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Speaking Softly to be Heard: 
Jewett’s Feminist Reform Contributions to 
The Congregationalist, 1882–1884
by TERRY HELLER

In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler reflects that the oppressive system of discourse on gender in recent Western Civilization is difficult to change through self-conscious individual or organized effort. Following Michel Foucault’s discussions of disciplinary practices, Butler argues that there is no real place outside the system to which one may escape or from which to launch revolution. One is always already within the discourse of gender, and all attempts to change it must derive from what the system itself provides. Inevitably, we are in gender trouble, and the challenge is to discover imaginative and useful ways to make trouble within the system or “the law.” “If subversion is possible,” she says, “it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (93). I believe that Sarah Orne Jewett attempted subversion of this kind in eight contributions to The Congregationalist during 1882–1884.

In the 1880s, feminist reform was multifaceted and not especially unified. Among the more visible efforts were public campaigns for temperance, suffrage, and reforms in marriage, divorce, property law, dress, education and work. Jewett expressed special interest in work reform, and she favored woman suffrage, as did her closest friend, Annie Fields, according to Sarah Sherman (78) and Judith Roman (55). Though reformers were not united in accepting the theory that men and women were intellectually and morally equal and, therefore, should be equally citizens before the law, many feminist reformers shared this belief, and Jewett agreed with them. However, Jewett is not yet known to have participated in any public campaign of reform. Jewett’s contributions to The Congregationalist show her engaged in what may be the most direct feminist reform activities of her career. What I find most interesting about this reform effort is that it takes place as a masquerade. Veiling herself was essential because she chose to express her feminist views—that the sexes are equal, that women, like men, may be called to any vocation, and that women have a right to suffrage—in a widely read and vigorously anti-feminist publication.

Butler describes a gender system made up of two major ideas: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality means...
mainly that our culture offers only two acceptable forms of gender identity for subjects to occupy: male/masculine and female/feminine. Phallogocentrism is the idea that our culture invests its construction of masculine modes of being with power and subordinates feminine modes of being. As Margaret Roman has argued, Jewett’s feminist reform was mainly concerned with challenging phallogocentrism. I believe Jewett did this in her Congregationalist essays by speaking to those of her fellow citizens who felt that their identity as Christians required accepting the system in which women are understood to belong to men rather than to themselves; in which women’s labor is assumed to be appropriated to the service of families, even if this blocks them from self-realization and deprives society at large of the benefits of their individual talents; in which their voices in public affairs are always to be filtered through male relatives.

I would like to characterize Jewett’s approach as veiled or masked subversion. Masquerade was necessary for several reasons, but the main one was to pass the editorial censors at The Congregationalist, to evade the dominating frame within which they nearly always imprisoned feminist thought. The Congregationalist was willing to publish feminist ideas, but, as a rule, the editors chose when to engage such ideas and were careful to place them within a dominating frame that defined such ideas as outside of Christian orthodoxy. For example, after the Massachusetts elections of 1883, the editors summarized a letter they and other newspapers had received from Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe before the election, a letter asking the state political parties to support woman suffrage. The editors’ response states and critiques the three reasons the letter presents for granting suffrage, and then the editors present at length their arguments against suffrage. They contend that most women do not want the vote; that election costs would increase needlessly, since wives will vote with their husbands; that women will be degraded by the processes of electioneering and visiting the polls; that in the divine idea of the family, the father/husband represents the family to the state; and that enfranchising women probably will give greater power to the worst elements of the state—impure women and anti-temperance, papally controlled Catholics [read Irish] (“The Voting of Women” 402). Though this article attempts to overwhelm suffrage proponents, its strategy of giving their ideas expression in a controlling frame is typical of many pieces from the 1880s, ranging from numerous articles on women’s work and education through fiction and even book reviews.

For a feminist message to be heard simply and clearly in The Congregationalist, it would have to arrive veiled in some way. While it may be that some authors, such as Rebecca Harding Davis and Rose Terry Cooke, used a mask of irony to place feminist analysis before readers of The Congregationalist, Jewett seems to have managed rather direct statements of core feminist values. Her mask may be seen as more transparent than the irony that pretends to take an orthodox position while providing support for an opposing position, even though a little of that can be seen in her two main
reform essays. In fact, Jewett’s social views in several ways coincide with those of *The Congregationalist*, so she is able to express them sincerely. This provides her an authoritative identity, an acceptable voice with which she can express feminist ideas intertwined among and veiled behind her ostensible purposes in the essays. To the degree that she is successful, Jewett can be seen as making rhetorical space for her feminism within rigid ideological frames and then making space within the thinking of her readers for a more capacious conception of an acceptable femininity.

