

Women, Work and the Victorian Periodical

Living by the Press

Marianne Van Remoortel



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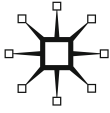
Women, Work and the Victorian Periodical

Living by the Press

Marianne Van Remoortel

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My aunt Denise Duys introduced me to the joys of needlework when I was a little girl and never tired of sending me patterns by good old-fashioned post. I will always cherish the memories of long summer afternoons spent knitting and crocheting, of her enthusiasm when I tried my hand at some of Matilda Pullan's designs and of her unflagging insistence on the importance of gauge swatches. This book is for her.

Introduction

The nineteenth century saw the rapid growth of the magazine industry in Britain. Whereas a handful of quarterly reviews dominated the market in the beginning of the century, by the 1860s hundreds of weeklies and monthlies were appearing. In the decades that followed, the number of periodical titles listed in *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory* tripled, from 537 in 1864 to 1,752 in 1890. This increased frequency and proliferation of new magazines led to an expansion of the workforce in the industry and opened up new opportunities for female employment. Women from a variety of backgrounds made a living by contributing stories, poems or needlework patterns to the periodical press. Others worked as editors, sought employment in the printing rooms or opened newsagents' shops. As Harriet Martineau enthused in her seminal treatise on 'Female Industry' in the April 1859 issue of the *Edinburgh Review*: 'Our countrywomen have the free command of the press; and they use it abundantly.'¹

This book aims to explore both the diversity of women's work for the press and the diversity in their lives, class and family experience. By reconstructing the biographies of women involved in the industry, it examines their personal and professional trajectories in relation to their magazine contributions. The common thread running through the chapters is the question of how women negotiated the relationship between their public and private selves. Quite often, that relationship turns out to be one of tension and contrast. In order to generate an income, women constructed fictional identities and voiced norms and ideals to which they themselves did not always adhere. This book traces the different ways in which these women

reinvented themselves in the press. It addresses the various circumstances that led them to do so and considers what they gained and lost in the process. By restoring a voice to overlooked authors and adopting new perspectives towards canonical figures, I hope to provide fresh insights into the participation of women in nineteenth-century print culture.

Victorian periodical studies, the area of research in which this book is situated, is a burgeoning interdisciplinary field uniting scholars from across the humanities. Their common point of interest is the Victorian periodical, whether studied as a material, textual, visual object or otherwise. This may seem self-evident, but it has also predisposed the field towards particular views and approaches of its own research subject. This book builds on and engages with a number of these tendencies. First, there is a general acceptance that anonymity is something periodical scholars simply have to learn to live with. Most Victorian periodical texts were indeed published anonymously or pseudonymously. Considerable effort, notably the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* (1965–1988), has been devoted to identifying authorship in a limited number of prominent journals, and more recently scholars have started to experiment with stylometric methods for authorship attribution. Still, researchers seem to be in tacit agreement that the vast majority of anonymous authors will remain forever unknown. The same goes for the countless individuals whose names by definition did not appear in print: the sub-editors, proofreaders, compositors, illustrators, engravers and others whose work was primarily mechanical. These people's contributions to the development of the press are still either overlooked or inadequately understood. In this book, I explore new ways of dealing with the pervasive anonymity of the Victorian periodical press and the industry that sustained it.

Secondly, this book complements recent studies addressing women's involvement with the periodical press by covering a much wider range of magazine work by women. Several scholars have emphasized the key role of periodicals in the professionalization of female authorship. Alexis Easley, Linda Peterson, Beth Palmer and Graham Law, to name but a few, have offered case studies on female journalists and serial novelists, including Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Charlotte Mary Brame.² The steady income that serial fiction offered to women

writing to provide for their families has been well documented. The chapters in this book look at other activities such as editing, fancy-work instruction, poetry, typesetting and illustration, showing the diverse types of work that women undertook for the press in a career context and examining their various positions in the publishing hierarchy.

