



“We Are Photographers,  
Not Mountebanks!”

spectacle, commercial space, and  
the new public woman

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*I*N its portrayal of new opportunities for women’s work and mobility, Amy Levy’s first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), provides a lens through which to examine the gendered culture of consumerism and spectacle in fin-de-siècle London. In this novel, the Lorimer sisters not only produce images for the marketplace by running a photography studio but also become spectacles as women in business and participants in urban life. Disavowing the status of “mountebanks” but needing the business that publicity brings, the sisters seek a precarious balance in their self-presentation. The narrator, too, must balance contemporary assumptions about the lives of working women to depict both the difficulties facing women attempting to make their own living and to argue that their respectability is the greater for their independence. The

figure of the shopgirl, known for her ambiguous class status and respectability, compromised by her associations with commercialism and spectacle, epitomized for many late Victorians the breakdown of traditional gender and class divisions and boundaries between public and private spaces. Though Levy's characters are not strictly "shopgirls" in that their economic and educational resources enable them to manage their own shop, *The Romance of a Shop* is crucially engaged with discourses about the female shop worker that were prevalent in contemporary social criticism, literature, and popular culture. Levy appropriates these discourses to negotiate the interconnected issues of gender, self-representation, and the nature of spectatorship, as well as to imagine a place for professional women in the urban landscape.

In spite of the renaissance of interest in Levy's life and work, critical attention to this novel has been decidedly limited, partly because of its supposedly conventional characterization, narrative development, and resolution. For Deborah Epstein Nord, the last part of the novel resembles a bad imitation of *Pride and Prejudice* with "all four sisters searching for the appropriate mate." Even Linda Hunt Beckman, who recognizes the novel's "parodic" relationship to Victorian realism, finds that it "neither strives for profundity nor reaches for originality." More recently, Susan David Bernstein has reappraised the novel by situating it amid contemporary debates about photography, representation, and modern independent women in London.<sup>1</sup> As Bernstein's work suggests, the novel's historical and literary contexts merit closer attention. Levy's negotiated use of representations of the shopgirl involves greater complexity and ambivalence toward middle-class women's increasing public presence in the city than scholars have acknowledged. Whereas writers as diverse as George Gissing, Cicely Hamilton, and Henry James portray the sometimes pleasant, often trying life of the shopgirl, Levy's novel is unusual in that the characters are shop proprietors, not paid assistants. Rather than commodities on display, modeling clothes for the purchasing public, Levy's "women in business" are the producers of spectacles, not the subject of them. And amid literature on working women, Levy provides a rare portrait of a woman who chooses to continue her work after marriage and children. Through her characters' position as women in business and in their excursions in London, Levy employs discourses about the shopgirl to expose the difficulty women have in escaping the spectacle of their gender even as they articulate a space for themselves in the public spaces of the city.

When the four middle-class Lorimer sisters are suddenly orphaned and thrown upon their own resources, they reject the expected recourse of becom-

ing governesses or teachers and determine to use their knowledge of photography, which had been their family hobby, to open a photographic studio. The news is received with horror by their friends and family worried about the girls' "loss of caste" and "damage to [their] prospects."<sup>2</sup> The novel follows the sisters as they find the appropriate place in London for their enterprise, attempt to make the studio "pay," and use their independence to explore relationships of business and pleasure.

The decision, which is made by the independently minded middle sisters, Gertrude and Lucy, to enter the marketplace appalls the conventional eldest sister, Fanny. Her exclamation "[N]eed it come to that—to open a shop?" encompasses all the ways in which such a "fall" to commerce involved a loss of status, marital eligibility, and respectability. While Lucy "hastily" responds, "Fanny, you are behind the age," and Gertrude defends the decision in terms of its practicality and progressiveness (the sisters would be able to stay together, and it is an enterprise "capable of growth," a quality "in which women's work is dreadfully lacking"), the novel continually threatens to validate Fanny's response (54–55). Though Levy frequently portrays Fanny as an out-of-date relic of simpering Victorian femininity—"a superannuated baby"—she also reveals Fanny's opposition to women's public involvement in a commercial enterprise to be not behind the age, but very much of the age (52).

In the last decades of the century, women were entering many occupations that involved their presence in public spaces, including as postal clerks, office workers, and telegraphers, but their full-scale entry into retail establishments elicited the most popular attention. Partly, this was due to the large numbers of women who were employed there. Contemporary estimates numbered female shop assistants in England between half a million and one million and found shop employment the most numerically significant source of new employment for women.<sup>3</sup> Although the term encompassed a wide range of positions in a wide variety of businesses, *shopgirls* referred most specifically to female workers in department stores who were responsible for restocking goods, helping customers with their purchases, and receiving payments over the counter. As a new phenomenon resulting from changes in production and the distributive trades, the department store prompted strong feelings. It was both criticized and celebrated for its mingling of every sort of product from all over the world and for its targeting of the female consumer, including through the provision of refreshments and toilet facilities that made the city a more hospitable place for women.<sup>4</sup> Department stores were marketed as a bridge between public and private spheres, and female shop assistants were among the

most visible of the new social actors that historian Judith Walkowitz identifies. These were women whose presence “challenged the spatial boundaries—of East and West, of public and private—that Victorian writers on the metropolis had imaginatively constructed to fix gender and class difference in the city.”<sup>5</sup>

The shop itself is a threshold space that inherently blurs the boundary between public and private by offering for sale in the marketplace products that enter private homes. This ambiguity became of heightened concern in the late nineteenth century, when prevalent conceptions of gender and class distinctions were challenged on many fronts. As though to mitigate or refute the public nature of the shop, promoters of department stores called them not shops but “houses.” The shopgirl, too, was an ambiguous figure, particularly when she displayed on her person the clothes for sale. She was a model for the middle-class lady at the same time that she was herself an object for public consumption. The problems and contradictions that shopgirls were seen to embody were expressive of widespread anxiety about the dissolution of traditional social distinctions and boundaries between domestic and commercial space. As commentators struggled to make the shopgirl legible, her apparent coherence as a category, which often obscured dramatic differences in relative economic prosperity and work conditions, helped her to function metonymically for women’s changing relationship to the public sphere.

