Tropical Spinster Seeks Feeder of Ground-Sparrows: A Parable of the Old Maid in the Short Story

Gertrude Stein suggests in *Q.E.D.* (1903) that “It is one of the peculiarities of American womanhood that the body of a coquette often encloses the soul of a prude and the angular form of a spinster is possessed by a nature of the tropics.” In this paper, I propose to locate—in a very un-Steinian collection of American short stories about old maids—a literary prehistory to the sexual place-type that defines Stein’s smouldering spinster. The inner landscape of Stein's kind of woman finds the historical conditions of its possibility, I contend, in works of short fiction by writers such Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry (Cooke), Olive Thanet, and Sarah Orne Jewett whose stories serve as a locus of formal and narrative experimentation in sexual sociability among women. Rather than read the short story as the queer “other” of the novel’s normative form, I suggest that the novel might in fact be read as the queer derivative of the short story. It is the short story that provides us with a circulation history of female sexual types and which enables us to trace the overlapping, and eventually mutually constituting, relationships between old maids and lesbians that makes the range and scope of later queer novels possible. My talk takes Stein’s *Q.E.D.* and Jewett’s “Martha’s Lady” as products of these experiments in short fiction. Despite their contrasting styles, both texts benefit from the legacy of the American short story’s long and rich history of type-complication with respect to the figure of old maid.