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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Emily Marie Disher entitled “Negotiating a Feminist Consciousness: Textual Interactions in the Women's Penny Paper.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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Negotiating a Feminist Consciousness: 
Textual Interactions in the *Women’s Penny Paper*

A Thesis 
Presented for the 
Master of Arts 
Degree 
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Emily Marie Disher 
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Abstract

This thesis examines both the heteroglossia and intertextuality of three important sections of the Victorian *Women’s Penny Paper*—the correspondence columns, “Out and About” advice column, and advertising pages. A study of each section in conversation with the others reveals the ways in which the paper built upon the shared interests of its readers to create a community that fostered a feminist consciousness. Ultimately, the intersection of consumer culture and feminist ideals both echoed and shaped by the pages of the *WPP* highlights the ways late nineteenth-century feminists negotiated their feminist identities amidst complex and conflicting influences.
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Introduction

It was truly a stroke of luck that I found the *Women’s Penny Paper*, tucked away in microfilm storage at the University of Tennessee Libraries. That the relatively short-lived penny weekly survived the nineteenth century is nothing short of a miracle in itself (penny papers were nearly as disposable as broadsides), and now only seven universities in the United States hold microfilm copies. Amidst scholarly research, the *WPP* flies almost entirely under the radar, while its predecessors and competitors find ample discussion among academics. Even in comprehensive works such as Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston’s *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*, which contains a chapter on “Feminism and the Press,” the *WPP* goes completely undocumented. In *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society*, the *WPP* receives a brief line when one article incorrectly states that the *Women’s Herald* grew “indirectly” from the *WPP* (it, in fact, developed directly out of the *WPP*, as its editor explicitly states when she changes the periodical’s name but not its content in 1891) (Niessen 275). In fact, the best description of the *WPP* outside its microfilm introduction seems to reside in David Doughan and Denise Sanchez’s annotated bibliography, *Feminist Periodicals: 1855-1984*. Doughan and Sanchez describe the periodical as “Lively and uncompromising feminism; the most vigorous feminist paper of its time” (13). Oddly enough, this “vigorous feminist paper” receives little notice amidst scholarship about nineteenth-century feminism.¹

¹ It is important not to confuse my use of the word “feminism” here with the more contemporary attitudes and actions we have come to associate with the term during the twentieth century and beyond. I use the term feminism in this paper to refer to the attitude and actions of a group of progressive-minded Victorian
It is important to introduce this publication into the discussions of Victorian feminism, periodicals, and culture, because, as its content reveals, it provided a stage for important and controversial feminist issues of the day to unfold and interact. As Wendy B. Sharer writes in “Disintegrating Bodies of Knowledge: Historical Material and Revisionary Histories of Rhetoric,” “Concern about the past means that revisionist historians have an obligation to seek out and advocate the preservation of material traces of the past when those traces are threatened by disintegration and discard” (122). In addition, it is our obligation as scholars to bring these material traces into the academic discussion to add dimension to the histories we write and constantly rewrite. It is my hope that this thesis will bring the *WPP* into focus, and shed new light on discussions of nineteenth-century feminism, consumer culture, and periodical genres.

**Birth of the WPP**

The *WPP* (1888-1890) was published out of London and created by founder and editor Henrietta Müller, who was well-known in feminist circles for her passionate promotion of strong feminist ideals. In *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England*, Jane Martin writes of Müller’s participation on the London School Board and the Educational Endowments Committee (43). Although Müller created the latter, she was snubbed and not appointed as Chairman. Martin notes women who sought to create better living and working conditions for females across class lines, spoke out for the advancement of women in the public sphere, and worked toward gender equality while seeking to preserve certain stereotypes which marked their gender as distinct and separate from men.

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*2 The *WPP* ran from 27 October 1888 through 6 January 1890, when it became the *Women’s Herald*. Though its name changes, it remains essentially the same paper, until it becomes politically liberal in April 1892, when Müller moves to India and relinquishes her involvement with the paper. Pidduck, William. Publisher’s Note. *Women’s Journals of the Nineteenth Century. Part I: The Women’s Penny Paper and Women’s Herald, 1888-1893.* 1 (1888-90): reel 1.*

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that Müller never received the recognition due to her for her contributions because “on the one hand, [she was] too independently feminist, on the other [she] espoused more radical politics. It certainly seems that Henrietta found her ambitions thwarted by a combination of male obstructionism and an interesting lack of female solidarity” (44). This “interesting lack of female solidarity” seems to have occurred because Müller was too forceful in her ideas—ideas that were extreme among both men and women of the late nineteenth century. Müller espouses many of these ideas in a paper she delivers at a Men’s and Women’s Club meeting on 9 July 1885 entitled “The Other Side of the Question.” In it, she responds to an essay on the woman question by the club’s founder Karl Pearson, and heralds women’s moral strength as superior to men’s physical strength as a measure of social power, therefore implying that women’s self control and high morals place them above men (Bland 13). This essay seems to have contributed to Müller’s reputation among the women as a “manhater” (Martin 44), but despite such criticisms, she remained undeterred in her promotion of women.

Müller was a highly-educated and well-traveled woman who spoke six languages (Martin 60) and was largely concerned with the education of women and the presence of women’s voices in the public sphere.³ In a letter to Karl Pearson on 29 March 1888, she discusses her resignation from the Men’s and Women’s Club, adding,

I hope to start a rival club for discussing the same class of subjects, but no men will be admitted—you will say this is prejudice, I will not stop to deny it. I will merely say that in my club every woman shall field a voice, and shall learn how to use it; it matters not in the first instance what her opinion may be, it does matter

³ For more on Müller’s accomplishments and activism, see Bland 30, 164.
very much that she should learn to express it freely and fearlessly (quoted in Martin 45).

It seems that this “club” manifested itself in the Women’s Penny Paper, which hit newsstands the following October.

The WPP does, in fact, seem to do exactly what Müller wanted her club to do. First, the WPP excludes men from its contributors of articles, with only one exception when Müller publishes an interview conducted by a man. In fact, the St. James Gazette ran an article accusing the WPP of falsehood and inconsistency when they discovered that the all-female publication had committed this blunder. Müller’s scathing response embodies her commitment to her publication and to women’s intelligence, power, and voice. She writes:

The St. James Gazette sings a loud song of triumph because, out of our 78 interviews which have been running on regularly since we started in October, 1888, one has been admitted which was written by a man, and the writer jumps to the conclusion—how like a man!—that there was necessity in the case.

If we women can write and publish 78 interviews, we can write and publish 79 or 779, and find no mystery nor difficulty in it. No, my friend! One swallow does not make a summer, nor was it “deemed necessary to resort to a man to conduct and describe” an interview on Lady Florence Dixie. There was no necessity in the case at all. A friendly offer was made spontaneously and was accepted. It would have been intensely ungracious and narrow-minded to have refused it. Voila tout.

The notice in the St. James Gazette is instructive, for it shows, what after we all
knew before, that some people would rather not believe that a paper can be conducted and written by women only.

The Women’s Penny Paper proves this fact, and proves it up to the hilt. Out of America we believe that our example is unique, but there are several journals in the United States entirely run by women, and run very successfully. (Müller, “‘The St. James’ Gazette’ on ‘Women’s Penny Paper,’” 318)

This reply encompasses Müller’s commitment to women, as she competes in a largely male periodical market. She stands by the subheading of her paper, which boasts, “The only Paper in the World Conducted, Written, Printed and Published by Women” (3 November 1888, 1).

The second major goal of Müller’s “club,” that “every woman shall find a voice” in the WPP no matter “what her opinion may be,” becomes reinforced through the variety of opinions and political loyalties included in the paper. In the first issue, “Our Policy” states that although women’s periodicals preceding the WPP did well, they “seem[ed] to run in a mechanical way along the old lines, and appear[ed] to dread nothing more than leaving the grooves already formed” (27 October 1888, 1). Müller intends the WPP to be bolder, more courageous, and “open to all shades of opinion, to the working woman as freely as to the educated lady; to the conservative and the radical, to the Englishwoman and the foreigner” (“Our Policy” 1). The paper does, in fact, seem to give space to a range of political opinions and occasionally includes articles from women overseas; however, the voices of working-class women rarely, if ever, find a direct outlet in the WPP.
This is not to suggest that the *WPP* does not champion the causes of working-class women, as many issues facing this group of women find discussion throughout the periodical. In fact, the paper’s creed reads:

She who does not practise altruism, she who is not willing to share her last morsel with another woman, she who neglects to help her Sister Woman, of whatever race, nation, or creed, and who is deaf to the cry of woman’s misery; she who hears another woman slandered and does not undertake her defence as she would undertake her own defence is No True Woman. (*WPP*, 4 October 1890, 594)

This follows Müller’s high ideals for women as morally superior and therefore more socially powerful than men, while reinforcing a community of women from diverse backgrounds. This sense of community, I will argue, provides a unique space for feminists to voice their opinions and critique and reconsider them in a textual dialogue with other women.

**Heteroglossia, Feminism, and the Public**

Based on the principles set forth by Müller, the *WPP* provides an abundant array of issues that progressive-minded Victorian women faced during the late nineteenth century. In addition, it presents a rhetorically complex medium through which women interacted with other women as writers, readers, or both, grappling with changing ideals of femininity and changing women’s roles in society. The multiple and varied voices, or heteroglossia, of the *WPP* make it a complex medium through which to study nineteenth-century feminism. Mikhail Bakhtin explains the importance of heteroglossia in *Discourse in the Novel*: “The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the
background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments—that is, precisely that background that, as we see, complicates the path of any word toward its object” (1205). While Bakhtin refers specifically to the novel, his theory of heteroglossia applies directly to the *WPP* as well; in each section of the *WPP* examined in this thesis, multiple voices and opinions interact with each other, debating a variety of issues and creating a multi-faceted perspective of nineteenth-century feminism. In addition, each section has its own character or voice, and in order to make meaning of the publication each must be studied in conversation with “other concrete utterances on the same theme”—the other sections of the paper.

Each column of the *WPP* contributes to a collective feminist consciousness created by its readers and writers. I have chosen to focus first on those portions of the publication that encourage readers’ written interaction with the paper—the correspondence columns and the “Out and About” advice section—in order to gain a sense of the difficulties they faced and the ways in which they (re)considered their identities in textual conversation with other feminists. In order to understand the tensions surfacing in these sections, I give particular consideration to another predominantly female community in which the *WPP*’s readers inextricably participate through their interaction with the periodical—consumer culture—which surfaces most directly in “Out and About” and the advertising pages. At the intersection of the ideals of the feminist community and the goals of consumer culture, we begin to grasp the conflicting ideals that influenced women in the late nineteenth century. Thus, I explore each of three sections in conversation as they inform and echo one another. Each column presents
debates or inconsistencies that may best be understood through the textual interaction among the three sections of the periodical. It is important to study these pages not to form a better understanding of the interactions of a relatively small group of Victorian women, but to understand the cultural constraints within which all Victorian women were operating and many were attempting to move away from. As I will show, the movement forward is fraught with culturally-enforced ties to feminine tradition. In addition, and just as importantly, the textual space in which these many voices interact—on the pages of this particular periodical—presents a complex and unique medium for the understanding of the rhetoric of the feminist periodical, as part of the greater arena of the Victorian periodical press.

In Chapter One, I investigate the correspondence columns as a starting point from which to understand how multiple voices interact over the common theme of women’s clothing—a subject around which one of the major feminist debates of the day was formed. This debate embodies the conflict between social tradition and women’s progress, which created contradictions in the defining of feminism. I use the work of theorists such as Nancy Fraser to approach the WPP as a “counterpublic” in order to discuss how women navigated between public and private spheres and created a counterpublic of their own through which to formulate and re-formulate their individual identities, as well as a sense of collective consciousness.

In the second chapter I explore the WPP’s “Out and About” column, which began appearing in the paper on 18 January 1890. Through this column, women could again find textual interaction in the paper, yet were inextricably tied to a consumer community reinforced by the column’s writer, “Rambler,” who provided testimonial advertising for
numerous products while promoting the work of feminists. I hope to show that the tensions apparent in the discussion of women’s clothing in the correspondence columns are tied very much to the idea of woman as consumer, which becomes strikingly apparent in this advice column. Here, the same issues arise and find treatment through both Rambler’s and the readers’ voices, but in a space quite different from that of the correspondence columns.

The final chapter will incorporate my findings from Chapters One and Two into a discussion of the advertising pages and how consumerism both echoed and reinforced the tensions feminists faced during the last decades of the nineteenth century. From corset ads to Rational Dress Society meeting reminders, one cannot begin to understand the abundance of ironies, tensions, humor, and concern present on these pages without understanding the larger debates featured in the correspondence columns and the reader interests presented in “Out and About.” Using Barthes’ theory of the visual image, I will explore the ways several representative advertisements work to influence the viewer, often reinforcing stereotypes, while others (particularly those created by feminists) seem to battle against the narrow roles in which most male advertisers attempted to relegate women.

After examining many of the voices contributing to the WPP and the changing definitions of feminist consciousness, I will look at the WPP itself as a voice competing to be heard in a male-dominated periodical market. As feminists sought greater prominence in the public sphere, the creators of the WPP sought greater prominence for their publication: the vehicle through which, as Müller hoped, “every woman shall field a voice, and shall learn how to use it.” In light of this discussion, I will further suggest the
importance of bringing the voices of the *WPP* into academic discussions of feminism, particularly when we understand that most contemporary women’s magazines grow out of a tradition of feminist publications, among which the *WPP* was a founding member. Today, women’s magazines continue to grapple with many of the same issues, and to incorporate many of the same forums for reader participation that we view in the *WPP*. 
Chapter One: “The Manly Young Lady”: Ambivalence in the Correspondence Columns

In the 9 February 1889 issue of the *Women’s Penny Paper*, a correspondent identifying herself as A. B. wrote a letter to the editor in which she expressed her disappointment at the misconceptions many people seemed to harbor toward feminists of her day: “I found it to be a not at all unusual idea that as soon as women took any part in public affairs, or interested themselves otherwise than in their own particular sphere, viz., the home, they must lose their womanly nature, and become manly in their talk, their manners, and their dress” (8). Much of the middle- to upper-class female readership of the *WPP* shared A.B.’s concern about the misconceptions of women who attempted to move into the nineteenth century’s male-dominated public sphere. Women who transitioned into public roles faced much anxiety about their roles in this sphere, particularly related to the ways they should present themselves to a public audience that was quick to label females active in the public as immoral. In order to cope with and discuss difficulties like these, women often carved out safe spaces composed primarily of women through which they could voice grievances and reconsider challenges.

