

WHAT'S "NEW" ABOUT THE "NEW WOMAN"? ANOTHER LOOK AT THE REPRESENTATION OF THE NEW WOMAN IN VICTORIAN PERIODICALS

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In a *Westminster Review* article on "The Evolution of the Sex" in April 1895 A.G.P. Sykes claimed that it was not possible "to read a review, a magazine or a newspaper, without being continually reminded of the subject which lady-writers call the Woman Question. 'The Eternal Feminine,' the 'Revolt of the Daughters,' the Woman's Volunteer Movement, Women's Clubs,'" he wrote, "are significant expressions and effective landmarks" (396). Another significant expression and landmark in the mid 1890s was, of course, the New Woman. Writing in the *Humanitarian* in 1896, Mrs Morgan-Dockrell asserted that "the close of the nineteenth century marks an epoch of social revolutions" (339), and claimed that among these social revolutions "immeasurably the first in importance, the most abounding in potentialities and in common interests" was the "new woman" (340).

It is well known that the periodical and newspaper press played an important part in the construction and mediation of the New Woman. Indeed, according to some contemporary commentators the New Woman was, in the words of Elizabeth Rachel Chapman, a "journalistic myth," an "invention" produced by and giving rise to an "interminable flood of gaseous chatter" (xiii); she was, in short, a "figment of the journalistic imagination" (Morgan-Dockrell 340). Even worse, according to the *Speaker* for 13 April 1895, she was—along with the new criticism and the new poetry—"more or less, the creature[s] of Mr Oscar Wilde's fancy" (403). In this essay I want to look again at some aspects of the journalistic construction of the New Woman and also at recent scholarship on this construction. In particular I want to reconsider the naming of the New Woman, to re-examine some of the claims that were made for and about her, and also to speculate on some of the effects of the emphasis on the "New" in New Woman.

In an interesting and thought-provoking article in *Victorian Periodicals Review* in 1998 Michelle Elizabeth Tusan revised Ellen Jordan's dating of the naming of the New Woman, a dating which has been widely accepted since 1983 when Jordan's essay on "The Christening of the New Woman: May 1894" first appeared in *Victorian Newsletter*. Tusan takes the baptismal act away from Sarah Grand and Ouida in the pages of the *North American Review* in 1894 and relocates it in the pages of a feminist periodical dated 17 August 1893, and then uses this new point of origin as the basis for an argument about the New Woman as a site of contest between the feminist press and the mainstream press. Tusan writes:

It was . . . in the pages of the fin-de-siecle [sic] feminist press that [the New Woman] was first invented as a fictional icon to represent the political woman of the coming century. The feminist version of the

New Woman was not the mannish and overly sexualized New Woman popularized in novels and mainstream periodicals of the 1890s but a symbol of a new political identity that promised to improve and reform English society. . . . An attempt to create a respectable image for political women through the invention of the identity of the New Woman took place in the women's press from 1893 until 1897. Simultaneously, a counter-image of the New Woman as a dystopic vision of a society gone wrong was promoted by the mainstream press. (167)

I will return to the broader argument about the contest between the feminist and the mainstream press later. For the moment I want to focus on Tusan's concern with origins. Tusan insists from the outset that the New Woman label originates in the women's press: "*After her introduction in the women's press as a symbol of the woman reformer, the New Woman made her first appearance in the mainstream press*" (170, emphasis added). According to Tusan, the crucial event of naming occurred in the pages of the *Woman's Herald*: "*The Woman's Herald's 'The Social Standing of the New Woman' marked the first time that the term New Woman with the imposing capital letters first appeared in a periodical*" (170). In fact in the edition of the journal that I have seen it is not the "imposing capital letters" which mark out the New Woman in this article in the *Woman's Herald*: all of the letters in the phrase "SOCIAL STANDING OF THE 'NEW WOMAN'" are capitalised because it is a title for one of several short paragraphs reporting on the papers given at an American Women's Rights Congress. The typographical point to note about this section heading is that "New Woman" appears—as she often does in contemporary usage—in quotation marks. The practice of containing the term New Woman inside quotation marks has the effect of ironising it, or converting it into a scare term or a term of abuse, or alternatively to signal that the user of the quotation marks is answering back against those who would either praise or (more usually) denigrate the New Woman.

