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Negotiating Pleasure and Danger in Society Women's Public Lives

Society women should not be dismissed. According to Maureen Montgomery, these women were important contributors to the development of America's upper class, and certainly were not mere frivolous creatures worthy only of historians' most cursory glance. Montgomery uses a wide variety of texts to trace elite women's increasing influence on the public life of New York's upper class at the end of the nineteenth century. This public life centered on leisure, but it was a leisure through which women maintained the boundaries of the elite, provided venues for business dealings within this elite, and promoted upper-class interests by showing off the enviable lives of the rich. This excellent study of New York society women takes us well beyond the question of whether upper-class women are worthy of our attention; *Displaying Women* demonstrates convincingly that they played a key role in the formation of America's ruling class and of our late twentieth-century cult of celebrity.

Displaying Women presents a strong argument for women's agency within the upper class; elite women are shown here as "makers of meaning" as well as "bearers of meaning." In her examination of society journalism, eti-

quette manuals, novels, published memoirs, and unpublished personal papers, the author identifies a dominant discourse on femininity, and she sees upper-class women as contributing to a counterdiscourse, which challenged "the meanings given to femininity and gender relations by the news media and by consumer capitalism in general" (p. 15). At the same time, Montgomery acknowledges the limits imposed on elite women's agency by conventional society. Etiquette was a tool used by upper-class women to order their world, and it gave them power in that world, but its rules also restricted women and kept them in a subordinate role. Society journalism increased women's social importance through the publicity it gave to their contribution to class building. But the unremitting coverage of upper-class women's lives also served to control their behavior, since they had to assume that they were being watched and that any improper action could end up in the newspapers for all to see.

Montgomery argues that upper-class women played a dual role; she employs Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of bourgeois women as both "active participants in the dominant male class structure" and "male-

constructed symbols of class distinctions” (p. 42). Through these two roles, upper-class women played an important part in the transformation of New York society, from a ruling group dominated by a “modest, genteel, older elite” to one that was, at the turn of the twentieth century, dominated by “publicity-conscious nouveaux riches” (p. 59).

Montgomery traces the movement of upper-class American women into the public sphere. After the Civil War, upper-class social life extended beyond the domestic sphere and into the public spaces once inhabited primarily by men and women of ill repute. In an attempt to maintain a clear demarcation between respectable society and that of actresses and courtesans, the rules of etiquette were made to apply to socializing in restaurants and public ballrooms, at the opera, and at the theater. The many new leisure activities for women brought them further into the public sphere. Shopping, motoring, and touring all became popular at the turn of the century and gave women greater mobility and independence.

It also became fashionable for elite women to engage in a wide variety of athletic activities including bicycling, golf, camping, riding, and tennis. Sports created even greater difficulties for women than shopping or travel. Women had to find modest, feminine sports clothing in quiet colors, and the unmarried needed a chaperon if they wanted to bicycle or motor in mixed groups. Violation of these rules could bring censure from older women and even newspaper coverage of the transgression.

By 1900, the society pages of newspapers reported in detail the lives of upper-class women. Even the debuts and weddings of the New York elite had become public events, increasing the extent to which these celebrations put women under public scrutiny. Some society weddings, like those of Anna Gould and Consuelo Vanderbilt to European aristocrats, provoked an endless stream of newspaper and magazine stories, and curious crowds and traffic jams at the church and brides’ homes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, display had become an integral part of the lives of men and women of the New York elite. The popularity of the Palm Garden, the premier restaurant at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (which opened in 1897), clearly demonstrates the importance of display: to enter the restaurant, patrons in evening dress walked down a three-hundred-foot long corridor lined with sofas and chairs known as “Peacock Alley.” In addition, the exterior walls of the restaurant were made of glass, while the interior walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

The wealthy had clearly decided to pursue a social life that was as public as it was sumptuous. Wealthy New Yorkers put themselves on display, both for each other (at opening night of the Metropolitan Opera), and for outsiders (at the Horse Show at Madison Square Garden). High society acquired new rules of display that closely resembled the “new marketing technologies” of late nineteenth-century consumer culture (p. 123). Upper class men and women were described in *Town Topics*, a society newspaper, as actors who were “sustained by looks of envy” from those beneath them in the class system (p. 122). Their display established their own social position; by commodifying upper-class glamor, society magazines and retailers (who used it in advertising their merchandise) also turned a profit.

