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INTRODUCTION

Olivia Louise Langdon was Jervis and Olivia Lewis Langdon's first biological child, born on November 27, 1845, in the fourteenth year of her parents' marriage.[1] Her sister Susan, born in 1836, had been adopted early in Susan's childhood;[2] her biological brother Charles would be born in 1849.[3]

At the time of Langdon's birth her parents had lived in Elmira only one year. Through the course of a career that began with shopkeeping in a succession of upstate New York towns and ended with a modest coal empire, Jervis Langdon had become involved with the lumber business, and had come to Elmira in 1845 to establish a lumber company in partnership with Sylvester G. Andrus. The business prospered; the partners invested in coal as well as lumber, operating mines not only in New York's Southern Tier but also in northern Pennsylvania. By 1860 the Elmira census listed Jervis Langdon, then age 51, as having real estate valued at $92,000 and a personal estate valued at $50,000.[4] Although this did not put him in a league with Jay Gould, it did ensure his family a comfortable living. In the early 1860s the Langdons moved from the modest house in which Olivia Louise had been born and reared to a mansion built the previous decade by the late Anson C. Ely, one of the organizers of the local bank.[5] Most of 1866 was spent renovating the new house, including installing a furnace and a water closet, and creating a conservatory that opened out from the dining room.[6] By the time Samuel

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Clemens appeared on the scene in 1868, the Langdons were established as one of the leading families in town.

The Langdon seniors were committed to social progress and human equality in addition to material success. During the 1830s, when they lived in Millport, about twenty miles from Elmira and at that time a thriving lumber and boat-building town on the Chemung Canal, they may have been involved with the Underground Railroad.[7] At the very least, they lodged Frederick Douglass, a known fugitive slave, on one of his lecturing trips through the region, and as letters from him document, continued to offer him hospitality when he was in the Elmira area.[8] In an era when few whites, even "liberal" ones, felt sufficiently comfortable with African Americans to socialize with them as equals, putting a black man in the guest room and welcoming him to the breakfast and dinner table was no mean sign of courage and commitment. In a further demonstration of that commitment, the Langdons were among the parishioners who separated from the Presbyterian Church in 1846 when it refused to condemn slavery. Founding members of the Independent Congregational Church (later the Park Congregational Church), they were intimate friends of Thomas K. Beecher, a theological radical, and Julia Beecher, his feminist wife. Although no documentation can be found to substantiate it, local lore insists that during their years in Elmira prior to the Civil War, Jervis and Olivia Lewis Langdon, with their friends Thomas K. Beecher, James M. Robinson, William Yates, and Riggs Watrous, were financial backers of the branch of the Underground Railroad that came through Elmira and that was "conducted" by ex-slave John W. Jones.[9] Certainly during these and subsequent years they were host to such inflammatory visitors as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Gerrit Smith.[10] Jervis Langdon was also an early supporter of Elmira College, the first U.S. college to be chartered to grant the baccalaureate to women.[11] As one sign of their support for the college, he and his wife moved their daughter Olivia from the excellent school that she had been attending to the college's preparatory branch.

Despite her parents' wealth and social commitments and the

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apparently harmonious relations among her family, Olivia Louise Langdon's adolescence was not without trial. A slow, unspecified illness consumed the years that she and her parents expected to be devoted to education. In 1860, when she was fourteen, she was apparently sufficiently debilitated to be placed in residence at the Elmira Water Cure, a well-known hydropathy establishment about two miles from her home. Run by Drs. Silas O. and Rachel Brooks Gleason, the Water Cure attracted men and women famous and obscure; our knowledge of Langdon's stint there is indebted to a letter from her roommate, Isabella Beecher Hooker, who came to the cure from her home in Hartford, Connecticut. For Langdon, however, the Water Cure did not succeed, and she spent the majority of the next six years in various sanitariums in Washington, D.C., and New York City.

Mark Twain legend – possibly invented and certainly perpetrated by Twain himself – has it that Langdon fell on the ice at the age of sixteen, was paralyzed, and spent two years in bed until a faith healer "raised" her in 1864. Laura Skandera has recently traced Langdon's movements and treatments during these years and has hypothesized that she had contracted Potts Disease, a paralysis of the spine, for which she was finally successfully treated by homeopathic doctors Charles and George Taylor at their well-known clinic in New York City.[12] It is clear from her mother's diary that Langdon lived in New York City for a time without her family, and that by 1866 she had returned home, where she was steadily, if slowly, gaining strength. Her commonplace book, which she began while she was at the Taylors' clinic, gives some indication of her interests during her time in therapy; after 1866 her mother's diary, as well as Langdon's own letters to her friend Alice Hooker, and Hooker's letters to *her* mother Isabella, indicate that much of Langdon's energy was devoted to catching up on both the education and the social life she had missed during her years in the sanitariums. By the time she met Clemens in New York City late in 1867 she was sufficiently recovered to join her family for their winter shopping and theater spree, but she was easily fatigued and still prone to rest in the family suite at the St.

