

## Fashion Journalism

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**Definition:** Victorian women fashion journalists also participated in other forms of literary and artistic professions, from novel writing to advertisements and editing. Fashion journals was often unsigned or initialled, and women were involved in producing the copy and stories in them. Influences travelled between the Continent and Britain as well as across the Atlantic, and the journals facilitated political commentary on gender. For example, musician and novelist Anne Thickett was critical of fashionable diversions such as the masquerade for their tendency to equate women, fashion and frivolity, but this she argued was due to women's lack of access to education. Such themes recur within women's writing about fashion across the Victorian period.

**Keywords:** fashion; Europe; America; transatlantic; print culture; literacy; gender

## Introduction

Writings about fashion date back to the Ancient World but journalism is largely an eighteenth-century practice connected to the rise of **literacy**, **print culture** and the so-called **public sphere** (with precedents in the Renaissance and seventeenth-century *courantes*). A type of monthly periodical focussed solely on fashion appeared in France in 1778 with *La Galleries des Modes* and later *Cabinet des Modes* (from 1785). The German language *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* followed in 1786. Such a press was predated by a wide variety of fashion-news formats including almanacs, lady's-pocketbooks (annual diaries commonly used in England) and newspaper squibs and advertisements. Generally unsigned or initialled at that date, some women were involved with the copy and stories in them. For example, "Mrs T-SS" has been discovered by Jennie Batchelor to be Anne Thickett (née Ford), a musician and novelist who wrote a series of conversational sketches for the British *Lady's Magazine* (1770-1818) and published the novel *The School of Fashion* in 1800. Thickett was critical of fashionable diversions such as the masquerade for their tendency to equate women, fashion and frivolity, but this she argued was due to women's lack of access to education. Such themes recur within women's writing about fashion across the Victorian period.

Women were also acknowledged at times in the late eighteenth century as major contributors to the design and success of fashion periodicals. The expert colorist “Madame Le Beau” was explicitly noted in *Gallerie des Modes*. The writing that accompanied the images in the text comes from the eighteenth century tradition of urbane wit and erudition, and a part of it was produced by the male *philosophes* in order to make money. In some cases men ventriloquised the voices of women. This practice continued into the nineteenth century. The famed French poet and writer Stéphane Mallarmé wrote a regular column on fashion for *La Dernière Mode* signed “Miss Satin”.

Over the course of the nineteenth century news about fashion changed its complexion. In the period immediately following the **French Revolution** news about men’s dress became less frequent than news about women’s and this pattern accelerated throughout the century. Fashion also became much less about the aristocracy and more about middle-class belonging. Men of the *ancien-regime* had been expected to show interest in their clothes as fine fashions were a sign of hierarchical status. Although men never abandoned this interest, it is fair to state that Thorstein Veblen’s late nineteenth-century concepts of “conspicuous consumption” and his theory of the “leisure class” in which women bore much of the visual responsibility of exhibiting the wealth, status and hopefully good taste of a family explain some of the preponderance of women in Victorian fashion journalism. In order to learn about fashion, no matter where they lived, as well as to participate in a range of debates about changing modes, theories of health and hygiene, national and **cosmopolitan** tastes, the **household economy**, **education** for women, the changing nature of the family, companionate marriage, the **corset debate**, and other moral and social issues, women everywhere needed to read about clothes.

### [Subheading?]

North America had a long tradition of female journalists and editors in fashion. Ellen Louise Demorest (1824-1898) saw her African-America maid cutting a dress **pattern** from paper and commenced a tissue-paper pattern business (such patterns date back to the beginnings of printing in the European sixteenth century, and some were designed by a woman, Margarethe Helm, Augsburg c1725). By 1876 she sold 3 million patterns a year. She and her husband William Jennings Demorest operated a large fashion emporium in New York and in 1860 published *Mme. Demorest’s Mirror of Fashions* and Demorests’s *Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (fig. ). European correspondents reported on every dress worn by Empress Eugénie. Women’s rights advocate Jane Cunningham Croly ran the *Illustrated Monthly* from

1860-1887. It included a “What women are doing” column that is reminiscent of twentieth century fashion journalism. Demorest refused service to shoppers who did not respect her mixed race workforce and was a staunch abolitionist. She helped found *Sorosis*, the professional women’s club.

