

Female Journalists and Journalism in fin-de-siècle Magazine Stories

By [Lorna Shelley](#), University of Wolverhampton

A lady journalist, it is reported, has been informing an interviewer, that she makes by her profession, and by working no more than an hour and a half everyday, the very respectable income of a thousand pounds a year...a thousand pounds a year! Hark! Do you hear? It is the frou frou of a hundred thousand skirts, the rush of two thousand feet, the cry of an hundred thousand tongues...all roads that lead to London are variegated with all the hues that feminine costume can assume; there is a movement...there is a swift and valuable current; they pour by their thousands out of trains,...the offices of all the journals are blocked...What a chance! What a chance!

Walter Besant. "Women in London." *The Author* 1893

<1>Male journalists repeatedly passed comment upon the number of women entering London and the journalistic arena. The above description by Walter Besant in 1893 creates a particular identity for the female journalist; she is a figure who aspires to a serious profession but is betrayed by her gender, her self-promotion, and her irrational use of city space. Whilst Besant's ridicule suggests that he felt threatened by the influx of female labour into his profession, not all journalistic accounts, fictional or factual, are so dismissive.(1) Male and female authors wrote about journalism and in doing so highlighted both the advantages and shortcomings of women's participation in the newspaper and periodical press.

<2>The rise of the short story about female journalists and women's roles in journalism is significant to understanding late-nineteenth-century magazine and print cultures. Stories with plots about journalism allow writers, who are usually journalists themselves, to explore their occupation, urbanity, and gender issues. Fiction gives attention to women entering newspaper offices and the resistance demonstrated towards them by male members of the profession. Journalistic profiles in literature reveal, as Howard Good observes, trends in views of journalists and journalism. (Good 188)(2) Stories function as records of contemporary experience, for they document evidence of the development of journalism at the end of the nineteenth-century and how gender often hindered the careers of female journalists. The woman journalist is an ambiguous character, in some stories celebrated while in others criticised. Both male and female writers ridiculed the female journalist. It seems that fictive explorations of the journalistic arena gave authors the freedom to express the difficulties, anxieties, and gender boundaries related to the profession. Stories by women writers such as Ella Hepworth Dixon and

Netta Syrett also bring into view the Woman Question and the New Woman, and the changes that journalistic writing, publishing, and reportage were undergoing at the *fin de siècle* in relation to women's work and public image.

<3>Although this article is centred upon magazine short stories, it is necessary also to look more generally at how the late nineteenth-century periodical press treated the subject of the "Lady Journalist". Debates, opinions and ideas regarding new journalistic practices appeared in numerous publications from the intellectual *Nineteenth Century*, to the satirical magazine *Punch*. Articles, essays and interviews, often in publications aimed at the female reader, connected developments in journalism with middle-class women's growing inclusion in the public sphere of work. In "Incomes for Ladies", a regular column published in *Lady's Realm*, the author of the column explores women's work, authorship, and participation in the press: "on almost all the various departments of the papers women are at work. There are women interviewers, reporters, paragraphists, essayists, critics, and descriptive writers." (Wimble(3)) Real-life women journalists wrote of assignments, workspaces, and professional relationships with male journalists and city editors. Some advocated the merits of entering the journalistic sphere, and emphasised the personal and influential aspects of the profession and the financial gains:

Journalism is one of the noblest occupations a woman can follow. It is a hard profession, for a journalist's work is never finished, but a broad-minded, honest woman can often do more with a single paragraph, and point the way more clearly than fifty sermons. There are women who by writing for the press, keep mothers and sisters, and who are the bread-winners in many families.... Journalistic work is essentially ephemeral, but it need never be frivolous...all women journalists should strive upwards to an ideal which does not find its expression in those trivialities which are the most serious failings of woman's work. ("Women in Journalism" 130(4))

<4>Primarily aimed at a female audience, *Sylvia's Journal* frequently printed articles and stories about middle-class women's increasing entry into work. As did the *Lady's Pictorial*, in which a contributor declared that:

The lady-journalist, with courage and a patience that are essentially womanly has persisted in her work by opening up a new and fitting field for educated and intelligent women-workers for all time. In journalism, reviewing, and interviewing, women are the most successful. ("New Careers for Women").

<5>The female journalist was frequently upheld as a positive role model in journals aimed at young educated middle-class girls who may have been contemplating a writing or journalistic career. Persuasive periodical accounts of women journalists emphasised both the rigors and attractions of the profession, often casting the female journalist as a heroic New Woman figure adaptable to modern and challenging work environments. In "Women Who Work", an essay by Marion Leslie published in *The Young Woman*, Leslie declared that "women ... into journalism [they] have come at a hop, skip, and a jump, and by their ready wit, light, facile pen, and indomitable pluck have made themselves necessary adjuncts to every editorial staff." (Leslie 128)(5) In Leslie's opinion, the lady journalist was a crucial role model for girls seeking

independent and interesting lives. Enthusiastic writing such as Leslie's suggests widespread inclusion and accomplishment in the journalistic sphere of the 1890s. Yet, as Valerie Fehlbauer points out in her chapter concerned with late nineteenth-century gender and journalism "The Bastille of Journalism", journals became the prime site of debate about gender and changes in society, sometimes offering discrediting pictures of the woman journalist. The working conditions and lifestyles of women journalists are often depicted in a critical and contradictory way, for these accounts seemed to function to both attract and dissuade the (female) reader from becoming involved in the profession.

