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# What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth Century English Women's Magazines and the Emergence of a Consumer Culture

JEFFREY A. AUERBACH

In February 1852, *The Ladies' Cabinet*, a magazine for upper-middle class women in existence for thirty years, announced to its readers that it would be changing its format, and would in the following months present a number of "improvements." By way of explanation, the editors of the magazine cited "a rapidity of progress" in the literary world, and an obligation to "the fair sex" to see that they were "well supported." The February issue, and all subsequent ones, included new monthly features on literature and the arts, a section of practical household tips, and a page of letters from its readers with editorial responses. The next month the editors noted "the increasing circulation of our long-established Journal of Fashion." But if one lifted up the veil of "progress," one would see that in fact *The Ladies' Cabinet* changed its format in order to compete with two other more successful and popular upper-middle class women's magazines, *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion*. Moreover, the modifications made in *The Ladies' Cabinet* represent only one of a series of changes that culminated in the merger of the three magazines into what would be, after 1852, one magazine published under three separate names. The consolidation of these three magazines reveals what sold and what did not.

It also captures at a critical moment the transformation in women's magazines from the Romantic fiction-dominated magazines of the 1830s to the more practical and political magazines of the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>1</sup> In the early nineteenth century, women's magazines tended to provide innocent and amusing reading material as an alternative to the daily newspapers, which were considered too tainted for women who were supposed to provide an Edenic sanctuary for their corrupted working husbands.<sup>2</sup> By the 1840s, there had been a gradual change in the common fictional story type from the gothic to the domestic, from the Romantic to the

Realist. The frequency of secular literature aimed at instruction and moral improvement had also increased during the 1830s, but did not become prevalent until well into the 1840s. Women's magazines during this period were also devoid of what might generally be considered political material.<sup>3</sup>

During the mid-1850s women's magazines became at once both more practical and more political. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1852-77), for example, which achieved circulation of 50,000 per month, was geared toward thrift, contained information designed to promote industry, usefulness, and domestic management, and was crammed with weekly notes on cooking, fashion, dress patterns, gardening, pets, and hygiene. In this magazine, mingled with Mrs. Beeton's recipes, were "hints on how to destroy bedbugs" and "how to nurse the now prevalent typhoid fever."<sup>4</sup> Many of the stories made their middle-class origins and designs to produce well-mannered servants and silver-fork bourgeoisie painfully clear. The magazine was clearly oriented toward the middle-class woman in the home and as consumer. But *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and others like it were also increasingly influenced by more politically-oriented journals such as *The English Woman's Journal* (1858-64), edited by Bessie Raynor Parkes and Mary Hays, which openly discussed the evils of the late-hour system, emigration schemes, poverty relief, prostitution, and the benefits of the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Bill. It was during this time that the movement for the extension of women's rights put down its roots and began to catch the public eye.<sup>5</sup>

The three magazines under consideration here occupy a "middle position" in the history of English nineteenth-century women's magazines, moving away from the Romantic sentimentality of the earlier decades, not yet fully focused on household manners, and only just beginning to promote issues of female emancipation, characteristics that would emerge in the 1860s. This transformation mirrors certain changes in mid-nineteenth century English society, revealing a gender and class in flux. But more important than the actual changes in content is their origin. For commercially-viable magazines such as these which did not rely on a wealthy patron for their support, readership and sales determined content. Publishers had to attract readers (or buyers); there was indeed a bottom line based on the pursuit of profits and pleasing the readership. The pressures of readership in a competitive environment forced magazines to adapt, and thus it can be argued that the product in existence after 1852 represented what middle-class women wanted to read, which in turn says something about their values, tastes, and desires. The merger reveals an industry searching for a formula to meet the demands and desires of its readership, as consumers were having an increasingly loud voice in the content of the magazines they read. The changes in magazine content

therefore shed light on the process that brought about and fueled the emergence of a consumer society.<sup>6</sup>

That the readership at least in part determined what was published is not to say that authors, editors, and publishers were not also determinants of what was published. As Neil McKendrick has so brilliantly pointed out, entrepreneurs have a number of strategies they can employ to create, and then cash in on, consumer demand.<sup>7</sup> Rather, this article suggests that at some point consumer demand, in this case the interests of the female readership, became vitally important in what was published. An analysis of changes in content over time will reveal not just the selling of middle-class identity at the moment of that class' emergence, but some of the ways by which women sought advice on how to be middle class, and the nature of that advice. Charting the elements of this merger cannot definitively answer the question of whether these changes occurred from the top down, that is, foisted by authors and/or editors upon an unwilling and unsuspecting female readership, or whether they were driven by sales, and hence an indication of what was and was not appealing to readers. Rather, it makes sense to view the changes in content in these three magazines over a span of several decades as the product of a symbiotic relationship between author/editor and reader, between producer and consumer. Authors and editors created women consumers, and women readers in turn helped shape what it was they consumed. This study, therefore, examines the dynamics of the formation of a consumer society by exploring the interaction between taste, production, and consumption.

