

A Woman Called the “Female Mark Twain” : The Nature of Marietta Holley’ s Humor

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A Woman Called the “Female Mark Twain”: The Nature of Marietta Holley’s Humor

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Marietta Holley was a best selling popular literature author in the late 19th century. Because of her sense of humor she was called the “Female Mark Twain,” in the popular press, says Kate H. Winter, “[A]nd it was claimed that she had as large an audience as Twain’s” (*Life with* 1). According to Walter Blair, “In 1905 a writer in the *Critic* said: ‘She has entertained as large an audience, I should say, as has been entertained by the humor of Mark Twain’” (231). In spite of fame and popularity in her days, Holley had been forgotten soon after her death until her works started to receive attention from feminists in the 1980s.

The purpose of this study is to show how Holley’s works have the kind of humor that could cover the social criticism serious and acceptable enough even today. Holley sends a political message by using laughter to make it easier for the people to understand. Although most of critics have concluded that humor is a prominent character in Holley’s novel, they fail to give details about it, except a few critics who focus on the vernacular as a remarkable point of her humor. First I would like to examine the methods Holley uses to enhance her humor, and then discuss the significance of her humor to women mainly through the analysis of one novel of hers with a long title: *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet’s: Designed as a Beacon Light, to Guide Women to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, but Which May be Read By Members of the Sterner Sect, Without Injury to Themselves or the Book* (1873) (From this point forward, it will be called *My Opinions* in this paper).

Marietta Holley was born in Jefferson County, New York, in 1836, and wrote twenty-one novels and many short stories in her life. It was *My Opinions* that made Holley and her humor famous. Holley wrote it on the recommendation of Elisha Bliss who was Mark Twain’s publisher at the American Publishing Company. The novel reflected a particular period of the history when the suf-

frage movement was developing, with a main character Samantha Smith Allen (a.k.a. “Josiah Allen’s Wife”) and her friend Betsey Bobbet, a typical spinster, discussing political issues, mainly the rights of women.

My Opinions acquired enormous success with “five printings in the first year and simultaneous publication in Britain” (Winter, *Nineteenth-Century* 225). Holley kept writing the “Samantha” series and dealt with such various social issues as the temperance movement, domestic violence or child labor. She enjoyed general popularity but had been totally forgotten after her death in 1926. However, Holley regained the spotlight, because, as Charlotte Templin says, “her work was rediscovered by feminists in the 1980s” (75).

1. Comic Duo and a Slapstick Comedy

Holley’s humor evokes laughter by criticizing authority. She sends strong political messages about the rights of women and inequality between men and women in *My Opinions* through the acts and words of Samantha. Although Samantha attacks men and politicians, she softens the aggressiveness of political messages by her humorous action of a comedienne. One of the methods used for producing laughter in this novel is to make conversations between two characters—in most of the cases, one of them is Samantha—comical and quickly. It resembles the performance of comic duo. Another method is to describe scenes as funny as slapstick comedies. These are effective ways to evoke laughter for ordinary people. They also have the merit of building a sense of affinity toward characters.

When Samantha acts comically, she always has a partner. The interchange between Samantha and her husband Josiah induces laughter. They often have a quarrel about gender inequality. Samantha brings up women’s right to vote again and again to Josiah who stubbornly makes an objection to her opinion: “I mean that women hain’t (sic) no business a votin’; they had better let the laws alone, and tend to thier (sic) housework. The law loves wimmin (sic) and protects’em” (Holley 87). Samantha retorts that women do not need to obey the law without the right to vote. In addition, Samantha says there are “three classes that haint no business with the law—lunatics, idiots, and wimmin—the lu-

natics and idiots have the best time of it'" (Holley 87). What Samantha means is that, although women are not given rights in the same way as lunatics and idiots, yet only women are supposed to take the responsibility of observing the law. Furthermore, Samantha imagines a tragic situation in which a woman stealing a small sheep for her starved children would be punished by the law. Samantha wishes that if the woman were a lunatic or an idiot she would be forgiven (Holley 87-88). In this scene the harsh reality of women at that time is contrasted with the comical and speedy husband-wife conversation that depicts the situation. Holley has an ironic sense of humor to rank women below lunatics and idiots.

