“I AM AN AMERICAN . . .”

“Whenever I open a book and see ‘Hoot, mon,’ I always close it immediately”: Constance Fenimore Woolson and Regional Humor

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In the nineteenth century “regionalism” was a synonym for “local color” writing, which, in turn was a pejorative label given to “light” literature, mostly sketches and short stories written by women after the Civil War in an effort to document a disappearing America. These stories often employed dialect and featured unusual regional customs in order to preserve them in a swiftly changing country linked by railroad, telegraph, and soon enough telephone. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse distinguish between the two labels, noting that “in the regional text, the narrator does not distance herself from the inhabitants of the region, as is the case in ‘local color’ writing” (xvii), but the difference is really only one of semantics. Constance Fenimore Woolson has in the past been recognized as both a local color writer and a regionalist because she sets her fiction in various out-of-the-way rural areas. Sometimes she writes to identify herself with the regional types she represents; other times she writes as a chronicler from the outside.

Unlike the other local colorists, however, who limited their works to a specific locale or state, e.g., Mary Wilkins Freeman to New England or Kate Chopin to French Louisiana, Woolson wrote about many regions moving from the Ohio and Michigan Lake Country to the Blue Ridge of the Carolinas to coastal Florida—and then to Italy. Her sensitive ear and strong eye for detail register the particular sounds and sights of each region: the ferns and the sounds of lake traffic in Michigan; the palmetto baskets, sand, and surf in Florida. She abhors the cliche, the stereotype, the “Hoot, mon” of some Scottish fiction (Benedict, CFW 67). But she is alert to serious regional issues, particularly those of race and nationality in the stories set in America, especially those set in the South after the Civil War. These various regions, however, are merely the canvases on which Woolson paints her own generous vision of humanity. This vision—regional but also oddly also universal in its regional focus—is always, one way or another, inflected with humor.

Women in the nineteenth century, in the world before Sandra Bernhard and Paula Poundstone, were not supposed to be funny. In 1842, a writer in Graham's Magazine explains “Women have sprightliness, cleverness, smartness, though but little wit. There is a body and substance in true wit, with a reflectiveness rarely found apart from a masculine intellect. . . . We know of no one writer of the other sex, that has a high character for humor . . . . The female character does not admit of it” (Habegger 116). Forty some years later, in 1885, Kate Sanborn bemoans the prevailing opinion of women’s lack of a funny bone.

There is a reason for our apparent lack of humor. . . . Women do not find it politic to cultivate or express their wit. No man likes to have his story capped by a better and fresher from a lady’s lips. What woman does not risk being called sarcastic and hateful if she throws back the merry dart, or indulges in a little sharp-shooting. No, no, it’s dangerous— if not fatal.

“Though you're bright, and though you're pretty, They'll not love you if you're witty.” (Habegger 116)

Woolson apparently didn’t care, and her regional stories are filled with “merry darts” and much “sharp-shooting.” The darts are often fired by one of the four humorous women’s nineteenth-century character types outlined by Alfred Habegger: “the queer or original girl, the wise old woman, and the bright lady” and the wild tomboy (170). The first two types are both “funny-peculiar as well as funny-ha ha.” The third type is the example of wit and is characterized by “its quick responsivenes and well-bred censoriousness.” She is merely “ha, ha” (171). But the most radical model is the girl who would be a boy, who, according to Habegger, is “a symbolic representation of a newly emerging ideal gender role that was conspicuously unmannerly, outspoken, and challenging” (182).

