

Pressing the Public: Nineteenth-Century Feminist Periodicals and “the Press”

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“It is both interesting and instructive to know to some extent how the woman’s cause is treated of in the newspaper press. Journalists are no more than human, and are so often in the wrong: but even if their ideas are wrong-headed or not properly informed, there is still much value in seeing how we are represented or understood.”

— “Our Cause and the Press.” *Woman’s Signal*, (14 Nov 1895).

“Real power lies in the power of knowing what others can tell you, and of making your own voice heard. A real democracy is a nation in which the characteristic opinions and feelings of every type of citizen find adequate expression, a nation also in which all men have the faculty and the opportunity of listening to such expression. The only real democracy is an actively conscious and self-expressive community. The Press is the mechanism of this self-expression . . .”

— R.A. Scott-James, *The Influence of the Press*, (p).

<1> Victorians actively debated the influence of the newspaper and periodical press, in publications ranging from the popular press to prestigious reviews. While studies such as Aled Jones’ *Powers of the Press* (1996) and Mark Hampton’s *Visions of the Press* (2004), or collections such as Andrew King’s and John Plunkett’s *Victorian Print Media: A Reader* (2005) have contributed to the recovery and analysis of related documents and the implications of these debates for a history of print media, limited attention has been paid to the ways in which women’s progressive periodicals engaged in overt and strategic ways with these debates – monitoring, evaluating, even exploiting the mainstream press of the day. It is not the function of the women’s periodical press per se that is my focus here, but rather how feminist periodicals operated in relation to the so-called “Public Press.” The press was quite simply the route to that other vaguely defined entity, “the Public.” Much has been made of the proliferation of the periodical press in the period, namely the growing numbers of publications assumed to be serving the interests of increasingly specialized and narrow readerships. But diversification did not imply disengagement from public discourse; new publications situated themselves in relation to the wider press and public in deliberate and reflexive ways. While the feminist or campaign-based publications often defined their relationship to the established press in antagonistic terms, they nevertheless seized on favourable coverage as a measure of the efficacy of their work. This

tension (between criticism and validation) underscores the degree of influence “the Press” was credited with having, even though its very status and reliability as a gauge of public opinion had been under attack since the early decades of the century. What I would like to highlight is how analyses of the Press – as implied or directly stated in nineteenth-century women’s newspapers – offer valuable and generally ignored interventions and insights into the larger debates about the influence and changing face of the press at the time. By exposing distortions and omissions in press coverage and practices, feminist journals encouraged a critical perspective on current sources of news and information and, in doing so, they were also redefining who constituted the public and what it needed to know.

Opening Doors to the Press: the Case of the *Women’s Penny Paper*

<2> Aled Jones’s *Powers of the Press* remains a major contribution to our understanding of the central position the newspaper had come to occupy in the nineteenth century as “an essential reference point in the daily lives of millions of people” (2). He argues that “the manner in which news was read, reflected upon and argued about provides an important means of mapping a hitherto neglected area of the cultural history of the nineteenth century” (3). One of the key conclusions Jones draws from his analysis is that because the argument about the nature and effects of the press took place in public and was conducted on many levels, with a broad scope of social participation, “it also helped to shape a public” (202). It was precisely because of this perceived influence, as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of information and ideas, that the newspaper press became such a crucial point of reference for reform groups and movements struggling to gain visibility and credibility in public debates. For the politically and socially marginalized or disenfranchised, not only was it important to have an organ through which to articulate and communicate ideas, but it was also imperative to engage with what was often referred to in monolithic terms as “the Press” or the “Public Press.”(1) Among the newly constituted readerships who acknowledged and responded to the newspaper as an agent of change were individuals and groups of women whose views were represented through the numerous feminist periodicals emerging in the latter half of the century.(2) It is precisely in this context that feminist reflections and arguments about the Press can provide insights into the social, political and cultural history of the period.

