

ANNE-JULIA ZWIERLEIN
SEBASTIAN GRAEF
HEIDI WEIG (Eds.)

Cultures of Lecturing in the Long Nineteenth Century

VOL. 2: Women and Public Speech
in Manuals of Rhetoric, Journalism,
Autobiography and Fiction



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Edited by
Rainer Emig
Anne-Julia Zwierlein



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Anne-Julia Zwierlein

Introduction:

Cultures of Lecturing in the Long Nineteenth Century

Oral Performances: Lecturing, Public Speaking, Reciting

The Victorian rise of mass print media competed against persisting cults of presence and orality: lectures, speeches, sermons, penny readings, and recitations, oral storytelling, and the reading aloud of newspapers contributed to a heterogeneous and thriving oral culture. “Public speech lay [...] at the core of Victorian public life”, writes the historian Joseph Meisel (2001, 115; see also Rose 2001, 84); and fellow historian Martin Hewitt, who has produced groundbreaking work on Victorian platform culture (2002; 2012), emphasizes that “audiences were often of a size to warrant the description of the platform as a system of mass leisure” (2002, 3). He also warns the aspiring researcher that “[s]ystematic records of any forms of nineteenth-century platform activity are entirely lacking: it was an element of public life that defied quantification.” (2002, 2) Public speech events were omnipresent in all cultural fields during the Victorian period, in politics, higher education, and rational recreation. Oral performances were also ingrained in Victorian biographies, as they had become an increasingly central element of pedagogy since the mid- to late-eighteenth century, when the elocution movement installed oral recitation, supported by elocutionary techniques, as an important aspect of school teaching (see Robson 2012 and Schroeder 2015).

The popularisation of the platform and the diversification of oral formats were important catalysts, and symptoms, of the political tendencies of the later half of the nineteenth century – a period of incremental democratisation which includes the long campaign for women’s suffrage. The second Reform Bill (1867) doubled the British electorate by including working-class males, and the same year saw the beginnings of the women’s rights movement, the 1867 foundation of the liberal feminist Langham Place group and John Stuart Mill’s unsuccessful petition for female franchise. Our period, the ‘long nineteenth-century’ addressed in the title, ends with early-twentieth-century organised mass events staging women’s public visibility and vocality: the famous 1907 ‘Mud March’ of suffragists from Hyde Park Corner to Exeter Hall and the 1910 mass demonstrations in Hyde Park. This increasingly energetic incursion of women into the urban public sphere in Britain was facilitated through a developing mass culture which comprised both print and orality – periodicals, newspapers, and popular fiction as well as popular lectures, oratory, and recitations. The nineteenth century has been called “the performing century” (Davis 2007), and emerging female identities, social aspirations, and political positions were performed and articulated in (mass) print and speech.

Traces of the ephemeral rhetorical performances of the long nineteenth century are accessible through the rhetoric of texts, through journalistic coverage of lectures and speeches in newspapers and periodicals, through lecture notes, epistolary or (auto)biographical reports, and mediations of public speech in fiction. If we define the culture of public speech as comprising oral performances as well as their journalistic coverage, overall audience numbers could be huge indeed: thousands of listeners indoors as well as outdoors in the case of attractive or controversial topics (see Hewitt 2002, 2, and Meisel 2001, 262), multiplied by the hundreds of thousands of readers who followed speech events in the newspapers. The circulation numbers of the larger dailies could reach between half and one million (see King 2004, 84, and Ellegard 1971), and we know that each paper copy was shared statistically by a sizeable number of people – partly owing to the fact that articles were read aloud in group settings (see King 2004, 120, and Rose 2001, 87-88). Periodicals actively mediated and disseminated popular orality and lecture events, via a range of genres such as lecture advertisements, reports, and fictionalised accounts that underlined the social and affective dimensions of the voice-event. Robert Ellison argues that “residual orality is one of the most significant aspects of Victorian discourse” (Ellison 1998, 132), and indeed, oral speech travelled through the medium of print in order to resurface in other oral performances.

