

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Special Issue:

Gender and Journalism: Women and/in the News in the Nineteenth Century

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**Gender and Journalism:  
Women and/in the News in the Nineteenth Century**

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<1> In her four-part essay on the “Present State of the Manners, Society, Etc. Etc. of the Metropolis of England” (1800), the poet and novelist Mary Robinson outlined the significance of news and newspapers in London’s vibrant print culture:

There never were so many monthly and diurnal publications as at the present period; and to the perpetual novelty which issues from the press may in a great measure be attributed the expansion of mind, which daily evinces itself among all classes of the people. The monthly miscellanies are read by the middling orders of society, by the *literati*, and sometimes by the loftiest of our nobility. The daily prints fall into the hands of all classes: they display the temper of the times; the intricacies of political manoeuvre; the opinions of the learned, the enlightened, and the patriotic....The press is the mirror where folly may see its own likeness, and vice contemplate the magnitude on its deformity. It also presents a tablet of manners; a transcript of the temper of mankind; a check on the gigantic strides of innovation; and a bulwark which REASON has raised, and, it is to be hoped, TIME will consecrate, round the altar of immortal LIBERTY! (Craciun 118)

Unsurprisingly, given her own history as a popular female author, Robinson stressed the role that women played in the print culture of the capital, remarking that “[t]he women of England have, by their literary labours, reached an altitude of mental excellence, far above those of any other nation. The works, which every year have been published by females, do credit to the very highest walks of literature: to enumerate names, will be unnecessary; their productions will be their passports [*sic*] to immortality!” (Craciun 111).

<2> Robinson probably had in mind the major female novelists and poets of her day when she assumed that no names were necessary. Women journalists, on the other hand, would have been virtually invisible to the reading public. Almost all daily and monthly journalism was published anonymously or pseudonymously in the early nineteenth century. Robinson's own essay on the metropolis was published in the *Monthly Magazine* under the initials "M. R.," and she frequently relied on other pseudonyms and authorial disguises in her journalism, such as the "Sylphid" essays that she published in the daily newspaper the *Morning Post*. The same is true for other prominent women journalists of the Romantic period, such as Mary Wollstonecraft. The impact of these writers on the newspaper and magazine culture of the early nineteenth century was hard to quantify at the time, and has become even more opaque as time has passed.

<3> As subjects of the news, however, women were highly visible, although not always for the best reasons. Robinson is a case in point: her affair with the Prince of Wales (later the Prince Regent and George IV) from 1779-1781 was followed avidly by the press, and she was forever after known as "Perdita" Robinson in the papers because she had begun the affair while acting in an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale* at Drury Lane. Actresses, heiresses and the women of the Royal family were guaranteed a considerable amount of coverage in the newspapers of the early decades of the nineteenth century, just as modern tabloid and women's journalism follows the social activities of fashionable women. Perhaps the most important news story involving women of the Regency period, the scandal around the behavior of Princess Caroline, the wife of the Regent, brought together sex, propriety and political intrigue in ways that echo coverage of sagas such as the Monica Lewinsky affair in the late twentieth century.

<4> Women readers had been courted by editors since the invention of the magazine in the 1730s, and the specialist ladies' magazine continued to feature in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Periodicals such as the *British Lady's Magazine* and *Lady's Monthly Museum* catered to an audience that wished for monthly titles, while publications such as the *Ladies' Fashionable Repository*, which began in 1809, signaled the start of a boom in annual periodicals directed at women that would continue through the middle part of the century.

<5> In Britain, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a number of technological, legislative, and educational developments leading to a rapid and large-scale extension both of periodicals and of a literate audience. With more publishing outlets and more potential readers than ever before, an increasing number of women found employment in the press. By 1896 membership in the newly formed Society of Women Journalists, based in London, numbered over 200, but this official figure represented only a small fraction of the women who regularly or semi-regularly contributed articles, columns, or 'pars' for papers and periodicals, with their use of anonymity or *nom de plumes* significantly diminishing in the last decades of the century. Despite their growing numbers, this "monstrous regiment of women" (Hogarth) faced on-going prejudice, and a series of cultural and structural barriers continued to limit the scope of their involvement with the industry. They were accused of not being able to write (Arnold Bennett famously expostulating, "Women enjoy a reputation for slipshod style. They have earned it.... Not ten per cent of them can be relied upon to satisfy even the most ordinary tests in spelling, grammar, and punctuation" [6-7]). They were generally herded into particular corners

of journalism, particularly women's pages, fashion and society columns, and the children's corners of weekly and monthly periodicals. Even when they 'wrote as the men did', women journalists were paid at different rates from men: Hulda Friederichs, "chief interviewer" for the *Pall Mall Gazette* from the 1880s, was reportedly the first woman journalist in Britain to be engaged on exactly the same terms of work and pay as male journalists (see Dillane). In numerous cases, the cultural capital of women's reporting accrued to the publication they wrote for, not to them directly: Flora Shaw wrote as colonial correspondent for the *Times* and her reports were read and discussed across Britain, but her editor hid her (female) identity for years from the owners of the *Times* (see Helly).