However, the “spectacles of leisure” that Montgomery describes were essentially gendered: women were on display for the male spectator. This was most obviously and deliberately the case at the opera and the theater, but the assumption that elite women’s purpose was to be looked at permeated their every activity in turn-of-the-century New York. Even the selling of the upper class that took place in newspapers and magazines concentrated on the display of elite women, who usually cooperated with society journalists. In these circumstances, the society woman’s role came increasingly to resemble that of an actress, but with the additional requirement that she appear unconscious of the fact that she was on display. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer admires Ellen Olenska’s exceptional ability to appear unaware of men looking at her, and Edith Wharton described this “aplomb” as a response learned, with varying degrees of success, by all women of her class.

This display was seen as fraught with potential danger: any appearance in public was supposed to entail risk for a respectable woman. Etiquette manuals instructed women to protect themselves from the rude male gaze by dressing inconspicuously and walking as quietly as possible through the streets. Even then they could be shamed by men’s notice. According to the Saunterer, even well bred men enjoyed the sport of appraising women as they walked by, with comments like “‘Dress a little short, eh? Pretty trim ankle though!’” – and, if decent women chose to go out in public, they had little choice except to shudder and endure such unwelcome attention (p. 89). At night this danger increased; a woman outside her home could be mistaken for a prostitute and treated accordingly. The greatest danger of display supposedly occurred in the streets, where elite women could be seen by strangers, but, even at the theater, where a woman

was on display to members of her own group, she could misstep and endanger her reputation. The distinction between moral and immoral women became harder to sort out as women became more mobile and had “legitimate” reasons to be in the public space at the turn of the century.

As women moved increasingly into the public sphere in the late nineteenth century, attempts to control their behavior proliferated. European rules of chaperonage were introduced in the 1880s for this purpose. The use of chaperons was controversial in the United States. It was seen by many as a somewhat insulting European affectation; American men and women were supposed to be governed by an innate decency and understanding of what was proper that made a chaperon unnecessary. Nevertheless, as women moved increasingly into the public sphere, chaperonage was adopted by the New York elite to protect the reputations of unmarried girls. Courting couples, and, later, motoring couples were seen as particularly in need of chaperons for this purpose. Chaperons also limited the possibility of contact between upper-class girls and men from the lower classes, and their presence served as a clear class marker.

However, a more effective and far-reaching method of surveillance became available by the turn of the century, rendering chaperons superfluous: the society pages of newspapers. In particular, Montgomery makes excellent use of the society column written by “The Saunterer” in *Town Topics* at the turn of the century. The Saunterer openly employed gossip, innuendo, and the threat of naming names in order to control the behavior of the New York elite, and of young women in particular. He saw danger in a variety of modern activities, especially those that allowed the crossing of gender or class lines. Unchaperoned motoring by unmarried couples, women bicycling in public, and bicycling or dance instruction which allowed lower-class men to touch upper-class women, all provoked the Saunterer. His intentions were clear: to censor the behavior of fashionable women and to retard the breakdown of social barriers. In this, his column was one of the clearest examples of society journalism functioning as a “repressive system for the reproduction of the status quo” (p. 91).

