

# Magazine

OF HER OWN?

Domesticity

and

Desire

in the

Woman's

Magazine,

1800–1914



MARGARET BEETHAM



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## A MAGAZINE OF HER OWN?

The woman's magazine has had a central place in popular print throughout the twentieth century, but the history of the form has been almost completely neglected. How did it become so important? When and how did it develop its familiar elements—the agony aunt, the fashion plate, the repeated promise to transform the reader and fulfil her desires? Did it empower or disempower these readers as they sought to be gendered and sexual 'women'?

*A Magazine of Her Own?* addresses a range of such questions as it charts the history of the British woman's magazine through the nineteenth century. It is simultaneously a chronological story, a set of detailed case studies, and an intervention into recent debates about gender and sexuality in popular reading. Margaret Beetham argues that the magazine as a form has been shaped by its association with women as readers but also and crucially that the meaning of femininities—whether of the domestic woman, the fashionable lady or the romancing girl—have been made in and through the magazine.

The range of Beetham's original scholarship will make this book valuable to scholars but it is also clearly, accessibly written. It is of interest across a range of scholarly disciplines, including women's studies, media and cultural studies, literature and history. It will also appeal more widely to any reader interested in the history of women and of popular reading.

Margaret Beetham teaches in the Department of English and History at the Manchester Metropolitan University, where she is Course Leader in the Women's Studies MA programme. She is a co-author of *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (1991).

# A MAGAZINE OF HER OWN?

**Domesticity and desire in the  
woman's magazine, 1800–1914**

*Margaret Beetham*



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## PREFACE

As a clever middle-class girl I was taught that I should despise women's magazines as silly if not pernicious. When I grew up and became a feminist activist and academic, I still had mentors who argued that such reading perpetuated my ideological oppression as a woman (Friedan 1965; Greer 1971). Then in the mid-1980s as popular culture began to be rescued for progressive politics I, like other feminists, began to explore the illicit pleasures of these magazines and our hate-love relationship with their endlessly repeated promises of transformation (Winship 1987). In the 1990s these ambiguities still remain unresolved and 'post-feminist' Naomi Wolf describes such magazines as simultaneously oppressive of women and the only chance for a female form of mass culture (Wolf 1990: 548–85).

All these critics stressed the importance in late twentieth-century culture of the 'women's interest magazine', a category which includes a third of British periodicals (Mintel 1986). There is some exciting recent writing on these contemporary magazines and their cultural significance (McCracken 1993; Winship 1987). There is no similar body of work on how they came to occupy their crucial place in popular reading and in the contested meanings of our femininity. Yet these titles, their characteristics and their cultural significance are the products of a specific cultural and material history. Understanding that history should enable us to locate ourselves politically and theoretically as late twentieth-century readers.

Cynthia White's *Women's Magazines, 1693–1968* opened up the field of study in 1970 and there have been useful studies of particular magazines or short periods since (Adburgham 1972; Shevelov 1989). Four of us jointly wrote a brief history which, like Whites book, traced the form from its beginning to today (Ballaster *et al.* 1991). However, there is still a notable absence of historical research and writing on women's magazines and, as I have discovered to my cost, such work is very difficult, both in methodological and practical terms. Theoretical work on periodicals as popular texts is still relatively undeveloped despite their importance. Where it exists it is in cultural and media studies and in relation to late twentieth-century texts. The practical problems of this historical research are also daunting, mainly because of the sheer mass of material involved.

This book seeks to continue the task of making good the absence of history from both popular and scholarly accounts of women's magazines. I have taken a wide sweep. My subject is popular women's journals from the whole nineteenth century. In that period the

mass press, the first of the mass media, came into existence in Britain and the woman's magazine evolved both its characteristic format and its crucial place in popular publishing. However, rather than attempt another descriptive general history, my method here is the case study in which I read and analyse particular magazines as representative or significant. This method will, I hope, both provide detailed historical knowledge and carry forward the debate about how to read texts of this kind and what they mean for our gender politics.

I define the 'woman's magazine' by its explicitly positioning its readers as 'women'. I therefore bring together the history of a particular publishing tradition and an analysis of the way 'woman' has been defined in and through that tradition. I privilege the concept 'woman' not because I think all women are united by their biology or by some essential womanliness but because historically the category has been used to locate and regulate women—as indeed it still is. The magazines which are my subject were and are part of that process; they not only defined readers as 'women', they sought to bring into being the women they addressed. The 'womanliness' the magazines sought to produce was always contradictory and entangled with other differences—especially those of class, nation and religion. Its relationship to the lives of the historical women—and men—who edited, wrote and read these magazines was likewise fractured and difficult to chart. Yet the concept 'woman' retained its political and ideological power across these contradictions.<sup>1</sup>

This book is, therefore, rooted in historical and bibliographical research and uses that research to tell a story. However, it also addresses the theoretical questions about the place of popular print in the cultural politics of gender. It is interdisciplinary and draws on a range of debates within literary and cultural studies and contemporary feminism to read some important but neglected texts.