Before the Gibson Girl alternatively charmed and scandalized the world in her tennis dress, we had Woolson’s Bessie Darrell secretly planning a midnight horseback ride in The Old Stone House. This Woolson’s earliest novel, an award-winner published under the name Alcottian pseudonym of Anne March, features five orphan cousins and their aunt’s attempts to rear them into a respectable adulthood. Aunt Faith’s biggest
challenge is Bessie, the only child of Aunt Faith’s youngest sister. Bessie is described as “more willful than all the rest . . . without a guiding principle . . . like a mariner at seas without a compass, sailing wherever the wind carries her” (7). Aunt Faith laments, “Careless and almost reckless, gay and almost wild, thoughtless and almost frivolous, she seems to grow out of my control day by day and hour by hour” (7). Eventually Bessie must be controlled so as to maintain the status quo, but until that happens, she is loads of fun to watch: “A quick student, Bessie always stood at the head of her classes for scholarship, and at the foot as regards demeanor. Twice she had been expelled for daring escapades in defiance of rule” (35). Bessie defends herself by blaming the rulemakers. It is the headmistress Miss Sykes’s fault that she goes into the garret, falls through the lath and plaster and hurts herself. She is, as her cousin Hugh puts it, “a good fellow” (41, my emphasis); always up for a lark, she is as good as a boy. Or rather, she is “a second Eve,” though Hugh’s nickname for her, Brownie, is conspicuously genderless. Just as Miss Sykes forbade her to go to the garret, Hugh forbids her to go down to the brook one night on a forbidden horseback ride. Bessie “swing[s] herself from rock to rock by aid of the bushes, as actively as a squirrel.” Then she is “seized with a sudden desire” to cross a rickety bridge. “If there was any danger, she wanted to be in it immediately,” for “she is lured on by the spirit of adventure strong within her from childhood” (159). Naturally, she falls, gets wet, is embarrassed, but recovers quickly. Aunt Faith does not discovers her transgression, and Bessie’s spirits are dampened only momentarily during her struggle home in her long wet dress.

In addition to having a supremely adventurous spirit, Bessie also tells it like it is, despite rules of etiquette. For example, when one of her cousin’s admirers reads a poem at a party and Sibyl dreamily declares it “blank verse,” Bessie murmurs “Very blank, I should say” (114). Queen Bess, as Hugh calls her occasionally, is a marvelous, powerful, subversive character — quite the fictional equal of her namesake — whose mere existence threatens the social order. She cannot be allowed to continue to grow into an independent woman if the peace of the Old Stone House is to be maintained. It takes the death of Hugh, who drowns while trying to save a woman and her child, to bring Bessie (who has rescued herself from death by drowning) to recognize her destiny as a “True Woman.” Fortunately, at this point — Hugh’s funeral — the novel ends, for once Bessie forsakes her tomboy past, all of the fun drains out of the writing, which devolves into sententiousness and didacticism. While Bessie is breaking rules and planning escapades, however, the novel perks along with much humor.

We don’t know whether The Old Stone House is set in Ohio or in New York, but its regional setting doesn’t really have anything to do with the humor. Setting is far more an issue in “Solomon,” one of Woolson’s Zoar stories set in central Ohio, as Woolson writes, “on the banks of the slow-moving Tuscarawas River” (236). “Solomon” features two cosmopolitan Cleveland women who drive to the central part of the state for a vacation in the community of old-fashioned German immigrants. Of the types of humorous figures Habegger names, these Cleveland ladies, Dora and Erminia, are bright ladies who, as outsiders, can comment on the odd customs of the indigenous population. When the local woman Dorcas Bangs wonders whether they’re dressed fashionably, Dora asks, “Do you like it?” Dorcas, a bright lady herself, responds rather humorously, offering a left-handed compliment: “Well, it does for you, sis, because you’re so little and peaked-like, but it wouldn’t do for me. The other lady, now, don’t wear nothing like that; is she even with the style, too?” “There is such a thing as being above the style, madam,” replied Erminia” (242–43). Much of the humor, of course, in the manner of local color fiction, results from the representation of local dialect and the misunderstanding of the outsiders. Dorcas Bangs, for instance, tells her visitors that her husband “allers said my face was real rental.” “Rental?” queries Dora. “Oriental, of course,” says Erminia, for Dorcas has dark hair. But the humor in the story is not had at the expense of the locals, who are treated with genuine respect. Rather, the real humor is the patter carried on by Dora and Erminia, who, like a married couple, have their preferences and enjoy competing with each other. It’s a sort of Burns and Allen or Stiller and Meara routine. Throughout the story one understands the pathos of the marriage of Solomon and Dorcas Bangs through Solomon’s eyes, the other through Dorcas’s eyes. At the end, when both Bangses have died, Dora comments on Dorcas’s lost beauty and Erminia on how her beauty in heaven must be making her husband happy. The last line is “Even then we could not give up our preferences” (269). This double perspective — Woolson’s ability to see the mixture of the serious and the comic — characterizes her work. Those who ignore Woolson’s humor in an effort to demonstrate its gravity and distort and flatten the comic edge of her prose.

