Rivaling the Gentleman in the Gentle Art: The Authority of the Victorian Woman Angler

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In his 1892 review of Mary Orvis Marbury’s *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*, Henry P. Wells wrote to the readers of *Forest and Stream*, “Whatever of other reward she may receive for her labors, Mrs. Marbury may be assured that her contribution will be quoted and her name remembered, long after all of her contemporaries in angling literature are quite forgotten except by the book collector.” This was high and public praise for a woman who was not only an exceptional fly tier but also an accomplished angler and author. It also echoed a genuine sentiment that was common among many nineteenth-century sportsmen who saw women’s participation in angling as respectable, productive, and warranted. Moreover, Marbury’s literary achievement was indicative of a growing number of Victorian fisherwomen who had found the opportunity to have a public voice through the pages of angling books or sporting magazines such as Charles Hallock’s *Forest and Stream*.

Indeed, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, some female anglers obtained a level of public authority that was on par with their male counterparts. For example, Cornelia “Fly Rod” Crosby discovered decades before American women had the right to vote that she could combine her skill as an angler with her abilities as a journalist, educator, and entertainer to enthrall audiences with her fly casting abilities and, in turn, use her popularity to shrewdly influence the masculine sphere of politics and conservation law in the State of Maine. Moreover, other women such as Sara Jane McBride, the proprietor of a fly tying business, published detailed entomological theses related to fly fishing in *Forest and Stream* that were heralded by Hallock as the scientific foundation of the very sport itself.

The kind of autonomy and authority that angling offered women through the pages of published literature, however, was as much a reflection of what Victorian women had already discovered through the practice of angling: they were a catalyst. This study explores the areas in which women grasped the opportunity to gain prominence in the public sphere through their expertise and knowledge of angling. Furthermore, it will also discuss how angling functioned as a “canopy of camouflage” under which a growing feminist movement could articulate—at times boldly—the agency of the New Woman through deliberate piscatorial competition.
with men. In other words, though it outwardly appeared as a simple recreational activity, angling functioned as a metanarrative for its adherents, in which the larger experiences and intentions of women became subtly intertwined, if not hidden, within the actual activity itself.

In the inaugural issue of *Forest and Stream* in 1873, Charles Hallock stated that “Ladies are especially invited to use our columns, which will be prepared with careful reference to their personal perusal and instruction.” Though Hallock’s motives behind the inclusion of women in his magazine were based on reforming the public image and respectability of field sports such as hunting, an anonymous Michigan sportswoman who wrote to thank Hallock for providing women with the opportunity to have their own column in *Forest and Stream* recognized something of much greater significance. In her letter to the “Women’s Column,” she openly challenged a male reader who had questioned the authorship of the first article ever printed in the column because it “was too well written,” to have come from a woman. By stating that “a woman can not only write a spicy article for a sportsman’s journal, but is capable of doing any work that requires brain power equally as well as a man,” she established both an argument for the capabilities of women, as well as proof that male sportsmen were not only reading what women were writing, but that they also felt compelled to respond to it. Furthermore, this exchange also illustrates how angling, and sporting magazines in particular, offered women a space where they could exercise a level of influence, and where some women could act as agents by taking this opportunity to address the crux of major societal issues such as equal intelligence.

Regarding the literary relationship among men, women, and the sport of hunting, Andrea Smalley has observed that the sporting world of the nineteenth century was surprisingly heterogeneous: “Male writers and editors not only affirmed female hunting competence but also asserted that women’s participation would reform hunting, making it a modern, respectable recreation.” Although angling had developed into a respectable female pastime centuries beforehand, it, too, benefited from the impetus given to the inclusion of women in sporting magazines. Fisherwomen now had a vehicle through which they could publicly share their experiences and knowledge of the sport not only to a new generation of women but also to a wider circulation of supportive and appreciative men. As one male sportsman remarked about the abilities of his wife, “She has caught as many fish and killed nearly as much game as her lord and master, and many a night we should have gone to bed hungry but for her ‘luck with the fish.’” Likewise, and in a more persuasive manner, a father exhorted his fellow sportsmen to invite their daughters to participate in outdoor recreations because “nature is ready to give impartially to boy and girl alike.” Even more important to the father, a girl would not be deemed “unmaidenly” by her friends or “unwomanly” by a male companion if she were to “conquer a game fish” or “catch the largest and finest fish.” Instead, he argued, “without losing any of her gentle attributes,” a girl could fish and have her exploits “cherished tenderly and often recounted in words of all praise” among her friends and family. In other words, teaching one’s daughter to fish would not jeopardize her capacity to attract a husband.

Indeed, angling was the preferred outdoor pastime of many middle- and upper-class, nineteenth-century North American women who had inherited it as a respectable sport from their Early Modern predecessors. Evidence for this comes