

INTRODUCTION ~ LITERACY, GENDER, AND THE RHETORICAL WORK OF EDITING

The following chapters endeavor to set forth the careers of some representative women now prominent in the editorial field, and tell not only their experiences, but their opinions and advice to young women wishing to follow similar courses today. It has been obviously impossible to list, much less to interview, all of even the topflight editors, but the following chapters aim at presenting an accurate and typical cross section of the magazine publishing field and its opportunities for women.

Lady Editor

Editorially, there was nothing Miss Cousins couldn't and didn't do. She could have been editor-in-chief of any magazine. When I had the opportunity to make her one, I didn't, convinced the political stresses she despised would depress her. She should have had the chance. I disappointed her. And, in the end, myself also.

Herbert R. Mayes, *The Magazine Maze*

Dueling Histories

In order to fully appreciate the work that women editors did in the mid-twentieth century, feminist researchers must reappraise the damning critique of women's magazines so forcefully argued in 1963 by the American feminist Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. It is a daunting task. Friedan composes a formidable list of cultural agents who created an environment for women that denied them opportunities for forging individual identities.

The list includes Freudian psychotherapists and popularizers, educators, anthropologists (Mead in particular), and sexologists. Leading that pack, however, are those in the magazine trade who created and sustained the dream image of the suburban housewife. Friedan, who wrote for women's magazines, enacted tough indictments, including herself in the pool of criminals: "A geiger counter clicked in my own inner ear when I could not fit the quiet desperation of so many women into the picture of the modern American housewife that I myself was helping to create, writing for the women's magazines" (34). Friedan locates 1949 as the year that the "feminine mystique began to spread through the land" (43).

Friedan and other feminists of the 1970s, including Susan Brownmiller, acted on this powerful critique. In her memoir, *In Our Time*, Brownmiller recounts radical feminists' actions against such publications:

I proposed that we target one of the big women's magazines that had remained immune to changing times. . . . [E]ditors warred over circulation and ad pages while they pushed a happy homemaker line from the 1950s that was white-bread formulaic. In a make-believe world of perfect casseroles and Jell-O delights, marriages failed because wives didn't try hard enough, single-parent households did not exist, and women worked outside the home not because they wanted to, or to make ends meet, but to "earn extra income in your spare time." The deceitful ideology discouraged the full range of women's ambitions. (83–84)

The rest, as they say, is herstory: the group "picked an invasion date" (Brownmiller, *In Our Time* 84), and in March of 1970, "representatives" of the Women's Liberation Movement "invaded" the offices of *Ladies' Home Journal* and asserted an impressive set of "nonnegotiable demands."¹ They executed their plan, defining for a time, the feminist position on women's magazines: real feminists didn't read *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Vogue*, magazines representing the "decidedly masculine preserve of feature jour-

nalism.” By the 1970s, women’s magazines were something to picket, in large part because they were being edited primarily by men: “From *Seventeen* to *Good Housekeeping* all the slick publications instructing their readers in feminine arts were run by men, except *McCall’s* where Shana Alexander was new on the job, and *Cosmo*, the brainchild of Helen Gurley Brown” (Brownmiller, *In Our Time* 83).

It’s difficult to reconcile this history with the enthusiasm expressed in *Lady Editor*,² a career guide written in 1941, but recovery work in feminist media studies provides the olive branch: *Lady Editor* is part of a tradition that evaluates and celebrates the fraught relationship between women and the publications they produce, ponder, and consume. In a little under one hundred pages, Knight offers her snapshot of women in editing history: “In 1828 when Sarah Josepha Hale left the ‘keeping room’ of her house in the little New England town of Newport to take over the editorship of the *Women’s Magazine*, which later was to combine with *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and become the revered forerunner of scores of women’s magazines, she probably never suspected, astute though she was, that she was inaugurating a field of activity for women which would offer employment to thousands” (*Lady Editor* 90–91).

Lady Editor is clearly a conscious attempt to create a feminist media history. In 1987, when Janice Winship published *Inside Women’s Magazines*, a project similar to *Lady Editor*, she acknowledged her discomfort when “[a]dmitting within feminist circles that [she] was doing research on—of all things—women’s magazines” (xiii). It is only recently that feminism has once again embraced, albeit tentatively, the world of women’s periodicals. With the publication of Jennifer Scanlon’s *Bad Women Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* (2009), one might even argue that feminist scholars no longer register tentativeness.