British lecture culture was undergoing huge transformations at the time: despite his own focus on “the notable orators of the period” (2001, 278), Meisel confirms that “the practices of public speaking as they developed in nineteenth-century Britain were a *new* formulation strongly connected to a host of other modernizing trends in the period” (2001, 5). Increasingly, the public speaker’s and lecturer’s personality and platform presence became part of the new spectacle of orality (see also Zwierlein 2016a), and the late-Victorian sensationalist ‘New Journalism’ thrived on a similar fascination with speakers’ appearance and modes of delivery. Julie Early summarises the intricate connections between the new culture of celebrity, and mass oral and print entertainment: “At the turn of the century [...] we see not only an age of the ‘personality’, but understand as well that publicity and celebrity are reciprocal functions of audience and technologies [...], [inducing] a blurring of boundaries between professional discourse and entertainment.” (Early 2002, 151) While Joseph McCabe, writing in 1908, judged that by 1870 the “high point of the culture of public speech” had passed (1908, 2:285), the late nineteenth century was in fact the period when oratory completed the transition from “great speeches” by “great men” (Meisel 2001, 9) to a more comprehensive, popular culture of public speeches and lecturing (on the embeddedness of popular lectures in other metropolitan social calendars and publishing rhythms see also Zwierlein 2022a). Joseph McCabe thus seems to be yearning back to a period of (male) parliamentary debates and ‘great speeches’, bypassing in his assessment of the state of oratory both working-class public speaking leading up to and following the 1867 Reform Bill – and the broadening of platform speech to include popular and women’s cultures.

Women’s Incursion onto Print and Speech Platforms

Despite the Victorian ubiquity of “speechification”, as Charles Dickens called it in an 1869 letter (see Watson 1973, 141), cultures of lecturing and public speaking have

remained “strangely invisible” in Victorian literary and cultural studies (Hewitt 2002, 1). Historians (for instance Meisel and Hewitt, quoted above, as well as their predecessor, Henry Jephson, 1892) have stolen a march on literary and cultural scholars in this particular field. Amanda Adams in her 2014 study of transatlantic lecture tours by British celebrity authors also observes that “work on Victorian oral culture has been slow in materialising compared to work in the field on the American side” (4). Indeed, US-American historians have recognised for a long time the importance of “speechifiers” for American nation building (Eastman 2009; see also Wright 2017; Ray/Stob 2018). Most importantly in our context, there is still much mileage in researching British women’s participation in nineteenth-century cultures of lecturing and public speaking. In 2002, Hewitt concluded his two-page survey of women speakers (until 1870) by emphasizing that “the precise role of women within nineteenth-century public speech remains obscure” (Hewitt 2002, 13), and Meisel’s study of Victorian public oratory by “great men” (Meisel 2001, 9) likewise excluded popular lecturers – and women. Lilian Shiman (1992, 126-37) had offered a few pages on women’s late-nineteenth-century incursion into political speech-making, and Janice Schroeder’s work on “the significance of public speech and private conversation for the mid-Victorian feminist movement” (2003, 97), with particular emphasis on women’s roles in the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (1857-86), was an important case study highlighting the incremental stages of women’s participation in cultures of public speech. Still, more remains to be done. Historically, women orators had been accorded some prominence in radical working-class movements during the 1830s-40s, yet the mid-Victorian conservative backlash, promoting the ideologies of femininity and respectability, had brought renewed restrictions for middle-class female public presence (see also Hewitt 2002, 13). Clare Midgley has shown how the anti-slavery and Temperance movements served as vehicles preparing later feminist campaigns from the 1860s onwards (1992, 172). It is vital to recognize the importance of semi-public sites of female speech for women’s collective elocutionary and oratorical training – among them, for instance, women’s work for philanthropic organisations, women’s teaching in Sunday Schools, and especially women’s reciting and speaking in front of ‘mixed’ (male and female) audiences in the context of late-Victorian rational recreation. Such collective preparation could then develop into the increasingly more energetic, eventually militant fight for the vote around the turn of the century.

Karen Boiko comments on the affect produced in audiences by the physical presence and immediacy of public lecturers, now lost beyond recuperation: “we have no way of truly recovering the experience of Victorian oratory. Yet, as Patrick Joyce has observed, it is worthwhile to try to recognize the ‘semi-religious effect’ of the aural and immediate.” (Boiko 2002, 33, with reference to Joyce 1994, 98) In late-nineteenth-century New Woman and suffrage fiction, we can glimpse the auratic ‘presence’ of women’s voices in print, literary stage-acts which were also meant to work as catalysts, generative of further female presences in public life and speech. Glenda Norquay (1995), Ann Heilmann (2003), Carolyn Nelson (2004) and others have written about, and documented, the religious overtones of the later phases of the suffragette movement. An intense traffic between orality and print is involved: women lecturers recount their own experiences in print, as in the case of famous suffragist Florence Fenwick Miller who thereby also placed the spoken word centre-stage: her autobiographical article on “How I Made My First

