked under the tutelage of the highly autocratic and abrasive director-manager, Augustin Daly, and was widely considered his primary leading lady. As such, she became the primary focus of his dedication to the manufacture and display of feminine virtue in contemporary, sentimental dramas and Victorian "purifications" of Renaissance and Restoration texts. Daly was notorious for dictating every nuance and detail of performance

and insisting on total obedience, even to the extent of exacting fines from those who strayed (Felheim 32). Extending his control into performers' private lives, he posted strict rules governing conduct outside the theatre as well. These rigid controls were imposed on all company members, but women seem to have suffered the most, as a series of notable actresses precipitously departed his employ (Felheim 19-20). Ada Rehan distinguished herself by staying, and he extolled her for what he saw as her loyalty and devotion. Acquaintances described the tyrant and star pupil as a "real-life Svengali and Trilby" (Felheim 42-43). Significantly, soon after Daly died, Rehan, like her fictional analogue, "lost her voice" and retired from the stage.

Like Augustin Daly, Syndicate potentate Charles Frohman, Maude Adams' manager from 1890 to 1915, was dedicated to the display of feminine virtue and loveliness. Observed his biographer and brother Daniel, "[Charles] Frohman took vast pride in the 'clean quality' of his plays as he often phrased it. His whole theatrical career was a rebuke to the salacious" (Marcosson 314). Through careful role selection and tyrannical media manipulation, Frohman cultivated Maude Adams' image as the "sweet embodiment of golden Girlhood" (Marcosson 158-185) and made her into the most popular actress of her generation—what one commentator called "the best piece of theatrical property in the world" (Kobbe 26-27). And, like Daly, Frohman—in his biographer's words—"exhausted every resource" to ensure that his star's off-stage image in no way contradicted her stage persona (Marcosson 294-295).

Though neither remained with him as long as Adams, both Viola Allen and Julia Marlowe also worked under Frohman management and were touted by his vast production machine as exemplars of ideal femininity. A popular impersonator of "charming feminine roles," Allen joined Frohman's Empire Stock Company in 1893 but left in 1898 when, in a rare miscalculation of public taste, he refused to produce Hall Caine's *The Christian* which became her career hit (Bordman 20-21). Although she left Frohman's personal management, Allen did not abdicate commercial employment or the highly marketable image of feminine purity cultivated under his dictates; she simply transferred her career to the supervision of another patriarchal manager, Syndicate affiliate George Taylor of the Liebler Company (Browne 12-13).

Of the four leading members of the Sisterhood, Julia Marlowe had perhaps the most independence in shaping her own career and public image. In her recent article on Marlowe, Patty S. Derrick notes that in the early 1900s, the actress and her partner E. H. Sothern were contracted for two seasons under Frohman management, but severed this agreement in a dispute over play selection. "Never again," Derrick writes, "did they rely on a manager to plot the artistic course of their careers, and Julia Marlowe would not even allow the suggestion of

performing under another's direction" (95). Marlowe's independence, however, must be qualified in light of dominant ideological and material forces. As Derrick points out, Marlowe was herself a fervent ideologue of neoclassical Womanhood who believed that as a female performer her task was ethical as well as artistic. To uplift and ennoble audiences, she chose works deemed of high artistic stature, asserting that Shakespeare's Viola, Juliet, and Ophelia were the best vehicles for displaying ideal femininity. Through such elevated aspirations, Marlowe's own artistic agenda surpassed any which Frohman might have dictated in "rebuking the salacious" in feminine representation. To the considerable extent that her self-imposed agenda reinforced dominant visions of perfect Womanhood, she succeeded as an independent agent. But whereas Wilson's historiography construes her artistry as a revelation of an intrinsically virtuous "womanly" nature, a feminist deconstructive reading points to factors of shrewd self-marketing and, perhaps, internalized ideology.

By failing to acknowledge the impact of market pressures and the direct manipulations of image maestros like Daly and Frohman on these actresses' lives and careers, Wilson colludes with his Gilded Age and Progressive Era predecessors in oppressive gender production. Like the entertainment industry of the turn of the century, Wilson's historiography masks the constructed nature of female performances both on and off stage and censors significant individual differences among actresses from the record.

Indeed, as historical phenomenon and historiographical fabrication, The Sisterhood of Sweetness and Light censors diversity not only in the lives of its members but of other women throughout the culture who fell under the wide arc of the Sister's iconic stature. Personality acting animated the static drawings and sculptures of collective mythographers like Gibson, Christy, and French and injected the spectre of a Lady Babbie into dominant expectations of wives, mothers, and daughters. With far-reaching ramifications for later periods, this acting style, in its demonstration of performance mechanisms for naturalizing ideal Womanhood, helped set the stage for modern realism in American feminine representation.

