Introduction

The career of Mark Twain (1835–1910) intersects with major issues, both “literary” and “political,” and his adoption and modulation of many matters of wide interest makes him a representative figure. This book is particularly concerned with his representations of the “feminine,” but it is perhaps best to start with a brief outline of the larger historical context within which Twain’s work should be viewed.

With increasing industrial and commercial development in the course of the nineteenth century, the American woman’s place in the economy was undermined. As the workplace became separate from the home for greater numbers of people, the sphere of women became more distinctly domestic in contrast to the growing public opportunities for men. Women’s natures, too, came to be defined in terms of the home, whereas men were encouraged to identify with a larger world of business enterprise. Women could not own property for much of the period, and did not have the vote: for the most part they did not benefit from this increase of choice and opportunity. With the changes in the economic structure came adjustments in social structure, and subsequently in popular ideology. Two different models of behaviour, contained in the concepts of masculinity and femininity, were evolved to explain and enforce this gendered segregation. Middle-class men, and those living in large towns, inhabited a masculine world of commerce and politics, associated with the management and future of the nation. Such a strong combination of economic and cultural forces also fostered a stronger felt feeling with other men, who shared these same gendered preoccupations.

On the other hand, women inhabited an increasingly private, domestic world, and, it has been alleged, their function within the economy came to be defined more in terms of consumption than in
terms of production, as they supposedly educated their aesthetic tastes to enjoy the leisure and goods earned by the activities of their fathers, husbands, and sons. They were sheltered from, and by, economic developments, and the concept of womanhood that resulted was designed to justify this exclusion from the world outside the home, and to give women some kind of subordinate status as creatures worthy of protection. They still retained their biological importance, and feminine culture attempted to enhance (and disguise) this residual function with manifold attractions and moral imperatives. Hence, while men were being overtly and indirectly encouraged to be competitive and economically oriented, middle-class women were being inculcated with complementary “virtues” of delicacy, submission, nurturance, an appreciation of beauty, and religious interest. Whereas men had power and were invited to aim for more, women were advised to cultivate traits that would flatter masculinity, as this would give them “influence,” or the ability to control from a subservient position. Although women had traditionally been treated as subservient to men, this imbalance was developed by the emergence of American industrial capitalism, turning it from an unpleasant fact of life into a subject for elaborate social commentary. The improvement in literacy rates and in publishing technology meant that this disparity could be intensively discussed in the proliferating novels, journals, newspapers, tracts, health and conduct books of the era, the most significant proportion of which were produced in the Northeast.

Given the dynamic, worldly nature of the masculine role, “feminine influence” came to occupy aesthetic and metaphysical fields; there was a “feminization,” a “Pink and White Tyranny,” whereby women exploited their femininity in order to colonize those areas of social interest that had been, at least partly, abandoned by men. The false values that came of this sheltered environment, it has been argued, insinuated themselves into religion and the arts, which were sentimentalized, and made to reflect the closed, narcissistic world of women. This was entirely in keeping with the interests of masculinity, in that ceding status to women was a proof of civilization: the spread of feminine values at a non-essential level hid actual commercial rapaciousness and dehumanizing competitiveness; it concealed the fact that materialism was the predominant force in the country.

It follows from this exposition that femininity was in fact a by-product of masculinity. It was created by the restrictions imposed on women, and it served masculinity, sponsoring those decorative values that gave society a human aspect, without endangering or impeding the enactment of power. It also follows that femininity need not have a completely female connotation: male writers could be as exigent or
persuasive in arguing the value of the feminine as women themselves; indeed, the gentility and refinement of Northeastern male writers, their very “literariness,” was often seen as “effeminate.” Men could also succeed in masculine terms by exploiting the demand for literature that employed feminine values. Similarly, the clergy increasingly abandoned the rigorous Calvinistic theology of the preceding era in favor of a softer Christianity which would reflect and encourage the protected interests and values of their greatest consumers, women. It also follows that, if men were bound to a mixture of competition and fraternization in their relations with other men, if a gentler life was to be found, it would be within the home. Women’s world had to function as a retreat for men from the masculine world: women took upon themselves the non-utilitarian values that men wished to possess or experience, but could not incorporate into their outside lives. Femininity in women, in this sense, represented a displacement onto women of that which was “feminine” in men.

