

Tim Duffy, "Intellectual Authority and Gender Ideology in Nineteenth Century Boston: The Life Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr." *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 23, No. 1 (Winter 1994).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/mhj/>."



Intellectual Authority and Gender Ideology
in Nineteenth-Century Boston:
The Life and Letters
of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

Tim Duffy

Three institutions dominated the lives of Americans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — the church, the family, and the state. The common thread linking these institutions was the authority vested in masculinity. From the supreme power of the Heavenly Father to the rule of the male head of the household, authority was conceived in masculine terms. According to the patriarchal tradition that had prevailed in western culture for centuries, men possessed superior powers of reason, moral virtues, and emotional stability, in addition to physical strength. These assumptions about gender were rarely discussed, but they formed the foundation for the authority of the man of letters. A presumptive masculine outlook governed notions of cultural and intellectual authority in early nineteenth-century Boston.¹

The emergence of the separate sphere ideology in the early 1800s signalled a reification of these constructions of gender and authority, for women were discouraged from venturing into the public domain at the same time that men yielded control over the mundane affairs of the home. Women acquired influence only indirectly, by inspiring emotional, religious, and sympathetic feelings in others. Their more sensitive propensities suited them for the new nurturing and educational function of the middle-

1. Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (Cambridge, England, 1981), pp. 18-59; E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York, 1993), pp. 2 and 10.

class home and for the faithful devotions of the church. Trained in the arts of humility, modesty, submission, and piety, women wielded power, it was believed, through kindness and affection. Taken negatively, women's influence was rooted in the manipulation of others through their seductive gifts.²

Hence the moral geography of the ideology of separate spheres accomplished more than the redefinition of social space. The new constructions of gender established two distinct sources of authority — one grounded in direct action and an ethos of achievement, the other predicated on the beneficent effect of self-effacing, indirect influence. Masculinity was identified with autonomy, accuracy, certainty, and mastery. Dependence, fluidity, indeterminacy, and sensitivity became the touchstones of femininity.³

The new gender ideology caused and grew out of a whole series of social transformations that redefined the function of the family, the nature of work, and the role of institutions, but the implications for America's intellectual life were no less substantial. The identification of women with less forceful forms of influence effectively sealed a substantial transfer of moral and intellectual authority from the male to the female sphere. Boston's class of intellectual elites who had long framed their authority in terms of the ideal of the man of letters were the inadvertent victims of this process of "feminization."⁴

2. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, p. 190.

3. T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (New York, 1981), p. 245; Leland S. Person, Jr., Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne (Athens, Georgia, 1988), p. 14. See also Rotundo, American Manhood, pp. 7-8.

4. For works on the oppressive, conservative, and shallow aspects of the cult of domesticity, see Fred Lewis Pattee, The Feminine Fifties (New York, 1940); Herbert Ross Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1869 (Durham, N.C., 1940); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," American Quarterly, XVIII (Summer, 1966), pp. 151-174; Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York, 1977). Others have pointed to the radical implications of sentimentality and domesticity. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs, I (1975), pp. 1-29. For excellent overviews, see David S. Reynolds, "The Feminization Controversy," New England Quarterly, LIII (March, 1980), pp. 96-106; Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," Journal of American History, LXXV (January, 1988), pp. 9-39.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, a professor of anatomy at Harvard, as well as a celebrated conversationalist, lecturer, poet, essayist, and novelist, was a prominent literary figure in nineteenth-century Boston. A sketch of the major outlines and preoccupations of his career illustrates how the life of letters assumed ambiguous gender connotations in nineteenth-century Boston.⁵

After attending medical school in Cambridge for two years, Holmes studied in Paris from April of 1833 to December of 1835, completed the requirements, and received his degree the following year. Writing to a friend in 1831, Holmes marvelled at the power he possessed while "slicing and slivering the carcasses of better men and women than I ever was myself or am like to be. It is a sin for a puny little fellow like me to mutilate one of your six foot men as if he was a sheep, — but *vive la science!*"⁶

Yet even his medical experience drew him back to literature and away from the manly alternative of science. His boyish appearance led to his dismissal by a woman who complained to her friend, "why did you bring that little boy in here? Take him away! This is no place for boys." Holmes' vocational uncertainties were exacerbated by his sensitivity over his slight stature. His "treble" had "broken into a bass" by the age of twenty, but he confessed that he still had "very little of the look of manhood."⁷