What follows is simultaneously a chronological narrative, a set of case studies in textual analysis and an argument about the use of contemporary theory. Its range is wide both theoretically and historically. I make no claims, however, to be exhaustive. Though I deal with more than a century of popular print, this is by no means the whole history of the magazine for women (see Ballaster *et al.* 1991). I have used an eclectic range of theories about the relationship between texts and readers as gendered, sexual and embodied selves.

You may, if you wish, read this book as we read the magazines which are its subject, going to the chapters which you think look most interesting, skipping, reading from back to front. Each chapter should make sense on its own. However, I hope you will read it as I designed it to be read, from the beginning through to the end. As a chronological story and a set of arguments, this way of reading makes better sense. However, as I argue throughout, it is always up to readers to consent to or resist the writer's designs upon them, and so it is here.

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This book has been a long time in the making and I have often wondered why I embarked upon it at all. In the course of its somewhat tortuous development I have incurred more debts both intellectual and personal than I can fully acknowledge here. Janet Batsleer, Laurel Brake, Elspeth Graham, Lynette Hunter and Linda Walker read chapters and commented on them in ways I found both stimulating and supportive. Helen Beetham discussed the whole with me and suggested cuts and amendments which helped shape the final draft, as well as typing a full bibliographical Appendix, which we were not in the end able to include. Brian Maidment encouraged me with ideas and volumes from his library. Erica Burman helped clarify my thinking on the final chapter. I have been sustained throughout by a network of women colleagues and friends to whom I owe much; thankyou Pat, Janet, Erica, Karen, Joanna, Carole, Peta, Elspeth and Miriam. David Beetham has been a constant enabler and support through the switchback ride of writing this book. To him and to my daughters, Helen and Kate, I can only hope the appearance of the book is some consolation as well as a token of my love and gratitude.

I am grateful also to my department and to its head, Colin Buckley, for a sabbatical term in the summer of 1994, which enabled me to complete the final draft. Thanks to the librarians and keepers of the various places where I did research: Birmingham City Library, the British Library, Colindale, the Brotherton Library of Leeds University, Manchester Central Library and Gallery of English Costume whose keeper allowed me to use their Archive, and above all thanks to staff of my own library at the Manchester Metropolitan University. I have given papers based on the material here at a number of seminars and conferences where discussion has helped me clarify my ideas.

I am grateful to Manchester City Art Gallery for permission to reproduce material from: the *Lady's Magazine* for 1780, *La Belle Assemblée* for three advertisements from *Queen* and material from *Home Chat*. Thanks also to the Manchester Metropolitan University for permission to use material from the *Family Friend*, the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and *Queen*.

It is usual to end with a disclaimer and I would not want to accuse any of my friends and colleagues of being responsible for what follows. I am, however, mainly aware of the impossibility of writing anything on one's own—just as I argue that the texts I discuss must always be read in terms of their relationships to each other and to other texts.

## LIST OF PERIODICAL ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BA</i>	<i>La Belle Assemblée</i>
<i>BM</i>	<i>Le Beau Monde</i>
<i>BMM</i>	<i>British Mothers' Magazine</i>
<i>CLM</i>	<i>Christian Lady's Magazine</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Contemporary Review</i>
<i>E&amp;M</i>	<i>Exchange and Mart</i>
<i>EDM</i>	<i>Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine</i>
<i>EWJ</i>	<i>English Woman's Journal</i>
<i>EWR</i>	<i>Englishwoman's Review</i>
<i>Fam. Mag.</i>	<i>Family Magazine</i>
<i>FF</i>	<i>Family Friend</i>
<i>Fem. F.</i>	<i>Females Friend</i>
<i>F.Econ.</i>	<i>Family Economist</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>Fortnightly Review</i>
<i>G.</i>	<i>Gentlewoman</i>
<i>GOP</i>	<i>Girls' Own Paper</i>
<i>H&amp;H</i>	<i>Hearth and Home</i>
<i>HC</i>	<i>Home Chat</i>
<i>HHW</i>	<i>Household Words</i>
<i>Id.</i>	<i>Idler</i>
<i>Ld.</i>	<i>Ladies</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>The Lady</i>
<i>LM</i>	<i>Lady's Museum</i>
<i>LM&amp;M</i>	<i>Lady's Magazine and Museum</i>
<i>L. Mag.</i>	<i>Lady's Magazine</i>
<i>LN</i>	<i>Lady's Newspaper</i>
<i>LR</i>	<i>Lady's Realm</i>

<i>MM</i>	<i>Mother's Magazine</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Monthly Packet</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>My Weekly</i>
<i>Myra</i>	<i>Myra's Journal</i>
<i>NMBA</i>	<i>New Monthly Belle Assemblée</i>
<i>19th C.</i>	<i>Nineteenth Century</i>
<i>Q</i>	<i>Queen</i>
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Saturday Review</i>
<i>W.</i>	<i>Woman</i>
<i>W. at H.</i>	<i>Woman at Home</i>
<i>WL</i>	<i>Woman's Life</i>
<i>WR</i>	<i>Westminster Review</i>
<i>Wo. R.</i>	<i>Woman's Realm</i>
<i>YE</i>	<i>Young Englishwoman</i>
<i>YW</i>	<i>Young Woman</i>



## INTRODUCTION

In the 1930s I sent for a dress pattern, costing 4/11 [25p]. I made it up and wore it during my honey moon. In 1943, I sent for a cut-out pink satin nightdress—very glamorous. I wore this after the birth of my second daughter. The cost then was 10/-[50p]. Now when I've read your magazine I pass it to my daughter-in-law, who gives it to her mother and aunt. Quite good value, wouldn't you say?

