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Travelling Regionalism and the Art of Comparison

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Introduction

Regional writing is often assumed to be a rooted genre, but it is edited, published, circulated, and read beyond the confines of its original locality. This chapter considers this seeming paradox by relating the writings of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) to regional writing by the German writer Ilse Frapan (1849-1908), the Irish writer Jane Barlow (1857-1917), and the English writer Mary E. Mann (1848-1929). These writers were compared to each other as writers of regional or dialect fiction in the reviews published in one prominent literary hub, London, so it is worth reading them in tandem with each other again, to see if their affinities still communicate something larger than the sum of their separate achievements today. For example, the *Bookman* reviewer noted that Ilse Frapan's story "God's Will" features the same situation as Mary Wilkins's "On the Walpole Road": "In both cases the heroine has drifted into a hopelessly unsatisfying engagement, has seen no way to cancel it, and actually stands at the very altar before she can nerve herself to try for liberty."[1] While "the somewhat austere New England writer" portrays a heroine who acts "from a stern sense of duty," Frapan "finds a more joyous way out of the dilemma."[2] The reviewer implies that Wilkins's stern sense of duty arises from her New England background, whereas Frapan's northern German sensibility (Frapan was originally from Hamburg, although she had settled in Stuttgart at the time of writing) is intrinsically associated with her comparatively liberal attitude toward love.

To note affinities between regional writers from different regions might draw accusations of formulaic or inauthentic writing on the part of the writers, because regional writing is supposed to be faithful to variations, not affinities, in dialect and culture. If we read the works of Frapan, Wilkins, Barlow, and Mann carefully, however, distinctions as well as affinities become apparent. Although nineteenth-century reviewers sometimes attributed these distinctions directly to different national traits–as in the

1 "Ilse Frapan," *Bookman*, April 1892, 16. In 1892 Freeman was still unmarried and known by her maiden name, Wilkins. Critics generally refer to her as "Freeman," although increasingly call her "Wilkins Freeman." I will refer to her as Wilkins occasionally, because I am discussing the reception of her work from a period before her marriage.

2 "Ilse Frapan," 17.

example above—these are distinctions in individual writers' sensibilities as well as distinctions between the regions they depict. This chapter addresses the theory that underpins comparative studies of regionalism today. As the chapter will address, today's comparatists shrug off the imperial origins of their method and examine writing from a variety of places without using European cities as their single standard of measurement.[3] Each of these writers can serve as a lens through which we reread and rediscover another.

This type of reading for correspondences between writers of different geographical contexts without direct lines of influence is similar to what Susan Manning calls "lateral" reading.[4] It illustrates that the nascent or subtle feminism that American critics have long associated with Freeman, Jewett, and other American women regionalists was shared across women regionalists from other national contexts. Often, critics who find feminism in American women's regionalism have associated this feminism with an unusual reworking of the genre; Cecilia Tichi, for example, argues that women regionalists are not interested in geography but "the geography of women's lives," and in their compendium of feminist approaches to regionalism, Majorie Pryse and Judith Fetterley quote Tichi approvingly.[5] More recently, critics of regionalism have argued that stories about sexual desire, heterosexual courtship, and the problem of female sexual choice are not unusual reworkings of regionalism but draw directly from regionalism's traditional themes of the conflict between local mores and translocal modern forces, as well as between older and younger generations.[6] Some

3 R. Radhakrishnan, Graham Huggan, Walter Mignolo, and Shu-Mei Shih have argued that scholars generally compare European and postcolonial literatures in an asymmetrical way. R. Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?" in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses,* ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 15-33; Graham Huggan, "The Trouble with World Literature," in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (London: Routledge, 2011), 490-506; Walter Mignolo, "On Comparison: Who is Comparing What and Why?" in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, 99-119, Shu-Mei Shih, "Comparison as Relation," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses,* 79-98. In a related line of argument, scholarship on regionalism often emphasises that the genre is written for metropolitan editors and circulated via metropolitan distributors and critics. In the US context, this argument was made most prominently by Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 107-41.

4 Susan Manning, *Poetics of Character: Transatlantic Encounters, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 157.

5 Cecelia Tichi, "Women Writers and the New Woman," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States,* ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 598; Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 54-55.

6 For an analysis of the conflict between older generations and younger generations in regionalism, see Josephine Donovan, *European Local-Color Literature: National Tales, Dorfges-*

writers plumb these regionalist topics for feminist potential, and among those writers are many women regionalists. When we read comparatively, we can see that the feminism associated with American women regionalists is not just a remnant of the predilections of feminist critics who recovered the American writing in the 1970s through the 1990s. It can, in fact, also be found in regional texts arising out of other contexts that were recovered at different times or remain neglected today. Understanding the transnational dimension of this feminist regionalism should make critics' understanding of regionalism more cosmopolitan.

