

Why Gender, Professions and the Press *Now*?

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<1>A special issue of an online journal like *NCGS* on “Gender, the Professions and the Press” seems peculiarly apposite at a time when both print and electronic media in the UK at least are much occupied with the relationship between gender and the professions. Following claims that the financial depression we are currently experiencing was caused partially by men’s risk-taking fuelled by testosterone and gendered genetics, (Silbert, Ford, ‘Genes’) as we write this in early June 2009, there has been a flurry of news items and commentaries concerning women, status and work.

<2> Several days of controversy were caused by an interview published in the Sunday newspaper, the *Observer*, with Stuart Rose, the chairman of the large retail chain Marks and Spencer, who claimed that “Girls today have never had it so good” in the workplace. (Day) A few days later, on 3 June 2009, the media commented on a Report published by the Royal College of Physicians which had been occasioned by a warning in 2004 from Dame Carol Black, the president of the Royal College of Physicians, that the feminisation of the medical profession might lead to its loss of power and influence. (Boseley, ‘Female’) The Report was intended to test what the *Independent* had called this ‘medical time-bomb.’ (Laurance and cf. ‘Feminists’) It shows that 40% of doctors working in the UK National Health Service and 60% of medical students are currently women. By 2013, the majority of General Practitioners will be women and, four years later, hospitals too will employ more female doctors than male. While women are still vastly under-represented at senior levels – just 8% of British surgeons are female in 2009, for example, and 28% of consultants – the dominant sex of the medical profession, male since the founding of the Royal College in 1800, seems set to change. But this shift also has other implications, the Report predicts: since women medical practitioners want to fit their jobs around their home lives and prefer to work part time, many more doctors will have to be trained in order to do the same amount of work. This will therefore require greater expenditure on medical training.

<3>Calls for more money are potentially inflammatory at a time of economic crisis, and unsurprisingly, several newspapers interpreted the increasing numbers of women doctors as “putting a strain on the [National Health Service].” (Rose *Times*, Smith, Widdup). Increasing numbers of professional women are still being presented as a threat, it seems, if without the obvious melodrama of Victorian outcries such as Eliza Lyn Linton’s against the “Shrieking Sisterhood”.(1) The professional medical press were more neutral in their comments, no doubt

conscious of the sex of their future consumers. The *Lancet* and the *BMJ* both went so far as to disagree with the Report's conclusions, denying any future crisis would result from an increase in the number of women doctors, although the previous year the *BMJ* had published a debate on the topic. (Dacre, McKinstry, Winyard, 'Women in medicine') The *Nursing Times*, perhaps delighting a little in *schadenfreude* because of the long-standing tension in the UK between doctors and nurses, supported the negative side. (Payne)

<4> This all too briefly presented contemporary case study of how the media treats gender and the professions highlights the contested relationships of all three. It also suggests the continued social salience of the combination at a time when study of gender and the world of work may appear as rather old hat. Martha Vicinus's *Independent Women* was published over a generation ago in 1985 as part of a prodigious flowering of work on women and labour (often with a feminist socialist slant) which includes Barrett, Ehrenreich, Hartmann and, later, Witz. But gendered work issues obviously continue to be relevant to, and hotly discussed by, society at large.

<5> The media themselves comprise a cluster of professions in their own right of course. (Tunstall, esp. 13-19) They thus not only disseminate and interpret ideas about gender in the workplace, but themselves consist of gendered workplaces. The inevitable tensions between the representations and everyday working experiences that together make up the press, generate feedback with possibilities of constant reconfiguration of gendered representation, interpretation and also actual working practices. This was just as much the case in times when "men of letters" were also considered "professionals." (see King in this issue) For all the recovery of women writers, editors and journalists detailed by Beetham, Demoor, Fraser *et al.*, and Onslow, the profession of the press was largely the preserve of men right through the nineteenth century (as is still the case with the media today ('Women Working')).

<6> Analyzing the complex relationship between gender, the professions and the press in the nineteenth century was the project we decided to collaborate on when Andrew was offered a twelve-months Visiting Research Fellowship by the University of Ghent in 2008. We were both involved in the publication of the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* at the time, with Andrew being especially responsible for trade and professional journals. (see also de Waard) This left us both with the conviction that more work needed to be done in the area.

<7> It is our contention that the nineteenth-century man gained status and identity as a professional not only through personal connection and his local society but through the non-geographic space and network of the periodical. Not only did the professional man keep up to date with new and (hopefully) ever more effective methods of solving his clients' problems, be they medical, legal or, amongst the more modern professional problems, actuarial or engineering, but specialist magazines regularly published examination papers and answers to them for the aspirant. Periodicals helped spread professional discipline in occupations beyond the original four, each time borrowing procedures developed by them. Specialist publications like the *Accountant*, *British Architect*, *Engineer*, *Law Magazine*, *Schoolmaster* and *Schoolmistress* created what Étienne Wenger has termed "communities of practice", groups which identify themselves through what they do and the specific knowledges they share. These communities

were also heavily gendered, with men occupying the positions of power in almost all of them (when not, indeed, comprising the entire community).