Jewett’s readers today are aware that she could engage in masquerades. For example, in “Law Lane” (1887), Mrs. Powder brings an end to a longstanding feud when she pretends to believe that an injured woman is at death’s door. This pretense brings about a change of heart in the deceived woman that makes it possible for her son to marry the daughter of the enemy family. Jewett’s readers also are aware that when she published *A Country Doctor* in 1884, she laid out a strong feminist position. The protagonist, Nan Prince, asserts women’s equality with men, especially with regard to having callings or vocations to all kinds of work and requiring the necessary social approval and support for following such vocations. Both of these views were counter to the prevailing gender ideology of the 1880s. Furthermore, in the chapters that recount her suitor’s motives for wishing to marry her and Nan’s final resistance to his proposal, Jewett presents a telling analysis of the moral and intellectual poverty of the common type of masculinity the young man represents. Though Nan is not herself a feminist activist and never speaks directly about suffrage, she does express sympathy for such reformers in what, so far as I know, is the only published indication of Jewett’s attitude towards feminist reformers:

I am willing to acknowledge that people who are eager for reforms are apt to develop unpleasant traits, but it is only because they have to fight against opposition and ignorance. When they are dead and the world is reaping the reward of their bravery and constancy, it no longer laughs, but makes statues of them and praises them, and thanks them in every way it can. (208)

Like Jewett, Nan pursues her own profession without showing much interest in general reform, but Nan clearly appreciates the work of feminists.

Jewett contributed to *The Congregationalist* when she was coming into her own as a writer, publishing widely and in a variety of outlets, bringing out several books, and presumably composing *A Country Doctor*. During this period, she published several stories on feminist issues and dealing with masquerades. “Tom’s Husband” (1881) uses gender role reversal to critique the position of housekeeper. “Farmer Finch” (1885) shows a woman making a success of a vocation thought to be reserved for men. Any story of role reversal involves a level of masquerade, since individuals of one gender put on some version of the role of the other. Jewett also played with gender masquerade in “An Autumn Holiday” (1880), portraying a man who loses his mental balance and sometimes believes he is his deceased sister, wearing her clothes and engaging in her normal social activities, including attending church. Comic in tone, the story suggests the ease with which a sympathetic
community can accept aberrations usually considered impossible violations of gender rules.

Jewett’s eight contributions to *The Congregationalist* are especially interesting publications from this period because, taken together, they constitute Jewett herself masquerading. Jewett seems to have developed a deliberate program of placing in the paper a series that begins by mirroring the paper’s opinions, but culminates with two feminist reform essays. This can be seen as a masquerade because Jewett manages to persuade the editors of *The Congregationalist* that her views are safely orthodox, and so she is allowed—finally behind rather a thin veil—to express ideas to which the editors were opposed. Whenever during the period of Jewett’s contributions the paper presents feminist ideas, they are framed within an opposing commentary, but Jewett’s main feminist contribution, “Every-day Work” (EDW), appears without an editorial frame.

*The Congregationalist* was strongly anti-feminist. Though editors generally favored improved women’s education and seemed to accept that economic and social reality did not reflect the ideal, the paper consistently made clear what that ideal was—women belonged in the domestic sphere, serving their families in the home. In *The Bonds of Womanhood* Nancy Cott describes as characteristic of American Victorian culture the same ideology of domesticity expressed weekly in *The Congregationalist*:

[M]other, father, and children grouped together in the private household ruled the transmission of culture, the maintenance of social stability, and the pursuit of happiness; the family’s influence reached outward, underlying success or failure in church and state, and inward, creating individual character.

... women’s certain, limited role. That was to be wives and mothers, to nurture and maintain their families, to provide religious example and inspiration, and to affect the world around by exercising private moral influence.

For *The Congregationalist*, the Bible was the foundation of this order. Austin Phelps lays out this position in his featured contribution of 1881 to a series of columns on “Great Subjects”: “Reform in the Political Status of Women.”