In Necessary Madness: The Humor of Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Gregg Camfield discusses the humor of one of Woolson’s contemporaries, Mary Wilkins Freeman. Her stories are
designed, he claims, "to give us the distance we need to see the variety of possible courses open to us, and to make us tolerant of the differences between people who have paid the personal prices that their choices entail. . . . We are meant to laugh, but the laughter is meant to be embracing rather than estranging. . . . Freeman's stories insist that sympathy and laughter are not incompatible, that on the contrary, they support one another admirably by enabling us to love and understand at the same time" (149). Certainly Woolson's humor similarly appeals to tolerance and understanding while recognizing that personal choice is to be protected.

The reader of "Miss Elisabetha," which is set on the north Florida beach, features an older single woman who has made her personal choice to raise her ward in what outsiders (including the reader and the foreign interloper Cecile Kernadi) can see is antiquated. Miss Elisabetha thinks she inhabits a near paradise. "Yet entire happiness can not be ours in this world, and Miss Elisabetha sometimes catches herself thinking how delightful it would be to use E flat once more; but the piano's E flat is hopelessly gone" (76). The reader finds Miss Elisabetha's romantic nature amusing. Even funnier is how Woolson punctuates (and punctures) Miss Elisabetha's dreamy sentimentalism with the down-to-earth comments of her servant Viny. Directly following Miss Elisabetha's instruction to her ward Doro that "A lady should not even step perceptibly; she should glide," Viny chimes in with the most quotidian of announcements, "Miss 'Lisabeet, de toas' is ready" (78). A bit later, Miss Elisabetha instructs Viny "Go back and latch the gate. . . . the cows might enter and injure the garden" to which Viny replied, "But th' arn't no cows, Miss 'Lisabeet" (79).

In *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Nancy Walker reflects that "intellectual freedom, independence, and the free play of a sense of humor are closely interdependent. The creation and perception of humor are above all the activities of an intellect that can perceive irony and incongruity, and a consciousness that is sufficiently detached from self-effacement to be able to play. The humorous vision requires the ability to hold two contradictory realities in suspension simultaneously — to perform a mental balancing act that superimposes a comic version of life on the observable 'facts'" (82). This humorous vision characterizes both Woolson’s fictional people themselves as well as her own narrative voice.

Some of the funniest characters in one of Woolson’s least funny fictions are the stalwart members of the St. John in the Wilderness choir, who act, not surprisingly, as a chorus (or at least as comic relief). They include, among others, Corinna Rendlesham, whose name resonates with the stridency of the famous fictional nineteenth-century French improvisatrice, Corinne, juxtaposed with a surname ending in "sham"; and Ferdinand Kenneway, who notes that the junior warden, sings quite correctly, "Oh, he's correct — very! It's his only characteristic. I don't know of any other, unless you include his health: he lives principally for the purpose of not taking cold" (269). In another criticism of one of his fellow choir members, Kenneway notes that Sophy Greer "can no more do [the Te Deum] than a consumptive hen" (269). Kenneway, we are told has lost his voice years ago, "but he found the places for everybody in the music books. . . . and pretended to be singing, which did quite as well" (274). As for Corinna, "she pitied 'poor puny men' whose throats were always 'giving out'" (274).

These eccentrics pride themselves on their "conversation," which focuses on "light topics of elegant nature" (298):

Mrs. Greer, for instance, had Horace Walpole's Letters — which never failed. Other ladies preferred the cultivation of flowers, garden rock-work, and their bees (they allowed themselves to go as far as bees, because honey, though of course edible, was so delicate). Mrs. Rendlesham, who was historical, had made quite a study of the characteristics of Archbishop laud. And the Misses Farren were greatly interested in Egyptian ceramics. Senator Ashley, among many subjects, had also his favorite; he not infrequently turned his talent for talking loose upon the Crimean War. This was felt to be a rather modern topic" (298-99).

The choir's feminine nostalgic focus on delicacy and on a world long gone is the humorous counterpoint to the tragedy of the Carroll Family: Madame Carroll, though middle-aged, dresses the role of the child bride to make her aging and infirm husband happy, and the increasingly senile Major Carroll cannot imagine a post-Civil War world beyond the Farms.

