

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Antipodes of Language: Silence and Speech in a Pair of Sarah Grand Stories

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Although Sarah Grand's intriguing novels about the New Woman have garnered extensive critical attention, her insightful short stories make abundantly apparent that they also deserve recognition, two of which are especially valuable in examining the compelling workings of language. These tales investigate and malign essentialist perceptions of language in assessing its two extremes of silence and speech. In "When the Door Opened—" the unnamed wife remains voiceless throughout the story while her husband elaborately constructs her through his words, based on inaccurate interpretations of her supposed behavior. Failing to ask vital questions and engage his wife in meaningful conversation leads him to damaging conclusions. By contrast, an independent model governs speech in "The Undefinable: A Fantasia," dominating a male artist immersed in troubling cultural assumptions about women. She recognizes misogynistic preconceptions and exposes their falsity through her voluble commentary. As such, the stories present dichotomous situations in which the wife becomes the victim of erroneous speech and the model becomes the linguistic victor. Included in the 1908 *Emotional Moments*, both stories appeared in 1890s periodicals and offer a fascinating treatment of women's relationship to language in the *fin de siècle*. Resisting closure, the tales leave significant questions unanswered in this early modernist structure that explores female subjectivity and efforts to constrict its potentiality. Nevertheless, the tales demonstrate that a woman either is objectified and constructed by language or she controls speech and attains a level of power over representation.

Troubling Assumptions

<2>Initially, the husband in “When the Door Opened—” utters statements reflective of an advanced man who respects an independent wife.⁽¹⁾ Despite his enlightened pronouncements, however, the husband soon reveals himself instead to be a reactionary and disturbing essentialist. The main characters remain unnamed, which suggests that the husband’s true opinions and the wife’s silence serve as a template for other Victorian spouses.

<3>As the story opens, the husband is aboard a train and addressing the male narrator, a stranger. Although the narrator is never identified as male, the inference stems from the fact that a Victorian woman likely would not be riding unescorted at night or cover the subjects that the pair discuss. The husband recounts an incident when his wife went alone to a masquerade ball, and he eventually followed. There he mistakes another woman, in the identical costume, for his wife, and he is appalled at her sexual aggressiveness.⁽²⁾ Before the husband can finish his account, the train reaches his stop and he departs. The story ends at that point, leaving the fellow passenger and the reader not knowing the outcome. Deeply troubled at the lack of a conclusion, the narrator remarks that he will always “be tormented with conjectures as to what happened when the door opened” (191).

<4>The husband had commenced his account when he observed another couple on the train in serious disagreement, which continues after they disembark. He argues against inappropriate male control of a wife, sounding like a New Man in the process.⁽³⁾ Such behavior, the husband asserts, will eventually cause the wife to resent and to betray her spouse.

Now, that man who was here just now watches his wife and keeps her shut up, or only allows her out under escort, as if he thought that she would certainly misconduct herself if ever she had an opportunity. The consequence is, she is growing to dislike and despise him, and he may drive her in the end to do the very thing he dreads and is guarding against. I cannot understand how a man can care to have a bond-slave, always under orders, for a wife. Personally, I prefer a free woman; and I should be sorry to think that liberty means licence in any but exceptional cases. (174-75)

When the narrator inquires how “exceptional cases” can be determined, the husband claims that character is revealed in girlhood; if a young woman is untrustworthy, “dogging” the eventual wife will not resolve the problem (175). If “young and thoughtless,” however, she needs “a companion, not a keeper” (175-76).

<5>The husband's own spouse, a decade younger, embraces "the full whirl of the social maelstrom" rather than sit quietly at home as he prefers (176). Each should act as he or she desires, however, rather than be compelled to defer to the other, he maintains. With each spouse free to pursue individual interests, they come together "with minds refreshed and something to say to each other." Yet the husband's argument against male control becomes suspect by his statement that "I *let* my wife go her way" (177, emphasis added). Musing about the event, the husband expresses concern, since "[a]ll kinds of people go to these public balls, and manners are apt to be free-and-easy when masks are worn." He worries that "bounders who haunt such places" could bother his wife and she could even dance with "some very undesirable partner" (179). The telling predicate intimating male control is soon repeated when the husband wonders, "Had I done right to *let* her go alone?" (179, emphasis added).