<3> The controversy over the refusal to allow a reporter from the *Women’s Penny Paper* into the parliamentary press gallery in 1890 offers a useful illustration of the ways in which women used journalism to attempt to access and participate in the political sphere in practical and symbolic ways. Before turning to the incident, it is worth considering how the paper (which described itself as “The only paper in the world conducted, written, printed and published by women”) positioned itself when it first appeared in October 1888. From the outset the *Women’s Penny Paper* was committed to broad coverage of news and events both in general terms and as they pertained more specifically to the advancement of women. It announced its policy on its first front page as “progressive,” its goal “to supply our readers with general English and Foreign News in such a way as to place before them the leading questions of the day in plain and concise language, so that those busy women who have not leisure to read the daily papers may so far acquaint themselves with the important events of the day, as to be able to form and express their opinion upon them” (“Our Policy” 1).(3) It opened its pages “to the working woman as freely as

to the educated lady; to the conservative and the radical, to the Englishwoman and the foreigner,” claiming for women “a full share of power with all its duties, responsibilities and privileges in public and private life” (“Our Policy” 1).

<4> The statement of “Our Policy” also situated the paper in journalistic terms, rejecting the “sensationalism” and gratuitous depiction of crime in the “Press of to-day” and “inaugurating a new feature in journalism” (1). This innovation is defined more specifically in relation to “women’s papers” which are described as having been too conservative, timid, and mechanical in spirit so far, “dread[ing] nothing more than leaving the grooves already formed” (1). Assessing their contribution to date, the article maintains “women’s papers have done good . . . But the time of experiment and apology is past,” claiming there has been “as yet no bold and fearless exponent of the woman’s cause in the Press who grasps her nettle and seeks only to speak without fear of consequences” (1). In these ways, it set out to be bold in tone, inclusive in appeal, and comprehensive in subject matter.

<5> It was its interest in addressing the political questions of the day that led the *Women’s Penny Paper* to request entry to the reporters’ gallery in order to provide reliable parliamentary coverage, particularly on issues affecting women. The issue was brought to the attention of readers in March 1890 in a brief account of the request. The article quotes the written reply of the Sergeant at Arms, K. D. Erskine, who claimed it was “impossible for [him] to comply” because he had “no authority to admit any ladies into the Reporters’ Gallery” and the gallery was already “quite filled,” noting a waiting list of applicants in the event of a vacancy (“Women in the Reporters’ Gallery” 242). The report supplies details of a subsequent conversation in which Mr. Erskine assured the representative he was acting on “instructions,” not “personal feeling” but he thought the male journalists would “much resent their intrusion, and he was afraid that the consequent outcry would be terrific.” In “Parliamentary Jottings” (reporting from “Outside the Press Gallery”) the following week, the Speaker of the House is reported to have claimed that “there was no order of the House against a lady being admitted” (255). The coverage of the incident took up considerably more space in the following weeks as the topic of editorials, correspondence, and feature articles outlining the “opinions” of a wide range of groups including: parliamentary men, press men, leading clergy, distinguished men, the Press, the Press Gallery, and distinguished women. This case encapsulates many of the strategies and tensions characteristic of more general attempts to engage the press.

<6> The editorial “Women in the Press Gallery” offers the clearest statement of how the *Women’s Penny Paper* framed this event and underscored the significance of “the fact that public opinion is intensely sensitive on the subjects of Woman and the Press.” The editorial goes on to analyze these two “Terms” and bears quoting at length:

It is because, in the person of our unpretentious representative, Woman, has for the first time, knocked at the *official* door of the Press and requested admission, that all this flutter has been created. Anyone who watches the newspapers day to day, as they grasp and work a new set of facts, making, marring, creating and destroying, now acting almost like a god in power and beneficence, then again like a demon of destruction, must be profoundly impressed with the suppleness and sensitiveness of the Press. We do not expect that the door to this august body,

as typified by the Press Gallery, will be opened to us at our first approach, but we shall try again . . . (258)

Acknowledging the support and advice from friends in the press, the editorial identifies the main point as having been achieved by the “*refusal*” of the Sergeant-at-Arms, stressing that his refusal was directed not to the representative of the paper per se, but “to her *as a woman* . . . It is not the newspaper, big or little, that has been refused; it is the Woman and the Woman will knock again—a little louder next time.” In response to objections based on the size of the *Women’s Penny Paper* or the fact that they could consult Hansard for parliamentary reports, the article outlines why direct access to the gallery mattered and provides a more general critique of the mainstream press:

The reports in Hansard are, we believe, *not verbatim*, and in no daily paper are questions of special interest and importance to women reported as fully as they certainly would be in a woman’s paper. Only women know to their bitter cost, how little they can learn from the reports in the *Dailies* of debates on their particular questions. . . . All great interests, and all political movements, of any importance whatever, have their own organ . . . (258)

Using the example of women’s suffrage, the editor describes reports in the “*Times* or any other *Daily*” as “bald and uninformative,” leaving women (like Oliver Twist) “hungry” for more. The piece concludes: “Under these circumstances it is not strange that women begin to feel like reporting themselves.”

