

Isobel Hurst

Ancient and Modern Women in the Woman's World

As an enticement to fashionable readers, Oscar Wilde was named as editor on the cover of the literary miscellany the Woman's World in 1887, completing the reinvention of the former society magazine the Lady's World. This periodical combines fashion and fiction with more serious material, with a particular emphasis on women's higher education and a fascination with the novelty of college life and the figure of the Girton Girl. The popularising of Hellenism in the 1880s is represented by reviews of productions of Greek tragedies at Oxford and Cambridge, and the fashion pages comment on the adaptation of Greek dress for the English climate. Contributors to the magazine include established literary figures such as Dinah Mulock Craik and university-educated women like Amy Levy and the classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison. Some of these writers come from the intellectual context described by Yopie Prins as "Hellenism and feminism in Victorian Cambridge," where, influenced by Pater's writings, "the seemingly antiquarian discourses of Hellenism served to create new configurations of sexuality and gender", inspired by the Greek Maenad, an "imaginary alternative" to Victorian spinsterhood (46-47). However, in the Woman's World, Maenads and the heroines of Greek tragedy are far from prominent alternatives; representations of a wide variety of historical and fictional women operating in both public and private contexts allow the magazine to appeal to conservative readers as well as feminists.

The Woman's World challenges stereotypes by juxtaposing ancient women with the modern Girton Girl or the emergent New Woman, using parallels between antiquity and modernity to place the emancipated woman as one of many types available to women throughout history. Wilde encouraged contributors to disregard conventional ideas of femininity and gender, but did not assume that the modern woman must avoid frivolity if she wished to be taken seriously. He responded to criticism of the fashion pages in the first number of the Woman's World by arguing that "Fashion is such an essential part of the mundus muliebris [woman's world] of our day, that it seems to me absolutely necessary that its growth, development, and phases should be duly chronicled" ("Literary and Other Notes"; repr. Wilde 104). Not only fashion, but topics such as marriage, politics and education are frequently approached from a historical perspective, in articles like "The Women of Greece," "Woman and Democracy," "Roman Women at the Beginning of the Empire," and "A Pompeian Lady." The magazine's readers might well have some knowledge of ancient history, which was considered a suitable alternative to the classical languages for girls. The Woman's World's focus on the lives of women in the ancient world offers an unfamiliar version of the reception of ancient Greece and Rome in Victorian culture, accessible to a wide readership, based on images rather than classical texts.

As Shanyne Fiske has argued, periodical articles "held a particular appeal for women and other lay readers because, unlike textbooks and classics primers, these articles were often immediately relevant to current events, many of which centered

on Greece as a site of both past cultural achievement and present political concern” (6). For example, in “Woman and Democracy,” Julia Wedgwood (who was known as an advocate of female suffrage) initially rehearses familiar analogies between British and Athenian democracy, and then goes on to apply notions of democracy to the Victorian home, where “obedience is no longer the ideal of marriage” (337). Like the dramatic monologue (such as Amy Levy’s “Medea” and Augusta Webster’s “Circe”), the periodical article can be used to construct an image of an individual female character in the ancient world which implicitly questions the social norms of Victorian women’s lives.

In the Woman’s World, articles such as “A Lady in Ancient Egypt” and “A Pompeian Lady” combine information about historical context and numerous illustrations with an account of a woman’s life. “A Pompeian Lady” begins with a quotation from Pater, and the article might well be described as an imaginary portrait, a creative rather than a scholarly reconstruction of life in Pompeii. It focuses on descriptions of clothes, pastimes and domestic life, offering an impressionistic depiction of an interior which seems likely to appeal to aesthetic tastes, with “silken curtains . . . soft Eastern carpets and skins spread on the floor, gilded bronzes, terracottas, coloured glass vessels--all the taste and delicacy of the household furniture and utensils add to the appearance of ease and luxury” (Marget 532). This article--significantly about a leisured lady rather than a working woman--fits in with accounts of contemporary fashion and interior decoration elsewhere in the magazine.

The Woman's World was to be more serious than its predecessor, which Wilde had described in a letter as "a very vulgar, trivial, and stupid production" (qtd. in Ksinan 412). It would have been "commercial suicide" to ignore the conventional subject matter of women's magazines, but Wilde prioritised "articles of social, intellectual and artistic interest" (Sloan 105). The change of name was designed to appeal to a new female readership; it is clear that Wilde and many of his potential contributors felt that the refined connotations of the term "lady" were undesirable. As Anya Clayworth observes, "'woman' described the adult female with no reference to social status," and suggested an interest in the "Woman Question" (88). Readers would be concerned with social issues, philanthropy, suffrage and higher education as well as domesticity and fashion. The Times commented in December 1888: "The Woman's World, edited by Mr. Oscar Wilde, gracefully got up as it is in every respect, has taken a high place among the illustrated magazines. Written by women, for women and about women, striking out an original line, it merited the success it has obtained" (qtd. in Mason 220).