<6>This is apparent in *The Woman at Home*, a conservative, domestic, and anti-suffrage publication (Fraser *et al.* 226) as well as journals that were not directly appealing to the woman reader, such as *Blackwood's Magazine* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, which printed articles that detailed involvement in journalism, but with a less encouraging discourse than Leslie's article in *The Young Woman*. Like magazine stories of the period, articles critiqued as often as they promoted the profession. They aired women's views and by doing so publicised the profession, yet at the same time warned of personal, emotional, and material hardships. As Sally Mitchell (109) observes, "Newspaper staff work had major drawbacks ... the work had to be done well into the night; assignments might take the journalist into unsuitable places." A recurring theme emerges from late nineteenth-century articles: that to be a woman journalist is to enter an arena that is difficult and unrewarding both artistically and financially. Concerns regarding women's careers in newspapers and reportage are raised in "The Experiences of a Lady Journalist" published in *Blackwood's*, for example. The anonymous author of the piece (Charlotte Eccles) tells of obstacles encountered in the journalistic arena:

One is horribly handicapped in being a woman... The immense difficulty a woman finds in getting into an office in any recognised capacity makes a journalistic beginning far harder for her than for a man. Where a man finds one obstacle we find a dozen. (Eccles 831)

<7>Eccles' piece is a good example of the ambiguous and contradictory views about journalism as a career for women, often held by female journalists themselves. It does eventually reach a more positive conclusion, despite the author's initial focus upon the difficulties faced by women in the profession. Many journals of the era distributed advice about domestic issues and working lives in the same issue. In *Woman at Home* employment advice appears alongside advice on shopping, cooking, and domestic management. (Beetham 158) An examination of the "Women's Employment" column reveals that it suggested suitable employment for middle-class women, yet also projected upon the woman reader a sense of hesitation and doubt. In "Reporting For The Press", the anonymous journalist relates her experiences of working for the press:

After a meeting in some distant suburb, I used to write my report in the train on my way back to Fleet-street. It was weary work especially on cold winter nights... My advice to every woman journalist would be to get out of the reporting groove as soon as possible. ("Reporting For The Press")

<8>Articles by female journalists often record the dilemmas they faced as urban workers. In "The Confessions of a Newspaper Woman", Helen M. Winslow describes the difficult life of a female reporter on a metropolitan daily paper:

I have attended an all-day convention, and worked far into the night, writing reports for messenger boys to take in sections “red hot” to the presses ... I have worked eight hours a day in my dark, dingy city office ... doing the work evenings ... going to the theatres from twice to five times a week ... The life is too hard and hardening... I have crawled from my bed in the morning only to fall back across it in a dead faint... Women are not fitted for the rush-at-all-hours a reporter’s life demands. There will be a chance for them as editorial, fashion, household, society, and critical writers.

The tensions of the work-place and the realities of reporting described in Winslow’s article act as a warning to the woman reader contemplating a career in journalism. However, despite the critical tone it is reflective of the amount of interest in women’s careers and modern occupations, and offers insight into the difficult and conflicting circumstances of the lives of newspaper women.

<9>In a similar way, magazine short stories investigated women’s roles in journalism, and reflected the divergences of opinion surrounding women’s involvement in the profession. Most often published in the periodical press, stories indicate how authors presented the profession of journalism to a popular and mass-market readership, who could follow the travails of journalism by way of fictional characters. The right of middle-class women to work in the public sphere was an ongoing topic and one of interest to readers. Lyn Walker’s insightful study of urban space claims that working middle-class women in the West End of London “made spaces for real change through the development of a public ideology for women”, undercutting the idea that middle-class women were invisible and marginalised in late Victorian society. Short stories of the period encompassed and reflected this idea. Authors frequently created urban figures in possession of a professional position and advanced views that led to visibility in public places and the eventual usurping of a scathing male editor.

<10>In Ella Hepworth Dixon’s story “A Scribbler’s Comedy” published in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, the female journalist protagonist, who adopts a male pseudonym, “John Bathurst”, has written “a volume of short stories illustrative of the New Revolt”. Even though “The New Revolt bored and scandalised” the male editor, he agrees to run a “series of articles on the New Emancipation”. The “comedy” in Hepworth Dixon’s story lies in the foolishness of the male editor, who, despite being married, falls in love with “John Bathurst”. The professional ineptness and emotional weakness of the male editor contrasts with the modern and confident lifestyle of the successful female journalist. Different from many other 1890s fictional women journalists, she is successful and does not doubt her role as “Lady Journalist”. As Fehlbaum points out, unlike other writers of the period, in “A Scribbler’s Comedy”, Hepworth Dixon does not “darken the image of the woman writer.” (84) Yet stories also reflected divided opinion upon women’s place in the public sphere of work and depicted ambiguous, even unfavourable attitudes towards female journalists. In some stories, these figures are cast as irrational and weak, ruined by professional life, faltering in a journalistic masculine marketplace. They are anti-heroines who are not, for the female reader perhaps seeking influential role models, inspirations for work and activity. It is this ambivalent set of representations which is of interest.

‘the Advanced Woman in Journalism’: A New Profession /A New Story

<11>Towards the end of the nineteenth-century an increasing number of women were contributing to periodicals and newspapers, writing stories, interviewing well-known writers, and sometimes editing publications. This intense feminisation of the profession was discussed in periodicals and magazines. Despite Janet Hogarth's (587) assertion that "If a woman cannot do night work, the prizes of Fleet Street are not for her ... this London world has no place for the average woman-journalist," plenty of women were living in the metropolis and active in Fleet-Street journalism. As Mitchell (109) observes, by 1892 women had formed a Writer's Club within walking distance of Fleet Street, where they could produce copy in a quiet and encouraging space. Women were claiming print space and public space, and the status of women within the press preoccupied journalists throughout the 1890s. Female journalists were often upheld as productive yet novice contributors. *Sketch Magazine* frequently printed articles which depicted and debated the merits and detriments of modern journalism. A regular column, "Journals and Journalists Of To-Day", introduced readers to, for example, "Mr William Earnest Henley's brilliant adventures in journalism and the most brilliant venture of all, his editing of the *National Observer*." In "A Journalistic Experiment," the author claims that the aim of the article is to "broaden understanding of women's modern ascent into journalism". Reporting on the temporary editorship of *Answers Magazine* by Mary Belloc, the article demonstrates that the "bright and graphic pen of women" was increasingly visible and valued in the 1890s periodical press:

The modern King Alfred the Great, speaking journalistically — Mr Alfred C Harmsworth...has decreed that one part of his Kingdom shall be ruled for one week by a lady. That very popular magazine, *Answers*...will contain nothing but contributions from women. The editor selected for this interesting experiment, which is itself a tribute to the advance of women in journalism, is Miss Mary Belloc.