It is interesting to note that in the article in the *Woman's Herald* the subheading "SOCIAL STANDING OF THE 'NEW WOMAN'" stands at the head of a paragraph giving a verbatim report of a section of a speech by a Mr Ham on "Woman," a speech, which in many respects could have been written about the aspirations of at least a significant minority of middle-class British women (and perhaps a larger minority of Americans) at more or less any point after the mid 1850s:

The woman's movement of this age is the most momentous event that has ever disturbed the sleep of the conservative. Without warning woman suddenly appears on the scene of man's activities, as a sort of new creation, and demands a share in the struggles, the responsibilities, and the honours of the world, in which, until now she has been a cipher. And the main proof of her worthiness, of her right to equal freedom with man is found in the obstacles she has already overcome. I confess I do not care to speculate about the social

standing of the new woman. If she has the industry and perseverance to educate herself, she will have the wisdom to create and the moral courage to maintain a more elevated social status than the world has hitherto known. (410)

Thus it would appear that, for what it is worth, the honour of naming the New Woman in her capitalised form must still go to Ouida, the eccentric penner of racy novels. Ouida, as is well-known, first used the capitalised form in her response to Sarah Grand's article on the uncapitalised "new woman," "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," in which Grand had characterised the new woman as one who has been "sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's Sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (271). Ouida's response to Grand took as its starting point the assumption that there was nothing new about the New Woman:

It can scarcely be disputed, I think, that in the English language there are conspicuous at the present moment two words which designate two unmitigated bores: The Workingman and the Woman. The Workingman and the Woman, the New Woman be it remembered, meet us at every page of literature written in the English tongue; and each is convinced that on its own especial W hangs the future of the world. (610)

Ouida's contention that the New Woman is so omnipresent in the pages of literature that she is already a bore may simply be a rhetorical strategy designed to dispel the drama of Grand's announcement of the awakening of the slumbering leviathan of the woman's movement. However, even if it is designed to have such an effect, it would also seem to imply that Ouida expects the readers of a general interest magazine (and not just the female readers of the feminist press) to be familiar with the New Woman. Indeed the extent to which Ouida's intervention in the New Woman debate takes it as read that the New Woman will be recognised by her readers as a particular form of representation can be seen in her reference to the "engraving in an illustrated journal" that lies before her as she writes; a representation of a meeting in favour of votes for women:

The speaker is middle-aged and plain of feature; she wears an inverted plate on her head tied on with strings under her double chin; she has balloon sleeves, a bodice tight to bursting, a waist of ludicrous dimensions in proportion to her portly person; she is gesticulating with one hand, of which all the fingers are stuck out in ungraceful defiance of all artistic laws of gesture. (613)

A similar sense that the New Woman is already a *femme passée* in 1894 is conveyed in *Woman* for September 12 1894. In "About New Women: A Chat with Mr Sydney Grundy," "A Girl About Town" writes: "Thanks to the success of Mr Grundy's play . . .

the New Woman seems to have taken a new lease of life. She was dying from sheer exhaustion; being worked to death by essayists, novelists, and facetious journalists and caricaturists, without whom she would never have been discovered in the first instance" (8).