It was easier for women to publish in magazines, journals, or annuals than to establish a professional relationship with a publisher of novels or volumes of poetry. Wilde sought out contributors: established writers, society women, college students, professional women and feminist campaigners. He wrote in a letter to a potential contributor that he was "anxious to make the magazine the recognised organ through which women of culture and position will express their views" (qtd. in Clayworth 91). Wilde desired a "socially and intellectually élite readership and

authors" (Brake 134), but needed middle-class readers as well, although a shilling per month may have been more than they could afford for a magazine. The Woman's World was not a commercial success and "market-driven concessions to the popular taste took their toll on the magazine's higher focus" (Ksinan 414).

The magazine is associated with aestheticism through the topics of some of the articles ("Japanese Art Wares", "Pictures of Sappho"), and through its editor, who has been described as "the visible embodiment" of aestheticism (Schaffer and Psomiades 3). If, as Elaine Showalter contends, "New Women and decadent artists were linked together as twin monsters of a decadent age, sexual anarchists who blurred the boundaries of gender" (x), the editor and contributors of the Woman's World might be regarded as an earlier and less confrontational version of the alliance. In other contexts, aestheticism's masculine appropriation of the domestic sphere may have harmed "individual women," who were increasingly derided as "ignorant amateurs," but the Woman's World was "a feminised realm" of aestheticism in contrast with the version exemplified by the Yellow Book (Schaffer 73, 2).

A representative selection of articles includes: "Kirby Hall," "Medicine as a Profession for Women," "Our Girl Workers," "The Christian Women of Turkey," "Emigration," "The Poetry of Christina Rossetti," "Lace-making in Ireland," "Culture versus Cookery," and a poem, "Historic Women" by Lady Wilde. Stephanie Green notes that the "contributors possessed divergent and uneven voices. Some preached dress reform and exercise or eulogized women in history,

others wrote about decorum or praised the latest extravagances in women's costume" (109). Perhaps the stance of the Woman's World can best be summarised in Amy Levy's comment, in an article on women's clubs: "It is not for me to rejoice over, nor to deplore, the complete and rapid change of the female position which has taken place in this country during the last few years. It is a phenomenon for our observation rather than an accident for our intervention: the result of complex and manifold circumstances over which none of us can be thought to have much control" (367). The "phenomenon" is placed in relation to women's lives in other classes, countries or historical periods.

The higher education of women was a sufficiently fashionable topic to have appeared in the Lady's World in a regular section on "The Lives of Lady Students, Lady Lecturers, &c.," designed to familiarise readers with the college setting, to correct misconceptions about women's motives in going to university and the unhealthiness of study for women. Higher education plays a much larger part in the Woman's World: Wilde wrote in a letter, "We must have the Universities on our side" (qtd. in Brake 135). Oxford and Cambridge feature prominently, but there are also articles on colleges in Ireland (Alexandra College, Dublin) and America (Vassar). The author of "The Oxford Ladies' Colleges" seeks to change the minds of readers who may see women students as "an object of curiosity--not, perhaps, unmingled with disgust." They do not, she assures the reader, imitate male undergraduates: "the greater number are attracted by the larger life, the more real education, the manifold interests which life in a community must always afford."

She links the readers of the Woman's World with the lives of students by commenting on social activities and interior decoration in women's colleges (32-33).

Acting and watching plays were favourite pastimes of women students. The 1880s saw a remarkable number of performances of Greek drama, particularly at Oxford and Cambridge. In the Woman's World in 1888 a review of "Greek Plays at the Universities" signed by a "Graduate of Girton" claimed that "the representation of Greek plays before English audiences has become so common that one naturally seeks some justification for it" (121). Women were initially active in the production of classical drama, and the planned performance of Sophocles' Electra at Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1877 would have been the first of the university Greek plays. The Principal cancelled the performance, in a move typical of the caution which was repeatedly manifested by college authorities, since any hint of impropriety would not only reflect badly on Newnham but damage the reputation of educated women. Girton College staged Electra in 1883, an "alternative, female appropriation of Sophocles" with three main female characters and a chorus of women (Hall 291).

