

BOOK REVIEW

## From Spinster to Career Women: Middle-Class Women and Work in Victorian England

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Anna J. Brecke

Rhode Island School of Design, Rhode Island, United States Email: [abrecke@risd.edu](mailto:abrecke@risd.edu)

*From Spinster to Career Women: Middle-Class Women and Work in Victorian England* is a fascinating history of women's labor and professionalization in fact and fiction. Young gives a history of women advocating for the right to work, and the representation of that work in fiction, that feels surprisingly relevant today. In the historical chapters, she argues for the professionalization of what we might consider pink-collar careers—nursing and typewriting, or secretarial work—to place them on equal footing with concurrent professional careers occupied by men. Young's choices of nursing and typewriting over other professions open to women, such as education, function especially well as these professions relied on developments in medicine and technology in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. This book joins a current conversation about Victorian work, and the always developing body of critical material about the diverse areas of lived experience where women's movements advanced in the nineteenth century.

The book has two sections, each of which addresses an area of women's professional development in the work force. Each section balances extensive research into public conversations concerning women's labor that was carried out in the Victorian press with representations of nursing and typewriting, or clerking, in short and long fiction. Chapter 1 makes a case for the way changing attitudes towards nursing as a profession worked to advance the cause of women's work by depicting nursing as a professional career for middle-class women on par with men's medical careers, and not charity work or blue-collar work. Chapter 2 further examines the interaction between gender and class in disputes over nursing reform and the role of new-style trained nurses within the hospital hierarchy. Chapter 3 brings fictional and fictionalized memoir-style accounts of nursing into conversation with the historical events chronicled in the first two chapters. Chapters 4 and 5 do the same for the professionalization and literary representation of the typewriter, paying particular attention to the way in which typewriting was not initially associated women's labor. Typewriting and nursing as careers for middle-class ladies followed similar paths of professional development and met with similar opposition centered around questions of class and gender. Young points to several careers that were seen as women's work by the end of the century but focuses on nursing and typewriting as areas of women's work that underwent a process of professionalization in this period.

Young's chapters on the history of nursing, titled "The Woman Question and the One Needful Thing: Work" and "The Strong-Minded Victorian Nurse: The Disputes

over Nursing and Hospital Reform,” work in tandem to introduce the professionalization of nursing as a women’s career, and then catalogue the controversies that plagued nursing’s evolution into a rigorously trained and well-respected profession. The professionalization of nursing, Young argues, relied on a convergence of a change in “habits of thinking” from the public and the rise of “new-style nurses” who were well-prepared through training and education to take positions in hospitals. The new “habit of thinking” she discusses is the shift in the late part of the nineteenth century from thinking of middle-class women’s working as the regrettable resort of the unmarried and economically dependent to an intentional choice by women who wanted to enter the workforce and establish themselves in careers. By establishing training programs and codifying the education and duties of the professional nurse, nursing schools and religious sisterhoods worked to provide credibility to nursing as a women’s profession. Conflict arose in the 1870s and 1880s between doctors, who were likely to be of “humble” class backgrounds, and “lady nurses,” who were likely to be middle-class and well-educated. Class status and medical hierarchy were at odds in the hospital setting, where “outside this culture, the granddaughter of a bishop would not take orders from the son of a wharfinger”; however, inside the hospital a middle-class lady-nurse would be expected to be subordinate to a doctor who was her social inferior (54). Young uses press accounts of the publicly conducted clash between doctors and nurses to illustrate how “new-style” nurses were initially received into hospital settings. An interesting side note in this section is the quiet fading away of the male nurse, who had played a prominent role in military contexts and private hospitals, but who was relegated to mental-health facilities and similar institutions unsuitable for lady-nurses by the turn of the twentieth century.

