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"Margot is human, isn't she, after all?"[1]: The Modern Girl in Interwar Élite Women's Magazines

In the 1930s, Katharine Brush penned an article for *Vogue* entitled 'They're Human After All.' She focused on the fictional heroine in magazines, whom she called Margot, and questioned why Margot was always written as a one-dimensional character without any flaws. Her point was that the women in society and fashion magazines were very real, with allergies, tears and preferences. Margot was not just the epitome of the modern girl, she was entirely human, with Brush arguing that she should be portrayed as such. Society magazines have often been viewed as frivolous and unworthy of serious study by historians of journalism. Studies of fashion and fashion history have suffered the same treatment.[2] This has been partly due to the impression that society and fashion news were dominated by female journalists. It has been argued that until the beginning of the twentieth century, and indeed beyond it, 'women occupied a "ghetto status" and were engaged solely in the so-called 'marginal areas of news.'[3] Yet, these marginal areas were often the only entry women could find to the world of journalism, separated as they were, before universal suffrage, from the realms of politics and foreign relations. However, there was a huge demand for society and fashion journalism, and they brought immense profits to press proprietors. Additionally, the fact that there were countless titles dedicated to women, fashion, and society news, as well as gossip columns in all the big national dailies, highlights that they were integral to the population's consumption of the news.

Deirdre Beddoe argued that the media was essential in the creation of a set of gender norms and expectations in the interwar years, with the stress falling on the assumption that women should strive to be good wives and mothers.[4] Indeed, feminist scholars such as Friedan and Greer claimed that the reading of women's magazines exacerbated the oppression of women.[5] This view contributed to the significant lack of material written in the second half of the twentieth century concerning women's magazines. When they were considered, they were often the recipients of misogyny and gendered language, perpetuating the assumption that the magazines themselves were misogynistic.[6] However, historians have recently challenged those assumptions and asserted that the press conveyed more than this one singular opinion and that

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[1] Katharine Brush, 'They're Human After All', Julian Messner (ed.), *Vogue's First Reader* (New York: Condé Nast Publications 1942). p. 161
[2] Helen Kopnina, "The World According to "Vogue": The Role of Culture(s) in International Fashion Magazines," *Dialectical Anthropology* 31, 4 (2007). p. 363
[3] Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming, *Women and Journalism* (London: Routledge, 2004). pp. 15-16
[4] Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989).
[5] Betty Friedman, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).
Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1971).
[6] Martin Conboy, *Journalism: A Critical History* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd. , 2004). p. 41

the wide range of voices in newspapers and magazines offered a variety of ideas and avenues for women.[7]

Some of the most visible types of magazines aimed at women were classed as society or fashion magazines, including *The Tatler, Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*.[8] These magazines were originally constructed to appeal to a sophisticated, élite audience, though eventually widened their scope and became successful with a broader range of readers.[9] Despite the broadening in attraction, a high literacy level, adequate funds, and the free time to enjoy reading remained prerequisites.[10] The magazines shared writers, with many journalists writing for more than one publication.[11] These were not necessarily the best-paid opportunities, but writers knew that their articles would be read by an élite and well-educated audience. They were designed to challenge their readers by featuring discussions and analyses of art, literature, theatre, and fashion. In the words of Douglas, 'they were not all sheen and glitter; they possessed sinews, bone marrow, and muscle.'[12] Far from seeking to explicitly indoctrinate women, they offered them opportunities to earn an independent living and to make their own decisions concerning their personal lifestyle.