Updating the Art of Comparison

Frapan, Barlow, and Mann were compared to Freeman in reviews published in London. London was a large node in the supranational publishing network. London-based weeklies, monthlies, and quarterlies were not the only source of authority about which fiction to import across national boundaries, but they were powerful. For instance, editors and librarians read the reviews and serialised fiction to decide what authors to republish or preserve, and thus, reviews were instrumental in determining which fiction was reprinted in different localities.[7] Their tendency to frame a text for their audiences seems to illustrate the appropriateness of Pascale Casanova's theory of the world republic of letters as a world system orchestrated by particular cultural brokers in the cultural capitals.[8] Or, to highlight the problem with another common metaphor, they illustrate that the global circulation does not "flow" evenly because it is always "subject to economic privileges and political agendas."[9]

In an example of the kind of rhetoric London reviewers spread, a reviewer for the *Athenaeum* opened with a comparison between Jane Barlow and Mary Wilkins, writing that imitation is impossible, because the New Englander is "shrewd, Protestant, and struggling" while "the Connaught peasant is idle,

chichten, Romans Champêtres (New York: Continuum, 2010), 116-117. For an analysis of the problem of female sexual choice as a Darwinian theme in literature, see Judith P. Saunders, "Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'Louisa' and the Problem of Female Choice," *Philosophy and Literature*, 43 (2019): 466-81.

7 I illustrate the centrality and power of New York publishers and London reviewers (and the cooperation between them) in *Transatlantic Footholds: Turn-of-the-Century American Women Writers and British Reviewers* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 17-18.

8 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

9 Noel B. Salazar, *Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 8.

dreamy, and resigned."[10] The *Athenaeum*'s reviewer's words might serve as a textbook example of how not to compare in a decolonial twenty-first century. For one thing, the comparison brings with it a charge of being second in a footrace. Second, differences between the writers' representations are attributed directly to essentialised descriptions of national or ethnological identity, as if the reviewer is directing readers how to distinguish, classify, and rank national types. His overriding belief in ranking national types works against the Irish, who come across as lazy and deserving of a lowly fate. In this case, it works in favour of the Americans. The reviewer was adopting the prejudice against the Irish for being lazy, superstitious, and incapable of governing themselves that was typical of the century.[11] The reviewer overstates the case. New Englanders in Freeman's works often preach resignation to fate. Barlow's Connaught peasants sometimes rebel against theirs. For example, Lucy Greenleaf in Wilkins Freeman's "Arethusa" (1900), which I will address later, ends up marrying a man for whom she feels little attraction. Larry Sheridan in Barlow's "One Too Many" chapter of Jane Barlow's *Irish Idylls* (1892) goes to great lengths to reverse his family's tragic decision to send him to America.

Twenty-first-century comparison must try to reverse some of the excesses that are the legacy of the nineteenth century. Comparative literary scholars have held a rich and disputatious conversation about this very question. As R. Radhakrishnan writes,

> comparative studies are simultaneously epistemological and political. Insofar as they are epistemological, they are characterized by a certain critical, utopian idealism; and insofar as they are inescapably political, they partake in and are actively symptomatic of the unequal and asymmetrical relationships that have and continue to structure the world in dominance.[12]

Scholars, including Radhakrishnan, Graham Huggan, Walter Mignolo, and Shu-Mei Shih, emphasise that the asymmetrical relationship most often partaken in by literary studies is the ranking of Europe and its Others, in

10 Erminda Rentoul Esler, "Review of "Irish Idylls," *Athenaeum*, Jan. 14, 1893, 49-50.

11 Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); L. Perry Curtis, Jr. *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971).

12 R. Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses,* ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 20-21.

which postcolonial literatures, in particular, must fit into Western categories or be seen as lacking.[13] In the case of the *Athenaeum,* comparing Jane Barlow to Mary Wilkins, the Irish peasants are constructed as a colonised Other internal to Europe, whereas the New Englander is constructed as the kernel of a newly ascendant American nation who is Europe's greatest inheritor. The comparison is less a discerning reading of the fiction than a rehearsal of popular prejudices about other nations.

Also relevant to a consideration of Freeman and her European contemporaries is the slanted landscape of American exceptionalism, in which American literature is assumed to be wholly different from European literatures and is interpreted in relation solely to American history and literary history. Studies of American regionalism relied upon American exceptionalism.[14] By reading Freeman alongside her European contemporaries, I hope to challenge this exceptionalism. I also hope to challenge the notion that American literature is inevitably belated and imitative of European literature. Transatlanticism as a topic in literary studies often announces itself as an analysis of the multi-directional traffic across the North and South Atlantic, but the tendency to re-establish the primacy of British, and specifically English, literature has not abated.