The correspondence columns of the *Women’s Penny Press* are an exemplary model of one such space created by Victorian feminists. Within this space, I have chosen to follow a debate about women’s clothing that finds presence in the periodical beginning in the 16 January 1888 issue; this debate serves as a representative example particularly fraught with the difficulties of women attempting to transcend a centuries-old relegation to the private sphere. During the nineteenth century, women were not only facing new choices between work devoted to the domestic sphere and work in public venues, but they also often tried to preserve traditional ideals of femininity, which sometimes clashed
with practicality and functionality, particularly in the subject of fashion. As the inaugural issue of the *WPP* declares to its readers as part of “Our Policy,” “Although we claim for women a full share of power with all its duties, responsibilities and privileges in public and private life, and although we do so with a full sense of the gravity of our claim, we will not forget the lighter and brighter side of things, the beauty, the brightness and the fun which make the chequered lights on our way” (*WPP*, 27 Oct. 1889, 1). While this statement implies the difficulty of carving out a space in the public sphere, it overlooks the tensions inherent in women’s attempts to preserve “the beauty, brightness and fun” traditionally associated with femininity while forging ahead into the public arena.

The debates surrounding women’s fashion reveal the complexity of women’s presentation of themselves in the public, as they attempted to acquire an equal amount of power outside the private sphere, while trying to distinguish themselves from men through traditional ideals of femininity. The correspondence columns provide a space through which the complex and conflicting values of women’s struggles to reconcile ideals of feminine beauty and morality with their growing desires for independence and increasing importance outside the home could play out. In this chapter, I will show how Nancy Fraser’s definition of subaltern counterpublics creates a framework through which to understand the way in which the correspondence columns became a space for feminist readers struggling to define their feminist identities, to create a group consciousness in a public manner, and to negotiate the appropriate ways to present themselves in a public that they still viewed as distinct and superior to their own feminist community. Following the thread of fashion as it weaves through the columns, I will pay particular attention to the tensions between feminine and feminist ideals. I will also illuminate the difficulties of
reading this correspondence as I discuss the complexities of the rhetorical space it occupies in the *WPP*.

**Considering Private and Public**

The distinction between private and public spheres has long been an elusive one, despite concerted and well-intentioned attempts to pin it down. Jürgen Habermas attempted to define the idea of the bourgeois public sphere in his historical and sociological study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which appeared in German in 1962 and found long overdue translation into English in 1989. Habermas traces the history of the public sphere from its earliest conceptions, to its rise alongside capitalism, to its eventual breakdown in the nineteenth century. While it is not my intention to provide a thorough summary of Habermas here, it is important to point to some of the major characteristics he outlines as he defines the public sphere. He provides the following definition to describe the bourgeois public: “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as public” (27). He then outlines three central characteristics of the sphere. First, Habermas explains that, “equality of status” was not presupposed, but “disregarded . . . altogether” (36); second, issues discussed were those of “common concern” (36); and third, the public was “in principle inclusive” (37). I highlight these three characteristics, which Habermas describes at great length in his work, because they have generated the greatest share of Habermas criticism.

After the translation of *Structural Transformation* into English, many critics began to reexamine Habermas’s definition of the bourgeois public sphere. For instance, several critics, including Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, and Nancy Fraser, have argued
that instead of a single public sphere, we should consider the more realistic possibility of "multiple, overlapping, and often contending public spheres" (Weisser 77). Negt and Kluge, for example, argue that "the public sphere was a tool used by the bourgeoisie to generate profit for themselves and their peers" (Weisser 76). They felt that the issues discussed in the public sphere were bourgeois, rather than "common" concerns; thus, they "envisioned a proletariat public sphere that was a counter sphere" (Weisser 76). They sought a fragmented version of Habermas’s public sphere, where many different publics interact, and therefore diverse voices and issues are heard.

Nancy Fraser takes up Negt and Kluge’s idea of the "counter sphere" in "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." Fraser, one of Habermas’s most prominent feminist critics, emphasizes the nuances overlooked by Habermas’s definition of the public sphere. She suggests that inequalities existing in the public simply cannot be "bracketed or overlooked" (60), so-called "private" topics should not be excluded from the public, and multiple publics, which she calls subaltern counterpublics, compete with one another (69). Fraser explains that the nature of competing counterpublics is complex: “[I]n stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (68). Fraser points to counterpublics as spaces where specific groups can differentiate themselves and discuss issues important among their members, but also suggests that these spaces create foundations from which members of each counterpublic can disseminate their concerns outward to other publics or counterpublics.
Fraser also emphasizes that Habermas’s public sphere was a bourgeois male sphere. Thus, it makes sense to think of this public as a space that excluded women, as we try to make sense of late-Victorian women’s attempts to break into this space and make their voices a part of this male-dominated discourse. Fraser notes that the term “public sphere” “has been used by many feminists to refer to everything that is outside the domestic or familiar sphere,” suggesting that feminists have taken too narrow a view of the public (57). This was certainly the case among feminists of the late nineteenth century, who frequently used the public/private binary when describing their struggles to gain power beyond the domestic sphere. Yet, these early feminists often participated in specific counterpublics, or even, as Lisa Gring-Pemble will suggest, transitional spaces that elude binaries.

Gring-Pemble challenges the public/private binary in her study of feminist correspondence in nineteenth-century America, through which she locates semi-public transitional groups created by women on the path to “a formal public declaration” (44). Citing the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, she writes that in such transitional spaces, “women, who were largely excluded from public discussion, shared, tested, and refined their ideas in a manner that compelled them to articulate their views in a powerful public document” (Gring-Pemble 44). I question Gring-Pemble’s classification of the Seneca Falls Convention as “transitional” rather than public, which she seems to conclude due to the fact that only women comprised the audience. Though not “public” in the Habermasian sense, such a gathering of women would certainly fall under the category of Fraser’s definition of counterpublic. Gring-Pemble does, however, make a convincing argument that women’s letters served as a transitional space between private and public
where women could build a feminist consciousness (41-42). She suggests that the pre-
cursor to the American women’s rights movement involved the “private” correspondence
between two of its leading figures—Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell. Gring-
Pemble explains: “Not entirely public nor completely private, Brown’s letters to Stone
function as a site for transforming her private thoughts into public action” (42). Gring-
Pemble seems to align with Charlotte Hogg in her distinction between public and private:
“the difference between public and private has to do with audience, or the absence of
one” (Hogg 76). She therefore suggests that once the letters became a physical
manifestation of Brown’s thoughts, they receive an audience and are no longer wholly
private—the first step toward public proclamation.

The consciousness-raising aspect of correspondence between women lies at the
heart of Gring-Pemble’s discussion. She notes that close same-sex relationships between
women during the nineteenth century were highly encouraged, and one extremely
important thread in the fabric of these relationships was letter-writing (44). She explains,

This elaborate interweaving of private and public matters highlights the
distinctive features of correspondence as a consciousness-raising medium. . . .

Through their correspondence, Stone and Brown become colleagues, thinkers,
debaters and audiences for each other in a space that linked the public and private.
. . . Drawing on their own private experiences, the thoughts and ideas of other
women in their social networks, and public documents, the women not only refine
how they, as individuals should believe and act in their private lives, but also how
they may act as social advocates in a public realm on behalf of and in tandem with
other individuals. (Gring-Pemble 46-7)
In the case of Stone and Brown, as well as other forward-thinking women both in America and Britain, letters became a safe bridge in which ideas could be raised among an intimate group of women, before these ideas became public for a larger audience. It seems plausible to conclude that the next step toward public identity would include publicizing the ideas held in the letters, if not the letters themselves.

If letter-writing was already a comfortable and familiar genre for women’s discourse, it should come as no surprise that women in late nineteenth-century Britain found an audience of supportive, progressive-minded women through the correspondence columns of feminist periodicals. Through this medium, women created a community through which they could find others like themselves. As Susan Herbst writes in *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream*, “Within marginal publics, community building is critical. Groups on the political and social fringes of society often, either consciously or unconsciously, build collectives that bind together their members” (2). Women did just this through the correspondence columns. In addition, Fraser, Green, and Johnston assert that “the periodical press offered women a means of engaging with the public domain. . . . In the absences of electoral participation for women in the parliamentary process, the periodical press was a vital means of engagement in society, politics and culture” (150-152). Correspondence columns provided female readers a textual space where they could grapple with changing definitions of womanhood, renegotiate their individual identities, and participate in a growing group consciousness; thus, these columns serve as an exemplary model of a textual counterpublic created by Victorian feminists.
Negotiating within the Printed Forum

Among the few feminist periodicals available during the nineteenth century, the *WPP* stood apart from its predecessors and competing feminist papers because it actually appears to have been, as the subtitle of its second issue boasts, “The only Paper in the World Conducted, Written, Printed and Published by Women” (*WPP*, 2 Feb. 1889, 1). Many other “all-female” publications merely disguised the participation of men on their staff. As Lynne Warren explains in “‘Women in Conference’: Reading the Correspondence Columns in *Woman* 1890-1910,” *Woman*, a London periodical aimed at middle- and upper-class women, created an artificial circle of women, “made up as it was of those writing under pseudonyms and under their own names, some of whom were actually men” (130). Thus, while readers sometimes questioned outright the gender of article-writers for *Woman* (Warren 130), the largely feminist readership of the *WPP* might have felt relieved to find a publication of varied voices belonging entirely to women. The ability of these women to interact *textually* in a discussion of matters beyond the domestic and within a community entirely composed of women would have been a rare experience within the Victorian periodical press.4 Thus, the *WPP*’s sense of community fulfilled a unique and needed role in the lives of feminist Victorians.

Part of this feeling of community emerges through the publication’s collaboration of voices. Each issue, for example, begins with an interview with a prominent woman of the day, incorporates articles by female journalists from other publications, uses articles

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from contributors whom the editor may critique or support in her editorials, and prints a seemingly wide spectrum of opinions from readers in the correspondence columns. Fraser, Green, and Johnston highlight the importance of reader contributions to nineteenth-century periodicals: “[R]eaders of the Victorian periodical press frequently acted as unpaid contributors, not only of needlework patterns and recipes, conundrums and instructions for wax flower-making, but also of articles and reviews” (75). Such reader contributions, and the ways articles often speak back to one another, created the impression of an on-going conversation through which readers could experience a sense of belonging.

A lively discussion in the *WPP* displays this conversational tone and showcases the tensions and complexities of one strand of nineteenth-century feminist discussion—the subject of women’s appearance. The situation of women entering the public sphere toward the end of the century was precarious; they not only struggled to reinvent their roles as women, but also grappled with the difficult question of how to present themselves in these new roles. Thus, while women tried to navigate their increasing presence in the public sphere, they had to simultaneously put much thought into the clothing they wore in this arena. Wendy Dasler Johnson writes in “Cultural Rhetorics of Women’s Corsets,” “In retrospect, it is not surprising that early women orators and writers, moving boldly into what had been positions of exclusively male authority, found that they were open to moral question. Positioned as rhetors, women’s bodies became transmitters of powerfully charged sensations” (207). As a woman became more vocal in the public, she constantly combatted questions of her morality. One way to do this without giving up her public presence was to ensure that she dressed as respectably or
morally-upright as possible because clothing, or the way a woman presented her body, was tied directly to conceptions of her morality, as distinct from that of men.

In fact, women who displayed even a hint of masculinity faced harsh criticism from both men and women in Victorian society. Fraser, Green, and Johnston explain, “From the 1860s, constant lampooning of the ‘unfeminine’ occurs in numerous forms from cartoons to non-fiction prose” (173). *Punch*’s campaign against Bloomerism (a fashion in which shorter skirts revealed a woman’s bloomers) in 1851, which includes a relentless series of mocking cartoons (many involving gender role-reversals), is a prime example of the ways the popular press mocked women whose clothing suggested even the slightest similarity to trousers. Thus, feminists often expressed a marked discomfort with women donning androgynous dress, and the pages of the *WPP* became a backdrop for these concerns to play out.

In the 16 January 1889 issue of the *WPP*, a contributing writer named “Minerva” (i.e. goddess of household arts) offers a piece entitled “The Manly Young Lady,” which condemns the uninformed connection citizens sometimes made between women dressed in men’s clothing and supporters of women’s suffrage. She emphasizes the difference between these two groups of women by criticizing the former:

To imitate is to admit superiority and by dressing like a man, . . . and generally aping manly ways, the manly young lady shows in the most sincere of possible ways that she thinks herself inferior to the beings she apes. . . . [W]e believe that the feminine intellect, like the feminine voice is equal but diverse from the male” (Minerva, *WPP*, 16 January 1889, 5).
Minerva cites femininity as a sign of women’s distinction from men and encourages women to set themselves apart from men while attempting to gain power in the masculine sphere. By using the collective pronoun “we,” Minerva invokes a collective consciousness with fellow suffragettes, and goes on (in the name of this collective) to blame men who “degrade womanliness and deny to women social and legal equality,” thus driving some women to “ape manliness” (WPP, 16 January 1889, 5). By positioning men as the “other,” Minerva attempts to appeal to women who have wrongly chosen to dress in masculine attire, while criticizing a particular set of people inclined to make the connection between feminism and androgyny that she finds derogatory.

Minerva’s article receives an impassioned, rhetorically-complex response from Müller in the paper’s next issue. In the 2 February 1889 issue, Müller’s response, likely encouraged by the “several private expressions of approval” incited by Minerva’s piece, showcases a fear of androgyny through her derogatory descriptions of “manly women,” and redirects Minerva’s blame of men onto the so-called manly women themselves (WPP 1). After defending the handsome and well-dressed women at the women’s suffrage meetings, she writes: “In our experience, the manly young woman, who uses a walking-stick, who dresses in a billy-cock hat, is . . . frivolous, empty-headed, and slangy. Woman’s suffrage and woman’s rights in any form, are to her an abomination and an insufferable bore” (Müller, WPP, 2 February 1889, 2). Müller writes to an audience whose majority will agree with her strong words, and also chooses diction that will exhibit her disapproval of androgynous dress and help dispel the erroneous connection between feminists and masculine attire to which Minerva points. She goes on to set forth a very distinct difference between this manly woman and those women who belong to
The Rational Dress Society, an organization primarily composed of women who argue for changes in women’s fashion that will make clothing more practical and healthy, but will still promote femininity as distinct from masculine clothes.

While Müller’s response foregrounds important tensions and complexities within the late nineteenth-century feminist community, it also serves other important purposes. First, it sets the tone of the *WPP* as an interactive textual community, where contributing writers may partake in conversation amongst one another, and their content can be reacted to and critiqued by the editor herself in a subsequent issue. This community, or counterpublic, allowed women to examine aspects of feminism in a recursive manner, as they negotiated their “membership” in the feminist community. Additionally, Minerva’s original article and Müller’s response spark heated discussion among readers in the correspondence section of the paper for the succeeding eight issues, and the subject resurfaces through discussions of Rational Dress in later issues.