Phelps’s essay was perhaps the most authoritative piece to appear on this subject during 1881–1884, the issues of the newspaper I have examined. When he wrote this article, Austin Phelps (1820–1890) was a popular Massachusetts minister, writer, and teacher, retired from the conservative Andover Theological Seminary. He also was the father of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward (1844–1911), popular author of *The Gates Ajar* (1868). His influential daughter’s public opposition on feminist issues may have influenced his writing in this piece (Coultrap-McQuir 168–77). He divides feminist reform into left and right wings, but he devotes his attention to uncovering the “animus” of hostility to fundamental values in the left wing, with which his daughter was associated, those who actively campaign for woman suffrage. The main problem is their rejection of the Bible:

If the Scriptures are clear and positive on any subject related to the organization of society, they are so on this, of the position of woman in the order of nature. St. Paul defines it beyond the
reach of cavil. . . . He finds his reason for the subordination of woman in the very act of her creation. He could not well have put the case in a way more flatly antagonistic to the opposite extreme of our day. What the inspired teacher meant to say on the subject admits of no reasonable doubt. If fire is fire, the apostle’s theory of the social economy under which God placed the two sexes at the beginning, and which Christianity leaves as it finds it, makes man the head, and woman something other than the head: man the power of government, and woman not that. (409)

Phelps goes on to assert that it is anti-Christian for women to claim equality with men, flying in the face of the inspired revelations of St. Paul. Almost certainly, Phelps refers to Paul’s first letter to Timothy, where after asserting that he speaks inspired truth, Paul writes:

I will therefore . . . that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. (King James Version 2: 8-15)

Phelps and most other contributors to *The Congregationalist* asserted that a Christian was committed to accepting the Bible as God-inspired revelation and, therefore, to literal acceptance of this social law of feminine subordination within a household. To oppose this idea would place one outside the pale of Christianity, with Mormons and communists, according to Phelps.

Because feminine subordination was the divine order, it was also the natural order. Phelps describes this natural order in his critique of the notion that women, like men, can have an individual calling. This is placed within an argument that feminist reformers are opposed to woman’s natural calling, maternity. He says that this opposition to maternity is:

the inevitable sequence of any theory of life which assumes that woman has, or can have, or can discover in the wide world, a “mission” more exalted than that of a mother in her nursery. Once fill a young woman’s mind with the notion that it is a grander thing to be a speaker on the platform than to be a wife in a Christian home; that it is a nobler distinction to be a successful author than to be a happy mother of children; that it is more honorable to head a half-score of “committees” for public service than it is to be a loving daughter in a father’s house, the model of refinement to younger brothers and sisters; and you can no longer find a place of honor in her thoughts of the mission of either daughter, wife or mother. These relationships become lost ideas. They must be superlatives or nothing. The duties they involve are either honors to be proud of, or drudgeries to be got rid of. The law of nature which imposes them on woman is either the voice of God, or the voice of tyranny. (409)

Though Phelps accuses the left-wing reformers of creating the either/or binary in which other vocations are exalted over the divinely defined vocations of all women—mother, daughter, wife—it seems clear that he creates or reflects this notion. Few feminists argued seriously that most women should give up parenthood in order to follow professions or engage in other public activities. Though he sees the logic as inevitable, it simply is unreasonable to believe that because some women choose professions over parenthood that this is a recommendation that all should do so, as Nan Prince could well have
told him. Phelps expresses an almost universal assumption of his time, that for women, parenthood as a profession excluded all others. Nan Prince shares this idea, at least with regard to medicine, believing she must give up marriage if she is to be a doctor. Phelps would in principle oppose her choice; motherhood should be woman's main desire, for, as St. Paul says, a woman's potential for salvation lies in her maternity. He would see Nan's mind as filled with "notions" that wrongly turn her away from her true mission, threatening her salvation. This reveals his presumption that women's minds can be filled with notions, that they are, on the whole, untrustworthy in determining their own capacities and desires.

Phelps leads a chorus in *The Congregationalist* 1881–1884, helping to express a general anxiety about forces that threatened to cut women loose from the anchor of the home. In nearly every issue there is material that affirms or defends this view of woman's position and proper work. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues in *Disorderly Conduct*, many forces were at work that contributed to women's entering professions, finding work outside traditional domestic settings, and seeking economic independence (167-81). Phelps's essay can be seen as expressing the wish, by preventing suffrage, to hold back the forces that were drawing young women into education and the non-domestic workplace. Phelps and his contemporaries saw these trends as causes rather than as elements of the larger-scale social problems that concerned *The Congregationalist*: increasing divorce, commercial erosion of the Sabbath, concentration of various kinds of power in amoral cities, and decreasing influence of agrarian Protestant values. Phelps envisions chaos arising from allowing women the ballot:

> Not a single interest of society can escape it. The ballot is but the first of its demands. The whole sweep of the relation of the sexes, and all the duties and rights of both, must come under revision. Natural foundations on which organized society has been built from the beginning of time, and without which it is a thing not proved that organized society can exist at all, must be torn up, if this reform is carried consistently to its maturity. . . . No other theory of life has ever cut everything loose from the experience of the race, and put everything at hazard on an unproved and untried hypothesis. (409)

In the face of such a terrifying unknown, *The Congregationalist* was determined to resist those forces that seemed to be changing women's position in the social order.