Both in this respect and in my approach to the issue of anonymity, I am indebted to Barbara Onslow's seminal *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2000). Onslow's study provides a panoramic view of women's involvement with the press as authors and editors, discussing Martineau, Gaskell, Eliot, Eliza Lynn Linton and Margaret Oliphant alongside a broad array of lesser-known figures. In addition, it provides 'brief glimpses behind-the-scenes' of the myriad, nameless 'handmaids and decorators' who worked as sub-editors, proofreaders, compositors, illustrators and engravers. This book responds to Onslow's conclusion that 'far more research [...] needs to be done' on these women and the 'part [they] played in these back-room activities' by putting names to previously unnamed back-room workers and shedding light on their lives and work for the press.³

In the past decades, moreover, periodical scholars have variously engaged with historicist, reader- and text-centred methodologies to situate periodicals in their wider social and cultural contexts. This emphasis on the periodical as published text and commodity may explain not only the tendency to overlook the preceding stages of production – involving countless individuals working in and out of public view – but also the recent efforts to reconceptualize the role of the editor as manager of these people and processes. While a few towering figures such as Dickens and Thackeray continue to generate significant scholarly interest in and for themselves, critics have also started to question the sovereign nature of the editorial function, arguing that the editor's authority is necessarily fragmented, dispersed and even contested through the multitude of voices that comprise the periodical. Dickens's editorship of *Household Words*, for instance, has been reassessed in terms of struggle and conflict with the various authors contributing to the journal, most notably Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell and Adelaide Anne Procter.⁴ Similarly, Mark W. Turner's study of Trollope rests on the premise that the 'cultural position of the editor was as much contested as that of the

writer or author' in mid-Victorian Britain, although this 'has not always been recognized by press historians and critics of Victorian periodicals'.⁵ While previous scholarship tends to view editors as by definition male, Turner argues that editorial identity needed to be negotiated carefully in relation to gender, class, authorship and other socio-culturally constructed categories.

A critical reconsideration of editorship is problematic, however, when there is very little to reconsider because we lack even a basic understanding of an editor's life, career trajectory and professional networks. If post-structuralist thinking has encouraged us to view periodical texts as performative of gender and class, it has often done so at the expense of the individuals staging the performance. This seems to be more often the case with female than with male editors, and with female editors of women's magazines in particular. For all the prominence of the *Ladies' Companion* and *Ladies' Treasury* in the Victorian periodical market, for instance, the editorship of these magazines has long been taken for granted. While 'Mrs Warren' of the *Ladies' Treasury* has, at best, been seen as a disembodied voice and textual construct, Caroline Alice White's long editorship of the *Ladies' Companion* has gone almost entirely unacknowledged.

By foregrounding how women's periodicals function socio-culturally, as vehicles for expressing social identity and gender roles, recent scholarship has tacitly relocated the authority and agency originally residing with the editor to the text. The result is an implicit but powerful conceptual divide between periodical production and periodical content. Important works such as Margaret Beetham's *A Magazine Of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914* (1996) and Kathryn Ledbetter's *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry* (2009) focus on the ways in which women's magazines (re)produce constructions of femininity rather than on the individuals behind these constructions. A post-structuralist interest in the performativity of texts, however, does not necessarily exclude attention to the biographical foundations on which fictional identities are built. This book aims to examine women's magazines as the products of specific authorial and editorial strategies and, more particularly, to explore women's motives for publicly reinforcing the very gender ideologies that paradoxically served to restrict their lives to the private sphere of home and household. My focus is not so much on how textual authority

is mediated through the various actors involved in periodical publication as on these actors themselves and their participation in the publication process and the networks involved.

Finally, such an approach may invite further thinking about the periodical as a publishing genre. Attempts to develop a theory of the periodical have been dominated by a desire to theorize its particular relationship to time and space. Unlike books, periodicals are, according to scholars such as Margaret Beetham and Laurel Brake, designedly ephemeral, heterogeneous and open-ended by their very nature. As historically contingent, 'date-stamped'⁶ objects, they cater to audiences on a regular (daily, weekly, monthly) basis, mixing different types of text and other forms of content. Each piece, from story to essay to illustration to advertisement, is 'instantly and always contextualized, embedded in a matrix of other pieces which make up the issue in which it appears'.⁷ Each issue, Janus-like, looks back the previous issues and forward to the next. This theoretical groundwork has been instrumental in the final decades of the previous century in establishing the periodical as a legitimate object of study in its own right and in emancipating periodical studies, as it were, from the cognate fields of book history and literary studies. At the same time, it has deterred scholars from exploring other kinds of spatio-temporal relationships that shape periodicals. Although they have long been fascinated with the historical contingency of periodical publication, they have not yet theorized its relationship to lived reality – the vagaries and vicissitudes of people's lives, the social networks in which they were participated and the ongoing processes of periodical production.