(Mrs A.F. Smith, Kent, letter to *Woman* 13 Feb. 1988, 7)

Last week I invited my girl friend to my house for a romantic dinner at which I intended to ask her hand in marriage. I had planned the meal weeks previously but, alas, I forgot one of the major ingredients. Frantically I turned to a copy of *Bella* that my girl friend had left behind. I came across a recipe for sweet-and-sour bacon chops for which I had all the ingredients. The meal was tremendous and my girl friend was impressed. She also agreed to my proposal. I can't thank you enough.

(Tony Docherty, letter to *Bella*, 10 Feb. 1990)

Throughout its history, the woman's magazine has defined its readers 'as women. It has taken their gender as axiomatic. Yet that femininity is always represented in the magazines as fractured, not least because it is simultaneously assumed as given and as still to be achieved. Becoming the woman you are is a difficult project for which the magazine has characteristically provided recipes, patterns, narratives and models of the self. Mrs Smith of Kent explained that it was precisely this for which she had valued it over many years. *Woman* had provided patterns for her to follow as she negotiated the complexities of an identity which encompassed sexual woman, frugal housekeeper and mother. The glamorous nightdress she bought through the magazine enabled her to become a desirable woman without abandoning her role as good housekeeper. For the magazine has historically offered not only to pattern the reader's gendered identity but to address her desire.

This femininity has been addressed in and through a form which is itself fractured and heterogeneous. The magazine has developed in the two centuries of its history as a miscellany, that is a form marked by variety of tone and constituent parts. The relationship between the two elements in the term 'woman's magazine' has been and is

dynamic. The magazine evolved as it did because from its inception it was a genre which addressed 'the feminine', but 'femininity' has also been informed by the development of print, particularly the magazine. The history of their relationship has been marked by continuity but also by discontinuity and by the constant re-working of the 'same' elements whose meanings are radically unstable. Mrs Smith's letter, with its public revelation of her intimate life, was in a tradition which had been re-worked during 200 years of feminine journalism.

Her letter earned her £5 and the 'good value' she identified in the magazine was economic rather than ideological or psychological. Magazines are commodities, products of the print industry. They have also become a crucial site for the advertising and sale of other commodities, whether nightgowns or convenience foods. Magazines are, therefore, deeply involved in capitalist production and consumption as well as circulating in the cultural economy of collective meanings and constructing an identity for the individual reader as gendered and sexual being. The woman's magazine works at the intersection of these different economies—of money, public discourse and individual desire—and it is there I situate the history I trace in the rest of this book.

Unlike earlier historians of the women's press, therefore, I do not read the magazines of the last century exclusively as instruments of a pervasive domestic ideology and a regime of sexual repression (Adburgham 1972; White 1970). This reading was embedded in a view of the period which has since been challenged by historians from a range of positions, including feminists (Barret-Ducrocq 1991; Bland 1995; Foucault 1981; Gay 1984; Shires 1992; Smart 1992). It has also been challenged by the theorising of post-structuralists, notably Foucault, whose theorising of the relationship of discourses to knowledge and power, problematic though it is for feminists, provides some useful tools here (Foucault 1981). In particular his argument that power is productive and not simply repressive throws light on the complex relationships enacted in women's magazines between readers, writers and editors.

Mrs Smith's letter suggests the power of the magazine's discourses of femininity but it also shows her capacity to exploit them. The magazine itself becomes, for her, a medium of exchange among a community of women, a process which circumvents the economic aims of its producers and reasserts an alternative set of values. Perhaps she is even exploiting her knowledge of the assumptions of the letters page to earn herself £5. Certainly she knows how to play the part of 'Mrs Smith', the average woman to whom the magazine is addressed.

Readers may be relatively less powerful than writers but they can still accept or resist meanings the writer produces. Writers are powerful in relation to language and the reader but less so in relation to the editor, the publisher or the advertiser. Editorial power is itself limited, discursively and economically, by pressure from advertisers and from readers. Moreover the balance of power between these different groups varies historically and is constantly in process. In the woman's magazine, gender and sexuality—yet other complex sets of power relationships—are caught up in these dynamics. Popular print is too complex a phenomenon to be understood in the simplistic terms of 'patriarchy' or of 'class', and theories of gender which construct women only as victims of repression are theoretically and politically suspect.

