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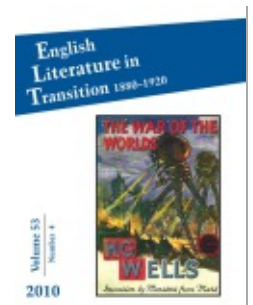
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The Woman of Genius and the Woman of Grub Street: Figures of the Female Writer in British *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction

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IN THE FICTION of the late nineteenth century, whether avowedly feminist or not, there is a strikingly frequent female figure: the independent heroine as writer, whether novelist, journalist, or amanuensis and researcher for a male writer. I propose here to explore the expression “woman of genius,” look at figures of the female writer in their ideological context and determine the interrelation and interdependence among them.

The Woman of Grub Street

I set out from Grub Street (or perhaps more accurately, *New Grub Street*). Condensed in this category are the woman journalist, the researcher/editor, and the hack writer, whether successful or not. Together, these form a densely populated area of the *fin-de-siècle* novel, as a partial roll-call will illustrate. Herminia Barton, in Grant Allen’s runaway best-seller *The Woman Who Did*, for example, keeps herself and the child born outside marriage after she did by means of journalism; Hadria Fullerton, in Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus*, is a genius in musical composition but of a kind too advanced for public taste, and so makes a precarious living from writing articles; Marion Yule, in Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, works virtually on a shiftwork basis in the Reading Room of the British Museum, conducting research for her father’s unsuccessful writings, and comes to see herself as “a mere machine for reading and writing,” an automaton in the service of industrialized literary production; in a novel virtually in dialogue with

New Grub Street, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Ella Hepworth Dixon's Mary Erle similarly serves her father's research needs before earning her own living through made-to-order hack fiction; Elizabeth Caldwell MacLure, heroine of Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book*, maintains herself as a struggling journalist between leaving her husband and finding her true calling as a public speaker; and Alice Barton, in George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin*, combines writing for magazines with nursing her sick sister.¹

These various figures from novels of the 1880s and 1890s have obvious points in common. First, they combine the tasks of writing and more traditionally womanly virtues of self-sacrifice and devotion, with the needs of a child, father, sister or needy friend that are prominent among the motivations for their activities. Secondly, it is difficult to think of any such female character who actually *wants* to be a journalist or to write in this way; such work is a last resort under the pressure of financial necessity for many whose initial artistic aspirations are higher: Herminia Barton has written a high-minded novel that does not sell; Hadria Fullerton suffers because her music is too advanced; Mary Erle sets out to be a painter; Elizabeth MacLure is the absolute type of the woman of genius who has not yet found her medium. History reveals, though, that journalism was not an occupation in which many women found themselves by accident. It was, instead, a keenly competitive area of professional activity for women, growing and being transformed in the last twenty years of the century by such innovations as syndication, the literary agent, the gossip column and the expansion of the popular press.²

Sally Mitchell has demonstrated that women journalists organised themselves rapidly into a professional body, establishing in 1892 a Writers' Club near Fleet Street, where they could produce their copy in relatively calm surroundings, and setting up a Society of Women Journalists which, in 1899, had 200 members.³ In 1898 there was a substantial market for Arnold Bennett's *Journalism for Women*, a manual for those desiring to enter the profession.⁴ The journalist Mary Frances Billington, writing in *The Woman's World*, offered in 1890 a rather sobering account of the difficulties faced by aspiring entrants. Women could have no reasonable expectation of reporting on areas of activity dominated by men—sports, war, finance, or the role of travelling correspondent. Unless they worked specifically for women's journals, female reporters must expect to write about social functions, the home, beauty

and dress, and philanthropy, replicating in the public sphere of professionalisation the private sphere of domestic ideology. It is not a job to be taken up in middle age, Billington suggests, but the need to begin young poses its own problems:

Few mothers and fathers like the idea of a young woman's enjoying independence so complete that she may be out at all hours of the day or night.... The idea of going out to do one's work with a chaperone at one's side is almost as comic as the story, vouched for as true by one paper, of the young married reporteress who took her place at the Press table of an athletic meeting at Lillie Bridge this season with a baby in her arms.