<7> The *Women’s Penny Paper* ran follow-up coverage for the next four weeks, soliciting as well as reprinting a variety of reactions. The incident was obviously reported on in numerous publications given the pages of extracts ranging from the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Evening Standard* to the *Newcastle Daily Leader* and *Bristol Times* and generated a variety of opinions from the groups noted above (press, clergy, men and women of note). The refusal to allow a woman journalist into the Press Gallery had become a rallying point for supporters and opponents of women’s rights. One commentator concludes: “In fighting the battle of the reporter’s privileges, the *Women’s Penny Paper* will be fighting for the greater question still, i.e. the abolition of monopoly, and selfish assumption by one sex, of power that Nature declares both sexes should equally share” (“Women in the Press Gallery” 293). The confinement of women “shut off by iron bars” in the “Ladies’ Cage” in the House of Commons, compared with the Reporters’ Gallery, came to embody these institutionalized inequalities (“Women in the Press Gallery” 375).

<8> The coverage reveals important assumptions about the “terms” of this conflict and the very use of upper case letters and italics foregrounds the conscious positioning of Woman as a collective identity and the Press as a powerful and exclusionary institution. Here, as elsewhere in the feminist press of the period, we encounter the recognition and articulation of a women’s movement (likened to other social movements) and the role of publications which function in necessary ways as alternative media, providing information not found elsewhere. Some years earlier, Amelia Lewis introduced her journal *Woman* to the “British Public” with the bold claim that “Woman has had no representation as a *Class*, has had no public voice as a *Class*, has had no

means of education as a *Class*, but has been deemed sufficiently provided for in our social system by being acted *for* by man” (“Editorial” 1). We see a clear attempt to expose what was regarded as the problem of media privilege – a perspective that should be of interest to all media historians but which we can only gain by looking at those groups operating outside the sphere of privilege.

<9> Related to this are the criticisms persisting well into the twentieth century of media distortion – both in terms of *what* newspapers reported and *how*. The questions of visibility and representation help account for the emergence and persistence of a feminist press. Reflecting back on her reasons for starting the *Women’s Penny Paper*, Henrietta Muller would later explain: “One of the things that always humiliated me very much was the way in which women’s interests and opinions were systematically excluded from the World’s Press . . . I realised of what vital importance it was that women should have a newspaper of their own through which to voice their thoughts” (“Interview” 916). The degree of effort and financial risk that went into producing papers and attempting to gain the attention of the wider press and public was predicated on the assumption that attitudes and norms would change once representative views could be brought to bear on questions of the day.

<10> The scope implied in phrases such as “questions of the day” or “questions of special interest and importance to women” deserves to be both clarified and emphasized. There are dangers associated with regarding the feminist press solely in terms of a “separate” or specialized press, a problem reinforced by the fact that its treatment in the scholarship can be attributed mainly to feminist and gender work in history and literary studies. What is too often overlooked in approaches which presuppose the specialist nature of these periodicals is the extent to which they were appealing to readerships and interacting with other media beyond their immediate constituencies. Ann Ardis points to the “external dialogics” of magazines which she defines as “their discursive exchanges with other print media” (38). I posit the term “publicist orientation” to capture both the appeal to a public readership and to other media.⁽⁴⁾ John Nerone highlights the practice of exchange lists between American newspapers and argues that editors of early alternative media may have “understood that most of their audience was not their own readers” and that “a healthy exchange list enabled an editor to speak to a national audience while pretending to speak to one’s own readers” (24).⁽⁵⁾ The point is that nineteenth-century feminists were not just communicating with one another; in fact they had no choice but to address “the public” and the wider sphere of male decision-making. The issues which interested and affected them included everything from social policy and legal reform, to education, work, and war. The implications of the “woman question” permeated all aspects of private and public life. As Barbara Caine reminds us, “these women contributed to the broad arguments surrounding the ‘woman question’, but they connected that question with other intellectual currents and they also brought women’s voices to bear on many different social, political and cultural questions (102).