<12>Numerous articles in the pages of the periodical press mapped women's journalistic accomplishments and the obstacles they overcame to become recognised as genuine professionals:

Women journalists have had to wait their opportunity to do that which they may do when they know how ... But whether in the stress and excitement of work on a morning paper, or following the quieter routine of a weekly, or the more literary duties of a monthly, in no other calling are there such possibilities. (Jackson "Chances")

Florence Jackson provides detailed advice to the aspiring woman journalist. Under headings such as "General Lack of Preparation", "Some Disadvantages", "Woman's Special Work" and "The Rewards of Journalism", she provides a personal account of her early years as a journalist and her later success. This article is especially interesting when read alongside advice given to would-be female journalists by male author/journalists (e.g. Bennett).

<13>Although this piece concentrates on the *fin de siècle*, it is important to acknowledge that journalism was not a new career for women. Female journalists existed before the 1890s, and their contributions to the newspaper and periodical marketplace is documented in both factual and fictional print spaces. However, women did, as Besant satirises in "Women in London", flock to newspaper work in the last decades of the nineteenth-century. The influence and

accomplishments of earlier, mid-century women journalists and periodical culture was often described in late nineteenth-century journalists' writing, for they frequently upheld mid-Victorian women journalists as pioneers who opened up the profession through their contributions to domestic, literary, and radical magazines, for example the *English Woman's Journal* (1858-64). Women such as Frances Power Cobbe, Harriet Martineau, and Bessie Rayner Parkes of the Langham Place group were celebrated as inspiring role models who made the journalistic profession socially acceptable. Writing in 1894, Sarah Grand recalled the career of Parkes and her editorship of *The English Woman's Journal* in the early 1860s. Grand claimed that "after a freer choice and wider public life, we should remember strong-minded women of opinion who made daring and original steps forward ... the origins of our work ... our opportunities to produce books and papers, edit and report without hindrance." Grand sets out to remind readers of the *New Review* that women journalists had, earlier in the century, prompted social change. In doing so, she defends the careers of contemporary and radical female writers and journalists.

<14>In her thorough and insightful account of the careers, activism, and the periodicals to which women contributed, Barbara Onslow details the early ventures of Langham Place. Writing of Martineau, Cobbe and Parkes, Onslow (37) observes that, "In their careers, as columnists ... these women were icons in their own century." Onslow's valuable study does not offer an expansive comment upon fictive accounts of female journalists (though in her introduction, she argues that "by the mid-1890s a depressing, superficial Bohemianism taints the image of journalism in women's novels.") However, debates around women's work in journalistic spheres can also be found in mid-century fictional accounts. There does appear to be more evidence of this in American literature than in British fiction. The female journalist, as heroine and positive role model, appears in American fiction at an earlier date than does her British counterpart, suggesting that American newspaper culture was ready to accommodate the female journalists earlier than British counterparts. This is explained in an article published in *The Academy and Literature* entitled "The Woman Journalist", in which the author of the piece claims that "years before that anomaly the lady journalist was admitted to the London newspaper office, she was a commonplace in every American city. For every American daily had just the work that a woman was especially fitted to perform." (23) In the periodical press, and in a number of fictional accounts, the American female journalist is often defined by her confidence, intelligence and professionalism (e.g. Jackson; Michelson).

<15>Although this study focuses upon *fin-de-siècle* short stories, it is important to note that the figure of the female journalist also appeared in nineteenth-century novels that often have similar plots to short stories.(6) Like stories, novels depict a female journalist who must overcome hardship and professional exclusion until a resolution is found in artistic, professional, and commercial triumph. An American novel which was a popular success on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1850s, *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis), possesses such a plot.(7) Although published almost forty years earlier, it is an important precursor to novels that deal with the difficulties of journalism and authorship such as Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) and George Paston's *A Modern Amazon* (1894). *Ruth Hall* revolves around a female journalist — Ruth Hall who, despite resistance from male editors who dominate the newspaper profession, is eventually empowered by her journalistic career, overcoming various obstacles, the initial one being that she is a widow. Throughout the book, Fern demonstrates how the female journalist

was contested and ridiculed. A common trope in stories about women journalists throughout the nineteenth-century is dismissal and rejection in male editors' offices. When Ruth Hall enters a newspaper office for the first time she meets with resistance from male employees:

Is this "The Daily Type" office? asked Ruth of a printer's boy... it was very disagreeable applying to the small papers, many of the editors of which, accustomed to dealing with hoydenish contributors, were incapable of comprehending that their manner towards Ruth had been marked by any want of that respectful courtesy due to a dignified woman journalist. (Fern 155)