Irregular hours, late nights, missed meals and the high pressure of deadlines mean that only the physically robust young woman should contemplate such a life. Humility and patience, accuracy, reliability and punctuality will be of far greater assistance than inspiration. In a remark that could serve as a chastening rebuke to the creators of fictional women of genius driven to journalism by penury, Billington concludes that editors are not interested in "genius on its own valuation": "For one article accepted, a dozen will be declined; not because there exists a base plot among editors to stifle rising genius, but because subject, style, treatment, feeling, are one or all unsuitable to his wants."⁵

The historical situation of women journalists reveals perhaps more clearly than the romanticized poverty of the novels cited a particular set of associations of journalism: on the one hand, with professionalisation comes a certain status of self-worth often new to women; on the other hand, journalism places writing in the area of commerce, money, paid labour, and the professional is also the employee. Both of these are important to the ensuing argument. And it is only a slight exaggeration to say that commercial success in a novelist—the Grub Street hack made good—is, in the representation of the fictional artist at this time, the clearest sign of worthlessness. Gissing's Jasper Milvain (already marked down for villainy by the name "Jasper") offers a useful example: shallow, cynical, contemptuous of his audience, materialistic, he provides the novel with its focus for that blend of the triumphalism of defeat and (in Jameson's term) *ressentiment* that characterizes Gissing's fiction.⁶ But it is interesting to note how often there is a gendering of the two associated roles of despicably successful artist and deserving but unsuccessful counterpart. The novel *George Mandeville's Husband* (which, despite the virulence directed at its female artist, modelled on some respects on George Eliot, was written by the feminist Elizabeth

Robins under the ungendered pseudonym C. E. Raimond) is one instance: its florid, domineering, maternally irresponsible and maritally vampiric George Mandeville first overshadows and finally destroys the career of her husband, a talented but self-effacing painter.⁷ Similarly, Henry James's story "Greville Fane" is narrated by a struggling male writer for whom the enterprise of literature was "an irritation, a torment," but its central character, bearing once more a male pseudonym, is a highly successful woman who "could invent stories by the yard, but . . . couldn't write a page of English. She went down to her grave without suspecting that though she had contributed volumes to the diversion of her contemporaries she hadn't contributed a sentence to the language."⁸ Gilbert and Gubar have detected within such plots an adversarial struggle for the profession of literature between male and female writers,⁹ but it can also be related to one of the major cultural debates of the period, the relation of art to commerce, which enters differentially into representations of male and female writers.

The "Woman of Genius"

It is necessary to establish what the term "woman of genius" means. It is a phrase that recurs with startling frequency in the writing at this time. In the story by James just mentioned we are told firmly by the narrator that Greville Fane, or Mrs. Stormer, is "not a woman of genius."¹⁰ More commonly, though, the term is to be found in the positive in writings by the New Woman novelists of the end of the century: in the sub-title of Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book: Being a Study from the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell MacLure, A Woman of Genius*, but also in Gloriana, the heroine of Lady Florence Dixie's Utopian novel of the same name, who is already touched by the "glowing sign of genius" at the age of twelve; in the heroine of Constance Fenimore Woolson's short story "Miss Grief" (a mishearing of her pseudonym, Miss A. Crief), whom the younger male narrator considers to have the "divine spark of genius"; in Hadria Fullerton of *The Daughters of Danaus*, whose music teacher foresees her ultimate failure because "[h]e regarded the maternal instinct as the scourge of genius"; or in Mary Cholmondeley's Hester Gresley, in *Red Pottage*, who one day perceives the path her life must take—authorship—through the sudden revelation of her genius.¹¹

The concept of genius had taken a particular inflection during this period through the somatic determinism that underlies many of the

theories and disputes concerning gender difference. Probably the leading British theorist of genius at the time was Francis Galton, a pioneer in genetics, whose *Hereditary Genius* (1892) defines the term as meaning “those qualifications of intellect and disposition which . . . lead to reputation” of the kind commanded by “a leader of opinion . . . an originator.”¹² Galton supported his theory of the hereditary quality of genius by reference to empirical research; he took as a kind of index of natural ability the names and entries in *The Dictionary of Men of the Time* (1865), and investigated the appearance there of so many men related by family, discounting any element of social determination upon such success on the grounds that true genius is of such power that mere social circumstance could not have repressed it.¹³ Throughout Galton’s work—and elsewhere in the related debates—the term “man of genius” is commonly used.¹⁴ So it might be supposed at first that gender has no place here, that conventional linguistic usage of the time was such that “man” can readily be taken as a gender-inclusive term. That this is not the case becomes clear, though, first from the range of quotations commonly used in the course of the argument, such as Goncourt’s “There are no women of genius; the women of genius are men,”¹⁵ and secondly, through the care taken to differentiate between men and women in consideration of the term, as in the case of Isabel Foard’s contention, in 1899, that: “It is said that clever men have had clever mothers, but it is not absolutely proved, in a biological sense, that this is always the case, or that the mother transmits her mental power to sons more than to daughters.”¹⁶