Jewett was quite capable of sympathizing with *The Congregationalist*'s conservatism. As most of her readers have affirmed, her published works are in part motivated by a conservative impulse, to remember, preserve, and project into the future the kinds of communal civility she found in the best examples of New England village life. But on key issues of the woman question, Jewett disagreed with *The Congregationalist*. And she decided to express that disagreement within its very pages. How did she do this?

Though it seems unlikely that Jewett planned her series of eight pieces to culminate with the two feminist essays (the sixth and eighth contributions), a reader could entertain the suspicion. Her first contribution, "The Plea of
Insanity” (POI), from January 1882, is an unusual essay for Jewett, since it is about the trial of James Garfield’s assassin, Charles Guiteau. Jewett rarely commented on current events in her public writing. The essay summarizes The Congregationalist’s official position on Guiteau, that though he was attempting in his trial to mount an insanity defense, he was really morally depraved. A morally depraved person has given way to temptation so often that he has deprived himself of the will to do what is right and so habitually acts against his conscience. Jewett had portrayed such a character in her 1871 story, “The Boy with One Shoe.” A morally depraved person must be held responsible for his actions; therefore, Guiteau should be found guilty and executed. Though Jewett does not mention execution, all of her readers knew that this was to be Guiteau’s fate. One would be hard pressed to find so little compassion, even for a murderer, in Jewett’s other works. For example, while Garfield was slowly dying in August 1881, Jewett published a narrative poem, “Sheltered,” about a woman’s compassion for a murderer. In several ways, the essay is not characteristic of Jewett’s work, but it is quite consistent with the newspaper’s position on Guiteau’s trial. One could see the essay as calculated to establish Jewett’s orthodoxy in the minds of the editors.

One theme in this contribution that would have been attractive to her editors was the purpose of human work: “growing to be better men and women is the only purpose that is sure, in this world, of success. A man may be disappointed and baffled who wishes to be rich or wise or great in any other thing than goodness” (POI). We all are under an obligation to pursue goodness, the only human purpose at which we can succeed regardless of external circumstances. Jewett elaborates this idea in her next Congregationalist essay, “Lucky People” (LP) from May of 1882:

To each of us in his lot and place in life God gives all of Himself that we will take; and to each of us He gives this world’s good fortune for which all work and toil—if we work and toil intelligently and reasonably. There are fewer gifts and graces of existence impossible to us than we think. And if we are called away from this world to the next, while our plans and purposes are yet unfulfilled, I am ready to believe that for ourselves in the future there will be satisfaction; and, if our chosen work was worth doing, the people we leave behind are also the better for it. (LP)

Jewett quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson at the end of “Every-day Work,” and I believe Emerson’s influence appears in Jewett’s views here of the goal of human work and of the divine support for that work that she observes in experience. Especially Emersonian is the word “chosen” that appears in this passage. Emerson, in works such as “Self-Reliance,” argues that every human being has a vocation, is called by the relation of the individual soul with divinity to a particular work. Jewett may be invoking St. Paul’s support along with Emerson’s for the idea of vocations for women. The phrase “gifts and graces” perhaps refers to Romans 12:6-8, which begins, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us....” The passage goes on to admonish each person to use spiritual gifts to the full. When a person “chooses” work, he or she follows the call of divinity to the soul. Congregationalists were told by their newspaper that women all were called
to domestic labor; only men received the sort of call Emerson and Paul refer to, a unique work for each individual. Women's work had been assigned them from the time of Adam and Eve. Men have vocations in the public sphere; women are called to domestic work, to housekeeping, to motherhood, and to serving men. As will become clear, Jewett accepts the Emersonian view—in opposition to The Congregationalist—that men and women alike are individually called to all kinds of work and should respond to that call for their own development and satisfaction and for the benefit of those who live after. She seems to find the St. Paul of Romans more useful than the St. Paul of I Timothy.