<16>Fern's narrative is reflective of real-life situations, for women journalists upon entering a newspaper office that was a predominantly male sphere often met with critical stares, ridicule, and comments that questioned their right to be there. The journalist H.H. Cahoon (121) describes a woman entering a newspaper office with "a brave attempt to overcome shyness, for her heart beats very loudly...all she sees is men, and no chance of success." Margaret Stetz, focusing upon women's entry into journalistic spheres and the discomforts encountered, repeats Cahoon's assertion that, "for a middle-class Victorian woman ... merely to enter the premises of a newspaper, a publishing house, or any place of business was an alien and potentially intimidating experience that put her at a disadvantage." (34) However, Fern does not cast the woman writer as entirely blameless in her position as novice and wary journalist. Although the novel overtly critiques male dominance in the commercial and artistic marketplace, *Ruth Hall* also comments upon the naïve idealism that many female journalists and authors possessed. The character Ruth speaks of "The sensitive souls who hesitate on the threshold of the newspaper man's office and do not enter." (Fern 157) Ruth differs, and by the close of the novel, after entering many newspaper offices and even gaining a news desk of her own, she is a successful journalist. Ruth Hall represents individualism, authorial talent, and the economically independent woman. Adopting the gender ambiguous pseudonym "Floy", Ruth is published in numerous journals, eventually becoming editor of the popular *Olive Branch* and abandoning her journalistic disguise. In the end, she gains creative autonomy and professional popularity.

<17>The novel provides an important fictional examination of the mid-century American journalistic marketplace (see Lutes). For the contemporary reader, it conveyed a message that women could play a part in changing the deficiencies, dishonesties, and gender and social barriers associated with the profession. To trace a similar fictional figure as Fern's Ruth Hall in British literature it is necessary to turn to late nineteenth-century magazine stories.(8) In these texts, female journalists' concerns can be placed within the context of larger social changes regarding education and work.

<18>Reflective of M. F. Billington's assertion in an article entitled "Leading Lady Journalists" that "we are numerous enough, we women of the press ... fiction has made heroines of us," (101) stories depict middle-class women's entry into the professional arena, mapping out the increasing prevalence of the woman journalist and the resistance encountered on the way. Stories frequently highlighted the differences in lifestyle between single women who are journalists, married women who do not work, and male journalists who inhabit spheres of power and influence. Martha Vicinus, in her commentary upon work and the single woman, argues that "single women in fiction were not permitted to be single and happy outside a carefully defined

set of family duties.” (11) However, the central action performed by many female journalist protagonists in late nineteenth-century fiction is the achievement of an unmarried, modern, and urban life that is antithetical to the image of the middle-class domestic woman. Like the New Woman, whom Ann Heilmann (1) describes as “an emblem of sexual anarchy or fashionable modernity, heralding degeneration or renovation, ... a prime signifier of crucial paradigm shifts in culture and society”, the female journalist, very often a New Woman figure herself, repeatedly called attention to middle-class women’s, often contested, positions outside of the private sphere. This is evident in stories, for in both their work and home spheres, characters refuse to be unfulfilled spinsters, floundering and in need of a husband. Despite Arnold Bennett’s argument in *Journalism For Women: A Practical Guide* (1898: 13) that “women journalists are unreliable as a class...the influences of domesticity are too strong to be lightly thrown off,” fictional female journalists were often depicted through the opposite of domestic entrapment. A career in the public sphere is not always associated with personal disavowal, but with the sustaining of intelligence and ambition.

<19>Netta Syrett’s female protagonists, in magazine stories published in the early 1890s, are often writers and journalists. They are either unmarried or escaping from bad marriages. A journalistic career offers them a chance to live independently in London. Penny Boumelha, in her article on late nineteenth-century fiction in which the heroine is a writer or journalist, claims that “it is difficult to think of any female character that actually wants to be a journalist...such work is a last resort under the pressure of financial necessity”. (165) Although this is true of many female characters who engage in journalism because they cannot marry or find themselves impoverished, there are numerous examples of female characters who enter the profession because they seek independence, equality, and recognition in the public sphere; “To be able to do something that all your clever men hadn’t accomplished” as the female protagonist states in “Jennie Baxter, Journalist”, a short story by Cottrel Hoe first printed in *Windsor Magazine*. Jennie Baxter, who has “written a good deal for some of the evening papers and for some of the magazines”, desires to inhabit the male-dominated journalistic ranks of the “*Daily Bugle*”. She refuses to confine herself to writing “a woman’s column...I have never read a woman’s column myself.” She argues with the *Bugle* editor who points out to her that women journalists “send articles... from their homes”. Jennie Baxter achieves her goal by outperforming an inadequate male journalist who carelessly blurts out a sensational scoop that Jennie writes up and sends to the newspaper before he can get his piece in print. She becomes assistant editor at the “*Bugle*”. The male editor, reminded by another member of staff that he once “didn’t believe in women journalists”, holds Jennie up as the most competent member of his staff.

<20>Female journalists in magazine stories are often New Woman figures aligned, in critical views, with either advancement or domestic failure. In contrast to the positive images discussed above, the female journalist, often a spinster figure, was also associated with familial transgressions and a too public image. The popular press perpetuated images of the unmarried female journalist as masculine, embittered, and without domestic responsibility. In “A Lady Journalist — as seen by a Man” published in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, the anonymous writer, who does not name any “Lady Journalists” in particular, claims that “No doubt she is capable of writing...but she could not inhabit the ideal household...she would not contribute to its health

and happiness... the effective gifts of the domestic woman... marriage should be the vocation of all these scribblers". (73)(9)

<21>Issues concerning marriage, domesticity, and working women are also confronted in "A Common Occurrence", a story by Netta Syrett, a writer repeatedly categorized by her work for the *Yellow Book* arguably at the expense and recognition of her wide range of journalistic stories and expansive novel writing. In "A Common Occurrence" the female character, Avice Seagrove, is an independent middle-class woman in possession of intellectual authority. Initially she is discontented with her lifestyle; her job, "typewriting in an office", leaves her dissatisfied. Through her married friend's eyes she is a failure because 'she hasn't a penny and lives by herself in miserable rooms". Avice is in love with the friend's husband who was once a successful journalist but on gaining great economic wealth through his marriage gave up his career. He is no longer in the public sphere and functions as a warning of the consequences of giving up literature and authorship for wealth and domesticity. The failed male writer's intrusive wife attempts to find Avice a wealthy and unsuitable husband. Once introduced to her potential husband she mocks his opinions upon the education of women, "in a properly constituted world women would have the brains of a jellyfish and the beauty of a Gaiety chorus girl. Then there might be a chance of happiness for them." Despite her ridicule, Avice nearly succumbs to a marriage based only on financial gain. She remembers the wasted life of the male writer, who, in a gender-role reversal, gave up his successful journalistic career upon marriage. Avice decides upon a new profession in journalism, writing for a magazine the "*Comet*".