Speech" (1894) was the beginning of her association with the feminist periodical *The Woman's Signal* (whose editorship she was soon to take on). New Woman novels likewise deliberately incorporated the multimedia context of newspapers, periodicals, and public speaking, imagining the novel as a metatextual platform. The charisma of platform oratory is of paramount importance in suffrage texts, which restage in print the suffragettes' multimedial public protests, turning lecture events as literary settings into sites of shock and transformation.

During the militant phase of the suffragette movement, female campaigners actively and deliberately staged the 'sensation' of their own speaking performances (thus responding implicitly to the codes of respectability that they were breaking). They became adept at producing public sensations when accosting ministers in the street and haranguing male speakers unexpectedly from auditoriums – seemingly spontaneous actions which were in fact carefully scripted performances. Suffragists' (auto)biographies record their "sensational protest[s]" during the "great years" from c. 1907 onwards (Strachey 1928, 305). Audiences of suffrage meetings, Ray Strachey insists in her 1928 history of the women's movement, were in their turn "startled to attention", and some of the "converted" were then "sent out to lecture" themselves (1928, 120-1; cf. Norquay 1995, 11; for the narrative of conversion see also the eponymous novel by Elizabeth Robins, *The Convert*, of 1907). Among the enabling contexts for women orators were the mixed formats of popular oral performances; the term "lecture", as in Strachey's text, was often used for political speeches, and we encounter the term across suffrage writing. Lectures could thus make the transition to political agitation without necessarily breaching genre restrictions; Hewitt remarks on the specific "cultures of the political platform, where lecture, address and public meeting offer a particularly blurred and protean version" (2012, 82). The female appropriation of semi-public speaking forums, such as recitations and penny readings, thus both preceded and informed the hyperbolic vocality of early-twentieth-century suffragism, which took female oral delivery from indoor settings out into the streets, culminating in megaphoned speeches (see Oliver 1987, 185). In Arnold Bennett's suffrage novel *The Lion's Share* (Cassell, 1916), for instance, the megaphone figures as both technical instrument and spiritual experience, creating exhilarating feelings of empowerment. Simultaneously, 'first speech' moments such as Fenwick Miller's are here combined with the – literal and metaphorical – raid upon obstacles: "She took the megaphone and put it to her lips, but no sound would come. Then, *as though it were breaking through an obstacle*, the sound shot forth [...]" (129; my italics)

Anthology Volumes: (1) *Practices of Oral Performance*; (2) *Women and Public Speech*

The two anthology volumes on *Cultures of Lecturing in the Long Nineteenth Century* explore the important cultural practices of Victorian lecturing, speech-making, and reciting. Volume 1 on *Practices of Oral Performance in Manuals of Rhetoric, Journalism and Autobiography* sets the scene by addressing general questions of rhetorical conventions and techniques. Volume 2 on *Women and Public Speech in Manuals of Rhetoric, Journalism, Autobiography and Fiction* sifts the evidence of late-Victorian (female self-)censorship where public speech was concerned, but also makes visible the

permeable boundaries between the alleged ‘separate spheres’ of Victorian gender politics, exploring how during the late nineteenth century numerous women underwent what we might call collective training for the oratorical competences that were then employed to such great effect by women suffragists.

Volume 1 analyses the following aspects of lecture culture: ‘The Art of Public Speaking’ (Section 1); ‘Speaking Techniques and Voice Production’ (Section 2); ‘Gesture and Attitude’ (Section 3). It also probes the social dimension of the speech event by taking a closer look at the lecturer’s ‘Relationship with the Audience’ (Section 4), as well as the duties of ‘Chairmanship’ (Section 5), the introducing and moderating of lecture performances. This first volume also acknowledges the material and organisational paraphernalia of lecturing – the vending of tickets, the question of venue, the rules of admission, the roles of lecturers, chairpersons, and audiences (see Section 6, ‘Managing Lectures and Lecture Tours’). It goes on to examine related forms of public oral performance that were popular during the Victorian period, such as ‘Public Reading and Reciting’ (Section 7) and ‘Penny Readings’ (Section 8). The latter originated around mid-century as a form of rational recreation for the working classes (but see 8.VII on Samuel Taylor’s claim to the ‘invention’). They consisted in public readings from literary and expository texts, in most cases performed by a number of local volunteers, and were often also accompanied by brief explanatory lectures. Penny readings became increasingly more middle-class, and eventually lost their mass appeal during the last decade of the nineteenth century. The volume closes by taking a look at representative examples of ‘Humorous and Satirical Approaches’ to the scene of lecturing (Section 9).