In the same issue that presents Müller’s fiery response to Minerva’s original article, we immediately begin to see the dimensions of *WPP*’s textual community through readers’ responses appearing in the correspondence columns under the all-caps title “The Manly Young Lady.” The first response comes from C.E.M., who blames women’s choices to dress in men’s clothes on the personal whims of these women, arguing that men’s clothes are not more comfortable than women’s. She goes on to reinforce Minerva’s point that women who wear men’s clothes become wrongly associated with suffragettes, thus damaging the reputation of the suffragettes, who seek to gain equality while retaining femininity (C.E.M. 7). The next issue includes a similar letter from A.B., who describes her “satisfaction of convincing” a skeptical man that most suffragettes do
not try to copy men’s clothes and attitudes (7). A.B.’s letter describes the way some feminists, like herself, attempted to tear down the false stereotypes Minerva addresses.

Soon after A.B.’s letter appears, one from Sara S. Hennell, a relatively prominent figure in the feminist circle (or at least among the pages of the WPP), underscores the morality issue at the heart of the concerns about dress. Hennell explains, “If men and women have different moral standpoints, as I think that in some measure they have, it must be incongruous and distasteful that any effort should be made at a close resemblance between the sexes” (7). This letter emphasizes both the distinction between men and women morally (with the woman taking on the role of moral example), and the subsequent ties Victorians made between traditional feminine dress and good morals.

The cultural values surrounding corsets, which arise as a subject of concern in this on-going discussion of clothing in the WPP, bolstered this connection between clothing and morality. Johnson summarizes Genevieve Stebbins’s discussion of corsets in Delsarte System of Expression to explain the values expressed by a woman wearing a corset. When wearing a corset,

the chest as the seat of emotions or the ‘mental zone’ is always thrown into prominence; the region of the heart (securely encased by bone or metal and stiff cloth) is the specific seat of the affections; and the abdomen or the ‘vital zone’ is the seat of the appetites. Wearing a corset shoves the chest out, pulls the abdomen in. Thus, in a nineteenth-century corset, a woman’s moral zone is ‘thrown into prominence’ while her appetites would be kept well under control. (Stebbins quoted in Johnson 211)
As this summary shows, through wearing a corset the female body signified multiple cultural values, many of which were tied to women’s morality.

Additionally, women who wore corsets, and other fashionable markers of femininity, were marked as middle- or upper-class, a distinction that even the most philanthropic middle-class Victorian woman would have been reluctant to eradicate. As economist Thorstein Veblen explains in his famous study, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), “[P]roductive labor is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and therefore special pains should be taken in the construction of women’s dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact (often indeed a fiction) that the wearer does not and cannot habitually engage in useful work” (126). Thus, despite the fact that many middle-class women were very active in their daily lives, they strove to appear as though they did little. As Valerie Steele explains in *The Corset: A Cultural History*,

The bourgeoisie liked to think of themselves as distinctively different from the laboring classes. A slender waist, for example, like dainty hands, was often perceived as a natural sign of superior ‘race’ or hereditary class status. Caricatures not infrequently contrasted the ample torsos of working-class women with the diminutive corsets worn by bourgeois ladies. Class distinctions sometimes overlapped with distinctions of gender, as working-class women were envisioned as being large and strong like men. (Steele 48)

Corsets, like heavy skirts and heels, distinguished women from men, and middle-class women from working-class women.

The tension between preserving class and gender markers and their lack of practicality surfaces on many occasions in the correspondence columns, where women
debate the functionality (or lack thereof) of women’s dress. As middle-class women began taking more active roles outside the home, many of them found that women’s fashions hampered their activities, while others spoke out in favor of corsets, heels, and full skirts. M.R.R. writes, for instance, that her “tailor-made frock which was appropriate to [her] inactive life in England” becomes, after a long walk “covered in mud for three inches round the bottom,” and she complains of her “pitiable” appearance (7). “A Dainty Housekeeper,” on the other hand, writes, “One can be just as useful and lead as active a life in the much abused articles of attire as many women who throw fashions to the winds and go in for divided skirts, no corsets, &c., &c.” (295). Of course, the “pitiable-ness” of one’s appearance may well have depended on the length and type of activity of the woman; most middle-class females, however, sought to look neat, clean and feminine in all their activities, in part to distinguish themselves from the working class.

Even among some of the most progressive-minded feminists of the nineteenth century, these connections between fashion and morality, and fashion and class, would have been difficult to combat. After all, many forms of dress that came into question during the latter half of the nineteenth century found reinforcement through that binding concept from which many Victorian feminists had difficulty breaking—tradition:

The fact that corsets had been a component of elite fashionable dress for centuries gave corsetry the authority of tradition. . . . During the nineteenth century, many aspects of life were rapidly changing but some traditions, especially those surrounding women, were all the more anxiously retained. Moreover, since most women’s socioeconomic lives depended on marriage, it was understandable that
their mothers and grandmothers should want to maximize both their physical ‘beauty’ and their reputation for propriety. (Steele 51)

As Steele suggests and the correspondence in *WPP* displays, traditions—particularly those relating to fashion or beauty—were difficult to break. With specific ideals of beauty in place, in a culture still dependent upon marriage for its women, introducing new standards of fashion was no easy task. Even Charlotte Stopes, a lecturer at Rational Dress Society Meetings, recognizes the pressure of tradition. She writes in the 1 March 1890 correspondence columns: “We only wish to point out the most dangerous errors [of dress] to those who do not know; and to consult about the best means of improving the fashion in points, which even those who do know, must at present follow, if they do not wish to be singular” (Stopes 223). Stopes notes that, in the name of conformity, even women who recognize the dangers of the current fashions will continue to wear them. E.D.M. adds in her 15 March 1890 letter to the editor, “[W]e must be content to go slowly, and in order not to shock old-fashioned prejudices too deeply, we must satisfy ourselves for the present with simply improving that which we now have” (247).

Some women, however, felt empowered to speak out frankly against traditional connections between fashion and morality, and many did so in the *WPP* correspondence columns. One month after the discussion of “The Manly Young Lady” began, the *WPP* finally published a letter suggesting that women not be so critical of the manly woman. Marian Marshall, a typist at the Type-writing Office at 126, Strand, W.C. (as she declares beneath her signature), suggests that men’s dress has been perfected for its function from years of experience in the working world, and that women might learn from it. She complains about the divided skirt promoted by the Rational Dress Society, noting that it
accumulates as much dirt and grime during a working woman’s daily routine as regular skirts. Appealing to women’s reason, she asserts, “No woman would think she was taking a second place from the simple fact that she imitated a pretty dress worn by another woman . . . ; why, therefore, this ruffling of feathers because the “manly young lady” has the courage which her sisters lack . . . by adopting a sensible style of dress” (Marshall, *WPP*, 2 March 1889, 7). While Marshall’s support of the mannish lady would have been a minority among her peers (as the *WPP* represents by the greater amount of letters both promoting the Rational Dress Society, and defending femininity), she has nevertheless found a space in the correspondence columns where she can vocalize her opinion. And, “As Herbst affirms, “conversation . . . gives public space its vibrancy and its true value” (qtd. in Gring-Pemble 43).

Also within the correspondence columns, Minerva tries to speak out against clothing which seems irrational and impractical but does so by using the values of femininity and morality as an argument against corsetry. In her letter published on 23 February 1888, she responds to Müller’s editorial supporting the Rational Dress Society. At this point, Minerva has an opportunity to clarify her early statements (here we see the recursive role of identity formation in the correspondence columns), as well as express her delight that her article has echoed with readers. In this letter, she underscores the necessity for dress reform as she briefly alludes to the negative health effects of corsets and heavy skirts on women who are “the mothers of the race” (Minerva, *WPP*, 23 February 1888, 7). Emphasizing the woman’s motherly role, Minerva reinforces not only ideals of femininity, but also important moral implications in Victorian culture, in an attempt to counter the long-held associations between corsetry, morality, and femininity.
held by so many. She writes, “Every man is dependant for his life’s health on the constitution of his mother” (Minerva, *WPP*, 23 February 1888, 7). She goes on to emphasize infant deformities from corsets, and suggest that women should be able to “combine beauty, comfort, and health in dress” (Minerva, *WPP*, 23 February 1888, 7). Thus, the mother, or moral guide, should be aided rather than hindered in her ability to promote the health and happiness of her children through the clothes she wears.

The open debate over women’s fashion continues throughout subsequent issues of the periodical, with many women speaking more openly about their own preferences for the practicality and comfort of men’s attire, and their admiration for other women who courageously buck the fashion trends. One example comes from Adel Clive in the 15 March 1890 correspondence columns. She writes, “Why writers and speakers on this subject have such a horror to the word ‘trousers,’ I cannot for the life of me make out” (Clive 7). Her letter includes a reprinting of a letter from her cousin, describing a wedding in which bride, groom, and all attendants wore trousers; it concludes, “[L]et me assure you, dear old pet, that I would sooner resign my right to vote for any election, supposing I possessed the right, than give up wearing trousers” (Clive 7). Despite such open support of trousers, however, most published correspondence suggested that women’s attire could be made just as comfortable as men’s.

True to its claim of non-partisanship, the *WPP* correspondence columns seem to have accommodated a wide range of responses and opinions on the subject from its diverse, yet united readers. Both prominent feminists and timid readers, who sign their letters with initials only, partook in the broad discussion in which they “shared, tested, and refined their ideas in a manner that” would compel many of them to voice their
opinions elsewhere. These women found a forum for discussion where they could feel comfortable that men would not interpose their ideas or mock them for their individual tastes (despite the occasional letter to the editor contributed by a man). Thus, these women succeeded in forming a counterpublic where their differences could coexist alongside their desires for increased power in the political realm.

**Complicating the Space for Discussion**

While readers’ letters appearing in each issue of the *WPP* suggest an open forum through which women of widely-differing opinions could express themselves, we must not be naïve about the control of the editor, which “allow[ed] the magazine to present these columns as having a nominally independent status while preserving its own dominant position” (Warren 127). In fact, the correspondence included in each issue typically occupies less than one page of an eight- or twelve-page issue⁵; it usually appears on the last page before the advertisements, secondary to the other content of the magazine; and it is almost always placed beneath a disclaimer, “[The Editor is not responsible for the opinions of Correspondents.]” in every issue.⁶ As John E. Richardson notes in his article on argumentative discourse theory,

[T]he newspaper not only constructs debates within and between letters, but also contiguously signals the pertinence to the ‘debate’ of the included letters, thereby legitimating their contents; publication has, after all, ‘always been subject to editorial discretion’ . . . and genuine contributions tend to be selected and edited

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⁵ The *WPP* expanded its paper from eight to twelve pages on 25 May 1889.

⁶ Throughout the issues I examined, spanning from 27 October 1888 to 30 March 1890, the correspondence columns uncharacteristically appear without the disclaimer and under the title “Letters to the Editor” rather than “Correspondence” during the issues appearing 30 November 1889 through 4 January 1890.
for publication in accordance with editorial policy, or with an eye to political and commercial interests. (148)

No doubt Müller would have faced these considerations; she certainly would have made the choices that would best benefit her paper. It is difficult, however, to ascertain the extent to which Müller edited and censored the letters submitted to the WPP, because we can know neither the volume of letters submitted, nor the content of those omitted. What we can ascertain, however, is that the WPP seems to give considerable space to certain feminist figures, including Minerva, Stopes, and Hennell. However, each of the letters contributed by these women provoked thoughtful and even excited responses from other readers. Müller even allowed these frequent contributors and other correspondents to banter back and forth a bit in the correspondence columns, reinforcing a sense of real conversation, vital to any community trying to foster a sense of belonging. Furthermore, despite the unequal distribution of voices, other readers did not seem deterred, but rather inspired by the familiar voices to respond with a letter of approval or disagreement, and among these responses Müller seems to make a concerted effort to include a wide range of opinions. Ultimately, she seems to have provided a space that both benefited her publication and facilitated a conversation that represented multiple sides of each issue.

Although Müller seems to have been fair in some regards, readers may have overlooked some of her biases; it would have been difficult to diffuse the sense of superiority most women associated with the editor of a paper, simply because that person ultimately controlled the publication:

The voice of the editor is, however, almost always inflected with a sense of superiority over the reader, adopting a tone of natural ascendancy. This is true
across the entire range of journals, from the influential quarterlies to the penny weeklies. What is more, the assumption of the unquestioned editorial authority is particularly noticeable, whether the readership is male or female, whether the editor is female or male. (Fraser, Green, and Johnston 78)

While this description does, in fact, ring true for Müller (referring specifically to her condescending words in the aforementioned editorial response to Minerva’s “Manly Young Lady”), her feminist readers would likely have responded positively to her authority, because of the distinct similarities they shared. As previously mentioned, the all-female staff of the *WPP* set it apart from its contemporaries, and it was still relatively rare to find a female editor (only in America would one find another female editor at this time). An audience of feminists seeking to gain equal power with men would likely have admired Müller’s powerful role as an editor and her courageous endeavor to start the *WPP*. In addition, Müller, like her readers, would have shared a similar middle- to upper-class lifestyle and ideals common to many women of the same social class (including the widespread dislike of androgynous clothing.)

Often it feels easy to forget Müller’s editorial presence behind the reader-centered correspondence columns, except for her occasional interjection. While such an interruption happens rarely, Müller does, occasionally, textually moderate the content of the letters she chooses to include in the periodical. For example, in the 23 February 1888 issue, Sara S. Hennell boldly emphasizes her signature of her full name, asking other women not to disguise their names when they send a letter to the paper: “Whenever we, as women, do actually try to utter ourselves, let it be with the full courage of our sex” (Hennell 7). Here, Müller responds in brackets to Hennell’s imploration, noting that the
husbands of many married women prevent them from writing such letters with their signatures, and hoping that the WPP “will encourage some women who are so situated to claim freedom of action” (Müller, WPP, 23 February 1888, 7). Where Hennell seems to emphasize the counterpublic as a “training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics,” Müller seems to remind her, and all readers, that the correspondence columns should be space for “withdrawal and regroupment” for a variety of members of the feminist community. Müller’s commentary here makes her visible in the space where reader’s voices are featured; while she always existed behind this column, monitoring, selecting, and rejecting correspondence, she sometimes breaks the fourth wall, so to speak, and becomes present in a space primarily devoted to writers. She deemphasizes her voice by putting her words in brackets and signing the statement “Ed.,” but nevertheless reminds readers of her inevitable presence, guiding the interactions of the counterpublic.