Notes

1. Martha Banta cites an array of iconic evidence across artistic media and elaborates on the ideology of American Girlhood. See in particular pp. 115-116, 208-214, and 530-535.

2. "Womanhood" (large-case W) is used here as a generic term for patriarchally constructed feminine gender. The American Girl is a class-, race-, and period-specific type of Womanhood.

3. The interchangeability of social functions and theatrical performances as arenas for feminine impersonation is evident in the regularly featured photo lay-out in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* during this period entitled "Fashions on the Stage."

4. Archetypal hero mythology, like the myth of St. George and the dragon, undergirds such influential narratives as Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" (1983). Christy's national chauvinist rhetoric directly implicates the American Girl as the virgin/trophy in this mythical paradigm (69-70).

5. The critical response to Clara Bloodgood's performance in Clyde Fitch's *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) is a case in point. As Carnevale-Kanak's research attests, critics like Alan Dale were repulsed not only by the presence of a facsimile of the nude statue of Apollo Belvedere in the second act but by the paroxysms of jealous rage into which the heroine had to contort herself before her final redemption.

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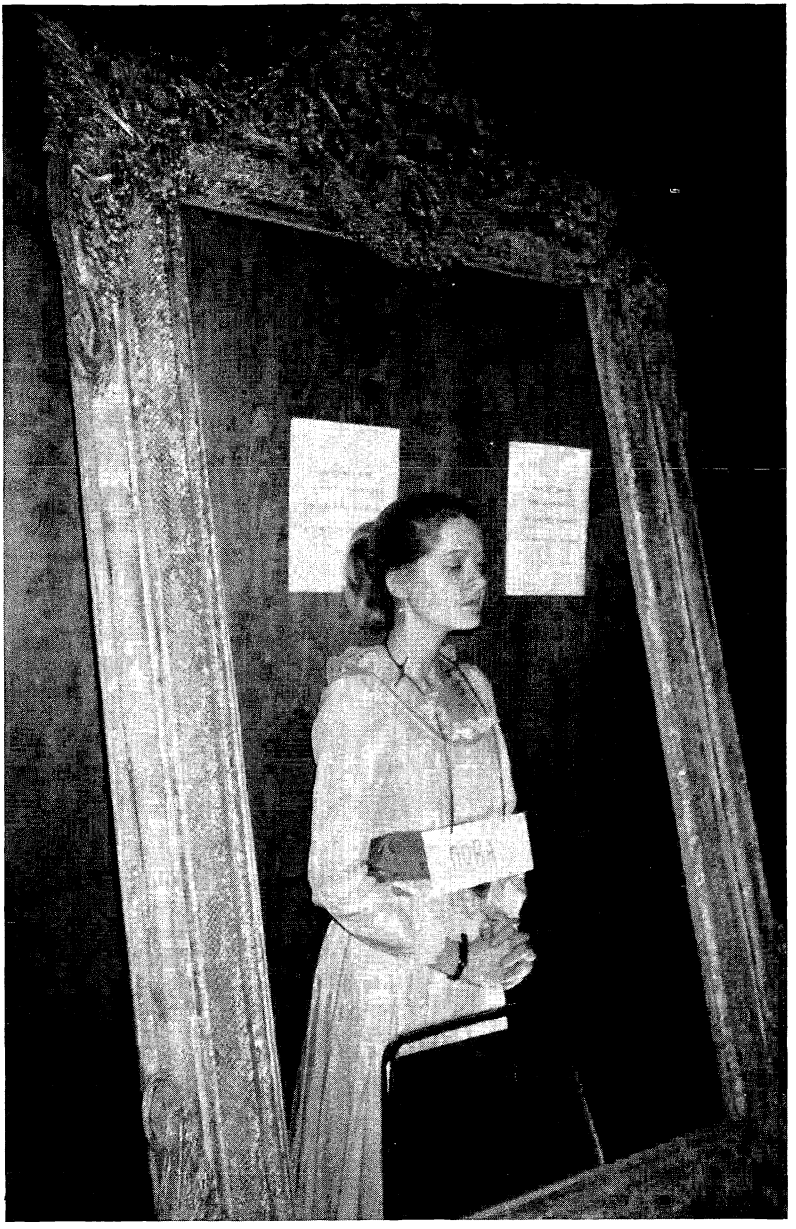

The Doll House Show. Photo by Gayle Austin.