Articles in *The Tatler* primarily focused on titbits of social information, marriages, engagements, balls, charity fundraisers, the annual presentations at court and the London Season events such as Royal Ascot. Each cover featured a photograph of a prominent high society figure, most commonly female, but occasionally children or male members of the royal family appeared. The intricate details given of every event that was considered important were windows into the lives of the élites. *The Tatler* featured regular columns, possibly written by the same writer each time, though there is no proof apart from consistency of language which can, with skill, be imitated. There were several iterations of 'The Letters of Evelyn' which made use of the plural "we" which drew in the reader, making them feel part of the situations they read about. She also consistently used the term "my dear" to refer to her readers.[13] This technique addressed the readers directly and highlighted that the writer considered them to be close friends. This also hints as to whom the writer and indeed the editors believed their readers to be. It would be uncommon to use such a term of endearment when referring to a man, leading us to the conclusion that most of *The Tatler's* readers were believed to be women. Announcing itself as a woman's magazine would have been limiting to *The Tatler* but most of its readers were undoubtedly women. Evelyn always began her column with the note of 'Grosvenor Square' as it would be displayed at the top of the writing paper of the time. Grosvenor Square was one of the most fashionable addresses in the interwar era, right in the heart of Mayfair and within walking distance of Piccadilly, Bond Street and Park Lane. To live there was a sign of affluence and of social prominence. Evelyn was clearly supposed to be someone who lived at the centre of high society and had the wealth to match.

The editor of *The Tatler* welcomed contributions of photographs and articles from readers. Photographs of 'important current events, of notable people, of interesting places, or

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[7] Adrian Bingham, *Gender, modernity, and the popular press in inter-war Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[8] *The Newspaper Press Directory and Advertisers' Guide*. (London: C. Mitchell and Co. Ltd).

[9] George H. Douglas, *The Smart Magazines: 50 Years of Literary Revelry and High Jinks at Vanity Fair, the New Yorker, Life, Esquire and the Smart Set* (Hamden, CT.: Archon Books, 1991). p. 1

[10] Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England 1855-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1976). p. 35

[11] Douglas, *The Smart Magazines*. p. 2

[12] Ibid., p. 4

[13] *The Tatler,* 7 January 1920, p. 3

of anything of an eccentric or uncommon nature likely to arouse interest' were welcome and would be 'liberally paid for.'[14] The effects of this policy were twofold. Firstly, the reader became more invested in the magazine, knowing that they could become intimately involved in its success. While in no way a stable source of income, women with a camera could have supplemented their income in this way. Secondly, *The Tatler* ensured that it could provide coverage of events that its correspondents had been unable to attend. This resulted in a sense that the magazine was everywhere, knew everything and was the best source for society news. Manuscripts 'of a nature suitable for THE TATLER' were also welcomed, from both professional journalists and amateurs.[15] The lack of by-lines or accessible records make it almost impossible to determine who wrote most of the material. Yet, it is not a preposterous suggestion that some of these anonymous contributions were written by women. There is evidence of high-society women writing for newspaper columns and for publications like *Vogue.* Therefore, it is not a stretch to presume that they did the same for *The Tatler.*

From its inception, *Vogue* was to be 'a dignified, authentic journal of society, fashion and the ceremonial side of life.'[16] It also aimed to be indispensable to the lives of smart women, continually urging readers to subscribe so as not to miss any details in upcoming issues. Yet, the pages of *Vogue* also intended to challenge the reader and make her think for herself. The Early April 1925 issue of *Vogue* stated in an editorial that 'Vogue has no intention of confining its pages to hats and frocks. In literature, drama, art and architecture, the same spirit of change is seen at work, and to the intelligent observer the interplay of suggestion and influence between all these things is one of the fascinations of the study of the contemporary world.'[17] The assumption was that the reader of *Vogue* was educated, intelligent and engaged with the cultural world around her. Indeed, she had many more opportunities than her mother and grandmother, with increased education levels, the chance to work in more spheres and a degree of freedom to make her own decisions. Apart from a small interim period in the 1920s, all of *Vogue's* editors have been female, until Edward Enninful took the helm in 2017. Therefore, there has always been a 'trickle-down' effect by which the social leaders, in this case, the female editors, writers and designers influenced the social and cultural habits of the readers.