The shopgirl was also one of the most visible examples of the fin-de-siècle’s *new public woman*—a term I use to evoke the New Woman’s claim to independent thought and action and to mark a different emphasis in a woman’s relationship to public spaces, one that regards her public presence as a key constituent of her identity. Encompassing a broad range of female “types,” including Odd Women, “professional women,” and shopgirls, as well as New Women, the category of “new public women” highlights anxieties about the increasing visibility of women in the turn-of-the-century city that these types all elicited and expressed, though in diverse ways.<sup>6</sup> As Sally Ledger has convincingly argued in her essay on Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, the shopgirl rather than the New Woman was the more problematic figure of modern urban life.<sup>7</sup> The shopgirl’s knowledge of public transportation and self-confident navigations of the city seemed to claim ownership of the city and social, sexual, and economic independence. The figure of the shopgirl was used by contemporary observers of the modern metropolis to explore relationships between physical mobility and mental freedom, women and work, gender and the city. While Levy distinguishes the Lorimer sisters’ position in several important respects from that of the proto-

typical shopgirl, she draws upon the concerns and prejudices surrounding them to explore the circumstances and opportunities for new public women.

Fiction and nonfiction of the period depict the conditions under which the shopgirl labored and the problematic character of her profession, attempting to make sense of her ambiguous class and social status. Some writers countered cultural attitudes that tended to reduce “the shopgirl” to a uniform archetype by exposing the heterogeneity of the class and social origins of these working “girls.” One observer finds that “every kind of girl, drawn from every class and strata of society, is found behind the counters of the modern emporium . . . —the daughters of artisans, of agricultural labourers, of skilled mechanics, of struggling and of prosperous shopkeepers, of clerks and of professional men.”<sup>8</sup> For some, including George Gissing, this close proximity of the daughters of laborers with the daughters of professional men could be dangerous to the latter’s respectability.<sup>9</sup> Others evoked their diverse social backgrounds to call for better treatment by the public, as well as by employers. A former shopgirl enjoins shopping ladies to treat girls behind the counter with more kindness, writing in 1888, “Many young ladies at home have little or no sympathy with the ‘common shop-girls,’ as they often term them. . . . In many cases they are girls suited to a higher sphere, but, through force of circumstances, have been obliged to go early into the world.”<sup>10</sup> Levy evokes this descent from the expected social sphere and plays with the social confusion elicited by her characters’ new position. Phyllis, for instance, recalls in *The Romance of a Shop* how one former friend “dodged round the corner at Baker Street the other day because he didn’t care to be seen bowing to two shabby young women with heavy parcels” and how another former acquaintance ignored Lucy on the train because she was traveling third class and wearing an old gown (125–26). As the passage makes clear, the sisters’ lack of new clothes, signifiers of a certain class position, also removes them from their former social circle by limiting their attendance at social functions.

While commentators on the shopgirl’s trials were motivated by diverse ideological views and goals—including labor rights, equitable treatment of women, and social morality—they largely agreed that the conditions of shop labor were physically and morally dangerous. The chief concerns were the lengthy workday, low wages, an exorbitant system of fines, the payment for work in truck (goods), and the living-in system.<sup>11</sup> The system of living-in, which required employees to live in housing provided by their employer, was frequently criticized for the liberty allowed young female employees, including

the provision of latchkeys enabling them to let themselves in late at night, and for encouraging illicit relations among shop assistants by making marriage nearly impossible.<sup>12</sup> According to social observers, the moral dangers resulting from the absence of parental surveillance and the freedom to wander the streets alone were compounded by the low salaries shopgirls received, for if they were to enjoy commercial entertainment, most shopgirls had to depend on being “treated” by male acquaintances, with the consequences that that might entail.<sup>13</sup>

Levy certainly knew of the popular concern about the circumstances of female shop assistants. Her close friend Clementina Black—who, along with Black’s sisters, likely provided a model for the Lorimer sisters’ independent London lives—wrote publicly about the hardships of service workers, including shopgirls. Appearing just two years after the publication of *The Romance of a Shop*, Black’s 1890 article “The Grievances of Barmaids” compares the hardships of barmaids to those of shopgirls.<sup>14</sup> Black would describe the lives of shopgirls in greater detail in a chapter of her book *Sweated Industry and the Minimum Wage*.<sup>15</sup> Levy’s placement of the Lorimers’ shop at 20B Upper Baker Street may also be significant in that it is just a few houses up from 12 York Place, Baker Street, the location of Lincoln House, which in 1886 was one of seven homes for working-class working women.<sup>16</sup> As her novel quickly makes clear, Levy is concerned with how the respectability of any woman working with the public is called into question.

Levy removes much of the morally dangerous elements of the shopgirl’s work conditions when she has the sisters live together above their own business, rather than as boarders with other girls of diverse backgrounds. But her treatment of the sisters’ new position, and its incompatibility with traditional societal views of feminine respectability, is indebted to contemporary debates about female shop assistants. Although the sisters are not subject to the system of living-in, they do live on their own and make their own decisions. And, perhaps more dangerously, they have entered the public realm of commercial exchange. Fanny’s objections to opening a shop thus are not only about the fall in social position but also are indicative of a constellation of class and gender codes. At the very least, to enter the marketplace as young, unmarried women made for an ambiguous social position with consequences for their perceived respectability.

