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Introduction: Women and Leisure Special Issue

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<1>According to the author of “Women’s Leisure,” published in the *World* on January 6, 1875, “ordinarily-educated women of the higher and well-to-do middle classes” have very little time to read, contemplate, and meditate, three practices that restore the intellect, refresh the soul, and feed the mind with knowledge and wisdom. Unlike men, who can escape domestic responsibilities by going to the office, study, or club, women “never” have an hour to themselves:

If a woman sits down to read, not to skip, twenty pages of history, before her attention is, maybe, arrested, ten to one the housekeeper wishes to speak to her; or Jacky’s playtime has arrived, and he must spend it by having a rare game with his mother’s sofa cushions, scattering her thoughts as he does the furniture; or else the elder girls want to practise the piano, regardless of their mamma’s finer feelings of harmony and the fitness of things; or the clergyman’s wife arrives to discuss parish matters, and to solicit contributions to the society for providing the Aztecs with decent clothing. (13).

“Fashionable women” have daily interruptions that are “more wearisome,” according to the author, because they must answer notes “every quarter of an hour,” receive callers, or entertain a “garrulous old aunt” who wants to review family stories “for two or more hours, without taking a breath” (13). Women in country houses have it no better; they are trapped in “the rural treadmill” of visiting “condemned hostesses” who must talk all day “while their husbands are happily and actively employed in slaughtering something” (13). The author claims that such women are simply going along with expectations, living their lives out in a hurried, disturbed state, with little chance of teaching their children the value of leisure. She emphasizes that “without leisure a woman’s mind becomes a disjointed set of ill-assorted ideas, or a jumble of facts without reasons, or, worse still, a blank, where ungoverned feelings and instincts are the only law . . . It is the want of leisure that makes a woman a fool (13). Working-class women undoubtedly suffered such a fate at a much greater scale than middle- to upper-class women, since leisure requires time, money, or opportunity. The author of “Women’s Leisure” concludes that “only those can work well who have leisure, and only those who have leisure know what it is never to be idle” (14).

<2>Although feminist perspectives of women’s leisure began to appear in the 1980s, the history of nineteenth-century women’s leisure has yet to be adequately explored. Karla A.

Henderson, M. Deborah Bialeschki, Susan M. Shaw, and Valeria J. Freysinger published a feminist approach to women's leisure in the United States titled *A Leisure of One's Own: A Feminist Perspective on Women's Leisure* (1980); their study features one chapter articulating nineteenth-century women's leisure in terms of the "ideal woman," asserting that "Just as women have always worked, women have also always had leisure" (19). Yet, as Henderson et al explain, "the experiences of women have not been acknowledged or separated from those of men":

Women's history is not a history of wars. Rather, it is a perspective that addresses women's influence on patriarchal society in light of their inferior status and their relegation to traditional functions based on sexuality, reproduction, and child care. This approach is applicable to all aspects of understanding women's place within a historical perspective, including one which focuses on leisure. (20)

<3>Other studies of leisure tend to be sociological and theoretical analyses of twenty- and twenty-first century women's activities. In a passing reference to women in his review of British leisure from 1850 to 1960, Dave Russell notes that opportunities for women's leisure "undeniably increased significantly across the country from 1850, albeit on a particular set of terms," especially for young, unmarried, middle-class women and, to a much smaller scale, some working class women (20). Unfortunately, no essay in Tony Blackshaw's *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies* (2013), in which Russell's essay appears, specifically addresses nineteenth-century women's leisure, indicating their continued marginalization in this topic. Jane Humphries and K. D. M. Snell claim that "We have little information about how women's time was spent over the gamut of their routines both within and outside the familial household. Gendered time schedules, their cause and their relative rewards, remain little fathomed. Yet they are of great interest in any attempt to understand how work discipline and leisure preferences have shifted over the past few centuries" (Humphries and Snell 2). Because the majority of nineteenth-century periodicals were published for middle- to upper-class readers, they offer an important, substantial body of information about how women distributed work/leisure time. Databases of digitized periodicals, including several working-class titles, are increasingly available for research. Scholars of women's history can now begin to expand the topic; for example, the article quoted from the *World* details the kinds of interruptions women experienced in their household routines and confirms that they confronted time challenges quite different from those of men. *The World* is not yet digitized, but the article confirms an existing trend of periodical writing about women that is waiting to be explored.

<4>Of course, long work hours, poverty, and a concomitant lack of resources limited possibilities for working-class women; thus leisure activities were largely class-specific. The notion of a leisure class developed after 1840 as a result of the industrial shift that changed concepts of time, according to Hugh Cunningham, who notes that "Technological developments—the railway, the telegraph, the motor car, the radio—were both sign and symbol of the increased pace of life" (Cunningham 155). A "gospel of leisure" developed alongside the "gospel of work" to counter evangelical fears that leisure would subvert a

seriousness of purpose in work by justifying leisure as an aid to work, thus legitimizing acceptable opportunities for the middle classes who could afford them.