Vanity Fair was a self-professed English magazine for Americans, bringing the sophistication of the continent to the American cultural élite. The reader of *Vanity Fair* would be interested in the theatre, art, literature, and the great outdoors, articles on which they would regularly find alongside those on 'the most interesting doings of the most interesting People who go to make of Vanity Fair a "very great Fair" indeed.'[18] *Vanity Fair* clearly felt that its intended contents might seem rather feminine, as the opening editorial stated in the second column, 'we announce that Vanity Fair is by no means to be a woman's magazine.'[19] The proof offered was the proliferation of articles on football and golf to be found on page 55. Yet, two issues later, they were at pains to ensure that women knew the magazine was intended for them too:

> For women we intend to do something in a noble and missionary spirit ... We mean to make frequent appeals to their intellects. We dare to believe that they are, in their best moments, creatures of some cerebral activity: we even make bold to believe that it is

[14] *The Tatler,* 3 July 1901, p. 2
[15] Ibid.
[16] Arthur Turnure, 1892 statement as quoted in Edna Woolman Chase and Ilka Chase, *Always in Vogue* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1954). p. 23
[17] *Vogue*, Early April 1925, p. 14
[18] *Vanity Fair,* January 1914, p. 13
[19] *Vanity Fair,* January 1914, p. 13

> they who are contributing what is most original, stimulating, highly magnetized to the literature of our day, and we hereby announce ourselves as determined and bigoted feminists.[20]

From our twenty-first century perspective, this statement is condescending and assumes that women can only think for themselves in their best moments and that no editor had ever before imagined that they might be possible of understanding intellectual pursuits. Yet, it was not a popular view among men in the era prior to the Great War. Moreover, this sentiment was written six years before the nineteenth amendment was enacted and American women gained the vote in every state. Therefore, the editorial can be viewed as progressive and setting the tone for a magazine that would consider women as intellectual equals to men, with articles aimed at both sexes.

A lack of by-lines on articles was common practice across journalism at the time, applying to both men and women. Yet it limited the exposure that a woman journalist could receive and likely condemned to obscurity many who could have been well-known had their names been printed. The lack of by-lines on articles makes it difficult for the historian to connect individual articles to individual writers. Yet, there are cases which can be analysed, due to the writer's later fame or her other writings being used as identifiers. Many of these were élite women with the necessary education levels to enter the industry and the skill and determination to stay there. A longing for freedom and a search for financial independence led to more young élite women seeking work as writers. Since it was perceived as a respectable occupation, those who took on roles as editors and writers included the daughters of aristocrats. There are many excellent examples of these women but for the sake of time, I am going to share just one with you, Nancy Mitford, who became a celebrated journalist and novelist.

Nancy was the daughter of Baron Redesdale and a prominent society beauty and debutante. She later became widely known as the author of entertaining novels largely based on her upbringing and her acquaintances including *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate.* Yet, like many contemporary male authors, Nancy made her living and began her career writing articles for magazines. One of her first commissions was as photographer for a party hosted by a friend in Scotland. She financed her train ticket by shooting the party for *The Tatler.*[21] She then wrote several articles for *Vogue* and was given a by-line, largely through the merit of her family and the assumption that she could possibly boost sales. Indeed, Nancy believed that her name carried weight, describing *Vogue* editor Alison Settle as 'a stingy old thing, she only gave me £6.6.0. for my shooting party article in spite of having my name and all.'[22] Then followed a weekly article for £3 for *The Lady* which had been founded by her maternal grandfather in 1885.[23] Nancy's letters from the late 1920s and 1930s display a great deal of worry over money, her parents not being a position to give her much, so writing was always her lifeline. Nancy wrote to Mark Ogilvie-Grant to inform him that she was employed by *The Lady* to write a weekly article for £250 a year, a steady income that she could rely on. At the same time, her first book, *Highland Fling,* was with the agents and she was 'in a state of complete depression', worried about the future.[24] Yet, she was later in much better spirits writing, 'I'm making such a lot of money with articles - £22 since Christmas & more owing to

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[20] *Vanity Fair,* March 1914, p. 15