## I

*The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music, and Romance* was by 1851 the most archaic and traditional of the three magazines. Begun in 1832, it was edited by Margaret and Beatrice de Courcy, a mother and daughter team, and published in London at 1s per month. Regular features in the 1830s included a serial installment, short stories, instructive articles, and poetry, the latter of which, according to one historian, "was in the sad, detrimental bittersweet vein."<sup>8</sup> The magazine carried crude fashion plates, but it also contained black and white steel engravings, which were generally of a very high quality. The subjects of these steel engravings were usually romantically picturesque scenes of castles, mountains, and ravines. Often these would illustrate stories in the magazine. By 1851 the magazine certainly catered to a well-educated audience, probably to the upper-middle class: many articles included words and phrases in foreign languages (French, German, Latin), and occasionally an entire article in French appeared. It also fulfilled an educational function, with articles on science and the arts.

The fiction in *The Ladies' Cabinet* was unquestioningly in the Romantic, sentimental mold, much more akin to what had been popular in the days of Byron than in the 1850s of Dickens and Thackeray. There were tales of adventure, of gothic castles or unsurpassable mountains, of husbands losing their lives at sea or becoming blind and crippled, of travels into dark woods prowled by thieves and bands of vagabonds. Hardly a month passed without an "odd" marriage, either sudden or based on mistaken identity. One example is the story "Affections Reward," about a "noble, happy, majestic couple," she "irrevocably his for weal or woe." Suddenly, the man is seized by "restless ambition," and they move to the city where she must now play the Lady of Fashion, the crafty woman of the world. They flit from one event to another, scarcely interacting; he is cold and distant, devoting his attentions to a fair Italian and "personating one of Byron's heroes." But whereas many would have given up, his wife "resolved to win him from his delusion." She cared for him, gave him everything he wanted, and in the end, succeeded. "Affection may be blighted for a moment," read the moral of the story, "...but the first zephyr of returning confidence bids every bud bloom anew."<sup>9</sup>

Moralistic messages in fact permeated both the fiction and the non-fiction. There were articles and stories which told women what to do and how to act. For example, women were taught not to appear in public with papers in their hair, since a cap or natural hair was preferred.<sup>10</sup> Women were, however, sent mixed messages on the subject of fashion. *The Ladies' Cabinet* consistently devoted almost fifteen percent of its space to articles about fashion and dress, and yet there also appeared poems such as the following, called "On a Fascinating but Deceptive Woman:"

A Woman with a beaming face  
 But with a heart untrue  
 Though beautiful, is valueless –  
 As diamonds formed of dew.<sup>11</sup>

Assuming these parts of the magazine were read, and their lessons heeded, what would women have been taught? Generosity, the fickleness and changeability of fashion, the devastating nature of evil thoughts, how gambling ruins lives, that "contentment is the talisman of happiness," and the importance of not saying too much or too little, but just the right amount.<sup>12</sup>

There were also stories which purported to describe women's character. Most often women were characterized as innocent, pure, and helpless - fairly typical domestic ideology. *The Ladies' Cabinet* unquestionably gave support to the notion of separate spheres for women and men. In one story, four elderly, single women discussed "the comparative claims

of husband and wife to precedence, or rather... of the appropriate sphere for the reign of each, and of their separate and several provinces."<sup>13</sup> This division of the sexes, both in terms of their innate characteristics and spheres of action, was bolstered by the magazine's portrayals of love and marriage. A short piece titled "Hints on Matrimony" asserted that "no woman will be likely to dispute with us, when we assert that marriage is her destiny."<sup>14</sup> In contrast, a June 1851 article extolled the advantages of marriage for men in much more pragmatic terms, in that it provided a home, friends in old age, children, people to cheer him in loneliness and bereavement, love, and caring.<sup>15</sup>

There was a similar dichotomy regarding love. The author of one article suggested that "a man may possibly fill up some sort of an existence without loving; but a woman with nothing to love, cherish, care for, and minister to, is an anomaly in the universe, an existence without an object."<sup>16</sup> This is, first of all, a clear instance of moralizing, for there were many women in mid-century England who did not marry.<sup>17</sup> The author in this case was trying to impress upon the reader a certain point of view, that certain behavior was socially unacceptable, although practiced nonetheless. But more important is the different role love is depicted as playing in men's lives. A September 1851 article mentioned that "Love is only an episode in a man's life; it cannot occupy his existence." The author, a man, continued, "We are too hard hearted to be your mates; it is true we can love ardently; but it is you who know how to love constantly."<sup>18</sup> A poem that same month included lines about how men's love disappears when "Women's eye grows dull/ And her cheek paleth."<sup>19</sup> Women were defined by their ability to love and their dependence on love; men were defined by an absence of it.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion*, not to mention other women's magazines such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Christian Lady's Magazine* or *Eliza Cook's Journal*, *The Ladies' Cabinet* devoted little attention to improving the status of women. The closest the magazine came to delving into the world of politics throughout 1851 was an article in June on female education, which was based on the premise that since "the happiness of human life is mainly dependent upon the character and disposition of woman, consequently her education... must be ever an object of the deepest solicitude." The author claimed that women who were fine scholars, mathematicians, logicians, and poets were often "incompetent to perform the common duties of life," but that on the other hand, women should not "addict themselves to domestic duties." The author wrote that "extremes in either branch are unpleasant, and mutually incompatible." Women should be somewhere in the middle, and the best thing to do was to stress health and physical education.<sup>21</sup> Another article a few months earlier contained what might

be a veiled reference to having women serve on juries: The author wrote about men having "an opportunity to manifest their power and cruelty without exposing themselves to an impartial tribunal, which we [women] insist should consist of an equal number of the two sexes." These statements are, however, the limit of *The Ladies' Cabinet's* political involvement in the early 1850s.