In spite of the aggressiveness of the topics that are brought up between Samantha and Josiah, laughable treatment of them softens the mood of conversations. Adding to the strong personality, Samantha has a big and tough body. On the other hand, Josiah is described as physically unattractive: bald and smaller and weaker than his wife. They make an odd couple. Jane Curry explains that Josiah is not the standard male character: "[H]e fits the comic stereotype of the small, weak husband henpecked by his larger wife" (5). Indeed, most of the exchanges between Samantha and Josiah evoke an image of the comedian talks.

Communication between Samantha and Josiah in daily life has an effect on creating empathy of women readers because the latter must have similar experiences. When Samantha utters her opinion about women's rights on and on, she finds that Josiah becomes tired of his wife's long-windedness: "I see Josiah with a contented countenance, readin' the almanac, and I said to him in a voice before which he quailed—'Josiah Allen, you haint heard a word I've said, you know you haint'" (Holley 91). From this scene, we can imagine a common situation at home where a wife talks eloquently about her thoughts, while her husband is not interested in it at all. That is why a wife becomes terribly mad at her husband. On the other hand, it is presumed that a husband who pretends to hear his wife's opinion wants actually to escape. There is a gap between the wife's opinion and her husband's interest. The more earnestly Samantha talks about women's rights, the more conspicuous the indifference of Josiah becomes. In this gap between the serious contents of Samantha's speech and Josiah's non-chalant action, we can find humor.

Another main partner for Samantha to make a comic duo is Betsey Bobbet, an ugly spinster who is desperate to marry. Since Betsey is wholly opposed to women's right for vote and thinking that marriage is the only right for female, she often has arguments with Samantha. Betsey's sentimentalism and poorly written emotional poems often disturb Samantha's peace of mind. Samantha does her best to escape from Betsey who wants to read aloud her poem. Betsey is a very persistent person, however, and forces herself into even Samantha's sick-room with her terrible poem (Holley 106-111). The contrast between troubled Samantha and tactless Betsey creates laughable sights.

Those comic duos naturally perform a slapstick comedy. Holley describes ordinary happenings in the small village in a comical tone. Linda A. Morris says, "that women's humor, especially in the nineteenth century, reflected women's own experience, as distinct from men's" (12). In an episode that is probably based on her own experience, Holley deals with a gossip in the gathering to make a bed quilt for the minister. The minister's attractive newly married wife is suspected to cheat him by calling her lover to home in her husband's absence. The "lover", however, turns out to be the minister's baby (Holley 69-84). This episode seems like a knockabout play in women's inner circle.

Yet Holley's slapstick comedies do not acted only in the women's world. When Samantha goes to New York, she encounters General Grant and Vice President Skyler Colfax in the train. When she tries to reach down her basket from the overhead rack, Colfax kindly helps her:

... he reached up smilin' as sweet as a rose, to take it down (sic), when all of a sudden the handle slipped out at one end, and down come the contents right on to his face, One nut cake, a long, slim one, sot up straight on his nose, as handsome as you ever see a circus man ride a white horse. But most mournful of all, I had some biled (sic) eggs, and unbeknown to me, Tirzah Ann had took'em out too quick, before they was much more than warmed through, and they broke onto his face and all run down into his whiskers. But if you will believe it, that blessed man smiled. (Holley 276-79)

Adding to an image of a known politician giving a funny performance, the picture of Colfax smiling in spite of the mishap satirizes politicians who are obliged to make an agreeable impression to everybody at all times.

The comical atmosphere renders even serious political issues into familiar commonplace topics. Although the gender inequality is passionately and repeatedly discussed in this story, we can recognize a humorous touch. By using effective method to produce humor, Holley succeeds to explain her progressive thinking.

2. Voices of Women

The significance of Holley's humor in *My Opinions* is to send a political message, especially of gender inequality, in a digestible way. By communicating social issues humorously, Holley encourages women to devote attention to their inferior situations. She makes Samantha a heroine with dynamic personality, who is so active that she cannot bear to express her opinions only in a small village. Samantha writes about the subject of women's rights to Horace Greeley (Holley 248), a real politician known to be opposing women's suffrage. When Samantha hears the news that Horace offers himself as a candidate for the U.S. President, she goes to New York to convey her own views to him. Samantha meets Horace and expresses her opinion face to face. Confronting Horace who asserts he will not "believe in Wimmen's Rights" (Holley 374), Samantha speaks eloquently for them: "Horace, we want the right of equal pay for equal labor (sic). The right of not bein' taxed without representation" (Holley 374). Samantha's plea extends over multiple pages, while Horace cringes from her energy. By demonstrating that even an ordinary housewife can hold pronounced views on the critical issue, Holley persuades average women that it is worth fighting for the cause.