<6> News reporting continued to be coded as the most masculine branch of journalism, and women were widely held as being unable to handle either the physical or moral demands of work in the newsroom. Female news-writing exceptions did exist: Emily Crawford was a redoubtable journalist, the subject of Teja Pusapati's article in this issue, and sent back to England reports from the Paris barricades in the 1870s. However, Crawford herself warned aspiring women news reporters not to embark upon the career without "dauntless courage, exceptional health and powers of physical endurance, and a considerable amount of reserve force" ("Emily Crawford" 185). News reporters like Crawford and the intrepid war correspondent Lady Florence Dixie (see Sebba) were vanishingly rare exceptions, as attested by Frances Power Cobbe's wistfulness in an 1888 article for the *Women's Penny Paper*: "I should rejoice exceedingly in the introduction of two or three women on the staff of every newspaper in the kingdom" (5).

<7> Women continued to feature strongly in the nineteenth century as subjects of the news, with their reputations and their bodies presented in news reports as objects and consumables. Lurid divorce cases, particularly after the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act helped make divorce accessible to the middle classes, were floridly reported, presenting tales of domestic disharmony, adultery and abuse to an eager reading public. In 1889, Florence Maybrick was sensationally convicted of the murder by poison of her much older husband, and reporting of her conviction, sentencing, and on-going debates around new evidence helped sell countless newspapers well into the 1890s.

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<8> Arguably, Richard Altick's 1957 *The English Common Reader*, with its two chapters on periodicals and newspapers, was the first significant critical engagement with nineteenth-century British journalism as the lynch-pin of literature and culture in the century. Scholarship on women and journalism in the early decades of the nineteenth century has, perhaps predictably, been extremely limited, given the difficulties of identifying authorship in most newspapers and magazines, but scholarship on the mid- and late nineteenth century has flourished. In the 1990s, Margaret Beetham's work on women's magazines foregrounded the significance of the periodical industry to the creation of gender ideologies. The critical spotlight that began to shine on Mary Robinson in the 1990s and early 2000s led to important work on her journalism by Sharon Setzer, Adriana Craciun and others, although further examples of sustained study of women's involvement in the early-century press are hard to find.

<9> Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholarship in this field has gathered pace. Barbara Onslow's *Women of the Press in the Nineteenth Century* (2000) offered a significant guide to the breadth of nineteenth-century women's involvement with the periodical industry, and re-introduced many once-feted but long-forgotten names, while Marysa DeMoor and Laurel Brake's comprehensive and indispensable *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* (2009) includes many entries on women journalists as well as publishers and periodicals. The output of a single recent year's scholarship alone confirms the significant scholarly attention that is being paid to women and the press. In 2004, Chambers, Steiner and Fleming's *Women and Journalism* surveyed the development of women's engagement in the journalism industry in both the United States and the United Kingdom, from mid-nineteenth century to the present day, while Fraser, Johnston and Green's *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* examined the representation and interrogation of gender across a wide range of nineteenth-century British periodical publications. The same year also saw the publication of Andrea Broomfield's *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media*, which analysed women's strategic and complex relationship to anonymous publication, and Mary A. Waters' *British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism 1789-1832*, which highlighted one area of the periodical press where women had found a natural home by focusing on the literary criticism of writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Letitia Barbauld and demonstrating the ways in which women were intervening in the world of periodicals in significant ways in the early nineteenth century.

<10> Studies of women's involvement with the periodical press have continued to increase in richness and sharpness of focus on women as producers (not just objects) of news in the nineteenth century, examining a growing number of the myriad outlets, political approaches, and self-representational gambits of women writing for dailies, weeklies, and monthly publications, as well as heavyweight quarterlies. Only a small sampling of recent critical activity can be offered here: Michelle Tusan has written on women and the missionary press; Marysa DeMoor, Joanne Wilkes, and Cheryl Wilson have offered diverse perspectives on nineteenth-century women reviewers and critics; Jennifer Phegley has examined women and family literary magazines. With specific reference to women's engagement with news production, Tusan's *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* (2005) provided a valuable study of the development of the women's press in Britain and specifically the growth of political advocacy periodicals. In 2012, Laura Vorachek examined women's investigative journalism in late-century London, with the particular focus of cross-cultural dressing, or women's use of "disguise."