The content of Müller’s textual interjection reveals greater dimensions of the tensions Victorian feminists cope with, and how they manage to do so, as well as the rhetorical complexities of published correspondence. These women could voice their opinions, but many only found the courage to do so after veiling their identity, even in a forum devoted to and primarily read by women. Dasler Johnson connects the necessity of anonymous writing back to the fear of the woman as rhetor. She writes, “[T]he common stratagem of writing anonymously or under a male pseudonym itself confirms for me that the first women taking on the disposition of an up-front rhetor were suspect” (207). While these women often use their initials rather than a male pseudonym, the attempt to preserve their moral integrity motivated forms of alias among nineteenth-century women
writers. If, in fact, many of these women remained anonymous even in the counterpublic of the feminist periodical, then could they, really, participate in it? After all, Fraser writes that “participation means being able to speak ‘in one’s own voice,’ thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one’s cultural identity through idiom and style” (69). Whether or not some women felt bold enough to sign their names helps to underscore the role of the WPP in the formation of their feminist consciousness—different levels of anonymity represent varying points of feminist identity development.

For the participation of those who were too timid to defy social conventions and their husbands, the correspondence columns can be likened to that which occurs in Gring-Pemble’s “transitional” spaces. The voices of these women could be heard through the expression of their opinions, and they could certainly see the result of their words through the reactions of other letter-writers; yet, they are not full participants in the counterpublic, because they have not staked their identities therein. The timidity of these women reinforces the public nature of the forum, and the risks of forming a presence within this space; while the audience of the publication primarily consisted of women, it did not exclude male readers and the possibility of greater consequences for speaking out therein. As Fraser writes, “Insofar as these arenas are publics they are by definition not enclaves. . . After all, to interact discursively as a member of a public—subaltern or otherwise—is to disseminate one’s discourse into ever widening arenas” (67). On the other hand, women who signed their names to their letters had moved into a role of greater, more confident participation in the counterpublic. The success of the correspondence columns, as well as the publication as a whole, relied on the voices of both types of women, who made up the collective feminist consciousness sustaining the paper.
The correspondence columns truly reflect *WPP*’s heteroglossia, however monitored or edited they may be. Of course, the correspondence columns appearing in the *WPP* do not represent all Victorian women, as only the *WPP*’s readership would find representation therein. The correspondence columns did, however, provide a space for clashing opinions, including those who disagreed with central opinions of the paper, to play into a larger dialogue. Warren explains the significance of this space in *Woman*:

> [E]ngaging with other readers’ contributions . . . feeds into the individual reader’s construction of her self in relation to the textual community of the magazine. . . . [Readers] are able to transcend the more abstract reader-text relationship and enter into a process of exchange with more tangible results. Such readers may be looking for reassurance or may wish to register their independence from the dominant values of the magazine; either way, by participating in the creation of meanings the process of identification becomes more dynamic and highly charged. (123)

This textual interaction between readers and the periodical allowed the reader to affirm her own opinion and identity through a tangible, *published* artifact, which allowed the reader whose letter was selected, and other women who agreed with her, to find their own positions visibly presented in the paper, along with regular contributing writers. Ultimately, many women were able to take part in the formation of a feminist identity, whether by reading the correspondence columns and reflecting on their own positions, or interacting textually through the publication of their letters. In the end, a great majority of the readers could take pride and solace in the fact that their opinions were being disseminated in a public forum—a feminist counterpublic—either directly, for the boldest
women, or vicariously for those still negotiating the complicated and sometimes intimidating avenues becoming available to them.
Chapter Two: Communities and Contradictions: Consumer Culture and the Feminist Consciousness In the “Out and About” Column

While the correspondence columns of the *WPP* were the most direct way for readers of the periodical to participate in the dialogue of the paper, they also interacted through the “Out and About” column, which began to appear in the *WPP* in January 1890. “Out and About,” offered readers the opportunity to dialogue with the column’s writer, known as “Rambler,” by writing into the paper with questions about anything from details of previous *WPP* articles, to women’s education courses, to the best hair comb manufacturers. Unlike the correspondence columns, which facilitated conversation between readers through correspondence, “Out and About” primarily represented its readers’ letters in brief snippets, and only on rare occasions. The conversation here almost always occurred between individual readers and the columnist herself. Yet, the column reinforced the community feeling so prominent in the correspondence columns because Rambler publicly responded to readers’ questions in an attempt to provide useful information to many other readers as well; thus readers found connections through similar questions. While women’s letters were only occasionally published in this section (and only partially), and the column did not appear faithfully in every issue, the column nevertheless allowed women to interact with the columnist directly and find answers to their most pressing questions in the paper.

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Occasionally, other articles replaced the “Out and About” section. Rambler replies to a reader inquiring about the lapse of the column in December 1890, for instance, with “‘The Out and About Notes’ were replaced last week by the article on Christmas Novelties. Even with the increased size of the paper we are very much crowded, and many articles have to wait” (13 December 1890, Rambler 125).
In Chapter One I suggested that the WPP’s correspondence columns were a textual counterpublic, because they provided female readers a textual space where they could grapple with changing definitions of womanhood, renegotiate their individual identities, and participate in a growing group consciousness. While “Out and About” exhibits some of the characteristics of the textual counterpublic found in the correspondence columns, it cannot be considered a true counterpublic because here readers’ voices became obscured behind the dominant voice of the columnist herself. While “Out and About” certainly allowed women another venue to participate in the growing feminist group consciousness, the column lacks the same level of analysis and consciousness-raising that characterizes the correspondence columns. Readers could not only write into the correspondence columns to express their own opinions, but they also found direct engagement with other readers in a space that appeared to be only lightly mediated by Müller. They could analyze the strengths and failings of other women’s arguments and could receive the same kinds of constructive criticism in return. Through these textual conversations, women could reconsider and redefine their own thoughts and opinions by interacting with many members of WPP’s readership. This degree of consciousness-raising is not possible in a column like “Out and About,” where the readers’ voices become secondary to Rambler’s.

A degree of self-cultivation naturally occurs through Rambler’s advice column—readers count on the columnist to guide them in their appearance and their purchases, and even some of the public events they attend. This refining or redefining of ideas, however, is less collaborative than that of the correspondence columns and, as I will show later in this chapter, Rambler’s voice becomes nearly synonymous with the advertisers often
appearing underneath her column and on adjacent pages. Thus, “Out and About” always carries an air of superficiality and motive which contrasts the apparent genuineness of the correspondence columns. The subject matter of “Out and About,” however, echoes and highlights the conflicts and compromises many feminists confronted. In this chapter, I will show that while the correspondence section allowed the greatest freedom for readers to voice their opinions on issues important to them, the recurring “Out and About” column facilitated multiple voices by merging concerns from readers’ letters with a testimonial advertising column under the guise of an advice section. Rambler combines a feminist consciousness with a female consumer community, sometimes successfully reinforcing both by promoting women’s business with female entrepreneurs, and sometimes less successfully seeming to contradict herself and the aims of the WPP. Thus, Rambler reinforces a sense of unity among her readers, by referring to ideas pertinent to the WPP, promoting women’s businesses, and dialoguing with her readers, while complicating feminist concerns by simultaneously reinforcing commercial stereotypes that repressed women. Her column embodies the tensions between the woman as suffragist and the woman as consumer, at the heart of which lie the conflicting values between woman’s progress and traditional feminine ideals.

**Nineteenth-Century Ladies’ Advice Columns**

It seems that no nineteenth-century periodical with a female audience could have been complete without an advice column. As Barbara Onslow writes in “Preaching to the Ladies: Florence Fenwick Miller and her Readers in the *Illustrated London News*,”

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8 The term “advice column” has taken on an association with relationship and sexual advice since the twentieth century. I use the term to refer to a column providing advice on a wide range of topics (which, in the nineteenth-century would not have included sexual advice in a woman’s publication.)
columns addressing domestic concerns were a staple of most women’s periodicals of the century. For instance, she refers to Matilda Browne’s “Spinnings” by “Silkworm” which appeared in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* during the 1870s, and allowed “readers to share their diverse and fragmented concerns over shopping, fashion, and the practical issues of domestic life” (Onslow 88). Onslow explains that readers envisioned “Silkworm” as a kind of friend to whom they could write and from whom they would receive reliable suggestions and advice. Annie Swan’s “Over the Teacups” appearing in *Woman at Home* during the 1890s served a similar purpose (Onslow 90). While advice columns like these, which focused on domestic issues, were common in nineteenth-century England, advice sections addressing both domestic and feminist concerns were not.

Florence Fenwick Miller’s “Ladies’ Page” in the *Illustrated London News* and “Out and About” in the *WPP* may be the most obvious attempts to combine feminist issues into an advice column during the nineteenth century. A comparison between the two, however, reveals two completely different approaches to accomplishing this combination. Fenwick Miller’s column seems very formal and almost never publishes letters or parts of letters from her readers; in fact, her column reads very similarly to the majority of articles in the *WPP*. She focuses considerable attention on charitable and political events, more so than the latest fashions or domestic concerns (though she does address these issues as well). Onslow writes, “The *raison d’être* of the ‘Ladies’ Page’ was more substantial fare. It kept its women readers up-to-date on the achievements of other members of their sex. . . . ‘Ladies’ Page’ readers shared a world of charitable and political initiatives to which they were encouraged to respond” (92). Fenwick Miller’s
serious attitude and subject matter seems to reflect this. In her column’s opening, Fenwick Miller wrote that the “‘women’s sphere may have been ‘Society, Dress, Domesticity and Charity’ . . . [but] ‘To that now is added Culture, Thought and Public Welfare’” (Fenwick Miller quoted in Onslow 91). Onslow notes that Fenwick Miller promised to “touch on such topics ‘with a light hand’” (90), but reading the “Ladies’ Page” reveals that she actually addresses “Society, Dress, [and] Domesticity” with less frequency than political and charitable issues.

When “Out and About” first appears in the 18 January 1890 issue, it appears to be somewhat similar to Fenwick Miller’s column, though perhaps more akin to a column of news briefs. It becomes more personal in tone with ensuing issues, however, eventually including the signature of the endearingly-named “Rambler,” and soliciting letters from readers seeking answers to their questions (15 March 1890, 250). This change may have occurred as an attempt to distinguish this column from the majority of the WPP’s articles, which address more substantial issues. After the transformation, “Out and About” focuses on less serious issues (for the most part), it reads with a more conversational tone, and Rambler incorporates her readers more directly when she includes portions of their letters. While Rambler spends some time discussing important feminist issues, she focuses more on fashion, material possessions, and answering her readers’ inquiries. Rambler seems a bit more frivolous than Fenwick Miller, devoting more space to promoting specific products than encouraging her readers to participate in important feminist causes. Rambler does, however, promotes a very general scope of topics, leaving her column open to a wide array of questions from her readers:
Under the “Out and About” column, we propose, in answer to an expressed wish, to give any information respecting general topics which come within its scope. In this way we may be able to help our readers who live in the country, and as we are constantly “out and about” in the busy world on the look out for the newest ideas and best fashions, our readers may rely upon our doing the best we can for them. (15 March 1890, 250)

Rambler seems to leave her column open to inquiries on a broad range of topics with her vague request for letters concerning “general topics which come within its scope.” The lack of specificity here, however, also gives Rambler a great deal of control to decide which reader concerns would, exactly, fit within her column’s “scope.”

By opening up her subject matter, and writing in a friendly persona, Rambler seems more inviting toward her female readership than Fenwick Miller, encouraging them to write in with whatever questions they may have. When she writes, “We hope to extend our sphere of usefulness,” Rambler implies a concern on the part of the periodical to be of use to its readers (15 March 1890, 250). This attitude follows throughout Rambler’s columns. In addition, unlike Fenwick Miller’s column which would be read by many more men and edited by them, the WPP offered no such threats. Rambler’s concern and the female readership may well have provided the same kind of encouragement to women to write in to the publication that they would have experienced with the correspondence columns. In keeping with the general atmosphere of female solidarity, the WPP’s advice column provides a space for women to interact with other women, though not in as public a manner.
Rambler and Her Reader

“Rambler’s” persona combined a friendly kind of charm with the worldly experience that allowed readers to trust her with their questions of fashion and commerce. She takes on the persona of a traveler both in the city and beyond (and, indeed she often makes note of the various places across Britain where she writes her column). She communicates a worldliness which makes her seem both knowledgeable and wise. The bulk of her column typically consists of her brief descriptions of the weather, timely events, and testimonials, while she responds (usually, but not always) to her readers’ questions in terse but informative blurbs at the end of each column. Rambler’s voice controls “Out and About” as the nature of the column requires that the writer adopt a friendly, but counseling persona; she positions herself as the superior—the one the reader comes to for advice and answers.

Rambler’s dominance of the “Out and About” section Ironically creates a non-threatening space for women to interact with the publication. Where women often wrote into the correspondence columns using a pseudonym or their initials, Rambler actually required them to do so, though she would still respond to those who forgot the pseudonym by using their initials. The first issue inviting readers to correspond with Rambler explains:

All questions must be addressed to “Rambler,” Office, Women’s Penny Paper, 86, Strand, and all correspondents must adopt a pseudonym through which they can be answered in the paper. Each correspondent will be taken in strict rotation, and as many answered as space will allow each week, although answers cannot be guaranteed to appear the same week. (15 March 1890, pg. 250)
That readers remain anonymous when their questions receive answers in the column could have been very empowering to many female readers. Knowing that their names would not be connected to their questions, they could have written in about anything, and not have risked looking foolish. The requirement for women to write in with a pseudonym creates a column that would seem to encourage women who want to conceal their names to at least enter into the dialogue of the publication. Thus, this space in which Rambler responds to her readers seems to be a safe one, where names are concealed, and little to no risk accompanies a reader’s curiosity or concern. Although these readers participate in the periodical in a low-risk, concealed manner, “the readers whom we glimpse in their extracted phrases . . . refuse to be positioned as passive readers, rather constructing themselves as active contributors to the journal’s economy, as writers” (Fraser, Green, and Johnston 75). Thus, while this kind of tentative participation in the periodical reinforces the sense that the “Out and About” column does not qualify as a counterpublic, the sense of community so apparent in the correspondence columns continues to find reinforcement, as more women are encouraged to contribute their voices to the textual conversation, with the idea that their questions may spark useful advice for themselves as well as other readers.

Sometimes Rambler directly facilitates dialogue between her correspondents, particularly when she cannot answer a reader’s question. Such an instance occurs when “Inquirer” writes into Rambler requesting information about Federiga Guerini, an Italian writer and former acquaintance with whom the reader has lost touch. Rambler publishes an excerpt from “Inquirer’s” letter, including intimate details written by correspondent:
During the winter and spring of 1877 and 1878 I often met with Signorina Guérini, at Cannes. She used to come and read Italian with my friend Miss Laura Short, who I know had a great admiration for Miss Guérini. Miss Short died six years ago, and since then I have heard nothing of Miss Guérini. . . . She was a most charming person to talk to and was very anxious for the higher education of Italian girls, and her object in writing was to provide more suitable novels for girls (WPP, 3 May 1890, 334).