<6>The husband hurries to the ball and immediately but erroneously identifies his wife, confident that she would be unable to recognize him in his costume. When he approaches her and she does not object, he is beset by a "horrible doubt" that she would attend to a male stranger. The husband decides to "experiment" by disguising his voice and inquiring if she were awaiting him (181). He is shocked by her positive response, supposedly in her own faked voice, that reveals "the easy assurance of one who is accustomed to such encounters." Disturbed by "the tawdry splendour of the scene," the husband nevertheless asks his "wife" to dance (182).

<7>Readily agreeing, the supposed wife then asserts agency in holding his arm, the husband recalls, and "leading me, rather than waiting to be led, through the motley crew about us to the ball-room, in a free-and-easy way that filled me with consternation." Because his wife "had always seemed to be reserved with strangers," the husband is stunned that the mask has caused her to act in such an unexpected manner (182). Her dancing additionally appalls him, for she moves "with the abandonment of a ballet girl" (182-83). When the dance concludes, she again clutches his arm and takes him to find refreshments, entirely comfortable with the surroundings.

<8>Later she grabs his arm again with an enticing look, causing the husband to wonder if in daily life she merely performed her wifely role for financial security. Although he attempts to deny the supposition, he determines that she would be unable to act in such an unfettered way at the ball unless she had done so previously. He assumes deceit when she advises that she had frequently attended the balls, for his wife had said before leaving their home that she had never gone to a masquerade, he recalls. Again the verb of control appears, for he calls himself a "thrice accursed fool ... to *let* her come alone!" (184, emphasis added).

<9>Although he had always deemed his wife “frivolous,” he now uses the term “fast” to epitomize her at the ball (184). Formerly believing that she was a trustworthy companion, the husband now decides that his wife “had taken me in finely” as he vacillates between condemnation and forgiveness. In another indication of her sexuality, the husband asserts that his wife’s speech was “vulgar” (185). The “wife” again asserts agency with her hand placed on his arm, and he squeezes it. She responds with a laugh and presses his hand, informing him that he is “waking up” (185). The husband reacts with “a horrid emotion” as she promises that she will enliven him. Calling himself “a broken man,” the husband decides to give the “wife” another test and asks her to accompany him home (186). She again laughs as he leads her to the exit and brings her to the carriage, whereupon she leans on him. He cannot determine if her action resulted from the movement of the carriage or from “mere wantonness,” and she readily accepts his arm placed upon her (188).

<10>When the pair arrives at the home and the “wife” removes her domino, a loose cloak frequently worn for masquerades, the husband reacts with astonishment. He describes her appearance as if she were a prostitute.

I gazed. I gasped. I fell into a chair. For the woman before me was a perfect stranger—a creature with dyed hair, blackened eyelids, and painted cheeks—not the sort of person to be seen with anywhere if one valued one’s reputation. (189)

Relieved that the woman was not really his wife, the husband stares at her “idiotically” as she stands “posing in a theatrical manner, with an affectation of coyness” (189). Moments later, his true wife returns home and is poised to open the door to the room where the husband and the stranger are ensconced.

Permutations of a Masquerade

<11>The setting of a masquerade taps into a frequent cultural practice as well as a rich site for gender investigation. Although staged in various locations, the ballroom was “the real domain of the masquerade,” Jennie Taylor Wandle commented in her 1892 *Masquerade and Carnival: Their Customs and Costumes* (7). The masquerade became a popular entertainment, with even Queen Victoria and Prince Albert participating in the activity.⁽⁴⁾ Yet masquerades carried a sexual component, which Henry Fielding noted in the early eighteenth century, around the time when the events gained much attention. As Catherine Craft-Fairchild relates of Fielding’s poem titled “The Masquerade,” the occasion enabled “those in attendance freedoms and excesses of behavior that they would not customarily enjoy” without disguising

themselves.⁽⁵⁾ Moreover, the poem questions “‘how from another woman / Do you [a] strumpet masque’d distinguish?’ (ll. 198-99),” Craft-Fieldchild comments, since “masquerade disguise obliterates the marks of dress that separate virgin from whore” (1). Terry Castle observes that “[t]he true self remained elusive and inaccessible—illegible—within its fantastical encasements” (4). Yet in Grand’s story, the husband believes that his wife’s mask reveals her character rather than obscures it.