In an era when ideas of masculinity became increasingly tied to ideas of bodily strength, the choice of a career became all the more important for a young man like Holmes, who would never rise above five foot four inches nor weigh more than 120 pounds. Holmes was attracted to the "seduction of verse-writing" early on, and after making an abortive attempt to master the law and a more successful study of medicine, in an effort to get

5. On Holmes' life and letters, see M. A. DeWolfe Howe, Holmes of the Breakfast Table (New York, 1939); Eleanor Marguerite Tilton, Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes (New York, 1947); Miriam Rossiter Small, Oliver Wendell Holmes (New York, 1962); Edwin P. Hoyt, The Improper Bostonian: Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes (New York, 1979).

6. Holmes to Phineas Barnes, March, 1831, quoted in John T. Morse, Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes (Boston, 1896), I: 70.

7. S. I. Hayakawa and Howard Mumford Jones, eds., Oliver Wendell Holmes: Representative Selections (New York, 1939), p. xxix; Holmes to Barnes, March 28, 1828, in Morse, Life and Letters, I: 55.

himself into "good working trim," as he put it, he remained deeply engaged by his literary pursuits. Holmes' vocational uncertainty only prolonged his state of dependence. He lived at home for all but his senior year at Harvard, and he was financially dependent on his parents during his studies in Paris.⁸

No topic caused young men in antebellum Boston more anxiety than the choice of an occupation, especially since it was a decision which was charged with gender significance. Politics, law, and business were considered manly endeavors, while the ministry, teaching, medicine, and the arts carried feminine connotations. In their nurturing function, doctors were shielded from the more masculine preoccupations of the marketplace, and they spent much of their time dealing with mothers and wives in the homes of their patients. Holmes' fascination with the manly power at the time when he was involved with his medical studies in Paris was an attempt to compensate in his mind for choosing a decidedly feminine occupation.⁹

Holmes was drawn to the more modest and literary-orientated style of medicine. He criticized the prevailing "fashion" by which physicians "over-medicated" their patients, and he objected to the practice of bleeding and dosing common in the nineteenth century. He subscribed instead to the benefits of exercise and the consideration of the emotional and physical state of the sick.¹⁰

Holmes' teachers in Paris, who were sometimes called "therapeutic nihilists," emphasized the "self-limited" nature of disease, and defended the workings of "nature" against the traditional practice of "heroic" medicine. Holmes praised his mentor, Charles Pierre Alexandre Louis, for his "truthfulness, diligence, and modesty in the presence of nature." The benefits of the "expectant treatment," which allowed ailments to improve

8. Morse, *Life and Letters*, I: 79; Holmes to his parents, November 29, 1833, in Morse, *Life and Letters*, I: 120-121.

9. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, pp. 169, 171-172, and 205-209.

10. Holmes, *Medical Essays, 1842-1882*, pp. 185, 194, and Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, pp. 78-79.

without medical intervention, were reinforced by Holmes' teachers in Boston.¹¹

Speaking before the Massachusetts Medical Society in 1860, Holmes complained that it was "hard to get anything out of the dead hand of medical tradition!" The aggressive medical treatments associated with heroic therapy were related to the larger problem of American culture, which Holmes identified with the competitive imperative of self-made manhood in the Jacksonian era.

How could a people which has a revolution once in four years, which has contrived the Bowie-knife and the revolver, which had chewed the juice out of all superlatives in the language in Fourth of July orations, and so used up its epithets in the rhetoric of abuse that it takes two great quarto dictionaries to supply the demand; which insists in sending out yachts and horses and boys to out-sail, out-run, out-fight, and checkmate all the rest of creation; how could such a people be content with any but "heroic" practice?

"I firmly believe that if the whole materia medica, as now used, could be sunk to the bottom of the sea," declared Holmes in an address to the Massachusetts Medical Society in 1860, "it would be all the better for mankind, — and all the worse for the fishes." Humility became the defining principle in Holmes' medical philosophy which he defended as an alternative to masculine ambition.¹²

The connection Holmes made between the dead hand of medical tradition and the regrettable influence of masculine authority was apparent in his opinions of his Parisian instructors. The medical tradition in France showed no resemblance to "the patriarchal authority which so often had held, and has such a tendency to acquire, the place of sound reason" in America. He admired teaching physicians who looked after the well-being of their students as well as their patients. Holmes gained an

11. Holmes, Medical Essays, p. 181; Holmes to family, April 4, 1856, quoted in Tilton, Amiable Autocrat, p. 99. Holmes studied under John Collins Warren and James Jackson. See Tilton, Amiable Autocrat, pp. 69-80.