Her next three contributions—a story, a book review, and another story—also may be mildly subversive. "A Guest at Home," her November 1882 story, tells of a "new woman" who returns to her village after gaining an advanced art education. She successfully reintegrates with her family and community, enriching both with diplomatic use of her education and eventually finding ways to earn a modest living. While other Congregationalist pieces complain about attitudes and expectations of young college educated women and fret about where they fit in the social and economic structure, Jewett's story points to opportunities for community enrichment in what seemed a disruptive trend to social conservatives. Indeed, there may be a sort of distant premonition here of Jane Addams and Hull House. The book review of May 1883, "A French Country Girl," recommends works of the devout Catholic Eugénie Guerin for their example of how to make the most of a retired domestic life. While the message is conventional, the medium would be something of a challenge for vocally anti-Catholic Congregationalists. Jewett may have chosen this particular writer in part because she was Catholic. Jewett also published an anonymous piece on the same topic in the Atlantic Monthly in June 1883 (854-56); if she knew this piece would appear in the Atlantic Monthly, her motivation for using it also in The Congregationalist may have more to do with rhetorical goals than with putting ideas she considers important into print. At any rate, by holding up the spirituality of Guerin's life as an example for Protestant readers, Jewett was pushing things a little, though not beyond what the editors would tolerate when the message was appropriately conservative. To find subversive thinking in the fifth piece, "A Dark Carpet" from July 1883, is somewhat more difficult, for this is mainly the story of a struggling genteel urban family that has recently lost the husband and father. It is not difficult for a modern reader to uncover ironies that arise from the dependence of the wife, the difficulties the daughters have earning a serious income from their labor, and the new dependence on a son who is just beginning adult work. However, only rather radical feminists of Jewett's time would have been likely to appreciate those ironies; it is difficult to imagine that the editors could have avoided reading this as an uplifting story of a family overcoming difficulty, much as contemporaries read Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868-69).

Jewett seems to have had in mind broadening the thinking of The
Jewett's readers between her first and sixth contribution. With her sixth piece, “Every-day Work” from September 1883, Jewett takes off her gloves but rather carefully maintains her veil of orthodoxy. Unlike any of the other seven contributions, this essay directly opposes the newspaper's position on the questions of women’s equality, vocations, and suffrage.

In “Every-day Work,” Jewett’s main argument is that housekeeping is a profession, that training helps one to do it well, and that doing it well should be a worthy and satisfying labor. To this she appends a related argument, reprinted in the June 1889 Ladies’ Home Journal, that young women should seek professional training in domestic work as the surest route to self-sufficiency (10). Such arguments were likely to interest the editors of The Congregationalist, since they are addressed to women and seem to assume that virtually all women ought to devote themselves to domestic labor. This is, indeed, the core of Jewett’s overt position in the piece, and she is sincere if not straightforward in expressing these opinions. Jewett wrote a number of pieces that directly and indirectly affirm the values of good housekeeping and the status of housekeeping as a profession that women should freely pursue, such as “A Good Girl” (1889) and “An Every-Day Girl” (1892). But there are several levels of conversation in this essay, and on one level Jewett affirms positions in opposition to the newspaper’s gender ideology.

In the fourth paragraph, Jewett reveals her assumption that women are called to vocations in the same way men are. The paragraph opens by commenting on professional women: “Every year there are more women who are fired with an ambition to be teachers, and clerks and preachers, physicians, and lawyers and artists. In every occupation and profession they have won renown, and have become useful and successful and honored” (EDW). Out of its context, this sentence could appear radical. We have seen what Austin Phelps thinks of filling young women’s heads with such notions. Seen in its context, this statement is qualified by what comes before it, Jewett’s placing in opposition “most women” whose work is domestic and a few women who have other callings. Jewett uses this opposition to qualify the opening statement. While women are called to the professions, the work that most women actually do, domestic labor, seems not to be done well, even though it is just as worthy as other professions. It is wrong to give in to discontent and do one’s ordinary work badly:

If she cannot be certain that she ought to do something else—if she knows that she is face to face with duty just where she is, she is to be most bitterly reproached if she is not in every way putting her whole thought and heart into her daily life. Having some work and liking it is the truest satisfaction this world can give; all the real pleasure and happiness of life follow in its train, and are linked with it. The minute you shirk your rightful work and try to escape from the place where you belong, you have blocked your machinery and you are worse than useless. If you wish to take a higher and better position in the world’s sight, you must earn your right to it; for whosoever climbs up another way is a thief and a robber. (EDW)