Although Ouida was not alone in employing a rhetoric of boredom to suggest that there was nothing new about the New Woman whom she has been credited with naming, other contenders for the title of christener-of-the-New Woman insist on her Newness or novelty. Grand, for example, employs a discourse of emergence to figure the slumbering body of women awaking from its pupa-like state to burst upon the scene:

Women were awaking from their long apathy, and, as they awoke, like healthy, hungry children unable to articulate, they began to whimper for they knew not what. They might have been easily satisfied at that time, had not society, like an ill-conditioned and ignorant nurse, instead of finding out what they lacked, shaken and beaten them and stormed at them until what was once a little wail became convulsive shrieks and roused up the whole human household. (271)

If Grand employs a discourse of emergence, Mr Ham's speech, as reported in the *Woman's Herald*, employs a discourse of rupture: "Without warning woman suddenly appears on the scene of man's activities as a new sort of creation" (410).

But, of course, there had been plenty of warning of women's awakening, much of it voiced in the Victorian periodical press. For example, as early as 1855 Margaret Oliphant had reminded the readers of *Blackwood's* of the way in which a new kind of woman had burst upon the fictional scene with the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847: "Suddenly there stole on the scene . . . a little fierce incendiary, doomed to turn the world of fancy upside down," one who "broke its boundaries, and defied its principles," and instigated "the most alarming revolution of modern times" (557). *Jane Eyre*, Oliphant claimed (with the benefit of several years' hindsight), was "the new generation nailing its colours to its mast," and she expressed retrospective surprise that "no one would understand that this furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the 'Rights of Woman' in a new aspect" (557). Similar claims about the fictional consequences of the awakening of women were made in many other reviews in the periodical press of novels written by women, and especially in reviews of the sensation novel in the 1860s. Indeed a very early example of the phrase New Woman in capitalised form appeared in the "*Belles Lettres*" section of the *Westminster Review* in October 1865 in which the author (John R de C. Wise, according to *Wellesley*) described the new heroine of the sensation novel. Like her later incarnation, this New Woman is also associated with turning the natural and domestic order upside down: "The New Woman, as we read of her in recent novels, possesses not only the velvet, but the claws of the tiger. She is no longer the Angel, but the Devil in the House . . . Man proposes, woman disposes, is the new proverb" (568). It is interesting to note that the same issue of the *Westminster Review* also included essays on such New Womanish

topics as personal representation (by Helen Taylor), and the capacities of women—mainly on Frances Power Cobbe (by F.W. Newman).

Another earlier sign of woman's appearance "on the scene of man's activities" was the rise and proliferation of a serious woman's press during the four decades preceding the naming of the New Woman: *Waverley* (in various incarnations from 1856) and *English Woman's Journal* in the 1850s; *Victoria Magazine*, *Alexandra Magazine* and *Englishwoman's Review* in the 1860s; the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, the *Shield*, the *Woman's Gazette*, and the *Women's Union Journal* in the 1870s; and in the 1880s the *Gatherer*, *Pioneer* and the *Women's Penny Paper*. Other warnings of the emergence of a new kind of woman were to be found in abundance in the pages of the mainstream periodical press: in the satirical essays on the modern woman in the *Saturday Review* in the 1860s (most notably in Eliza Lynn Linton's "The Girl of the Period"); in periodical articles and novels about Girton Girls in the 1880s; and in *Punch's* long campaign against various species of New Women. As early as 1863, for example, a reviewer in the *Christian Remembrancer* was recalling the "former times" before "*Punch's* generation of 'fast young ladies' were born" (209).

In other words, from at least the late 1840s, commentators on modern British life and letters were addressing issues of modernity through their focus on woman and particularly the new kind of woman. Why was it then that so much emphasis was placed on the newness of the New Woman in the 1890s, and why was so much ink spilled in attempting to define, own, or contest that newness? In order to try to answer these questions I will return, first of all, to the naming of the New Woman in the pages of the *North American Review*. In "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" Grand engaged—as Tusan implies—with the dystopic version of the New Woman found in the *Saturday Review*, *Punch* and elsewhere, arguing that the present trouble with women, gender relations and press representations of them "is not because women are mannish, but because men grow ever more effeminate" (275). In her *North American Review* article Grand saw the solution to society's problems, and especially to the man problem, as lying in the hands of the New Woman. Grand's New Woman, however, looks very much like the old one: she is a kind of Ruskinian super good-housekeeper, a mythic construct who will "set the human household in order" and "see to it that all is clean and sweet and comfortable for the men who are fit to help us make home in it" (276). Interestingly Mary Ward—another new kind of woman with a very complex position on the New Woman—was still using the same terms in 1910, when she was quoted in an article on the anti-suffrage demonstration in the *Times* (July 14) as describing women's civic duties as the "enlarged housekeeping of the nation" (9).