In *Understanding Women’s Magazines*, Anna Gough-Yates provides a succinct overview of the trajectory of feminist media studies. Groundbreaking studies in the 1960s and 1970s largely

“focused on women’s magazines at a textual level, and analyzed them for their ideological content” (Gough-Yates 6). While such studies galvanized feminist criticism and institutionalized it in the academy—no small feat—they tended to present a monologic polemic: women’s “magazines offered ‘unreal’, ‘untruthful’ or ‘distorted images of women,’ period (Gough-Yates 8).³ Later critics, following the influential work of reader-response pioneer Janice Radway, began to employ reader-response methodologies. Both of these approaches—textually based and reception oriented—complicated the earlier “women’s magazines are sexist” polemic. Instead, these later studies scrutinized “the relationships between feminism, femininity and women’s magazines, exploring the extent to which these texts foster dominant forms of femininity among their readers” (Gough-Yates 13). They came to conclusions various enough to offer only “the sheer unpredictability of the relationship between reader and text” (Gough-Yates 14). Readers skipped or embraced various features and, insofar as they were making conscious choices, used them for differing rhetorical purposes, varying from self-help to fantasy.

Subsequent studies work to further illuminate the dimensions of the relationships between women’s magazines and their readership. Gough-Yates, for instance, positions herself with an emerging group of scholars interested in the conditions of production, an area only lightly explored. She is motivated in part by the work of Marjorie Ferguson, who once worked for a woman’s weekly and whose work combines insider knowledge of the industry with academic analysis. Without a fuller narrative about *production*, Gough-Yates posits, we are left with only a partial, distant picture, including an incomplete understanding of the women who are industry insiders, women educated in feminist sexual politics, women who enjoy magazines but who have had university courses that taught critical analysis of media and feminist history. These women are in many cases self-identified feminists. In the almost two decades since Winship gingerly admitted her guilty research pleasures, the trajectory has become

clear: feminist media critics now read nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's magazines as sites "where women's oppression was debated and negotiated, rather than merely reinforced" (Gough-Yates 10). As Rita Felski summarizes, radical feminists of the late 1970s (thankfully) sparked significant cultural and literary debates, but "to beat what is by now a very tired drum," all feminists do not "claim that literature either causes or simply reinforces the oppression of women" (11–12). Instead, feminist media criticism asks that "we rethink the dichotomy between women's magazines as mythmakers and feminists as unveilers" (Moscowitz 67).

While there are clearly differences between radical feminism of the 1970s and the latent, conflicted mainstream feminism of women's magazines, there are also surprising points of commonality, which are difficult to see when we look back in time rather than forward in time, when we start with Susan Brownmiller, rather than Sarah Josepha Hale or Ruth Adams Knight. Brownmiller's memoir, for instance, reframes another history, *American Story* (1968), a memoir written thirty years earlier by Bruce Gould and Beatrice Blackmar Gould about their tenure as coeditors of *Ladies' Home Journal*. The Goulds, as Brownmiller would later do in her memoir, placed women's sexual issues front and center. The feminist media scholars Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange describe the work done by the Goulds' *Ladies' Home Journal* and other similar magazines: "During the first half of the twentieth century magazines played a leading role in the transmission of sexual knowledge, for they were much more accessible to working-class people than were expensive texts. Among the existing genres, it was the women's magazine, not the medical or specialized journal, that was most important. The advice column, a typical feature of the women's magazine, became the vehicle for mass sex education" (74).

As evidence, Bashford and Strange—and Mary Ellen Zuckerman before them—point to the *Ladies' Home Journal* survey in 1938 that queried readers about whether "they wanted to read more

about such sensitive matters as divorce and birth control” (qtd. in Bashford and Strange 84–85). The readers apparently did.⁴ In other words, women reading the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1938 understood that the quality of women’s lives was deeply dependent on the ability to make informed decisions about relationships and reproduction.

In her preface to *In Our Time*, Brownmiller articulates her purpose: “I set out to write this memoir with a sense of urgency because I could see that much of the movement’s story had already been lost or distorted” (10). Likely feeling the heat of growing radical feminism, the Goulds also write to set the record right. They proudly tell of the activist agenda they engaged over the course of their editorial partnership. Although they conceded that they were “not exactly crusaders,” they enthusiastically explain how they indulged Beatrice’s “bluestocking” tendencies (Gould 172): They changed the “absurd company rule that all secretaries and female clerks who married must quit their jobs immediately” (Gould 160); they worked to achieve editorial independence from their advertisers (Gould 170); they were early campaigners against the dangers of smoking (Gould 182–83); they used their growing power to introduce “distasteful” subjects such as “pregnancy and childbirth” (Gould 173); they rallied behind the cause of high maternal death rates; they continued Bok’s policy of openly discussing venereal diseases (Gould 190); and they promoted the “hushed-up subject of birth control, expressing in print for the first that a majority of American women definitely approved family planning,” angering both the Catholic church and advertisers in the process (Gould 195). They spoke as champions and as representatives of women’s pursuit of full, happy citizenship. There is no mistaking Brownmiller for Beatrice Gould or vice-versa. Brownmiller might claim that she is articulating the “woman’s point of view,” but she would never write that she “found her true self in marriage rather than in the responsibilities and rewards of her position” (Gould 11), a sentiment Gould feels comfortable asserting. Gould considered herself a “bluestocking,” but she did

