

Max O'Rell and the New Woman: A French Perspective on Anglo-Saxon Feminism

The bestselling French author Max O'Rell dismissed the feminist campaign for gender equality in England and the US in the 1880's and 1890's as 'the most ridiculous production of modern times' and presented what he called the existing 'harmonious partnership of French husbands and wives' as the ideal. My paper will examine how this very popular author used his self-styled persona as a French traditionalist to win large audiences on both sides of the Channel and the Atlantic. In his humorous travel accounts, Max O'Rell predominantly dealt with social issues such as the differences in morals and manners within the middle-class. In particular, his texts provide a rich guide to cross-national perceptions of feminism at the end of the nineteenth century in France, England and the US. My paper analyzes how Max O'Rell's stereotyping functioned within the specific cultural and social conditions in the Victorian world. It thereby examines the complex relationship between perception and social reality as well as cross-cultural influences within the context of late 19th century gender problems, taking into consideration not only the author's texts but also their interaction with other sources such as novels, feminist texts, etiquette and medical advice books and newspaper coverage of social scandals.