Immediately below this entry, Rambler publishes a response, presumably from a friend of hers (as “Inquirer’s” letter was not yet published to receive responses from readers), assuring “Inquirer” that Miss Guérini was still alive, though she did not know where the Italian woman was now residing (WPP, 3 May 1890, 334).

Rambler actively pursues “Inquirer’s” search in subsequent issues. After asking at the British Museum, and receiving a reply that they have not heard of Miss Guérini, Rambler addresses “Inquirer” in her column suggesting, “Perhaps you can give fuller information” (5 April 1890, 286). Two issues later, Rambler publishes another response to “An Inquirer,” this one coming from another WPP reader: “A kind friend writes from Florence:--‘I knew Miss Frederiga Guérino at Cannes, and possess her novels at home, and can get further information for you when I return home next week if you wish it.’ I shall hope to publish this information shortly” (19 April 1890, 310). Rambler follows up for “An Inquirer” in the 3 May 1890 issue, with more information from the “kind friend,” Miss Conybeare, along with a similar response from another reader (348).
This kind of sustained conversation facilitated by her column forms another facet for the feminist community in the *WPP*. Rambler’s inclusion of snippets from correspondence is sporadic at best, and depends upon anonymity of readers whose concerns are published (as well as Rambler’s own pseudonymity), but when she cannot answer a question directly, she relies on a community of readers with similar interests to help a fellow reader. In this particular instance, the sense of a female community is reinforced by the subject matter (a female writer’s whereabouts) and by the British museum’s complete lack of knowledge of this writer. We may assume that most, if not all, major positions at the museum would have been held by men, and none can adequately answer “An Inquirer’s” question. Thus, Rambler must rely on the knowledge of a supportive feminist community to find the answer. “Out and About” seems to reinforce a kind of interdependence between women for the supplying of helpful information.

**Community, Consumerism and Contradiction**

Perhaps to an even greater extent than her reinforcement of the feminist community, however, Rambler appeals to her readers as a community of consumers. Lori Loeb explains in *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* that though women were restricted to relatively few roles in the public sphere, they maintained power through their role as the primary purchasers of the household. She notes that “as society moved from an ethic of production to an ethic of consumption, the role of women as household purchasers acquired new social significance. In the commercial forum the woman exercised a considerable degree of free choice. . . . As consumer ideology of choice and of pleasure proliferated, women were empowered” (Loeb 33-34). Loeb looks
to women’s roles as consumers as sources of power, through which they took on great responsibilities for the household, but simultaneously exercised freedom of choice.

Since most women would have actively participated in shopping and purchasing, these activities provided a link between them. “Individuals might be joined by self-illusory hedonism, by the shared experience both of being consumers and enjoying the anticipation of satiation. This was a sort of community, even though it was not tied to one specific physical place” (Loeb 128). Unlike the counterpublics discussed by Fraser, consumer culture created an abstract community in which women, much more prominently than men, participated. Within this community, however, female consumers could only have had indirect impact, as men still largely controlled advertising and production. Thus, members of the female consumer community would have shared similar goals, but would not have interacted with advertisers in the critical and recursive ways that they interact with one another in the correspondence columns of the WPP.

Despite the fact that consumerism did not seem to reinforce women’s critical feminist consciousness, any publication specifically created for a female audience, however feminist, would have been aware that a large part of women’s lives and duties included her participation in the consumer community and, not surprisingly, would have capitalized on this fact. The WPP was no exception, even when its advertisements appeared to clash with its overall aims. In the second issue of the WPP, in fact, nearly half of the single advertising page declares in all caps, “Ladies are shoppers; advertise in the Women’s Penny Paper, which they read” (3 November 1888, 8) (see Figure 2.1). The creators of the WPP are well aware of the importance of consumerism in their readers’ lives and summon potential advertisers to capitalize on this fact.
The *WPP* needed to advertise to stay afloat and remain competitive in the periodical marketplace, and “Out and About” becomes an ideal way to appeal to female consumers by “puffing” products. As Laird explains, “puff advertising [was] paid or pressured endorsements that appeared as editorial copy” (59). Nevett further elaborates, “Toward the end of the century, company promoters were also making considerable use of the editorial columns. They were prepared to pay higher rates for an announcement
WOMEN'S PENNY PAPER.

PRESENT RELIGION,
BY SARA S. HENNELL,
THIRD AND LAST VOLUME;
INCLUDING THE
CONSTRUCTIVE SUMMARY AND A FULL GENERAL INDEX.

"This work is an attempt to produce a system of natural religion expressly from a woman's point. It sets out the independent views of a personal instruction."—

"This book is admirably written and by no means facile enough to suit the spiritual principles underlying our religious systems, and to show how they affect their moral and practical results."—

LONDON—TRUBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL.

British Women's Temperance Journal.

POPULAR AND HIGH-CLASS, DEVOTED TO WOMEN'S WORK IN TEMPERANCE REFORM.
MONTHLY—PRICE ONE PENNY.

LONDON—Elliott Stock, 52, Paternoster Row.

LADIES BACKWARD IN ENGLISH (Handwriting, Spelling, Composition, Correspondence, Drawing, Reading, Elocution, &C.), TAUGHT AND INTRODUCED TO EMPLOYERS, (Professional and Commercial). THOROUGH TRAINING IN SHORTHAND, TYPE-WRITING, REPORTING, JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SERVICE APPOINTMENTS.
Addres—Principal. 78, Cheapside.

BYRON, SHELLEY, KEATS IN MEMORIAM
YEARLY PRIZES FOR WOMEN WRITERS.
A printed copy of the eleven Prize Essays accepted by Her Majesty can be obtained for One Shilling, from
MRS. MARY CRAWFORD, Camberwell, Berks, Gloucestershire.

滋OZ'S PATENT CORSETS
ARE THE BEST.
Prepared by a New and Special Scientific Process.
Medical opinion recommends them for the
enchantment that they are unsurpassed for Comfort,
Style and Durability. Sold all over Europe and
everywhere in India and Colonies. Name and Trade
Mark Anchor on every pair and box. Ask your
Draper or Outfitter for IZOD's make; take no
other and see you get them, as bad make is often
sold for the sake of extra profit. Write for our
sheet of drawings.

E. IZOD AND SON,
30, MILK STREET, LONDON.

LADIES ARE SHOPPERS
ADVERTISE IN THE
WOMEN'S PENNY PAPER
WHICH THEY READ.

Crown Soc., Cloth 6d.

WOMEN AND WORK. An Essay on the Relation to Health and Physical Development of the Higher Education of Girls and the Intellectual or more Systematical Effort of Women. By Emily
"No woman is a woman until she has been marked by her foal and driven her companions with strong industry and enthusiasm."—
Court Journal. "Mrs. Pye is thoroughly in earnest, and her theories and speculations are unique and of the most serious and mature kind; the most serious of all the old women and of the most serious kind of modern philosophers, for the problem with which they deal is both important and important.
"-LADIES.—"This is really a clever book.

LONDON—TRUBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL.

Figure 2.1. “Ladies Are Shoppers,” 3 November 1888
which did not have the appearance of an advertisement” (157). It seems likely that Rambler partook in paid puffery, though this remains largely unverifiable today. Regardless, we can easily detect Rambler’s testimonial advertising through the persona of a well-traveled woman with a wealth of knowledge.

While Rambler’s readers were most likely aware of the columnist’s overt advertising for products through “Out and About”—after all, the same products and services she advocates appear in the advertising space following her column, sometimes even on the same page—her testimonials may have done more to advertise the products than the actual advertisements themselves. “Testimonials from the famous or highly esteemed were mirrored by a plethora of testimonials from happy consumers. The same product could be used by the famous as well as the most humble householder. The acquisition of consumer goods by rich and poor alike became a significant agent of democratization” (Loeb 10). Rambler situates herself as a woman traveling about town trying out products, and noting the latest fads, making her opinion valuable. For instance, in a manner typical of her column, she writes on 5 July 1890 that she has “paid the lady florist ‘Loadstone,’ a visit, and found her surrounded by the most lovely flowers” (441). Rambler goes on to describe the shop into which she has “rambled,” complete with details about the florist and her flowers. In the 9 July 1890 issue, Rambler puffs “Loadstone” again, describing the “Stanley wedding” and the “bridal bouquets and posies” that were produced by “Loadstone” (466). Meanwhile, the Loadstone ad runs on the following page (See Figure 2.2). Through her persona, Rambler makes an ideal candidate to provide advertising testimonials—she carries an ethos with her readers that might just make her opinion valuable to them. Perhaps most importantly to her readers,
Figure 2.2. Loadstone Lady Florist, 9 July 1890
her testimonials provide a woman speaking to women, about the feminized consumer realm, rather than a man speaking to women through advertisements and editorial puffs.

Most importantly, while Rambler provides testimonials for a wide range of products, she spends much space promoting women’s businesses and products created by and for women, thereby creating a bridge between consumer and feminist communities. She possesses a unique power to connect female consumers and female entrepreneurs, in a more immediate way than the advertising pages. From one issue to the next, her column heralds the presence of women in the public sphere as business owners, educators, artists, or speakers, and encourages readers to partake in the business of these women. In this way, she encourages public interaction between women in ways that the correspondence columns do not, and she relies on women’s shared activity of consumerism to do so. Her repeated attention to Loadstone flowers is only one example of the attention she draws to women’s achievements in the public sphere and her attempts to facilitate contact between successful women and potential customers. In addition to women’s businesses that produce material products for their clientele, Rambler often provides space to women orators, lecturers and teachers—the kinds of women making their voices prominent in the public sphere. For instance, in the 12 April 1890 issue Rambler promotes Miss Grace Latham’s delivery of a paper on Shakespeare, drawing on feminist sensibilities to encourage readers to attend the speech. She opens the announcement with, “Women are far often more successful than men as reciters, and are gradually coming to the front in a way which is very creditable. Those interested in their own sex should try and hear Miss Grace Latham…” (298). She draws commerce into the piece when she adds, “She often gives recitations, and at any time will be pleased to make arrangements for private
entertainments or ‘At-homes.’ Her terms can be had by writing her privately…” (298).

Descriptions of other lecturers and programs of education created by women occupy her columns regularly, as she promotes the sharing of knowledge between women.

In a similar manner, Rambler often connects the sensibilities of the Rational Dress Society with products promoted in her column. Her promotion of this society appears on many instances. In the 22 March 1890 issue, for example, she writes, “The business woman needs, in her rational dress, a certain number of pockets…” (262). As a solution, she suggests the Directionare dress, which contains seven pockets. Here Rambler supports both the woman active in the business world and a practicality of clothing that will make this lifestyle easier. In this description, she does not name a specific manufacturer in an advertising manner, but instead seems simply to be offering her opinion on functional dress. Her opinion echoes that of readers’ letters in the correspondence columns such as Marian Marshall’s, in which Marshall writes that “a style of dress ought to be evolved which should be at once comfortable, womanly and serviceable for professional and working women to wear,” which echoes the ideals of the Rational Dress Society (WPP, 30 March 1889, 7). Rambler conveys a similar opinion that women’s clothing be both practical and feminine.

In many other instances Rambler combines feminine and practical aspects of women’s clothing in order to advertise products. For example, in the 22 March 1890 “Out and About,” Rambler writes, “Boots are greatly to be preferred to shoes where ladies have to walk much. Shoes are apt to get down-trodden, and when the rain comes boots preserve the neat appearance of the ankle [sic] far better than any shoe, and are much more comfortable” (262). She goes on to “confidently recommend” boots from Messrs.
Lilley and Skinner (262). Again, she echoes letters from the correspondence columns which recommend boots for active women (for instance, M.R.R., WPP, 16 March 1889, 7), and she combines practicality and preservation of the feminine shape of the ankle.

While she seems to support rational dress on most occasions, however, Rambler, in her role as advertiser, sometimes becomes a mouthpiece for certain products, heralding them above the general opinions expressed throughout the majority of the paper’s articles, including those of the Rational Dress Society. For instance, Rambler lauds the knitted corset in two of her columns during 1890. Initially, she praises them for complying “in many ways [with] the desired reforms of the Rational Dress advocates: while affording the necessary support to the figure they do not impede circulation, nor compress the vital organs; and they allow perfect freedom” (15 March 1890, 250). Nearly five months later she again promotes the knitted corset (an ad for which has run nearly continuously since the early days of the paper), writing of their benefits for children and their “comfort and cleanliness” (9 August 1890, 502). In these cases, Rambler seems to be connecting this particular kind of corset with women’s health—the primary concern of the Rational Dress Society.

In the 20 September 1890 issue, however, Rambler writes a laudatory piece about the Invigorator corset (the advertisement for which appears three pages later). She writes:

The dispute anent corsets still rages, but while slight persons and children may dispense with the support they afford, it is otherwise with those inclined to *embonpoint*; as the French politely say, stays to them are a necessity. The Invigorator corsets are decidedly some of the best to be seen, and are patented by Reast. They allow perfect freedom of motion, relieve the waist from all weight of
clothing round it, and have invaluable advantages in their construction for
securing expansion of the chest, erect figure, and flatness of the back. Children
who have acquired a habit of stooping should try Reast’s patent Invigorator
corsets. They are made in every size and quality, and can also be obtained in all
natural wool. Ladies who take much exercise will find these corsets particularly
pleasant to wear. (20 September 1890, Rambler 572)

Here, Rambler seems to contradict herself; the words she uses to describe the Invigorator
corset do not emphasize comfort and health the way her descriptions of the knit corset do,
and as this corset appears to be a traditional one, she makes no connections between the
product and the Rational Dress Society. One can only assume that her inconsistencies
result from the power of advertisers to manipulate the content of her column. In addition,
when Rambler takes on the role of advertiser, as she so often does, she must promote
products for a wide range of the WPP’s readership, not necessarily those that align with
the aims of the paper. And, as we have seen from the correspondence columns, many
women reading the WPP were reluctant to let go of, or even alter, the corsets they wore.