Another prominent North American woman editor was Sarah Josepha Buell Hale (1788 – 1879), author of “Mary had a little lamb” (“Mary’s Lamb”, 1830) and the main promoter of ‘Thanksgiving’ as a national holiday. She ran the Boston-based *Ladies Magazine* 1828-1836 (calling herself “editress”), then was poached for the Philadelphia-based *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1837-1877), the most influential women’s magazine in North America. She did not support [suffrage](#) but believed that women exercised soft power in other ways including dress, interior decoration, the household economy, and child rearing. Hale supported education for women and published Catharine Beecher. One of the new job’s proposed was the profession of interior decoration or household design. It is for these reasons that the first professional interior decorators emerged in North America, not Europe, and were mainly women such as Candace Wheeler – who worked with Tiffany and established the New York Exchange for Women’s Work, still in existence - the former actress-suffragette turned designing millionaire Elsie de Wolfe, both of whom wrote extensively in the press and in book form: stylish novelist Edith Wharton also exercised considerable influence in this domain as taste maker, commentator and publisher of monographs on good taste in houses and gardens for a new American era of prosperity and self-confidence.

### **[sub-heading?]**

Dedicated women’s fashion magazines proliferated throughout the Victorian period. With the rise of the “New Journalism” in the last third of the century, so-called ‘women’s news’ or women’s interests sections which included dress fashions, housewifery, news of royalty and high society, actresses and showgirls became a feature of the daily press. Much of this [production](#) is unsigned or initialled. Much of it was written by men, in the case of *Woman’s World* by no less than Oscar Wilde, who, with his wife Constance, edited the journal. But much of it was also written by women, who dominated many of the most important European and North American fashion magazines. US *Variety* covered the NY vaudeville scene from 1905. Sime Silverman, who founded *Variety*, regularly commented on fashions. His wife, Hattie Silverman, was the magazine’s fashion columnist “The Skirt”, who commented on stage fashions. Ada Patterson, a prominent journalist who was derisively called one of the

“sob sisters” for her coverage of murder trails, and Elsie de Wolfe (later Lady Mendl), actress, then the first American interior decorator, covered fashion and fashion history for *Theatre Magazine* [they may have been ghost-written like her best-selling book, *The House in Good Taste* (1913)].

The role of the female magazine editor emerged as an important role for women writers and creative directors in the Victorian period. This compensated in some ways for the fact that every day and political journalism was considered rough, crude and therefore men’s work. Thus many women journalists were forced to write “into” the space of fashion and the home, which was a type of double-edged sword.

Even if women were not named on mastheads and in articles, they were often the movers behind Victorian fashion periodicals. The famous Berlin journal *Der Bazar* published by Louis had been the idea of the female playwright and novelist Antonie von Cosmar (1806–70) and Schäfer’s wife Margarethe (née Voigt) who financed it. Von Cosmar (Frau Dr Klein or K.v.C) had filed stories in *Berliner Modenspiegel* for twenty years previously and desired a woman’s magazine “that I could edit without any male support”. Cosmar had also been a bookseller, an indication of a continuity with the eighteenth-century West-European links between printers, stationers, booksellers and retailers in the small or populuxe luxury industries, at a time when periodicals and light novels were forms of luxury consumption. Schäfer and Cosmar were the co-editors at the Bazar but for a short time. They continued to sign articles on fashion with “A. v. C.” and “K. v. C.”, good examples of the ambiguity we now face from our present perspectives (worldly readers at the time were sure to know they were women).