Concern about the shopgirl’s moral status was largely due to the sexual availability her employment implied. Her involvement in commerce was itself

a problem: as Walkowitz puts it, “if she sold things, did she not sell herself?” For women who sold the clothes they modeled, their own bodies were in a sense involved in the commercial exchange. Like the prostitute in being subject to the desires of the marketplace, the successful shopgirl marketed herself as well as her wares in a threatened merging of economic and sexual exchange. As Walkowitz argues, “the shopgirl . . . and other service workers occupied the ‘middle’ ground of sexuality,” as neither “ladies” nor “prostitutes.”<sup>17</sup> Female service workers appeared as managers of a “carefully channeled rather than fully discharged,” “open yet licit sexuality” that Peter Bailey terms “parasexuality.”<sup>18</sup>

One of the few contemporary fictional representations of a woman owning her own shop indicates that self-employment was no preserver of respectability. Mabel E. Wotton’s story “The Hour of Her Life” (1896) portrays the dubious morality conferred by a woman’s involvement in the public arena of commerce. The events of the story take place entirely within a flower shop in London’s club land; its proprietress (and the story’s protagonist), Annette Browning, sells men’s buttonholes, “whose perfection and cost put a certain *cachet* upon the customers.” The shop’s exclusively male customers, Annette’s two maids, and the “inner sanctum” to which a “favoured few were occasionally admitted” all undermine demarcations between sexual and economic exchange and even suggest a brothel, though we are told that the only object was “flirtation.”<sup>19</sup> Born in France and the daughter of an English officer and an orange seller in Drury Lane, Annette straddles multiple identities. Cast off by her father’s family and wanting nothing to do with her mother’s, Annette says of her class origins, “I am a sort of Mahomet’s coffin . . . and hang between the two worlds without belonging to either.”<sup>20</sup> Though Annette models her social engagements on what the society papers suggest is acceptable (“[L]adies—real ladies—went out in the evening with men who were not their husbands” [104]), the one man she cares for cannot see her as an appropriate match for a man of his class: “A woman in her position, who had been fêted by a vast number of the fastest men in town; whose beauty had enabled her to sell flowers at fancy prices, and whose life generally since the opening of the shop had proved she was answerable to no one for her actions, was assuredly not the sort of woman to become the future Lady Sydthorpe” (106). That his comments are made without a will to hurt adds piquancy to her situation. She is, as he tells her, “too young and too beautiful to be here by [her]self” (105). In depicting the challenge to social propriety and notions of feminine respectability

represented by an independent woman in business who is responsible to none but herself, Wotton also shows such a woman's consequential marginalization. Annette's position in-between two classes, her borderline respectability, is represented by her shop, itself like Mahomet's coffin, hovering between its identity as an exclusive business in club land and its association with transgressive heterosocial environs. Annette's placelessness is graphically represented at the story's end with the narrator's depiction of the shop closed and with a placard affixed to its shutters reading "gone away." Annette presumably disappears from London as she does from the story, as though her incoherent social position makes her presence untenable.

Levy's portrayal of women in business is remarkable in that the Lorimer sisters' precarious balance between domesticity and professionalism maintains their respectability and insists on the respectability of their profession, even while it defines them as pushing the boundaries of what is appropriately "feminine." This balance between domesticity and professionalism is represented both by the spatial composition of their shop and lodgings on Baker Street and by the sisters' manipulation of that space. The promise and excitement of the Lorimer sisters' new independent life in London is immediately figured geographically with an opposition between the "large, dun-coloured house" on Campden Hill, west of central London, and the rooms they find on Baker Street. Whereas the first is "enclosed by a walled-in garden" and seems quiet enough to be in the country, the latter are above a chemist's shop on Upper Baker Street, a busy thoroughfare (51). The narrator takes the reader, along with the sisters, on a tour of the house, describing the layout at length: the sisters will live in the top two stories; a dressmaker has her business on the next floor down; a chemist and his wife, the owners of the building, have their shop and home on the ground and basement floors, respectively.<sup>21</sup> The reader is also provided with descriptions of the renovations the sisters undertake as they make their bedrooms on the second of the two floors, at the top of the house, and their sitting room and kitchen on the floor below. This preoccupation with the spatial components of their new home—the rooms that "bounded the little domain" (77)—serves to highlight their essential domesticity with their eagerness to make their rented rooms homelike. At the same time, it emphasizes their embrace of a new active role in the home, for such labor was performed by servants in the home on Campden Hill.

The emphasis on the ways in which the sisters domesticate their rented rooms is extended to the photographic studio and its adjoining waiting room. Situated at the back of the house, the studio is reached from the street by going

up a short flight of stairs and down a “little, sloping passage.” The distance from the street seems to make their business more private and less in the public domain. However, the sisters recognize the truth of their friend’s advice that “[y]ou will have to make this place as pretty as possible,” as “you will be nothing if not aesthetic” (76). As testified by the increasingly elaborate displays in department stores, to beautify the market space had come to be seen as a commercial necessity. Their friend’s use of the personal pronoun “you” to refer to the business (“you will be nothing if not aesthetic”) is indicative of how the sisters’ identities are tied up with that of their shop—and how both shop and sisters must please the public eye. Accordingly, the sisters decorate their shop with “various aesthetic devices,” such as lanterns and reproductions of celebrated paintings, “artfully” mingled with examples of their own work (78). Narrated hand-in-hand with their domestic arrangements, the sisters’ decorating of the studio is positioned in between a feminine role of beautifying the home and a market-driven need to appeal to the consumer.