Displaying Women invites comparisons between New York’s high society and that of the European capital cities – and not only from historians of turn-of-the-century Europe. Elite New Yorkers themselves constantly made this comparison. They modeled New York high society after the European aristocracies, and they suffered from

the knowledge that Europeans often dismissed them, declaring that America had no aristocracy. Central to this discussion was the question of leisure: in America, only women were at leisure. Contemporaries, including Henry James, noted that almost all men worked in New York, and that business considerations and a business attitude shaped social life to some degree. Many accounts suggested that men were reluctant participants in society’s rituals, that they were often bored at elaborate dinner parties, and, because they had to be at the office by nine or ten AM, that they were unwilling to socialize into the fashionably early hours of the morning. The fact that men took this attitude marked leisure and society’s concerns as women’s territory – an important gender divide within the “leisure class.”

Society also appears to have been both more puritanical and more egalitarian in New York. Montgomery notes that the distinction between respectable society and the demimonde was maintained far more strictly in New York than in Paris at the turn of the century. She also records a greater ambivalence among these wealthy women about the appropriate relationship of a mistress to her servants. Some upper-class American women argued that servants deserved many of the same pleasures enjoyed by their employers—good books and pictures, a comfortable sitting room in which servants could receive friends or read, the opportunity to go to the theater, and even warm relations between mistress and servant. Upper-class American women certainly did not see their servants as their social equals; nevertheless, their concern suggests that they were not entirely comfortable with a rigidly hierarchical relationship.

Finally, New York high society appears to have adapted itself to “modern” influences, especially newspaper culture and publicity, with particular enthusiasm. These same influences changed the public space in European cities – Judith Walkowitz describes them in late nineteenth-century London in *City of Dreadful Delight*.^[1] But the absence of an established aristocracy very likely encouraged the evolution of social celebrity in New York. New York society had to justify itself as an elite group, and it came to rely on the use of the press and public display to glamorize and promote itself as America’s aristocracy. Society women became public figures and social celebrities. By the turn of the century, upper-class women fed stories to reporters, and the articles that appeared in the society pages of newspapers and in women’s magazines flattered elite women and set them up as an ideal for all women to emulate. As Montgomery describes it, this symbiotic relationship seems to

be the obvious precursor of today's cult of celebrity (in the United States and Europe), and of celebrity appearances on television talk shows and in magazine interviews.

This volume convincingly argues the importance of elite women as historical subjects and as actors in the evolution of the American upper class at the end of the nineteenth century. The author weaves together her sources with great dexterity, as well as making extensive and excellent use of Edith Wharton as a social critic and observer of the changes taking place in turn-of-the-century upper-class life. Montgomery demonstrates on every page her ability to enlist the best ideas from sociology, anthropology, and cultural history in interpreting and evaluating these historical sources. Only the voices of individual women seem to be used sparingly, and, perhaps, in comparison to the author's other sources, to be underinterpreted. Historians familiar with the many collections of middle-class American women's letters and diaries might wonder at the author's more limited use of upper-class women's private papers. It may be, however, that these sources have little to tell beyond what is apparent on the surface, and that this superficiality points to some of the real limits to upper-class women's agency. For most elite women, their actions and words could only form a cautious and conservative contribution to the discourse. There were too many threats to their respectability and position in society if they acted or expressed opinions outside of the norm. These women were "makers of meaning," but in a limited arena, and only of meanings

that did not challenge the status quo. They could and did contribute to the evolution of society, but only rarely were elite women able to change the direction of that evolution. Edith Wharton was the exception in her willingness and ability to criticize New York society boldly, and from the inside.

The details of society women's lives may strike us as frivolous and inconsequential, in many of the same ways as those of the countless minor celebrities who are their counterparts today. But our often easy dismissal of celebrity and display misses the point of more serious and critical study of these subjects. Display, particularly of women, is most effective when it makes its impression without lending itself easily to analysis—if it is too accessible, it loses much of its power to influence us. By making explicit the importance of upper-class display, and by exposing and explaining its mechanism, *Displaying Women* makes an important contribution to the history of celebrity, and to our understanding of turn-of-the-century America.

Note

[1]. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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