The conclusion to this qualitative analysis of content is that *The Ladies' Cabinet* as of 1851 was still very much along the lines that magazines had been fifteen years before. The fiction was characterized by Romanticism and sentimentality, there was little practical advice about how to run a house, and for the most part the magazine steered clear of political issues such as labor legislation and the Irish Question. A quantitative analysis of the content of *The Ladies' Cabinet* provides a similar conclusion. Throughout 1851, on the average seventy-six percent of the pages were devoted to fiction, eight percent to general knowledge or history, thirteen percent to fashion (which included four pages of plates), two percent to poetry. Most of the "prescriptive literature" was incorporated into the fiction. There were no articles on household management or the arts, nor was space devoted to letters from correspondents. All of these features would be added in February of 1852, along the model of what *The Ladies' Companion* and *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* had been printing for years.

## II

*The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion* were the standards by which *The Ladies' Cabinet* was judged. *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* was begun in 1832, and published weekly in quarto issues which sold for 1d under the title *The Maids, Wives, and Widows' Penny Magazine, and Gazette of Fashion*. From January until June 1833 the title was shortened to *The Maids, Wives and Widows' Penny Magazine*, now under the editorship of Mrs. (Margaret Harries) Cornwell Baron Wilson, and still printed as a weekly in London by Joseph Rogerson. Little is known about the editor, who was the wife of a wealthy and prominent London solicitor. She was thirty-six when she became editor of the magazine, the author of many poems, romantic dramas, comic interludes, novels, and biographies, none of which appear to have been best-sellers.<sup>22</sup> In July 1833 she changed the title to *The Weekly Belle Assemblée*, though it also went under the title of *The Penny Belle Assemblée*, slowly raised the price to 2d weekly, and reduced the size to octavo. It was in 1834 that it became a shilling-a-month publication under the title of *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*.<sup>23</sup>

When Wilson took over the magazine, it printed a mixture of fiction,

poetry, literature reviews, many short (i.e., half-page) stories or anecdotes, riddles, “public amusements,” and the latest fashions. In addition, each issue contained four black and white and two color fashion plates, more than any other magazine in its price range. Soon after she took over, Wilson printed a statement of purpose, which was “to render this Magazine equally suitable for the Library-Table of the literary or the Boudoir of the Woman of Taste and Fashion.”<sup>24</sup> Clearly Wilson was doing something right, for on the preface page to Volume III she printed excerpts from praise accorded to her magazine by the “public press.” The *Norington Review* called it “one of the cheapest and most entertaining publications of the day,” and the *Berkshire Chronicle* wrote that “the high reputation of the editress endures a better supply of mental food for the fair sex than we have observed in this class of magazines.” The magazine began to include advertisements in February 1836, the content of which suggest not only that the magazine was a commercial enterprise, but that it was oriented predominantly towards the middle or upper-middle class.

During the fifteen years leading up to 1851 Wilson made several modifications in her magazine, changes that *The Ladies' Cabinet* did not make. In particular, *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* moved away from the Romantic, sentimental fiction that it too had printed in its early years. A typical story of the 1830s, much like what *The Ladies' Cabinet* printed in the 1850s, was “The Ladder of Love,” a story about a beautiful eighteen year-old girl Theresa that begins “On a sultry evening in the month of July...” and ends with Theresa “clasped, even in death, in her lover’s arms.”<sup>25</sup> This kind of fiction must not have been too appealing, for in January 1843 the editor announced that she had just secured some new writers, “some of the most popular writers of the day,” so that the magazine could “compete with the highest periodicals of the present enlightened age.”<sup>26</sup> And by the early 1840s this meant writers of Realist, not Romantic fiction, writers like Dickens, whose bestselling *Sketches by Boz* had been reviewed by the magazine a few years earlier. When in 1851 the magazine finally added a specific section titled “Work,” which contained tips for running a house, the magazine was being sold in several London shops (listed in the magazine) and “by all Booksellers in Town and Country.”<sup>27</sup>

When *The Ladies' Companion at Home and Abroad*, also known as *The Ladies' Companion and Monthly Magazine* was begun in 1849, it was created along the lines of *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, and resembled it far more than it did *The Ladies' Cabinet*. This in itself suggests that the formula developed by *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* was more successful than that employed by *The Ladies' Cabinet*. *The Ladies' Companion* began under the editorship of Jane Loudon, a well-published and successful author who was forty-two at the time she began work on *The Ladies' Companion*.<sup>28</sup> One year after she began the maga-

zine, however, she relinquished control to Henry Fothergill Chorley, well-known music critic editor of the *Athenaeum*. Chorley was forty-two at the time, and although he had written a variety of books, none seemed to have sold particularly well.<sup>29</sup> But it was not the editors that mattered; it was the content, and by the time of the merger in late 1851, it was clear that the content of *The Ladies' Companion* was appealing to its readership.