Appealing to Press and Public: Strategies of Engagement

<11> The *Women’s Penny Paper* provides a particularly compelling example of the tactics of the feminist press in these years but it was by no means an isolated case. Similar concerns shaped the features and coverage of other publications. Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston

stress the public function of the *English Woman's Journal* : “Its primary role was to enable public discussion about the conditions in which women lived and worked, providing a space for both women and men to legitimately explore and re-imagine the role of women in society in relation to principles of social justice” (152). Janice Schroeder offers a more detailed account of how the *English Woman's Journal* was willing to take risks by participating in “a diverse periodical culture through a variety of print conversations” in order to influence public opinion on issues concerning women (244). It is reasonable to apply these observations and analyses to other campaign-based and general feminist journals which positioned themselves in the ever-widening terrain of print media, often distinguishing themselves from “women’s papers” on the market.

<12> Feminist periodicals are highly reflexive in this sense; the editors explain and justify their reasons for producing and sustaining these papers, often acknowledging how impractical this may seem in light of the proliferation of publications at the time. The first issue of *Woman* in 1887 justified its appearance by noting:

It has also been said, that there are so many papers for women. True, there are plenty of pictorial prints, with a letter-press scarcely robust enough to satisfy the intellectual appetite of the youngest of jeunes filles. Several societies have their own organs, and there are not a few journals of a domestic character; but what seems to us to be wanting is a weekly newspaper that will chronicle the various phases of the onward movement . . . Women are taking a much larger share in the world’s work than has ever been known. (“To Our Readers” 4)(6)

Similar claims continued into the next century. The *Women's Tribune* announced:

Another new paper! Hardly needed, some will say, when the dailies and the weeklies and the monthlies jostle each other, overlay and smother each other on the bookstalls . . . Yet surely there is a need among those women who desire the broadening and deepening of life . . . for a paper more adequate to the fulfillment of these ideals than any that exists at present. . . . No thoughtful woman can be satisfied with the position of women with regard to general journalism. Well qualified and competent writers are put aside or are asked for inferior work, and many matters which vitally concern women are not admitted into general journalism at all, or are discussed with a most undesirable flippancy. . . . ‘Why not have a special man’s paper?’ say some. When women are judges, Prime Ministers, barristers, juries, generals, soldiers, sailors, and candlestick-makers, that may very likely be necessary.” (“The Women’s Tribune” 4)

These examples underscore the relationship between women and the field of journalism more generally, both as subjects and as professionals.

<13> The *Women's Penny Paper* was also not the only paper to criticize the conservative and timid nature of the weeklies and monthlies targeted at women. Feminist periodicals distinguished themselves from magazines targeted at women, and were often openly critical of those publications or of the belittling assumptions informing the content of “women’s pages” in newspapers. Amelia Lewis ridiculed these elements:

‘A LITTLE gossip for the ladies.’ That is what an ordinary middle-class periodical, should it be ambitious of extending its circulation [to the weaker sex] thinks it is necessary to include within its table of contents. ‘A little gossip for the ladies! Yes, they are not interested in what interests man—in politics, literature, intellectual fruit of any kind; let them have something that shall be suited to them as a plaything that pleases a child; give them a column full of gossip.’ So do wise editors argue; and, supported by its titillating tittle-tattle, their journal becomes popular. (“Woman and Gossip” 313)

For some, the lack of adequate representation was not only a betrayal of women, but also of the men who made up the public. The first issue of *Women & Progress* declared: “There is no question that the attitude of the majority of the daily Press is a gross breach of faith with their readers. The public expects news from them, not misrepresentation. Men buy a daily paper to learn what is going on. To conceal or misrepresent what is going on is to obtain money under false pretences” (“The Press” 1). Feminist criticisms and impatience with these tendencies in the press are evidence that “women’s pages” and the bulk of women’s papers did not reflect the interests and concerns of all women at the time. They must also inform how we read and interpret that press now.