<12>With its properties of concealment, disguise, and pretense, a mask serves as an overdetermined image in creating an inaccurate impression of identity. The real “mask,” the husband assumes, is the social one that his wife dons in the home and displays in public as a shy, respectable woman. Obtusely, he fails to recognize that the presumption applies only to him with the New Man persona he strives to convey both in private and public spaces. Once he dons his mask, his disturbing perceptions of women come to the fore. As Fielding opined of the masquerade, attendees “masque the face, t’ unmasque the mind” (l. 74). Holding the reactionary and essentialist view that all women are fundamentally alike, the husband alters the virgin/whore dichotomy widely held by Victorian males. Rather than imagine antithetical poles, the husband elides the two personas so that the pure wife exposes the sexualized demon in adopting the mask. The point is accentuated with both the wife and the stranger wearing the same garb.

<13>The husband’s supposition resonates with the widespread eighteenth-century concern of a sexual aura generated by a masquerade. Prostitutes often attended, and “their presence [was] ubiquitously acknowledged,” Castle states (31). Other women at that time, like prostitutes, could attend a masquerade alone without reservation, and a common impression held that the event “encouraged female sexual freedom, and beyond that, female emancipation generally,” Castle explains (33). Other aspects of the eighteenth-century masquerade also inflect “When the Door Opened—,” such as the fact that unrestrained speech flourished so that such conversation “between strangers was the rule” (34), and speech itself was disguised. “[J]ust as one manipulated the visible signs of identity,” Castle remarks, “so too one manipulated the auditory” (36). Additionally, normative distances between strangers were diminished as participants “approached one another more closely and more intrusively than they would have in ordinary social settings,” and “[a] new, liberated vocabulary of gesture arose,” Castle indicates (37).⁽⁶⁾ Such tendencies certainly underlie Grand’s story and help account for the husband’s uneasiness at his wife’s lone attendance at the masquerade. Also, the husband’s estimation of the scurrilous stranger’s behavior throughout the story would readily apply to a prostitute as well as her appearance.

<14>Conversely, the wife projects wholesomeness and innocence at the ball with both her garment and her mask. Her domino is adorned with lacy white trim and a delicate pink lining, both hues suggestive of artlessness and stainlessness. Lace also appears on the mask itself, and the wife holds a white fan. As a presentiment of the husband's elision of spotlessness and wantonness, however, the domino is "silver-grey" (178); the silver evokes the white cast of the precious mineral, but the grey suggests murkiness and obfuscation.

<15>No description is given for the husband's mask, but his costume is highly significant. "It was the black velvet costume of a Spanish Don of the period of Philip IV, the Velasquez period, a handsome dress copied from a picture," the husband relates (180). The blackness of the material resonates with his sinister and blind impressions of his wife, while the historical positioning provides an ironic commentary on his character. Philip IV could be deemed a progressive individual as an ardent patron of artists such as Diego Velasquez, himself a progressive painter. Velasquez revolutionized artistic style in moving from the prevalent stodginess of the era to a pioneering approach that immensely influenced the realism of later generations. Like Velasquez, the husband is a painter, but unlike the famed Baroque artist he displays neither advanced nor innovative ideas. One aspect of the artist's work does resonate with the husband, though, through Velasquez's reliance on chiaroscuro. With its definitive contrasts between light and darkness, chiaroscuro could serve as an emblem respectively of the husband's social mask and his actual personality. Interestingly, darkness provides the overwhelming feature of Velasquez's painting, and an unenlightened view certainly dominates the husband's true assessment of women. Indeed, the stranger "wife" designates the husband Don Sombre, and the name's denotations of shade and darkness provide apt appraisals of his character.

The Carnavalesque

<16>The masquerade ball brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the carnivalesque, which offers an illuminating perspective for "When the Door Opened—." (7) As Bakhtin discussed, the carnival upended conventional relationships, enabled transgressive conduct, and caused individuals to adopt antithetical personas. "Carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms," Bakhtin asserted in "Carnival and the Carnavalesque" (250), and during such an event "[t]he laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary ... life are suspended" (251). The four elements that Bakhtin itemized as intrinsic to carnivalesque behavior seem quite applicable to Grand's story. The first category, "free and familiar contact among

people,” provides a defining trait of the masquerade ball that the spouses attend, enabling “a new mode of interrelationship between individuals.” Second, “eccentric and inappropriate behavior ... permits—in concretely sensuous form—the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves,” as the husband assumes his wife is enacting. Third, misalliances engender “[a] free and familiar attitude,” evidenced by the behavior of both the husband and the false wife. Finally, the “profanation” with its associations to the body defiles sacred beliefs—which on the secular level of the story can be considered as the husband’s assumption of the appropriate gender conduct for his spouse as well as his own unseemly behavior in inviting the fake wife to his home (251). Moreover, the carnivalesque brings a reversal of hierarchies, which suggests the stranger’s assertion of agency and sexual desire that the husband supposes only a Victorian man should exhibit. The cultural assumption calls for her to respond to his wishes, not display her own desire. Her occasional laughing also applies to the carnivalesque, since it suggests “a shift of world orders” in Bakhtin’s estimation (254). Indeed, his notion that carnival brings “a temporary suspension ... of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” (*Rabelais and His World* 15) could serve as a summary of the masquerade scenes in the story.