These influences and necessities led to a culture, constructed across a variety of forms and genres, which I have collectively called the feminine aesthetic. Although it was argued by Victorians and by subsequent writers that femininity is an unchanging quality resulting almost solely from the fact of being female, I should make it clear that I concur with those cultural historians who have viewed such gendered aspirations as contingent on a larger social and economic reality. One obvious way of proving this is by turning aside from the history of ideology to look instead at the actual lives of men and women. We find countless examples of people who failed or were unhappy in their predetermined roles, and especially numbers of women who were embittered and antagonistic toward the circumscription of their lives. This would suggest that these roles were not based on essential biological or spiritual facts. Similarly, we can find examples of variation in ideology from region to region, and from one era to the next. There are also many examples of people who chose or were obliged to adopt modes of life that were contradictory to their supposedly natural propensities. Therefore, when I discuss the feminine aesthetic, I am referring to a system of beliefs and attitudes, expressed in a variety of discourses, which should be related to the specific social, political, and economic context of their production.

The topic of feminization has been represented and interpreted by many cultural historians, literary critics, and writers. D. H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* affirms the idea that many of his chosen texts are paradigmatic of “embattled masculinity”; he sympathized with what has elsewhere been described as “anxious male autobiography,” writing that the American Eagle is a “hen-eagle,” and
reflected on “American women in their perfect ‘suits’. American men in their imperfect coats and skirts!” Some of the earliest Twain scholars gave it considerable emphasis in their work. Van Wyck Brooks asserted that Twain would have been a much greater artist had it not been for the feminine influences of his mother, his wife, William Dean Howells, and Northeastern culture generally. He claimed that during the nineteenth century “a sort of unconscious conspiracy actuated all America against the creative life.” He wrote that “the cultural domination of this emasculated New England played into the hands of the business régime,” thereby inviting his readers to reject all women’s writing, and indeed all Northeastern writing, as negligible, or somehow “uncreative.” Brooks wished to see a “vital, restless, critical, disruptive spirit of artistic individuality,” and the chagrin that underlies his book is derived from the belief that Twain, potentially an ideal literary hero, was stymied by the women in his life, and by the influence of feminine aesthetics generally. Twain, supposedly, was somehow obliged to share the values of these women, and it was this that prevented him from producing a “free,” “authentic,” and implicitly masculine literature. Although Brooks did not approve of the “philistinism” of American commercialization, in terms of aesthetics he privileged the masculine over the feminine, finding in Huckleberry Finn’s rejection of feminine civilization a truly “free” literary expression. Mark Twain’s greatness lay in his partial evasion of women and feminine values. Brooks does not satisfactorily explain Twain’s coercive writings in favor of femininity and the male privileges that helped to produce it.

Bernard De Voto, though he reacted against the pessimism of Brooks’s Twain, also characterized the “authentic” “American” theme specifically as an escape from feminine influence. “The loneliness of prairie and forest suffuses American literature,” he wrote, “to make our most authentic theme. It was not hidden from boys.” Lionel Trilling supported this notion in his essay, “The Greatness of Huckleberry Finn,” in which he wrote, “No one, as [Twain] well knew, sets a higher value on truth than a boy. Truth is the whole of a boy’s conscious demand upon the world of adults.” De Voto relished the “enormously male” literary tradition out of which Twain sprang, and, like Brooks, duplicated long-standing prejudices that can be traced back to Twain himself. He describes the blacks, for instance, as a “humble race, simpler than most, more joyful, more bawdy”, and, of a letter to the Boston Advertiser complaining that no women had been present at the Whittier literary dinner when, the correspondent asserted, surely Harriet Beecher Stowe had deserved a place, De Voto remarked that this was “refined womanhood practicing its fury.” Brooks’s and Lawrence’s criticism of Northeastern culture as “emasculated” is reproduced by DeVoto as
“cryptorchism,” again encouraging the belief that masculine culture is the only valid, “authentic,” “American” culture.⁸

The attitudes of these writers are representative of a larger consensus which has prevailed for much of the present century. Predominantly male, white, middle-class writers and critics have written enthusiastically of the male, white, middle-class writers of the previous century, introducing women’s and “feminine” narratives as the antagonistic background which shows the achievements of the men in an even more heroic light. Such critics have tended to bemoan the feminine aesthetic as a barely tolerable handicap placed on Melville, Hawthorne, Twain and others, who were obliged to compete for readers with, in Hawthorne’s phrase, “a damned mob of scribbling women.”⁹ Women writers, and male writers with “feminine” views to espouse, are supposed to have saturated the market with their sentimental, romantic, didactic products. These critics tended to confuse feminine influence with actual power. Herbert Ross Brown declared that it “was not strange . . . that the household gods should be worshiped in a society controlled by women,”¹⁰ and Fred Lewis Pattee interpreted the worst moments in American history as the result of feminine perversion of right-minded masculinity. In his book, The Feminine Fifties, he wrote, “What caused the colossal explosion we call the Civil War? Read the title of my volume.”¹¹ Although Brooks wrote critically of the economic order, most of these writers located the problem in women and their reinforcements, as though masculinity were a natural, independent state, in contrast to the artificial, reactionary culture of women. Rather than investigating the contending aesthetics of masculinity and femininity as interdependent concepts in the context of broader social struggles, they have for the most part sided with male writers and the values of masculinity, representing feminization as a vindictive crusade led by troublesome and self-indulgent women. Their view of the feminine aesthetic has equated “popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority.”¹²