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Nicholas Hotel more than the others. She would be known as delicate and susceptible to disease the rest of her life; in the midst of her delicacy, however, she managed to bear four children, run a complex household, entertain lavishly, and do a considerable amount of journeying around the world.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens's early biography is much better known than his wife's and needs little recapitulation here. Born on November 30, 1835 in Florida, Missouri, member of a large and at times tragic family, he spent his childhood in Hannibal, thirty miles from his birthplace, on the Mississippi River. Clemens's father, John Marshall Clemens, was like Jervis Langdon in keeping shop; he was unlike him in being largely unsuccessful. After his death in 1847, Clemens's brother Orion, a printer, largely supported the family, while their mother, Jane Lampton Clemens, took in boarders and the other family members chipped in.

Clemens's formal schooling, never very consistent, ended in 1849. In 1848 he began to learn the printer's trade; in 1851 he went to work for Orion, and over the next few years he wrote and printed his first humorous sketches. By 1855 the entire Clemens family had left Hannibal: brother Orion to go to Keokuk, Iowa, home of his new wife, Mollie Stotts, where he set up a print shop and briefly employed Sam; sister Pamela, now married to William Moffett, to St. Louis, where their mother, Jane Lampton Clemens, and presumably their younger brother Henry, joined her. In 1857 Clemens apprenticed himself to steamboat pilot Horace Bixby; receiving his license early in 1859, he successfully piloted the Mississippi until 1861, when fear that he would be impressed by Union forces motivated him to enlist in the Confederate volunteers.

Clemens's stint in the military lasted two weeks. After crawling about the countryside searching for battles (in order, he later claimed, to avoid them) his troop disbanded and Clemens accepted a job as Orion's secretary when that peripatetic sibling decided to move to Nevada to work for the territorial governor. Over the succeeding seven years Samuel Clemens's horizons

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broadened and Mark Twain was born. Clemens's assignment to Orion's staff lasted no longer than any of his previous jobs with his brother. After it ended Clemens spent part of his time learning how to be a miner, more of it speculating in mining stock, and the most useful part of it learning how to write. Beginning as a correspondent for several western papers, he at one point rose to the position of staff reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*. Living in a boom/bust economy, he followed its customs, alternating between boarding houses in the territories and luxurious hotels in San Francisco. Though he had been using pseudonyms since 1852, he first signed letters "Mark Twain" early in 1863. During this period he also began to publish in eastern papers; "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" was reprinted throughout the country. In 1866 – the year Olivia Langdon returned home from her years in sanitariums – he traveled to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) as a correspondent for the Sacramento *Union*; in addition to the newspaper letters that resulted, this trip also launched his lecturing career, when he developed a series of highly successful talks about the islands after his return. In 1867 Clemens returned to the East, edited his first collection of sketches (*The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*), lectured on the Sandwich Islands, and engaged to be the correspondent for the New York *Tribune*, the New York *Herald*, and the *Alta California* on the first organized tour from the United States to Europe and the Holy Land. The *Quaker City*, the ship chartered for the jaunt, left New York in June; one of its passengers was Olivia Langdon's brother Charles, whom Mark Twain would befriend on the boat and later immortalize in *The Innocents Abroad* as "the Interrogation Point." Returning to the States in November, he worked briefly in Washington, D.C., and contracted with the American Publishing Company in Hartford, Connecticut, to turn his *Quaker City* letters into a book. In December he visited New York, where Charles Langdon introduced him to his family at their suite in the St. Nicholas Hotel. That night the entire group went to hear Charles Dickens read.

The Courtship of Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain began as a study

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Jervis Langdon, *c.* 1869. The Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

Olivia Lewis Langdon, *c.* 1870. The Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

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Olivia Louise Langdon, *c.* 1857. The Mark Twain House, Hartford, Connecticut.

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of the cultural – especially the reading – environment into which Mark Twain married. It has evolved into the story of a courtship largely because the more I examined the similarities and dissimilarities between Samuel Clemens and Olivia Langdon, the more I wondered how they resolved their differences. As I studied 1860s Elmira and pieced together the Langdon family history I discovered an unexpectedly vibrant and intellectually engaged community and a family whose moral and social commitments suggested a very different profile from that which most of Twain's biographers had drawn, and I felt that this information was crucial to an understanding of the Clemens's relationship. With this, Samuel Clemens's own letters of the period reveal a figure who was more the settled bourgeois, the middle-class American who shared his contemporaries' basic assumptions, than I had expected him to be in 1868.