not sympathize with the newer generation of feminists. In her words: “Absolute equality was our view—with the male slightly more equal than the female, but both equally enjoying the unequal arrangement.” Like many, she took cheap shots against what she perceived as radical feminists and saw her magazine as standing in defense against them: “We never let the hulking, overbearing, Amazon type get by” (Gould 201).

Gould and Brownmiller were not, literally or figuratively, on the same page. In pointing to their similarities, I am not claiming their sameness. Still, each woman uses memoir to write her professional history into a history of women’s rights and privileges. Each insists on her place in a progressive history; each claims to be an authoritative narrator. Brownmiller explains on her website, “*In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* is not movement hagiography, nor is it ‘a balanced history’ written by someone with access to library archives but far removed from the actual events” (Brownmiller, “*In Our Time*”). In other words, *she was there*. The Goulds, too, authorize this insider view, insisting on the truth—and rhetorical stance—that memoir can contribute to institutional and cultural history. In the absence of memoirs, histories based on letters often make the same revelatory promise.

In one other central way, women graduating college in the 1920s and entering the work force were not so different from the radical women who would follow later in the century. Women in the mid-twentieth century exhibited the same tenuous intellectual, aesthetic, and gendered relationships to the publication material they consumed and produced. The central questions asked by researchers in feminist media studies can thus be mapped onto historical rhetorical studies: Can such periodicals lead to “the formation of fantasy and imagined ‘new selves’” (Gough-Yates 13), or must they necessarily participate in the process of patriarchal inscription? Could these magazines offer sites for women to realize their own rhetorical agency and to promote their own literate values, or were the women who chose this work over, say, teaching, forgoing any possibility of such work?⁵

To discover the answers to these questions, feminist media critics are using ethnography, firsthand accounts by those working in the publishing industry. Although rhetorical historians cannot elicit specific information through targeted questioning during interviews, cannot guide the process in the same way that ethnographers can their contemporary subjects and participants, rhetorical historians can use biographies, memoirs, autobiographies, and letters to provide accounts of production. When corroborated by multiple accounts and when coupled with textual analysis and reader responses through reception or through the filtered letters to the editors, we can begin to develop a nuanced, albeit incomplete history of mid-twentieth-century magazines and the literature contained therein.⁶ In doing so, we can make visible the blue marks, the revisions, the editing, that went into the making of modern U.S. letters.

Surplus Literacy, or Women with Sheepskins

In the early twentieth-century United States, the typewriter changed writing practices, making demands for new kinds of literacy skills. As a technology, the typewriter was initially perceived as “sex neutral.” By 1935, as Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon document, typing had become a thoroughly feminized skill. Still, once women were at the typewriter, they did more than merely imprint men’s words; indeed, they entered print-related professions and careers (journalism, academia, publishing, agencies, and businesses) in record numbers. By 1930, women formed 23 percent of editors; “the highest percentage of participation occurred in the youngest age group, which included the early child-bearing years” (Adams, *Group* 154–55). The trend would continue through the 1940s.⁷ In *Lady Editor*, Ruth Adams Knight sets out to advise these “career bent” young women who came “barging out of leading colleges with their sheepskins flying” (92). *Lady Editor* chronicles an industry peopled with women in high places. It trains its lens particularly on women in a range of publication types: “slicks,” news magazines, digests,

pulps, class publications, and traditional women's fare (fashion, home). It is an incredible snapshot of this "invisible" profession as it stood at the start of World War II. The tone of *Lady Editor* evinces the authors' enthusiasm for the opportunities that editing created for emancipated, enfranchised modern women: "It was only after the turn of the century [that] women really came into their own, until today they step right along with men in the publishing game. While there are still cases of ability which go improperly rewarded, there is no field where recognition of feminine ability is more universal" (91). Not surprisingly given these opportunities, many young women had set their sights on "getting on a magazine" (92).