This example is not the only instance where Rambler seems to contradict herself
due to advertising; such contradictions occur rather frequently. For instance, in the spring
of 1890, Rambler focuses on the importance of gloves for four straight issues; in each
issue, however, she promotes a different retailer! On 22 March, she suggests Mr.
Pemberthy’s emporium; on 29 March, Messrs. Swan and Edgar; on 5 April, Miss Alice
Brady’s shop; and on 12 April Messrs. Tucker Widgery. A string of promotions like this
suggests paid puffery, and could potentially have caused readers to question the sincerity
of the column, as well as the quality of advice.
While not as direct as the previous examples, Rambler’s contradictions appear in her juxtaposition of subject matter as well. Sometimes her content seems downright frivolous, yet these superficial concerns appear alongside serious feminist issues. For instance, in the issue praising the Invigorator corset, Rambler also advocates the new Chic suspenders for women, explaining in detail the advantages of the brand, and how to appropriately attach them to skirts. This detailed clothing advice, along with the Invigorator corset description and a promotion for Mrs. Stidder’s hair tonic, appears above answers to correspondents about women’s work at the Army and Navy Stores, the admission of women to lectures at the Pharmaceutical Society, and work in hospitals (20 September 1890, 572). In similar fashion, Rambler writes in a later issue extensively of Mr. Macleod’s University Preparatory Institute and Macleod’s “desire to make known his oral and correspondence classes for ladies, and . . . [his preparedness] to open classes for ladies seeking the higher certificate of the St. Andrew’s L.L.A. examination or who wish assistance in a course of higher study at home or in class” (25 October 1890, Rambler 13). She then immediately writes to recommend the Messrs. Philp’s dress-making abilities, and women’s handkerchiefs: “I saw some charmingly dainty handkerchiefs at Marshall and Spellgrove’s last week, which will tempt those not superior to the little weaknesses of feminine toilet. They were moderate in price and very chic” (13). She then laments over having seen diseased potatoes and felt for the “unfortunate Irish” who “[w]e can all help . . . by assisting the Donegal Industrial fund in Wigmore-street” (13). Women’s sensibilities, interest in beauty, and compassion all appear in one week’s column. In instances like these, one notices a jarring range of topics, spanning from the most superficial elements of the feminine toilet, to some of the most prominent feminist
concerns. Because of this, “Out and About” seems to exaggerate the conflicts feminists face because it seeks to support feminist ideals, while reinforcing stereotypes that relegate women’s mental capacity to superficial concerns through her testimonial-style advertising.

Of course, the WPP was not the first feminist periodical to succumb to the pressures of advertising, despite the possible conflict with their own philosophy or content. As Donna Harrington-Lueker writes in “Finding a Market for Suffrage,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony’s paper The Revolution succumbed to the pressures of advertising, which placed their content in striking discord with interspersed advertising pieces. For instance, “The Revolution ran investigative pieces on New York's low-wage seamstresses while trying to develop accounts with sewing machine manufacturers. It featured advertisements for land sales in New Jersey and California while excoriating the capitalist land grab” (Harrington-Lueker 134). Harrington-Lueker attributes the incongruence between content and advertisement to The Revolution’s situation in a “highly competitive publishing market” (131). On the other hand, when advertisements reinforced content, Harrington-Lueker suggests that “the paper was willing to capitalize on the connection between its cause and the emerging national marketplace for consumer goods” (131). It seems as though the WPP was also willing to capitalize on the “marketplace for consumer goods.”

Even when Rambler is not advertising products that seem to contradict feminist ideals, she often contradicts herself, which may be symptomatic of the difficulty many feminists faced when trying to reconcile consumer stereotypes that reinforced women’s domestic roles, as well as their feminine appearance, with feminist aims for greater
equality and power in the public sphere. For instance, in the 9 August 1890 column, Rambler discusses an “advertisement in the daily papers for a lady gardener,” and encourages women to choose so pleasant an occupation, noting that “It needs a special vocation to be a teacher and not one in a hundred has it. Yet all women imagine they can teach, they weary and wear themselves out in their efforts while far pleasanter occupations are open to them” (502). In this instance, she seems to discourage women from teaching, while encouraging less intellectually taxing work. Yet, as previously mentioned, Rambler often promotes women lecturers and teachers through her column.

In addition, Rambler generally seems to support women adopting occupations traditionally assigned to men. In the 28 June 1890 issue, however, she seems to contradict herself as she praises a woman who has temporarily taken over her husband’s business. She writes,

I am always glad to note any new occupation open to [women] which heretofore has perhaps been looked upon as belonging exclusively to men. . . . I was therefore interested last week to meet a lady who is prepared to carry on her husband’s tea business during his absence from home. . . . The trade is not a lucrative one; there are certain duties connected with the trade, such as the buying of tea at Mincing-lane auctions, &c., that could not very well be performed by a woman; but there can be no objection to a wife or a daughter acting for a short time as locum tenens for the breadwinner. (390)

Rambler seems to contradict herself within this excerpt, first suggesting her optimism about women’s adopting roles in business that have traditionally been designated to men, but then suggesting that many roles in the tea trade could not “very well be performed by
a woman,” and that the woman should act as breadwinner only “for a short time.” Like the readers of the *WPP* who pale at the idea of a woman wearing men’s clothes, Rambler’s treatment of women’s work exhibits the same ambivalence about women adopting men’s roles; just as fashion and morality went hand-in-hand, so, too, did domesticity and morality.

Many feminists were concerned with the presence of females in the public sphere and greater equality between women and men; yet, as we have already seen through the discussion of the letters to the editor, many of them felt simultaneously dubious about abandoning the traditional ideals of femininity—such as fashion—which represented their morality, class, and outward distinction from men according to widely-held, middle-class mores. Rambler expresses the logic behind the seemingly contradictory content of her column when she writes, “Even the most literary women are not proof against the fascination of a pretty gown or dainty bonnet; and the wisest of women recognize the truth that there is a subtle power in outward adornment which cannot with safety be despised” (19 March 1890, 310). This sentiment adheres to the paper’s policy set forth in the first issue; as discussed in Chapter One, the policy declared: “[W]e will not forget the lighter and brighter side of things, the beauty, the brightness and the fun which make the chequered lights on our way.” Thus, summaries of news events, or lists of female scholarship recipients appear alongside notes on the season’s most fashionable colors, and Rambler’s testimonials of the best gloves.

The focus on beauty, brightness and fun falls in line with the very middle-class worldview that Rambler exhibits throughout the column. Not just in the products she puffs, but also in the topics over which she writes and her sometimes condescending
attitudes toward particular issues, Rambler exhibits middle-class biases. For instance, in the 9 August 1890 issue, Rambler describes an interaction with a poor flower-seller with seventeen children who she hopes will not have any more children: “Ignorance and preventible [sic] evils are so often put down by the poor as the will of the Almighty, and so thousands are born into the world to suffer and die from preventable disease and starvation” (502). Here, Rambler does not even attempt to disguise her middle-class prejudices.

Rambler appears rather judgmental again when she describes riding costumes in her 7 June 1890 column. After criticizing the woman riders’ posture, she writes,

The short cutaway jackets were generally worn by these Amazons with high buttoned waistcoats. The effect is very good so long as the rider is stationary, but when the horse trots the short tails flop up and down in a ludicrous manner. The long coat which was to be worn with the costume designed for the cross saddle riders was certainly far more elegant in every way. (7 June 1890, 389).

Rather than focusing on the artistry of the riders, Rambler dwells on the unattractive attire of the women. Her voice sounds ironically similar to the scoffing words with which Müller describes the “Manly Young Lady” in 2 February 1889 issue. Her focus on attractive clothing naturally follows her middle-class thinking. As Linda Young explains in *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain*: “Knowing the right degree of plain or fancy dress for self and others on all occasions was an inexplicit standard, amounting to the most subtle form of cultural capital within the genteel habitus” (163). In many instances, Rambler positions herself as informer of fashion, instructing her readers to the latest fashions, colors, etc. For example, in the 8
February 1890 column, she first criticizes American ladies for their “tendency to overdress,” and then goes on to describe the colors of the season. She writes:

Violet and the softer shades of mauve are the fashionable colours, and at present all our milliners seem to have but one idea, *i.e.*, bonnets composed entirely of every kind and shade of violets. . . . A lady, well known among the society celebrities, made a very good appearance last Sunday at a fashionable parade by her toilette, which was a violet velvet, and her bonnet a variety of shaded violets” (188).

Again showing her middle-class ideals, she goes on to complain that such articles are yet difficult to find in stores, as they have yet to “clear off the rejected rubbish, prior to a complete renovation of the coming season” (188). Here, and in most of Rambler’s columns, “Out and About” seems to fit under the Green, Fraser and Johnston description of the Victorian women’s magazine: “The women’s magazine can appear, for example, to transcend class boundaries by referring to experience common to all women, but also reinforces stereotypes of women as concerned with trivial subjects such as appearance and gossip” (177). This statement seems true of “Out and About,” though not the *WPP* as a whole.

Rambler represents the conflict between consumer culture and feminist ideals, even though she sometimes combines these harmoniously in her promotion of women’s businesses. Her column heightens our awareness that even a progressive magazine like the *WPP* could be a pawn to advertising. The puffery of the column seems inconsistent with the primary content of the paper, but the paper must cater to advertisers for its survival, and by doing so ensures a greater range of audience members. Rambler
certainly would attract the same women who wrote into the correspondence columns with anxiety over the “Manly Young Lady.”

Müller does, however, subordinate “Out and About” to the last section of the paper before the advertisements (or the very first column of the advertising section), and when more important articles arise, “Out and About” is the first column omitted. Perhaps it is this relegation to the back of the paper that preserves the journalistic content of the rest of the paper. As Fraser, Green, and Johnston suggest, women had to worry about “undermin[ing] journalistic credibility” with contradictory or excessive commercialization (192). They had to combat classification under the negatively-viewed “‘Lady Journaldom’—occupied by the female journalist: a contradictory figure who aspires to the condition of serious journalism, but is also constrained in her femininity and her professionalism by the characteristic commercialism of the genre” (Fraser, Green, and Johnston 192). Therefore, feminists like the contributors of the *WPP* found themselves treading a fine line between credibility as serious competitors in the male-dominated periodical market, and content that would help them survive (i.e., advertisements) and that would attract the widest variety of female readers, including those whose interest in feminist issues remained tentative.

Feminist publications needed advertisements to survive, and sometimes they offered additional services in an attempt to garner greater revenue from their readers. Yet, sometimes their attempts at revenue—whether through advertisements, or paid advice—seem to reinforce stereotypes and break down the community of women they are trying to build up. While Rambler sometimes successfully brings together consumerism and feminist ideals, she generally creates an unstable bridge between readers and
advertisements, mixing them together in a column fraught with inconsistencies. While women try to move into the public sphere, she suggests they take on suitable jobs like gardening; while other women fight for healthy women’s dress, Rambler advertises the Invigorator corset; yet, she supports women stepping in at men’s businesses, and suggests that women choose a knitted corset—a healthier option than the stiff, traditional version.

Where Rambler reinforces the consumer interaction between female customers and female consumers, she seems to reinforce the feminist community and its interactions in the public sphere, beyond the *WPP*. In this way, she seems to encourage her readers to take the friendliness and mutual support fostered by the correspondence columns beyond the textual and into the public. On the other hand, Rambler’s role as advertiser often fills her column with inconsistencies, representing the difficulties feminists faced when trying to reconcile feminine ideals reinforced through consumerism, and their desire to break away from tradition and forge ahead in the public. The inconsistencies of Rambler’s column seem to parallel the advertising pages themselves. In Chapter Three, I will explore the force of the advertising pages, which seem to both echo and reinforce the irregularities of “Out and About.”
Chapter Three: Commodity or Emancipated Subject: Advertising and Representations of Woman in the WPP

Thus far, I have looked at the wide range of conflicting voices expressed through the WPP’s correspondence columns and the ways in which women negotiated and renegotiated their feminist identities in this textual counterpublic, particularly in relation to their debate about self-representation in the public sphere. In Chapter Two, I used Rambler’s column to illuminate the conflict that underlies the ambivalence apparent in the correspondence columns—that between the traditional stereotypes of women reinforced by consumer culture, and the progressive ideals of the feminist community. To fully understand the difficulties women faced as they attempted to negotiate their roles in the public, it is important to study the ways outside pressure—particularly patriarchal influence—reinforced long-held stereotypes within the WPP itself; the most apparent space where these pressures enter directly into the paper is in the advertising pages. The Victorian cultural values reflected in the ads, and those of the feminist counterpublic which clash and grapple on these pages, shed greater light on the social pressures feminists faced as they attempted to break down the boundary between private and public. The advertising pages, in fact, shape and mirror the tensions displayed in both the readers’ correspondence and “Out and About,” but showcase these tensions in an amplified manner through their subordination of feminist aims to the goals of a largely male-controlled consumer market.

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between ads produced by men that commodify the female body through their use of images of the woman, and the feminist or progressive-minded advertisements that appear contiguously, in the back of each WPP
issue, a relationship that grows directly from the tensions between consumer and feminist communities. Using Barthes’s theory of the image to approach a sampling of the advertisements in the *WPP*, I will discuss these ads in direct conversation with the correspondence and “Out and About” columns in an attempt to grasp the fullest meaning of the nineteenth-century feminist experience as it plays out in the *WPP*, including the ways these women became objects of a consumerism that they supported as they also tried to assert themselves as subjects in the public sphere.

**Gender, Budget and the Image in Advertising**

During the earliest issues of the *WPP*, advertisements appeared on the very last page of each eight-page issue (sometimes spilling onto an extra half-page), typically including many small, text-laden ads for feminist groups and women’s businesses or educational opportunities for women. While images occasionally appeared on the advertising pages during the first year of publication, they were usually few, and they only occasionally occupied more than one-third of the page. When these images did appear, they never promoted strictly feminist issues; rather, they touted the best beauty products, disinfectants, or corsets. Most, if not all, of the advertisements related to women’s success or activity in the public sphere contain no images at all, probably due to limited budgets. As a result, the impact of feminist advertisements paled in comparison to those of larger companies.

Charles Hill explains in “The Psychology of Rhetorical Images,” “an object or person is most present to us when we can see it directly” (29). Hill notes that the power of an image to persuade can often out-argue the most startling or moving text (29). Because the advertisements for women’s interests in the public sphere lacked images,
they seem subordinate to the products with elaborate or large illustrations, and seem to
dissolve into the background with long paragraphs of text only broken up by occasional
bold headings. Hill states that images can “crowd out other considerations from the
viewer’s mind,” adding, “The rhetor’s hope is that this process will prompt audience
members to accept his or her claim based on one or two pieces of powerful, vivid
evidence, and not stop to think about issues such as the relevance or actual importance of
the evidence, or about what other arguments and opinions should be brought into the
equation and weighed before making a decision” (29). By presenting a particular image
in a particular way, the representation put in front of the viewer will most likely call forth
certain ideas while dismissing others simply through the rhetor’s careful placement and
depiction of the image.

When an advertiser added text to images, as is done in each of the illustrated ads
appearing in the WPP, he gains even greater control over the possible meanings his
viewer may infer. Roland Barthes explains the power of the combination of text and
visual images in Rhetoric of the Image, he writes:

[T]he text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing [the
viewer] to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle
dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance. In all
these cases of anchorage, language clearly has a function of elucidation, but this
elucidation is selective, a metalanguage applied not to the totality of the iconic
message but only to certain of its signs. The text is indeed the creator’s (and hence
society’s) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is a control, bearing a
responsibility—in the face of the projective power of pictures—for the use of the
message. With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a *repressive* value… (original emphasis 157)

Barthes notes that language in combination with images might be explanatory, but it also represses many connections the viewer could make between the image and its many signifieds, making her more likely to interpret the image in a specific way—the way the advertiser intends. Barthes refers to “a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds” from which the reader may “choose some and ignore others” (156); through the use of text, however, the advertisement’s creator can often manipulate the viewer’s interpretation of the advertisement, making her more likely to choose certain signifieds and leave behind those which the text represses. Because larger companies could afford to implement images, then, they naturally had the advantage over feminist advertisements which relied on text alone.

