Summary: Language and Gender in American Fiction

In the 1880’s, fiction by women in HARPER’S MONTHLY equaled in quantity the fiction by men. Fifty years later, virtually none of the women remained in print, while many of the men were remembered as great writers. Elsa Nettels explains this in part by noticing that women were praised for writing in language that was defined as inferior to masculine language. Categories of masculine and feminine writing were clearly understood. If a woman wrote “strong” prose, she could expect criticism for manly writing, while if a man wrote sensitively, especially about women, he could expect praise for his comprehensive imagination.

William Dean Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather presented critiques of the basic binary opposition of patriarchy, that masculine and feminine are opposites and that masculine is superior to feminine; but because none proved sufficiently able to understand how language embodies and preserves this binary, they were unable to subvert the system decisively.

Nettels shows in clear, jargon-free language how Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather were complexly uncomfortable with Victorian gender roles. Each attacks the damaging symptoms of the system that restricts women’s consciousness and that deprives men of full and equal partnerships with women. Yet each fails really to understand the system, especially issues of language that define power and civilization as masculine, that restrict speech and, therefore, knowledge available to women, that discourage women from engaging in public discourse and, therefore, leadership.

Nettels also examines utopian fiction, with special attention to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s HERLAND (1979), noticing that even fiction that incisively criticizing the symptoms of patriarchy fails to challenge the basic binary.