The part-public, part-private Baker Street building is a liminal space, open to passing strangers yet a domestic haven. While the sisters’ private rooms are spatially separate from the studio and its waiting room, they are revealed to be vulnerable to intrusion. Levy emphasizes the sisters’ vulnerability when, one evening, they are alarmed at a commotion from the floor below their living rooms, where the dressmaker has her business. They (and we) learn later that she has attempted to kill herself and was only stopped by the landlord’s vigorous opposition. Because the dressmaker scarcely appears in the text aside from this scene (and even here she is heard about, not seen by the sisters), she seems to serve solely as a cautionary figure, or so Gertrude interprets her. After the woman’s attempted suicide, Gertrude lay awake, feeling that there was “[o]nly a plank—a plank between them [her and her sisters] and the pitiless, fathomless ocean . . . into whose boiling depths hundreds sank daily and disappeared, never to rise again.” True to Gertrude’s musings, the dressmaker does disappear—“A day or two later” she “vanished for ever”—and her fate emphasizes the precariousness of the sisters’ lives (95). The dressmaker’s placement on the floor between the photography studio and the girls’ living space suggests that danger lies in the space between their professional work and their domestic lives. They inhabit a porous space in which the “boiling depths” might rise from the streets below.

The sisters’ association with, but difference from, discursive constructions of the shopgirl places them on the threshold between vulnerable and protected, an ambivalence that Levy explores through the multiple possibilities of the

windows in their living quarters that reveal as much as they shield. As Victor Burgin has said in reference to Walter Benjamin, the porosity of the window, which allows actions of the street to be seen from inside, and vice versa, competes with a dialectic of interior and exterior.<sup>22</sup> Levy gives Phyllis, the youngest sister, a delicate and beautiful girl, “a frequent custom” of amusing herself “by looking into the street”—a practice to which Lucy objects, saying that “any one can see right into the room” (105). Because in the course of the novel Phyllis will succumb to temptation and “fall” from respectability, one might infer that her love of watching from the window, no matter who watches her in turn, signals a susceptibility to transgression. This kind of viewing might also be contrasted with the sisters’ work with the camera lens, a professional, respectable window. Yet Gertrude, a character read by most critics as the sister with whom Levy most closely identifies, “had herself a secret, childish love for the gas-lit street, for the sight of the hurrying people, the lamps, the hansom cabs, flickering in and out of the yellow haze,” a love that is later represented as a source of creative inspiration for Gertrude (105). Levy thus indicates the importance of urban spectatorship to her aesthetic aims and evokes the problems this poses for the female artist. If taking up the role of spectator endangers a woman’s respectability because she is *a priori* a spectacle, then how is the woman artist to represent modern life? Taking this tension as its subject, Levy’s poem “A London Plane-Tree” features a speaker who looks at the plane-tree in the square through a window—“Here from my garret-pane” (5)—imagining that the tree loves the town of which it, unlike the speaker, is a part.<sup>23</sup> As Ana Parejo Vadillo observes in her wonderfully nuanced reading of the poem, the speaker behind the windowpane is both prisoner and spectator, confined outside urban life and posited as an observer of that life.<sup>24</sup>

The trope of a woman watching urban life from behind a windowpane recurs in Levy’s oeuvre, providing her with a fecund image through which to illustrate and protest limits to women’s participation in urban life, limits that are particularly restrictive for women of the lower middle class. With middle-class definitions of respectability that prevented interactions with strangers but without the financial resources that enabled middle- and upper-middle-class women to travel about the city shopping and visiting, lower-middle-class women had few social opportunities, particularly for meeting men of their age. Levy uses the trope of viewing urban life through a window in her short story “Eldorado at Islington,” published in a magazine edited by Oscar Wilde, to probe the difference that class makes for women’s social opportunities.<sup>25</sup> In the lower-middle-class London borough of Islington,

Eleanor Lloyd, from her window in the roof, could see not only the wall and the plane-trees, but, by dint of craning her neck, the High Street itself, with its ceaseless stream of trams and omnibuses. There was a public-house at the corner, and, as the door swung backwards and forwards, Eleanor caught glimpses of the lively barmaid behind her tall white tap-handles. A group of flower-girls . . . stood outside on the pavement, jesting with the 'busmen and passers-by. Eleanor, who was a "lady," (Heaven help her!) used sometimes to envy the barmaid and the flower-girls their social opportunity. (488)

Eleanor recognizes that female service workers—who, as a matter of course, interact with diverse people—enjoy some advantages over a woman of her station, who must carefully maintain her middle-class respectability; barmaids and flower girls, like shopgirls (who were otherwise a rung higher on the social ladder), had many more opportunities for a range of social interactions, much to the disapproval of social moralists. Positioning Eleanor as a prisoner of social expectations and a limited urban spectator who must “cran[e] her neck” to see the activity of High Street, Levy evokes sympathy for the lower-middle-class woman who is herself a kind of “Mahomet’s coffin,” without the liberty of either the working classes or the better off. As Phyllis neatly observes in *The Romance of a Shop*, “It is a little dull, ain’t it, Gerty, to look at life from a top-floor window?” (106). Levy illustrates how a natural desire to enjoy greater participation in urban life is incompatible with restrictions on what respectable women with limited financial resources might do without damage to their reputations. Through the Lorimer sisters’ attempt to negotiate these opposing needs, *The Romance of a Shop* reformulates definitions of female respectability to posit a new relationship between women and public urban spaces.

Levy challenges limits imposed on respectable women’s urban travel by evoking stigmas against public transport and quickly dismissing them as both pretentious and outdated. In one memorable scene, Gertrude returns home from the British Museum, “careering up the street on the summit of a tall, green omnibus, her hair blowing gaily in the breeze.” The sisters’ friend and neighbor, “Frank, passing by in painting-coat and sombrero, plucked the latter from his head and waved it in exaggerated salute, an action which evoked a responsive smile from Gertrude but scandalized Aunt Caroline Pratt who was dashing past in an open carriage” (99). Although Aunt Pratt’s reaction to the vision of her niece smiling at a man on the street from atop an omnibus is sharply critical and overbearing, it is not necessarily extreme. The open top of the omnibus was traditionally the province of men; women were expected to sit in the first

level's interior. Gertrude's choice to mount "boldly to the top" of an omnibus marks her incisive claim to public urban space and to the free vistas that such a perch allowed (80).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, with a spectrum of classes represented by the women using public transportation, fine distinctions in deportment were important markers. Mrs. Humphry's *Manners for Women*, an etiquette guide for young women, describes the difference between "well-bred" and "underbred" women through their occupations of public space:

There is a quiet self-possession about the gentlewoman, whether young or old, that marks her out from the women of a lower class, whose manner is florid. This is perhaps the best word to describe the lively gestures, the notice-attracting glance and the self-conscious air of the underbred, who continually appear to wish to impress their personality upon all they meet. . . . The well-bred woman goes quietly along, intent on her own business and regardless of the rest of the world, except in so far as to keep from intruding upon their personal rights. . . . A delicate sense of self-respect keeps her from contact with her neighbour in train or tramcar or omnibus. . . . The woman of the lower classes may spread her arms, lean up against her neighbor, or in other ways behave with a disagreeable familiarity; the gentlewoman never.<sup>27</sup>

A women's social status could thus be read by her degree of engagement with strangers and by the amount of public space she claimed; the gentlewoman would remain detached and self-contained, while the woman of the lower classes would invade the consciousness and space of her neighbors—taking more than her share. While *Manners for Women* argues that a woman's class is rendered legible by her behavior, as an etiquette guide it inadvertently but inevitably suggests how class itself is a performance. Levy indicates the difficulty of this performance; not only is a respectable female body defined negatively by what it does not *do* (as Mrs. Humphry writes, it does not move so as to draw attention to itself), it also does not elicit actions from others. Should a lady be so unfortunate as to be recognized and saluted by a passer-by, Aunt Pratt implies, she should have the decency not to notice, to remain impervious to the gaze and gestures of others.

In raising this issue, however, Levy undercuts its importance. One of Gertrude's keenest pleasures is to go about London. Choosing to ride an omnibus rather than travel via the Underground, Gertrude "argues to herself": "Because one cannot afford a carriage or even a hansom cab . . . is one to be shut up away from the sunlight and the streets?" (80). Levy celebrates this form

of transportation in her “Ballade of an Omnibus,” published the following year in *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. Gertrude’s perspective on this point is also endorsed by the novel’s plot and in the narrator’s sympathy with Gertrude’s identity as *flâneuse*: “[F]or Gertrude, the humours of the town had always possessed a curious fascination. She contemplated the familiar London pageant with an interest that had something of passion in it; and, for her part, was never inclined to quarrel with the fate which had transported her from the comparative tameness of Campden Hill to regions where the pulses of the great city could be felt distinctly as they beat and throbbed” (80). While contemporary commentators warned women about the dangers of urban travel, Levy evokes the specter of danger to firmly dismiss it.<sup>28</sup>

Levy also minimizes the scandal of Gertrude’s being seen as at home on the streets by using the university-educated “Girton girl” as a foil who demonstrates by contrast the gentility of the sisters. She is given a peripheral place in the text, described only as an “ex-Girtonian without a waist, who taught at the High School for girls hard-by” and strode with “her arms swinging like a bell-ropes” (160–61). The narrator cursorily sums her up in terms of her university education (her waistless gown suggests that she carries her academic background with her), her current vocation, and her unfeminine public presence. More unflattering observations are made through the sisters’ consciousness: when the Girton girl moves into the lodgings vacated by Frank, they “chose to regard her as a usurper; and with the justice usually attributed to their sex, indulged in much sarcastic comment on her appearance; on her round shoulders and swinging gait; on the green gown with balloon sleeves, and the sulphur-coloured handkerchief which she habitually wore” (161). Because we never learn anything more about this graduate of Girton, it would seem that all we need to know is that academia is far more dangerous to a woman’s grace than is dignified labor—a point that is likely tongue-in-cheek, because Levy herself was a student at Newnham, Cambridge’s other college for women. As with Levy’s detailed description of the sisters’ work to decorate and make homelike their rented lodging rooms, the use of the Girton graduate as a foil insists on their preservation of a feminine domesticity in spite of their labor in the marketplace.

Contrary to widespread fears about the threats of independent urban life to young women, real danger to the Lorimer sisters does not come from traveling on public transport or from enjoying “the humours of the town.” Rather, Levy has Phyllis, the youngest sister and the only victim of their enterprise, die

the quintessential Victorian female death from consumption. Her moral fall, which precipitates her death, occurs with her seduction by a wealthy and married painter for whom she models.<sup>29</sup> In spite of—or to spite—representations of urban dangers, Levy has Phyllis's fall come through socially elevated circles, not through the city streets. That Phyllis's acquaintance with the painter begins through his patronage of the photography studio suggests the dangers to women in the public eye; her fall is symbolically represented in visual terms by her removal from the sisters' studio, where she helps to produce images, to the painter's studio, where she is an object for the artist's gaze. But Levy is ambiguous about the degree to which the sisters' relationship to commodity production and consumerism is to blame. Phyllis's susceptibilities—her boredom with a quiet life and her love of male attention—are as important as her circumstances to the story of her fall.<sup>30</sup> The other three sisters are happily, and virtuously, married at the novel's end.