In contrast to Eurocentric or US-centric comparison, Walter Mignolo argues for a decolonial method of comparison, in which "Decolonial scholars look not for similarities or differences between two or more entities or texts but attempt to understand their location in the colonial matrix of power."[15] Mignolo, and separately Shih, argue for showing how texts relate rather than how they are similar or different. Shih explains, "Relational studies of literature in integrated world historical contexts can occur along various axes and pivots, from different perspectives, around different thematics, and in different scales."[16] Despite the potential for a comparison between Freeman and her European contemporaries to merely re-entrench American ascendency, decolonial methods of relational comparison seem possible. Similarities may be attributed not to slavish authorial imitation

13 Graham Huggan, "The Trouble with World Literature," in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (London: Routledge, 2011), 490-506; Walter Mignolo, "On Comparison: Who is Comparing What and Why?" in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, 99-119; Shu-Mei Shih, "Comparison as Relation," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, 79-98.

14 Examples of studies of American regionalism that do not look beyond the borders of the United States are too numerous to mention here.

15 Mignolo, "On Comparison," 101.

16 Shih, "Comparison as Relation," 80.

but to similarity in production, translation, republication, and consumption of the texts in question. By reading regional literature, we are not, or we may not, be treating European literatures in their world dominance, but we are noting the complexity of Europe, and its regions that have not been successfully 'modernised' or standardised, culturally or economically. This anarchic method of comparison, in which one may pivot from any text to any other, may be just what some of the London reviewers were recognising was already happening by noting the influx of regional literatures from every direction into London-based taste-making coteries. That is, the world republic of letters need not depend exclusively on the power of particular metropolitan cultural brokers, but might actually be a more variegated and agentic field.

Contemporary theorists of regionalism have made significant inroads into new ways of thinking about the genre. Regional writing is no longer assumed to be a parochial genre produced by locally based writers and of interest primarily to locally based readers.[17] Josephine Donovan's book-length study, *European Local-Color Literature,* traces the history of regional writing (which she refers to by another of the genre's names, "local colour"). Her work explains how the conflict between premodern peasant cultures and the forces of the Enlightenment, with its promotion of rationalisation, standardisation, and technological advances, occurred in different countries at slightly different times and in slightly different ways, and hence the genre travelled and changed under different conditions. Both literary influence and socio-economic and political underpinnings are relevant to Donovan.[18] Drawing upon scholarship on England, Ireland, Scotland, and the United States, Giulia Bruna argues that recent "readings of nineteenth-century regional fiction have problematised assumptions of its embeddedness in a single locality, and have drawn attention to multiple, transnational and transatlantic affiliation."[19] Like Donovan, Bruna mentions that regional fiction is referred to by various names in different national contexts, such as "provincial novels" or "idylls."[20] In particular, she posits a "glocal village imaginary" in which the Irish writers Rentoul Esler and Katherine Frances Purdon treat Irish villages with reference to local dialect and mores at the

17 In opposing ways, Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, and Pryse and Fetterley, *Writing Out of Place*, earlier argued for national, but not transnational, functions for regionalism.

18 Josephine Donovan, *European Local-Color Literature*, 1-6, 22. 97-99.

19 Giulia Bruna, "Global Irish Village Imaginaries: Local-Colour Fiction of Erminda Rentoul Esler and Katherine Frances Purdon," *Open Library of the Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2022): 4.

20 Bruna, "Global Irish Village Imaginaries," 2-3.

same time as their tales "existed in a complex, supranational media environment."[21] The comparisons between Freeman and other regionalists in the London press do not merely reinscribe the centrality of London but serve as tantalising traces of this complex, supranational media environment.

Paratextual Invitations

The prefaces that accompanied transnational editions of regional fiction illustrate that regional writing can be accessible and attractive for readers transnationally in this supranational media environment. The prefaces frame the fiction for translocal readers, but interestingly, they advocate a culturally specific reading, not a universal one. For the regional writing of this period raised and continues to raise difficulties for translocal readers. Its often impenetrable dialect and its allusions to obscure social conventions and histories make regional writing as purposefully difficult to understand as modernist writing. Regional fiction introduces its own kind of disorientation. Writers, editors, and culture makers were aware of the difficulties regionalism could cause. The prefaces reveal the culture makers' consciousness of what their work demands from readers and what they believed its significance might be for new readers.[22] To illustrate this, I will discuss Wilkins's preface to the 1890 Edition of *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, published by David Douglas in Edinburgh; the translator Helen A. Macdonnell's preface to the 1892 T. Fisher Unwin London edition of Ilse Frapan's *Heavy Laden and Old Fashioned Folk*; and Jane Barlow's preface to the 1894 Dodd and Mead edition of *Irish Idylls*, published in New York. Macdonnell also translated another collection of Frapan's stories for Fisher Unwin, and in a later section, I will analyse the story "God's Will" in Macdonnell's translation.