To collapse power absolutely into discourse, however, is likewise to oversimplify and to lose sight of the material and political history in which struggles over meaning take place. This means recognising that as commodities magazines are only available to those with the necessary levels of literacy, income, leisure and space for reading. It also means that as texts, magazines enact relations between groups which are very differently situated in the social and cultural structures of power. In the complicated negotiations over meaning which characterise popular print, some groups have more power than others to make their meanings 'stick' (Cameron 1986; Thompson 1984). In the rest of this book, readings of specific magazines are situated in unequal power relationships, particularly—but not exclusively—those of gender.

The asymmetry of gender is clearly evident in Tony Docherty's letter to *Bella* which forms the other epigraph to this chapter. Throughout its history men have entered the woman's magazine as readers, writers and editors. It may be that by doing so, they learn to read 'as women'. Certainly, the magazine provided Tony Docherty with that crucial recipe and with a narrative of romantic encounter. But his reading gave him access not to being a woman but to the feminine world of the domestic and to female sexuality, which he appropriated 'as a man'. The language of this letter with such phrases as asking her hand in marriage suggests that this appropriation may be ironic, even parodic. Nevertheless the point remains.

Like the nineteenth-century middle-class home, the woman's magazine evolved during the last century as a 'feminised space'. It was defined by the woman who was at its centre and by its difference from the masculine world of politics and economics. But whereas the middle-class woman could not enter the public world of work or politics, the middle-class man could and did come home at night to be revived and humanised by his immersion in the domestic world of the feminine. The equation of the feminine with the human—or at least the humane—is only one aspect of the complexity of gender dynamics which the popular magazine enacts. It did not necessarily empower women. The feminised world of the magazine whose history I trace is constantly entered and appropriated by historical men (Modleski 1991). The asymmetry of gender difference therefore recurs throughout this book and is fundamental to its project. It would be impossible to write a comparable history of magazines which defined men in terms of their masculinity.<sup>1</sup>

However, the woman's magazine like other 'feminised spaces', including women's studies courses, hen parties and girls' schools, also has a radical potential. Like them it may become a different kind of feminised space, one in which it is possible to challenge oppressive and repressive models of the feminine. As the following pages show, the potential mismatch between 'femininity' and historical women could be a source of power for those women, though in the context of gender inequalities this was rarely the case.

## FEMININITY AND THE TEXT

This book arises at the intersection of two interdisciplinary academic projects, women's studies and cultural studies and I have drawn on methods and theoretical approaches

evolved in both. Two key concepts which recur throughout the book, therefore, are 'femininity and the 'text'. Its implicit argument is that the meaning of both these terms and the relationship between them which is my subject must be situated historically. Indeed I want to resist the academic pressures to separate 'theory and conceptualising from historical practice, analysis and narrative. Nevertheless a brief account of how I use these two key terms may clarify the argument and method of what follows.

In addressing 'women', the magazines I discuss assumed the tidy coincidence of gender and sexuality with the embodied self. These categories are utterly entangled in our culture and their relationship is constantly assumed as given. In the late twentieth century, feminist, gay and lesbian, and queer theorists and activists have argued that the mapping of femininity (that is appropriate social behaviour) onto female heterosexual desire, and of both onto biological femaleness, far from being natural is only accomplished by powerful social, linguistic and psychological forces.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, that task is never fully accomplished. Early critiques of social construction which suggested that gender was imposed on a more basic sexuality and that the body at least was natural have themselves been subjected to the criticism that they deny the extent to which sexuality is an effect of discourse and the female body a product of the social expectations of femininity (see esp. Butler 1990, 1993).

Throughout this book I assume not only that the meaning of femininity was and is radically unstable but that its relationship to sexuality and the female body had to be constantly re-worked. I do not assume that the magazines imposed a socially constructed femininity on a natural sexuality or on already existing bodies, but rather that the meaning of these terms was dynamically related. Nor did this go on simply in the realm of discourse. The female body was materially shaped by the corsets, medicines and hairstyles which the magazines recommended. And these recommendations were themselves the products of economic as well as ideological imperatives, the need for the magazines simultaneously to insist upon femininity and to attract advertising from the makers of corsets and medicines.

At certain moments the radical instability of these categories and the slippages between them became obvious, as happened in the 1890s (see Ch. 8). However, that instability was endemic throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, I would argue that the magazine as a form assumed the place it did in women's reading in part because it addressed this problem. It sought to bring into being the woman it addressed as gendered, sexual and embodied. The naturalness of this complex identity had to be insisted upon again and again precisely because it was so slippery, and for this the magazine which comes out regularly weekly or monthly over time is the ideal form.

Across these instabilities there were certain constants. The first of these is that 'woman' was always positioned as other to and deviant from a norm assumed to be masculine/male. The second was that this involved not just difference but also power and the third that the meaning of these categories was always worked out within particular material histories. This is crucial also for my second key concept, that of the text.