With so many women graduating college, the issue was already hauntingly familiar to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century academics. It was a problem of surplus English graduates, of greater supply than demand.⁸ What would these women wielding sheepskins do? To what use would they put their newly found higher literacy? Some trained as teachers, careers they would likely be expected, perhaps even required, to drop upon marriage; others identified writing or editing as viable professions, suited for either activists or "ladies" or those, like Freda Kirchwey who edited the *Nation*, who found themselves betwixt and between the two labels.⁹ Because it was low profile, editing particularly presented itself as suitable, meaningful work for women not wanting to be conspicuous. While my focus is on large-circulation magazines, it's worth noting that small-circulation, specialized magazines likewise provided many opportunities. For example, Noliwe M. Rooks argues in *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* that African American women's magazines "allowed African American women to find work as journalists, printers, writers, and editors; to define personal, as well as group, identities; to create a sense of unity by establishing a communication network among women in different regions; to present and comment about world and local events from an African American female perspective; and to highlight achievement

often overlooked and ignored by the dominant or African American male press” (3). What was true for African American women and smaller-circulation magazines—this opportunity for engaged work—was true in greater numbers for privileged, white women with growing access to college educations and to a burgeoning mainstream publishing world.

These women were entering and graduating a curriculum that since the 1920s had experienced great changes, the result of “Progressive theories of education as well as . . . the huge increase of career-minded students” (Adams, *Group* 30). In 1941 when Ruth Adams Knight published *Lady Editor*, universities were training not just “more literate mothers,” “not just sensitive readers and community participants,” but instead “creative writers who could influence and improve the populace through stories that described America’s myths, moral imperatives, and visions for the future” (Adams, *Group* 40).¹⁰ This progressive curriculum led to a professional class of women who “moved out of manners and childrearing into news and editorial writing, magazine feature writing, textbook writing, scholarship, historical studies, poetry, and fiction” (Adams, *Group* xvii). Still, not all critics have been persuaded that the change was so dramatic. Langdon Hammer in his “Plath’s Lives: Poetry, Professionalism, and the Culture of School,” acknowledges the shift in curriculum; however, he argues, using the case of Sylvia Plath, the “female professional” was not “a liberating alternative to the restrictions of the student’s position” (66). Plath, Hammer continues, “conceived of the female professional as a kind of student, and vice versa” (66). In other words, once an apprentice, always an apprentice. As evidence, he points to Sylvia Plath’s *Mademoiselle* feature from 1953, “Poets on Campus: 5 Talented Young Men Combine Poetry and the Classroom.” Hammer argues that “Plath’s role as a student journalist in a young women’s popular magazine begins to suggest the difference gender makes. None of the ‘Poets on Campus’ has advanced his career by winning a guest-editorship at *Mademoiselle*. Their prestige is greater than Plath’s, and it would only

be weakened by the kind of commercial writing Plath was encouraged to do. . . . Nor are they really there in *Mademoiselle* to be emulated” (64). Rather, they are there as examples of “the young professional man for whom *Mademoiselle* is helping its reader to make herself desirable, because there is an equivocation in the future that *Mademoiselle*, like Smith, imagines for the college woman: a career, yes, but marriage too, and someday children, and when choices must be made, marriage will come first” (Hammer 64).

It is not within the scope of Hammer’s argument to spend a great deal of time on the countervailing messages prevalent in *Mademoiselle*. Nor does he dwell on those originating from college campuses.¹¹ Consider the advice from M. Carey Thomas that “the Bryn Mawr woman” should “resist the temptation to marry” (qtd. in L. Davis 35). These students were taught that “the Bryn Mawr woman’s place was not necessarily in the home, but rather in the world—as a person making a significant contribution to the sciences or the humanities” (qtd. in L. Davis 35). Hammer is correct that women did receive conflicting and diverging messages: these privileged college graduates had to choose the kind of woman that it was their duty to become—single career woman, single working woman who stops work upon marriage, married woman, or married woman with a career. Duty, of course, was more broadly defined than in the nineteenth century: while some were answering to church, others were answering to institutions, or elite society or political groups or international projects. The progressive career track certainly didn’t broadcast itself as the easiest option. Women choosing it did so in an environment of unbridled optimism and unbridled criticism. As women entered the English major in record numbers, men such as Rollo Walter Brown, began to worry that women were driving men from this field of study, transforming “humane subjects” into “‘ladylike’ subjects” (qtd. in Adams, *Group* 38). Part of this transformation entailed a move from what was perceived as “hard” analysis that required “mental discipline,” philology, for instance, to expressive and creative assignments