Both *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion*, like *The Ladies' Cabinet*, were in 1851 directed toward the middle and upper-middle class.<sup>30</sup> They stressed, for example, the importance of decorum that was suitable to one's station. *The Ladies' Companion* printed a story about a young doctor who had just arrived in London. When a female acquaintance sent a servant to inquire about his health following his long journey, he replied, "My compliments to Mrs. Munton, and I am pretty well; much obliged to her." He then said to himself, "It was as well to say only 'pretty well,' for 'very well' would have destroyed the interest Mrs. Munton evidently felt in me."<sup>31</sup> In another story the magazine affirmed the significance of class boundaries:

The rich are much more easily brought in contact with the poor than with those belonging to the middle class immediately beneath them. What an impenetrable barrier there is between the respectable and affluent tradesman's family and that of the class coming under the head of the gentry. They want nothing of each other - nothing brings them together - and the pride of each other keeps them apart.<sup>32</sup> This passage is not only about middle-class competition for the place of the old aristocracy; it is indicative of the common attempts on the part of the middle class to separate themselves, psychologically as well as financially and socially, from the working classes below them, in this case by asserting that the upper class had more in contact with the lower class than the middle class.

Another area in which *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion* did not differ too much from *The Ladies' Cabinet* was in the moralizing, prescriptive nature of their fiction. "There are several morals in this little tale," wrote the author of one story. "Take your choice among them, dear reader; being wrapped in sugar they may not prove distasteful: at any rate, if taken faithfully, they must be useful."<sup>33</sup> Other stories ended with lines such as, "In every trouble that befalls us there is an angel."<sup>34</sup> Women readers would have read that "it is round our very hearth, under the roof where we rest, and in the daily, hourly intercourse of life, that the heart must either be satisfied or not." Women were told that they needed the support of men, who had stronger minds, and more enlarged intellects than their own, and that by age thirty "the fatherless, brotherless, single woman need pause and ask her own nature

if it have enough of the old oak in itself still, still to stand alone.”<sup>35</sup> Women were also taught the proper way to walk, as well as “How to Manage a Husband,” which meant making herself available to him, convincing him that she could not do without him, submitting to him even when she knew she was right, amusing him, and taking care of the house prudently.<sup>36</sup> All of these writings, which echo those expressed in *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, suggest that men could not be understood by women, that they married for beauty and youth not love, and that his “sphere” was one of work, while hers was one of nurturing.

A careful survey of the content of *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies’ Companion* in 1851, however, reveals not only how similar they were to each other, but how different they were from *The Ladies’ Cabinet*.<sup>37</sup> In both *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies’ Companion*, fiction occupied less than half the space in the magazine, this in contrast to *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, in which fiction occupied over seventy-five percent of the magazine. The love story was still the most prevalent story-type, but in *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies’ Companion* they were not nearly as sentimental. They tended to be about “real-life” situations with which the middle-class readership could identify. There were stories about love between the classes, children rebelling against their parents’ wishes, and proper courtship, rather than stories about Byronic heroes sweeping isolated widows off their feet, or lost husbands returning home just in the nick of time to save their wives from imminent danger.

Next in terms of percentage of space was nonfiction (fourteen percent in *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, sixteen percent in *The Ladies’ Companion*), which occupied nearly twice as much space in these magazines as in *The Ladies’ Cabinet*. In the July issue of *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, for example, there were articles on the history of shoes, a biography of Ruskin, and a history of the Incas. Both magazines, like *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, also included articles on the latest fashions and plates to accompany them, amounting in both cases to just under ten percent of space.

The biggest difference between *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, and *The Ladies’ Companion* was that the latter two were attentive to societal issues which were of particular importance for women. Most prominent among these was the treatment of domestic servants. Wilson argued for *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*:

The comfort or discomfort of our [middle-class women’s] domestic life very greatly depends on the zeal and good faith of servants. Between the head of families and their servants surely there should exist the recognized bond of mutual obligation... For certain services duly rendered, certain rewards are tendered.

And to make her point, Wilson posited the case of two identical middle-class houses, each with two or three servants, and asked why in one the door is answered by the same good smiling face, whereas in the other there are always different servants, who are rude and dirty? She argued that there was a mutual affinity and attraction between good mistresses and good servants. She believed that employers of servants had to go beyond “industry and blind obedience” to “order and planning,” true middle-class values. Servants should be treated like humans, and allowed friends, affections, and intellectual activity. *The Ladies' Companion* also took up this issue, treating it similarly in two lengthy articles in 1851.<sup>38</sup>

These magazines also provided commentary on the issue of women's education. Wilson's solution to the mistreatment of domestic servants was education, for “the Crusade of the Nineteenth Century... is a crusade against Ignorance,” and education will solve the bad habits of “haughtiness and exaction.”<sup>39</sup> One author wrote, “It is certainly a painful thing that we see so many women beating against their bars - wishing to be one thing or other, rather than what they are.” As a solution the author urged education for women: “It is cruel to wish her a wider sphere unless you bestow upon her a more equal cultivation, measuring by ‘equal’ nothing *identical*, but only that the nature of the woman should be as carefully attended to as that of the man.”<sup>40</sup> In another article in October, the author lashed out against the many people who thought it was fine for a woman to study history but not politics, when politics so quickly becomes history. The author was for women studying both: “It is only by the aid of a more thoughtful and largely-informed race of teachers and governesses [i.e., women] than are at present by any means abundant, that any great advance can be made.”<sup>41</sup> Both articles reveal not only the ways in which women's magazines of the 1850s spoke out in favor of opening up opportunities for women in all classes, but also the limitations of those opportunities; they were never to receive the same treatment as men. Not until the latter half of the century did English women's magazines begin to advocate full equality.<sup>42</sup>