Politicians are the targets of ridicule and the ironical humor in *My Opinions*. By describing them as comical personas, Holley advises the public not to shrink before the authority. It is Holley's favorite device to introduce so many real politicians in her novels that they could add to the story the air of authenticity and reinforce political message. Suffragists and politicians who appear under their

own names in the “Samantha” series are General Grant, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Victoria Woodhull, and Susan B. Anthony among others.

Although male politicians are described humorously, female suffragists are represented as respectable characters. For example, Susan B. Anthony is described as “smart and sensible lookin” (*My Opinion* 315). Holley portrays Elizabeth Cady Stanton as an attractive woman who looks like a star: “[she] had jest (sic) about as noble a lookin’ face as I ever see, with short white curls a fallin’ all around it ... It was the face of an earnest noble woman, who had asked God what He wanted her to do, and then hadn’t shirked out of doin’ it” (*My Opinion* 313-14). It is likely that Holley’s descriptions about those suffragists are based on general information. Yet we can assume that Holley wants favorable pictures of real suffragists to create a good impression of them.

Consequently, *My Opinions* became popular and the “Samantha” series continued to be read among suffragists. Susan B. Anthony even asked Holley to attend at their convention or to write something for a suffragist paper, the *National Citizen*: “Come—in cog. [sic] if you choose—only be here—.... But if you cannot be present, will you not send a letter to be read and printed—that we may have the influence of your name as well as good word—” (Winter, *Life with* 66). Anthony wrote a favorable letter to Holley about one of her books, *Sweet Cicely*: “We have read it aloud here [in Washington]—Miss Spofford and I and her sisters and laughed until we cried over it!! A very bright newspaper scribbler in Philadelphia ... says she cannot stand it much longer with Josiah—it is time to kill him off and for Samantha to marry a *smarter* (sic) man!!” (Winter, *Life with* 90). *Sweet Cicely* is the fourth novel in the “Samantha” series. It insists on the harmfulness of drinking and the importance to gain the right to vote for women. Anthony was not the only suffragist who showed kindness to Holley. According to Winter, Frances E. Willard gave Holley credit for her books: “As early as 1877 a letter from Frances E. Willard invited Holley to be delegate to the annual convention of the Women’s National Christian Temperance Union in Chicago” (*Life with* 67). Those suffragists must have been attracted to “Samantha” series and their propaganda aspects. Samantha was a suffragists’ heroine who could explain their thought as clearly and comprehensively as possible. That is to say,

Samantha is a symbol of suffragettism.

Yet Holley did not create Samantha only as the embodiment of political messages. Samantha is also a representative of ordinary women, since she can speak for those who cannot. She is an efficient but undistinguished housewife who works hard in the farm everyday. By recording Samantha's ordinary lives, Holley manages to gain the empathy of female readers. Nancy A. Walker says, "Instead of writing frontier tall tales and political satires, American women have tended to focus on more domestic issues: housework, children, community affairs" (29). Holley discovers and displays humorous elements in the "domestic issues" (Walker 29) by picking up familiar examples.

One of those "domestic issues" (Walker 29) used effectively to appeal to women is communication between husband and wife. In spite of her love for Josiah, Samantha knows well how to manipulate her husband. One day Josiah gives Samantha earth-shattering news that Betsey Bobbet has got married suddenly to Simon Slimpsey, a poor sick old widower who has fourteen children. Although Samantha asks him to deliver the news immediately in detail, Josiah would not talk until his stomach is filled: "I should think it was about dinner time" (Holley 409). So Samantha has to start to cook at once, saying, "For a long and arduous study of the sect has convinced me that good vittles are more healin' than oil to pour onto a mans (sic) lacerated feelin's" (Holley 409). By describing the large appetite of Josiah, Holley shows that "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach". She satirizes through Samantha's mouth the enthusiasm of men who demand food. Although men do not take notice of it, some women can manipulate them secretly as Samantha can under the mask of cooking. Holley points out that women have hidden superiority. Women who have a feeling of gender inequality privately must be pleased to know it.