Methodologically, then, this book explores new ways for studying the Victorian periodical press by drawing on a wide range of digitized biographical and demographic sources rarely tapped in periodical research, including birth, marriage and death records, census returns and wills. In addition, it relies on extensive research in library magazine collections and online periodical databases and makes ample use of archival material such as letters, publishers' records and pension applications. By combining these different sources and methods, I aim not only to identify and document the discrepancies between women's public personae and the everyday realities of their private lives but also to demonstrate why these disconnects matter to periodical studies. At a time when increasing emphasis is being placed

on the study of periodical networks at different geographical (local, regional, national, transnational, global) levels, I want to examine how women working in different sectors of the periodical industry negotiated their place in these complex structures. By doing so, I hope to bring renewed attention to the pivotal importance of individual agency in the creation and mediation of social relations and the production of texts.

Throughout its chapters, this book moves in and out of the backwaters of the Victorian periodical industry as it examines the lives and careers of women working for the press. Such a project naturally poses considerable challenges. If so many women have been lost to history, how do we find them again? Where do we start looking and how do we find out more about them? Chapter 1 discusses the possibilities and difficulties of studying print culture in relation to biography. More particularly, it explores the wealth of new possibilities offered by recent developments in Digital Humanities to push the boundaries within which prominent periodical scholars like Walter Houghton, Anne Lohrli and Barbara Onslow were working from the 1960s to the turn of the twentieth century. While they were forced to rely almost exclusively on time-consuming archival research and trawling manually through long runs of journals or reels of microfilm, digitization has since opened up new pathways for both periodical studies and biographical research.

Each of the subsequent chapters deals with different types of work in the magazine industry, centring around particular women who built their careers on these activities. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the disconnects between the private lives of two female press workers and the discourses of domesticity and femininity they promoted in public. Chapter 2 qualifies the participation of the *Lady's Treasury* (1858–1895) in Victorian domestic discourse by reconstructing the life of its editor and main contributor, Eliza Warren Francis. As 'Mrs Warren', Warren Francis claimed the authority of a staunch middle-class wife and mother. In reality, she was a childless, widowed boarding-house keeper who knew that the success of the magazine depended on creating the impression that she had gained expertise through personal experience – on carefully editing away, in other words, the many discrepancies between her private life and public voice. Chapter 3 examines the life and career of Matilda Marian Pullan, arguably the most prolific contributor of fancywork patterns

to the mid-nineteenth-century British periodical press. While she enthusiastically taught women how to dress themselves, their families and their homes in the garbs of middle-class respectability, her own life challenged many of the ideals that she publicly articulated. Pullan, as it turns out, needed the regular income of magazine publication to support herself through early widowhood, the care of an illegitimate child, an unhappy second marriage and escape by emigration to the United States.

The subsequent chapters widen the focus to include other types of discourse that women developed in the commercial context of the press. Chapter 4 offers new insights into Christina Rossetti's publication strategies by looking at her often-neglected contributions to *Macmillan's Magazine* (1859–1907) and other periodicals. Especially in the early stages of her career, Rossetti regularly sold poems to the press in order to generate an income while working on more ambitious projects such as *Goblin Market* (1862) and *The Prince's Progress* (1866). In these usually short 'pot-boilers', as she called them, she strategically fashioned a purer, more direct and simpler voice that she knew would appeal to larger audiences than the longer, more complex poems in her poetry volumes. Because she had parted with the copyright for a few guineas, she could not claim any share in the profits of her 'pot-boilers', many of which became widely successful on both sides of the Atlantic. This chapter nuances Rossetti's reputation as a spiritual poet renouncing worldly materialism by juxtaposing the publication histories of some of her most popular poems with the payment details provided by her correspondence.