The idea that women lack the capacity for genius goes far beyond the commonplace that there have been no female Shakespeares. One rather belated contributor to the debate seeks to answer just this point, in fact. Winifred Ashton, writing under the pseudonym Clemence Dane, suggests that instead of looking for the female genius, we might do better to look for the “feminine of genius”:

. . . in the penny dip of history great women come as easily to the blindly groping hand as great men do. And yet—no Shakespeare! no Michelangelo! no Blake! Any amount of administrative and pioneer qualities, but no pre-eminence in what, in the stricter sense, we call genius, the godlike capacity for breathing on the dust and making it a living creature. What is the matter with women when it comes to the creative arts? Is it too fantastic to suggest that there is nothing whatever the matter with them—that this formidable array of facts merely goes to prove that genius in women is not absent, but working with different tools, expressing itself in a totally different

medium? . . . Women have produced no great woman artist! What! Is it a little thing to light such a flame? Is it not in itself genius to be such a creature, so made, so grown, so balanced, that its word, its look, its mere existence, can call into being the creative artist in another mind? Great is the creative artist! But what of the other artist—the creature who drives him to create?¹⁷

This gendered binary opposition of creative genius and muse has, of course, been present virtually throughout the history of the concept of the genius, but it rarely appears in so crude a form in this newly materialist late nineteenth-century version of the idea. Instead, a new version of the “equal but not identical” argument attributes different forms of intelligence to women and men on the basis of their reproductive roles as these are enacted in the processes of evolution.

The main impetus for the reconsideration of genius appears to have come from the science (or pseudo-science) of eugenics,¹⁸ in which a pre-genetic understanding of the transmissibility of physical and mental characteristics feeds directly into a social programme of so-called “race improvement.” Galton’s tracking of families of genius is not intended as a pleasant historical diversion, but as the basis for a planned approach to selective breeding in order to maximise the stock of mental and physical ability, as well as of solid civic virtue, in the British population. For Galton, there is a distinct racial or national dimension to eugenics. He is confident, for instance, that the “natural ability of which this book mainly treats, is such as a modern European possesses in a much greater average share than men of the lower races.”¹⁹

The other best-known late nineteenth-century theorist of genius, Cesare Lombroso, perhaps unsurprisingly focuses his attention on its frequent occurrence in Italy, and includes as the frontispiece to his book *The Man of Genius* (1891) a map showing the distribution of genius in its poetic, musical, and artistic manifestations across the different cities and regions of Italy. It rapidly becomes clear, then, that however absolute the quality ascribed to genius, its primary use in such theories is as a tool of differentiation; it distinguishes humans from the animals, the higher races from the lower, the male from the female, and, as in all binaries, it establishes them in a hierarchy. For Galton and most of his British contemporaries, at the apex of civilisation stands the Englishman.

This is not to say that genius can be seen as in all circumstances a blessing. One of the explanations offered for the relative absence of genius among women depends upon the theory of differential variability,

of which Havelock Ellis was a major exponent. Put at its simplest, this means that the distribution of deviation from the mean of intelligence is held to be considerably greater among men than among women. Whereas Galton gave little thought to this matter, assuming that talent was normally distributed across the male population, others held that there was, in Havelock Ellis's arresting phrase, a "tendency of men to be abnormal." He devotes a chapter of *Man and Woman* to tracking by sex variations in what were seen, in contemporary terminologies, as congenital defects: hare-lips, club-foot, supernumerary nipples, left-handedness, albinism, idiocy, moral insanity, disposition to suicide, and criminality. In all of these, he suggests, men predominate. Ellis later proposes, in a kind of back-formation of argument, that genius, being uncommon, can appropriately be seen as a congenital deviation from the norm which will therefore prove to be found more commonly in men than in women:

All sorts of monstrosities and deformities on the physical side are more common in men. It is not surprising that the same should be true of intellectual mutations, and that there should be more genius among men as well as more idiocy. It has never seemed to me that in admitting this conclusion I was departing from the doctrine of sexual equivalence I have always held. Many fallacious and sometimes contradictory arguments have, however, been brought by women against it, so far at least as genius is concerned, for I have not observed that the champions of women have shown much enthusiasm regarding their equality in idiocy.²⁰