Unlike Grand, Ouida named the New Woman in order to mock her (as well as to mock both Grand's vision of her and Grand's grammar and turn of phrase). Ouida's New Woman is less myth than menace, a caricature of self-important extremism: "The 'Scum-woman' and the 'Cow-woman,'" to quote [Grand's] elegant phrasology "are both of them less of a menace to humankind than the New Woman with her fierce vanity, her undigested knowledge, her over-weening estimate of her own value and her fatal want of all sense of the ridiculous" (615). Interestingly, to modern eyes Ouida's

vision of the woman of the future looks quite radical compared with Grand's vision of the super housekeeper of the family of man:

Woman, whether new or old, has immense fields of culture untilled, immense areas of influence wholly neglected. She does almost nothing with the resources she possesses, because her whole energy is concentrated on desiring and demanding those she has not. She can write and print anything she chooses; and she scarcely ever takes pains to acquire correct grammar or elegance of style before wasting ink and paper. She can paint and model any subjects she chooses, but she imprisons herself in men's *ateliers* to endeavour to steal their technique and their methods, and thus loses any originality she might possess. (613)

Ouida goes on to decry women's abdication of their influence over the education of children (by putting it into the hands of school boards or governesses and tutors, depending on their class), and to bemoan their failure to set an example on animal welfare issues (by wearing fur and feathers). It is, to say the least, rather ironic that a writer who is usually regarded as anti-feminist and conservative on women's issues in this particular instance seems to be attacking the New Woman—Grand's beacon of progressiveness—in terms which suggest that she is not progressive enough. In this respect Ouida's rhetoric is echoed by some recent cultural historians: Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey for example, who have written about the role played by middle-class women in producing and reproducing bourgeois hegemony. Ouida, like Armstrong and Poovey, perhaps endows middle-class women with more social and economic power, and ideological influence than they actually possessed.

The contest between the "feminist" and the "anti-feminist" novelist over the meaning of the newly named New Woman enacted in the pages of the *North American Review* in the Spring of 1894 was re-enacted in the pages of the periodical press throughout the nineties, and to some extent it is still being re-enacted in current debates about the New Woman's history, identity and meaning. This contest has in part been played out over the question of who and whose is or was the "real" New Woman, and just how "New" she was. When they wrote in more general interest or mainstream periodicals rather than in feminist periodicals or journals specifically for women, those nineteenth-century writers who sympathised with the cause of modern woman tended to invoke a journalistic "phantom" of the New Woman from which they could distance themselves in order to reinstate their own version of the New Woman; this often turned out to be a modernised version of the womanly woman. The journalistic phantom tended to be the fictional New Woman as mediated through the press debate about the New Woman fiction, and such examples of the emancipated woman as the "Wild Women," "Shrieking Sisterhood" and "Revolting Daughters" who filled the pages of the *Nineteenth Century* and *Fortnightly Review* in the early 1890s.