12. Medical Essays, pp. 189, 193, and 203.

impressive level of expertise in Paris, but he benefited most from the small circle of students that gathered around his most brilliant teachers, allowing each student a close, personal connection to the work at hand. If ambition was the typical manly emotion, Holmes conformed to a feminine model of medicine.¹³

Holmes gained the respect of Boston's medical community more for his writing ability than for his medical expertise. The literary qualities of his anatomy lectures were not lost on his auditors. One student verified that "more than all, he possessed that rare ability, genius we may call it, of expression or style which captivates and holds fast the reader by its keenness, wealth of illustration, striking analogies, epigrammatic forms of expression and airiness of touch." Another confirmed that his "illustrations were poetic, his similies most fortunate, and the lecture, though conversational in tone, was a rhetorical masterpiece." Through his "literary armory" Holmes made the study of medicine "entertaining."¹⁴

Holmes considered "The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever," a lecture given before the Boston Society for Medical Improvement in 1843, to be his most important contribution to medical science. Writing passionately in an effort to save women from the careless practices of the medical profession, Holmes argued that physicians were actually responsible for spreading the disease that plagued obstetrical wards. Holmes implored his fellow doctors to approach women as "the object of trembling care and sympathy" at the "doubly precious" moment in their lives, and not as mere objects of their technical skill.¹⁵

Holmes suspended his medical practice in 1849, but in one final gesture of his devotion to a career that integrated both feminine and masculine styles of authority, he attended to the medical needs of Boston's ailing men of letters. The role of nurse

13. Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, pp. 97-98, 105, 125-6, 99-100, 126-28. On masculine ambition, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, (Chapel Hill, 1980), p. 209.

14. Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., *The Early Years of the Saturday Club, 1855-1870* (Boston, 1918), pp. 147, 148.

15. Holmes, *Medical Essays*, pp. 112, 121, and 130. See also Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, pp. 175-76; Gail Thain Parker, "Sex, Sentiment, and Oliver Wendell Holmes" *Women's Studies* 1:1 (1972): pp. 58. One critic denounced Holmes' work as consonant with "the jejune and fizenless dreamings of sophomore writers." (*Medical Essays*), p. 110.

was one of the few positions of public importance granted to women in the nineteenth century, and Holmes adapted this feminine role to his own effort to comfort his colleagues. He treated Herman Melville "with fraternal tenderness," and Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and John Lothrop Motley also received visits from Holmes within days of their death. Holmes' treatments, which consisted of easy walks and intimate conversations, were more akin to the ritual visitations of middle-class Victorian women than the ominous calls of the nineteenth-century doctor armed with noxious nostrums.¹⁶

In his introductory medical school lecture in 1879, Holmes stated that the ideal health practitioner possessed a mixture of gender capacities.

I myself, all things considered, very much prefer a male practitioner, but a woman's eye, a woman's instinct, and a woman's divining power are special gifts which ought to be made useful. If there were only a well-organized and well-trained hermaphrodite physician I am not sure I would not send for him-her. . . as likely to combine more excellences than any unisex individual. . . . Mainly, however, I think the ovarian sex finds its most congenial employment in the office of nurse; and I would give more for a good nurse to take care of me while I was alive than for the best pathologist that ever lived to cut me up after I was dead.¹⁷

His preference for "a well-organized and well-trained hermaphrodite physician" underscored the structural changes in conceptions of gender and authority in the nineteenth century.

Holmes' style of medical care borrowed less from the doctor and more from the strategies of the friend, confidante,

16. Welter, pp. 163-64; Parker, 47; Peter Andrew Gibian, "Oliver Wendell Holmes in the Conversation of his Culture," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford, 1987), pp. 350, 364; Jay Leyda, ed., *The Melville Log* (New York, 1951), II: 502; Small, pp. 133-34; Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, p. 279. Motley praised Holmes' ability to "moralize [sickness] into a thousand similies." See Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, p. 325.

17. Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, pp. 192, 332-33. Holmes insisted that his support for the admission of women to Harvard's medical school be placed in the record.

conversationalist, and nurse. It was all a part of his effort to wed feminine styles of influence to powerful and practical purposes in society, and he emphasized the curative power of sympathetic relations in his fiction as he did in his limited medical practice.

The lives and interests of men and women of letters in Victorian America were nearly always neatly separated, in compliance with the reigning idea of separate spheres, and yet the parallel universes inhabited by men and women were mirror images in many ways. Same-sex literary clubs granted both sexes the opportunity to shed conventional gender norms. In their separated literary circles, women challenged and inspired each other to intellectual opportunities and attainments denied to them by the popular culture. At the same time, men met separately to luxuriate in intimate surroundings that offered precious escape from the ruthless competition of the public sphere.

The act of segregation actually imparted an ambiguous gender connotation to the literay activities of both men and women. Only in these segregated settings could men and women assemble within communities of equals and defy the spirit of the separate sphere doctrine. At the convivial meetings of the Saturday Club, prominent men of letters such as Emerson, Prescott, Hawthorne, and Holmes satisfied their appetite for boisterous and competitive talk, while they also cultivated such feminine values as sympathy and mutuality. The presence of alcohol and cigars gave the meetings an indelicate ambience, but the meetings of the Saturday Club always included a meal, as a powerful symbol of domesticity. The Club functioned both as a surrogate family and a bastion of masculinity. Boston's men of letters refused women entrance to the conversations as a way to protect the feminine dimension of letters as much as to revel in their manliness.¹⁸

The literary clubs of Boston advanced many of the same values that pervaded the "female world of love and ritual." The Saturday Club, like the woman's world, was non-hierarchically arranged. Members contributed freely and equally as they wished; nothing was demanded of them beyond their presence. The cultivation of sympathetic and intimate ties in a literary setting

 18. See Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, pp. 220-22. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, pp. 176-77. Most scholars have emphasized the masculine spirit of literary clubbiness. See Emerson, ed., *Early Years of the Saturday Club*, pp. 130, 169-71; Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1991), p. 8.

replaced usefulness as the primary inspiration for literary clubs by mid-century.¹⁹

Holmes advanced the value of clubbiness as an eminently serious and enjoyable endeavor. Conversation at the Club was free-wheeling and informal, but by no means effortless. The "vitality" of the meetings, according to Holmes, depended on its unassuming spontaneity, "on its utter poverty in statutes and by-laws, its entire absence of formality, and its blessed freedom from speech-making." The meetings were scenes where one could find "wisdom in slippers and science in a short jacket." Still, participants associated the conversation of Boston with serious literary effort, even if they went to great effort to present their activities in a modest light.²⁰

Holmes was passionate about preserving the friendships he formed in Boston's literary clubs. Throughout his life he remained extremely close to James Freeman Clarke, John Sargent, John Lothrop Motley, and James Russell Lowell. Literary friendship allowed Holmes to escape the limitations of the separate sphere doctrine.

The intimate friendships of early manhood are not very often kept up among our people. The eager pursuit of fortune, position, office, separates young friends, and the indoor home life imprisons them in the domestic circle so generally that it is quite exceptional to find two grown men who are like brothers — or rather unlike brothers, in being constantly found together.²¹

19. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, p. 129; Julie Ellison, "The Gender of Transparency: Masculinity and the Conduct of Life," American Literary History IV (Winter, 1992): 590-592; McCarthy, Women's Culture, p. 249; Smith-Rosenberg, "Female World of Love and Ritual"; Lillian Faderman, "Female Same-Sex Relationships in Novels by Longfellow, Holmes, and James," New England Quarterly LI (September, 1978): 309-332; Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven, 1977), pp. 160-196.

20. Ralph Waldo Emerson: John Lathrop Motley: Two Memoirs (Boston, 1892), pp. 300 and 497; Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table: Every Man His Own Boswell (Boston, 1892), p. 64. Emerson was admired for being adept at "managing his conversation." Holmes noted that Emerson studied conversation as well as books to good effect. See Emerson, ed., Early Years of the Saturday Club, p. 13.

21. Emerson and Motley, p. 369.

Friendship was more than a matter of personal indulgence. It was a form of cultural opposition to the worst developments in American culture. It was the last bastion against the feminizing realm of the "domestic circle" on one extreme, and the ruthless "pursuit of fortune" on the other. Friendship and letters went literally hand in hand as a cultural statement of defiance against the fragmentation of American culture along lines of gender. On their own terms, the market and the domestic sphere were equally imprisoning.