This last complaint is entirely justified, assuming Ellis's connection of the two is first conceded; the inborn madness of women, at least in women's writing of this period, almost always leads directly back to the syphilophobic plot of the sexually infectious man.²¹

Lombroso concurs with Ellis on the variability of genius, giving the ratio of 70 male geniuses to 30 female, though, interestingly, he claims that there is equivalence in the frequency of idiocy.²² From Ellis's placement of genius among the "monstrosities and deformities on the physical side" it becomes evident that this particular form of deviation from the norm is by no means always seen as a blessing. It is a commonplace that genius and madness are near allied, but the notion of inherited and heritable genius gives a new force to the thought. If genius is regarded as a form of inspiration or of intense focus upon one activity, then, says Galton, "it is perilously near to the voices heard by the insane, to their delirious tendencies, or to their monomanias. It cannot in such cases be a healthy faculty, nor can it be desirable to

perpetuate it by inheritance."²³ Lombroso goes further, suggesting that "Many lunatics have parents of genius, and . . . many men of genius have parents or sons who were epileptic, mad, or above all criminal." From this he concludes that "genius is a true degenerative psychosis belonging to the group of moral insanity. . . ."²⁴

The key term here is "degenerative"; the theorisation of genius is beset by the fear that deviation from the norm always leads in the direction of physical debility and/or mental deterioration. This surprising inversion of the optimistic readings of Darwinian evolutionary theory that prevailed a little earlier in the century proved a source of comfort to some feminists, who could see in the very averageness of the female sounder evolutionary qualities. The feminist pacifist Anna Garlin Spencer, for example, argued that

Speaking generally, the feminine side of humanity is in the "middle of the road" of life. Biologically, psychologically and sociologically, women are in the central, normal, constructive part of the evolutionary process. On the one side and on the other, men exhibit more geniuses and more feeble-minded, more talented experts and more incompetents who cannot earn a living, more idealistic masters of thought and action and more "cranks" and ne'er-do-weels [*sic*] who shame their mothers.²⁵

The degeneration of the species is one of the cultural obsessions of Northern Europe in this period, and it is one of the contradictory ironies of the thesis that genius—most associated with the innovative, creative, and experimental forms of intelligence—should also be one of the agents by which degeneracy saps the powers of will and critical intelligence.

The historian of medicine George Drinka has argued that the "degenerate myth" and the "genius myth" are two powerful and interdependent causal hypotheses for the concept of neurosis, and that where they meet is in the contemporary construction of modernity.²⁶ The suggestion here is that the demands of modernity—embodied in the pace, anonymity and exposure to the masses of urban life—produces dangerous overexcitations of the nerves, leading to excessive sensibility, hyperaesthesia, and a general instability of nervous (and therefore cerebral) function. Whether these manifest themselves in the form of the genius or the enervated degenerate, they are in any case transmitted through heredity, and there is no clear somatic distinction to be made between the heightened nervousity of the idiot, the hysteric, the epileptic or the genius. The noted French physician Moreau produced a visual representation of this in his celebrated image of the "tree of idiosyncratic hereditary

nervous states," in which we find exceptional intelligence, tics, neuralgia, music, imbecility, deafness and rickets all represented as branches or twigs from the same common stock of nervosity.²⁷

Genius & Failure: Figures of the Female Writer

In claiming for their heroines the status of "women of genius," then, the New Woman novelists are engaging in a risky manoeuvre. On the one hand, the range of its ideological usefulness is considerable. Whatever theory of genius is drawn upon, it is clear that—whether in the form of gift, natural ability, or degenerative psychosis—it is held to be innate; it is not earned, developed by hard work, or sought by ambition, but there, built into the mind, of course, but also into the body. The very phrase "a woman of genius" is a calculated challenge to prevailing medical or physiological theories, and therefore to the social orthodoxies and programmes built upon them. Consequently, it feeds directly into arguments concerning the injustice of educational arrangements that do not allow those of innate genius to fulfil themselves. This is the line taken, for example, by Vernon Lee, who uses the idea of inheritance of genius to bolster her claims of social injustice:

[Woman] has not become as efficient a human being as her brothers; whatever her individual inherited aptitudes (and . . . women are, after all, the children of men as well as of women, and must, therefore, inherit some of their father's [*sic*] natural powers), she has not been allowed to develop them in the struggle for life; but has been condemned, on the contrary, to atrophy them in forms of labour which can require only the most common gifts, since they are required equally of every woman in every family.²⁸

But at the same time as it lends support to claims for a larger scope for the exercise of talent, the concept of innate genius also enables the representation of achievement without conscious ambition—then as now, a problematic quality in feminist reconstructions of the feminine. If the power of genius simply resides within, then it becomes only another form of destiny to which women must assent, without challenge to the conventional womanliness of self-forgetfulness. This can be seen in the revelation which convinces Mary Cholmondeley's Hester Gresley, in *Red Pottage*, that she must write:

And as Hester leaned against Rachel the yearning of her soul towards her suddenly lit up something which had long lain colossal but inapprehended in the depths of her mind. Her paroxysm of despair at her own powerlessness was followed by a lightning flash of self-revelation. She saw, as in a dream,

terrible, beautiful, inaccessible, but distinct, where her power lay, of which restless bewildering hints had so often mocked her. . . . The strength as of an infinite ocean swept in beneath her weakness, and bore it upon its surface like a leaf.²⁹

There is here nothing of choice, will, ambition, but only surrender to a greater power, so that the language and moral configuration of orthodox femininity are retained even while they are unquestionably put to new uses.

If the woman genius represents a claim to creativity and intellectual power, it is but a step, according to the most influential theories of the day, from there to idiocy, convulsions, dementia and criminality. Sarah Grand's Beth has the correct heredity in this version of proto-genetics: her father is a drunkard, her mother both sickly and violent. In order to safeguard her from the imputations of hereditary nervousity, Grand also feels obliged frequently to assert, alongside the genius of her heroine, the "proportion" that governs her intellect and the "balance" of her character. But Beth is a rare instance among these novels of a surviving and fulfilled female genius, albeit in a rather odd Utopian rewriting of the motif of the Lady of Shallott. Elsewhere, heroines of genius certainly seem vulnerable to the ravages of heightened nervous irritability: Cholmondeley's Hester Gresley is an artist of genius, but when her pompous brother destroys the only manuscript of her second novel, in a combination of envy and moral outrage, she knocks down his child with an intent to kill him, and thereafter lapses into a fatal brain-fever; and Woolson's "Miss Grief" starves herself to death, after refusing to alter a word of her disorderly works of genius to secure their publication. The woman of genius has discovered a new path to that self-starvation that so often recurs in the plots of novel heroines.

There is a further ideological complexity raised by the figure of the "woman of genius," that the claim to equality and worth staked in the person of these heroines rests upon their singularity. It derives, in fact, from an argument from exception; it is precisely *because* they are not as other women that they are able to represent a claim on behalf of all women. This is scarcely a new problem, of course; Mary Wollstonecraft's novel *Mary*, for instance, is misogynistic in its representation of its other women in order more clearly to delineate the heroine-status of its protagonist. Nevertheless, it is a problem that continues to trouble feminist interpretation and commentary. Rachel du Plessis relates the "woman of genius" plot to the class origin and position of the New Woman

novelists, and regards it as a kind of apotheosis of bourgeois individualism.³⁰ Terry Lovell, on the other hand, suggests the danger that the argument from exception risks discounting the claim being made, and locates in this problem what she calls “the second obligation laid by their authors on these women . . . the woman’s new woman was constrained to prove herself a real woman in spite of her genius.” As Lovell points out, plot mechanisms for doing this are few: “She might have a child to whom she gave a mother’s love and sacrifice; she might fall in love, or inspire a great love; she might endure great deprivation and suffering for another.”³¹ But as the plots of victimage and self-sacrifice reassert themselves, attesting to this desire to re-generalise out from the exceptional to the commonplace, the qualities of orthodox womanliness are in their turn re-naturalised. This is scarcely surprising, of course, given that such qualities are held in their turn to have both a somatic basis and an evolutionary role that confirms and justifies the moral valuation of the feminine. It is here that the vexed question of the maternal instinct raises its head. The relation between intellectual or creative genius and reproduction was in any case an issue in dispute; against Galton’s proposals for eugenic breeding, for example, can be placed Lombroso’s flat assertion that men of genius are for the most part sterile and/or degenerate (in this context read “homosexual”).³² But in the case of the woman genius, matters are further complicated by the assumption that the reproductive, and therefore evolutionary, role of the female is more clearly defined. In a curious way, it came to be argued that, since the woman’s evolutionary role finds its justification always in the future, her intellectual qualities are directed primarily toward altruism and the maintenance of the knowledge of the past. W. K. Brooks, for example, writes in 1883 that