“that required or allowed students to experiment with the genres being studied: poetry, drama, fiction, and the personal essays” (Adams, *Group* 42), assignments more conducive to “finishing” a young woman’s education, perfecting a genteel style. Production (and appreciation) of literature was thus wedded to proper, gendered, classed behavior; to be a woman of style meant to be a woman who appreciated (or better yet composed) literature. Eventually, women entered the English major with other intentions, for instance, to become writers or journalists, the subjects of Adams’s study, but they could not entirely escape the “natural” link between femininity and style. In some cases, this link served them well, opening doors into work as editors or literary agents. Katharine White’s long tenure at the *New Yorker*, for instance, was secured by her image as a woman of taste. As I argue in chapter four, the opportunities that accrued from women’s association with style and taste—with fashion—did not come without the attachment of heavy, binding strings.

Fine Flame, or Lady Editor: Choosing between Poisons

Second-wave feminists targeted *Ladies’ Home Journal* not so much because of its content—although that was certainly part of the equation¹²—but because of its staffing: in 1970 the journal was once again edited by a man, John Mack Carter. *Ladies’ Home Journal* was not unique. Friedan recalls, “I sat one night at a meeting of magazine writers, mostly men, who work for all kinds of magazines, including women’s magazines” (36). One of these editors “outlined the needs of the large women’s magazine he edited: ‘Our readers are housewives, full time. They’re not interested in broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home’” (Friedan 37). It was this attitude that Friedan and others sought to change: “The whole world lies open to American women. Why, then, does the image deny the world? Why does it limit women to ‘one passion, one role, one occupa-

tion?” (37). They started with *Ladies' Home Journal*. In 1970, at the *Ladies' Home Journal*, there was one woman “above middle management,” and she, as Brownmiller explains, “belonged to a generation of tough lady editors who sat at their desks and wore flowered hats” (In *Our Time* 85). It is at this point in the critical history that scholars in feminist media studies raise their hands to interrupt. “Lady editors” is a fraught term whose implications are erased when we outlaw the term or when we mark certain women as exceptions.¹³ Many of the women that Ruth Adams Knight profiles were using traditional venues—home or fashion magazines—to advance what they believed were forward, progressive, sometimes even self-proclaimed feminist or “feministic” ideas.¹⁴

In sum, not all backpedalled from feminism as quickly as Beatrice Gould,¹⁵ although I would argue that with some frequency, feminism was subordinated to the goals of belletrism, the mission to disseminate high letters. Knight pitches this exalted mission to prospective female editors: “The modern magazine, with the pretty model photographed on the cover, and the name of the author of the most popular best seller listed in large type, is a comparatively recent concept. If you have ever taken the trouble to dig back into the origin of the periodical, you know that in the beginning it was concerned with the most solemn aspects of literature and of interest only to the erudite” (*Lady Editor* 90). Recounting the work of women like Irita Van Doren (*Herald Tribune Books*), Martha Foley (*Story*), Amy Loveman (*Saturday Review of Literature* and *Book-of-the-Month Club*), and Edith J. R. Isaacs (*Theatre Arts*)—the latter of whom was “confined to her bed for several years” (*Lady Editor* 151)—*Lady Editor* records how women, in the years preceding and following World War II, helped create a collective mass desire to consume literature, selling it as a commodity of women’s magazines.¹⁶ Some of these editors felt it almost an exalted mission to advance American literature by seeking out and publishing brilliant writers. Acting in their roles as editors, they were—or imagined themselves to be—purveyors of high culture and high art (visual and written). They were—or

imagined themselves to be—what we might call emissaries of haute couture and haute literacy. This isn't the history we always see; it wasn't a history that sustained itself.