In defining the magazine as a text I am drawing on the Barthesian definition of the text as a 'methodological field and site of interdisciplinary study' (see Pykett 1990:12). I read the magazine neither as reflecting nineteenth-century culture nor as a place in which the

ruling class or group imposed its ideology directly on subordinate groups. Nor do I understand the magazine as producing experience as an effect. The magazine as 'text' interacts with the culture which produced it and which it produces. It is a place where meanings are contested and made. For the way we make sense of our lives as individuals and social groups involves constant negotiations in which there is no single determinant (Cameron 1985:170). This process also characterises the making of meaning in the magazine.

There are, however, structures and power relations which shape those negotiations in the magazine as in the wider culture. The texts I discuss were structured by the technologies of print and paper-making, which produced them as material objects, and by the economics of the publishing industry, which produced them as commodities. Crucially, also, the periodical press was a literary formation. The magazine developed its own generic and linguistic conventions and its subdivisions, each with their own discourses and practice. Increasingly, also, it developed a set of visual conventions and techniques through use of illustration. These economic, technological and literary or visual formations were caught up also with the social formations and power inequalities of gender, class and nationality. Together these structured but did not determine the way readers and writers used the magazine to make sense of their society and of their lives. Above all this was a dynamic process and not static, as the metaphor of structures may suggest. Just as the meaning of femininity was always being re-made, so was the meaning and the form of the magazine and its conventions.

## METHODOLOGY

Defining the magazine as text shapes the methodology of this book. Textual reading depends on close attention to particularities. This book is, therefore, organised around case studies in which I offer close readings of particular magazines. I chose these as representative or significant after extensive sampling of the hundreds of titles I identified in an extensive bibliographical search.<sup>3</sup> The case study method has also provided a way of dealing with the sheer mass of material involved in a study of this scale. Such a method may more accurately be described as inter-textual than textual analysis, since it is impossible to decide what constitutes a single text when one is dealing with a serial which came out weekly for years. Each number of a magazine only makes sense as part of a field of other texts as well as a field of power relations.

Literary and social historians are used to turning to periodicals for evidence about the past. However, they have rarely treated them as texts in themselves, using them instead as repositories from which they can remove 'facts', expressions of ideas and ideology, or fictional work in prose and poetry. There are notable exceptions to this, scholars on whose work I have drawn heavily.<sup>4</sup> However, I have found most useful methodologically the work by feminists writing about contemporary serial forms for women, particularly Janice Winship's work on magazines and Tani Modleski's on soap opera (McRobbie 1978a and b; Modleski 1984; Winship 1987).

Treating the magazine as a text involved me also in considering the way it developed as a form over a period of time. Despite its importance in print culture, literary scholars

have not considered the periodical as a genre with its own history. Yet, like the realist novel, the magazine was a form with recognisable conventions which were re-worked over the years and should be studied along a span of time. I have, therefore, combined the case study with the chronological narrative. The case studies represent particular moments in the development of the genre over the period of more than a century and they are organised more or less chronologically. This enables me to discuss the continuities and discontinuities in the magazine's development and to relate them to the making and re-making of gender definitions through time.

It is not, however, a simple chronology. Rather, I have used the case studies to construct an argument about periodisation. The book is divided into four sections but effectively I divide the century into three periods, so the last two sections of the book deal with the most important period—the 1880s and 1890s. The emergence of a strand of magazines specifically targeted at women was complicated and slow. In the first section of the book, which deals with the period from 1800 to 1850, I chart this process. The second section uses the Beeton's magazines which flourished between the 1850s and 1870s to discuss the consolidation of that tradition in both middle- and upper-class reading. In the third and fourth sections I discuss how a diverse women's press became established at the centre of popular publishing. Throughout, the development of the magazine as a text is intertwined with the changing meaning of womanhood. In the rest of this chapter I set out some of the ways this relationship is explored in the book which follows.

### THE ENGLISH WOMAN OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The woman's magazine came into existence during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when the press and gender relations were both caught up in the revolution which made Britain the first industrialised and urban society. Historians have long since noted the emergence from that revolution of group identities understood in terms of class'. It is only recently that feminist historians like Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff have argued that middle-class identities were constructed on the ground of gender difference and took one of two forms, that of the masculine breadwinner or the domestic woman (Davidoff and Hall 1987). Nancy Armstrong's more radical argument concerns the textual production of the domestic woman in conduct books and novels (Armstrong 1985).

Women's magazines were produced by and produced these politics of classed gender or gendered class. Because material conditions made regular purchase of even relatively cheap printed matter beyond the reach of working women, most magazines targeted the middle class and offered explicitly bourgeois models of feminine behaviour. Throughout the century, femininity was represented as hidden in the privacy of the home and in the female heart, analogous sites for the exercise of virtuous self-control.

Yet this powerful discourse was constantly disrupted by others, particularly the discourse which vested femininity in appearance and located gender difference in the 'natural' difference of the body. The female body both as the mark of difference and as an erotic surface was always inscribed within the domestic. The biological difference of sex was marked culturally by dress. For most of the century men's and women's clothes were

exaggeratedly different, not least because the curves of the female figure were emphasised through the use of corsets. The clothed female body represented in the fashion-plate became a staple of the periodical genre and the corset reappears again and again as a motif in this history.