if the female organism is the conservative organism, to which is intrusted the keeping of all that has been gained during the past history of the race, it must follow that the female mind is a storehouse filled with the instincts, habits, intuitions, and laws of conduct which have been gained by past experience. The male organism, on the contrary, being the valuable organism, the originating element in the process of evolution, the male mind must have the power of extending experience over new fields, and, by comparison and generalization, of discovering new laws of nature. . . .³³

It becomes apparent that in such a view, the demands of genius—innovative and experimental—are at odds with the conservative and accumulative evolutionary function of the woman’s mind, in which the alleged maternal instinct plays a central role. And indeed there is no

heroine in these novels in whom writing and mothering are combined in any positive way. At the one extreme lies the despised George Mandeville, in *George Mandeville's Husband*, a bad writer and a worse mother who neglects her daughter to such an extent that she dies, but who then turns her into material for a story; at the other, perhaps, lies *The Daughters of Danaus*, in which the successful author Valeria du Prel cautions the aspiring Hadria that the "dictates of Nature" are not to be ignored, even though it is apparent that Nature must hate women "Because of the blundering, merciless way she has made us; because of the needs that she has put into our hearts, and the preposterous payment that she demands for their fulfilment; because of the equally preposterous payment she exacts, if we elect to do without that which she teaches us to yearn for."³⁴ The incompatibility of the two roles is poignantly imaged in the number of genius-heroines who refer to their works as their children; it is some such sense, for example, that motivates Hester Gresley, whose assault on her brother's child is in explicit retaliation for his "murder" of her own "child," her manuscript. A choice between fulfilling the ideological requirements of genius and those of the conventional ideology of womanhood would be interesting; more interesting still is the fact that so very few of these artist-heroines are permitted to fulfil either.

The question of artistic failure is important, especially in the context of that version of nervous susceptibility that was often taken, in the self-description of the period, to be the very hallmark of modernity. Such nervous affectibility could, it was thought, take a variety of forms, among them the hysteria associated with femininity and its counterpart hypochondriasis, somatically coded masculine; the debility of neurasthenia; or the instability of the epileptic. But in the domain of art, the primary figure for such modern nervous overstimulation is the decadent. In the writings of the period, this is a designation that can take in everything from the alleged hyperaesthesia of the proponents of "Art for Art's Sake" to the supposed hysteria of the New Woman novelist.³⁵ They are in particular connected, for many critics of the time, by the place of moral ideas in their work: their avowed absence from the writings of the aesthete and their unabashed centrality in the fiction of the New Woman novelist-with-a-purpose are alike examples of a disproportion that signifies a departure from the putative norm which has come to be virtually synonymous with genetic health and hence with the healthiness of the "race" and its culture.³⁶

In fact, there are of course a good many differences in the works of these different kinds of writers, who in any case occupy a good deal of space and time expressing hostility to one another; a character in *The Beth Book*, for example, announces with a conciseness rare in that work: "The works of art for art's sake, and style for style's sake, end on the shelf much respected, while their authors end in the asylum, the prison and the premature grave."³⁷ A difference of particular significance, however, lies in their preferred forms and modes of publication, the aesthetes concentrating on the poem, the illustration, the essay, the short story or the little magazine in preference to the major literary form of commercial success, the novel, while the feminist writers were primarily associated, not merely with the novel, but with the best-seller from a major publishing house.³⁸ This admittedly over-generalised distinction takes us close to one of the key cultural debates of the period, the relationship between art and commerce. Any reader of Gissing will be familiar with the issues; his *New Grub Street* anatomises the various possibilities of what is, for him, virtually an inverse relation between commercial success and artistic authenticity. But he was by no means alone in such a view; indeed, that is the dominant view in the production of oppositional culture at this time. Gissing was only one of many to be depressed by the great increase in the rate of publication of fiction—according to Nigel Cross, more than a threefold increase in the annual number of new fiction titles occurred between 1880 and 1896.³⁹ "The growing flood of literature swamps everything but works of primary genius," remarks Gissing with typical gloom.⁴⁰ It has to be remembered, though, that at least in the popular imagination, the greater part of this increase was due to the increasing participation of women.