The career of Betsy Talbot Blackwell, the editor of *Mademoiselle* from 1939 to 1971, is emblematic. Though decidedly not a feminist,¹⁷ Blackwell quadrupled the magazine's circulation by targeting college and young career women and by providing them with quality reading material. She also founded the New York guest editing program made famous by Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Because Plath's particular perspective on her experience in 1953 has been written so firmly into American literary history, it's somewhat difficult to see what others might have perceived, a glimpse we catch at the class of 1953's fifty-year reunion captured by Alex Witchel's "After 'The Bell Jar,' Life Went On." Let me concede that I accept the reunion comments as just that—reunion comments, no doubt nostalgic, no doubt romanticized, perhaps even invented. Most of the comments participate in that most common of enterprises: mythologizing and re-mythologizing Plath. And yet these comments, together with other views gleaned from biographies or memoirs, show that there was another stance on the *Mademoiselle* guest editing program, one that signals pride—and tremendous interest and drive. The program began in 1939, its purpose as Alex Witchel writes "was twofold: the magazine's advertisers could get valuable feedback from the cream of its market, and the women whose writing and artwork were the best could travel to New York and work on the enormously popular August college issue." Those traveling to New York over the years included writers Joan Didion, Francine du Plessix Gray, and Ann Beattie. The program ended in 1979 (after becoming co-ed), but "in 1953 it was still in its heyday," and the guest editors were chosen from 1,500 applicants (Witchel). As Laurie Glazer Levy, an alumna from 1953, remembers, "Betsy Talbot Blackwell, the editor of *Mademoiselle*, put us against the wall and said, 'You are my writers and you will do great things'" (qtd. in Witchel).¹⁸ Another of the group, Ruth Abramson Spear, recalls that a *Mademoiselle* ed-

itor really inspired her: “She told me, ‘You’re going to be successful in life. You have that fine flame’” (Witchel).¹⁹

“Fine flame” might seem like inflated language to apply to young college women brought to New York to work on a fashion magazine, but it represents the degree to which Blackwell and others associated with the magazine prided themselves on doing great things, for women yes, but mostly for American letters. Writing about the fiftieth reunion event, the journalist Alex Witchel encapsulates a legacy that would surely have pleased Blackwell: “*Mademoiselle* was known as a forum for exciting new fiction by writers like Truman Capote; Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* was published there in its entirety.”²⁰ In 1935, when Blackwell joined *Mademoiselle*, it was a magazine “aimed at young women (before youth had any status)” and “contained fiction and poetry (not a young woman’s highest priority)” (Rayner 42). It fell upon the newly hired Blackwell to explain “to the businessmen a basic fact of publishing: almost no one advertises in a magazine devoted exclusively to fiction and poetry. If they hoped to attract advertisers they would simply have to broaden their appeal . . . that is, if they were interested in making money” (Rayner 42). Blackwell succeeded in making her point, with the result of raising the profile of the fashion and beauty sections and improving the *Mademoiselle*’s finances, a business success story that fits preconceptions of women’s fashion magazines. Yet it’s what Blackwell does with this financial success that makes the story interesting: “*Mademoiselle* was so awash in advertising it could afford William Faulkner, Dylan Thomas, Joyce Carol Oates, and Robert Penn Warren. She could afford to suggest that Truman Capote write about his childhood Christmas experiences in the South” (Rayner 43–44).

In contrast, the *New Yorker*, for all its aspirations, published writers whose work was more palatable to a middle-class audience, work less stylistically experimental, not so regionally or racially or sexually charged: “It is something of a scandal,” Brendan Gill sheepishly observed to the Capote biographer Gerald Clarke, “that [the *New Yorker*] didn’t publish any of Truman’s short sto-

ries. . . . But it's also a scandal that we didn't publish anything by Hemingway or Faulkner and only one story by Fitzgerald" (qtd. in Clarke 75). The authors that Blackwell "published during her reign reveal the great sympathy she felt for the arts along with an understanding and ability to recognize talent. In the 1940s there were Ray Bradbury, Robert Penn Warren, W. H. Auden, and Colette. In the 1950s there were Elizabeth Hardwick, Carson McCullers, Lesley Blanch, Eudora Welty. In the 1960s there were Edward Albee, Gore Vidal, Isaac Bashevis Singer. In the seventies there were Rebecca West, Susan Brownmiller, Hortense Calisher, and Joyce Carol Oates" (Rayner 44). Others have written more convincingly that Blackwell hired people—George Davis, Leo Lerman, Mary Louise Atwell—who could recognize talent. Regardless, as editor in chief, Blackwell was able, through fashion, to work a kind of cultural magic, transforming a thirst for beauty products into an appetite for belles-lettres.

Ruth Adams Knight would have predicted this trajectory. Though magazines had modernized and expanded to accommodate "highly diversified tastes" (*Lady Editor* 89), many still retained the original literary quality. In fact, her very first chapter after the introduction presents "the class publications," or "fare for the intelligentsia," underscoring the relationship between high literacy and high-class culture, a formula that publishers such as Raoul Fleishmann (first publisher of the *New Yorker*) and Condé M. Nast had come to bank on. Such publications were not, Knight explains, off limits to women whose "interest in a periodical lies in its style and literary merit rather than in its popular appeal . . . in quality above quantity" (*Lady Editor* 97). To be sure, such publications were smaller in circulation, although she believes that circulations are widening with "improving public taste," but they "are edited thoughtfully and fearlessly, with little consideration for mass approbation, and they frequently make literary history" (*Lady Editor* 97).