<14> The point is worth stressing in light of the disproportionate emphasis in general histories of the press and collections of nineteenth-century media on fashion, family, and domestic publications for women. Such emphasis is presumably the product of accepting views generated at the time that news and politics were undesirable, even inappropriate, subjects for women – what Laurel Brake terms the “normalized exclusion of women from politics of the period” (106) – rather than understanding that these very issues constituted sites of struggle at the time. This is why the distinction between a women’s press and a feminist press is so important, and why the recovery of feminist critiques of the Press is necessary to expanding the scope and terms of debates about press history.

<15> These prevailing narratives often inform the selection and framing of documents reproduced from the period. To use one example, the *Victorian Print Media* reader consciously attempts to represent “women’s” voices, including pieces such as Charlotte O’Connor Eccles’s account of being a woman journalist in a man’s world and Evelyn March-Phillipps’s “Women’s Newspapers” from the *Fortnightly Review*.⁽⁷⁾ In the case of March-Phillipps, the editors foreground what they see as her suggestion that “while providing a welcome focus on women’s lives, [women’s newspapers] were nevertheless inspired by consumer culture’s promotion of an ideal femininity” (King and Plunkett 366). March-Phillipps is indeed critical of the extent to which so many publications devoted excessive attention to fashion and advertisement, but she is critical in the spirit of the journals noted above; the survey of “frivolous” publications comes by way of revealing what the more serious woman seeks. What is excised from the *Victorian Print Reader* in the editorial process are the very sections (namely the last three pages of the original article) where she calls for a publication of substance for women, and singles out *Woman* as a current example of a “clever little paper” capable of offering “thoughtful discussions” (March-Phillipps 668). She also acknowledges how much of significance is left out of the daily press:

No doubt the intellectual woman will habitually turn for her news to the ordinary paper, but the diverse subjects with which she is now specially connected in this country, demand a fuller treatment than the ordinary paper will give them. For instance, the Women Workers' Conference . . . an event of deep interest to hundreds, if not thousands, of women, the general papers scarcely touch upon it. (669)

The type of paper she envisions at the end of the article “would appeal to many who never look at the ordinary fashion-paper” and “would aim at occupying a leading status in the world of women – it would be something more than a mere colourless catalogue of feminine doings and dresses” (670). The effect of King and Plunkett’s editorial choices is to reinforce the all too common impression of women’s publications as superficial and preoccupied with fashion and consumption, here conveniently criticized by a woman journalist. What is lost is how March-Phillips identifies very different constituencies of women readers in the context of a larger argument about the past and potential future of women’s newspapers.

<16> Feminist periodicals published reports on a comprehensive range of events and developments nationally and internationally. The elaborate and systematic work of monitoring the press and publishing extracts is evidence of the variety of publications editors and contributors read or had access to on a regular basis. They operated essentially like early clipping services. The practice manifests itself in different ways, with campaign-based organs targeting very specific statements or news items, while general feminist papers cast a wider net. For instance, *The Shield*, the Anti-Contagious Diseases Acts Associations’ Weekly Circular which appeared in 1870 concerned itself with “diffusing information” related to the Contagious Diseases Acts (“Our Address” 1). Logically, this mandate included reporting on news stories related to incidents involving the arrests of girls and women affected, opinion pieces or articles about the legislation. The features were entitled “Notes on Occurrences,” Intelligence from the Subjected Districts,” “Parliamentary Intelligence,” and “The Press.” These features consisted of extracts or commented on coverage of related issues in a host of publications. Feminist periodicals also monitored the press for comments about themselves. One example is the *Women’s Penny Paper* feature “What Some of Our Contemporaries Say of Us,” but the tendency can be found across the spectrum of publications, functioning like an early citation index and offering useful clues to where and how they were reviewed. These were strategies adopted by the suffrage press as well, particularly into the Edwardian years of the campaign, when the expanded and diverse movement monitored and analyzed the daily press and its practices through the “press work” and “press departments” of various leagues.