### III

It is only with this in-depth analysis of content that the failure of *The Ladies' Cabinet* can be understood, for its failure is both evidence of and a product of a shift in the content, especially fictional, enjoyed by the reading public. This can be broadly defined as a shift from Romanticism to Realism, from sentimentality to sensibility, from the gothic to the domestic. The Romantic fiction of the first half of the nineteenth century contained “wildly improbable plots, exaggerated social contrasts, glamorized villains and recklessly brave heroes.” Imprisonment - physical, psy-

chological, spiritual – was a central metaphor.<sup>43</sup> This early fiction was often characterized by a reverence for nature, individualism, a revolt against social convention, the exaltation of physical passion, and the cultivation of emotion and sensation for their own sakes.

But changes in society – industrialization, urbanization, division into classes – brought about changes in fiction, as writers turned their collective attention to the condition of the people in works such as *Hard Times* and *Sybil*. There was a movement toward “life as it is,” which meant dealing with the dirty issues of life and death without idealization. As Emerson wrote in 1860, “Let us replace sentimentalism by realism, and dare to uncover those simple and terrible laws which, be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern.”<sup>44</sup> As the social range of fiction expanded to accommodate the changing structure of society, so too did its geographical range: a novel about factory workers had to be set in an industrial town, not a country mansion. *Mary Barton* announced its novelty of setting in its subtitle, “A Tale of Manchester Life.” Moreover, as Kathleen Tillotson has pointed out, many writers began to prefer a setting which was neither historical nor contemporary, but which lay in a period from twenty to sixty years earlier. Novels such as *Middlemarch*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Vanity Fair* exemplify the desire to avoid the specific associations and moral constraints of strictly contemporary novels, and the sense of flux, of the present as the soon-to-be-past.<sup>45</sup> While *The Ladies’ Cabinet* persisted in printing stories set in the eighteenth century, *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies’ Companion*, adapting to changes in the desires of their readership, printed stories in the more recent past. A new style of fiction had emerged by the 1850s, and *The Ladies’ Cabinet* did not print it. If George Lukacs is correct that the realist novel is “the predominant art form of modern bourgeois culture,”<sup>46</sup> then it should not be surprising that with the rise of the middle class in Victorian England, middle-class women’s magazines would begin to print realist fiction. The emergence of realist fiction was directly related to the process by which the middle class sought to define itself and stabilize its place in society.

Accompanying the emergence of the middle class was the appearance of a consumer culture and a professional society. One feature of *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies’ Companion*, in contrast to *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, that is an expression of this transformation is the importance the former placed on entertainment and household management. They contained monthly features called “Amusements of the Month” (descriptions of available plays, concerts, and events at the Haymarket), “Music” (previews of upcoming concerts and reviews of past concerts), and various sections on literature which included book reviews, analyses of writers’ works, and passages from dramas. Combined, the arts amounted to slightly more than ten percent of the content. One example

of the differences between the three magazines is their coverage of the Great Exhibition: *The Ladies' Cabinet* ran one article on the event, while *The Ladies' Companion* printed four and *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* five. Clearly *The Ladies' Cabinet* was not reaching out to middle class society, which flocked to the Crystal Palace "to see and be seen."

Also unlike *The Ladies' Cabinet*, both *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion* included articles on household management, sewing patterns and ideas for knick-knacks, and one or two short stories for children. In *The Ladies' Companion* this section was called "The Work-Table," and usually amounted to about five percent of the space in each issue. There was a great variety of articles and subjects, and the content was clearly oriented toward middle-class women in the home, responsible for running the household and taking care of the children with occasional help from a servant or maid. The content was also oriented towards these women as consumers: of household goods, of concert and theater tickets, and of the magazines themselves. There was, then, quite clearly a shift in content, away from merely entertaining women, and towards instilling in them a desire to consume. These magazines, therefore, need to be treated not just as products, but as producers of an ethic of consumption.

Another product of the transformations taking place during the second quarter of the nineteenth century was the appearance of articles with named authors. The use of authors' names is indicative of a growing acceptance of the professionalization not only of writing, but of writing for the press in particular. In the early part of the century, the editors of magazines tended to exercise rigid control over the content that was printed in their journals. After mid-century, however, many editors relaxed their controls; no longer could magazines be counted on for their support of a given political position. As market forces began to dominate the English economy, it became imperative for writers to make a mark for themselves, to garner a following, and they could not do this without using their names. In addition, whereas in the earlier part of the century writing for money was not considered respectable, by mid-century it had become not only respectable but profitable. And as it became more acceptable to make a living by writing for the press, more writers could use their names with less fear of appearing *declassé*. By 1847, G. H. Lewes could write for *Fraser's Magazine*, "Literature has become a profession. It is a means of subsistence almost as certain as the bar or the church."<sup>47</sup>

Throughout all of 1851, only a handful of articles in *The Ladies' Cabinet* appeared with named authors. In contrast to this, on average, almost eighty percent of the articles in a monthly issue of *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* had named authors. As for *The Ladies' Companion*, whereas in the first six months of 1851 only half of the articles had named

authors, in the second half of the year over seventy percent of the articles, on average, in a monthly issue had named authors. The inclusion of by-lines is an indication of modernization: *The Ladies' Companion* adapted to the standard set by *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*; *The Ladies' Cabinet* did not.