When Mary Wilkins's first story collection for adults, *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, was published three years after its American debut in a briskly selling David Douglas of Edinburgh series on American Authors, it printed an author's preface introducing Wilkins's stories to a British readership. The preface contains the modest pose characteristically adopted by genteel women writers who ventured onto the public stage while wishing to maintain their feminine identity: "These little stories were written about

21 Bruna, "Global Irish Village Imaginaries," 5.

22 Like all prefaces, they are performances rather than transparent windows into the writer's mind or reader's actual needs.

the village people of New England."[23] Wilkins then offers a reason why British readers might be interested in reading her work: New Englanders were descended from Old Englanders. She writes, her stories "are studies of the descendants of the Massachusetts Bay colonists."[24]

Why should the British read Wilkins? This was a question that Wilkins asked herself and was somewhat nervous about, as evidenced by references to her British readership in her letters, and a defensive speech she planned to give in 1926 when awarded the William Dean Howells Medal for Distinction in Fiction.[25] In the 1890 preface, Wilkins seems to explain her British readership via blood relation: the British might be interested in reading her work because they are related to the characters. As I have written, this rhetorical move is potentially exclusionary, as she treats all of the British Isles as English, and she ignores the Irish and French-Canadian presence in New England.[26] In addition to this ethnocentrism, though, the preface should be interpreted as a provocation, announcing the stories as culturally distinct and inviting readers to read across cultural differences. The preface works against a universalist reading.

The translator of Ilse Frapan's stories, Helen A. Macdonell, who remains an obscure figure, wrote a preface for Fisher Unwin that also works against a universalist reading. Like David Douglas, Fisher Unwin republished many foreign titles. Adopting a similarly modest pose, Macdonell writes about how she is pleased to introduce Frapan to British readers. She excuses her German author for writing in the short story form, which had low status in Britain.[27] Macdonnell too authenticates the tales, assuring readers that Frapan writes equally authoritatively about her native Hamburg as about southern Germany, because she has lived there for many years and mastered the Bavarian and Wurttemberg dialects. Macdonell then raises one of the biggest obstructions to the portability of regional literature–the difficulty of its dialect: "It is to be feared, however, that this salient feature of her work may prove a barrier even to such foreign readers as know German pretty

23 Mary E. Wilkins [Freeman], "Author's Preface to the Edinburgh Edition," in *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1890), v.

24 Freeman, "Author's Preface," v.

25 For the speech, see Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Preface", in *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Brent L. Kendrick (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985), xv.

26 Palmer, *Transatlantic Footholds: Turn-of-the-Century American Women Writer and British Reviewers* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 75.

27 Dean Baldwin, "The Tardy Evolution of the British Short Story," *Studies in Short Fiction* 30, 1993: 23-33.

intimately–a matter of true regret."[28] Macdonnell translates Germanic dialect terms into English near-equivalents. Any translator of regionalist texts can sympathise with Macdonell's plight, and teachers who have tried to teach texts written in dialect might also offer commiseration. In this way, Macdonnell offers a culturally specific interpretation of the stories she translates, even as she implicitly argues for cross-cultural understanding.

Jane Barlow attached a brief preface to the Dodd and Mead edition of her first collection consisting entirely of short stories, *Irish Idylls,* that makes a similar case for portability and translatability of culturally distinct fictions. Like Wilkins, Barlow explains why foreign readers might take a special interest in her work: because so many Irish immigrants have flocked to American shores. Barlow makes a plea for a greater understanding of both the Irish who leave and the Irish who stay behind:

> They will perhaps care to glance at his old home, and learn the reasons why he leaves it, which seem to lie very obviously on the surface, and the reasons, less immediately apparent, why his neighbours bide behind.[29]

Barlow makes a case for tolerance. The phrase "the reasons why he leaves it, which seem to lie very obviously on the surface" alludes to the poverty of the Irish people whom she depicts in her work, and the reference to reasons that are "less immediately apparent" makes a plea for seeing Ireland as a source of community and resilience rather than mere hopelessness. Like Freeman's work, Barlow's collection sold very well after cultural export: the Dodd and Mead edition was reprinted at least three times.[30] Barlow and Freeman offer one reason why regionalism should be studied in a transnational frame: the people featured in regional fictions were not rooted in place but migrants from one region to another. But Macdonnell offers another, even more compelling reason, which is that culturally distinct fictions are worth the hurdles that dialect and local customs put in readers' way. All three prefaces

28 Helen A. Macdonnell, preface, *Heavy Laden and Old-Fashioned Folk*, by Ilse Frapan (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), 7. https://archive.org/details/heavyladenandolooakungoog/page/n2/mode/2up

29 Jane Barlow, *Irish Idylls* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1894), 5. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015063919685&view=1up&seq=13.