And this takes us close to the significant contradiction with which so many women novelists were struggling to contend in their representation of female artists: there is a tension between the feminist impulse to validate the genius, or at least the abilities, of the heroine and the context of an understanding of art in which only failure will confirm its authenticity. Andreas Huyssen has demonstrated persuasively that, in the establishment in this period of early modernism of separate domains of elite and mass culture, there is a significant inscription of gender:

It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether

traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities ... Time and again documents from the late nineteenth century ascribe pejorative feminine characteristics to mass culture—and by mass culture here, I mean serialized *feuilleton* novels, popular and family magazines, the stuff of lending libraries, fictional bestsellers, and the like—not, however, working-class culture or residual forms of older popular or folk cultures.⁴¹

Huyssen is writing primarily of nineteenth-century France, but the point holds good for Britain too. The figure of what Mary Cholmondeley calls “the ‘new woman’ with stupendous lopsided opinions on difficult Old Testament subjects; the ‘lady authoress’ with a mission to show up the vices of a society which she knew only by hearsay”⁴² is a familiar object of satire in the period, and her presence in the works of so many novelists who would certainly have been seen by most of their contemporaries precisely as New Woman writers betrays a particular cultural anxiety.

The fictional and lived contradiction between “authentic” and “enslaved” literary labour is often represented at the time as a dichotomy between an absolute value ascribed to the productions of creative genius and the commercial values associated with the industrialization of literature,⁴³ and it feeds into what Linda Huf has identified as one of the central motifs of the male-authored *Künstlerroman*, a mystique of masculinity in which the lonely male artist pits himself in adversarial opposition to the inauthentic and commercialized culture of modernity, represented by the masses, the publisher and the banker.⁴⁴ However, the opposition of art and commerce takes on a somewhat different inflection in the case of the artist-heroine in these late nineteenth-century novels.

The woman of Grub Street, toiling away in the Reading Room, producing ephemeral articles for family magazines, or, like Dixon’s Mary Erle, surrendering her ambitions to produce instead “a three-volume novel on the old lines”⁴⁵ confirms the association of femininity with trash: with commerce, with the values of the marketplace, alienated labour, and inferior aesthetic values. Nevertheless, at the same time she represents professionalisation, career, financial independence, and the opportunity to manifest talent, all of them goals cherished with good reason by first-wave feminists. The successful woman writer must, by definition, be compromised; stranded between the self-sacrificing plots of womanhood and a concept of the artist that identifies commercial success with inauthentic and market-oriented mass culture, she is a

figure who must be repudiated, satirised or devalued at risk of undermining the authenticity both of the good artist *within* the text and of the writer *of* the text. The woman of genius, on the other hand, embodies the claims of women to intellectual and creative equality with men and to the highest aesthetic achievements, but only at the cost of dedicating the heroine to failure if she is convincingly to represent authentic cultural values. The contradictions and complexities of the feminist impulse and the ideology of art within such novels are evinced in what Ann Ardis has called their “boomerang” plotting,⁴⁶ the delegitimization of women’s ambition in the name of artistic authenticity. The novels of the female artist are, by and large, pessimistic tales of defeat at the hands of the world, but, as Lyn Pykett has observed, their rather interesting variety of textual self-consciousness derives in part from their being written and published realist novels about the lives of women driven to death, despair or failure by the impossibility of writing or publishing realist novels about the lives of women.⁴⁷ Dixon’s *Mary Erle*, in a realist novel bearing close structural and thematic similarities to *New Grub Street*, epitomises this in the scene in which she must abandon her desire to write “a realistic novel ‘with twenty-seven years of actual experience in it’” in order to fulfil a publisher’s commission for one with a ball in the first volume, a picnic and a parting in the second, and a marriage in the third.⁴⁸ It seems that these moments of self-contradiction, together with the striking migration of so many New Women novelists’ heroines between journalism and high art, temporary success and poverty, speak directly of their own political and ideological impossibility; and this is where the interdependence of the Woman of Genius and the Woman of Grub Street most significantly lies.

Notes

1. Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did* (London: John Lane, 1895); Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1989); George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 137; Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Merlin Press, 1990); Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book: Being a Study of the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell MacLure, A Woman of Genius* (London: William Heinemann, 1898); George Moore, *A Drama in Muslin: A Realistic Novel*, 7th ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1893).