Although *Der Bazar* carried a man’s name as publisher it had an all-woman staff who were well paid and later pensioned. They included Agnes Kähler (1819–95), poet and novelist Marie Harrer (1819–70) and Frieda Gestefeld (1840–96). The latter married Franz Lipperheide (together they also established a famous fashion library gifted to the Berlin Royal museums); they published *Die Modenwelt* (1865–1942). The famous feminist writer Jenny Hirsch (1829–1902) worked at *Der Bazar* from 1860-64. As Marianne Van Remorteel has argued, the success of *Der Bazar* and the lack of international [Copyright Law](#) saw its mixture of literary and fashion reports copied around Europe and America in at least eight other nineteenth-century versions, including British *Ladies’ Treasury* (1857–95), Dutch

*Gracieuse* (1862–1936), *North American Lady's Friend* (1864–73), *Polish Bazar* (1865–66), *Danish Nordisk Mønster-Tidende* (1874–1952) and at times parts of the famed New York *Harper's Bazar*. This was in part because of the power of the images, which were made with wood blocks and for a luxury edition, steel. The plate generally came from Paris. Women editors at *Bazar* co-ordinated and in part directed these visual images, generally sourced from male artists who worked to direction, and so extricating the precise contribution of women becomes even more tantalising and confusing, as is so often the case with fashion text and images. Van Remoortel points out the extent of the international role of women in translating and reformatting French fashion information to suit local needs and interests, sometimes working with publisher husbands: [Isabella Beeton](#) (1836–65) of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Laura Aller (1849–1917) of the *Nordisk Mønster-Tidende*, and Sarah Peterson (1829–91) of the *Lady's Friend*. She also lists a group of unmarried women editors: Dutch sisters Susanna Maria (1818–1882) and Johanna Weeveringh (1820–1887) of the *Gracieuse*, *La Mode illustrée's* Emmeline Raymond (1828–1902), and *Harper's Bazar's* Mary Louise Booth (1831–89).

Mary Louise Booth had an astonishing life story, arriving in New York as a poorly paid vestmaker and commencing her literary career as an unpaid writer and reporter, later a successful translator (women's multi-lingual abilities are a common thread amongst the success stories outlined here). In the 1860s she worked as secretary for J Marion Sims, the controversial figure in the history of [gynaecology](#) who tested surgical vesicovaginal fistula remedies on un-anesthetised slave women as well as treating Empress Eugénie (Booth was also close to early female doctor Marie Zakrzewska in New York). Booth stated in a 1875 interview that the magazine would be apolitical: "Care is taken to exclude everything of a political or sectarian nature, as well as all objectionable matter, and to make a paper which may be read aloud with pleasure and profit to the whole family". She therefore did not comment on suffrage, despite her earlier personal commitment to it, but the journal commented on education and the changing nature of [employment](#) for women. Booth included New York fashion news from the beginning: world cities of fashion such as Paris, London, New York, Vienna and also Melbourne, Australia, were a part of international reporting, trade and sales catalogues, dress-pattern services and syndicated [design](#) services, not all of which were French but many in fact came from Jewish-run companies in Vienna (all disappearing with Anschluss in 1938). Women were not just introduced to hot topics such as the anti-plumage debate, the ostrich feather crash, tastes in summer and winter furs, but also

the new “tricot-tailleur” or long tubular knitwear for women such as telephonists and typists invented around 1900, as well as the “konfektion” or ready-to-wear separates which were a particular speciality of Berlin and Vienna well before the post-war period.

Booth became possibly the highest paid woman in North America, with a final salary of \$4000 a year (relative adjusted income of \$100-200,000 in 2015: a woman teacher made \$55; a male manual worker \$345 and a skilled worker \$1000). This indicates how the “safe” but hardworking space of the woman’s magazine provided highly significant employment, empowerment and also independence to talented women at a time when other writing and employment prospects were severely curtailed. The idea of the “lady editor” continued well into the twentieth century with the rise of iconic figures such as Edna Woolman Chase [a New Yorker who took over from Todd], Carmel Snow and Diana Vreeland, who were re-interpreted as whimsical but determined fashion figures in the film *Funny Face* (1957)

Booth had other famed journalist compatriots. (Mary Katherine) Kate Field (1838–1896) was a celebrated author and journalist, published *Kate Field’s Washington* (1890-95), was a supporter of black rights, lobbied for the creation of Yosemite National Park and was founder of one of the first American women’s clubs. She was descended from a family of actors and playwrights and her wealthy uncle had tried to stop her from working. She replied that she would “accept poverty if necessary, but until then I want freedom to work in whatever direction I feel called” (Scharnhorst 40). Field was a dyed in the wool entrepreneur: she represented and wrote the advertising copy for Alexander Graham Bell’s new telephone in the United States and it was her singing voice that Queen Victoria heard when she first held the device at Osbourne in 1878. She built the brand for the California wine industry. The New York Times described her wearing a scandalous new bathing costume and she was labelled a “garb authority” later in life as she attempted to build a clothing co-operative that lost others’ investments. Field is purported to be the model for journalist Henrietta Stackpole in [Henry James’](#) *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