30 The Library of Congress lists an 1893 edition and an 1897 edition. Barlow's similar title Strangers at Lisconnel was published in 1895 by Dodd, Mead. The *Bookman* wrote in 1894 that the American run of Irish Idylls had been exhausted and a second one was being issued. "News Notes," *Bookman*, April 1894, 5-8.

actively work against a universalist reading: they announce their material as culturally distinct and yet eminently worthy of readerly attention and sympathy.

Leaving Men at the Altar

In her discussion of what comparison can be, Shi argues that the details of texts should be used to guide critics to extract the relevant socio-economic and cultural contexts; close reading is still an important component of criticism at a transnational scale.[31] This need to read the texts is true of transnational regionalism as well. In this section, I will discuss Wilkins Freeman's "Arethusa" (1900) and Frapan's "God's Will" (1890), two stories of awkward brides leaving their grooms at the altar, as examples of the kind of implicitly feminist spin that many writers were giving to traditional regional tales of courtship and star-crossed lovers.

Both Wilkins Freeman's "Arethusa" and Frapan's "God's Will" feature heroines who are deceptively meek and obedient. Lucy Greenleaf and Marie Deininger are compared to "lambs,"–like lambs to the slaughter.[32] Lucy obeys her mother in most regards, being "gently acquiescent towards all wishes of others" (221), but she does not wish to marry. Rather than develop an ideology around women's freedom, she demurs and deflects when boys come to call. Only a boy named Edson Abbot continues to court her. Lucy's mother approves of Edson because he comes from a fine family and treats farming from a scientific angle. While Edson seems to symbolise modernity coming to the countryside, his is the wrong modernity. In "God's Will," which takes place in a Swabian country village northeast of Stuttgart, Marie Deininger has a similarly mercenary father who wants her to marry her cousin Pete because he feels that only Pete is capable of taking over his profitable wine-growing acres. With Marie's mother dead, the father rules the house with "industry, thrift, and good conduct," and Marie, who comes to love another, accedes to his desires.[33] The engagement lasts years, and even a sympathetic minister counsels Marie to obey her father, because it is "God's will." The phrase becomes a mantra throughout the story, until the actual wedding day, when Marie's inner conscience is portrayed in a muddle:

31 Shi, "Comparison as Relation."

32 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Arethusa," in *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*, ed. Mary R. Reichardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 222. Ilse Frapan, "God's Will," in *God's Will, and Other Stories*, trans. Helen A. Macdonnell (London: Fisher Unwin Pseudonym Library, 1893), 12, 93.

33 Frapan, "God's Will," 20.

> It is my father's will; but then he wants it because of Pete, seeing that he has no son of his own, and that Pete can do the work of three, and does it too. It is my uncle's will; but that is on account of my property. It is Urschi's will; but then she wants to get her own sons a show in the inheritance. It is Pete's will; he, however, wishes to have the farm. But it was my dead mother's will who loved me dearly and so it is also God's will and must therefore be mine.[34]

The repeated mantra of the phrase "God's will" empties it of meaning and endorses an ironic, anti-religious reading.

The stories resolve their conundrum differently, but in both cases, they find room for a sliver of female agency. Lucy marries Edson, but only after she convinces him not to pick her beloved arethusa orchid, and after she disappears embarrassingly on the day of the wedding to visit the orchid in the swamp, thus winning a concession and keeping her own identity in the midst of marriage. The story endorses a continuing preservation of local nature even in the midst of the drive toward modernity that Edson symbolises. In "God's Will," Marie makes it to the alter and then says "no" rather than "yea," so the marriage is off, Pete is free to marry Marie's younger, fun-loving sister Lena, with whom he is more compatible, and Marie is free to marry the serious and upwardly mobile Wilhelm. Unlike Pete, Wilhelm has studied and his carpentry skills have even won an award. As part of his understanding of the modern belief that the countryside can be picturesque, Wilhelm does not ridicule Marie for planting flowers. The question in the stories is not whether modernity or tradition is better universally, but which is better for a particular woman.