<17> General feminist journals generated a good deal of their content by reproducing extracts and commentary on news or feature articles appearing in other print media. The Press itself became a source of news. The *Englishwoman’s Review* ran a regular feature on “Public Opinion on Questions Concerning Women” which consisted of excerpts from publications such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Fraser’s Magazine*, the *Westminster Review*, the *Contemporary Review*, and the *Saturday Review*, as well as dailies such as the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. This was a standard practice in feminist journals and varied mainly in terms of the length of the excerpts and amount or tone of commentary provided. Whether these sources were framed in critical/ironic, favourable, or informational terms also varied between papers and over time. Occasionally they

highlighted significant interventions on the part of the press; in “Out on Strike” the *Women’s Penny Paper* notes that “To the Editors of the *Leeds Mercury* is due the sole credit of having brought this story [of the strike of the Women Weavers at Alverthorpe] before the public, and, as they themselves say, of endeavouring to state the case fairly on every ground” (4). From an historical point of view, the selection and framing of content from the wider press reveals much about what and how they were encouraging subscribers to read.(8)

<18> Women’s periodicals, perhaps not surprisingly, are an important source of information on how women regarded their relationship with the press, as well as women’s contributions to and achievements in journalism. Topics such as women’s newspapers, women and the press, and journalism as a profession for women appeared frequently. The *Women’s Penny Paper* featured regular interviews, many of which focused on women journalists. Implied in some of the coverage of press-related issues was an analysis of trends or styles of journalism. *Women and Work* took issue with an article about the movement to advance women’s work from the *Evening Standard* for its approach as well as its content:

The entire article is penned in the somewhat reckless style that suggests ‘snatching’ at a subject, and bundling together a sufficient number of telling sentences to fill a given space . . . there are thousands who write and speak in an equally ignorant and flippant manner, and thousands who will accept such utterly superficial utterances as those of an oracle, because few people understand how and by whom more than half the leaders of the daily press are supplied. Led by, not leading the people, writers on these journals simply catch up the froth of popular ideas, beat it up with a little spice of smart writing and a reckless admixture of truth and falsehood, and turn it out as something new, and each section of the public devoutly believes in all it reads in its own pet papers. (*Women and Work* 4)

Jones identifies one of the key questions at the time as being “whether the press reflected or created public opinion, whether in its myriad forms it represented shifts in public mood or whether it determined the direction and extent of those discernible changes in popular attitudes” (87). The public role of the press became a major preoccupation for politically engaged women because it had such serious implications for the attitudes they were trying to change and the goals they were working to achieve.

<19> One of the most direct forms of intervention in public debates was the act of placing letters to editors in newspapers. Not only did campaign and general feminist journals reprint important letters that their members or supporters published, but also information about those that were refused publication. The first issue of *The Shield* ran an article entitled “Remonstrance Against the ‘Conspiracy of Silence’” which documents attempts to respond to a letter by Elizabeth Garrett (supporting the Contagious Disease Acts) which had been published some weeks earlier in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Reproduced in *The Shield* is the letter written by Harriet Martineau and Josephine Butler which appeared in the *Leeds Mercury*, the *Western Daily Press* and other newspapers outlining the replies to Garrett’s letter (by Professor Sheldon Amos, Dr. Elliott Bell, and the Rev. Dr. Hooppell) which were “uniformly rejected” by the editor of the *Pall Mall*. The published letter criticizes the London press, stating: “while such a ‘conspiracy of silence’ is possible, and practised among leading journalists, we English greatly exaggerate our privileges

as a free people when we profess to encourage a free press, and to possess the right to hear both sides in a momentous question of morality and legislation” (“Remonstrance” 2). In this case, a single letter was able to register their objections, expose what they believed to be bias, and publicized the incident and analysis in more than one paper at a time. There were no doubt subtexts and rivalries at work at all levels of these kinds of conflicts, but evidence of and access to such critiques of editorial practices are invaluable to “mapping the cultural history” of the nineteenth century.

<20> In spite of reformers’ attempts to demonstrate the unreliability of the public press and redress its omissions and distortions, it remained a barometer of sorts. Feminists had a complex and contradictory relationship to the mainstream press and the constituencies it claimed to represent – hostile and adversarial on one hand, yet a source of validation and measure of success on the other. The *Woman’s Signal*, in a regular feature entitled “Our Cause in the Press,” treats the kinds of extracts, referred to above, more ironically by prefacing them with the following:

It is both interesting and instructive to know to some extent how the woman’s cause is treated of in the newspaper press. Journalists are no more than human, and so are often in the wrong; but even if their ideas are wrong-headed or not properly informed, there is still much value in seeing how we are being represented or understood, while when our brothers represent us generously, or even fairly and justly, it is a source of great satisfaction and encouragement to know it. (340)