Along with the usual happenings in Samantha's daily lives, attacks on gender inequality are depicted in an easy-to-understand and funny way. When Samantha meets Horace she uses some metaphors based on her ordinary life to prevail on him to change his mind: "Nature made queen bees Horace. Old Nature herself clapped the crown on to'em. You never heard of king bees, did you? Industrious equinomical (sic) critters the bees are too. The public duties of that female dont

(sic) spile (sic) her, for where will you find housework done up slicker than hern (sic) ?” (Holley 384). Shelly Armitage says, “Samantha manages to convert her domestic metaphors to public affairs ... ” (200). Samantha’s way of persuasion for Horace using “domestic metaphors” (Armitage 200) seems humorous and understandable to those who avoid the difficult reasoning. We can assume that Holley uses “domestic metaphors” (Armitage 200) as an effective weapon to justify the women’s movement for ordinary female.

Holley causes Samantha to talk about political opinions from the women’s viewpoint. By this technic Holley persuades women to take interest in the fight for their rights. Samantha explains the difference of opinion between her and male politicians: “Horace and I differ on some things such as biled vittles, Wimmen’s Rights, and cream biscuit” (Holley 247). She holds three different opinions from Horace’s. Samantha’s juxtaposing domestic things with political things is humorous because “Wimmen’s Rights” are treated in the same way as common things. We can see that for Samantha the weight of the political things is equal to that of the domestic things. By the juxtaposition of the domesticity and the politics, Holley tries to reduce people’s resistance to political issues. It can only be made possible by the author with the sense of humor.

It is worthy of remark that Holley uses an ingenious method to prove that the claim for the right of women is not a bad move. She lowers resistance to the suffrage movement by giving importance to home and a married life. Although Samantha manipulates Josiah when she wants to accomplish her goal, her love for him has never changed since their wedding day: “And that love has been like a Beacon (sic) in our pathway ever sense (sic) ” (Holley 18). When Samantha says goodbye to Josiah to go to New York, she feels that “a tear risin’ to my eye” (Holley 271). These words from powerful and aggressive Samantha must be appealing to female readers. It is Holley’s technique to make the impression that involving in the political matters does not reduce feminine qualities.

Holley insists that women can take care of their husbands and home even if they advocate women’s rights. Before going to New York, Samantha has got her housework done perfectly for Josiah: “ I determined Josiah should live like a king durin’ his temporary widowerhood (sic) ” (Holley 257). Samantha has

cleaned their house wall-to-wall and has cooked large amount of meals. Holley points out to ordinary housewives that if they do not forget their duties at home, they need not feel guilty about protesting against the gender inequality. She convinces them that women engaged in the suffrage movement or insisting on their rights should not be considered odd.

Female readers must feel affinities for Samantha because of her humorous actions and greater emphasis on home. The feeling of intimacy is useful for gaining many readers and sending political messages. Although suffrage movement was on the rise at that time of Holley's writing, not many women joined in those activities. Winter says, "The success of *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* is astonishing when one considers that women suffrage movement engaged only a very few men and women" (*Life with* 61). We can assume that the more women read *My Opinions*, the more Holley's idea would have become popular. In other words, Holley's humor has an effect on the purchasing behavior for women, and they willingly buy her novel and circulate her thought. It would be appropriate to say that Samantha is also a symbol for ordinary women because she can convey their hidden messages.

Conclusion

We have outlined the features of Holley's humor. Cheri L. Ross says, "[S]he was the first widely popular American woman writer whose work was openly feminist. As such, she pioneered a new dimension in both humor and feminist discourse" (13). By using humor tactfully, Holley criticizes authority or social problems in *My Opinions*. The novel became popular not only among suffragists but also with ordinary women. Understandability of her messages and a sense of affinity for Samantha encouraged people to read the novel. Consequently, it enabled them to direct their attentions to the unfair state of society.

Nowadays, although American women can vote and even have the right to be elected as the president of the United States, they are struggling to gain the positions equal to men in the political world. Modern women have to fight and endure in the society and at home as the nineteenth century women. Holley covers the issues that are available even today. Holley was a popular writer who

was called the “Female Mark Twain” in the late nineteenth century, but unlike that great author she was totally forgotten for a century. Yet as I have demonstrated in this paper, Holley’s works are worthy to be reread now.

The future direction of this study will be to examine Holley’s novels in terms of other issues such as child labor and domestic violence, and make further analysis of Holley’s humor in those works.

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