Volume 2 then concentrates on the participation of women in Victorian cultures of lecturing. When looking for oral performances by women – at least in the period before militant suffragettism – we have to attend more closely to the scene of rhetorical education and women’s participation in what has been termed the Victorian “craze for elocution” (Adams 2014, 4), as well as the more inclusive cultural scene of rational recreation and popular voice events. Volume 2 accordingly starts with a section on ‘Women and Elocution: Reading and Reciting’ (Section 1), and then moves on to an important venue and training ground for female public speech, ‘Women’s Debating Clubs’ (Section 2). This section, as will become apparent, also includes satirical commentary, and Section 3 is then dedicated wholly to the ‘Satirizing [of] Women Speakers’ that was a ubiquitous expression of male (and sometimes female) conservative backlash against female public speech, across the spectrum of newspaper and periodical publishing from mid-century into the era of the suffragettes. The final two sections of volume 2 are investigations into women’s own narratives about the moment of ‘speaking out’: their ‘Conversion to Suffragism’ and ‘First Speech’ (Section 4). Such narratives trace the almost religious moment of awakening and conversion to the Cause – the fight for the vote – which was an omnipresent, indeed topical feature in New Woman and especially suffrage fiction and autobiography (see my reference to Strachey’s *The Cause* and Robins’s *The Convert*, above). It was often combined with another topos, a woman speaker’s ‘First Speech’, which imitated the long-established male ‘first speech’ convention (compare volume 1, section 1.I, where Edward William Cox in 1863 exhorts the promising young law student that “You may now make your first attempt to speak in public”, and section 1.VIII, where Andrew Wilson in 1898 reminisces about “My First Lecture”). In the case of women speakers, a particular narrative construction of

coincidence is a frequent feature: the first speech was not premeditated, neither was it prepared. It is constructed as happening on the spur of the moment, for instance because the woman protagonist has to stand in for an absent speaker at the last minute – as with Fenwick Miller’s above-mentioned “First Speech” (compare volume 2, section 4.II), or with Beth’s spontaneous demand, “May I speak?”, in Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* (1897) (volume 2, section 4.IV), or with Ursula’s “first effort” in Edith Zangwill’s *The Call* (1924) (volume 2, section 4.XIV). Such constructions are obviously at odds with the increasing professionalisation of women’s public speaking that we observe during the last decades of the nineteenth century: Section 5 deals with the ‘Training and Professionalising [of] Women Lecturers’ which suffrage periodicals and suffrage organisations undertook on a systematic scale, developing specific training to further their campaigners’ public speaking skills.

Together, our two anthology volumes offer a window into the cross-traffic between orality and print (as well as other media) that defined late-Victorian metropolitan cultural life, tracing representations and fictionalisations of ephemeral oral performances through print and, sometimes, manuscript. From manuals of rhetoric via journalism and autobiographical writing to fiction, our excerpts are taken from serial and volume-format publications (many of them still out of print today), and in some cases transcribed from manuscript notes in the archives of late-Victorian lecturing institutions. The sources have been selected, introduced, and annotated with care. Some of our materials are published here for the first time (and most of them for the first time since the Victorian era). In both anthology volumes, we include documentation from handbooks of rhetoric produced in the context of higher education and professional training, autobiographical material by lecturers and orators, as well as journalistic pieces. Questions of representation and audience targeting became more complex as the professionalisation of journalism introduced standardised formats for lecture reports, from full-text versions to brief paraphrases, with specific price tags attached by the news agencies (see Meisel 2001, 270, on agencies’ offers to their client newspapers, from the mid-century onwards, of a choice of either “verbatim”, “full”, or “summary” reports). Frequently the mode of reporting also had gatekeeping functions, in many cases serving to suppress women’s voices by omitting them from record (see Zwierlein 2022b).