Literature acquired feminine associations by the mid-nineteenth century, as the meaning of masculinity was confined to more direct forms of power. In format, style, and subject matter, Holmes' essays exhibited this process of feminization.

Perhaps Holmes' greatest contribution to American letters was bringing the pleasures of literary clubbiness before the public in his conversational essays. His participation in the literary clubs of Boston inspired the publication of his famous breakfast-table essays, which in turn served as a starting point for countless literary discussions among his readers.²²

In 1831, Holmes published the first series of breakfast-table essays in the *New England Magazine*. In three unsigned installments of this original series, titled "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," the title character ruled the breakfast-table in a manner that conformed to the presumptive masculine style of authority.

In his contributions to the *Atlantic Monthly*, beginning in 1857 with the new "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," followed in 1859 by "The Professor at the Breakfast-Table," and in 1872 by "The Poet at the Breakfast-Tale", Holmes effected a more discursive style, giving each of the boarders a distinct personality and role in the discussion. These later breakfast-table essays consisted of the conversations of a group of fictional boarders who discussed a wide range of topics. Conversations in each series were reported by the title character, and they included aphoristic and witty observations, stories, puns, and poems. The *Atlantic Monthly* essays were a stunning success. The *Autocrat* sold ten thousand copies in three days, and twenty thousand copies within the first weeks of publication.

22. Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (New York, 1991), pp. 56-57 and 59.

While the original "Autocrat" was austere, reserved, and imperious, and projected the masculine image of commanding authority, the "Professor" captured the spirit of the later essays when he promised to be "a good listener" and vowed not to control the discussion like his predecessor. "The day of the Autocrat's monologues is over."²³

The combination of "Autocrat" and "breakfast-table" aptly conveys the over-all pattern of gendered ambiguity running throughout Holmes' essays. Holmes once stated that the variety of his duties at Harvard's medical school required that he occupied not merely a professor's chair, but an entire "settee." As the images of the breakfast-table and the settee indicate, Holmes employed the articles and strategies appropriate to the domestic sphere to furnish the basis for his intellectual authority as a man of letters.²⁴ By locating his fictional conversations at the breakfast-table of a boardinghouse, Holmes challenged the notion of separate spheres at the same time that he made use of the gender categories enforced by that ideology.

Taking in boarders was one of the few ways that women were able to enter the marketplace in the mid-1800s, a practice that not only gave them a view to the larger world, but also gave them access to cash. Women who took in boarders often ran the equivalent of hotels, restaurants, and laundries, all under the guise of their "domestic" responsibilities. In 1830, Holmes had moved into the Benjamin House, a boardinghouse in Boston, and later set up his medical practice there. Sarah Josepha Hale, author and editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, was one of Holmes' fellow boarders.²⁵

The dining room was often the most elevated space of the Victorian home, but Holmes mitigated his violation of this private space by locating his discussions at a boardinghouse, a semi-private institution. Holmes' essays, furthermore, displayed the prominence of metaphors of eating that was common in

23. The Professor at the Breakfast-Table: With the Story of Iris (Boston, 1892), pp. 17-18. For similar remarks, see The Poet at the Breakfast-Table (Boston, 1892), p. 182. The 1831 "Autocrat" series is conveniently reprinted in Hayakawa and Jones, eds., Oliver Wendell Holmes: Representative Selections, pp. 435-447.

24. See Morse, Life and Letters, I: 173; Medical Essays, p. 20.

25. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, pp. 172-73, 210-13, and 218-25; Tilton, Amiable Autocrat, pp. 68, 70, 81, and 142.

Victorian literary culture, which advised readers not to gorge themselves on one author. Certain authors were considered nourishing while others were poisonous. These metaphors provided a warning against specialization and furthered the domestic affiliations of literary culture. Preferring the desultory inclinations of the generalist to the concentrated ambitions of the specialist, Holmes defended his decision not to have concentrated on "some limited subject." "I cannot express the loathing with which my mind turns away from a subject it has got enough of. I like nine-tenths of any matter I study but I do not like to *lick the plate*."²⁶