In the *WPP*’s inaugural issue, for example, an ad for Izod’s patent corsets, and another for Jeyes’ disinfectants, occupy the largest space on the single page of ads and incorporate the page’s only images (Figure 3.1). Jeyes’ Disinfectants immediately attracts the eye with its image of a solemn nurse, occupying the greatest portion of the half-page ad, while Izod’s Patent Corsets also draws the viewer’s attention with its bold border and image of a woman’s figure as she reaches above her. Other advertisements on the page fade into the sea of text over which these prominent illustrations seem to float. These other ads, of course, are primarily those of low-budget feminists or feminist groups including the British Women’s Temperance Society, several female essayists whose works have just been published, and a group offering classes in composition, type-writing, reporting and journalism for women (*WPP* 27 Oct. 1888, 8). Immediately, the
Figure 3.1. Advertising Page, 27 October 1888
power of large corporations becomes apparent on the *WPP* advertising pages, where feminist interests often become dwarfed or subordinated to the commercial interests of largely male-run businesses who reinforce restrictive stereotypes of women in their advertisements. Thus, while this, the first issue of the publication, declares on its front page, “Our policy is progressive: home politics, that is, industrial, social and educational questions are of primary importance in our estimation” (original emphasis 1), its first advertising page exhibits a different story.

Only among the earliest issues of the paper is this subordination of feminist advertisements atypical. When the paper first begins, feminist concerns usually take prominence, at least in terms of the amount of total space devoted to them. Sometimes the largest advertisement in the section boasts of feminist accomplishments, meetings, or businesses. In the 9 March 1889 issue, for example, one notices an announcement entitled in all capitals, “Women and the Vote” (Figure 3.2). The announcement reads, “A Public Meeting . . . To advocate the extension of the Parliamentary franchise to Women on the same conditions as it is or may be granted to men,” and includes an extensive list of men and women who will attend (*WPP*, 9 March 1889, 7). The advertisement is simple, again relying on text only, but large and noticeable. In this particular issue, as in so many of the *WPP*’s early, eight-page issues, the single advertising page devotes the majority of its space to feminist, rather than domestic concerns, promoting women’s involvement in the public sphere over their confinement to the home.

While the number of elaborate advertisements is few when the *WPP* begins, smaller, cheaply-produced ads eventually become outnumbered by larger commercial interests who have the funds to use large advertisements with detailed images to attract
Figure 3.2. Women and the Vote Announcement, 9 March 1889
readers. On 25 May 1889, the WPP expands its eight-page paper to twelve pages. The paper announces: —“We have much pleasure in announcing that, owing to the rapidly increasing demands on our space, and the necessity we have been under of holding over much interesting matter, The Women’s Penny Paper is to-day enlarged to 12 pages” (WPP, 25 May 1889, 6). Ironically, much of this increased space becomes devoted to advertising; over the next few months the number of advertising pages expands from one page to two and a half or three (depending on the issue). Increasingly, feminists compete for space (even in this feminist paper) against larger, male-run companies with fancier advertisements. During the 1890s, the amount of advertising space devoted to feminist concerns diminishes to half or less of the available pages; thus, as the publication grows and prospers, a greater number of advertisement pages devote a large amount of space to large companies and familiar brands that promote products relating to beauty, fashion, and domestic concerns. We begin to see the regular occurrence of elaborate advertisements produced by these large-budget companies, like the Victoria Toilet Company and Emerson and Company Art Furnishers and Décor. Again we are reminded of other feminist papers like Stanton’s The Revolution that succumb to advertising pressures that seem to contradict major aims of the respective periodicals. As we saw occasionally in “Out and About,” the advertising pages of the WPP reflect the power of the product to prevail over the agenda of the paper in the consumer-driven periodical press. In “Out and About,” however, commerce between female shoppers and woman business owners generally remains central to the column; in the advertising pages, this occurs with less frequency.
It becomes particularly pertinent to consider that men, for the most part, were the creators of advertisements appearing here as in other women’s magazines, and that these advertisements often included representations of the female body. Using images of women in advertisements targeting women promoted the woman’s participation in public commerce, but at the same time reinforced the same ideals that confined her to the home. Fraser, Green, and Johnston explain, “The use of feminine tropes, for example, as a press marketing strategy in one sense allows women to enter the marketplace, as it also binds them in other ways to passive and conventional forms of social existence” (174). Women participating in the community of consumers did not necessarily promote change for women, but continued to reinforce their roles and managers of a household, interested in promoting the appearance of femininity without “getting her hands dirty” in the politics of change for women. Veblen writes when describing the impracticality of middle-class women’s clothing, “It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman’s earning a livelihood by useful work. It is not the ‘woman’s sphere.’ Her sphere is within the household, which she should ‘beautify,’ and of which she should be the ‘chief ornament’” (179-80). Advertisers proliferate the tropes of femininity that reinforce this view through their images of women, promotion of products to beautify the woman and the home, and their tempting of women to partake in the commerce that continues to propagate traditional roles of womanhood. While the role of the woman partaking in public commerce was certainly a role encouraged by the WPP, the advertising pages seem to subordinate the many other public roles and progressive ideals promoted by the paper. Feminists’ competition for space amongst the large numbers of loud male voices present on the advertising pages of the WPP seems to provide a
microcosm through which to view the way feminists struggled to stake out their presence in the male-dominated public. The power of these male voices informs the ambivalence that Victorian feminists felt between the stereotypes Victorian consumer culture proliferated, and their changing relationship with the public sphere.

**Consuming Stereotypes**

A plethora of ads appears during the two-month-long discussion of “The Manly Young Lady,” exhibiting both a desire to preserve feminine stereotypes and the feminist agenda to move women into more prominence in the public sphere. The final page of the 9 February 1889 issue, for example, showcases an advertisement for Cherry Blossom perfume, toilet power and soap, featuring an illustration of a clear-skinned, attractive nun (no doubt a symbol of purity) in the center of the page (Figure 3.3).9 The text overlaying the image guides the reader’s interpretation of the advertisement, connecting the image of the nun to the Cherry Blossom heading which stands out in white against the dark background of the illustration. A list of products draws the eye to the left of the advertisement, and down to the company’s play on words, “Nun Nicer,” meaning of course, “none nicer” (8). This pun appears in an artistic font created to resemble candles, presumably used to reinforce the somber, religious tone of the ad. While the text is necessary for the viewer to make sense of the image of a nun, and to what she relates, it is the nun that proves most interesting for her cultural signification; in fact, she at once embodies a great number of signifieds seen throughout Victorian advertising. Her skin appears young and flawless, which the advertiser no doubt wants his viewer to connect with the effectiveness of his toiletries. The purity of her skin is echoed in the purity

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9 This advertisement continues to run sporadically on the WPP advertising pages throughout the rest of the year.
Figure 3.3. Cherry Blossom Advertisement, 9 February 1889
associated with the nun, reinforcing cultural connections between cleanliness and moral purity. Loeb explains, “Purity becomes the almost obsessive focus of the Victorian advertisement, fueled by adulteration scares” (57). Loeb describes the anxiety many Victorians felt between their growing consumerism or hedonistic desires, and their struggle to preserve moral purity. She writes, “The Victorian advertisement assumed an evangelical appearance, but subverted its content in a hedonistic direction” (102). In this particular advertisement, the religious content is obvious, but, as Loeb suggests, the advertiser uses this content to direct its viewer to spend money on products to beautify the self.

The emphasis on purity in this advertisement also suggests product purity, which, in addition to moral and physical cleanliness, was a great concern among Victorian consumers. Concern with product purity occurs throughout ads ranging from medicine to clothing, as readers are warned against imitators: “In these advertisements constant vigilance about product purity and veracity evokes the evangelical wariness of the taint of sin” (Loeb 111). The Victorian consumer walked a fine line between self-indulgence and moral preservation.

The anxieties emerging in advertisements like this one seem to echo and shape the anxieties of the feminists, as they struggle to preserve femininity (and thus morality) while moving into the men’s sphere. Cherry Blossom’s nun relates directly to Müller’s concerns in the preceding issue, when she writes so disparagingly of women who dress like men in her response to Minerva’s “Manly Young Lady.” She writes,

No true woman can meet [the manly young lady] without a feeling of compassionate pity for the wasted opportunities, the neglected education, the bad
influences which she shows forth. The true woman can measure more accurately than another how few ‘chances’ such an one has received from her surroundings, and how great might have been her power for good, if the sweet nature had not been poisoned at its source. (Minerva, WPP, 2 February 1889, 2, emphasis added.)

Müller’s words exhibit the fear of moral adulteration that her culture associates with women who are unfeminine. Like the Cherry Blossom advertisement, Müller’s language portrays an image of the feminine woman who preserves her moral purity. Thus, while its size is only a result of the budgets of the advertisers appearing in the paper, it seems ironic that the Cherry Blossom advertisement is the largest ad on the page, drawing attention away from less conspicuous ads reinforcing women’s achievements. Thus ads for The Dorothy Restaurant—“Opened by the Ladies’ Restaurant Association exclusively for the use of Ladies,” the British Women’s Temperance Journal, a publication by prominent feminist figure Sara S. Hennell, and an announcement for the Rational Dress Society’s divided skirts gain only secondary notice. Again we observe that even in the feminist WPP, women’s accomplishments continued to take a back seat to women’s concerns about femininity and self-representation.

Another recurring advertisement in the WPP, which relies in part on Victorians’ anxieties and obsession with cleanliness and moral purity, is that for the Victoria Toilet Club (Figure 3.4). This advertisement, which occupies almost half a page, declares to its potentially worried consumer “Don’t Go Bald,” accentuates the cleanliness of its salon with repeated use of the word “Sanitary” in bold capitals, and suggests remedies for weak (i.e. unhealthy) hair. The advertisement presents an image of a woman, whose curvaceous
figure is draped in a loose-fitting robe, gazing at herself in a mirror as she plays with her cascading, floor-length hair. The image reinforces the benefits of each of the major services of the business: “Sanitary Synthedine Hair Wash—For promoting the Growth, Strengthening, and Beautifying of Human Hair”; “Victoria Sanitary Toilet Cream—For Preserving and Beautifying the Skin”; and “Infallible Cure for Chapped Hands: Will make them beautifully soft and white” (16 August 1890, 515). By gazing at herself in the mirror, however, the woman in the image also seems to reinforce a sense of idleness and narcissism often ascribed to women. Her idleness seems reinforced by the excessive length of her hair, which Veblen writes, “hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion” just like full skirts (171). For the company, she markets “personal and private pleasures” for the individual (Loeb 132), but she simultaneously reinforces the idea that women are objects to be looked upon (even by
themselves), and not to be taken seriously as more. Rambler also promotes the Victoria Toilet Club in her column, but scolds the business for not offering the same opportunities to both men and women: “The Victoria Toilet Company issue [sic] subscription tickets to gentlemen, and I am sure if they would do the same for ladies they would greatly increase their custom” (7 June 1890, 389).

In addition to ads that promote perfect skin and cascading hair, the unrealistic images that sexualize and objectify Victorian women continue in the corset advertisements that frequently appear in the WPP. In fact, they are the most frequent and consistent fashion product found in the WPP’s advertising pages. Victorian women were extremely wary of abandoning familiar ideals of femininity, for fear of the reputation they might acquire in a society reluctant for women to acquire the freedoms of men. In the 20 September 1890 issue, in which Rambler promotes the Invigorator corset, the second full page of advertisements provides several images of women selling beauty products. The Invigorator Corsets ad includes testimonials from various periodicals that have reviewed the product, a price list, and images of a voluptuous woman with a cinched waist, wearing the corset (Figure 3.5). Unlike Cherry Blossom’s nun, the emphasis here is drawn to the woman’s figure, rather than her face. The woman in the Invigorator Corset epitomizes late nineteenth-century beauty norms, including soft, plump arms (Summers 163) and a “curvaceous and statuesque” figure “thrown into relief by a tiny waistline” (Summers 44). While the advertisers have featured the woman’s figure and undergarments with the woman’s raised arms and accentuated curves, they have mitigated the sexuality of the image by presenting the image in negative space (white background) in one view (Summers 198), and arranging flowers in the other, and
by diverting the woman’s gaze from that of the viewer. The title of the product, however, certainly contains sexual undertones, which would seem to divert the attention of women concerned with their moral purity. Leigh Summers explains in *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*, however, that these representations of women were acceptable among Victorians due to a long history of artistic representation of the female body (186). The woman’s tiny waistline would certainly seem to be more artistic than realistic, at least to the modern viewer. Its small size suggests the unhealthy waist-cinching condemned by the Rational Dress Society, reinforcing unhealthy stereotypes for the feminine body. The unhealthiness of this woman’s corsetry seems ironically reinforced by Rambler’s comment in the same issue. When she writes to support the Invigorator Corset, she notes that overweight women, those who are “embonpoint,” find corsets a necessity, and she then suggests the Invigorator corset. If the female in this advertisement is, as Rambler suggests, a bit plump, then her unnaturally thin waistline suggests a heightened degree of constraint and stress on the body.

In *The Visual Culture Reader*, Anthea Callen discusses images of the body as cultures influence them: “[H]owever carefully observed, the represented body is an abstracted body: the product of ideas that are culturally and historically specific, and in which the social formation of the producer determines the appearance and meanings of the body; its meanings are then further modified in the act of consumption” (401). The Victorian woman’s body, for instance, was to represent morality, purity, health, and freedom from physical labor. The producer of images of the female body reflects (and proliferates) Victorian society’s idealized feminine body image, and uses text like “*health insured by using Reast’s patent*” (emphasis added) to deflect attention from the unhealthy
aspects of a cinched waistline, which, as we have seen, are becoming increasingly discussed among feminist circles, and instead guide the reader toward a correlation between healthiness and the Invigorator Corset. This correlation becomes reinforced by the image of the desirable female body—an unrealistic stereotype to which women aspired through consumption of products like this one (not unlike the twenty-first century’s obsession with waif-like thinness and tans). The beautiful woman, like the one shown here, was considered clean, well-kempt, and moral.