[21] Selina Hastings, *Nancy Mitford* (London: Vintage, 2002). p. 69

[22] Nancy to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, 8 January 1930, quoted in Charlotte Mosley, ed., *A Talent to Annoy: Essays, Journalism, and Reviews 1929-1968 by Nancy Mitford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). p. 6

[23] Nancy to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, 23 January 1930, Nancy Mitford, *Love from Nancy: The Letters of Nancy Mitford*, ed. Charlotte Mosley, 2 ed. (London: Spectre, 1994). p. 62

[24] Nancy to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, 19 February 1930, Mitford, *Love from Nancy*. pp. 64-5

me so I'm saving it up to be married but Evelyn says don't save, dress better & catch a better man.'[25] The Evelyn in question was Evelyn Waugh, a lifelong friend of Nancy's who supported her writing and often offered friendly criticism. This friendship drew her into contemporary literary circles and led to the publication of *Highland Fling* in March 1931, with the *Evening Standard reviewing* it as 'engagingly and convincingly done', cementing Nancy's name as not just a socialite but a writer.[26]

The magazine career of Nancy Mitford demonstrates several facets of the life of an upper-class woman writer. Firstly, although Nancy enjoyed writing and made a career out of it, her primary motivation was money. She wrote that 'it is rather fun to do but a bit of a strain every week to think of subjects.'[27] Her letters contain far more comments on the amount of money she was making and what she was able to spend it on than any article topics. Articles were initially a way to fund her social life rather than for the thrill of grammar and syntax. Secondly, she wrote for more than one publication, writing articles for *Vogue,* providing photographs for *The Tatler,* and taking on the role of 'The Lady' for *The Lady* and reporting from the Chelsea Flower Show, the 4th of June at Eton and the Aldershot Tattoo.[28] Nancy, and indeed many writers of the era, did not sign exclusive contracts and was free to work for multiple publications. Thirdly, although Nancy wrote for more than one publication, they were all targeted at the same group of people, namely the social class to which she herself belonged. Therefore, it was seen as a respectable occupation which allowed her to attend events where she would undoubtedly meet friends and be considered a guest rather than a journalist. Indeed, Nancy continued to remember her time writing for society magazines as her career as a novelist progressed and made references to them in her novels, including *Love in a Cold Climate.*

The study of fashion and society magazines does several things. Firstly, it can tell us much about the media and the ways in which they sought to influence their readers for monetary gain. *The Tatler, Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* all repeatedly advertised their subscriptions, with *Vogue* placing particular emphasis on the fact that the reader would miss essential details if they did not have one. This marketing technique was manipulative, playing on the readers' fears of social ostracism if they were not correctly dressed or up to date with the latest news. Secondly, we can see what the standards of beauty and fashion were in the era and how women were being influenced to dress and maintain their beauty routines. It is not correct to say that all women were unduly influenced by fashion magazines and made to conform. That would be to assume that all women were the same and were influenced in the same ways. Instead, based on the evidence from the three magazines analysed, the female reader was exposed to many opinions, ideas, and new forms of culture. *The Tatler* presented her with a wealth of information on the beau monde and likely fired dreams of aspiration. *Vogue* exposed her to the latest fashions as well as some modernist literature and art. *Vanity Fair* gave her literature, art, theatre and exposure to satire and political observations. While the magazines opened new worlds to the readers, they provided safe places for women's writing careers to flourish and launched some of the most prolific names of the era including Nancy Mitford, Eleanor Smith, Dorothy Parker, Clare Booth Luce and Diana Cooper. Could society magazines be manipulative? Yes, most certainly. But did they offer a place for women that was their own and where they could learn and thrive? Most definitely.

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[25] Nancy to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, 26 March 1930, Ibid., p. 67
[26] Nancy to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, 15 March 1931, Ibid., p. 73
[27] Nancy to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, 19 February 1930, Ibid., p. 64
[28] Hastings, *Nancy Mitford*. p. 69