Thus Mrs M Eastwood, writing in the *Humanitarian* in 1894, sought to distinguish between "The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact," between the supremely

adaptive New Woman who was “a positive and tangible fact” and was “altogether otherwise” to the fictional “creation of the hyperbolically emancipated woman’s riotous imagination” (376). The Real New Woman, the “abiding” New Woman, or what Grand and others labelled the “True” Woman, was concerned, Eastwood claimed, “with nothing less than the reformation of the entire male sex” and with the reformation of “the weak and foolish sisters who have obstinately remained behind in their crumbling preserves” (376). Elizabeth Rachel Chapman similarly found it “necessary sharply to emphasize the distinction” between the “phantom” or “journalistic myth known as the ‘New Woman’” and “the real reformer and friend of her sex and of humanity, whom I would call the ‘Best Woman’” (xiii). Emma Churchman Hewitt was also concerned with the differences between the constructed New Woman and the abiding new woman in her 1897 *Westminster Review* essay on “The ‘New Woman’ in her relation to the ‘New Man’”:

Everybody today has a fling at the “New Woman,” as though she were a product *per se*, but, “The “new woman” with her independence, her clearly defined ideas of right and wrong, her knowledge of the world, and her superior education, is far better fitted to be the mother of noble men than the “old” woman with her narrow environments and her knowledge, which went little beyond household love. The “advanced” woman of today is miscalled “new”. She is as old as the days of Delilah. (337)

Writers in the women’s press, on the other hand, constructed the New Woman in opposition to both the “self-styled ‘womanly women,’” and upholders of “old-fashioned prejudices and worn-out creeds” (May 268), and the fictional New Woman. However, there seems little to choose between the way in which the women’s press and the “mainstream” periodical press represent the Ruskinian “true” new woman, as is evident if one compares the above quotations from Grand, Eastwood and Churchman Hewitt with the following extracts from articles by Frances Willard and Austin May in the *Woman’s Herald*:

“A true woman carries home with her everywhere. . . . Home is but the efflorescence of woman’s nature under the nurture of Christ’s Gospel. She came into the college and elevated it; into literature, and hallowed it; into the business world, and ennobled it. She will come into government, and purify it; into politics, and cleanse its Stygian pool (Willard 3).

Those women who have neither the inclination, the courage, nor the capacity to leave the beaten track of old-fashioned prejudices and worn-out creeds, are inclined to condemn their more courageous sisters as “unwomanly” . . . [but] a truer type of woman is springing up in our midst, combining the “sweet, domestic grace” of the bygone

days with a wide-minded interest in things outside her own immediate circle, extending her womanly influence to the world that so sadly needs the true woman's touch to keep it all that true woman would have it. (May 268)

There is little, if anything, in these extracts that could not be found in the writings of members of the Langham Place circle in the 1850s and 1860s.

Some recent scholarship has focused on the contest over the provenance and meaning of the New Woman in terms of the journalistic context in which she appears, reading this contest in terms of a struggle between the women's or feminist press and the mainstream press (as Elizabeth Tusan does), or in terms of a struggle within the feminist press between different generations of feminists (as Barbara Caine does). However, as Ann Ardis, Sally Ledger and I have demonstrated elsewhere, wherever she appears, and whoever is naming her, the New Woman was and remains a highly contradictory construct. The naming of the New Woman was an attempt to fix and own (or disown) a very unstable and contested figure. The New Woman was (and remains) a contradictory and mobile figure or signifier. This mobility was sometimes quite literal, since when she wasn't hallowing and elevating the home, literature, the college or business; or cleansing Stygian stables of various kinds; or smoking and vamping her way through the drawing rooms of England; or suffering from a hysterical breakdown, the New Woman was careering around on a bicycle. The New Woman was simultaneously, or by turns, a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was over-sexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial super-mother; she was male-identified or man-hating and/or man-eating, or she was the self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic, or alternatively she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was a timeless and unchanging figure; she was the agent of social and/ or racial regeneration, or a symptom and agent of decline. Whatever she was the New Woman was always in the process of being constructed in relation to some other concept of femininity, of which she herself was constitutive.