In contrast, the Sanitary Knitted Corset Co., Nottingham, more frequently touted by Rambler, advertises in a small block of text right next to the Invigorator corset ad (Figure 3.5). This advertisement subtly suggests curves without presenting the woman’s body; instead, the ad uses a dark background to set off “Knitted Corsets” with a curved line resembling an unraveling scroll of parchment. The advertisement emphasizes “Support Without Pressure [sic],” and describes the various wools and prices for each corset, as well as other wool products available. The diminutive ad size and lack of images suggests the company’s smaller advertising budget compared to Invigorator Corsets, but the Nottingham company repeats the same advertisement through a long run of WPP issues, and receives greater prominence in “Out and About.” This advertisement’s subtler suggestion of curves seems to imply sensibility over fashion. The product details themselves become the showcase of the ad, rather than the sexualized female body.

The juxtaposition of these two advertisements reflects the corset debates unfolding at the same time in the articles and correspondence of the periodical. In the 12 April 1890 correspondence columns, for example, “A Dainty Housekeeper” writes to the
WPP about her use of a corset, gloves, and heels. She describes her daily duties, which are all typical of a middle-class lady’s routine, and writes:

[O]ne can be just as useful and lead as active a life in the much abused articles of attire as many women who throw fashions to the winds and go in for divided skirts, no corsets, &c., &c. . . . [I]t is very hard that because one has a little womanly vanity about a nice appearance one should be considered incapable of being an active and useful member of society. (295)

This reader explains her retention of all fashionable articles of her day, including corsets, and her simultaneous ability to lead an active lifestyle.

Other readers, however, urge the elimination of the corset. Adel Clive writes to the WPP for a second time on 3 May 1890, responding to several women who, after her first published letter in the column, became interested in her style of clothing (which resembles men’s). Not surprisingly, Clive notes that many of the inquiries she receives
are “anxious” about her nontraditional attire, but she writes exuberantly about her clothing. She notes that “the corset and the elegant frivolities known as ‘women’s underwear’ are entirely done away with,” and the garment that “supersedes the corset [is] the waistcoat” (Clive 331). Clive stands in agreement with Minerva whose early letter to the editor, as discussed in Chapter One, explains the negative effects of the corset, and the need to do away with heavy skirts so that the corset will no longer be necessary to suspend them (WPP, 23 February 1889, 7).

While most women were not eager to entirely do away with the corset, many were concerned about their health and willing to compromise. Thus, while “A Dainty Housekeeper”—and other readers who felt strongly about preserving femininity whatever the cost—might have been drawn to traditional corset advertisements appearing regularly in the WPP, many readers would have looked for advertisements more akin to the Nottingham Knitted Corset ads, which appear, even in their advertising, to be more practical and less concerned with vanity than products like the Invigorator. This middle-of-the-road approach is not only advocated by Rambler in “Out and About,” but can be found throughout the WPP. For instance, in the same issue where Adel Clive describes her attire, a brief puff for an abdominal belt can be found amidst the WPP articles. The writer notes that women with weak back muscles too often “return to the old martyrdom of wearing stays” because they “experience irritating weariness in the back” after giving up corsets (326). An abdominal belt, she claims, is the “remedy to all who find the ordinary corset unendurable” (326). In this case, an enterprising business attempts to capitalize on the debate about corsets, hoping to find a compromise between opposing sides, and, as a result, find a wider market of consumers for his (or her) product.
Women as Subject and Object

Corset advertisements seemed to present the greatest number of images of women in the pages of the *WPP*. These and other images of women used in the *WPP*’s advertising pages add a visual dimension to the debates occurring in the correspondence columns concerning femininity and imitation. By attempting to preserve traditional values, women reinforced a distinction between genders that was instituted by men and used as a means of control. Marcus suggests that fashion reinforced women as objects of sexual desire for men when she asserts, “Conventional wisdom assumes that fashion and dolls embody what women want to be and what men want to have, that women identify with simulacra of femininity and men desire them” (115). The advertisement, particularly those for female undergarments, reinforced the objectification of the female by both men and women, especially through its images of women. “[T]he advertisement stresses conformity to the embodied characteristics of the essential feminine, from girlhood to motherhood” (Fraser, Green, and Johnston 194). The ideal of the “essential feminine,” seemed to be a myth from which even feminists were reluctant to wholly break away.

As the correspondence columns exhibit, women were often the most passionate supporters of preserving the superficial distinction between men and women, as they saw external differences as symbolic of internal differences of values. The preservation of external difference occurred largely through imitation, as facilitated by advertisements such as those appearing in the *WPP*. Women paid great attention to the appearances of other women, keen to copy looks that accentuated the feminine, while complying with the cultural aesthetic, which fuelled the consuming of products related to the superficial or appearance. Summers explains,
nineteenth-century female viewers . . . may have identified with the women depicted in corsetry advertisements in a straightforward quest to emulate them. Others may have emotionally aligned themselves with these images, seeing in them a reflection of the close and affectionate same-sex ties, or same-sex longings. Other women, lesbian or not, may have sexually objectified the subjects within these advertisements. These women may have reversed and appropriated the gaze . . . ‘for their own pleasure.’ (185)

Sharon Marcus reinforces this view in *Between Women*, when she explains, “The imperative to please men required women to scrutinize other women’s dress and appearance in order to improve their own, and at the same time promoted a specifically feminine appetite for attractive friends and lovely strangers” (61-62); “Fashion was a way for women to enjoy femininity as a freestanding object of visual pleasure” (113). The femininity women admired in one another, however, allowed for the reproduction of ideals that restricted women, often physically.

Loeb suggests, however, that “the commercial woman offers a portrait of feminine power” (33); yet, the commercial woman undoubtedly inspired women to objectify women. Women may have been the gazers when they admired other women for their outward appearances, but they simultaneously objectified those women in the same ways men objectified women. Thus, while women comprised a community of consumers that Loeb suggests could not be connected to a specific place, their participation in the community had the potential to stultify the progress of feminists, because deeply integrated into ideals of feminine beauty upon which consumer culture
revolved were strongly held beliefs about a person’s moral character and her inherent worth.

Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, “[G]ender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction” (188). As we have already seen, imitation not only becomes a goal of consumer society, but it also sits at the heart of the “Manly Young Lady” debate appearing in early issues of the periodical because of its connection to the expression of gender, particularly the demarcation between genders to which most Victorian women strictly adhered. We can recall Minerva’s original statement about imitation of men in the initial article: “To imitate is to admit superiority and by dressing like a man, . . . and generally aping manly ways, the manly young lady shows in the most sincere of possible ways that she thinks herself inferior to the beings she apes . . .” (Minerva, *WPP*, 16 January 1889, 5). She, of course, received some strong responses from other women who suggest that imitating a man is no worse than imitating a woman. For instance, Julia Mitchell writes in a letter of correspondence: “The more originality and variety the better, and the more practical. Do not let us be always aping one another in dress any more than in any other province, or following one particular pattern too closely” (9 March 1889, 6).

Some women—very few—were pushing for a more progressive view of individuality than even the *WPP* as a whole seemed to promote. In fact, Young explains the importance of imitation among middle-class culture: “Induction from birth endowed the most confidence about clothes; otherwise, experience by imitation was the most effective
teacher. The safest strategy, therefore, was to be inconspicuous” (163). Thus, the gaze of the woman upon other women became a central method of reinforcing middle-class norms—the same norms that restricted women to the domestic sphere. Most women felt as Sara Hennell did. She writes, “To many persons it seems to be doubtful whether manliness and womanliness are distinctions that either do or ought to exist. I am very far from so thinking myself…” (23 Feb 1889, 7). Hennell, like the passionate and very feminist Müller who writes in degrading tones about women dressing like men, believes that the distinction between genders must remain and continue to be exaggerated, especially as women gain prominence in the public sphere.

**Advertising Voices and the Cultural Conversation**

Through examining the influence consumer culture had on Victorian feminists, and the ways consumerism complicated the identities of these women, as well as the ways advertisements represented these women, it becomes clear that “The advertisement became both a mirror and instrument of the social ideal” (Loeb 10). By studying the ads of the *WPP*, in combination with one another, we are able to see more clearly the ideals of different groups as their respective values clash and/or overlap. Advertisements have always existed as part of a larger cultural framework and take on greater meaning when studied as a series of voices within a much larger conversation. Reconstructing past cultures as accurately as possible provides many difficulties, but by using the surviving visual and textual traces, we can collect and make some sense of the many voices contained therein. As Stuart Hall writes,

There’s always something decentered about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification, which always escapes and evades the
attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures. And yet, at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, the trace of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality, as a site of representation and resistance, all of those questions can never be erased from cultural studies. (1906)

Hall suggests that cultural studies will always be elusive to a certain extent—after all, pinning down a culture after its day has passed will always leave absences we cannot fill or fully grasp when looking back. Yet, cultures did not exist independent of their texts and the intertextuality of those texts, and however elusive a culture may seem, its texts remain to shed light on the past. Advertisements often supply us with a wealth of information about a culture. Those in the WPP are a prime example, as they have provided the capstone to understanding the tensions apparent in the rest of the paper.
Conclusion: Voice, Visibility, and Permanence

While the *WPP* represents both feminist and consumer ideals throughout its columns, in its aims it ultimately stands as a powerful textual counterpublic wherein readers were encouraged to interact, despite widely varying degrees of progressivism and feminist ideals. The *WPP* created a counterpublic, a space for women of all allegiances to come together through common values, even when those values seemed to counteract the very progress the feminists tried to achieve. This is not to suggest that the feminists whose voices dominate the periodical only found resistance to change from their readers; as we have seen, even outspoken, passionate feminists such as editor Henrietta Müller felt great anxiety when demarcations between the feminine and the masculine seemed to be breaking down. For Victorian feminists, the preservation of woman’s role as moral guide, primary shopper, and fashionable beauty was an essential accompaniment to her rising presence in the public sphere.

Preserving ideas of the feminine with which all readers would be familiar, the *WPP* would have been more inviting to a wide range of readers. In fact, the *WPP*’s focus on commerce, though largely a matter of profit-making for the paper, also enabled the paper to reinforce ties among women as shoppers with shared goals and ideals. The ideal of community underlies even the most superficial participation of readers with the *WPP*—that of gazing at the advertisements. Drawing on the shared values of consumerism, the *WPP* could potentially encourage women to converse about superficial issues, which might eventually lead to their conversation about significant feminist issues; the sense of community fostered by the *WPP* certainly seems to invite this conversation into its pages. This encouragement was extremely important in creating a
transition from domestic to public, where women would (ideally) find themselves interacting on equal footing with men. Nicole Tonkovich explains in her study of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, “[W]omen might construct a public voice in print even while remaining bodily in the ‘private sphere.’ . . . Thus the give and take of oral public debate was increasingly supplemented by silent, individual, and private acts of reading and writing” (162). Of course, as we have seen, the *publishing* of private acts of writing (such as correspondence) allowed women to enter, if tentatively, the textual discussion of important feminist issues that were taking place in the public. In addition, women’s activity in the public sphere as consumers could potentially springboard women into more significant roles in this sphere, particularly after they have taken the first step toward voicing their opinions in public by publishing their words in a publicly-distributed paper.

As feminists sought greater prominence in the public sphere, the creators of the *WPP* sought greater prominence for their publication: the vehicle through which, as Müller hoped, “every woman shall field a voice, and shall learn how to use it.” The *WPP*’s role in the public was fraught with the same challenges its readers faced—the publication struggled to gain visibility beyond the private sphere where it was most often consumed. Readers and contributors seemed to successfully spread the word and expand the readership of the paper, but finding the paper in public places sometimes proved quite difficult. For instance, a series of letters from readers and responses from the *WPP* show women’s frustration when they cannot find the publication at railway bookstalls. In the 22 March 1890 issue, the *WPP* responds to readers writing, “Many have complained as to the difficulty of obtaining the Women’s Penny Paper at the railway bookstalls, [sic] we
should be obliged by notice being given of stations where the paper is not procurable. . . .

Readers will help us by asking for their copies at the said stalls and also of their agents, and insist upon having them. The demand creates the supply” (258). Here, the WPP calls out to its readers as consumers to help make the publication more visible in the public sphere. In a later issue (18 October 1890), a “Gentle Reminder” appears in the correspondence columns from a reader calling herself “Unenfranchised.” She implores WPP readers to “ask constantly” after the paper at bookstalls, and to “write to Smith and Co, Strand, and complain” if the periodical does not appear (622). She explains that this method seems to be working, and the only time she cannot find the paper is at the end of the week when they are “all sold” (622). By December 1890, the paper publishes a comprehensive list of public places where women will find the publication, proving that the solidarity among readers promoting word of mouth publicity, and reader loyalties boosted the WPP’s presence in the public sphere, thus boosting the presence of women’s voices therein. After all, as Hall reminds us, texts are “sources of power,” and textuality as “a site of representation and resistance” (1906); the presence of women’s texts in a male periodical market was a significant indication of women’s roles as speaking subjects in the public sphere as they resisted the confinement to the private sphere so long imposed upon them.

Just as readers demanded visibility for the WPP in the public commercial sphere, academics should demand the same level of visibility among historical and cultural scholarship. Ultimately, studying the difficulties of feminists as they arise in the WPP provides the roots of future feminism, andforegrounds the very challenges women face today. In 1992 Judith Walkowitz wrote, “Most notably, the dilemmas that late-Victorian
feminists confronted echo many of the dilemmas we feminists encounter today, with many of the same terms of agreement and disagreement operating inside and outside of feminist ranks” (10). Sixteen years later, this still seems to be the case. In fact, many women’s magazines today could be considered an ironic blending of the traditionally feminine, and the forward-thinking feminist. Women are encouraged to be everything from mothers, cooks, shoppers, home decorators, to career women, independents, and persons unafraid to speak their minds. In the late nineteenth century, unnaturally molded bodies of corset-wearers could be found in the WPP’s advertising images, paired with warnings of corset dangers by health professionals in WPP articles. Today, unhealthy beauty expectations like waif-thinness or golden tans are made to seem healthy through advertising’s reinforcement, despite encouragement for women to embrace their curves, or warnings about the damaging effects of UV rays, which all occur within pages of one another in the same women’s publication. Business etiquette tips now stand alongside parenting advice in women’s magazines, not unlike advertisements for women’s employment and various household products to protect children which we find in the WPP. While women are no longer afraid to wear pants, most still strive to create the picture of femininity that men will find sexy, and that other women will want to emulate; ultimately, women continue to strive for a preservation of femininity that sets them apart from men, and for power in the public or professional sphere as well. Both consumer culture and ideals of women’s independence continue to compete with one another while women struggle to reconcile their domestic and professional careers.

That so many of the contradictions in subject matter and the rhetorical forms present in the WPP remain in Western women’s culture today suggests the vitality of
discovering, preserving, and discussing this periodical that has found so little notice among scholars. Victorian consumer society seems to have provided the foundation from which our current indulgence in consumption has grown. In addition, the same oppressive experiences that shaped our predecessors continue to shape women today. Understanding the struggles of women before us creates a solidarity between women across time. The very solidarity the *WPP* strove to create for its Victorian readers, can link women across generations.
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Vita

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