It was not unusual to use positive coverage and forms of acknowledgment on the part of the mainstream press as measures of success and signs of progress for campaigns or the women’s movement generally. In an article entitled “Woman’s Debt to the Daily Press” for *Woman’s Signal*, Clara Bewick Colby offers a highly ironic account of how “With but few exceptions the daily press made the early steps of woman’s progress just as arduous and uncomfortable as the possession of its brilliant masculine intellects and the advantage of the situation enabled it to do” (39). After expressing gratitude to the press for forcing women to strengthen themselves in every way, she concludes by noting a shift: “Thus we find [the male newspaper writer] as generously appreciative today as he was scornfully doubtful yesterday, and nothing in the development of humanity is more marked than the change in attitude of the press towards woman. The change is not wholly in woman, but it is in the eyes that look at her that she seems ‘new’.” The assessment is as much about women’s progress as it is about the progress of the press itself.

<21> Monitoring the Press was a way to measure the effectiveness of the women’s movement and shifts in public opinion. In *The Shield*, a piece entitled “The Attitude of the Press” reports that over a period of months notices of their work have appeared in “some of the best known of the London papers” and claims “We welcome this circumstance as a proof, both that public interest in the question is increasing, and that the directors of the Press are themselves awakening to a sense of its grave importance” (294). The article openly criticizes the lack of complexity with which the issue had formerly been treated and the hypocrisy of the Press in reporting the salacious details of the proceedings of Divorce and other Courts while choosing to ignore the

work of this campaign on the grounds that it required reporting offensive details. The article interprets the lifting of the “‘the conspiracy of silence’ on the part of the Press as a sign that it is beginning to take a wider and juster view of our agitation, and to see that we are not mere crotchet-mongers, but that we are fighting the battle of constitutional freedom, of justice, of morality, and of common sense” (294). The papers often credited themselves for these signs of progress. For this reason, in 1866 the *Englishwoman’s Review* sought to build on the achievements of its earlier incarnation, the *English Woman’s Journal*, in the hope that it could “prove equally effective in calling the attention of the public to the wants and condition of women . . . for we believe the favourable change of opinion, and the more respectful tone with regard to women, which may be observed in the literature of the present day, to be in no small degree due to the influence of the *English Woman’s Journal* (“The Work” 4-5).

Conclusion

<22> In many ways these tendencies and features presuppose and reinforce the belief in the power of the press to educate and influence public opinion (hence the persistent, if often short-lived, efforts to publish politically-based papers for women). These publications reveal the difficulties, but also the determined efforts to be heard. In an editorial entitled “Lend a Hand,” Amelia Lewis reveals her impatience with the game of deference and the advantages of being acknowledged by the London press, admitting “it is thought dangerous to offend the public press” (50). With some sharpness, she tries politely to explain: “Looking a little anxiously upon the vast human question, of which we have but raised the corner of the veil beneath which it is heaving and quivering with suppressed or ill-directed vitality, we must say we had hoped for one little, small, word of encouragement from one section of the public whom we *most particularly* esteem – the public press” (49-50). But with the courage of her convictions she proposes a “new public” be created and appeals to “our already-created public to exert their own independent faculties in judging us” and “to allow us to go our own road . . . to plead for all social reform, to pursue inquiry into all social life, and to represent Woman’s place in every direction of it” (50). She concludes “It would have been more gratifying to be helped a little on our rough way by our literary brethren; as it is, self-exertion shall supply the want of that help.” The boldness with which these papers interpolated themselves into public debates could not have been lost on their readers and suggest a powerful resonance for our current debates about the public sphere. It is for this reason I have chosen to quote so extensively from them, reinforcing Martin Conboy’s recent criticism of newspaper histories which do not pay sufficient attention to the language of the press, arguing that “the language of newspapers is the most vital and dynamic aspect of their history” (3).