Young devotes a good deal of time to analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853) as both contaminated and redeemed by her working life. She sheds new light on the redemption arc of this fallen woman character as a lady-nurse, while positing Ruth as a kind of ur-lady-nurse whose narrative precedes most texts in this genre. Young argues that Ruth is both virtuous and fallen, a middle-class lady and a working woman, and as such a character who was not neatly definable when the novel was published, or today by modern readers familiar with other fallen-woman texts. By the end of her story, Ruth represents a fictionalized version of the lady-nurse rather than the Dickensian Sairey Gamp depicted at a moment in time before the lady-nurse became the real-life norm. By combining the necessity of laboring for money with the idea of nursing as a charitable vocation, Ruth can be redeemed at the close of the novel. Young makes a salient point that Ruth must be redeemed for both her fallenness and her participation in nursing, as both situations undermine her as a representation of appropriate womanhood. In this way, the novel becomes a proving ground for the controversies that follow the professional nurse in fiction and reality over the coming decades.

In this section Young also tackles the evolving nature of literary representations of nursing that follow *Ruth*. Mid-century short stories about nursing establish some of the hallmarks of the genre for nursing tales: memoir or fictionalized accounts of real nurses contradict negative public impressions, and romanticized or fictional accounts depict adventurous young nurses going overseas to work with the military, whereas stories in the *Girl’s Own Paper* and nursing novels showed the profession to be a life of womanly self-sacrifice and hard work. Nursing fiction undermined the working-class Sairey Gamp stereotype, lauded nurse characters who did not choose nursing over marriage, and created the role of the nurse as a “raconteuse” telling the story of those she

nurses rather than her own. In the memoir section, Young addresses accounts of nurses that helped to bolster the public perception of the nursing profession. As the debates in the 1870s and 1880s concerning lady-nurses became more stringent, fictionalized memoirs and biographies of nurses worked to contradict the contentious image of hospital politics painted by the press. Particularly notable in this grouping of texts is William Ernest Henley's "Hospital Outlines: Sketches and Portraits" recounting his time spent at the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh in the 1870s, which shows both old- and new-style nurses in a positive light; and the serial "The Wards of St Margaret's" (1894), which redefines the spinster at its close as a retired professional woman who has lived a full and useful independent life. Adventurous young nurses travel to foreign countries unaccompanied by parents or chaperones. In realistic accounts, nurses reveal the humdrum nature of their daily lives, whereas in fiction nursing becomes entwined with the love story and marriage plot that met the expectations of the reading public in novels like Elizabeth Lysaght's *A Long Madness* (1877), L. T. Meade's "A Girl in Ten Thousand" (1894–95), and George Manville Fenn's *Nurse Elisia* (1892).

Shifting her focus to the typewriter, Young uses the same format to create historical context for typewriting as a professional career for women, and fictional representations of women working as typewriters. Highlighting the gendered and class connotations of typewriting illustrates the desirability of these jobs for middle-class ladies. Despite the developments of the twentieth century that would color clerical work as pink-collar, there was a brief period in the later nineteenth century when clerical work was not yet associated with women's labor, making clerking and typewriting positions highly sought after roles for middle-class ladies seeking professional employment. In chapter 4, "Work and the Challenges of Modernity: The Victorian Typewriter," Young follows the structure she established in the chapters on nursing by looking to the Victorian press for public debate about the rising employment of women in male-dominated offices. A main undertone in the criticism of women's clerical work was that it was "simple" enough that women could take it on, voiced in the 1876 *Civil Service Review* report that diminished the "efforts of women working in governmental departments by referring to the 'small duties of their small offices'" (106). Young notes that opinion pieces devaluing women's contributions to the workplace helped to reinforce the actual devaluation of clerical labor and justify the lower salaries paid to women workers.

Importantly, in this chapter Young calls into question previous scholarship that showed typewriting to always have been considered a women's profession, akin to the telegraph or telephone operator. Young examines a crucial period in the 1870s and 1880s revealing that like nursing, typewriting and clerical work were places where women's innovation and advocacy drove their entry into the professional labor force. The technological development of the typewriting machine "allowed women to be active agents in defining a role for themselves in the commercial world" (116), and by the 1880s schools were established by women to train other women in typewriting and various clerical work. Notable are the efforts of Marian Marshall, whose Society for Promoting the Employment of Women established the first London-based typewriting course for women in 1884, and American Margaret Longley, who first suggested the ten-fingered method of typing at the First Annual International Congress of Shorthand Writers in 1882. Unlike nursing, however, typewriting did not hold status as a professional career for educated women due to a job market plagued by cheaply trained typists and increasingly low-wage positions. This downturn did not diminish the importance of the profession as one that facilitated women's economic independence and entry into the workforce more broadly.