<22>Syrett argued for the merits of independence, city life, and a writing career in much of her fiction. In her short story "The Real Facts", Mary Denton, the protagonist, exemplifies the image of the woman journalist living in London and writing for money:

London life was still new to her; new and absorbing in its interest...she was trying to write, trying ...to express some of the mental ferment which her new life had engendered...the article was finished the next day...I've placed two of the little articles in *The Weekly Magazine*.

Despite the adverse behaviour of a fellow female journalist, who cheats and plagiarises Mary Denton because she is left in poverty due to a cruel husband, the story functions to explain the merits of a career in magazine journalism. In much of her writing, Syrett makes male characters problematic and the cause of female deception and downfall. Male characters are often weak morally or professionally. In stories with a female protagonist who is a journalist, a recurring theme is that of female empowerment by way of the claiming of male space, both professional and domestic. In Syrett's story "That Dance at the Robsons", a male journalist is a "little wretch" who gains his copy by eavesdropping upon private conversations. The female protagonist, Norah Kingsley, has studied at Cambridge and is an aspiring journalist hoping to make her own living. Norah discovers and exposes the underhand methods of the male journalist. He is dismissed from his paper, and Norah is rewarded with a position.

<23>Syrett's narratives are highly critical of male behaviour and depict, as Ann Ardis observes in *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922*, (545) "culture's conflicts about women's entrance into the public work force." Such conflicts were played out in *fin-de-siècle* magazine spaces. Many journalists and editors viewed the female journalist as a menacing figure and

questioned the presence and motivations of women in the journalistic sphere. On entering the metropolitan and newspapers arenas, the female journalist was sometimes viewed as an occupational threat, intent on undermining masculine authority and activities:

Arrived at the newspaper office ... journalism has of late shown a marvellous power of assimilating the flimsy modern reportage and the disorderly new woman whose lack of knowledge of the system is injurious to production ... There is much bad work done by lady journalists. ("Modern Journalism")

Magazines regularly included references to the "bad work done by lady journalists". On the presumption of male dominance in late nineteenth-century journalism, it is probable that the anonymous *Chamber*'s writer is male. Rather than looking upon women's entry into the journalistic sphere as one of social progression the author marks it as regressive and professionally dangerous. The periodical press was an influential, and contradictory, sphere for both resisting and celebrating the female journalist. Negative portrayals of the "Lady Journalist" can also be found in magazine stories, which are the subject of the next section.

Fictional Female Journalist as Anti-Heroine

<24>If some women writers were heralding a career in journalism as advancing, radical, and modern, there were others, interestingly often New Women authors and journalists themselves, providing fictional women journalists with deceitful personalities, inept at their work, and at worst scheming for, and awaiting, marriage to escape the profession. Some of these stories seem to affirm the idea that women were not physically or intellectually fit for journalism except as conveyers of fashion, gossip, and philanthropic hobby-like concerns. Male and female writers, in fictional characterizations, pitched the female journalist as a "new" model of womanhood invading male workspace, often with harmful and fatal consequences. Stacey Spaulding points out, in her study of journalists in popular American fiction, that "it seems logical to assume that as women actually played a larger role in journalism, fictional portrayals would show them as strong and independent persons." As discussed above, many writers did demonstrate the growing influence and presence of women in journalism in a celebratory manner. However, there are numerous stories that detract from such a view. Plot lines raise issues relating to professional and personal integrity, publicity, sexuality, and 'subversive' behaviour in male editors' offices. Rather than creating admirable accounts of women journalists who enter newspaper offices to advance themselves, writers created anti-heroines.

<25>The volatility of journalism and the struggles of a woman to gain copy are depicted in "The Journalistic Instinct", a story by "Belle" published in the *Pall Mall Magazine*. In "The Journalistic Instinct", the female journalist, who calls herself "Lady Le Strange", is, according to the narrator, "quite out of harmony with her environment ... *The Evening Mail* was an old established paper." She is fashionably dressed, the "perfect type of that idle society woman whose shortcoming and follies were so often shown up in the columns of the *Evening Mail*". Lady Le Strange does have "brains" and "an intelligent gaze" and eventually fits into the newspaper environment: 'she had easily become accustomed to the brilliant young journalists ... grimy printers, to the cheeky newsboys'. She becomes an "indispensable member of staff" and the tone of the story, at this point, seems to be about the effectiveness and intelligence of female

journalists at ease in modern metropolitan surroundings. However, the author changes direction and we learn that Lady Le Strange is “a woman of the world”, who is really “an odd emancipated damsel”. In order to gratify her “passion for composition”, she bases a story, “Platonic Friendship”, upon her rejection of a former suitor despite the “insensitivity” of doing so. She is guaranteed a wide audience, the “circulation of the *Evening Mail* was large”, the “journalistic instinct awoke within her”, and she sends the piece to her “Fleet Street office”. The rejected lover reads the story, visits Fleet Street and denounces her as “indelicate ... he had lost faith in womankind”. Lady Le Strange loses “faith” in her “journalistic duties”, and instead of maintaining independence and effect in the newspaper office, resigns to “addressing herself to the editor” when the “journalistic instinct came upon her.”