The Woman's World reviewer appears to share the concern that performing Greek tragedy might be thought improper, but argues that acting a Greek play is "amply justified" as part of a University education. The benefit is for the actors rather than untutored audiences: "To those who have no knowledge of Greek life and thought, whether it be through the old writers themselves or through the imperfect medium of translations, a Greek play is an excitement that must surely soon pall, as to them the interest of it is centred in the setting of the play rather than

the play itself . . . to the actors it cannot fail to be intensely interesting." She claims that it is only through performing tragedies that students fully understand the characters in relation to the whole, and obtain a clearer insight into the meaning of the play, "which wakes a still more lively interest" in the reading of other plays. Although she concedes that it is difficult for the nineteenth-century audience to sympathise with Greek religious ideas, she claims not only that the plays of Sophocles retain their appeal for a modern audience, but that the qualities of tenderness and pathos are actually enhanced by the modern "imitative method of acting" (126).

Given a readership whose "interest" in the play would probably depend on the "setting" rather than the Greek text, she concedes that scenery is indispensable on the modern stage, as the audience is "so spoilt in the matter of scenery by the constantly increasing realism in scenic effects, that the power of the imagination is weakened through disuse" (122). The writer praises John Todhunter's remarkable Greek-style drama Helena in Troas (1886), which attracted notice because of the attention paid to designing a set and costumes based on those of the fifth-century Athenian theatre.

Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh note that the performances of Greek tragedy in the universities in the 1880s reflect "increasing understanding of the ancient world in its entirety--the move away from a narrowly philological understanding of antiquity"; there was an interest in classical archaeology beyond the academy, following high-profile excavations (432). However, as the author of "Greek Plays at

the Universities" points out, such "archaeological considerations" were employed selectively: the theatrical costumes of the 1880s were based on sculptures, and the figures found on vases, rather than "the festal garments of the worshippers of Bacchus" supplemented by a "distinguishing mark" for each character (123). The Victorian actors pictured in the article do not wear masks. The accepted modern interpretation of Greek dress is "very graceful and charming" drapery with "manifold lines and folds," which may be imitated without any technical skill (124).

The gracefulness of Greek dress is also a consideration for the reader, surrounded by fashionable appropriations of ancient Greece which were criticised by the satirist H. D. Traill as "South Kensington Hellenism" (Beard 44-45). The fashions inspired by Greece receive attention in the Woman's World: in December 1887 there is a description of Greek influences including "long Sappho robes clinging closely to the figure" in the Paris collections. Wilde was already known as a supporter of dress reform, who favoured a version of Greek costume. In "Woman's Dress" (1884) he responds to a letter by a "Girl Graduate" who had claimed that numerous petticoats and muddy streets necessitated tight corsets and high-heeled shoes. It is possible, Wilde argues, to follow "the laws of Greek dress" in modern garments (with the addition of "a substratum of pure wool"): even in a "moderately tight gown with sleeves," the "principle of suspending all apparel from the shoulders" would create "rich and rippling folds." His aim, he pointed out, was not an "antiquarian revival of an ancient costume, but ... merely to point out the right

laws of dress, laws which are dictated by art and not by archaeology" (Pall Mall Gazette, 14 October 1884; repr. Wilde 3-4).

Two articles which represent women in very different eras, Jane Ellen Harrison's "The Pictures of Sappho" (April 1888) and Amy Levy's "Women and Club Life" (June 1888) work particularly well together to promote the idea of a woman's world, informed by the authors' experiences of collegiate life. The classical scholar Harrison had been a student at Newnham in the 1870s, where she had exhibited fashionably aesthetic taste--favouring Rossetti among modern painters, and Swinburne as a poet. She wore aesthetic dresses in olive green and decorated her college room with Morris wallpaper. Despite being recognised as an outstanding student, she received a disappointing second class in the then predominantly philological final examination, and her ambition of remaining at the college as Newnham's first classical tutor was thwarted. Returning to the college as a fellow almost twenty years later, a charismatic and controversial scholar, she was empowered by changes which made art and archaeology, and ancient religion, part of the curriculum.

Harrison chose to explore the ancient world through archaeology after leaving Cambridge, gradually developing an innovative approach which applied the methods of anthropology and psychology to her studies. She studied Greek art, especially vase painting, with the distinguished archaeologist Sir Charles Newton at the British Museum, and gave lectures on Greek studies. Her audiences at the

Museum were mainly women, whom she described in her Reminiscences as “all spinsters, well-born, well-bred, well-educated and well off” (51).

A former Newnham student commented “Jane Harrison with her originality and her penetration into the world of Ancient Greece brought glamour into scholarship” (Phillips 67). As a lecturer in the early 1880s, she sounds not unlike Wilde, the aesthetic apostle on his American lecture tour. Mary Beard describes her lecturing style as “flamboyant,” enhanced by dark lighting and “power dressing” (57-58). The experience of popular lecturing seems to have shaped her early books, including Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature (1882), on the iconographic tradition of the Odyssey. She uses art to illuminate the development of myths, describing artefacts and comparing depictions of the same scene; her references to Homer are taken from Butcher and Lang’s popular translation of the Odyssey.