At the same time, mass print reached out to an increasingly heterogeneous audience as the century progressed, creating new spaces for women’s voices in print: “Provincial newspapers, women’s magazines, children’s periodicals, and illustrated fiction weeklies, along with temperance, trade, and myriad other classes of periodicals either sprang into being or proliferated into other formats and titles. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was generally acknowledged that choice of reading matter marked membership not only in a national framework but also in overlapping sets of niche markets and interest groups.” (King/Easley/Morton 2016, 7) We reflect this diversity – which was accompanied by an increasingly active participation of women, as contributors, producers, and editors, in the periodical market (see Mutch 2016; Palmer 2011; Ballaster et al. 1991; Beetham 1996; Fraser et al. 2003) – by including in our volumes excerpts from a range of upmarket periodicals and newspapers (*The Times*; *The Train*; *The Strand Magazine*), as well as magazines addressing a mixed upper-middle to lower-middle-class audience (*All the Year Round*; *Belgravia*; *Punch*; *Judy*), magazines issued by the Religious Tract Society (*The Leisure Hour*; *Sunday at Home*), feminist periodicals

(*Women's Penny Paper*; *The Woman's Herald*; *The Woman's Signal*) as well as popular penny fiction weeklies (*Bow Bells*; *London Journal*; *London Reader*). For a systematic content analysis of these and other periodicals in the context of 'lecturing women' see also Zwierlein 2018.

In both volumes, we offer additional evidence from the archives of some of the important physical sites of speech: Mechanics' Institutes, and Literary and Scientific Institutions. These recognised public sites staged educational and entertaining speech events – both lectures and recitations – to aspiring audiences, prompted by but developing beyond a social reformist programme of 'rational recreation' (see Bailey 1978). They were part of a multimedia metropolitan culture, vying against a range of other, even more spectacular attractions, for instance the light-and-sound shows offered at the Royal Polytechnic (see Groth 2013; Flanders 2006; Altick 1978). Lecturing institutions provided rational recreation and popular education, thus reaffirming the importance of the spoken word in a culture supposedly dominated by print (and increasingly the visual). They were instrumental in promulgating knowledge to larger segments of the population (the working class; women) before the advent of the University Extension scheme, and before the women's colleges at Cambridge, Oxford, and London took over those functions in a more systematic form. Through their combined attention to physical sites of speech and represented speech in print culture, our two volumes thus respond to recent turns in cultural studies which emphasize the institutional cultures of performance and popular periodical literature. They also intervene in the field of sound studies (see Picker 2003; Sterne 2003) by attending to theorisations of Victorian voice and vocality in the one source type centrally concerned with voice production: manuals of elocution and rhetoric. In volume two, we include manuals of rhetoric explicitly addressing women and their (alleged) physiological specificities. The period's masculine ethos of public speaking was here reframed by and for women, and the male-oriented conventions of audience behaviour and management applied to a 'mixed' or female audience. Such texts endeavoured to generate new female presences in public life and speech. We also include fiction excerpts that show how New Woman and suffrage novels imaginatively transformed and developed the ideological and political potentialities of the lecture scene with a specific view to women's participation. Both volumes combined show how the vibrant scene of lecturing became increasingly more socially diversified, popularised, and (in incremental, sometimes countervailing steps) more socially inclusive – a catalyst of social change.

Documenting, in volume one, some of the multiple formats, genres, and material paraphernalia of the vibrant nineteenth-century scenes of lecturing and speech-making, we then home in, in volume two, on how women participated in and redefined that culture by making use of both oral and print platforms. The two anthologies are thus roughly divided along seemingly traditional binary lines: the masculine frameworks in volume one, the incursion of women in volume two. While closer inspection of both volumes will also reveal many cross-currents and overlaps between these, far from 'separate', 'spheres', we have to acknowledge along with Helena Michie that many of the late-nineteenth-century social debates operated with an assumed "hyperbolic gender difference" (1999, 409) which, due to its very hyperbolism, was both proposed and contested at the same time. Where the technicalities of oral delivery were concerned, nineteenth-century manuals of rhetoric routinely reached back towards the standards of

