

MARIETTA HOLLEY ON TEMPERANCE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: FRAMING AND INTERPRETING A LEGACY OF SOCIAL REFORM.

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Abstract:

The values of historical figures may be misconstrued when later scholars view

the past through a perspective of newer facts and beliefs. Such revisionist research can apply new values to reshape understanding, but in the process may inadvertently marginalize or invalidate the original values at stake. Consequently, the interpretation of past events and cultural trends can be very different from the intended meaning of the principals involved. An examination of the life, work, and legacy of Marietta Holley exemplifies this type of skewed interpretation. As a writer, supporter of political rights for women, and advocate of social reforms in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, Holley had ample opportunity both to express her personal values and to influence American society. Holley became a focus of twentieth century feminist scholars who framed her work to further a specific interpretation of feminist history – in the process these scholars displaced Holley’s values and the meaning of her legacy and niche in American culture.

Studying Holley illuminates the creative ways through which a group can exercise freedom within a restrictive social environment, using that very creativity to challenge that environment. This thesis will address two major questions: how Holley constructed a unique personal legacy through the use of language and actions as a humorist, temperance and women’s rights proponent, and social reformer; and how a number of twentieth and twenty-first century researchers distorted her intended impact on American social and cultural development. The Holley analysts placed her within a frame of women’s rights and distanced the scholarship from an alternative interpretation that temperance was her main reform cause and the impetus behind her women’s rights stance.

As this thesis will reveal, both life and literature reflected values that found expression in female involvement in the temperance and women’s rights movements. Holley believed in political and social empowerment for women, especially as that female power could be used constructively toward reform. With Holley as a focal point for the convergence of women’s history, culture, and literature, this study will explore her place in popular fiction and find alternative interpretations for the influence she hoped to have on society.

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