This passage, like nearly every part of the essay, has a double meaning. Jewett says directly that women who labor at home should think of them-
selves as professionals, putting heart and mind into it. But there are those 
first two “if’s,” qualifications that leave open that any woman might have 
another vocation that is not domestic. Jewett’s recommendation, it turns out, 
applies to these women, too—writers (like herself), clerks, teachers, doctors, 
preachers (a profession forbidden to Congregational women). Jewett con­
tends that a woman who resists following her rightful work and occupying 
her true place in life cannot hope to be useful or to fulfill herself. She cannot 
become one of those “lucky people” whose life work, even if left unfinished 
at death, is valuable to those who remain. Jewett’s editors are likely to have 
missed Jewett’s main implication, however, for to them a woman’s place and 
rightful work were obviously domestic. By carefully controlling the context, 
Jewett was able to carry the editors along and to veil what looks to be another 
intention, to assert that individual women actually are called to a variety of 
vocations and that it would be a mistake to prevent their responding fully to 
those calls.

In the sixth paragraph, Jewett supports women’s equality and suffrage:

The whole level of things must rise like the great tide of the sea before the world will look with 
favor upon certain new rights and privileges being given to women. It is of no use to urge the 
plea that there are no more ignorant and unprofitable women than there are men. Women have 
been called inferior, and they are ranked so; the only way to gain equality is to deserve it, and to 
show such advance in good sense, in far-sightedness and liberality of mind, in usefulness and 
steady putting aside of all shirking, in literally making the best of themselves, that the right of 
deciding certain public business matters will be a right unwise and impossible to be refused. It is 
of no use to fight the question with platform speeches and petitions to the legislatures of the dif­
ferent States, since suffrage will not come until it comes by right and not by favor. But the world 
in general has never been ready for reforms, and in a certain sense the great changes come about 
independently of ourselves, by the working of the great laws of existence which we can help or 
hinder only to a limited extent at any one point. (EDW)

This is a masterful piece of rhetoric. Consider how it probably appealed to 
the editors and, thereby, escaped their censoring pens. That women are as 
useful and intelligent as men is irrelevant to the question of equality. Women 
are ranked as inferior. The only way to gain equality is to deserve it. Women 
cannot expect to vote unless they show themselves able to handle the respon­
sibility. Public agitation by reformers is really fruitless, for social change is 
tidal, the result of large-scale forces, not of the demands of the discontented. 
Even though as I have summarized them, these ideas contain the possibility 
of woman’s equality and suffrage, they would have seemed orthodox to the 
editors and to the readers they wanted to construct and maintain. One wishes 
at this point for detailed knowledge about the Congregationalist editorial 
staff, but I have not succeeded in learning even the names of these people. 
Still, as Austin Phelps makes clear, from the point of view of Congre­
gationalist orthodoxy, there was no question of women “becoming equal” to 
men and deserving the vote. It is comparatively easy to read this paragraph 
and miss Jewett’s subtle but still direct statement that, in fact, women are 
equal to men, but only appear to be unequal, and that when this appearance 
is remedied, it will be impossible to deny them suffrage. Even if the editors
were more subtle than I give them credit for, Jewett’s statements are veiled not only by the way she has arranged this paragraph, but by the overall context. That is, if an editor happened to suspect Jewett of advocating woman’s equality and suffrage, he might rationalize that these were impossible and distant hopes being offered to persuade women to professionalize housekeeping, to become even better at domestic labor now. Such an editor would need to pay careful attention to notice that another part of Jewett’s veiled context is the assertion that women are called to vocations not exclusively as homemakers, but exactly as men are, to all kinds of work in the world. Jewett disguises her feminist position and “keeps it behind” the main ideas of the essay, but nevertheless, she states it clearly.

Jewett’s life and work suggest that, in fact, she believed social change occurs slowly and as a result of the action of forces beyond individual control. If she is masquerading here, she is not saying what she does not believe; rather she is saying what she really does believe, but under the mask of appearing to agree with The Congregationalist more than she actually does. Jewett was not a feminist activist, but she was a feminist writer. As Margaret Roman shows, Jewett could find ways to participate in feminist change by altering consciousness through her writing. It appears she created an opportunity to put into the minds of one of the largest American Protestant denominations of her time ideas contrary to their stated beliefs, to present these ideas as connected and even consistent with certain main Congregational values, and to suggest thereby the reasonableness of such ideas. A Congregational woman reading Jewett’s essay might well find herself considering, despite St. Paul’s apparent objections, that pursuing her calling with all of her heart and mind could show women to equal men, at least in the ways that make them deserving of suffrage: “in good sense, in far-sightedness and liberality of mind, in usefulness and steady putting aside of all shirking, in literally making the best of themselves” (EDW).