oratory as defined by Cicero's *De Oratore* (55 BC) and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (95 AD), whose shared emphasis on the style of address as much as its substance remained hugely influential. Those classical models were mediated to nineteenth-century readers through a plethora of eighteenth-century manuals of rhetoric which had defined the scene in Britain for decades, unsurprisingly with a 'masculinist' bias (see also 'A Note on Annotation' below). There are some overviews (and reprints) of eighteenth-century rhetorical treatises, products of the heyday of formalised rhetoric in Britain (see Zunshine 2008 and McDowell 2017), but histories of rhetoric, as Boiko confirms, have not been helpful "in providing a sense of Victorian public speech, for they serve chiefly to remind us that by the early nineteenth century formal rhetoric had declined" (Boiko 2002, 33). The field of rhetorical practice, however, continued to be dynamic and thriving. Volume 1 focuses on the vitality of the lecturing scene: The excerpts from mid- to late-Victorian as well as Edwardian publications on rhetoric have been selected with a special view to the specificities of the social situations of lecturing and the varying relationships with the audience thus created. There are no modern reprints of nineteenth-century manuals – in contradistinction to the better-known eighteenth-century manuals by Sheridan, Walker, and Blair (see 'A Note on Annotation'). This neglected tradition of treatises for male and, increasingly, female speakers frequently emphasized practice rather than theory, and attended to the co-production of the lecturing event between lecturer and audience (see also Ray/Stob 2018). These publications also departed from classical and eighteenth-century antecedents in that they attended to the specific situation of women lecturers, including the social prescriptions – which they, alternately reinforced and criticised – around women's self-presentation. Codes of propriety and respectability, however, were increasingly contested and eventually forcefully undermined when the suffragettes became visible and vocal agents in the public contest of voices around the turn of the century.

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A Note on Annotation

Our nineteenth-century handbooks of rhetoric and elocution frequently quote from earlier, mostly eighteenth-century rhetorical treatises. One early modern treatise, Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique*, 1553, is also mentioned several times, and of course the all-important models from classical antiquity, most prominently Cicero's *De Oratore* (55 BC) and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (95 AD). In our anthology volumes, the bi-bibliographical data for these earlier rhetorical treatises are given only once, on first mention.

For our readers' orientation we enumerate here the most frequently recurring eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century treatises which function as points of reference in our excerpts. In alphabetical order: Austin, *Chironomia* (1806); Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783); Graham, *Principles of Elocution* (1837); Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762); Walker, *Elements of Elocution* (1799); Whately, *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828).

Furthermore, biographical data for frequently mentioned famous orators, writers, politicians, and scientists are given only once per volume – on first mention (this is the case, e.g., for Demosthenes, Disraeli, Emerson, Gladstone). Finally, as our two-volume anthology addresses mainly English literary and cultural scholars, we have refrained from annotating canonical authors such as – in alphabetical order – Arnold, Browning, Carlyle, Darwin, Eliot, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, Shelley, Tennyson, Thackeray, Wordsworth.

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Section 1

Women and Elocution: Reading and Reciting

(I)

*Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799-1872) was a Victorian moral reformer, author, poet, and social commentator. Married to a clergyman, many of her texts exhibit a strong Christian colouring, with an emphasis on the role of the woman as the heart and soul of the Christian family. She was particularly renowned for her many etiquette manuals and social guidebooks, of which the three-volume-series The Mothers of England (1843), The Daughters of England (1845), and The Wives of England (1846), Family Secrets, or How to Make Home Happy (1841) and The Young Ladies' Reader (1845) were the most successful ones. In most of her books she took up the theme of female duty, particularly in the context of motherhood, advocating the principle that 'good mothers make good men.'*¹

[From: Sarah Stickney Ellis. "The Art of Reading Well, as Connected with Social Improvement." *The Young Ladies' Reader*. London: Grant and Griffith, Successors to John Harris, Corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, 1845. 1-20.]

THE YOUNG LADIES' READER.

THE ART OF READING WELL, AS CONNECTED WITH SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT.

BY MRS. ELLIS.

[...] The art of reading aloud, and reading *well*, is thus entitled to our serious consideration, inasmuch as it may be made a highly influential means of imparting a zest, and an interest, to domestic associations; and of investing with the charm of perpetual freshness the conversation of the family circle, the intercourse of friendship, and the communion of "mutual minds." One of the highest offices of thought, when communicated by one individual, is to strike out thought from others. There are books which operate in this manner to such an extent as almost to create a new era in the intellectual existence of the reader; and where this is the case, how vastly superior is the enjoyment always arising [2] out of new trains, and fresh combinations of ideas, when shared with others, than when confined only to our own experience!

¹ "Lives of Illustrious Women: Mrs. Ellis." *The Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times* 288 (3 Jul 1852). 3; Linda Nead. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1988. 28.