As women gained influence as critics and scholars, this critical consensus was undermined. By far the most comprehensive rewriting of the subject is Ann Douglas’s The Feminization of American Culture. She wrote that, “As if in fear of contamination, historians have ignored what Harriet Beecher Stowe astutely called ‘Pink and White Tyranny’: the drive of nineteenth-century American women to gain power through the exploitation of their feminine identity as their society defined it.” Douglas defined feminization as the struggle of dispossessed women to gain influence in a society in which they had little actual power. They elevated the importance of their own sphere in a massive cultural effort,
bringing to the fore “feminine” values of sympathy, sentiment, nurturance, and spirituality. However, she also argued that the resulting culture, being the product of a sheltered world which had little contact with the industrial and commercial “realities” of the age, was degenerate and narcissistic. The result, in Douglas’s view, was that women occupied their growing leisure hours with mass-produced sentimental and romantic literature, becoming unquestioning and self-indulgent consumers “living a dream-life in the busiest, most wide-awake society in the world.” The general effect of this feminizing process was deleterious because, while masking rampant materialism with its delicate humanity, its coy, self-praising fictions removed all rigor from American intellectual life. In this way, Douglas arrives at a viewpoint not dissimilar to that of Brooks.

If Douglas interpreted the cultivation of the feminine as the passive acceptance of a bribe (the acceding of status and leisure in return for subservience and exclusion), more recent, feminist critics have tended to see feminization as making a virtue out of necessity. Writers such as Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, Cathy Davidson and Nancy Armstrong have chosen to focus on the fact that women had no choice in the matter; that the feminine aesthetic itself was a weapon for converting others to feminine interests; and that, whatever the ideology, many women’s lives were marked more by hard work, isolation, and the very real perils of frequent childbirth, than by leisure and an elaboration of vanity. Other historians have shown the way in which supposedly objective medical discourse, mostly produced by men, reinforced the limitations imposed on women, or made the female body the site of contention for social authority. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Mary Ryan have provided case studies of women who did seek to play an active part in society, and who used feminine culture as an effective support-network.

With regard to ideology, Baym, Tompkins and Davidson have stressed that the literary tradition which evolved was often designed to deal with the problems facing women in America. Far from providing a simple escapist indulgence, many women’s books helped their readers to overcome the hazards and difficulties of their existence. Baym counters charges of sentimentalism in women’s fiction by reminding her reader that such novels were “full of poverty, coarseness, brutality, exploitation, treachery, pettiness, illness, exhaustion, degradation, and suffering”; that the plots “repeatedly identify immersion in feeling as one of the great temptations and dangers for a developing woman”, and that, far from providing the camouflage suggested by Brooks and Douglas, these books posit domesticity as “a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is
perceived to prevail in American society." Davidson, writing of the rise of the novel in the post-revolutionary period, asserts that the seemingly melodramatic plots of sentimental novels were not as absurd as they might appear to the modern reader, and that in fact, “Given the political and legal realities of the time, the lack of birth control, the high fertility rate, and the substantial chances of death at an early age, many of the readers fared no better than did their most unfortunate fictional sisters.” Tompkins, too, deliberately jettisons the traditional “unchanging formal, psychological, or philosophical standards of complexity, truth or correctness” associated with literary criticism, in favor of a method which “attends to the way a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social or religious conditions.” She describes feminine aesthetics not as the invidious capitulation described by Douglas, but as a positive attempt “to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view”.

The fact is that American women simply could not assume a stance of open rebellion against the conditions of their lives for they lacked the material means of escape or opposition. They had to stay put and submit. And so the domestic novelists made that necessity the basis on which to build a power structure of their own. Instead of rejecting the culture’s value system outright, they appropriated it for their own use, subjecting the beliefs and customs that had molded them to a series of transformations that allowed them both to fulfill and transcend their appointed roles.

The accuracy of either Tompkins or Douglas must to some extent remain conditional: some women lived in peaceful seclusion, consuming romances, fashions and fashionable preachers with no feeling of disadvantage, successfully subdued by a culture that had little use for them; others must have found in books and journals useful advice and consolation in an otherwise restrained and mundane life; others still actively campaigned, and deliberately created their novels, journalistic pieces and poems, covertly or directly, to gain more power.