It is undoubtedly the case that journalistic representations and discussion of the New Woman and the Modern Girl were central to the struggles between feminists and their opponents, to the struggles within feminism (and especially between different generations of feminists), and to broader struggles and conflicts within the culture at large in the nineties. It is equally undoubtedly the case that there was nothing new about that. The figure of the Woman (True, Real, Abiding, New, advanced, "un-" or mannish) and the girl ("of the period," True, modern, new, Girton, or in her guise of revolting daughter) had (to mis-appropriate Tusan's words on the New Woman) "emerged as a contested terrain over which competing cultural values were negotiated" quite early in Victoria's reign. What, then, is at stake in the discourse of novelty within which debates about women were embedded in the 1890s? As Mrs Morgan-Dockrell pointed out in 1896, the New Woman was merely one of a range of ostensibly disparate cultural and political phenomena heralding the "New Era": "That very word "new" strikes as it were the dominant note of present-day thought, present-day effort and aspiration. It sounds

out from every quarter. The new art, the new fiction, the new journalism, the new humour, the new criticism, the new hedonism, the new morality" (339). In 1894, as well as continuing its campaign against the New Woman, *Punch* had jokes about the New Humour, the New Journalism, the New Art and a poem on "The New Newness".

Of course newness, news, and novelty sells newspapers and periodicals. Indeed it sells lots of things, as Walter Benjamin pointed out in his study of Baudelaire:

Novelty is a quality which does not depend on the use-value of the commodity. It is the source of the illusion which belongs inalienably to the images which the collective unconscious engenders. It is the quintessence of false consciousness of which fashion is the tireless agent. This illusion of novelty is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the illusion of infinite sameness. . . . Just as in the seventeenth century allegory becomes the canon of dialectical imagery, so in the nineteenth century does *nouveauté*. And the newspapers march shoulder to shoulder with the *magasins de nouveauté*. (172)

As well as throwing light on the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with the New Newness, and on the modern journalistic culture of novelty, the naming, claiming, and blaming of the New Woman gives an interesting perspective on what would appear to be a perennial problem for feminism: the problem that Sally Alexander has described (borrowing a term from psychoanalysis) as "repetition." In "Feminism: History: Repetition," Alexander points out that not only are "so many of the discontents of feminism . . . repeated again and again even in the same vocabulary as far back as the seventeenth century" (244), but also that "if there is repetition in the discontents, there's repetition too in the patterns of the women's movement's demise" (245). This process of repetition can be observed in the process of naming and defining the New Woman in the 1890s. In the discourse of the New, of emergence, of appearance without warning, the woman's movement is always in the process of being born and never growing up, it is always appearing from nowhere in a cyclical pattern of forgetfulness. The woman's movement thus becomes just one of the "Phases and Crazes" of woman that Lady Jeune reviewed in the "Old and New Century" Number of the *Gentlewoman* in January 1901:

Some decades later saw the birth of another female development, but the New Woman took herself much more seriously [than the 'bloomer']. . . . Her mission was a complete reversal of the law of the sexes. . . . The New woman made a great deal of noise and attracted much attention. We were told that the whole structure of society was to be shaken to its foundations. . . . The New woman has, however, had her day, and has disappeared. (10)

This discourse of the new, of emergence, and the pattern of forgetfulness, offered (and still offers) both an opportunity and a threat for women in general and for feminists in particular. On the one hand the idea of the new signals a break with the

past and a new beginning, but, on the other hand, it signals the ephemeral, and the transitory, and it can all too easily be drained of political efficacy by being re-absorbed into a culture of novelty. Thus, although the discourse of emergence and the cycle of forgetfulness offer the opportunity for new beginnings and for constant reinvention, it has been very problematic for feminism which has sometimes given the appearance of having to do the political equivalent of reinventing the wheel in every generation since the late-eighteenth century; repeating old debates in new terms and replaying old dramas in new costumes, representing the old woman as the new woman and *vice versa*. In the nineteenth century (as in our own time) these dramas and debates were, perhaps, overdetermined by their conditions of production in the newspaper and periodical press.

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