Like Freeman, Ilse Frapan had a complicated relationship to heterosexuality and marriage. The daughter of an instrument maker, she first worked as a teacher. In 1883, she moved to Stuttgart with her artist friend Emma Mandelbaum, where Frapan studied literature. In 1887, Frapan and Mandelbaum relocated to Munich and eventually Zurich, where Frapan studied the natural sciences. Although she was briefly married to an Armenian man, scholars attest that her greatest love was Mandelbaum.[35] Freeman scholars likewise agree that the writer's longest lasting and most nurturing relationship was with Mary Wales, and Freeman is regularly considered as a lesbian

34 Frapan, "God's Will," 88-89.

35 James J. Conway, Afterword, *We Women Have no Fatherland*, by Ilse Frapan, translated by James J. Conway (Berlin: Rixdorf Editions, 2018), 107-26.

or queer writer.[36] The gender radicalism of these two writers is implicit rather than explicit in their insistence that heroines have sexual choice.

The Archive.org version of the T. Fisher Unwin volume *Heavy Laden and Old-Fashioned Folk* was digitised from a copy at Harvard University, donated there from the library of Sarah Orne Jewett, a well-known New England regionalist closely associated with Freeman. Jewett, then, may well have read Frapan. Freeman rarely mentions her reading in her letters, which are the only archival materials that have come to light for her, so it is not known whether the writer also read Frapan, Barlow, or Mann. The presence of Frapan in Jewett's library demonstrates a transnational circulation of village idylls.

Valuing Elderly Women

In their joint focus on mature women struggling with poverty and pride and working to gain recognition from their neighbours and the readers, Jane Barlow's "A Windfall," a chapter from *Irish Idylls* (1894), is similar to Wilkins's "An Honest Soul" (1884). Reviewers of the day noted that Wilkins was talented at portraying elderly women, and this volume by Barlow was praised in similar terms.[37] In both stories, the elderly women symbolise hard-bitten elements of the region that have to contend with the passing of time and the changing of ways. Wilkins's Martha Patch in "An Honest Soul" spends each day doing piecework sewing for her neighbours without a front window in which to look out onto the road. Martha is proud, and she will not ask her neighbours for help in cutting out a window. Instead, she sits and sews each day with no view of the street. Two quilts for her neighbours take her longer than usual because she mistakenly sews Mrs. Bennett's unusual scrap into Mrs. Bliss's quilt. Painstakingly, she rectifies her mistake, by which time, she faints from exhaustion. When her kind next-door neighbour Mrs. Peters finds her, she deftly gives Martha more work to do and asks her husband to cut a window into her front wall.[38]

Barlow's Widow M'Gurk from "A Windfall" is, like Martha Patch, a proud but poor old woman whose story is told with droll hyperbole. Living alone since her husband's death, she manages her own farm of more than half an acre, planting the potatoes herself. Mrs. M'Gurk is proud because she originally came from a higher social status and suffered bad fortune when her

36 Susan Koppelman, ed. *Two Friends: And Other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories by American Women Writers* (New York: Meridian, 1994).

37 Review of "Irish Idylls" by Jane Barlow. *Athenaeum*, Jan. 14, 1893, 49-50.

38 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "An Honest Soul," in *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*, ed. Mary R. Reichardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 6.

father took to drink. For example, when a neighbour, Judy Ryan, comes to offer her charity in the form of potatoes, Mrs. M'Gurk sends her summarily out of the room. Thus, like Martha Patch, Mrs. M'Gurk suffers what Barlow calls a "tug of war between pride and penury" (20). One day Mrs. M'Gurk receives a windfall of fifteen shillings from a distant relative who had died in Connecticut, New England. The community gathers round Mrs. M'Gurk, helps her understand the money order, and gives her ideas about what to buy. On the morning before Mrs. M'Gurk sets off, she must stop and ask everybody if they need anything from town. She returns with a packed basket with gifts for everybody, including the children of Judith Ryan, for whom she buys a hoard of peppermint sticks, which reconciles the neighbours. Mrs. M'Gurk buys only a small bag of salt for herself and has only threepence remaining.

Both stories pay serious attention to ageing, independent women while maintaining a broad sense of humour. Both Martha and Mrs. M'Gurk are well-rounded and individuated. Both stories celebrate communal life. Whereas the courtship stories "Arethusa" and "God's Will" portray elders as domineering and misguided, these stories emphasise the usefulness of elderly people in building a community. The act of creating community cohesion is not idealised, however, but treated with irony and detachment. When Mrs. M'Gurk stops by at everyone's house before going to town to ask if they need anything, the narrator drily says, "This is a long established social observance, which to omit would have been a grave breach of etiquette; yet, like other social observances, it sometimes became rather trying."[39] When Mrs. M'Gurk fails to return by nightfall, the neighbours gather round and worry together about what pratfall might have occurred. Barlow said that American readers should recognise why some people stay in Ireland, and this story depicts Lisconnel as a trying place, sometimes fragile, but generous and nurturing as well. The spunkiness of these elderly women represents the region's contention with the winds of change.