Mary Poovey raises the question as to whether we should stress “women’s ability to capitalize on and enhance the kinds of power that the nineteenth-century moralization of women and the feminization of virtue generated,” or whether it is more appropriate to emphasize “the restrictions women suffered as a consequence of being idealized.” An important element of her response is the assertion that sexual difference was the primary difference on which all others were based. This “binary logic” and “oppositional thinking” was used to confirm other social arrangements, such as the sexual division of labor and the model of moral influence. She argues that “both men and women were subject . . . to the constraints imposed by binary organization of difference and the foregrounding of sexual nature . . . men were too thoroughly ensnared in
the contradictions that characterized this ideology to be charged with being simple oppressors.”

It is this comprehension of feminization as an ideological process that involved men and women, both in its creation and its effects, that I will argue in this study. The question of feminization has recently been used to bring about changes in the canon of literature that has usually been studied and considered important. Feminist critics have argued that writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner should have a place in any discussion of American literature. It might be construed as a recidivist action, therefore, to approach the subject via the work of a man. However, it seems to me that if feminine aesthetics were to some extent developed by men, or in relation to male domination, then the masculinist outlook should also be considered. The feminist revision of the issue, which has emphasized the various uses women made of their cultural advantages, has tended to avoid consideration of the male uses of the same aesthetic. Mark Twain is a representative example of a man who tried, with a variety of techniques, to both enforce and moderate the cult of femininity. He can be used to suggest the intended integration of masculine and feminine values, the uses that the feminine aesthetic had for men, and to illustrate the threat that “excessive” femininity contained. For although Twain is usually associated with a boyish, picaresque world, he returned throughout his career to the questions raised by the role and nature of the feminine aesthetic.

My analysis of Twain’s writings as they relate to the discourse of gender involves discussion of “works” such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in combination with “non-literary” texts such as newspaper reports, letters, autobiographical statements, and the productions of his daughter and one of his servants. A traditional literary critic, who might object to a confusion of the self-consciously literary text with other writings, would find it extremely difficult to enforce this distinction in the case of Twain, as some of his most famous books contain a strong autobiographical element. Equally, Twain was eager for a (carefully selected) edition of his letters to be published after his death, presumably believing that it would add to his literary and general cultural status. In reading Twain (or any other author), we should be aware that all writings constitute an aesthetic and ideological presentation of one kind or another, and are therefore suitable for analysis. Although Twain sometimes tried to deny this rhetorical aspect by stressing the “Hard Facts” and “information” to be found in his works, and often using the gambit of unpremeditated “eye-witness” urgency, we should treat this as “the most artful artlessness.” Similarly, we should not try to locate a coherent, individualized subject in the name of the author: he or she was subject to all the influences that appear in his or her texts. Indeed, if we
are relying on the author’s texts (and associated ones) for an understanding of that author, we are essentially treating the author as a text, or as a noun to describe collective elements which appear in a variety of texts.26 As Twain wrote to an unknown clergyman in considering the notion that he had been formed by his reading, and had subjected himself, unconsciously or half-consciously, to “training processes”: “Doubtless I have methods, but they beget themselves; in which case I am only their proprietor, not the father.”27
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Mark Twain’s early career

THE WEST IN ROUGHING IT

In 1861, Twain’s brother, Orion Clemens, was appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory. Twain adopted the nominal position of assistant secretary, and both departed by stagecoach for the West on July 26, 1861.¹ Twain spent much of the next year trying to make his fortune in the mining regions of Nevada, but succumbed to the offer of regular employment with the Virginia City Territory Enterprise in August, 1862.² He lived in the West for a total of five years; until May 29, 1864, he spent most of his time in and around Virginia City and Carson City, Nevada, at which point he went to work in San Francisco. In the winter of 1864–5 he again spent time in mining camps, this time in California, at Jackass Hill in Tuolumne County and Angel’s Camp in Calaveras County, before returning to San Francisco in February, 1865. He departed for the East by sea on December 15, 1866.³ While in the West, therefore, he experienced the miner’s life, the life of the mining town, and the life of the great, if recently constructed, metropolis. There are two distinct types of literary source for this period: the contemporary commentary, consisting of the various articles and sketches that Twain wrote for the newspapers and journals; and the retrospective overview to be found, most importantly in Roughing It.

Roughing It was written in the period from September 1870 to October 1871. This was not long after he had left California. The pressures of his new life were extreme. He had married into a very proper and wealthy Eastern family, and, not long after settling in Buffalo, his father-in-law died; a friend of his wife’s died while visiting the household, and his son, who was patently lacking in physical robustness, was born.⁴ This may account, to some extent, for the way in