<26>The “journalistic instinct” is somehow, in the narrative of “Belle”, a maligned parody of the maternal “instinct”. The female journalist longs to create the “perfect copy” and “nurture it for all to see”. (“The Journalistic Instinct” 67, 68) Bad journalism is as destructive as neglectful motherhood. The story presents a contradictory image of the *fin-de-siècle* female journalist, for it depicts both journalistic success and professional inadequacies. It establishes that masculine opinion and professional power play a part in curbing female creativity, but appears also to claim that women’s “journalistic instinct”, when given too much free reign is damaging, especially to men. The pseudonym “Lady Le Strange” impresses that the occupation is somehow at odds with female behaviour. The aim of the story seems to be to confirm the assertions made by P. Frenzeny in “Yarns in a Fleet Street Office”, an article that interestingly appeared in the same issue of the *Pall Mall Magazine*, in which the story by “Belle” was printed. Frenzeny wrote that, “In evaluating journalists, especially those that are women, one must take into account that their hearts often rule their pens...what they try and accomplish is no doubt for the social good...but I see unhappy women...and well intentioned editors writing, covering their mistakes.” (175)

“After a year on the papers I longed for the hearth”: Marriage or Journalism?

<27>Echoing Frenzeny’s sentiments regarding the anti-domestic female journalist, the successful journalist and author Mrs W. K. Clifford (Lucy Clifford), recalling her time writing journalism, in a column entitled ‘some Women’s Thoughts’, comments upon the clothing and environment of women arriving to hand in copy at a Fleet Street office: “the dress materials conjure up all manner of delightful visions of summer and its attendant joys ... but are made dowdy by the scenery of Fleet Street”. Mrs W. K. Clifford then goes on to seemingly question her own involvement with the journalistic sphere, explaining how she “looked around and saw women who had no desire to write, knew nothing of the print market ... there is no amusement in the spectacle of the woman of forty-five with no affinity to home or hearth ... after years on the papers I longed for both of them.”

<28>Fictional women journalists often reflect the dilemma of choosing between a career and marriage. Characters are faced with the choice of sacrificing their occupations or foregoing marriage for a life of poverty and personal frustration. Journalistic lifestyles are at odds with male expectations of the domestic woman. Male characters often “rescue” female journalists and by doing so denounce their professional lives. A story by Mrs Roy Devereux (Margaret Pember Devereux), “The Feminine Potential” — the title appears again in her volume of essays, *The Ascent Of Woman* published in John Lane’s Eve’s Library Series — explores how a woman

journalist rejects a potential suitor. The female protagonist, Margot, wonders why “people get married...and then thought it was only part of the futility of life.” Later she discovers that the man who proposed to her has married someone else. Margot, in a morbid move, gasses herself in her London attic. Devereux, unlike Syrett in “The Real Facts”, appears not to hold heroic views of the single woman who writes for a living. “The Feminine Potential” seems to say that the woman who rejects domestic womanhood is to blame for her ensuing downfall. Devereux is also scathing of ‘spinster journalists’. In *The Ascent of Woman* she claims that “The ordinary article on woman is saturated, be the writer thereof male or female. But any callow youth or any inexperienced spinster lacking in knowledge of life and literary ability is accepted as a competent critic of women.” (6)

<29>Devereux was not a conservative, anti-woman writer: *The Ascent of Woman*, typically for John Lane’s Eve’s Library Series, is concerned with women’s new and transforming presence in the public sphere. Yet like other *fin-de-siècle* women writers, Devereux holds contradictory and ambiguous views about the female author/ journalist. Perhaps because of the instability of the profession, women writers chose to depict its shortcomings and adopt a warning tone. Edith Nesbit’s magazine story, “Miss Lorrimore’s Career”, was published in *Sylvia’s Journal* opposite the article “Women in Journalism”, from which I quoted earlier in the article. Nesbit’s female character Miss Lorrimore makes “her living by journalism.” She possesses “brave independence”, and writes for various journals: “I have a paper on old maids to finish for the *Globe*”. She researches articles better than any of her male contemporaries in the British Museum Reading Room. Miss Lorrimore attracts a lot of male attention and when she is offered a marriage proposal from a male journalist, she at first turns him down. Later because of emotional turmoil, regret, and professional self-doubt, she abandons magazine journalism. A friend laments the fact that he does not “often see her name in the magazines now, and she’s grown a bit thin and seedy looking”. After six months absence, the rejected admirer returns and once again declares his wish to marry her. This time she submits to the proposal, at the same time declaring “I don’t care about independence now...I don’t want independence, I want you.” The research undertaken for her “old maids” article for the *Globe* appears to have triggered fears of the single life.

<30>This number of *Sylvia’s Journal* offered contrasting images of the female journalist. The article “Women in Journalism” mentions the need for women to sustain their careers and independence: “...women who believe in women, and feel that her mission has never yet been properly fulfilled, and that the time is coming when she will take her place not as the inferior or rival, but as the equal of man”. In contrast, Miss Lorrimore “has short fluffy hair” and declares her wish to “abandon journalism and serious books.” (“Miss Lorrimore’s Career”, 133) *Sylvia’s Journal* was, as Fraser *et al.* (223) observe, politically conservative and domestic. However, as Linda K. Hughes points out, “*Sylvia’s Journal* was also receptive to “New Woman” issues especially under the editorship of Rosamund Marriott Watson (January 1893-April 1894). It seems that in printing different images of the female journalist — the professional New Woman journalist asserting autonomy in the workplace, and the fictive novice denouncing the profession for romance — *Sylvia’s Journal* may have been appealing to a dichotomous readership, made up of both domestic and advanced women.