Narrative Disturbance

<17>The unsettling of normalcy that shapes the carnivalesque underlies the narrative structure as well. Linearity traditionally dominated the framework of Victorian narratives, of course, and tended to establish a narrow script for females to enact, but *fin de siècle* experimentation undermines proscriptions in Grand’s story. The initial paragraph announces the departure from customary narrative form by disrupting the fluid motion of transports that analogously embody linear progression. In so doing, “When the Door Opened—” allows for hermeneutic possibilities that staid Victorian narratives would stifle. Quotidian existence is associated with stupefaction, cloudiness, and chaos in the tale, but moments emerge in which the veil of ordinariness is lifted. “What curious glimpses of life one catches sometimes unawares,” the story begins, “scenes that flash forth distinctly from the tangled mass of movement, the crowded details, the inextricable confusion of human affairs as they appear to the looker-on in a great city” (171).

<18>These insights, typically obscured by social constructions and expectations of normality, are linked to the stoppage of linear motion, which on a narrative level is manifested in breakages of a tenacious script.

Seen amidst all the turmoil, from a hansom cab, from the top of an omnibus, from the platform of an underground station in a train that stops for a minute, from the pavement in a carriage blocked in by the stream of traffic, by day and night; from out of the routine, the commonplace doings of people in the commonplace moods and phases which weave themselves into the weft of wholesome lives, they stand out to view, these intervals of intensity, the beginnings of episodes—tragic, heroic, amorous, abject; or the conclusions which mark the turning point, the crisis of a life. (171-72)

The openings and endings of conventional narratives become fragmented and disordered; if linearity is restored, those valuable interludes remain in memory even though they are occluded as a straightforward plot resumes.

If it be the beginning, how one aches to know what the end will be; and if it be the end, what would one not give for the first part! Yet, tantalizing as these fragments are, they possess a charm which is not in the finished story, and are recollected with vivid interest long after many a tale, begun at the beginning and rounded to a satisfactory conclusion, has lapsed from the mind like a thing that is done with and forgotten. (172)

<19>Until the final paragraphs, “When the Door Opened—” apparently conforms to the essentialist expectations of a Victorian reader; the wife supposedly obliterates the fragile boundary between the pure and the sexually compromised woman, revealing herself to be simply another example proving that female nature is unchanging and perfidious. After all, the story begins on a train and seemingly ends when the husband disembarks and ceases his account. The titular door announces that such an expectation is wholly erroneous, however.

<20>The door functions as a vital element that ushers forth alternative readings of the supposedly straightforward story. A door denotes a barrier, a stoppage, and an impediment, which would become an apt image for narrative closure, but a door also signals a threshold. The story’s door is opening, and in the process no conventional conclusion can appear, a point amplified by the assertive dash at the end of the tale’s title. Instead, a reader is left wondering at the wife’s actions once she peers into the room and discovers her husband with an unknown, sexually provocative woman. Will she follow a traditional trajectory and accept the cultural presumption that men have physical needs they are driven to satisfy? In that scenario, the wife would grudgingly realize that she must implicitly consent to his behavior if she wishes to maintain financial security as well as avoid the scandal of a dissolved marriage. The opened door suggests, however, that she can justifiably leave him, ignore the

scurrilous gossip that would follow, and proceed to embrace a liberatory, independent existence. Thus, she can reject the stultifying script that would bind her to an unfaithful husband who could cause her immeasurable pain as she alone accedes to her marriage vows. Ultimately, then, “When the Door Opened—” allows a Victorian woman to imagine that her life’s path need not be dictated by cultural expectations and demands.