<8> The contributors to this issue did not restrict themselves to periodicals only directed exclusively to specific communities of practice. They are much more wide-ranging in their searches, finding appropriate material in all kinds of the periodical press, whether a high-culture quarterly, a specialist monthly, a popular weekly or a women's magazine. Thus we find discussed in this issue the *Journal of Physiology* and *Great Thoughts* (Mussell); the *Ladies' Magazine of Gardening*, *Ladies' Companion*, *Gardening Magazine* (Moody); the *Woman's Signal*, *Lady's Newspaper* and the *Girls' Own Paper* (McNeely); a prodigious number of *fin-de-siècle* periodicals, from the *Academy* to the *Yellow Book* (Shelley); the *Cornhill* (Huelman); the *Lancet* (Harrison); the *Westminster Review* (Hadjiafxendi).

<9> Despite the rise of masculinity studies in the 1990s, it remains the case that much more work has been published on women and gender, usually by women, than on men. This is reflected too in the articles in this special issue. Nonetheless, four of the articles in this special number focus on professional masculinity in a variety of contexts: Andrew King seeks to offer a survey of nineteenth-century professional masculinity in general and discusses some of the issues in its study; Debbie Harrison writes on the aggressive Thomas Wakley's *Lancet* and some of the conflicts he provoked; Lisieux Huelman discusses the insecurities of a particular medical masculinity at a transitional historical stage, and James Mussell elaborates on a later, scientific masculinity apparently evacuated of subjectivity.

<10> Other contributions in this issue consider women in those few professions where their presence was at least tolerated by men, if never really welcomed. Thus we find discussed in this issue the multiple occupations of the composer/teacher/journalist Clara Macirone (by Sarah MacNeely), of the gardening journalist and writer Jane Loudon (by Nickianne Moody), of the science popularizer/ journalist Edith Gray Wheelwright (by Jim Mussell); the ethical issues faced by the professional woman of letters Marian Evans (by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi); and the representations of women journalists in magazine stories and articles written by both men and women (Lorna Shelley). The easiest solution for women journalists might often have seemed to publish anonymously or to sign themselves as men. Marian Evans did the latter with her novelistic persona of "George Eliot" - and the complications and ambiguities of this decision have been well explored. But many women, including Marian Evans at the stage covered here, sought ways to validate their positions and identities *as women*, refusing to efface their difference from the men who dominated their professions.

<11> Hadjiafxendi's observation of Eliot's preference for "an axiology of culture" - vocation rather than profession - recalls what King describes as Trollope's sacrificial "anti-economics". For Eliot, writing must be beyond trade, just as Trollope's paid labour for the Civil Service must give more than it receives. Harrison's consideration of the explosive Thomas Wakley can be seen, if reductively, as an example of the spread from below of new disciplinary techniques in medicine. As an attempt of minimizing risk in treatment, scientific medicine becomes an actually more reliable trade. Huelman notes Gaskell's awareness of the potential for conflict between scientific and domestic claims to knowledge. Neither were essentially, but both in

effect, specifically gendered, as Gaskell realised. McNeely offers case studies of how women were urged to become more disciplined in order to achieve more status and respect in the world of music and in society more generally. Moody shows how Jane Loudon's professional dedication to the task of writing led to her commitment to disseminating discipline in "domestic management, manners and morals." Mussell's subtle discussion of the contrasting ways popular and specialist science writing in periodicals offers differing formulations of subjectivity, the specialist learning to elide the gender of the observer so that the object under scrutiny might give the illusion it was speaking for itself.

<12>Gender refers not only to externally imposed social categories but also to internal identities and to social practices on a micro as well as macro scale. No one approach can hope to capture the complexity of its operation, not even when focused on the narrow topic of this special issue. It is to be welcomed, therefore, that the contributions here evince a wide variety of approaches and styles, each sensitive in its own way to the diverse and intricate interactions of gender, professional identity, and the nineteenth-century press.(2)

Endnotes

(1)The tabloid *Sun*, with a readership far less likely to be professional, treated the report in its usual jocularly aestheticising manner, providing opportunities for verbal play at the expense of both male and female doctors. (see Keith) If anything, its commentary follows the logic of a helplessly obedient working-class laddism in the face of an inevitable natural law of feminine superiority, an always problematic position that risks the charge of covert misogyny.(^)

(2)The editors of this special number would like to thank the general editors of *NCGS* for the opportunity to assemble what they feel is an exciting issue, and to extend their warm thanks and appreciation for the patience, good humor and sheer hard work of Joshua Reid, the technical editor, without whom these pieces could never have been published.(^)

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