<31>The equivalence of woman with home, at odds with journalism, awaiting proposals and romantic resolutions, produces, in terms of women's writing, jarring themes for the modern reader. Yet for some 1890s readers of stories about female journalists, the journalist's downfall seems to have been a welcome one. As an anonymous critic claimed, in a caustic *Bookman* review of Mrs Everard Cotes's (Sara Jeannette Duncan) *A Daughter of To-Day* (1894), a novel about a female journalist, Elfrida Bell, who commits suicide after failing to make an impact in the journalistic world: "Elfrida Bell from Sparta, US, makes her way to Fleet Street ... uncertain of her talent except as a woman who says too much ... when we read of her journalism we feel amusement ... the thematic of suicide is most welcome."

<32>Female journalists are often cast as anti-heroines because of their ability to cause the downfall, professional and emotional humiliation, and even death, of male journalists. Disillusioned and fearful, male journalists lose out professionally and economically to women journalists. Hugh Crackenthorpe's story "A Conflict of Egoisms" depicts the bitter competitiveness between an ambitious female journalist and the failing writer she marries. Oswald Novell, a mediocre author, refuses to participate in journalism "because of his deep sense of literary conscience". He ignores journalistic changes and the reading demands of a modern public. In contrast, the female journalist, Letty Moore, is at the centre of new journalistic practice and commerce:

Everyday for the following six years, she spent in and out of the narrow grimy building in Fleet Street, doing all manner of odd jobs...After a while, working up to paragraphs and even writing leaderettes ...three or four times her salary was raised...then the sub-editorship of a ladies' weekly was offered her. (Crackenthorpe 280)

On her marriage she gives up journalism. Just before that we see her "in a state of unnatural passivity.... she went to the office as usual ...she clung onto the old life instinctively...at the thought that it would all be gone". The male writer cannot understand Letty's unhappiness due to her abandonment of journalism. When she returns to the profession, he jumps into the Thames, unable to stand marriage to a woman journalist who is "all for the press and publicity". The tone of the story blames the selfish woman journalist for the ending of the man's career and his life. Letty Moore assumes power both in the private and public spheres. She is deemed dangerous and destructive. Yet she can also be upheld as a New Woman who refuses to be domestic and subordinate to an inept and weak man. For Crackenthorpe, though, Letty is a woman with the means to lay to waste male authorship and ambition.

<33>An important question is whether or not the treatment of the fictional female journalist is affected by the gender of the author. Not all men depicted women journalists negatively, a key example being the positive slant given his journalist heroine by the male writer Cottrel Hoe in the "Jennie Baxter" stories published in *Windsor Magazine*. In a similar vein, an influential female journalist is depicted in a little-known story by Henry Harland, "The Burden of Thomas Creed", in which a newspaper editor is saved from "the many sided tragedies and comedies of Fleet-Street" by the "successful apprenticeship of the first woman on the paper ... Miss Susan Alden, whose copy is admirably done."

<34>Then again, women could draw negative portraits of women journalists. George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), somewhat surprisingly given her status in recent criticism as a New Woman author, depicts a dubious and destructive female journalist in a short story entitled “A Lady Journalist”. Paston is perhaps best known as an author of two novels with advanced female authors/journalists, *A Modern Amazon* (1894), and *A Writer of Books* (1898). A *Sketch* reviewer claimed that “George Paston and Miss Ella Hepworth Dixon are undermining the citadel of our self-complacency by showing editors and such god-like persons in their habits as they live”. (“Things-Seen-By-A- Modern-Man” 693) Here, Paston and Hepworth Dixon, the author of a New Woman novel about a female journalist, *The Story of A Modern Woman* (1894), are upheld as radical writers who provide the reader with realistic and progressive images of the journalistic sphere. In Paston’s novels the heroines are writers who must overcome financial, professional, and personal barriers. Regina Haughton, the heroine of *A Modern Amazon*, attempts to escape, through her journalistic work, from a husband who believes that “A hard-working man ... gets his stimulus from his male friends ... he wants a wife to love him unreasonably, to believe in him blindly, to forgive him unquestionably.” (Paston *A Modern Amazon* 257) Despite Paston’s characters being quite worn out with journalism and authorship by the end of both novels, they are sympathetic heroines who bring into view the adversities of both personal and professional life. In “A Lady Journalist”, however, Paston depicts a woman who cheats her way into writing for the “*Reader*”. Once accepted onto the staff of the *Reader* as a reviewer, she cannot cope with the demands of the job and asks her suitor, another *Reader* journalist, to fake articles for her. He agrees but hopes that “Evelyn would very soon tire of this journalistic fancy.” (Paston “A Lady Journalist” 68-73) “Evelyn did not tire of her journalistic freak” and demands that he writes more copy for her. He, meanwhile, is strained through writing articles under his and her names and the editor sacks him. She is given his post. “He realised that his sweetheart had gradually ousted him from the berth he had won at the cost of so much hard work and steady perseverance” and is relegated to finding work on the “rather scandalous paper the *Pillory*”. In a final act of deception, Evelyn marries the editor of the *Reader*.