Chapters 5 and 6 shed light on the lives and careers of women working as 'handmaids and decorators' of the press. Chapter 5 focuses on Florence and Adelaide Claxton, two of the most prolific graphic artists of the mid-nineteenth century, and, together with Mary Ellen Edwards, pioneers of the first real generation of professional female magazine illustrators. I argue that, more than traditional and arguably more prestigious artistic media such as painting, the periodical press offered the two sisters a public forum for satirizing the habits and values of genteel society as well as their own plight as young female artists struggling for professional recognition. Chapter 6 examines women's participation in and manipulation of narratives of social change. Its focus is on the Victoria Press, Emily

Faithfull's women-run printing establishment in London. If the Victoria Press is generally regarded today as an important, highly controversial experiment in the history of labour reform, it is mainly because Faithfull employed young women as compositors in a male-dominated trade. This chapter, however, introduces new evidence of negligent business management and internal conflict with the compositors, many of whom stepped forward to criticize Faithfull in the press. I trace these women in censuses and other historical records and explore the circumstances that led them to seek employment in the printing industry, complementing Faithfull's well-documented reasons for hiring them. Finally, I address the question to what extent Faithfull's conflict with her compositors challenged the philanthropic discourse of reform that she and her circle developed in, for example, the *Victoria Magazine* (1863–1880) and the *English Woman's Journal* (1858–1864) (two periodicals the female compositors, perhaps ironically, helped to produce).

1

Women, Work and the Victorian Press

Research into women's work for the press raises tantalizing questions of attribution and identity. The vast majority of periodical texts were published anonymously or under pseudonyms. On the basis of preliminary findings for twenty-one of the forty-five journals covered by the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, Walter E. Houghton estimated the number of unsigned or pseudonymous contributions for the period 1824–1900 at roughly 70 per cent.¹ As several critics have pointed out since, women were even more likely to disappear into anonymity than men. Alexis Easley gives the example of *Fraser's Magazine*, which famously portrayed its contributors as an exclusively male coterie of 'Fraserians', thus 'mask[ing] the contributions of several women to the magazine'.² The Irish-born fiction writer Selina Bunsbury was one of *Fraser's* most prolific authors, contributing some fifty stories in the 1830s and 1840s, yet in contemporary accounts and histories of the magazine, including the recent entry in the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, she is rarely acknowledged as such.³ Similarly, Marysa Demoor has revealed among the anonymous reviewers of the *Athenaeum* a surprising number of women, including Mathilde Blind, Augusta Webster and Geraldine Jewsbury. Basing her conclusions on careful examination of the 'marked file', the annotated editor's copy kept in the City University Library in London, Demoor demonstrates that women played a far more active and important role in late-nineteenth-century literary criticism than the masculine or ungendered voice commonly adopted by reviewers of both sexes would suggest.⁴

The *Wellesley Index*, moreover, focuses on a narrow set of influential monthlies and quarterlies at the more expensive end of the Victorian periodical market. In doing so, it privileges a type of publication that only a small, elite segment of the population would have been able to access as contributors, let alone at editorial or management level. Women in particular more often lacked the resources – money, education, status, networks – needed to build prominent careers in the press industry. Carol T. Christ has calculated that about 13 per cent of the 11,560 authors in the *Wellesley Index* are women, many of whom have but a single article or letter to the editor to their name.⁵ The low numbers for high-profile journals such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the *Fortnightly Review* and *Westminster Review*, however, cannot be extrapolated to the periodical market as a whole. Barbara Onslow has rightly observed that women ‘certainly contributed to less prestigious papers – particularly the vast religious, women’s and cheap “family” press’.⁶ At present, there is no comprehensive bibliographic tool like the *Wellesley Index* to help scholars edge their way through this large body of texts. Chances are that, if such a project were undertaken, the percentage of female contributors would turn out to be considerably higher than the *Wellesley's* meagre 13 per cent.

Finding the female contributors is one thing, but getting to know more about them is quite another. Even when magazine contributions are signed with (what appears to be) a woman’s real name, they rarely tell us anything about who this person actually was, what kind of life she led and why she worked for the periodical press. As Onslow observes:

Scanning runs of journals, one’s eye is caught by once popular, almost forgotten names like Mrs T K Hervey and Miss Pardoe, and others less familiar and less frequent. Who was Maria Norris whose ‘A Few Words on Geology’ earned her a by-line in *The Ladies’ Cabinet* in 1852? Or Mrs White who surfaced in ladies’ papers about the same time? We may never know the extent of women’s work in these areas.⁷

Anne Lohrli’s rigorous sleuthing through the office account book of Dickens’s *Household Words*, kept by sub-editor William Henry Wills, shows the great social, geographical and age diversity of the more than 380 people writing for the journal. The number included ‘some