In *Lady Editor*, Ruth Adams Knight was particularly optimistic about women's roles on "class publications," the "fare for the

intelligentsia”: “Editorially this field is one where women have played an important part and where, when the world returns to normal again, they will doubtless continue to do so in the future. Such opportunities as the present offers to women are due largely to the draft, which, sweeping the field clean of the younger men in the publishing business, may provide openings which would not have existed in ordinary circumstances” (97). Knight was certainly aware of perceptions that women’s literary presence was a soft and sentimental one; she recognized that editing opportunities for women might diminish if the critics weren’t, in twenty-first-century parlance, “handled.” The nineteenth-century editor Sarah Josepha Hale was her model rhetorician of choice: “Sarah was modest about her own talents, shy and shrewd about revealing too soon to a masculine world the threat of any feminine ability in the editorial field, or as a matter of fact, anywhere else” (*Lady Editor* 91). *Godey’s Lady’s Book* might look innocent enough, but only to those who didn’t understand Hale’s tactics: “Little by little *Godey’s Lady’s Book* expanded from a strictly fashion magazine to one of ever widening feminine interests” (*Lady Editor* 91). Hale thus made her mark—extended her rhetorical influence—not only by opening the editorial field to women, but also by changing the “vast proportion of the magazine market.” In short, Hale made editing “a woman’s game” (*Lady Editor* 91–92), one that the numerous examples in *Lady Editor* elucidate.²¹

While Knight does not include the *New Yorker* among the “thin ranks”—“*Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Magazine* carry the bulk of the old tradition” (*Lady Editor* 97)—by the 1960s, the time of its loudly lamented decline,²² the *New Yorker* had achieved this status, and true to Knight’s prediction, women had played a role, one that was decreasing as the United States recoiled not to prewar normalcy but to its distorted postwar twin. Numerous and varied cultural histories detail what happened in the postwar period, and it wasn’t the sunny outlook that Knight predicted. When the postwar job market for women shrank, when public sentiment turned against women in the postwar workforce, that

surplus of college-educated unemployed women transmogrified into an unprecedentedly large leisured consumer class. They read. They shopped. They aspired for more. The glossy women's magazines with their pages upon pages of advertising and domestic fiction designed to lull readers into complacency and conformity were an integral part of a bourgeois consumer culture that left women bored, dissatisfied, contained, and restless. When their restlessness grew too profound, they tranquilized themselves. This critical story works,²³ but there is for me one insurmountable difficulty: this is not the way lady editors working in the boom decades (the 1920s through the 1950s) told their own stories. If we accept the passionate renderings of their own letters and life stories—and I would argue that we should at least listen and represent these voices in our rhetorical histories—these women exercised their love of words, becoming missionaries in social and literary causes.

In 1941, Knight could point to the story of Martha Foley, who along with her husband White Burnett coedited *Story* and originated the celebrated annual collection of O'Brien short stories (*Lady Editor* 98). She is careful to note that Foley forged her own path. While Foley “is kind and encouraging to girls who long for the sort of editorial position she has held,” she does not offer a training ground for them. “There are editorial secretaries, of course, proofreaders, copyreaders, girls who handle make-up and typography and absorb some of the editorial atmosphere. But there is no editorial staff and the cruel truth is that if you want to be an editor on a class magazine right this minute you may have to follow Martha Foley's example, and start your own” (*Lady Editor* 100). Freda Kirchwey did it with the *Nation*, Lila Acheson Wallace with her husband created the famous *Reader's Digest* (which, oddly enough, she categorizes as “Fare for the Intelligentsia”). Each was “launched tentatively as an experiment” (*Lady Editor* 101).

If reviews are an indication, *Lady Editor* likely did not receive the kind of commercial success its authors hoped for. The *Spring-*