The definition of femininity in terms of physical appearance alone was associated with an outmoded, aristocratic ideal but the biological and social necessity of female beauty proved a concept highly resistant to bourgeois moralising. In the discourses of dress, and especially in the illustrations, it persisted in middle-class magazines throughout the century and emerged in the 1880s and 1890s as a revitalised aristocratic model of femininity.

Since the nineteenth century defined itself as a class society, the relationship between class and gender definitions were often specifically spelt out in the magazines. The identification of femininity with 'Englishness', whiteness or Christianity by contrast only became explicit at particular moments. However, like those of class, these identifications were consistently assumed and constantly re-worked. The association of 'true' femininity with the English middle-class woman, articulated in domestic literature like Sarah Ellis's *Women of England* series of the 1830s and 1840s, entered deeply into the tradition of women's magazines (Ellis 1839, 1842). It combined with the evangelical tradition embodied in various mothers' magazines which made an analogous identification of femininity with Christianity. All these fed into the more explicit nationalism and racism of the 1880s and 1890s when England's imperial role was widely discussed.

Women's magazines, unlike newspapers, were not published in provincial centres outside London. My research in one such centre, Manchester, has revealed no magazines addressed specifically to women and a number which assumed that regional identity was inherently masculine (Beetham 1985). Throughout the century, therefore, women's magazines produced an exclusively metropolitan version of femininity. By the 1880s and 1890s women's magazines were read across the empire but the identity offered in the magazines bound readers firmly into the culture of the capital. Even 'provincial' readers in Britain were at the margin of the magazines' world, a problem only emphasised when magazines arranged agents to shop in London for goods they recommended.

### FEMININITY AS CONSUMPTION

The move from reading to shopping became increasingly central to the genre. The magazines positioned women both as purchasers and readers of texts, although the two were not necessarily the same person. Mrs Smith, like many other purchasers, circulated her magazine around her family. In the nineteenth century, when magazines were relatively more expensive, the ratio of readers to purchasers was even higher than today (Altick 1957:322–3; Mintel 1986). The magazine bought by an upper middle-class woman might be read by her daughters, her servants and her friends, then swapped for another through the exchange pages of the first magazine before being thrown out or sent to a second-hand book shop.

For the woman purchaser, one commodity—the magazine—gave entry into a world of commodities. In the nineteenth century, the feminine role of providing for the household

became increasingly defined as shopping, as well as—or instead of—making. This representation of woman as domestic provider then came to overlap with other rather different ways in which femininity was linked to consumption, and contrasted with the (implicitly masculine) world of production.

In the 1880s and 1890s the definition of women as ‘shoppers’ became central to the magazines’ advice columns. Commodities were increasingly represented as essential to the work of being feminine. Shopping itself was changing, especially with the development of urban department stores which made the display of commodities important both inside the shop and in their plate-glass windows (Adburgham 1964; Bowlby 1985). The woman shopper was defined both by the activity of looking—whether through plate-glass windows or at newspaper advertisements—and by how she looked herself. The definition of femininity in terms of appearance thus returned in the 1890s linked primarily not to the display of the aristocratic lady but to that of bourgeois commodity culture.

By the end of the century, women’s magazines across the market were carrying as many pages of advertising as of editorial copy and were relying on advertising revenue at least as much as direct sales. The importance of commodities for the feminine was established not only for ‘the lady’ but for a mass readership. Femininity in the 1890s magazines appeared both in the body constructed through the purchase of certain commodities—the dress, the hair-piece, the ointment—and in the domestic scene (or *mise-en-scène*) which likewise depended on skilful shopping for and deployment of commodities. There was, therefore, a dynamic relationship between this re-making of femininity and the material basis of the magazines in advertising revenue.

### THE PERIODICAL AS COMMODITY

The generic term ‘periodical’ includes all serial forms of print: newspaper, journal, review and magazine. The importance of class as a determinant of the development of the periodical press was recognised by contemporaries and by later scholars (Altick 1957; Wiener 1969). However, the place of gender in that history has been relatively neglected. Yet the first periodicals aimed to include ‘the fair sex’ as readers or even as writers and, like the novel with which its early history was so entwined, the periodical has at particular moments been understood as a feminine or feminised form (Ballaster *et al.* 1991; Shevelov 1989). The development of a strand of magazines which named women specifically as target readers must be understood within that general history.

The reasons why the magazine rather than the newspaper became associated with femininity are taken up in what follows. However, all periodical forms share certain important qualities, chiefly their relationship to time: the ‘periodicity which gives the genre its name and distinguishes it from other kinds of print. This feature is crucial both economically and discursively.

Ironically, given that I am considering examples from the last century, the periodical is above all an ephemeral form, produced for a particular day, week or month. Its claims to truth and importance are always contingent, as is clear from the date which is prominently displayed (sometimes on every page). This affects its material form as well as its meaning.

Because they are designed to be thrown away, most periodicals are physically more fragile than books, produced on cheap paper and without stiff covers.