Resistant Speech

<21>In marked contrast to the silent wife in “When the Door Opened—” comes the vocally forceful model in “The Undefinable: A Fantasia.”^[8] Grand reconceptualizes the representation of women as objects of art, interrogating a tradition that positioned a female subject as a passive recipient of masculine interpretations of her subjectivity. Grand assails the unsettling perspective articulated, for example, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his sonnet from *The House of Life*, “The Portrait,” whereby female subjectivity is filtered through and informed by the painter’s controlling gaze and brush. Thus, as Rossetti’s artist-speaker comments, “They that would look on her must come to me” (l. 14) since he shapes and reveals “[t]he very sky and sea-line of her soul” (l. 8). As Christina Rossetti argued in the far different sonnet, “In an Artist’s Studio,” however, such interpretive power transforms the individual woman into a signifier of all women, simply an example of an immutable female essence who is depicted “[n]ot as she is, but as she fills his dream” (l. 13). Grand contests this Victorian aesthetic philosophy by transforming the model from silent and objectified muse into a vocal and resistant force who subverts the artist’s efforts to delineate, constrict, and solidify her subjectivity according to a perception of female “nature,” thereby achieving the titular fantasy of undefinability. In so doing, Grand also challenges the customary narrative trajectories for women characters and crafts an empowering script.

<22>Though the artist narrates the story and seemingly controls it, the model instead wields authority and governs the interpretive process by deploying the interwoven linguistic strategies of interruption, criticism, command, ridicule, silencing, and intimidation. The approach feminizes the painter, who is frequently mute, often speaks involuntarily, obeys instantly, and shrinks from opposition. Whenever she appears unexpectedly, the model dominates the conversation and directs its trajectory. She determines when the artist is psychologically prepared to begin the painting, decides upon her pose, scorns the artist’s limited vision, and enjoins his interpretation. Through the model’s interventions, aesthetic representation becomes, in effect, a participatory process by which the subject successfully resists becoming merely a mediated object.^[9] Indeed the narrative confers upon the model enormous

power, for she not only constructs her own representation but that of the artist himself. Tellingly, the male artist is never allowed to finish the painting and thus frame her, literally and figuratively, within his vision. Through “The Undefinable,” Grand has created a parable of the New Woman—rebellious, revolutionary, and resistant to delimiting conceptions of womanhood.

<23>Feminist criticism has drawn attention to the ideological stakes of late-Victorian aesthetic representation. As Kathy Psomiades observes in *Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*, “representations of femininity in aestheticist writing and artworks are neither merely incidental nor purely decorative”; instead, they “play an integral part in the cultural work aestheticism does” (2). Margaret D. Stetz notes that such work means “the objectification of women in the act of ‘appreciation,’ a form of masculine connoisseurship dependent on silent and passive female spectacles.” In contrast, Victorian women opposed to the prevalent aesthetic philosophy sought “to rescue the worship of beauty ... from its association with the exploitation of women” who served, Stetz notes, “as nothing more than beautiful ‘occasions’ for masculine discovery, theorizing, and reverie” (31). Grand, like the female aesthetes whom Psomiades and Talia Schaffer describe in *Women and British Aestheticism*, “explicitly address[es] aestheticism’s gender politics” and challenges the “masculine traditions” that informed aesthetic philosophy (10).

<24>“The Undefinable” opens with a prominent artist assessing his latest painting and reflecting on his well-received accomplishments. Despite his arrogance as he recalls “a most far-seeing” critic’s admiration of his work (304), the artist dismayingly discovers that the painting “moved me no more than a fresh canvas standing ready stretched upon the easel” (306). As he struggles to understand his artistic failure with “the powerlessness of the picture to move me as it ought” (309), an unknown woman suddenly arrives at his lodgings and offers herself as a model. Like her, the artist is unnamed, suggesting that the poem’s import extends beyond the two individuals. The artist reacts uneasily to the model, for she does not conform to his impression of female essence with her assertive gaze, and he deems her unattractive. “[T]he direct look of her eyes into mine was positively distasteful,” he recalls (310). Especially disturbing to the artist is that “[c]oming from a creature whose exterior does not please, such a glance inevitably repels, especially if there is anything commanding in it, and more particularly the command of a strong nature in an inferior position” (310-11). Despite his inclination to the contrary, he allows her to enter, setting the scene for the story’s intensive examination of masculine aesthetic representations that constrict and demean women as objects of art. Through

the model's interventions, the artist's initial distaste for the New Woman whom she represents is transformed into a profound appreciation.