Scholars have criticized the tidiness of the novel's closure, in which the beautiful fallen sister is "killed off" and the other three are "married off."<sup>31</sup> But such assessments do not simply neglect audience expectations for a resolution consistent with the generic mode suggested by the "Romance" of the novel's title; they have also failed to recognize Levy's playful use of a familiar narrative. I would suggest that the novel's closure, particularly in Gertrude's marriage to a lord, contains ironic reference to the mythology surrounding the shopgirl and the fantasy of an elevating marriage. It was widely accepted that most shopgirls were eager to escape the hardships of the trade through marriage, and shop work was typically imagined as a temporary stopgap between childhood and wifehood. Indeed, literature (both fiction and nonfiction) of the day suggests that the likelihood of marriage is what stimulates much of the discomfort with the shopgirl's ambiguous class origins and social status, the hardships of her employment, and their implications for her morality. After all, could a woman so associated with the marketplace and public by-ways really make a good wife and mother?<sup>32</sup> This question was all the more pressing given shopgirls' perceived aspiration for social advancement. Members of the working class termed them "counter-jumpers," aspirers to middle-class respectability, and periodical literature frequently makes reference to shopgirls' perceived ambition to marry above their station. Even while one writer argues that many shopgirls are, by birth, "suited to a higher sphere," she also claims, "Many of these shop-girls have attended private classes for self-improvement so that

they may acquit themselves properly should fortune favour them with a step higher in life.”<sup>33</sup>

Mass entertainment suggested that this ambition to marry “up” was often fulfilled. The freedom and independence of the shopgirl made her a popular subject for late-Victorian musicals, which propagated a mythology that a working girl could better her position in life by taking work in a department store, where she could meet a better class of men and, presumably, accept a proposal of marriage from a man who would then be able to “free her” from her shop labor. Erika Diane Rappaport discusses the genre of shopgirl musicals, enormously popular in the 1890s and 1910s, in which “the shop girl never remains a worker. . . . At some point in the play she usually changes places with an upper-class shopper” through marriage or unexpected inheritance.<sup>34</sup> In Cicely Hamilton’s comic play *Diana of Dobson’s*, for example, the shopgirl Diana, who “wasn’t brought up to earn her own living,” unexpectedly inherits three hundred pounds, travels to the Alps disguised as a rich widow because “[y]ou’re ever so much freer when you’re married,” receives several proposals from gentlemen, and after several twists and turns of the plot, engages to marry one of them.<sup>35</sup> These stories of marital success were, of course, in tension with the supposed moral dangers of the shopgirl’s work conditions, and some contemporary periodical articles are forthright in rejecting this fantasy of social ascension, presenting the fantasy itself as another danger of the trade. An essay of 1890 recounts the downfall of a shopgirl who is deceived by dishonorable attention from a gentleman’s son, attributing her susceptibility to how “romance of this very kind was the typical legend of the order to which she belonged, the one wild hope shot across its grey reality: though . . . to what dismal swamps it may lead.”<sup>36</sup> Levy includes both the romance of social ascension with Gertrude’s marriage and the threat of a tragic fall with Phyllis’s fate.

If the novel’s closure contains ironic reference to popular formulations of shopgirls’ marital ambitions, it is also more affirmative of women’s public involvement in artistic and professional circles than is usually recognized. Rather than halting all nondomestic work with marriage, and especially with children, Levy imagines an alternative. After Lucy’s marriage, we are told, she “is going to carry on the [photography] business” in a new location where there will be “studios for both” her and her artist husband (187). And in the novel’s epilogue, we learn that though she has two children, “photography . . . has not been crowded out by domestic duties.” In fact, she has “succumbed to the modern

practice of specializing, and only the other day carried off a medal for photographs of young children from an industrial exhibition" (193). Though the modernity of Lucy's specialization is perhaps tempered by its maternal component, her technical and artistic abilities are confirmed by her success in competition with others in the industry, as well as by her equal stature with her husband.

The novel's epilogue also suggests that 20B Upper Baker Street continues to be a space of opportunity for women when the narrator reveals that "[t]he Photographic Studio is let to an enterprising young photographer, who has enlarged and beautified it beyond recognition." The gender of this young photographer is left ambiguous, but the studio's beautification implies a feminine occupant. This suggestion of continuity is both troubled by and amplified with the nostalgic last sentence: "As for the rooms . . . : the sitting-room facing the street; the three-cornered kitchen behind; the three little bed-rooms beyond;—when last I passed the house they were to let unfurnished, with great fly-blown bills in the blank casements" (194). The narrator's intrusion in the first person is rare in the novel, and its deliberate insertion here does more than enhance its reality effect, the belief that this is a true story of which the narrator has first-hand knowledge. In this concluding sentence, the reader is invited to participate in a nostalgic practice of looking back and also to continue the story. With a thriving studio below, the rooms' blank casements invite new tenants, suggesting that there is space available in London for enterprising young women.

Throughout the novel, Levy insists on the respectability of women's commercial pursuits. Unlike contemporary representations of the lives of shopgirls, in Levy's work the young women are given skills and financial resources that they can turn to professional use so that they are able to own their business and to live together in lodgings of their own. It is especially remarkable that Levy chose to make her characters practitioners of a skilled profession. While women did own their own businesses in 1880s London, including their own photography studios,<sup>37</sup> the few literary representations that allow the shopgirl to graduate to shop owner generally conclude the story with that transformation. And as with Wotton's "Hour of Her Life" and Shaw's *Pygmalion*, female shop owners are generally restricted to the more feminine commodity of flowers, which would also seem to require little professional training. In contrast, the Lorimer sisters increase their technical knowledge of photography through the study of books in the British Museum Reading Room and apprenticeship

at an established studio. As we have seen, the sisters further demonstrate their status as artists as well as businesswomen by mingling the products of their work with the work of well-known painters in the halls of their business.