What interested me most was the – for want of a better word – "intellectual" environment of Langdon's and Clemens's courtship. For most of this century scholars have denigrated Langdon's tastes, values, and general education, portraying her as a neurotic nonentity in her youth and a paragon of dull propriety in her maturity. My own past work on nineteenth-century women readers had already taught me to be leery of blanket statements about female neurosis and ignorance, and I found that Langdon, like most of the other nineteenth-century American women who had the misfortune to come to the attention of twentieth-century critics, had been grossly caricatured by her husband's biographers. When I tried to look at Langdon's intellectual life I realized that she is most usefully seen within the context of serious nineteenth-century women readers – not the Margaret Fullers of the era, not the writers who read as an aspect of their profession, but the women who, never aspiring to authorship, read for information, for pleasure, for models, and for spiritual and intellectual improvement. Consumers of literature as of other tangible goods, serious women readers used books in their creation of a highly structured moral and material environment. In her life as in her reading Langdon strove to be a responsible member of this com-

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munity, and her contemporaries were nearly unanimous in their praise.

Clearly Langdon's passion for books was one of her attractions for Clemens, as was his similar passion an attraction for her. Unlike their incomes and past experiences, books provided them with common ground. It also gave Clemens a chance to pose as Langdon's intellectual superior, an opportunity he eagerly seized and that has provided critics with ammunition for destroying Langdon's own credibility. But taking Clemens's airy superiority at face value effectively prevents appreciation first, of Langdon's own intellectual background and agenda; second, of the cultural values that she and Clemens shared; and third, of the respect with which Clemens often received her opinions. Their reading behaviors certainly reveal individual tastes and personalities, but they also demonstrate common cultural assumptions.

Until very recently, few critics have been willing to explore Langdon's life and values. The early years of the twentieth century saw a widespread reaction against the cultural assumptions that she represented, and nineteenth-century women, with the male artists (such as William Dean Howells) who supported them, became the victims of a generational rebellion. Olivia Langdon was one of these victims; in devaluing everything she valued, twentieth-century critics left themselves no way to evaluate *her*. Additionally in their need to paint her as a zealot of Victorian propriety they missed entirely her sense of humor, her flexibility, and her capacity for fun. It would seem impossible to write a biography of Mark Twain without knowing something of the mind, habits, values, and worldview of the woman with whom he lived for thirty-four years, but most of Twain's biographers have done precisely that, in the process skewing their presentations of their materials so that Clemens's family life is either ignored or misrepresented. Hence not just Langdon but also Clemens has been done an injustice. Mark Twain may have been as saintly or as devilish, as sane or as neurotic, as passive or as manipulative, as he has been painted by the various biographical camps that have tackled him, but he cannot be assessed without genuine at-

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tention to the people with whom he daily interacted – and the emphasis here must be on interaction, not mere reaction. Perhaps because it was composed of women, the family that most of Twain's early biographers portray is flat, a collective background for Mark Twain's angst and antics. And Langdon's own background is rarely more than suggested, and then only to be dismissed.

In the past few years scholars have attempted to address this issue, either focusing on Langdon exclusively or factoring a more complex character into discussions of Twain. In *Getting To Be Mark Twain,*[13] for instance, Jeffrey Steinbrink adds a rich and informed consciousness of Langdon and her Elmira connections to his study of Mark Twain's years in Buffalo. Reesa Willis has attempted a full-scale biography of Langdon in *Mark and Livy,*[14] and Laura Skandera-Trombley has explored Langdon's medical history, the women among whom she was reared, and Elmira's social history in *Mark Twain in the Company of Women.* Guy Cardwell's evaluations of Langdon in *The Man Who Was Mark Twain*[15] also attempt to resurrect something of the historical figure.

I hope that this book will contribute to Olivia Langdon's reevaluation. Inevitably, this entails shifting perspectives on the man she married. The more I began to know 1860s Elmira, Jervis and Olivia Lewis Langdon, and Olivia Langdon and her friends, the more I began to realize both how like and unlike them Clemens was. *Like,* in that they were all white Westerners, assuming in the depths of their being that their race, age, and culture were superior; like in that they all held (consciously at least) the same class values – the value of chastity, for instance, or of education, or of fiscal and moral responsibility. Like also in that they held the same assumptions about the material bases of good living, and that they agreed on the essential rightness of an ever-increasing horizon of activities, experiences, and expectations. They were *unlike,* however, in their modes of interpretation and their evaluations of cultural events, in their attitudes toward cultural authority, and in their faith in the reality of the word. They were also unlike in their rhetoric and in the paths, rhetorical and

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