<25>The model's assault on conventional aesthetics is achieved in part by deriding the artist's preoccupation with form over content like the late-century aesthetes. His paintings, the model asserts, are simply "form without character, passionless perfection, imperfectly perfect" (330); he has degenerated "from art to artificiality" and become merely "a painting machine" (353). The artist epitomizes the failing of masculine representations of women as objects of art in opining that a woman's role in the creative process consists simply of being a "subtly-inspiring presence," whereas "the rough work is for man, the interpreter" (349). Such views are faulty, the model stresses, in that they offer only reductive portrayals of women as "[r]ounded form, healthy flesh, and lively glances" (352). In effect, these artistic approaches embrace the notion of an unchanging female essence that can be captured and perpetuated, thereby precluding any substantive change in perceptions of women's subjectivity and, by implication, material changes in the culture itself that would allow greater freedom. Such representations consider a woman as "the creature" who "existed merely for man's use and pleasure of old; the toy-woman, drudge, degraded domestic animal, beast of intolerable burdens" (346).

<26>The model instead calls for an aesthetic recognition of the New Woman, who signifies a kind of evolutionary progression through which humanity as a whole can reach a higher plane of development. "[A]n outcome of the age," the New Woman points to such advancement whereby the "impossible mix of incongruous qualities" she displays will bring forth an "admirable composition" (341-42). She is the marker of "glorious womanhood" through her strength, candor, spirit, and independence (346). The aesthetic process, then, must regard and represent the New Woman appropriately, adopting a dramatically different approach than renderings that merely objectify and commodify the female form. Rather than be considered a passive recipient of the masculine artistic gaze through which her subjectivity is crafted according to the artist's vision of womanhood, the New Woman must be portrayed in her complexity, mutability, and unpredictability. The story's artist ultimately arrives at that realization, understanding that the New Woman offers "a source of inspiration the like of which no man hitherto has even imagined in art or literature" (357). As a subject who forces the male artist to reevaluate his narrow conception of female essence, the New Woman becomes as integral an agent in aesthetic representation as the painter himself.

<27>As their first and subsequent encounters reveal, the model wrests from the artist the power of representation as the insistent speaker controlling the conversation.

Though seeming to assume a submissive posture in the early scene by asking the artist if he desires a model, she simultaneously becomes the peremptory voice in “speaking without a particle of respect or apology, as if to an equal,” thereby silencing the artist, who can only remain mute to her query. “You can’t tell, of course, until you see me,” she replies for her speechless companion; “I had better come in and show myself.” Yet by adopting “a confident tone” in tendering the offer, the model calls into question his ostensible authority over her (311). The artist can respond only nonverbally, as he “involuntarily ... stood aside to let her pass” while “bending [his] body from the waist” in submission. As he remembers the moment, he inadvertently attests to her vocal supremacy in musing, “Ah! now I recall what it was that had me hesitate—her voice. It was not the voice of a common model” (312). As he assesses her suitability for a model, he again finds her gaze disturbing.

They were the mocking eyes of that creature most abhorrent to the soul of man, a woman who claims to rule and does not care to please; eyes out of which an imperious spirit shone independently, not looking up, but meeting mine on the same level. Now, a really attractive, womanly woman looks up, clings, depends, so that a man can never forget his own superiority in her presence. (314)

<28>When the artist finally does speak, it is only after her prompting interjection, “Well?” as she significantly “prolong[s] the word melodiously” (314) to maintain as long as possible her control over the conversation. Indeed, she causes him to respond in an unintended way, for he replies, “to my own surprise, in a satisfied tone, as if I were receiving instead of conferring a favour” in asking her to return the next day for a sitting. When he next speaks, again he acts “involuntarily” and is silenced, for he can respond to her derisive comments about his work only in his own mind as she departs (315).

<29>Other references to the model’s assumption of the dominant role in the aesthetic process abound. Though she submits to his gaze in their first encounter, situating the artist as the observer and herself as the object that is observed, she is the true agent in the scene; instead of responding to a command, she “place[s] herself” in the light that she deems proper for his sketching of her and pointedly turns her back to one of his earlier works, a painting she had scorned (313). It is she who decides when the artist should draw her and refuses to appear when he orders because “I knew you wouldn’t be ready for me” (318). When she arrives another day for her sitting, the model confidently and emphatically states that “I am here to be painted” and instructs him to “[j]ust set your palette” while she arranges her clothing to her own satisfaction (350). She determines when the sitting should end, responding to his

plea that she remain stationary with the assertion, “I can’t stand here all day,” uttered while she descends “the throne” upon which she had been posing. She leaves the artist before he can reply and is “gone, absolutely gone” (356).