Tolerating Abusive Husbands

Mary E. Mann's stories share an affinity with those by Barlow and Freeman, but unlike *Irish Idylls*, or "God's Will," Mann's stories are unremittingly stark. Her Dulditch is a fictional village in Norfolk similar to Mann's own native village of Shropham, with a moniker meant to be a play on the word "dull." There are few courtship narratives in these stories. Signs of the

39 Barlow, "A Windfall," 28.

agricultural depression that started in the 1880s are everywhere. Emphasis is laid on poverty and the coarseness that poverty can breed. Efforts have been made to recover Mann for contemporary readers throughout the late twentieth century, most notably by A.S. Byatt, who included Mann's story "Little Brother" in *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (1998). Byatt praises Mann's story for grim social realism without middle-class proselytising.[40] All of the Dulditch stories, which appeared in periodicals and were collected in volumes including *The Fields of Dulditch* (1901), *A Sheaf of Corn* (1908), and *Astray in Arcady* (1910), have recently been reprinted by Larks Press in Norfolk with a Foreword by D. J. Taylor and Introduction by Patience Tomlinson. Mann received mixed reviews and never became very famous. Her agent and reviewers often faulted her for being "gloomy" or "piling up the agony."[41] D. J. Taylor speculates that her reputation has not lasted because her best work was her short stories, which have proven a more difficult vehicle for canonisation in the UK.[42] The following comparison of Mann's "David Peck's Love Affair" and Freeman's "Gentian" (1886) illustrates how regionalism's focus on everyday, humble lives sometimes broached the serious issue of domestic violence. In both stories, economic depression in New England and Norfolk led to poverty and increased tensions within the home.

Mann's fiction is full of casual references to domestic violence. Wives are regularly clouted on the head by their husbands, and the belt is considered a useful instrument for disciplining children. It is the other side of the coin from comic courtship: after marriage comes the gruelling hardship of wives and husbands forced to get by and get along. The story "David Peck's Love Affair" relates to Freeman's many tales of bickering couples, including "Gentian."[43] Both stories involve stubborn, domineering husbands and submissive, timid wives. In "Gentian," an old man, Alfred Tollet, has been sick with an unnamed illness that causes mental lassitude; he complains

40 A. S. Byatt, "Introduction", in *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xx.

41 "Novels," *Saturday Review*, Feb. 4, 1893, 127-28; "Novels of the Week," *Athenaeum*, March 7, 1891, 307-8.

42 D.J. Taylor, foreword to *The Complete Tales of Dulditch*, by Mary E. Mann (Dereham: Larks Press, n.d.), 5.

43 Mann's willingness to portray cruelty and desperation also makes her work comparable to Freeman's and Alexandros Papadiamantis's regional tales of infanticide, as analysed by Myrto Drizou, "Transatlantic Lloronas: Infanticide and Gender in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Alexandros Papadiamantis," in *New Perspectives on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: Reading with and against the Grain*, ed. Stephanie Palmer, Myrto Drizou, and Cécile Roudeau (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 95-111.

of "great depression and languor" all spring.[44] Stubborn Alfred will not let his wife Lucy call the doctor, and since Alfred "had been the sole autocrat of all [Lucy's] little Russias," Lucy is afraid to act.[45] The line about "Russias" indicates the writer's recognition of a transnational frame of reference and one that links domestic squabbles between husband and wife to freedom fighting between subjects and rulers. Lucy's unmarried sister Hannah Orton suggests that Lucy give Alfred the herb gentian, disguised in his tea and food. Lucy eventually obeys, and Alfred's condition improves. When he discovers the ruse, he responds brutally, giving Lucy the silent treatment. David Peck, a gamekeeper in "David Peck's Love Affair", is similar to Alfred, except that he is physically violent as well, striking his wife and children when he comes home after drinking. The fact that David works as a gamekeeper makes evident the inequalities of the Norfolk countryside at a time when large landowners were monopolising land to raise pheasants instead of letting local labourers plant corn. David's wife Matilda Peck, who is not yet thirty years old despite her eight children, fails to cook supper for him one evening. When he storms upstairs to punish her, she takes her youngest child and leaves for her mother's, an "anxious, prating, uncomfortable" widow, who is reputed to have driven her own husband into his grave.[46] At first, Matilda sounds brave and defiant: "I'll h' done with havin' a child a year, and bein' at the mercy of that villain. I'll stop along o' you mother, as you've often arst me. And he can shift for himself at last."[47] But Matilda, like Lucy, is often submissive, deferring either to her husband or her mother.

