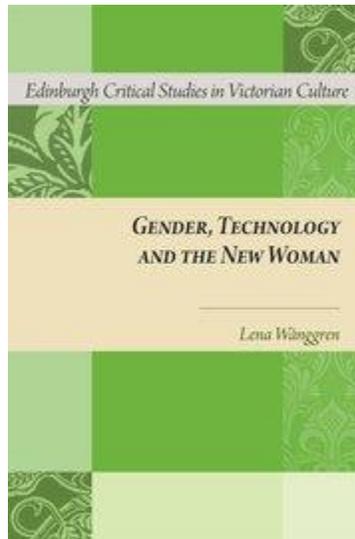


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**“A World of Disorderly Notions”: Technology and Agency for the New Woman**

[Gender, Technology and the New Woman](#). Lena Wånggren. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 218 pp.

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<1>In mocking the New Woman, *Punch, or the London Charivari* adapts a line from *Don Quixote* to caption an image of “Donna Quixote” as influenced by “a world of disorderly notions *picked out of books*, crowded into his (her) imagination” (qtd. on 22). One such “disorderly notion” comes in the form of innovations that emancipated the New Woman. Lena Wånggren’s study of the New Woman’s engagement with new technologies of the *fin de siècle* offers examples from fiction and periodicals to demonstrate ways that innovation influenced and was influenced by the beginnings of the feminist movement.

<2>The first chapter describes the intersection of the New Woman and modern technologies through detailed exploration of the New Woman in society and in literature that emphasizes the wide variety of perspectives on the oft-discussed figure. This overview highlights the contradictory views (sometimes by the same author) that cannot be reduced to either promoting or discouraging women’s independence, complicating earlier notions. For example, in analyzing New Woman typists, Wånggren balances the expected reading of the typewriter as a tool of emancipation with an 1898 journal article promoting the typewriter for channeling the “superfluous energies” of “well-educated girls” (qtd. on 40). She further complicates readings

of these machines assumed to give women freedom by asserting the agency of the women operating them. Wånggren also outlines the feminist theories of technology that underpin the study and places the New Woman discussion within the context of emerging technologies. In doing so, she joins recent scholarship like Gillian Sutherland's *In Search of the New Woman* (2015)(1) in expanding analysis of the New Woman figure beyond her place in fiction.

<3>In the four chapters that follow, Wånggren presents three specific technologies – the typewriter, the bicycle, and medical equipment – in more depth. Each chapter combines New Woman characters in fiction and in the pages of periodicals. In Chapter Two, Wånggren explores the agency of the New Woman through the ambiguity of the term 'typewriter' during the *fin de siècle*, as it could designate both the machine and its operator. After presenting this through the nonfiction writing of the period, Wånggren discusses Grant Allen's novel *The Typewriter Girl* (1897), a novel in which the New Woman protagonist vacillates between her independent behaviors and succumbing to biologically essentialist emotion. Wånggren expands upon previous readings of the novel's typists by distinguishing between the secretarial work often given to men and typewriting work done by women, concluding that the distinction is about agency. Tom Gallon's *The Girl Behind the Keys* (1903) also explores the person and machine dichotomy with a New Woman protagonist who emphasizes her position as machine to her employer while secretly working to uncover his illegal practices.

<4>The third chapter explores another machine widely associated with the independence of the New Woman, the safety bicycle that democratized transportation and gave members of middle and working classes, as well as women, freedom to cover greater distances. Like the discussion of the typewriter, Wånggren's analysis of the bicycle complicates the common belief that it in itself emancipated women, and instead restores agency to the New Woman through the use she makes of this new form of transport. Before turning to New Woman novels about bicycling – H. G. Wells's *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) and Grant Allen's *Miss Cayley's Adventures* (1899) – Wånggren presents the debates about women riding bicycles that considered everything from rational dress to medical concerns through nonfiction texts by those concerned about the trend and by the New Woman cyclists themselves. In discussing the fictional representations of the New Woman on a bicycle, Wånggren develops a nuanced discussion that incorporates the inherent class issues in the analysis of gender and agency. In doing so, she follows Rita Felski in her "'historically attuned' approach" (79) and insightfully reads Wells's protofeminist message in spite of the fact he is often dismissed by feminist scholarship for prioritizing socialist beliefs over gender.

<5>Wånggren divides the discussion of medical technologies across two chapters, addressing first nurses and then doctors. In addition to the many innovations of the period, Wånggren reads the hospital itself as a machine and explores beliefs about the nurse as a tool used by the doctor, much like the typists discussed above. Primarily though, these chapters present the historical context of modern nursing and its personification in the New Style nurse as well as an overview of the challenges early female doctors faced, including entry in to higher education. These two sections provide a remarkably clear and readable history of women's place in the medical field in the late nineteenth century, including common experiences of regular women

working as nurses and doctors alongside the well-known figures of Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, and Sophia Jex-Blake.

<6>The analysis expands beyond the expected associations of genders to the professions of doctor and nurse and the hierarchy between the two that mirrors that of the home's separate spheres. The female doctors of chapter five are read in the context of debates about whether practising medicine would unsex the female doctor or if she should, instead, be more womanly in her care for others. In response to the fear that women practising medicine would lose their femininity, many fictional representations incorporate a romance that forces the medical woman to choose between love and career. Wånggren's study uses two novels that counteract this, Arabella Kenealy's *Dr. Janet of Harley Street* (1893) whose protagonist argues that female doctors should be neuter and Margaret Todd's *Mona Maclean, Medical Student* (1892) in which the titular character marries and continues to practise medicine. With these novels and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Doctors of Hoyland" (1894), Wånggren analyzes the complicated ways that these medical women navigated the field through professionalism and skills with medical technology of the fin de siècle while honoring the feminine ideals of the Victorian era.

<7>These technologies come together along with others not previously included through the example of the woman detective, which Wånggren calls "the ultimate embodiment of the New Woman's engagement with technology" (164). The character of the woman detective derives from the simultaneous rise of detective and New Woman fiction in the *fin de siècle*, and as Wånggren notes, many of the New Woman characters in the previous sections engage in some unofficial detective work as well. The fictional example in this chapter – from Mathias McDonnell Bodkin's *Dora Myrl, the Lady Detective* (1900) – neatly combines characters and technologies from the remainder of the study with a protagonist who is "a bicycling female doctor who has previously worked as a telegraph girl, a telephone girl and a lady journalist" (164-5). In addition to relying on the typewriter, the bicycle, and the medical technologies of the rest of the study, Dora Myrl's detection also involves technology new and old, including electricity, the railway, photography, and flight.

<8>On the whole, this volume brings together a seemingly disparate list of innovations in a cohesive and comprehensive study of gender and agency in the face of *fin de siècle* technology. The blend of nonfiction and fiction in each of the chapters brings together canonical works with less studied ones and is visually supported through fifteen illustrations from the pages of periodicals and the covers of novels that are incorporated into the analysis of how her contemporaries viewed the New Woman's interaction with technology.

<9>The brief conclusion to the study connects the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* with women today, noting the many examples of our current technology also used by women at the end of the nineteenth century. This final section ponders the feminist uses of technology in both periods to underscore the book's central argument: on its own technology does not have the emancipatory power it is often assumed to have; instead, Wånggren gives agency to the fictional and real women who used (and use) the technology to create social change.

## Endnotes

(1) Gillian Sutherland. *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain 1870-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. ([^](#))