Redefined Roles

<30>The shared nature of the aesthetic process is strikingly reinforced through the story’s unsettling of the very roles of artist and model. When the model arrives for the first sitting, she adopts the role of artist and converts him into a model as she critiques his demeanor and his “posing,” causing him to change his position “[i]nvoluntarily” (323). She accuses him of being “a prince .. not an artist,” telling him that he has “eaten all of that out of yourself” (323). The artist finds himself “gravely offended by the liberty of language she allowed herself” (324).

<31>With her command over their interactions, the artist only “ventured at last” to mention his intention to leave for dinner. Uneasy to confront her, the artist advises the model “tentatively” of his plan (328). When she tells him that they can have dinner at the studio instead, he wonders, “Why did I never dream of opposing her?” The shifting of roles becomes especially pronounced as she embarks on the creation of her own “picture” by overtly making him the subject/object of representation. Claiming that he is “nothing if not classical in appearance,” she tells him that he should wear a toga. Although he wishes to reject her instruction, “she would not let me speak” (329). The pair’s impending dinner serves as a metaphor of the aesthetic process as she directs the arrangements of decorations and furniture for the picture she will fashion while he is reduced simply to occasional suggestions and subservient assistance. As he removes his coat and vest to help her adjust the scene, he seemingly sheds as well his role of artist. Upon her leaving the studio to refresh herself, he again questions the fact that “it never occurred to me to oppose her; but certainly it never did” (331).

<32>When the model finally poses for the artist, he begs her to remain still so that he can sketch her, but in simply making the request he cedes control to her as “[s]he signified her consent” (334). While pondering the model, the artist attempts to contain her within his image of Woman as he “rapidly read each lineament for the purpose of fixing it on [his] paper” (336). Invoking the names of Sappho, Ceres, Venus, and Diana as he draws, the artist implicitly strives to craft his representation of the model according to these paradigms of essentialized womanhood and confer upon her the qualities associated with the immutable female nature that he apprehends the others epitomize. Even as he is apostrophizing those figures, however, the model thwarts his attempt to define her as she interrupts his thoughts

and orders, “Get on, do!” Instead of sketching the model according to his essentialist vision, he is compelled to recognize in her “a confidence of intellect: decision, intelligence, and a force of fine feeling combined in her which brought her up to date” (337). Rather than matching an abstract notion of a female nature marked by a mythic unchangeability, he inadvertently identifies her instead as one who is firmly situated in history.

<33>The artist’s attempt to confine the model within classical conceptions of womanhood is not only disrupted but reversed as she returns to her objective of converting him into a classical conception of manhood. She selects for him a tunic, accoutrements, and “a small harp, such as we associate with Homer” (340). Unlike the artist, however, the model recognizes the absurdity of such essentializing efforts; as she gazes upon him, she becomes “instantly ... convulsed with laughter” (341). As they dine, she peers at his face in a “sober way” as if he were the model and orders him to adjust the wreath that forms part of his costume (345). The artist later attests to the mutability of their functions in responding to her disclaimer that “I am no artist!” with another of his involuntary comments, as the equivocal remark, “I don’t know that,’ slipped from [him] unawares” (349).

<34>The traditional position of Woman as a silent muse in the service of a male artist also comes under challenge as the scene progresses.⁽¹⁰⁾ The artist holds the conventional view that men are the creators and women the inspirers. As he opines that “[n]o woman has ever truly distinguished herself except in her own sphere,” the model immediately alters the context of his remarks to the appropriate register of cultural supposition and a masculine desire for dominance. “Now, no cant, *please*,” she chastises him (349). “[N]ow that our full emancipation is imminent,” she says, “why, you shall see what you shall see.” Further destabilizing the artist’s opinion of gender roles, the model answers his subsequent query, “Then why don’t you paint?” with the ambiguous remark, “All in good time” (350).