<23> Periodicals were vehicles for participation in the public arena, often defined in male terms and represented by the Press. In her editor’s farewell address, Florence Fenwick Miller claimed that she knew that men had read the *Woman’s Signal* and that she had “particularly desired to represent the advanced movement amongst women respectably and worthily, intellectually and morally, in the eyes of men” because it was from men that the “extension of [women’s] liberties” must be gained (184). But March-Phillipps had remarked earlier in the *Fortnightly Review* that “Those publications which eliminate the frivolous and the homely, and exist for the advancement of a ‘cause,’ are read by suffragists and teetotallers, but are as Greek and Hebrew to the general

public” (March-Phillipps 669). How successful these publications were in achieving their goals is difficult to measure, but that does not diminish their importance to us in historical terms – namely what they provided and believed was worth providing for readers at the time, however limited in number they may have been.

<24> There is much to be gained by including feminist interventions in the historical debates about the influence of the press. I am not including here the contributions of prominent feminists regarding aspects of the “woman question” in the agenda-setting journals of the time, even though that involvement had an important impact on the profile women were gaining in the field of journalism. I have focused, instead, on the meta-analysis of the Press which emerges from women’s publications that deliberately set out to reconfigure the arenas of public debate. In the process of producing alternative /competing media (representing views that were systematically excluded or undervalued in the Press), they also offered an important contemporary perspective on and critique of the Press and its practices. They encouraged a critical stance on current sources of news and information by highlighting editorial tactics, distortion, bias, and omissions and offer a record of the shifting perceptions of the Press as a field of contention in the period. By calling into question the reliability of the mainstream press as a source for understanding early reform movements, these publications reveal the need for more complex approaches to documenting the period. The very omissions and biases that feminist papers criticized then, continue to reproduce themselves in press history and scholarship now. Victorian feminists recognized the need to chronicle their own histories then, and feminist media historians are working to assert the significance of them now. The goal is not just to add some bits about women into press history, but to challenge the substance of existing narratives and to understand how women contributed to reshaping the nineteenth-century public.

Endnotes

(1)As a category the “Press” was understood and treated in the broadest terms. Sometimes there are specific references to the “London Press” or to the “daily press” but if the titles from which extracts were reprinted in features noting the opinions of the press are any indication, then it referred to a range of publications including dailies, weeklies, regional papers, monthly and quarterly reviews.(^)

(2)I use “feminist” deliberately here to distinguish between the wide range of commercial periodicals targeting women readers and the more overtly progressive publications identifying themselves as committed to the emancipation of women or, as Beetham and Boardman put it, those attempting “to provide a critique of contemporary culture and women’s place within

it” (61). They also, usefully, distinguish between “campaign journals” (devoted to particular issues or causes) and “general feminist journals” (61).(^)

(3) I refer to the paper’s voice in general terms because the early issues did not identify an editor by name. Eventually, the masthead indicated it was edited by Helena B. Temple, who was in fact Henrietta Müller, who claimed later in an interview with the *Women’s Herald* (the later incarnation of the *Women’s Penny Paper*) that the editing had been carried on under the name of Helena B. Temple and Co. “in order that my own individuality should not give a colouring to the paper, but that it should be as far as possible impersonally conducted and therefore open to reflect the opinions of women on any and all subjects” (28 Nov 1891: 916).(^)

(4) I derive the term from Nancy Fraser’s use of “publicist orientation” in relation to her point about how counterpublics militate against separatism by directing themselves towards “wider publics” (124). I address the wider theoretical debates about “publics” and the status of the feminist press in media history scholarship in *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere*, co-authored with Lucy Delap and Leila Ryan, forthcoming from Palgrave.(^)

(5) I do not have direct evidence of exchange lists for feminist periodicals, but it is likely that they sent copies out for review and/or notices. Amelia Lewis was clearly annoyed that the “London Press” had not deemed *Woman* worthy of a small word of encouragement, when papers around the country (and even in France) had offered expressions of good will (10 Feb 1872: 50).(^)

(6) Note that this *Woman* is not the same journal as *Woman* edited and conducted by Amelia Lewis in 1872. Both can be found in the Harvester Press microform collection, *The Social and Political Status of Women: Radical and Reforming Periodicals*.(^)

(7) Note that the spelling of her name at the end of the article in the *Fortnightly Review* appears as March-Phillipps.(^)

(8) There is insufficient space here to deal with how this point extends to other features of these periodicals, particularly the function of book, art, and theatre reviews.(^)

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