On the whole, the men and women who wrote for *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion* were comfortably middle class, wealthy, and well-educated. There were sixty-two names which appeared as by-lines in the two magazines during 1851, forty-eight percent of which are traceable.<sup>48</sup> Women outnumbered men three to one. Most were the children of landowners, merchants, or businessmen, and the men at least tended to have received good educations, often at a boarding school. Most, though by no means all, of the women, were educated more locally, frequently by parents or friends. Most of the writers were socially involved, and the women at least tended to be activists on women's issues. The average age of authors in 1851 was forty-three: forty-five for women, thirty-eight for men, which suggests either that men were able to get to a certain point in their careers at an earlier age than women, or that the men tended to use the women's magazines as a stepping stone to some other job, whereas the women tended to write for the women's magazines for a longer period of time, and consequently at an older age. Although many biographers do not include information on marital status, more than half the women writers were married, and at least ten percent were not; for a third there is no mention. Of those women who married, a quarter had been widowed at least once by the time they wrote in 1851. Very few of the authors were born in London, but most lived there for substantial portions of their professional lives. Most were quite popular, and wrote a variety of works, ranging from poetry to how-to manuals, and often for a number of different magazines.

These changes within the writing industry paralleled changes throughout British society, which, according to Harold Perkin, saw the rise of a "professional ideal" and, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, had indeed become a professional society.<sup>49</sup> One of the basic components of professionalization is an ideology about how the work is to be done.<sup>50</sup> In the case of the fictional writer, by the 1850s this ideology was Realism, and thus it should come as no surprise that the writers of the realist fiction, in *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion* would use their names, and thus label themselves as professionals, whereas the writers of Romantic fiction for *The Ladies' Cabinet*, not yet professionals, would avoid the practice.<sup>51</sup>

It should now be clear why *The Ladies' Cabinet* did not survive. It was not a "professional," consumer-oriented magazine. It printed out-of-date fiction by unknown authors who could not develop a following, and it

did not supply the dose of practical information regarding women's domestic life that the female readership so clearly demanded. And so, in February 1851 the readers of *The Ladies' Cabinet* learned that their magazine had fallen "under the control of a newly appointed editorship of established reputation" which would provide "artists of known talent." The new editors announced that future issues would contain the kinds of articles *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion* had been printing for years.<sup>52</sup> By March the circulation of the magazine had already increased.<sup>53</sup> This obvious response to consumer demand suggests that at least in part, it was the readers, not the editors and writers, who determined what was published. That is, realist fiction and household tips were not merely imposed by the editors and writers on the readers; the readers wanted them.

In the competitive world of mass markets, some magazines adapted and others did not, and it is the failure of those that did not adapt that enables historians to make assertions about what it was that middle-class women did and did not read. The bottom line for all three of these magazines was sales; they would not continue to print columns that did not sell. And so it becomes clear that what the readership wanted was the kind of material found in *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies' Companion*, not that contained in *The Ladies' Cabinet*. That magazines printing one kind of material sold better than a magazine printing another kind indicates that the former was more popular, that women wanted to read it more. The readership had spoken.

This case study, then, has important ramifications for the study of women's history, the emergence of a consumer culture, and the linkage between the two.<sup>54</sup> There has been an assumption, prevalent among literary scholars but also among many historians, that literary texts not only affected how women lived, but were written in the interest of exercising power over women.<sup>55</sup> The problem with this approach is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate causality and intentionality. Several historians have demonstrated that there is frequently no connection between what women read and the way they live their lives.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps most importantly, this line of argument deprives women, as consumers, of agency. The analysis of the merger offered here restores to mid-Victorian women some of the agency that has been denied them by historians. There is no doubt that editors and authors attempted to shape the values of their readers. This paper does not argue that tastes are totally independent of the attempts by merchants to create a market for their goods. Rather, it demonstrates that it is much more accurate to think of the dynamic between authors, editors, publishers, and readers as a complex symbiotic relationship.

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## ENDNOTES

1. On English women's magazines in general in the period, see Irene Dancyger, *A World of Women: An Illustrated History of Women's Magazines* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978); Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970); Alison Adburgham, *Women in Print* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972); Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
2. The stamp tax on newspapers and periodicals which covered the news also provided a disincentive for so-called women's magazines to cover domestic and foreign news, politics, and public affairs. In order to avoid the tax, they tended to focus on dress, consumer goods, and manners. See Adburgham, p. 271; White, pp. 38-40. This is not to imply that women did not read newspapers or "mainstream" literary periodicals, only that there is abundant evidence of the glorification of womanhood and the worship of female purity as the antithesis of, and antidote for, the corruption of men. See *The Ladies' Cabinet*, 1847, pp. 138, 156; Dancyger, p. 18. More generally, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
3. Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 112; Dancyger, pp. 51-5.
4. Dancyger, pp. 57, 67-8; White, p. 46.
5. White, pp. 46-7; E. M. Behnken, "The Feminine Image in *The English Woman's Journal*," *Ball State University Forum* 19 (1968): 71-5; Pauline A. Nestor, "A New Departure in Women's Publishing: *The English Woman's Journal* and *The Victoria Magazine*," *Victorian Periodicals Review* XV (Fall 1982): 93-106. More generally, see Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
6. See, among many books that argue for the presence of a consumer society in mid-nineteenth century Britain, if not long before, Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London: Europa, 1982); Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behavior and Material Culture, 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1988) and "Changes in English and Anglo-American Consumption from 1550 to 1800," *Consumption and the World of Goods*, pp. 206-27; Carole Shammas, "Changes in English and Anglo-American consumption from 1550-1800," *ibid.*, 177-205; Erika Rappaport, "'The Halls of Temptation': Gender, Politics, and the Construction of the Department Store in Late Victorian London," *Journal of British Studies* 35 (1996): 58-83.
7. Neil McKendrick, "Introduction: the birth of a consumer society: the com-