Mann's story raises explicit and disturbing questions about social class and domestic violence. David follows Lucy to her mother's house, threatens to "break every bone in her skin," and breaks the widow's window.[48] Policemen witness the incident and take David Peck into custody. Eventually, he is dismissed because he is in good standing with powerful people. As the sardonic narrator says, "[b]ecause of his good looks, his honesty, and other good qualities which, spite of the little surface failings already indicated, he possessed, David was something of a favourite with the better classes."[49] David's landowning employer gives David extra money when he discovers

44 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Gentian," in *The Revolt of 'Mother' and Other Stories* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 19.
45 Freeman, "Gentian," 18.
46 Mary E. Mann, "David Peck's Love Affair," in *The Complete Tales of Dulditch* (Dereham, Norfolk: Larks Press, n.d.), 130.
47 Mann, "David Peck's Love Affair," 130.
48 Mann, "David Peck's Love Affair," 131.
49 Mann, "David Peck's Love Affair," 131.

David is suffering from marital strife. A separation is agreed, and Matilda and the younger children move to the widow's home. Matilda's mother rules over her, however, not allowing Matilda to leave her mother's property because she fears for her daughter's life. David loudly boasts of his newfound freedom to the entertainment of the town, but secretly he cries.

Both couples eventually reunite, to wildly different effects. Freeman's story ends ambiguously but not unpleasantly. Lucy runs to Hannah's, where they make a living for several months by taking in sewing. Hannah is one of the writer's independent spinster heroines. Eventually, Lucy and Alfred realise their love for each other overrides their differences, and Alfred asks Lucy to come home and tend to his health by giving him gentian again. David and Matilda Peck also resolve their differences by the end of the story, and the "love affair" mentioned in the title consists of David throwing pebbles at Matilda's window and weepingly declaring his contrition. The sources of national and professional authority in the text all cooperate to keep the couple together. Mann's comparatively greater focus on issues of social class is welcome. It is less easy to extract feminist possibilities from her stories–unless one reads intertextually–as readers of the period's regionalism were likely to do.

Conclusion

This examination of regional fiction by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Ilse Frapan, Jane Barlow and Mary E. Mann demonstrates echoes among regional writers across national and state boundaries. There is no question of servile imitation or secondary status, as they integrate recurring regional plot motifs into a locally specific fiction. When we read Freeman alongside Frapan, the prevalence of tales of love and courtship is leavened with a sliver of recognition of various types of female desire and a defiance against parental wishes. Both Barlow and Freeman focus not only on young women's inclinations, but elderly women's as well, and they portray women without men. When we read Freeman alongside Mann, issues of sexual abuse and the damages done to people by social class and economic penury become increasingly visible. When read alongside each other, the nascent feminism of the transnational regionalist movement comes into view.

In his essay on comparison, R. Radhakrishnan writes,

> Even more crucially, what happens to those areas in each work that remain 'indigenous' and are not relevant to the common ground area of the comparison? Would these areas be abandoned from critical-the-

> oretical consideration as mere hinterlands whose function is nothing more than prepping and propping up the avant-garde area of comparison?[50]

This comparative approach should not run roughshod over elements of the writing. Both "God's Will" and "Arethusa" contain fantasy moments involving nymphs and fairies that have fallen outside the scope of this comparison. Many of Frapan's stories are based on middle-class life in Hamburg, not a location typically considered set backwards in time and therefore "regional." Barlow wrote about the famine as well as a comparatively tame topic like proud elderly ladies.[51] All of these writers wrote novels as well as stories.

Nonetheless, these writers found a form that would make far-flung locations legible to metropolitan audiences and rural audiences in other locations. Eric Storm argues that World's Fair depictions of rural folk grew standardised as the fairs proliferated and agents discovered what styles of representations pleased audiences; the fairs' attention to peasant communities grew formulaic.[52] At times, writers like Freeman and Barlow have been dismissed as too mainstream, formulaic, or conventional.[53] Yet careful close readings can work against the trap of relegating regionalism to mere formula. Close readings can note the affinities between writing set in different locations and discern the differences that render texts unique and worthy of remembering. Scholars of regionalism might continue to embed regionalism into the fabric of specific places, even as they venture into the state of comparison.

50 Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?", 18.

51 Christopher Cusack, "Sunk in the Mainstream: Irish Women Writers, Canonicity, and Famine Memory, 1892-1917," in *Irish Women Writers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Alternative Histories, New Narratives*, ed. Kathryn Laing and Sinéad Mooney (Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2020), 36-47.

52 Eric Storm, "Nationalizing the Vernacular: The Global Construction of Regional Identities at World Fairs" (keynote presentation, Cultural Representations of the Region in Transnational Contexts c. 1840-1940), Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, Jan. 13, 2023.

53 For Barlow, see Cusack, "Sunk in the Mainstream." For Freeman, see Sandra A. Zagarell, "Why Mary E. Wilkins Freeman? Why Now? Where Next?" in *New Perspectives on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, 273-75.

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