Levy has her protagonists insist on and earn respect, as women, artists, and professional workers. Gertrude, for example, refuses interviews with columnists interested in lady photographers because she wants herself and her sisters to be respected as photographers, not patronized as “mountebanks.” Such a label, with its suggestions of public performance, self-degradation, and charlatanism, would be an affront to the sisters’ careful shaping of their public image, as female professionals who have maintained a feminine domesticity and as producers of images, not spectacles themselves. But Levy also reveals how insistence on respect can be difficult in the face of social prejudices and the realities of the marketplace, so that the sisters can only be grateful for the extra business when “some unauthorised person wrote a little account of the Lorimers’ studio in one of the society papers, of which, if the taste was questionable, the results were not to be questioned at all.” The sisters’ business thrives as “[p]eople who had theories about woman’s work; people whose friends had theories; people who were curious and fond of novelty; individuals from each of these sections began to find their way to Upper Baker Street.” Depicting the spectacle of women in business with a touch of mockery, Levy ironically adds that “it had got about in certain sets that all the sisters were extremely beautiful, and that Sidney Darrell was painting them in a group for next year’s Academy, a *canard* certainly not to be deprecated from a business point of view” (135). Beneath the narrator’s lighthearted tone, Levy depicts the serious tension between the sisters’ self-representation as professional and respectable wielders of the camera lens and popular perceptions of them that would transform them into spectacles, to be seen either in person or in an artist’s rendering.

In *The Romance of a Shop*, Levy draws on familiar discourses surrounding the figure of the shopgirl to assert that femininity, respectability, and business acumen can coexist and even facilitate each other. Making both a home and a business for themselves in the urban marketplace, the Lorimer sisters challenge popular and literary expectations for shopgirls and New Women. By manipulating the gaze of spectators and turning the lens outward, Levy’s new public women negotiate their own representation to forge both independent and respectable London lives.

## Notes

I would like to express my appreciation to the American Association of University Women, whose provision of a dissertation fellowship supported the research foundational to this chapter.

1. Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 202; Linda Hunt Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 158; Susan David Bernstein, introduction to *The Romance of a Shop*, by Amy Levy (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), 11–41.

2. Amy Levy, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), ed. Susan David Bernstein (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), 72. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

3. Amy Bulley and Margaret Whitley judged that in England “the total number of both sexes in the retail trade is about one million, and about four-fifths of the assistants in the drapery trade are women. In other trades [such as the grocery trade] the proportion is not quite so high.” Bulley and Whitley, *Women’s Work* (London: Methuen, 1894), 49. M. Mostyn Bird estimated that “two million persons serve over the shop-counters of the UK, of which far more than half are women.” Bird, *Woman at Work: A Study of the Different Ways of Earning a Living Open to Women* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1911), 62. Historian Lee Holcombe puts the number of female shop assistants in England in 1914 at nearly half a million (about half the total number of shop assistants) and “by far the largest group of middle-class women workers in the country.” Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales, 1850–1914* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973), 103.

4. For a fascinating discussion of depictions of middle-class women shoppers and department stores’ tactics of self-promotion, see Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

5. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), 68.

6. While these metropolitan female types were related and had overlapping characteristics, they also differed in important ways. For example, unlike the discursive construction of the New Woman, new public women did not always proceed with what we might call a feminist agenda; they may even have been opposed to female suffrage. However, representations of women who took up new professional roles often invested them with the belief that they were entitled to keep the money they earned, thus indirectly endorsing changes in gender roles. And unlike prevalent constructions of the New Woman as educated and with a relatively privileged background, new public women could come from any class, though they often emerged from the upper-working, lower-middle, and middle classes. Their new occupation of public urban sites might have been motivated by necessity rather than, or as well as, by choice. Their public presence and the multiple

ways in which it might be experienced, both by themselves and by others, was the new public women's defining characteristic.

7. Sally Ledger, "Gissing, the Shopgirl and the New Woman," *Women: A Cultural Review* 6 (1995): 263–74.

8. Bird, *Woman at Work*, 65.

9. In *The Odd Women*, for example, the middle-class Monica Madden must share lodgings with other shop assistants. The libertine ways of some of the shopgirls, along with other pernicious influences of shop life, lead to Monica's deviation from the behavioral strictures she was raised with, as when she takes up with a man she meets in a park. For more on Gissing's ambivalent portrayal of the figure of the shopgirl, see my essay "'Counter-Jumpers' and 'Queens of the Street': The Shop Girl of Gissing and His Contemporaries," in *Gissing and the City: Cultural Crisis and the Making of Books in Late-Victorian England*, ed. John Spiers (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 109–17.

10. Anonymous, "Sympathy with Shop-Girls [By One of Them]," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* 65 (1888): 351–52, quotation on 351.

11. Inordinate time standing, insufficient time for inadequate meals, and unsanitary and crowded living environs were also concerns.

12. Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work*, 117.

13. For more on the lives and work of female shop assistants in this period, see Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work* and Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880–1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006). Sanders also analyzes contemporary constructions of "the shopgirl," focusing especially on her importance as both subject and audience of a range of popular forms of entertainment. Sanders's study is impressive overall but inconsistent in its claims for the shopgirl, finding her at times a unique discursive construction and at other times a figure representative of all working women in public urban space, an inconsistency that itself illustrates the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory identity of "the shopgirl."

14. Clementina Black, "The Grievances of Barmaids," *Woman's World* 3 (May 1890): 383–85.

15. Clementina Black, *Sweated Industry and the Minimum Wage* (London: Duckworth, 1907). Black also worked politically for employment reform at the Women's Trade Union Provident League. Bernstein notes that a brief review of Levy's last novel, *Miss Meredith*, "relates that profits from Levy's posthumous publications were to be applied to the 'philanthropic work of Miss Clementina Black'" (26).

16. For a discussion and an accompanying map of important locations for women in the West End in the last half of the nineteenth century, see Lynne Walker, "Vistas of Pleasure: Women Consumers of Urban Space, 1850–1900," in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 70–85. The address of the sisters' shop and home also recalls 221B Baker Street, the residence of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, first named in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).

17. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 46.

18. Peter Bailey, "Parasexuality and Glamour: The Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype," *Gender and History* 2 (1990): 148–72 (quotations on 148 and 167).

19. Mabel E. Wotton, "The Hour of Her Life," in *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), 101. Subsequent references to this story appear parenthetically in the text.