It is true that all books are not calculated for being read aloud. With regard to some which may be profitably glanced over, it would be absolute waste of time to linger upon every page. In every family there are also individuals under the necessity of occasionally reading for their own benefit or information, what others could not share; but amongst the vast number of literary works now offered to our choice, there is no want of such as ought, in common justice, to be shared by every member of the family circle; just as an agreeable and intelligent visitor would not be closeted with one person only, nor be doomed to the penalty of spending, a few minutes with one, and then a few minutes with another; but all would gather together for the entire and simultaneous enjoyment of such conversation as the visitor might introduce.

The hurried manner in which most persons are now spending their lives, tends, perhaps more than any other cause, to destroy the interest and the advantage which might be derived from reading aloud. Mere snatches of time are all which the generality of people believe they can afford to give to a book; and thus, each volume of the vast number circulated by our libraries and book-societies, is snatched at by each separate member of a family, and supposed to be read as far as time will allow.

The more we are pressed for time, however, the more necessary it becomes that we economise the busy moments of each day. But where, I would venture to ask, is the economy of this kind of reading? Suppose a family to consist of ten members, each of whom indulges at intervals in an hour's silent and exclusive reading of any [3] given book, and it must be a small book indeed which can be thoroughly read in an hour. According to this plan, ten separate hours must be consumed in order to enable each individual to say they have read the book at all, and that without the benefit of each other's impressions or remarks, and without those lively outbursts of thought and feeling which tend so much to render all such impressions forcible and lasting, – as regards the young, too, without the great advantage of the observations of age, and experience, to correct their sentiments and opinions.

Ten uninterrupted hours of social and family reading! What a sum of intellectual enjoyment might be gathered into that space of time! But then it must be *good* reading, or the enjoyment is exchanged for unspeakable annoyance; not pompous or theatrical reading, but good, easy, familiar, and judicious reading; such reading as best conveys to the hearers the true meaning of the writer. Let any one listen to the reading aloud of his own book, where he is anxious that it should be appreciated, and he will soon discover that good reading is that which does him justice.

That there should be so very little of this kind of reading now prevalent in society is not to be wondered at, when it is so little regarded as never to be counted amongst the items of education, and when young ladies, especially, are sent home from school so learned in foreign languages, that they scarcely know how to articulate their mother tongue – so accomplished in music, that they scarcely know how to give the proper tone and emphasis to the most common and familiar expression. As a proof how inferior the art of reading correctly is considered in the present day, one of our most popular periodicals for the current year states as an argument in favour of [4] young ladies being better taught, that they are now so deficient in this peculiar art, as often to render unintelligible the sense of the words which they sing: as if the art of reading had no higher object. The case, however, bears no comparison; for in singing, though the words are not distinguished the ear may still be charmed; while in reading aloud, if the sense of what is read be lost, the

ear must necessarily be offended. And an offence indeed it is to all taste, judgment, and right feeling to read badly; – an offence which sufficiently accounts for the fact of family reading being so little practised and enjoyed in the present day.

It certainly does appear strange that those who speak every day with the tone of right reason, and the emphasis of truth, should so pervert the admirable facilities of that beautiful instrument of music, the human voice, as to read aloud with any tone and emphasis but those which are right and true. Yet so it is; and many a young lady now sent home from school after a costly and, what is called a *finished* education, is wholly incapable of reading so as not at the same time to disgrace herself, and offend her hearers. I speak of young ladies in particular, because the female voice is more pliable, the female perceptions more quick, and the female character altogether more easy of adaptation, more sympathizing, and therefore more capable of identifying itself with the thoughts and feelings of others. Women have therefore many natural advantages in acquiring the art of reading well; and it ought to be no light consideration with them, that they might in this manner often beguile the weariness of a father, a husband, or a brother, when their conversation is either deficient in interest, or otherwise lightly esteemed.

[5] It is sometimes said that nothing can be easier than to read well, if persons do but understand what they are reading. But where then are the good readers who find it so easy? or where, in other words, are the people of understanding? for certainly many of our readers would be utterly unable to understand themselves, were not the sense of what they utter conveyed to their minds through the medium of sight.