Nineteenth-century readers who could afford it had their periodicals bound in volume form, a practice which ensured that millions of issues have been preserved and has made possible books like this. However, the low status of popular magazines for women mean few libraries hold copies, let alone complete runs, and the practice of stripping out covers and advertisements before binding into volume form makes even these copies largely incomplete. Because of the convention of anonymous or pseudonymous journalism, which only began to give way at the end of the century, it is also often difficult to discover the identity or even the gender of different writers and editors. The contingent claims for truth of the individual periodical, therefore, inform its history, too.<sup>5</sup>

However, its relationship to time has also been the source of the periodical's immense vitality as a form. Though each number is rooted in a particular historical moment, the series of which it is a part may continue for years, decades or even centuries. Of course the continuation of a title does not necessarily mean a periodical remains 'the same'. The *Queen* magazine was launched in the 1860s and continues to appear in the 1990s after amalgamating with *Harper's Bazaar*. It is clearly not now the same magazine as Mr and Mrs Beeton's original. Nevertheless there are powerful pressures towards continuity in periodicals—not least the need to be recognised and bought by regular readers—and *Harper's and Queen* is still an up-market publication with an emphasis on fashion. This capacity to re-make itself, each number the same and yet different, characterises the form.

These qualities ensured that as nineteenth-century Britain became a literate society, periodicals became central to popular as well as elite reading. The *Waterloo Directory* (Wolff *et al.* 1976) lists 29,000 titles for the period 1824–1900 and it remains incomplete. I compiled a list of nearly 1,000 titles for this book, some of which came out weekly over decades. Daunting though it may be to scholars, however, the volume and variety of this material is testimony to the vitality of the form.

As a commodity, the periodical was the first to have its sell-by date stamped on it. This allowed producers to control precisely when their material became obsolete but it also put pressure on them to make production and distribution efficient. Throughout the century, new technologies of print and picture reproduction, paper-making and distribution were all pioneered in periodical publishing where speed and regularity were essential.

The periodical was, therefore, crucially involved in the development of the nineteenth-century economy. Changes in finance (the appearance in the 1890s of large companies financed from public flotation on the Stock Exchange), the development of the professions—including journalism—the new technologies of communication and transport like the railways and the telegraph, were all involved in the development of the press. The magazines analysed in this book were, through their crucial role in advertising, also locked ever more firmly into the capitalist economy. Not only were periodicals themselves commodities, they helped to create a commodity culture.

### THE WOMAN AS READER

Though she might not have been a purchaser, the woman addressed by the magazine was always a reader. The importance of gender in the culture of print was taken up in much nineteenth-century debate on reading (Flint 1993). Because reading became identified as an activity carried on in the privacy of the home, the middle-class woman who was the hub of that domestic world became central also to the activity of reading. Her leisure was the signifier of her gender and it was her leisure which was the necessary condition for the emergence not only of the novel but also of other forms of print such as the family magazine (Watt 1957).

Yet women, like the working class, were assumed to read differently from the middle-class male norm and there was much anxiety over appropriate reading matter for them.<sup>6</sup> Concern was concentrated in particular on the possible access of young women to sexual knowledge, since sexual ignorance was essential to true femininity. The axiom that women read mainly fiction heightened this anxiety, in part because of the lingering belief that fiction was inferior to biography, history or science because it was not 'true', but also because fiction dealt with sexuality, though in the legitimated form of romance. The figure of the reader as a young girl in need of protection from illicit knowledge thus dominated the production of fiction, the policy of libraries and debates about reading until the 1890s (Flint 1993; Grierst 1970:120–55; Moore 1885). Women's magazines addressed this ambiguous figure of the woman reader as both limit to and centre of the reading public.

Untangling the relation between these debates about female reading and historical readers is a task beset by difficulties, particularly in relation to magazines. There is a dearth of specific information about who historically read these texts and how. In the absence of independent auditing of magazine circulations in the nineteenth century, global circulation figures are usually drawn from the unreliable versions given by proprietors and editors. All this makes it difficult to discuss the question of readers' engagement. Although I argue that cultural meanings, including those of gender, were negotiated in these magazines, I have had to rely on the texts themselves to provide evidence for this. Unlike cultural critics of the contemporary I am not able to interview readers directly and therefore am in danger of assuming that I can construct the historical reader from the text. In particular, by focusing on how the texts produce meaning I may seem to deny readers any possibility of resisting or re-making those meanings.

In dealing with this problem, I have drawn on the recent debate in critical theory over the concept of reading 'as a woman' (Culler 1982; Fuss 1989; Jacobus 1986; Mills 1994). The argument that women have often been taught to read 'as men' and the counter-argument that men can learn to read 'as women can too easily deny the material and ideological conditions in which women learn to become 'women', that is learn to take on their gender. In particular it can too easily write out the asymmetry of power relations in which masculinity is the norm. Nevertheless, the separation between the reader constructed or positioned by the text and the historical reader, which is central to this debate, is a necessary and useful one.