In France one of the most important nineteenth-century fashion periodicals was *La Mode Illustrée: Journal pour la famille*. Its editor was a Madame Emmeline Raymond who ran the journal for the astonishing stretch of time from its establishment in 1860 until she died in 1902. She was also the foreign correspondent to *Harper’s Bazar*. Her work ethic and scrutiny of every aspect of the magazine’s production was frequently commented upon.

In the United Kingdom *The Daily Mail* had a woman's section every issue from its establishment in 1896. *The Daily Mirror* was launched as a woman's newspaper with a female editor, Mary Howarth, in 1903. It was folded in 1905, becoming an illustrated paper. The British papers struggled with news from Paris that was considered too elitist and out of touch with the lives of working and middle-class women. If you wanted to gaze at the clothes and stories of the great actresses and demi-monde of the period in expensive half-tone grisaille photogravures there was always *Le Théâtre* from Paris.

Yet other famous women editors were not so comfortable with working in this fashion space. In the American South editor Mrs Mary E. Bryan argued in "Why Women Should Read Newspapers" that women needed to engage with the wider world in the mid nineteenth century. "But not for you shall I write pretty butterflies of fashion", she wrote. We see an image of American women actively engaging together in the street with up-to-date news in a photograph from the papers of Rosika Schwimmer in 1903 [figure]. The latter was a Hungarian pacifist-feminist who was a correspondent for several European newspapers and nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1946. Accused of being a socialist in the USA, she was unlikely to have been writing notes on fashion unless they were asides about women's attire as symbolic of their subservient position.

Of course, feminist journalists did not necessarily spurn clothes. We know from literary studies that the issue is more complex than that. Not all women enjoyed the process of selecting, acquiring, and managing clothes: Virginia Woolf is a good example of an author who in her personal life found the adoption of contemporary fashion vexing and hard work: 'I tremble and shiver all over at the appalling magnitude of the task...' [Women's History 523]. Nonetheless, she felt dress important for characterisation and also for understanding modernity. But other modernists who were young women in the Edwardian period such as the lesbian couple Madge Garland (born Marjorie McHarg in Melbourne in 1898, died 1990) and Dorothy Todd ['Dody'] (1883-1964), who ran British *Vogue* in the 1920s, clearly thought fashion performed important cultural "work". They promoted Bloomsbury and other avant-garde circles, and Garland and Todd helped to dress and style Woolf, once noting she looked like she had a wastepaper bin on her head. Todd commissioned Woolf reluctantly to write several articles for *Vogue*; most of Woolf's income from 1904-1919 came from journalism, not literature. Todd (Editor) and Garland (Fashion Editor) lived together openly in Chelsea and ran stories such as 'What Spinsters are Wearing', revealing the uber-chic

lesbian *demi-monde* including Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge in word and image until Todd was sacked by its publisher Condé Nast in 1926. Upon their objection he threatened them with legal action to expose their ‘morals’. Garland went on to establish the first fashion courses at Royal College of Art London in 1947, therefore producing curricula, which are also a form of writing.

### Summary

Fashion following the collapse of the old regimes from the eighteenth to the mid nineteenth centuries became a more complex matter for women of all classes. It moved away from the world of the court to that of the actress, typist or even the university student; advertisements for servant girls stated “no corsets” and activist suffragettes adopted either alternative or ultra-fashionable dress; there was no one template for women and fashion in the nineteenth century. Whether celebrating, castigating or navigating fashion, fashion provided many Victorian women writers and journalists with both subject and object for their work.

**Cross-References:** Beeton, Isabella; Corset Controversy; Cosmopolitanism; Designers; Editors; Education; Household Management; Journalism; Patterns; Suffrage

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