field *Republican* devoted 180 words to it, the *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* about the same. Its fullest review, a mere 220 words, came in the *Journal of Home Economics*, which praised its scope: “Leaders in the various lines of work within each division were interviewed, often quoted, as to what personal qualifications, training, and experience are desirable, how to get started, and what the work includes” (Rev. of *Lady Editor* 746). Still the reviewers lamented its humanistic bent: “Journal readers may wish that in the section on magazines a paragraph or two had been devoted to the non-commercial, professional magazines that seem to offer limited but increasing opportunities for women trained in some branch of natural or social science who don’t care for teaching or advanced research and who do like reading, writing, and human contact” (Rev. of *Lady Editor* 747). Why was *Lady Editor* such a flop? One possibility rests within this text, which simultaneously praises the accomplishments of “driven” women and doubts the motives of the majority of women who graduate college: “I want a job on your staff because I just love to write,” explains Knight, “is an old and familiar chant in the ears of every editor who must interview aspiring applicants” (*Lady Editor* 92). Such applicants must be disabused, and frequently are, Knight indicates. “The demand, ‘Write what?’ is not the rebuff it sometimes seems, but an honest question to determine on what your ambition is based. For a vague and indefinite yen to ‘write’ considered alone is probably the greatest disqualification possible in the editorial field” (*Lady Editor* 92–93). This point is repeated several times in *Lady Editor*, such as in the “one bit of advice” Martha Foley of *Story* offers aspirants: “If you want to be a writer,” she warns, “stay out of publishing. Don’t try to combine the two activities. . . . If you are going to be a writer, be an honest one. Write out of your own convictions, believe in what you are doing. If you want to be an editor, forget the writing” (qtd. in *Lady Editor* 101). Women like Katharine White had learned this lesson well. In January 1959, Sheila Atkinson Fisher, a fellow Bryn Mawr College graduate, wrote to White to ask her to contribute to a collection of articles by prom-

inent figures with connections to Bryn Mawr. Fisher specifically invited White to contribute a piece on the current state of the short story. White's reply evinced her professionalism:

I am honored to be asked to contribute a piece to this anniversary issue of the *Alumnae Bulletin*, but I think I shall have to say no to this assignment. In a way it is tempting, for what I would write on if at all, would not be the trends in short-story writing with mention of young writers worth watching, for this would be impossible for a still active editor of *The New Yorker*. I could, though, perhaps write something on how to detect new talent and how to encourage young writers. (Oh no, this, too, would be too intramural!) But the fact is I simply do not have time to write a 2000 word article as an extra to my present work. Also I am not a writer; I'm an editor.²⁴

While curricula in women's colleges, as Katherine H. Adams documents, grew to incorporate more creative writing both as separate class work and as an approach to studying literature, this belletristic work, *Lady Editor* warns, does not prepare women for the real work of editing. Rather, "experience in strange and seemingly remote fields results in important positions and that 'literary ability' of which you are so proud may count for little or nothing. Several outstanding magazines have a whole staff of editors who never write a line" (Adams, *Group* 93). For this reason, college graduates may not, in fact, find themselves in any better standing than those from vocational schools: "the girl who has only business school training and can act as a secretary is very likely to get the assistant editor's job you want so badly" (Adams, *Group* 93).

Young women looking for glamour and visibility were likely to be disappointed by a profession characterized by its invisibility: "The truth is, that along with one or two other creative fields, the stage, radio and the movies, the editorial field is almost universally misunderstood by those desiring to enter it. Because it has a certain allure, the assumption is . . . that it is a fairyland of golden possibility" (Adams, *Group* 93). Far from being a fairy-

land, Knight makes clear, the editing profession is a place for hard work, much of which will go unrecognized. A good editor is like a good chorister or a good Rockette: she should not stand out. Such an ideal was easier to sustain in the collective environment of women's colleges than in the world of work where despite increasing numbers, they were still exceptions.

Loving Literacy

Women editing large-circulation magazines in the mid-twentieth-century United States did so at a time when women's schooling and expectations about women's ways of being in the nation were changing. It was also a time in the United States when literacy became a kind of secular faith. As a metaphor, Sylvia Scribner argues, literacy is politically, spiritually, and culturally freighted, as all metaphors are. Scribner identifies three metaphors identified with literacy (other critics have identified dozens more), including the formation of literacy as a "state of grace," "the tendency . . . to endow the literate person with special values" (13).²⁵ This endowment accrues not just in the literate individual but in the texts that allow such an individual to come to be: "the literate individual's life derives its meaning and significance from intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual participation in the accumulated creations and knowledge of humankind, made available through the written word" (Scribner 14).²⁶ In short, if literacy is a state of grace, it is made possible through introduction to shared, valued texts. Learning is sanctification.

Perhaps the best illustration of this trope—literacy as something holy, an act of reverence—appears in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published in 1960. Lee's particular use of the metaphor extends: literacy becomes a natural, powerful, sustaining form of love, both personal and civic. Scout's modern teacher would have preferred that children learn the science of reading at school, by parsing the words on the page, by memorizing an alphabet, by mastering phonics. In this scheme, skills can be isolated and tested. What such skills can accomplish is moot;