2. See Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 204–205.

3. Sally Mitchell, “Careers for Girls: Writing Trash,” *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 15:3 (Fall 1992), 109.

4. See Margaret Diane Stetz, "Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth: Bookselling at the Bodley Head in the Eighteen-Nineties," *Victorian Studies*, 35:1 (Autumn 1991), 73.
5. Mary Frances Billington, "Journalism as a Profession for Women," *The Woman's World*, 3 (1890, rep; New York: Source Book Press, 1970), 8–10.
6. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 200–205.
7. Elizabeth Robins, *George Mandeville's Husband* (London: William Heinemann, 1894).
8. Henry James, "Greville Fane," in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, Leon Edel, ed. (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1963), 8 (1891–1892), 436.
9. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume 1: The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 126–35.
10. James, 436.
11. Lady Florence Dixie, *Gloriana, or, The Revolution of 1900* (London: Henry & Co., 1890), 1:6; Constance Fenimore Woolson, "Miss Grief," in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, Elaine Showalter, ed. (London: Virago Press, 1993), 176; Caird, 319; Mary Cholmondeley, *Red Pottage* (London: Virago Press, 1985), 37.
12. Frances Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences*, 2nd ed. (1869; London: Macmillan, 1892), 33.
13. *Ibid.*, 6–8, 34–36.
14. *Ibid.*, viii. The only time I have noted the use of non-gendered term is when Galton goes on to gloss "a person who is a genius" as "a man endowed with superior faculties."
15. Goncourt, quoted in Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Secondary Sexual Characters*, 4th ed., rev. and enl. (London and Newcastle: Walter Scott, 1904), 420; also in Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), 138.
16. Isabel Foard, "The Power of Heredity," in *Westminster Review*, 151 (1899), 550–51.
17. Winifred Ashton (Clemence Dane, pseud.), *The Women's Side* (1926; repr. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 135–36, 137.
18. First proposed by Francis Galton in his *Hereditary Genius* (first published 1869).
19. *Ibid.*, 33.
20. *Ibid.*, 23–28; Ellis, *Man and Woman*, 412, and Chapter 16: "The Variational Tendency of Men," 358–72; Havelock Ellis, "The Question of Genius in Women," in *My Confessional: Questions of Our Day* (London: John Lane, 1934), 171–72.
21. For example, see Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* (London: William Heinemann, 1893), Margaret Deland, *The Rising Tide* (London: J. Murray, 1916), and Emma Frances Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman* (London: William Heinemann, 1894.) See also Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World, or, Our Androcentric Culture* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), 64–66.
22. Lombroso, 142.
23. Galton, x.
24. Lombroso, 145, 333.
25. Anna Garlin Spencer, *Woman's Share in Social Culture* (1912; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1972; *American Women: Images and Realities*), 171. See also Ellis, "The Question of Genius in Women," 171–73; and Gilman, 265–67.
26. George Frederick Drinka, *The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 53–59, 251–52. Degeneracy was first promoted as an important concept in heredity by Benedictin Morel in 1857, and quickly gained acceptance in European psychiatry and anthropology. See Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 68–70, 218; also Drinka, 47–53, *et passim*.
27. Drinka, 55.

28. Vernon Lee, "The Economic Parasitism of Women," in *Gospels of Anarchy* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 280.
29. Cholmondeley, 37.
30. Rachel Blau Du Plessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 84–104.
31. Terry Lovell, *Consuming Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987), 122.
32. Lombroso, 142.
33. W. K. Brooks, *The Law of Heredity* (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1883), 160, quoted in Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 95.
34. Caird, 71, 95.
35. Lyn Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9, 164–76, 181–82; also Elaine Showalter, introduction to *Daughters of Decadence*, x–xiii.
36. See, for example, James Ashcroft Noble, "The Fiction of Sexuality," *Contemporary Review*, 67 (1895), 493; B. A. Crackanthorpe, "Sex in Modern Literature," *Nineteenth Century*, 218 (1895), 614.
37. Grand, *The Beth Book*, 460.
38. See Cross, 167, 215; also Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Tania Modleski, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 191–94.
39. Cross, 206.
40. Gissing, 493.
41. Huyssen, 191, 193.
42. Cholmondeley, 20.
43. See Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 8–9.
44. Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (New York: F. Ungar, 1983), 10–11.
45. Dixon, 149.
46. Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 148–56.
47. Pykett, 187.
48. Dixon, 149.