Though there is a good deal more one could say about the features of “Every-day Work,” several of which are problematic, and about the artfulness with which Jewett constructed it, we have perhaps seen enough to appreciate her achievement. Jewett managed to foreground the expression of values dear to the hearts of the editors of The Congregationalist, while expressing from behind that foreground screen three ideas that were opposed by virtually every other piece to comment on the topics during 1881-1884. After noticing this achievement, it may seem anticlimactic to talk about her final two contributions, so I will not say very much about them. That there were two more suggests that The Congregationalist retained confidence in Jewett, even with the appearance in 1884 of A Country Doctor. The Congregationalist praised the novel in a remarkable review:

A Country Doctor, by Sarah O. Jewett, is a most agreeable book. One hardly knows whether it is about Dr. Leslie or Nan, his charming ward, who follows in his steps professionally, and whose purpose to become a physician is almost, but not quite, overthrown by the pleas of a lover. The quiet, natural flow of the story, the positive and delightful individuality of its characters, and its
wise and wholesome teaching upon a most important subject, render it much superior to most literature of its sort. Miss Jewett has a positive genius for describing such places as Oldfields and Dunport, and such people as many of their residents herein mentioned. (June 25, 1884, 216)

What wholesome teaching the reviewer refers to is difficult to know. The editors would approve of some values the book supports, such as temperance and filial piety. And Nan Prince is a virtuous woman in all the ways that count, except that she argues vigorously that women should heed the voice that calls them individually to their vocations. Perhaps she remained an acceptable heroine because she argued that an exceptional woman whose true profession is medicine cannot marry, since marriage is another all-consuming profession. However it was managed, The Congregationalist seems not to have taken note of Jewett’s opposition to their official gender ideology.

In January 1884, Jewett contributed “A Visit Next Door,” a story not likely to disturb The Congregationalist. Two women, neighbors and friends, diverge economically and socially until their friendship seems ended. The less fortunate woman is overworked, and her health breaks down. When her friend is made to notice this, she reestabishes the friendship and helps to make her quiet and comfortable home next door a place where her less fortunate neighbor can vacation and restore her health. While the difficulties of the poorer friend point to typical problems of women in more overtly feminist fiction, the story seems squarely focused on the importance of friendship and neighborliness in sustaining communal civility.

Jewett’s final contribution was “Misdirected Energy” (ME) in October 1884. This essay follows fairly directly from “Every-day Work.” Whereas the earlier piece overtly concerned itself with reforming how women approach domestic work, the final piece looks at how domestically employed women use their leisure time. As feminist reform, this essay seems milder than “Every-day Work,” though Jewett makes a point that serves the same feminist goals. She says “fashion” seems to dictate that domestic women will use their spare time doing fancywork and decorative needlework. While she does not object to this work in itself, she thinks it a mistake for most women—who lack any special talent or derive no satisfaction from it—to sacrifice their precious leisure to such work. Instead, she recommends pursuing intellectual growth:

We are in this world for the sake of growth and development in spiritual things—for the sake of profiting by the experience of life; we ought to learn something, and grow a little, mentally and spiritually, every day of our lives; we ought to be continually elevating our uses and enlarging our horizons. (ME)

The way to do this is by reading. Though she offers the required nod to devotional reading, she makes clear that what she has in mind is an eclectic reading of the best writing of all kinds, echoing Matthew Arnold in Literature and Dogma. In the context of “Every-day Work,” Jewett can be seen to want to elevate individual women through their work and their use of leisure. By itself, “Misdirected Energy” may seem fairly conventional, except for its scanting of Bible study and devotion, for which The Congregationalist had
weekly departments. But in the context of “Every-day Work,” this essay is an extension of the effort to alter appearances and reveal the true equality of men and women. Reading the best that has been written is one way of developing such qualities as good sense, farsightedness and liberality of mind that will make women appear what they really are.