<35>Negative portraits of female journalists raise issues surrounding feminist debates of the late nineteenth-century. Anti-heroine characters are antithetical to the non-domestic advanced woman in journalism not least because they are temporary transgressors, and do not keep on with their careers. If we associate characters with cultural and political climates, then many texts appear to demonstrate conservatism on the Woman Question. Yet stories in which female journalists are depicted as doubtful characters still present women’s modernity, presenting themes of publicity and authorship. Many magazine stories and novels published in the 1890s functioned as critiques of the social status of women, yet critics feared the popularity of such stories and questioned their influence upon the woman reader. As *The Bookman* critic comments in the review of *A Daughter of To-Day*: “an interesting item is the extent to which the lady writer of to-day will tell a story about vulgar modern cheap and popular journalism.... Let us hope for a not too healthy popularity.” The reviewer goes on to comment upon the ‘sensational newspaper work’ depicted in the novel. Low and trivial forms of New Journalism, causing professional injury to journalists was a recurring theme in *fin-d-siècle* stories. Kate Jackson notes in her study of New Journalism and the periodical press that “the tensions between commercial value and literary value in journalistic production are often played out in fiction”. (210) However, more detailed portrayals of “vulgar” newspaper offices and new journalistic practices, which Joseph O. Baylen describes as “such innovations as bold headlines, special and

sensational articles on the metropolis ...” (370) and “yellow journalism” are usually found in stories that have a male protagonist who is a journalist.(10)

<36>Stories about women’s involvement in journalism examine the tensions of the workplace the stories themselves are generated in, dramatizing the difficulties and limitations women faced in the pursuance of a professional career. However, despite complex and ambiguous representations, stories printed in the periodical press, in publications aimed at both male and female readers, provided information that extended readers’ understanding of what it meant to be a woman journalist at the *fin de siècle*. Despite the dominance of the press by a masculine confraternity, stories depicting female journalists, especially when read alongside periodical articles that supported and publicised women in journalism, functioned to highlight the inroads into the profession made by women. Such stories were informative, modern “advertisements” for women’s presence in the professional public sphere of journalistic work.

Notes

(1)The late-Victorian press repeatedly positioned the aspiring middle-class female journalist as disillusioned in her bid to leave the domestic sphere and enter the public newspaper arena. In goes on to question “The prominence of women... what are her qualifications? ... sending work blindly ... they cannot gauge an editor’s requirements.” Such gender prejudice is also depicted in short stories about female journalists: “He objected, in the first place, to the presence of women in newspaper offices: Their place, he used to say, was in the nursery, not in Fleet Street.” (See Dixon, “A Scribblers Comedy” 286)(^)

(2)Good is one of few critics to discuss journalists as fictional characters in late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century fiction. Good claims that “fiction with a newspaper setting had a popular appeal and fulfilled a public need” to know more about the press and practical journalism. However, Good’s study entirely focuses upon fictional male journalists. Despite some recent critical work that looks at depictions of female journalists in fiction(see Fehlbaum, Mitchell, and Lute), I would argue that the place of journalism in fiction and the female journalist as fictional character have been neglected in established academic criticism.(^)

(3)Wimble’s column was a regular feature in *The Lady’s Realm*. Other suggestions for “incomes” suitable for middle-class women are: “decorative art, “bookbinding”, “gardening”, “weaving and jewellery”, and ‘starting tea-houses in sylvan spots”. See *The Lady’s Realm* 1 (November 1896 — April 1897): 104, 215, 331,444, 564, 671.(^)

(4)This is a particularly insightful and effective commentary by a female journalist in a bid to be taken seriously as a professional worker. Like a number of women’s magazines of the time, it registered and discussed middle-class women’s work and new career opportunities. Articles which appeared in women’s journals (see below) uphold the female journalist as an advanced woman, intelligent and creative, and with a definite role in the creation of journalism as a modern and suitable profession.(^)

(5)In her discussion of *The Young Woman*, Emma Liggins points out that “as it gradually became more acceptable for young women to refuse or postpone marriage, the late-Victorian periodical

press had to cater for a growing number of female readers who were perhaps more interested in work.” (216)(△)

(6) Journalism as a plot and subject matter, and the female journalist as fictional character are depicted in a number of novels published at the *fin de siècle*, for example, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) by Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Newspaper Girl* (1899) by Mrs C.N. Williamson, *Anna Marsden's Experiment* (1899) by Ellen Williams, *A Yellow Journalist* (1905) by Miriam Michelson, *Girl Comrades* (1907) by Ethel F. Heddle.(△)

(7) *Ruth Hall* was first serialised in Britain in the *Family Herald* in 1855. King: 103, 109-10, 200-1 argues that it is a key text in the British penny fiction market. The edition I have used is the Penguin (1997).(△)

(8) In a review of Mrs C. N. Williamson's novel *The Newspaper Girl* (1899), the reviewer interestingly claims that short stories published in the periodical press provide more valid accounts of female journalists and journalism than Williamson's text: "This book may be described as a very tolerable piece of journalist's work. As a "newspaper novel" is full of journalism in both subject and style ... the American lady who plays the part of heroine is without beginner's doubts and has boundless enthusiasm for the profession, but the sugary feminine influence is often in evidence... the romantic plot is insufficient when compared to the clever sketches and stories about lady journalists and newspaper work published in various quarterlies, monthlies, and weeklies... In evaluating the lady journalist in literature, one must take into account the average woman journalist's skill and capacity" (*Athenaeum* (30 June 1899) 591).(△)

(9) The *Gentleman's Magazine* appears to have relished in its undiplomatic role as critic of the advanced and journalistic woman. In "The Wail of the Male: By One of Them" in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1894, the anonymous author of the piece declares that "I am not a fanatic. I am only a husband. I am not against woman's rights. I don't think all women ought to be married. I am glad that women should be newspaper reporters ... Still ... the serpent's tooth is hid in the new movement ... the angel in the house is gone."(△)

(10) Numerous articles published in the press critiqued American "yellow journalism" upholding it as antithetical to art and culture. As the American journalist Elizabeth Banks, somewhat ironically, declared "in America we have the real "yellow journalism", and in England you have not got it, and blessed are you". For stories about male journalists, see, for example, Sperry; Ashcroft Noble; Thompson; Williams, *The Stolen Story*. These stories critique, and in Sperry's case satirise, New and yellow journalism, commenting upon the professional malpractices of male journalists and the shortcomings of badly run newspapers.(△)

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