<35>All of the artist’s flawed impressions of the artistic process serve to throw into relief the model’s perception of an ideal aesthetic stance. “[P]ositive perfection,” she instructs the artist, requires not simply an attention to stylistics but to both “form *and* character” (331). Rather than portray a woman’s “mere outer husk” that captures “nothing,” the artist “must reveal the beyond of that—the grace, I mean, all resplendent within” (353). As the artist himself learns, he must “paint this woman as she is!” (347)—not according to a reductive assessment of women, but through “a new and solemn sense of responsibility” to his subject (346). Art becomes a moral act in the model’s view, a far different philosophy than that espoused by late-Victorian aesthetes such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Pater, for example, denied

visual art's "responsibilities to its subject or material" in *The Renaissance* (108), suggesting an underlying amorality in the creative effort, while Wilde similarly asserted about verbal art that "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (21), a contention that could be extrapolated to visual art. Grand's model, however, cautions that "an artist should be an honest, earnest man"; if not, "however great he may be, he falls short of the glory" (348). Ultimately, the artist realizes that the model is "a free woman, a new creature, a source of inspiration the like of which no man hitherto has even imagined in art or literature" (357). He recognizes that her message meant, "Give me my due; and when *you* help *me*, I will help *you*!" (358).⁽¹¹⁾ The model leaves the studio, never to return.⁽¹²⁾

<36>Through its open-ended closure, "The Undefinable" reinforces its warning against defining an individual woman as Everywoman. In deserting the artist before he has finished her portrait, the model avoids the unenviable fate of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel," who struggles ineffectually to break from "[t]he golden barriers" that frame her within the artist's image of her subjectivity (l. 142). Instead, the model leaves the artist a chastened but wiser practitioner of his craft, one who has come to recognize that the women whom he paints must be represented not as objects with whom he may trifle but as subjects to whom he owes the responsibility of rendering as they are rather than as he wishes them to be.

<37>The "Undefinable," like "When the Door Opened—," ultimately concerns empowerment. If the misconstrued wife of "When the Door Opened—" decides to leave her husband, she can escape his control, but forgiveness of his distrust would obviate the possibility. The assertive model of "The Undefinable: A Fantasia" succeeds in reshaping the artist's aesthetic perceptions, but whether her influence will extend beyond him remains unanswered. Both stories, however, offer a vital lesson to their female readers: only through a pronounced facility with language can a woman combat powerful efforts to define her by others' words. By presenting two opposed aspects of language—its absence and its presence—the stories can foreground the sharp contrast between these linguistic states. Through the comparison, the stories can compellingly investigate the ramifications of silence and speech.

Notes

(1)The story first appeared in the *Idler* in 1897.^(^)

(2) To Anne-Marie Beller, “the husband’s mistake” about his wife’s identity, “and the suspicion and anxiety it provokes, also acknowledges the precarious nature of female autonomy in this period” (194).(^)

(3) Kathryn Anne Atkins points out that the character “is attempting to reconcile his views as a ‘New Man’ who has declared that he wants ‘a free woman’ as his wife, with the conventional assumptions he makes about” the false wife. Atkins adds, “By exhibiting his readiness to view sex as a currency to be traded in exchange for marriage and comfort, he reveals himself to be quite insecure in his role as a ‘New Man’” (137).(^)

(4) As the National Portrait Gallery revealed about masquerades: “Encouraged by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, this vogue continued throughout the nineteenth century.”(^)

(5) Fielding’s 1728 poem was supposedly written by “Lemuel Gulliver, Poet Laureat to the King of Lilliput.”(^)

(6) This gestural display included various manifestations of physical closeness, such as dancing “and other forms of bodily contact ordinarily taboo between strangers in public,” Terry Castle adds (37).(^)

(7) Castle also draws the connection between the masquerade and the carnivalesque, noting that “[i]t is impossible to speak of the masquerade without reference to the carnival and the carnivalesque. . . . The classic features of the masquerade—sartorial exchange, masking, collective verbal and physical license—were traditional carnival motifs” (11).(^)

(8) The tale was initially published in the 1894 *Cosmopolitan*.(^)

(9) As Carolyn Christensen Nelson states, “Rather than being the passive object of man’s gaze, [the model] asserts her individuality onto the creative work” (4).(^)

(10) Functioning as muses, Elaine Showalter notes, means that women “have their lives appropriated and simplified in the interest of another’s art, [which] seemed a tragic fate” (xv-xvi). Showalter adds that “the strong utopian impulses of the period led also to stories which reimagined the roles of artist and muse,” as in Grand’s tale (xvi).(^)

(11)The comment calls attention to “the symbolic function of the central character here and the need for men to help the New Woman by recognising her” for her vast potential and “not just a beautiful muse” (Liggins *etal* 72).(^)

(12)As Angelique Richardson remarks, “[t]he unknowability of woman is reclaimed, and embraced” in the story (lxvi).(^)

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