In fiction, the typewriter presents a conundrum. On the one hand, as it is a new profession, fictional accounts are not encumbered by previous iterations of the trope, as nursing stories had had to contend with the specter of Sairey Gamp. On the other, the depiction of professional, independent working women was not common, nor was typewriting itself a stable profession. Young focuses on novels in which typewriting, and the women employed as typewriters are depicted in complex ways, as well as examining the sometimes unflattering comedic representations of the typewriter in sketches and cartoons. James Payne's *Thicker Than Water* (1884) and George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) echo the public debate about typewriting and clerical work as suitable occupations for middle-class ladies. Payne's Mary Marvon is ultimately unsuccessful as a professional, and the close of the novel sees her story reconciled in appropriate marriage. Gissing's novel features a typewriting school run by progressive thinkers Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot, who see the typewriting profession as a means to female emancipation. George Brown Burgin's *Settled Out of Court* (1898) gives us another successful version of the independent typewriting woman. Geraldine Mitton's *A Bachelor Girl in London* (1893) gives a perhaps more realistic version of the typist in protagonist Judith's struggle to support herself in the city. Mitton's novel fictionalizes the grueling real-life circumstances of a job market flooded with underqualified typists looking for work. Grant Allen's *The Typewriting Girl* (1897) takes a comic approach to these struggles, and Young interprets his typewriting heroine Juliet as a kind of foil to Mitton's realistically portrayed Judith. Each of these novels manages to illustrate the precarity of typewriting's status as a profession for middle-class ladies. In some comedic representations, the typewriter figures in what Young calls "frankly sexist jokes" (131), and others use the typewriter as a kind of romantic comedy heroine. Lighthearted treatments of the typewriter serve to undermine the professionalization of the field as many of them center around typists who eventually marry their employer after a proposal scene in which the typewriter machine plays a part. Whether comic, sexist, or earnest, these typewriter narratives share the common theme of navigating unprecedented relationships between men and women required by the new phenomenon of working women in offices. Young closes this section with a discussion of the typewriter as a cultural symbol whose presence in the Victorian imagination had come to represent "a modern young woman, embarking on an independent (usually urban) life" (153). This symbolic typewriter appears in John Fulford's *Some Unoffending Prisoners* (1899) and Ménie Muriel Dowie's *The Crook of the Bough* (1898), in which both machine and typist come to represent a kind of uneasy modernity.

By focusing on nursing and typewriting, two professions that today continue to be seen as women's work, Young's book not only uncovers a historical record of women's efforts to step into the public sphere and establish themselves in the workforce, it also provides context for ongoing struggles for workplace equality that persist in the twenty-first century. The framework provided by these early women's labor-rights movements serves to contextualize depictions of women working as nurses and typewriters in fiction in a way that gives valuable insight into the lived experience of Victorian women. Despite evidence to the contrary, the cultural myth that Victorian middle-class women rarely worked persists, and Young's book labors to help dispel that misconception by revealing the fascinating development of two women's professions. *From Spinster to Career Woman* is an important addition to the history of work and to the study of proto-feminist fiction. As a history of women's public-sphere work, this book chronicles a transitional period in which cultural ideals about domesticity and womanhood were contested by women's efforts to create professional spaces for themselves to occupy.

This book will be immensely valuable to those working on nursing and clerical work histories and their representation in fiction. More broadly, Young's work offers possibilities for anyone researching or teaching on women's labor movements and the public reactions to a workforce that increasingly included women in the later part of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Young's critical examination of women's efforts to carve a space for themselves in these professions will be of interest to scholars of early feminism and the women who organized those movements.

**Anna J. Brecke** is a lecturer at the Rhode Island School of Design. Her research focuses on gender and popular media in the nineteenth century and today, including noncanonical nineteenth-century women's writing, television and the gendered body, and gender in supernatural/speculative fiction. Her 2021 book *Widening the Sphere: Mid-to-Late Victorian Popular Fiction, Gender Representation, and Canonicity* examines the incomplete picture of women's writing and the Victorian novel more broadly created by the historical exclusion of women writers in popular genres from studies on Victorian literature and culture.