Although the Italian setting of "The Front Yard" is a world away from Ohio, Florida, or North Carolina, Woolson continues to employ her characteristic humor, at once ironic and whimsical, in writing stories set in
Italy. Like Miss Elisabetha and Madame Carroll, Prudence Wilkin (who looks more like a Mary Wilkins Freeman creation than any other of Woolson's characters, and perhaps for good reason, given her name) has made her choice, and we are to respect her for that. The choice of husband has not served her well, however; he has died and left her with his mother to care for as well as his brood to raise. She has worked her whole life to save up a bit of additional money so that she can level her cow shed and replace it with a real New England front yard with flowers and a fence. In a land of antiquities, this cow shed is the only antiquity that interests Prudence, and she threatens it, “Just you wait till next Fourth of July, you indecent old antiquity, you!” (3).

But Prudence is used by her adopted children, who eat into her nest egg one by one.

She is not bitter, though. She does her best to make her own humor by renaming her step-children according to her understanding of Italian. As Woolson tells us, “She remained convinced that Italian was simply lunatic English, English spoiled”: “One of the children, named Pasquale, she called Squawly, and she always believed that the title came from the strength of his infant lungs; many other words impressed her in the same way” (8). One of the girl’s names is Annunziata, but Prudence calls her Nounce: “If it means “announce,” Nounce is near enough I guess… Giovanni’s name she pronounced as though it were two words – Jo Vanny; she really thought there were two. Jo she knew well, of course; it was a good New England name; Vanny was probably some senseless Italian addition” (9). What is so interesting is that Prudence, for all of her limited knowledge of the world, recognizes her own position as outsider and copes with it as well as she can and with more than a touch of humor. One of the daughter, Assunta, joins a convent, but as Prudence reasons, “she had always been a mystery in the house, and the constant presence of a mystery is particularly trying to the new England mind” (10). When, at the end of the story she is dying after having been provided her front yard by two fairy godmothers from the States, her response is “My! I’d had no idea I was so sick as that” (48). Prudence’s own humor is an alternative to rage. It is compensatory and opens up possibilities of power and order to Prudence, who is, from the point of view of her step-children, conspicuously powerless. She is a model of the wise old woman Habegger catalogs as a distinctively humorous type.

Perhaps Woolson’s last humorous creation is also her best. Maud Muriel Mackintosh of *Horace Chase* (1896) is a no-nonsense pipe-smoking sculptress. In our first introduction to her, Anthony Etheridge says of her “I have always thought that girl might be a genius if she could only get drunk! Perhaps the pipe is a beginning” (52-53). A bit later we get a physical description: the red-headed Maud is “not at all handsome, though her hazel eyes were large, calm, and clear. She was a spinster of thirty-six—tall and thin, with large bones. And from her hair to her heels she was abnormally, extraordinarily straight” (60). Later, she is described as being muscular. What makes her “not at all handsome” is that she is a woman: the description we are offered is one of a very handsome, upright young man, Horace Chase himself, perhaps, who is similarly described as “tall, thin, and muscular… His voice was pitched in a low key” (82-83), echoing Maud’s contralto. Unlike the other women in the story – Dolly and Ruth – she is unsentimental. Her sculptures are realistic. As she affirms, “Prettiness is the exception, not the rule… I prefer to model the usual, the average; for in that direction, and in that only, lies truth” (81). Artistically, then, Maud is ahead of the curve, choosing realism over the prevailing idealism.

When Chase and Ruth marry, few can understand the love match. Maud confesses that the marriage is strange; “However, I won’t desert him at such a moment. I stand by him” The text makes yet another androgynous note: “She was in reality not so much bridesmaid as groomsman” (146). Throughout the novel, we are treated to the spectacle of Maud and Wilhelmina (who goes by “Billie,” curiously enough) as bosom buddies, and by the end of the novel, Maud has begun smoking cigars, having given up the pipe (356). The most delicious moment of the novel comes when Malachi Hill decides to revenge himself on Maud for having treated him contemptuously by kissing her. Following the event, Maud goes to Billy’s room to confess:

“You know all the talk and fuss there is in poetry, Wilhelmina, about kisses (I mean when given by a man)? I am now in a position to tell you, from actual experience, what they amount to.” She came nearer, and lowered her voice. “The are very far indeed from being what is described. There is nothing in them. Nothing whatever!” (362-63)

It behooves us to note Maud’s qualification about kisses – “I mean when given by a man” — and the fact that she completely disappears from the novel at this point, about fifty pages before the end. The final four chapters are devoted to the dissolution of the Chases’ marriage, which is damaged beyond the repair even the most dedicated groomsmen could provide.
So what exactly is Maud’s role? As Camfield notes, “Just because humor can be an alternative to anger as a way of facing repression, it is not therefore any less volatile than anger. It has expansive potential in its capacity to disrupt frames of reference, to reveal the artificial basis of ideology” (63). What Maud’s does is to disrupt the novel’s sentimental ideology of domesticity by being the woman she is: a prototype of “the new woman” as “mammish lesbian” who emerged in medical and social discourses during the turn of the century. She smokes, she is characterized by masculine descriptors, and she has no illusions about reality, choosing realism over sentimentality in her art.² She offers a choice to Woolson’s readers who would have been looking to Woolson to provide models of womanhood to counter those of the beauty and the self-sacrificing mother; models of independent women with brains and talent.

In fact, Woolson herself must’ve been a very funny lady embodying many of Habegger’s humorous types over the period of her life: the original girl, the tomboy, and the bright lady.” As a young girl growing up in Cleveland, she was known for her talent at composition and her lovely soprano voice and perhaps even more so for her athleticism and mischievousness. She was a great walker and boater, power-rowing down the Cuyahoga River in the days before girls were encouraged to engage in athletic pursuits. Recalling her youth in a letter to her former teacher Linda Guilford, Woolson wonders whether Guilford remembers “the time we stole the cherry pies? … The pies were just from the oven—hot and fresh and tempting—and they had been incautiously placed on a window ledge (to cool), just within our reach!” (Benedict, CFW 40). She closes a letter to her childhood friend Belle Carter with “‘Horse at the door.’ I must go and be murdered! Farewell” (Benedict, Voices 271).

We can see the humorous lady in Woolson’s own distanced description of herself as a convalescent. In a letter to her nephew Samuel Mather, she writes: If you and Flora could have peeped in half an hour ago, and seen me seated on the rug, with the kettle on a trivet attached to the grate behind me, and all the materials for the linseed poultices assembled on a tray at one side, while I, with tear-stained face, was drearily playing solitaire on the atlas propped on my knees, you would have laughed I’m sure. I never play games you know; so when I play solitaire, it is desperation indeed” (Mather Family Letters). This funny lady is not even afraid of chiding Henry James about his daring as a man to write The Portrait of a Lady (James 535). Would that Woolson had lived to be a “wise old woman,” for certainly we’d have seen more humor from her pen. Camfield writes that “laughter was…[Fanny Fern’s] antidote to excessive sensibility, either in sympathy or in feeling one’s own pain” (55). Just this sort of humor characterizes Constance Fenimore Woolson’s fiction, from the beginning, with her stories set in the Lake Country to her later fictions set in Italy and, again, in the South. Much of her life was painful: family members died, illness and depression intervened; still, Constance Fenimore Woolson chose to laugh both at herself and her maddening, incongruous, changing world.

Notes

² I would suggest that if Henry James can be depicted as a Native American in the Bartheleme collage, “Henry James: Chief,” famously cited by John Carlos Rowe, then we can think of our sharp-shooting Woolson as Calamity Jane.

³ See Barbara Welker’s famous formulation in “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860.”

⁴ This concept derives from Camfield, who writes of Fanny Fern that “Humor to Parton…is an alternative to rage as an appropriate response not only to the constraints of domestic ideology, but also to her own ambivalent acceptance of those constraints” (61).

⁵ Havelock Ellis actually mentions smoking as a characteristic of female “inverts” in Sexual Inversion (1896) not long after Horace Chase was published. Moreover, Woolson knew John Addington Symonds, Ellis’s collaborator, who co-authored much of Ellis’s book, though he died before it was published. My thanks to Kristin Comment for helping me to flesh out the cultural ramifications of Maud’s behavior.

Works Cited
Mather Family Letters. Constance Fenimore Woolson to Samuel Mather, 8 February 1892.