To return to my framing of this look at Jewett within Judith Butler’s discussion of subverting the gender system, one may ask what Jewett accomplished in her feminist reform contributions to The Congregationalist. In most of the stories and essays, she indirectly presents liberalizing ideas. In “Every-day Work” she affirms that women can benefit themselves and society as a whole by professionalizing the domestic work of housekeeping, practicing it as an honorable calling, divinely sanctioned as any vocation thought to belong to men. This in itself is somewhat subversive, not because of gender ideology’s “official” rationalizations, but because, in practice, housekeeping is not thought of as a profession. Tom in Jewett’s “Tom’s Husband” learns this as he becomes absorbed in housekeeping as women typically experience it. He finds the position degrading and destructive of the self:

He seemed to himself to have merged his life in his wife’s; he lost his interest in things outside the house and grounds; he felt himself fast growing rusty and behind the times, and to have somehow missed a good deal in life; he had a suspicion that he was a failure. One day the thought rushed over him that his had been almost exactly the experience of most women, and he wondered if it really was any more disappointing and ignominious to him than it was to women themselves. “Some of them may be contented with it,” he said to himself, soberly. “People think women are designed for such careers by nature, but I don’t know why I ever made such a fool of myself.”

Having once seen his situation in life from such a stand-point, he felt it day by day to be more degrading, and he wondered what he should do about it. . . . (TH)

By taking on the role of housekeeper, Tom is transformed psychologically into a “woman.” He comes to feel circumscribed, alienated, dependent, inadequate, and diminished in his subjectivity. Jewett “wounds” Tom to suit him for domestic work in the first place, giving him a childhood injury that keeps him indoors during the formative years of boyhood, and then weakening his eyes in college so he was unable to complete his degree and was further inclined to depend upon his family wealth rather than industry. Tom’s experience reflects the attitude towards “woman’s labor” that Austin Phelps expresses when he imagines women involved in law and legislation, “the absurdity of the intermingling of the gravest duties of the court-room and the Senate Chamber, with those of the nursery” (409).

More directly subversive than the proposal to raise the respectability of housekeeping is Jewett’s veiled argument that women are called to vocations and that their success in such vocations illustrates their equality with men, and, therefore, if this equality can be made even more visible to society as a whole, in part by professionalizing housekeeping, then suffrage must follow. But how subversive is it simply to gain a hearing for these ideas from a presumably hostile audience?
What Jewett seems likely to have accomplished is to insinuate a new way of seeing and thinking into a discourse of gender that opposed her point of view. We can admire her subtlety, but we may wonder whether it was worth the trouble. Jewett seemed to think it was. Though I lack precise information about what The Congregationalist paid its contributors, it is likely Jewett got rather little for these pieces, perhaps as little as twenty dollars each, which The Independent was paying as its “highest rate” in 1879 (Coultrap-McQuin 133). Income probably was not a strong motivation. Jewett enjoyed playing a joke, as she confessed to John Greenleaf Whittier after she anonymously published an amusing hoax on “A Color Cure” in the Contributor’s Club column of the Atlantic Monthly in 1882 (Cary, “Some Bibliographic Ghosts” 140-41). But these signed essays do not seem intended as jokes, and it is not consistent with what we know of Jewett’s character to imagine her placing “Every-day Work” in The Congregationalist just to see if it could be done. More likely Jewett seriously intended to undermine in a non-confrontational way the newspaper’s anti-feminism. To introduce a counter-current into the flow of anti-feminist discourse probably could not change the course of history, but it is consistent with Jewett’s view that one can influence the operations of the great laws of existence only in limited ways. She chose to bait ideology in one of the caves of its dissemination. Or perhaps more precisely, she chose to soothe the beast in its drowse while quietly shaking its spellbound prisoners towards wakefulness. Whether the effort was successful, I cannot measure, but in Judith Butler’s terms it would qualify as a good effort. Jewett seems to have evaded the attention of those editors who were so conscientious about placing feminist views within a dominating anti-feminist frame. By using the veil, Jewett evaded the frame, and perhaps spoke softly—in a way not likely to polarize—and so she could be heard in the privacy of the reading chair. While feminist activists like Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe could appear in The Congregationalist only as the proscribed “opposition,” Jewett was able to express their very ideas without being seen as such. By this means, Jewett might attract readers to her other more overtly feminist works, such as A Country Doctor. Activist tactics could galvanize those who were open to their views, but the vigorous framing efforts of Congregationalist editors pressed readers to reject any words from that direction. Jewett’s approach provided women readers especially with an “orthodox” way of conceiving their equality with men. Her efforts may be seen as aimed more at converting than at mobilizing. Perhaps with her tactics, Jewett created a space in which those many women, who—The Congregationalist was persuaded—did not want the vote, could seriously consider a more open future of cultural possibilities for feminine identities.

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