To utter words and syllables with facility is, unquestionably, of easy attainment; hence the rapidity with which some persons glide from the top to the bottom of a page, from the beginning to the end of a book, without leaving one definite impression upon the minds of their hearers. This, however, is not the greatest violation of good taste and right feeling, which our juvenile readers commit. Some there are, and these constitute a numerous class, who, either for the benefit of themselves or their friends, adopt a particular tune, which carries them through all subjects, the grave as well as the gay, the pompous as well as the playful, blending all into one unintelligible mass of words, the entire sense of which, to say nothing of their humour, pathos, or sublimity, is sacrificed to the *melody*, if such it may be called, to which the words are set.

There are other readers, who, beginning on a high key, from inattention to sense and punctuation, regularly sink lower and lower, until want of breath compels them to suspend their efforts on the utterance of a certain number of words; after which, beginning again on the same high key, they run down in the same manner at the expiration of the same length of times their efforts being scarcely less distressing to themselves than to their hearers. Besides these, there are several [6] other regular systems of bad reading faithfully adhered to on all subjects, and yet as much at variance with harmony of sound as with common sense. Especially, there is the genuine novel reader's cadence, with a hurried and monotonous commencement of every sentence, and a melancholy fall at every period, so closely and systematically applied to every portion of the book, that if the sound of the voice in this exercise was set to music, and the corresponding notes played upon some instrument, it would scarcely be possible to hear them without thinking of imprisoned maidens, wounded heroes, hopeless love, and all the different disasters that love "is heir to." So far, it may be said, this must be good reading, inasmuch as the tone of the voice is in harmony with the subject. But the fact should first be ascertained, whether the subject

originates this tone, or whether it may not be mere habit and association which awaken the remembrance of such subjects, whenever that peculiar tone is heard.

In order to obviate tendencies of this description, which appear to be almost universal, too much pains scarcely can be spent in the early instruction of children in the art of reading aloud. And here I would venture to suggest that a very serious mistake is made by many who undertake the task of general instruction, in not sufficiently distinguishing betwixt the two different attainments of articulating single words, and giving to entire passages their proper tone and emphasis, so as to render the sense they are intended to convey clearly intelligible to others. We do not treat the art of writing a correct and fluent style in the same confused and slovenly manner, by blending it with that of shaping out letters with a pen. And yet an exercise of the [7] faculties is required as entirely different in one case, as in the other. If any reader of these pages has ever known what it was to endeavour to write cleverly, and at the same time to improve her hand-writing, she may form some idea of what is imposed upon children, by requiring them to enter into the meaning of a writer before they have become familiar with the articulation of mere words.

The art of reading, as now generally treated, would seem to consist in the mere recognition and utterance of certain signs of ideas, as they appear to us in their printed form. But it should never be forgotten that unless a *right* utterance is given to these signs, they fail to represent ideas; they are mere words, and nothing more; and such, in fact, are half the books now read aloud to us, according to the usual method. A perfect mastery over mere words should then be obtained, before much can be attempted in the way of adaptation of the voice; more especially as it cannot be expected that young children should enter either fully or clearly into the meaning of any writer. Set tunes, however, should be carefully avoided, because, when the habit of reading to a tune is once adopted, it is not easily laid aside; and as the mind matures, the eye having become so familiar with all common words that they can be uttered with facility by the organs of speech, there will come a time in the experience of all young persons, when they may with propriety be introduced to that higher branch of the study of reading, which requires a totally different exercise of mind from that of uttering mere words. It is now that they may safely enter upon a sphere of understanding and of thought, of which, at an earlier period, they could have formed none but very inadequate conceptions; [8] and which, presented to them as it too frequently is, by faint and false glimpses, tends only to increase the labour and confusion in which they are necessarily involved, when attempting to carry on two distinct processes of thought at once. It is impossible to specify any particular age at which this study should commence, because the fitness for it must depend upon observation, experience, previous habits of thought, and individual capability of feeling and perception. Quick powers of sympathy have also much to do with reading well, because a correct tone and manner can only be attained by a just appreciation of the writer's meaning, entered into on the instant that his expressions have to be uttered.

As the most perfect music is that in which the air is exactly adapted to the words, so the most perfect reading is that in which the voice is so managed as to give to the sense its fullest and most entire expression. An *excess* of this manner, as practised in public recitation, is out of all keeping with family and social reading, and is consequently in bad taste; but a gentle pliancy of voice and manner, so as to follow with rapidity and ease the true meaning of the writer – dwelling, as if to give time for thought, upon passages the most abstruse, allowing just enough of melancholy cadence to passages of sorrow, and the