mercialization of eighteenth-century England," in McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, pp. 1-8; "The consumer revolution of eighteenth-century England," *ibid.*, pp. 9-33; "The commercialization of fashion," *ibid.*, pp. 35-99; "Josiah Wedgwood and the commercialization of the potteries," *ibid.*, pp. 100-45. On the other hand, Jan de Vries, in *The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), suggests that changes in demand resulted in changes in production, rather than vice versa. This position has its theoretical underpinning in none other than John Maynard Keynes' *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, which details the devastating effects that a lack of consumer demand can have on an economy.

8. Adburgham, p. 266; Adburgham had on the whole a quite deprecating opinion of the magazine, calling it "a prudish publication" and "not elegantly produced" (271, 297).
9. *The Ladies' Cabinet*, February 1851, pp. 86-9.
10. *Ibid.*, January 1851, p. 47.
11. *Ibid.*, May 1851, p. 229.
12. *Ibid.*, October 1851, p. 208; August 1851, pp. 73, 107; June 1851, p. 289; March 1851, pp. 130-5.
13. *Ibid.*, April 1851, p. 157.
14. *Ibid.*, March 1852, p. 126.
15. *Ibid.*, June 1851, pp. 292-3.
16. *Ibid.*, March 1852, p. 126.
17. In England and Wales in 1851, one out of eight women could expect not to have married by age forty-five; see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 26.
18. *The Ladies' Cabinet*, September 1851, p. 155.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
20. On neither of these subjects was the magazine wholly consistent. In another piece in April 1851, the author wrote that although some say that unmarried women over thirty-five "must be held to belong to the hopeless sisterhood... this, however, is not only a vague and sweeping, but a mistaken generality." Indeed, the author continued, "an Old Maid is a being having the better and the rarer attributes of her sex" (153). These different opinions are at least in part attributable to the fact that articles for these magazines were written by a number of different authors, often unscreened by an editorial board, and free to write whatever they wished. But more revealing, they seem to indicate a society in flux, unsure what its morality should be, unclear about what current practice.
21. *The Ladies' Cabinet*, June 1851, pp. 279-80.
22. Henry Fothergill Chorley, editor of *The Ladies' Companion*, unflatteringly called her "a large lady, but a small authoress. She displayed [at a literary ménagerie] rather protuberantly, below the waist of her black dress, a tawdry

- medal, half the size of a saucer, which had been awarded her by some provincial Della Cruscan literary society." See his *Autobiography, Memoirs, and Letters*, ed. Henry G. Hewlett, vol. I (London: Richard Bentley, 1873), pp. 239–40.
23. *The Waterloo Directory of Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900, Phase I*, ed. Michael Wolff, John S. North, and Dorothy Deering (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1976), p. 659. White in her book was incorrect about the publication data of the magazine: She asserted that it was "launched in 1847" (42).
  24. *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, preface page to Vol. II (January–June 1835).
  25. *Ibid.*, February 1836, p. 93.
  26. *Ibid.*, preface to Vol. XVIII (January–June 1843).
  27. *Ibid.*, June 1851, p. 384.
  28. She had previously edited *The Ladies' Magazine of Gardening* (1842), and was the author of nineteen books, including *The Mummy, a Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827), and a number of books on gardening, an interest she shared with her husband, a well-known if only partially successful landscape gardener. One of her gardening books sold over 20,000 copies and went through nine editions, and *The Ladies' Country Companion; or, How to Enjoy a Country Life Rationally* (1845) "did for the outdoor activities of the inexperienced mistress of the Victorian household what Mrs. Beeton's great book did for her indoor economy." See Geoffrey Taylor, *Some Nineteenth Century Gardeners* (Skeffinton, 1951), p. 39; Anne Crawford, et al., eds., *The Europa Biographical Dictionary of British Women* [London: Europa Publications, 1983], p. 262; Frederic Boase, ed., *Modern English Biography* (Truro: Netherton and Worth, 1892–1908), II: 499; Leslie Stephens and Sidney Lee, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1917; Oxford University Press, 1949–50), XII: 148; Joan Gloag, *Mr. Loudon's London* (London: Oriol Press, 1970), pp. 61, 67.
  29. *DNB*; Boase, p. 614; Chorley, I: 69–95, 124–6, 178–9; II: 6.
  30. Like *The Ladies' Cabinet*, both *The Ladies' Companion* and *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* were shilling-a-month publications and used words from and printed articles in foreign languages.
  31. *The Ladies' Companion*, 1 February 1851, p. 2.
  32. *Ibid.*, 31 May 1851, p. 195.
  33. *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, May 1851, p. 337.
  34. *Ibid.*, January 1851, p. 19.
  35. *Ibid.*, p. 3; 1 August 1851, pp. 1–3.
  36. *Ibid.*, 1 September 1851, p. 97; 1 March 1851, pp. 89–90.
  37. There were only minor differences between the two magazines. *The Ladies' Companion* printed a monthly feature called "Household Hints and Recipes" by Eliza Acton, the author of a popular cook-book, with short pieces on