In an era when people increasingly defined themselves by the objects they collected and displayed in their homes, the ornaments and furnishings referred to by Holmes assumed powerful symbolic meaning. The arrangement in the home of furniture, engravings, and prints reflected the subtle educational means of domestic influence, and the breakfast table was a particularly potent symbol of the domestic sphere. The "settee" likewise captured the image of repose, an intellectual quality more assimilable to feminine passivity than masculine aggressiveness.²⁷

Holmes' essays magnified the social nature of reading insofar as the literary work itself was a household conversation (and very often a discussion about such a conversation). The parlors of middle-class Americans were the centerpiece of domestic literary culture, where occupants gathered around a central source of light, often reading to each other, or discussing the same volume each had read independently. Small couches, called "tête-à-têtes" were a common feature in Victorian parlors. Named after the French term for an intimate conversation, these couches were curved on each end, forcing its occupants to face each other. Furnishings and arrangements in the later nineteenth century would be more individualized.²⁸

 26. John F. Kasson, Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America (New York, 1990), p. 187; Stevenson, The Victorian Homefront, p. 33; Holmes to S. Weir Mitchell, March 27, 1871, in Morse, Life and Letters, II: 14.

27. Kasson, Rudeness and Civility, pp. 169-187; Stevenson, The Victorian Homefront, p. 2; McCarthy, Women's Culture, pp. 5-6 and 60-79; Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1780-1860 (New York, 1985), p. 142.

28. Stevenson, The Victorian Homefront, p. 11.

The organization of space in the domestic sphere and the structure of Holmes' essays reinforced the deeply intimate quality of the life of letters. While the marketplace rewarded some men and ruined others with seeming brutal impartiality, the life of letters offered a much more personal way of understanding the world. In his essays, Holmes mounted a concerted defense of modest forms of influence, by exploring the insight derived through intimacy, the spontaneity of conversation, and the art of disruption.

One of the first issues addressed by Holmes in the *Autocrat* was the value of clubbiness. "Let me tell you that next to youthful love and family affections," wrote Holmes, "there is no human sentiment better than that which unites the Society of Mutual Admiration." With the Saturday Club uppermost in his mind, Holmes claimed that literary societies were the "noblest of institutions" and "the crown of a literary metropolis." The cultivation of conviviality at the Saturday Club provided the chief inspiration for Holmes' literary career. In addition to his breakfast-table essays, Holmes published over forty poems on the subject of his Harvard class of 1829.²⁹

Only the spoken word conveyed the power and importance of sociableness. "I am afraid it is impossible fully to present the intricate conditions of an inward life," Holmes wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe, "except through the inflections of speech and those sudden surprises of our own thought, which the immediate contact of another intelligence so often forces upon us." Holmes defended conversation as the truest literary form, and considered himself "an epicure in words." As he stated in the *Autocrat*, "talking" was "one of the fine arts, — the noblest, the most important, and the most difficult." Holmes roughed out his talk, "as an artist models in clay."³⁰

Conversation was vital because of its disclosure of "partial" truth, and Holmes preferred the man of words to the man of facts. He was not interested in any easy and coherent form of knowledge, believing with Emerson that consistency was the hobgoblin of little minds. "Don't be 'consistent,'" he cautioned his

 29. Howe, *Holmes of the Breakfast Table*, p. 94; *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 4-5. The Saturday Club was often referred to as the "Mutual Admiration Society."

30. Morse, *Life and Letters*, II: 245; Howe, *Holmes*, p. 113; *Autocrat*, quoted in Morse, *Life and Letters*, I: 246; *Autocrat*, p. 27.

readers, "but be simply true." Holmes prized the literary effect of incomplete knowledge, and he proudly reported his unwillingness to read books thoroughly. "I have always read *in* books rather than *through* them, and always with more profit from the books I read *in* than the books I read *through*." Since genuine insight was never definitive or complete, Holmes always strove to avoid the grim and ambitious pursuit of knowledge. True learning demanded a questioning and amiable disposition.³¹

Holmes' conversation was effusive rather than conclusive. Listening was crucial to the Saturday Club and contributed to the passive quality of a life of letters. "Talking," wrote Holmes, was allied to the "divine quality of receptiveness," a naturally feminine quality. Conversations never proved assertions, but merely presented opinions, and Holmes defended a non-argumentative form of talk.³²