<11> In relation to women's journalism on the other side of the Atlantic, important early work was done by Ishbel Ross's foundational 1936 book, *Ladies of the Press*, and Barbara Belford's *Brilliant Bylines* (1988) offered a biographical anthology of notable American newspaper women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More recently, Jean Marie Lutes' book *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930* (2006) claims newspaperwomen at the turn of the century developed new models of authorship and reworked sensation reporting. In a necessarily brief sampling of recent critical accounts, a number of focussed examinations have been made of Nellie Bly (who began working at the *New York World* in 1887) and other 'stunt reporters' of the late century (Lutes, Delaney, Scatamacchia); the groundbreaking investigative reporting of Ida Tarbell and her

book *Women in Journalism* have enjoyed recent critical appraisal; Jane Gabin has investigated the turn-of-the-century reporter Elizabeth Banks; and Karen Roggenkamp has contributed work on late-nineteenth-century female journalists and sensation reporting.

<12> We are now well embarked upon mass digitization of nineteenth-century periodical material, though the journey is an enduring and an enduringly rich one: a wide and increasing number of databases and initiatives are making periodicals and newspapers accessible globally to students and scholars. The British Newspaper Archive has scanned over 8 million pages and boasts 8,000 pages are being added every day. Important early nineteenth-century magazines, such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* are increasingly available in online copies. For scholars of nineteenth-century periodicals, the inestimable value of the Waterloo Directory and the Wellesley Index grows rather than decreases due to the steady updates provided by the Curran Index and on-going efforts to identify contributors to the periodical industry. In America, the National Digital Newspaper Project is digitizing papers from 1836-1922 and numerous digital repositories hold copies of nineteenth-century newspapers from all over the country. Increasing numbers of local (rather than solely metropolitan) newspapers are being digitized and examined, and our understandings of the operations and contributions of provincial and local papers steadily advance (see, for example, Hobbs and Januszewski's recent work on local newspapers in the United Kingdom). James Mussell's recent work, *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age* (2012) offers an engaging account of the "politics, practice, and pedagogy of digitization" of nineteenth-century periodical resources (1), arguing that we must both embrace and engage critically with digitized versions of these texts, as they are central to an understanding of the nineteenth century.

#### **Our Issue:**

<13> The recent surge in scholarly interest in the nineteenth-century periodical press, hand in hand with ambitious digitization projects allowing us ever-expanding access to primary materials, has increased our ability to analyse and discuss the dynamic parameters of women's involvement with the industry. Despite their long-persisting exclusion from the "masculine" domain of news reporting (and limits on the social acceptability of their news *reading*), women helped make, break, and shape the news throughout the nineteenth century, and their efforts are more accessible to twenty-first century readers and scholars than ever before.

<14> This special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* concentrates on women as contributors to the multi-faceted construction of news and news reporting across the nineteenth century. We wished to preserve a focus on news production, as distinct from women's more general involvement in magazine writing and the creation of miscellanies, but welcomed broad interpretations on "news production."

<15> Teja Pusapati's article "'Blowing the Cover': News of Emily Crawford's Foreign Correspondences in the 1890s Feminist Press" focuses on the career of Emily Crawford, who wrote an often cited article called "Journalism as a Profession for Women" but whose own journalistic career has been paid little attention. Crawford is an intriguing figure: a foreign correspondent for the *Daily News*, she reported news with and, arguably, for her journalist husband, with her own contributions often intriguingly

opaque. Pusapati argues that Crawford was able to use the anonymity and confused attribution of much of her reporting to fashion to her own advantage complex narratives of her own professional development.

<16> Teri Finneman's "The Forgotten First Lady: Reinventing Varina Davis Through Her Journalism" draws out from the recesses of nineteenth-century history the figure of the "forgotten first lady", Varina Davis, offering a fascinating depiction of the post-Civil War journalistic career of the widow of the Confederate President. Finneman outlines Varina Davis' varying contributions to *The World* and other papers, arguing for the significance of the convention-challenging exemplar Davis provided as a Southern gentlewoman moving north and entering the labour market, as well as for the important contribution Davis' journalism made to improving relations between the North and South in the post-war years.

<17> Finally, F. Elizabeth Gray's "'With thrilling interest': Victorian women poets report the news" takes a case study approach to Victorian topical poetry written by women, which explicitly and complexly engages with contemporary journalistic reportage. Gray closely reads three poems within the historical and social context of their construction and publication, arguing that the poems suggest alternative analytical frameworks for current events than those provided by newspapers and promote alternative political positions. Writing poetry about the news and about the reporting of the news in the nineteenth century, Gray argues, allowed women writers – for the most part excluded from nineteenth-century newsrooms – to pose fundamental questions about the production of authority and authenticity.

<18> This special issue provides only a small taste of the latest work on women and news in the nineteenth century. There is considerable scope for future work on a range of issues related to this field, such as: the on-going recovery of neglected women periodical authors (especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century); revisionary studies that look at journalism by women writers who are primarily known for their work in other genres; comparative research that sets women journalists and women newsmakers alongside one another; the emerging press cultures of the colonies and other locales in the nineteenth century and how women participated in them; women and censorship; and many more. We hope that this special issue prompts further investigations of this rich seam of women's writing and reading.

<19> We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all those who submitted contributions for this special issue, and to the reviewers who generously shared their time and expertise.

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