Harrison employs a similar method in “The Pictures of Sappho”. For her, Sappho is unique in the ancient world--“one bright, particular star who dared to shine with unreflected light” (274). Harrison describes herself as presenting (for an audience of women) “ancient evidence” which has so far been examined by “no one, except the professional archaeologist”. She acknowledges Wharton’s 1885 edition of Sappho, “executed with complete and reverent care,” but seems to prefer Swinburne; she quotes approvingly his note on his poem “Anactoria,” that he had “striven to cast his spirit into the mould of hers.” Her subject is “one humble tribute,” a series of vase-paintings representing Sappho. She questions the traditional valuing of textual evidence over archaeological sources by constructing

an image of Sappho from previously unnoticed objects: "because the tribute is the work and offering of Greek hands, it seems to me worth ... at least as much attention as the ... stories of late comedians scrupulously preserved by obscure commentators." Harrison's description of the vases is illustrated, so that readers can evaluate her judgements, but the particular vases seem in the end less important than her own observations on the unreliability of legends about Sappho. She prefers to think of Sappho as always young, as the vase painters represent her, but grudgingly reports "one wretched lexicographer says that she married a well-to-do merchant, bore him a daughter, and lived to a good old age. We cannot think of her growing old" (276-7).

However, Harrison is less interested in debunking myths than in using Sappho as a model for the life of the intellectual woman: "The world she loved best was, after all, a woman's world; and so, in another vase-painting, we may see Sappho is seated in the mist, her girl friends and her disciples around her. She will read to them, and they will listen intent" (275). Harrison believes that a female community fostered artists and scholars, and discusses the role of collegiate life in reviving the social instincts which had allowed Sappho to flourish in "a woman's world"--the reference to the magazine's title suggesting that the female readership forms a kind of intellectual community. They represent the "social enjoyment which comes to women from the society of women only, an enjoyment that supplements, nowise supplants, their enjoyment of the society of men" (276). These women are not engaged in the discussion of domestic machinery, which Harrison rather

dismissively describes as “permissible and even laudable,” but “keen and emulous culture of the arts” (275). She refers to these groups of women as “clubs,” a term which clearly relates her account of Sappho to the readers’ late nineteenth-century world.

“The Pictures of Sappho” appeared in April 1888; in the June number Levy explored the club as an institution which offered women “a haven of refuge . . . undisturbed by the importunities of a family circle, which can never bring itself to regard feminine leisure and feminine solitude as things to be respected” (364). The club, as Elaine Showalter has argued, represented a significant aspect of the construction of masculinity, providing men with alternatives to domestic life and functioning as an extension of the masculine worlds of public school and university (11). Women’s clubs, like many other feminist innovations, had been mocked in Punch, but Levy claims that by 1888 they are accepted: “The mingled sense of independence and esprit de corps which made college life at once so pleasant and so wholesome are not wanting here in the colder, more crowded regions of London club-land” (365). The University Club for Ladies was founded in 1887 on an economical basis, as “a club of workers”--professional women, not club-loungers--in a modest suite of rooms with Morris wallpaper, recalling the aesthetic fashions of women’s colleges. The club, Levy proposes, could alleviate the professional woman’s sense of struggling in a hostile world, of “compet[ing] with a guild of craftsmen all more or less known to one another . . . bound together by innumerable links of acquaintance and intercourse” (366). She defends the members of women’s

clubs against accusations of impropriety by noting that “the prophetic chorus of many Cassandras and Isaiahs” had been wrong about the women’s colleges, which had proven to be “hard-working and self-respecting bodies” (367).

Similarly, Harrison argues that the college and the club are essential institutions for the educated woman: “Women, we are told, are not clubbable. Well, who knows? They were in Sappho’s days. One thing is certain, a woman who does not know the joy of meeting a chosen few, her college friends, her own elect, at a well-appointed feast (Sappho herself loved ‘things delicate’), has a fine sensation yet to try” (276).

These two articles and many others in the Woman’s World endorse the idea that women should claim the right to develop an esprit de corps, a network of professional women, or a charitable endeavour, or a group of artists, in any way that is open to them. The college and the club are held up as models, but talking about fashion and society are as valid in a “woman’s world” as Harrison’s account of Sappho. Even if the reader is not a feminist pioneer, she can experience the pleasure of belonging to a club, identifying with a group, simply by reading the Woman’s World.

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