<5>Essays in this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* examine a selection of British women's leisure activities and demonstrate that women sought leisure on any terms they could manage. Alexis Easley's essay on scrapbooks provides an extravagantly beautiful display of women's art and reading as a "form of self-fashioning" and an "active process of creating meaning from the ephemera of daily life." Etching, drawing, painting, needlework, lace art, embellishment, calligraphy, and cut-and-paste clippings of poetry, images, jokes, pearls of wisdom, and anecdotes from books and periodicals become part of stunning page designs in women's scrapbooks from the John Rylands Library and the Harry Page Collection at Manchester Metropolitan University between 1825 and 1860. Easley closely examines clippings pasted or copied into a specific scrapbook from 1850 and traces them to their original source to demonstrate what women read and how they read it. The process reveals ways that women "were participating in a process of remediation that was the hallmark of an emergent mass-media culture." Easley emphasizes that the scrapbooking fad that began in 1825 parallels the growth of popular print culture and demonstrates ways that women both responded to, and wrote, a history of domestic culture.

<6>My essay on the roller skating fad of the mid-1870s examines a new athletic activity for Victorian women and demonstrates that skating drew women outside the traditional domestic space for leisure into masculine-gendered rinks, where they freely mixed with casual acquaintances relatively unmoderated or chaperoned. For about two years, between 1874 and 1876, periodicals provided a stream of reportage and guides on fashions, skates, rinks, and skating etiquette for women, indicating that women dominated the sport. Sometimes roller skating was a source for self-display or for romance, perhaps with the "wrong" person, but many women also sought roller skating for competition, leisure, or healthy exercise. *Punch* magazine typically articulated conservative fears of women's independence in cartoons and other features during the two-year span of the skating fashion. The thought of young women leaving the house alone to go to a skating rink activated moral anxieties, but fervent complaints about impropriety seem to have been ineffective. However, warnings about potential skating injuries were valid, as *Punch* cartoons imply. Nevertheless, roller skating was wildly popular for a short time before bicycling took over in the 1880s as a path to freedom for women.

<7>Robyn Miller examines Jane Eyre's world of bird watching, reading, and painting to reveal the intersection of leisure time, natural history, domestic ideology, and Jane's own freedom, personalized in avian species. Robyn Miller examines Jane Eyre's world of bird watching, reading, and painting to reveal the intersection of leisure time, natural history, domestic ideology, and Jane's own freedom, personalized in avian species. Miller positions Thomas Bewick's *A History of British Birds* as an influential "household presence" that serves as a significant part of Jane's leisure entertainment, while providing a pattern of "personification and idealization" that expresses ways that Jane's desires "to upend traditional domesticity." Miller's analysis of Bewick's birds points to the impact humans have on nature and suggests that Bewick, Jane Eyre, and Charlotte Brontë place their own "fingerprint" on the natural order

with their cultural practices. Miller concludes that “through her leisured gaze, Jane portrays birds like herself: resistant to domestic influence despite her containment within various households,” while disrupting biodiversity.

<8>A study of Mary Lamb’s *Mrs. Leicester’s School* leads Liora Selinger to investigate the confluence of labor and leisure in the practice of educating young women. The enjoyable part of the teacher’s life at Mrs. Leicester’s School is in encouraging her pupils to think and learn. However, Lamb’s experience with needlework, recorded in her essay titled “On Needle-work,” infuses Mrs. Leicester’s School with an awareness that the comingling of leisure and labor can sometimes curtail women’s freedoms. When tasks like needlework, which Lamb relates to harsh conditions of the working class, are mistaken for leisure, women are unable to benefit from intellectual improvement. Lamb advises women to put their leisure hours to better use assisting others and enjoying the returns of these efforts in reciprocal relationships.

<9>Madeleine C. Seys reviews Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* to show how Braddon uses Lady Audley’s leisure pursuits of painting, needlework, and novel reading as rhetorical strategies that represent betrayal and manipulation. Seys reveals that Lady Audley cultivates a “semblance of idleness” while “embroidering the truth of her identity and her past.” Traditional women’s leisure activities provide a distraction from Lady Audley’s crimes; embroidering Berlin wool work patterns or painting watercolor pictures help Lady Audley to assemble a new identity while they give her an alibi.

<10>The essays in this special issue on women and leisure supply primary evidence of nineteenth-century women’s leisure activities and seek to inspire further scholarship on this wide-ranging topic.

Works Cited

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