- “Truffles and their use,” puddings, and gingerettes (a new beverage). The addition of this cooking section accounts for the higher proportion of articles on domestic matters in *The Ladies’ Companion* than in *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* (fifteen percent in *The Ladies’ Companion*, five percent in *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*). *The Ladies’ Companion* also included a monthly section on gardening advice, which consisted not only information on when to plant certain flowers and how to tend to the garden, but on more aesthetic issues as well. The only other difference was that *The Ladies’ Companion* included significantly more letters from correspondents than *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* did. On the whole, though, and certainly when compared with the content of *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *The Ladies’ Companion* contained essentially the same material.
38. *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, February 1851, pp. 76–9; on the issue of the treatment of domestic servants, see also *The Ladies’ Companion*, 1 February 1851, pp. 41–2. The debate in *The Ladies’ Companion* was continued in November in a fictional piece about two housewives and their treatment of their respective domestic servants (1 November 1851, pp. 178–80).
  39. *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, February 1851, pp. 76–9.
  40. *The Ladies’ Companion*, 1 April 1851, p. 137.
  41. *Ibid.*, 1 October 1851, pp. 122–4.
  42. Elaine Showalter, “Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship,” *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975): 20.
  43. Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period, 1830–1890* (London: Longman, 1985), pp. 5, 10.
  44. Quoted in Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 259. See also John A. Cuddihy, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: André Deutsch, 1977), pp. 601–2; Dancyger, p. 60; James, pp. 97–113, 167–8; Ioan Williams, *The Realist Novel in England* (London: Macmillan, 1974); George Lukacs, *Studies in European Realism*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Hillway Publishing, 1950), esp. pp. 6, 11. An example of the increased use of realist fiction is “Mr. Harrison’s Confessions” in *The Ladies’ Companion*, which focuses on everyday people and events: maids, urban life, “the voices of mothers calling their children home for bed.” The author took great pains to describe the characters in the story in minute detail (1 February 1851, pp. 2–6). In another story the author made a point to describe the character’s activities – dusting, arranging books, pausing to read a selection every now and then, playing the piano (1 November 1851, p. 178).
  45. Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen Forties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 88–99, 107.
  46. Lukacs, p. 2.
  47. [G. H. Lewes], “The Condition of Authors in England, Germany, and France,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 35 (March 1847): 285.

48. For an author's name to be considered his or her real name (at a time when many authors wrote either anonymously or pseudonymously), it had to appear in one of the following sources: Boase; Hale; *DNB*; Crawford; *British Bibliographical Archive*, Microfiche edition, ed. Paul Sieveking (London: K. G. Saur, 1984).
49. Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1969), pp. 252–70 and *The Rise of Professional Society* (London: Routledge, 1990).
50. The literature on professionalization is voluminous, but see esp. I. Waddington, "Professions," *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 650; Terrence Johnson, *Professions and Power* (London: Macmillan, 1972); Jeffrey L. Berlant, *Profession and Monopoly* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Magali S. Larsen, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Nancy Tomes, "Women in the Professions: A Research Agenda for American Historians," *Reviews in American History* (1982).
51. Christopher P. Wilson, in "The Rhetoric of Consumption: Mass-Market Magazines and the Demise of the Gentle Reader, 1880–1920," *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wrightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), made a similar argument regarding magazines, especially for women, in American after 1880, a period roughly equivalent to England c. 1850 (43).
52. *The Ladies' Cabinet*, February 1852, pp. 49–50.
53. This according to the editor. There are no known circulation figures for either *The Ladies' Cabinet* or the other two magazines under consideration here.
54. Adburgham; Lorna Weatherill, "A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behavior in England, 1660–1740," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 131–56; Amanda Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751–81," *Consumption and the World of Goods*, pp. 274–301; Richards, esp. pp. 100–4, 205–48; Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
55. Sally Mitchell, "Sentiment and Suffering: Women's Recreational Reading in the 1860s," *Victorian Studies* 21 (1977): 29–45; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. p. 5; Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 31, though it should be noted that this is not Flint's argument. See also Eugenia Palmegiano, *Women and British Periodicals 1832–186: A Bibliography* and "Feminist Propaganda in the 1850s and 1860s," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 10 (November 1970), pp. 5–8; Nestor, pp. 93–106; Dancyger, pp. 76–7; John W. Dodds, *The Age of Paradox: A Biography of England 1841–1851* (New York: Rinehart, 1952), 116; Dulcie

- M. Ashdown, *Over the Teacups* (London: Cornmarket Press, 1972), p. i; White, p. 49.
56. Flint, p. 188; Jay Mechling, "Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers," *Journal of Social History* 9 (1975): 44; Carl Degler, "What Ought to Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 1478.