Since gender is not natural or stable, there is—as I have suggested—always the potential for a space to open up between the historical woman reader and the way the text defines her femininity. It is in that space that the ‘resisting reader’, in Judith Fetterley’s phrase, may come into being (Fetterley 1978). Any text can be read in this way, but, as I argue in the next section, the magazine as a form empowers its readers in specific ways which encourage the possibility of diverse readings. The evidence for the resistance of nineteenth-century readers is sometimes directly evidenced but has also to be inferred from the way the dominant definitions of femininity had constantly to be reasserted, a process which the chronological sweep of the book makes clear. However, I would argue that the possibility of a resistant reading depends on the political and social context in which the reader is placed.

I am also aware that I am a historical reader and my readings, too, are contingent upon the context of late twentieth-century feminist politics and academic debate in which I am situated. I attempt to read these relatively neglected texts in terms which recognise the historical distance between their production and my reading. However, I also read with an awareness of the continuities between these texts and contemporary constructions of femininity and today’s magazines for women.

### POWER AND READING: THE PERIODICAL TEXT

The key element in reading the periodical is its double relationship to time.<sup>7</sup> Each number of a periodical is both of its moment and of a series, different from and yet the same as those which have gone before. The economic imperative is to be consistent enough to maintain a readership, and this is achieved by a number of devices, including general format, mix of ingredients and price. Most important of all, however, the individual periodical works by positioning its readers in a particular way, as ‘Tories’ or ‘interested in sport’ or ‘women’. This is something more than market targeting: it affects the contents, the price, the style and the tone in which readers are addressed. It must be more or less consistent both within one number and across the series in order to reinforce and to reassure readers of the identity being offered to them. We are very familiar with this from contemporary media where a woman’s magazine can describe its readers by its own title as ‘*Cosmo Girls*’.

This positioning of the reader may be described as ideological, as inserting or ‘interpellating’ individuals into social identities which already exist and which offer them ways of making sense of the world (Althusser 1971). If the reader accepts the position of ‘woman’ offered by the magazine, she takes on both the role and the character which it defines as womanly. As I have suggested, I want to resist this way of describing how the periodical works, not least because as a genre it has another equally important characteristic which militates against this argument.

For the periodical is also marked by a radical heterogeneity. It refused, and still refuses, a single authorial voice, for example. When one prodigiously energetic writer was rumoured to have written a whole number single-handed, this had to be denied (Colby 1970:199). It also mixes media and genres. While the review and the academic journal may consist almost entirely of one kind of writing, the more successful periodical forms

like the magazine and newspaper are the least homogeneous. The periodical is generically as well as physically more liable to disintegrate than the book. Its typical contents—narratives, poems, pictures, competitions and even jokes—are forms which have a more substantial cultural presence outside the periodical. Even that most periodical of genres, the article, was and is quite likely to be collected and appear in volume format. All this suggests a fractured rather than a rigidly coherent form.

As I have suggested, this diversity empowers readers of periodicals in particular ways. First, they are empowered as consumers who can decide whether to continue to buy the periodical or not. Regular buyers are essential for the periodicals survival and they may influence the shape of their magazines by their consumer choices. Second, they have power as readers because they can to a unique degree construct their own text from the printed version. We do not read a magazine straight through from front to back as we do a novel. The form invites us to flip through, read in any order, omit some sections altogether and read others carefully. Finally, periodical readers are constantly being invited to become writers. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century magazines relied on readers to provide a good deal of copy. As professionalisation transformed the press, the role of readers-turned-writers was confined to the letters pages but these were and still are an important element of the form. We are all potential Mrs Smiths when we read magazines, just as we are all potentially resisting readers.

The magazine is the most mixed and various of all periodical forms. In the examples I discuss, the ‘interpellation’ of the reader into the role which the magazine defines is therefore fractured by the way the form works to empower the reader. In this respect one might argue that the form is inherently subversive, or even inherently ‘feminine’.

### THE PERIODICAL AS A FEMININE FORM?

The argument that the periodical is ‘feminine’ takes various forms. The first draws broadly on Julia Kristeva’s distinction between ‘men’s time’, which is linear, and ‘women’s time’, which is less bound by clock and calendar and more attuned to bodily and psychic processes (Kristeva 1986:188–213, esp. 191–3). Mattelart (1986) uses the idea that women’s perception of time is cyclical to argue that serial or periodical forms, like soap operas and magazines, chime better with women’s experience than men’s. As such they are of particular importance to women though they are not highly valued in male dominated culture.

Another analogous but rather different argument describes serial forms like soap opera as ‘feminine’ not because they are cyclical but because they resist closure. They thus correspond to an account of feminine psychology as more open than the masculine, less marked by rigid ego boundaries and less dependent on a single orgasm or closure for its pleasure. Magazines may not be examples of *écriture féminine* but their qualities of fragmentation and openness seem to suggest that such publications are by their very nature potentially subversive of masculine cultural norms (Modleski 1982).

These ideas of the consonance between the form of the magazine and femininity are interesting but do not take account of the double-faced quality of the periodical. As well as being part of a continuum, magazines are also of their particular moment; the series is