The value of conversation, moreover, could not be established with any precision. Like man's limited capacity to know, conversation itself was a constantly shifting and fluid concern. Holmes' conception of the ideal conversation involved rapid exchanges between the participants. Communication at the Saturday Club was explosive, raining down on the company like a "carnival-shower of questions and replies and comments, large axioms bowled over the mahogany like bomb-shells from professional mortars, and explosive wit dropping its trains of many-colored fire, and the mischief-making rain of *bon-bons* pelting everybody that shows him-self. . . ." The description was broken off in the *Autocrat* by events in the narrative, thus introducing another aspect of the uncertain nature of conversation — interruption.³³

Despite the assertive titles Holmes gave to his breakfast-table essays, he practiced conversation as the art of disruption

31. *Autocrat*, pp. 142-143; *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 33-34; Gibian, "Oliver Wendell Holmes in the Conversation of his Culture," p. 300. See also *Autocrat*, p. 219; *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 23-24; *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 1, 148, 263-264, and 309; Gibian, "Oliver Wendell Holmes...", pp. 65, 73, and 339.

32. *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, p. 17; *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 90, 189 and 217; *Emerson and Motley*, p. 172.

33. *Autocrat*, p. 64. On the importance of rapid-fire talk in the Saturday Club meetings, see Gibian, "Oliver Wendell Holmes...", passim, and Emerson, ed., *Early Years of the Saturday Club*, pp. 43, 68, and 91-92.

rather than as a skill of resolution. He was often "contrary" merely for the sake of conversation. Opposition, rather than settled truth, was the purpose of discourse. "Intellectual anarchy" was one of the virtues of the "disorganization" of the Saturday Club, and the success of the club depended on the principle of "mutual repulsion," rather than consensus.³⁴ "I was just going to say, when I was interrupted, . . ." is the famous first line of Holmes' "Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," which referred to the interval separating his 1831 "Autocrat" from the 1857 series in the *Atlantic Monthly*.³⁵ The power of immaturity, which was itself assimilable to the dependency of women, was a hallmark of Holmes' persona in life as well as in his fiction.

Just as the *Autocrat* began with an interruption, Holmes all but ended the breakfast-table works with an interruption. The last incident occurs just as the character known as the "Master" is on the verge of finally giving his comprehensive explanation of "the Order of Things." Near the conclusion of this speech, the Master states,

I will repeat the substance of this final solution
[that had come to him over the course of his fifty
years];

*The one central fact in the Order of
Things which solves all questions is*

—

34. *Autocrat*, pp. 264 and 268-270; *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 46 and 336; Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat*, p. 243; Gibian, "Oliver Wendell Holmes...", passim. Holmes also made ample use of paradox, surprise, and the concept of plagiarism in his essays, to emphasize the difficulty of uncovering new knowledge. On the concept of originality and plagiarism as it relates to the feminine implications of intellectual modesty in the nineteenth century, see Tomkins, *Sensational Designs*, pp. xvi, 40-46, 100, 125, and 133; Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York, 1993), p. 118.

35. The frequency and effect of these gestures increased in the *Poet*, where Holmes introduced the character of "That Boy," whose main function was to interrupt the discussion at the table by firing off his popgun. "That Boy" insured that there would be no "speech-making" at the breakfast-table. For more examples of interruptions, see *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 2, 78-79, 138, 146-47, 168, 213, 246-47, 256, and 299; *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*, pp. 8, 37, 43, 46, 63, 93-94, 100, 150, 218-19, 280, 309, and 319; Gibian, "Oliver Wendell Holmes...", pp. 76, 139-141, 188, 194, and 224-234.

At this moment we were interrupted by a knock at the master's door.³⁶

The final interruption proved to be the landlady, bearing the news that she would no longer be keeping boarders. This final episode of Holmes' breakfast-table papers confirms that Holmes was chiefly interested in dialogue, in discursive insight, not in settling issues or grand solutions. Questions were more important than answers. This closing episode of the *Poet* brought the breakfast-table series full circle. What had begun as a mere interruption of a conversation, ended that way.

Holmes realized that the place of talk in American life was much different from the magisterial authority of the great talkers of earlier times. It is in this vein that his conversation challenged the presumptive masculine basis of literary authority. His use of the term "Autocrat" was mainly ironic, as the course of the conversation depended more on the actions of the landlady than the ambitions of the Master.³⁷

36. The Poet at the Breakfast-Table, p. 339.

37. The Poet at the Breakfast-Table, p. 266. For more examples of modesty, see pp. 160-63, and 321.