20. *Ibid.*, 106. Wotton seems to take for granted her reader's familiarity with "Mahomet's coffin" as an expression for the sensation of being pulled equally in two directions, so that one is suspended in midair without support. In Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), the beginning of part 2, chapter 4 (titled "The Inconveniences of Following a Pretty Woman Through the Streets at Night") finds Gringoire "fond of comparing himself to the tomb of Mahomet, attracted in opposite directions by two lodestones, and eternally hesitating between the high and the low, between the vault and the pavement, between fall and ascent, between zenith and nadir" (168). This passage as a whole suggests the imaginative possibilities of *flânerie* and, especially with the drama that follows, women's vulnerability in public urban space: "Gringoire, a practical philosopher of the streets of Paris, had noticed that nothing is more propitious to reverie than following a pretty woman without knowing where she is going. There was in this voluntary abdication of his freewill, in this fancy submitting itself to another fancy, which suspects it not, a mixture of fantastic independence and blind obedience, something indescribable, intermediate between slavery and liberty, which pleased Gringoire" (167–68) (my translation from Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* [Paris: Eugène Renduel, 1836]).

21. Levy's choice to describe 20B Upper Baker Street through a "tour" rather than a "map" (to use Michel de Certeau's terminology) includes the reader in the sisters' discovery. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 121.

22. This is an ambivalence that Burgin notes "marks the representational space of modernism in general." Victor Burgin, "The City in Pieces," *New Formations* 20 (1993): 37. Levy's use of the window provides further evidence for the view that literary modernism has its precursors in the late nineteenth century with New Women writers, as Ann Ardis persuasively argues in *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

23. The poem opens *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*, published posthumously in 1889. It is reprinted in *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861–1889*, ed. Melvyn New (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 385.

24. Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 54.

25. Amy Levy, "Eldorado at Islington," *Woman's World* 2 (1889): 488–89. The next number of this magazine appeared after Levy's suicide on 10 September 1889 and includes a tribute to and obituary of Levy written by Oscar Wilde (*Woman's World* 3 [November 1889]: 51–52), reprinted in an appendix of the Broadview edition of *The Romance of a Shop* (ed. Bernstein).

26. For a concise history of the development of mass transport and its effects on late-Victorian women's participation in urban life, see Vadillo, *Women Poets*. Vadillo argues

that the new public transport system provided Levy and three other London-based women poets a means with which to develop a distinct urban aestheticism that uses the figure of the urban passenger as an emblem of the modern poet. With her focus on lyric, Vadillo does not examine *Romance* except to note its references to public transport.

27. Mrs. Humphry, *Manners for Women* (London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1897), 18–19.

28. Harassment was a real concern for women in the city, as evidenced by personal testimony and published advice about where and how to walk safely, but concerns about safety were also used to curtail women's movements. See Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* and "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," *Representations* 62 (Spring 1998): 1–30.

29. Gertrude "saves" her in the nick of time and takes her home through a snow-storm. The text is ambiguous about Gertrude's decision to take her from the seducer's house, no matter the consequences to her sister's physical health. Contrary to other commentators on this novel, I do not believe that Levy's portrayal of Gertrude is purely affirmative. Gertrude's myopia, for instance, indicates that her perception or judgment is not always accurate.

30. From the novel's start, Phyllis is associated with aestheticism and decadence, in contrast to her sisters' more pragmatic sense of social forms and obligations, leading Gertrude to cry on one occasion, "Phyllis, will you never learn where to draw the line?" (*Romance*, 141). While Phyllis's seduction by an unscrupulous married gentleman draws on a Victorian stock plot, Phyllis is unlike other late-nineteenth-century fallen women, such as Thomas Hardy's title character Tess, in that she participates willingly and with full knowledge that her seducer is married. As Bernstein argues, "Levy challenges the typical fallen woman of Victorian fiction by refusing to frame her character as either innocent female victim or knowing temptress" (40).

31. For example, Nord claims that Levy "does not know what to do with her independent, idiosyncratic heroines . . . and resorts to killing off the beautiful, 'fallen' sister and marrying off the remaining ones" (*Walking the Victorian Streets*, 202). Melvyn New agrees, though he argues that this closure is not so much a novelistic weakness as a reasonable recognition of "proletarian" reality (*Complete Novels*, 26). To Nord's complaint that the last third of the novel resembles "a shoddy *Pride and Prejudice*" (202), Beckman counters with the faint praise that Levy was not attempting to be original, only amusing and appealing to a popular audience (154). Deborah L. Parsons similarly finds that "Levy backs down from the implied female radicalism by concluding the girls' stories with the conventional endings of marriage or fall and death." Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.

32. Periodical articles exhibit a preoccupation with this domestic suitability. One commentator worries, "What woman, after this environment, would know how to make a home pleasant?" O. M. E. Rowe, "London Shop-Girls," *Outlook* (February 1896): 397–98, quotation on 397. According to another, many shopgirls "make good marriages . . . and they must find the habits of patience, good temper, courtesy, and self-control learnt by them in business serve them in good stead in their after married life." M. A. Belloc, "The Shop-Girl," *The Idler* (August 1895): 12–17, quotation on 16.

33. Anonymous, "Sympathy with Shop-Girls," 351.

34. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 198. Rappaport clarifies that this was not a radical social inversion, because the denouement almost always revealed that the shopgirl was not actually born into the lower orders; her marriage "restored her to her rightful place among her class" (194). Rappaport's chapter 6, "Acts of Consumption: Musical Comedy and the Desire of Exchange," examines the history of these musical comedies, which were inspired by "the unstable and fluid quality of class and gender identity" and "commodified and, in a sense, enjoyed" the "anxieties associated with mass consumer culture" (178–80). For a focus on the shopgirl as consumer of these popular productions, see also chapter 5, "Distracted Pleasures: Gender, Leisure, and Consuming in Public" (esp. 178–82), in Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies*.

35. Cicely Hamilton, *Diana of Dobson's: A Romantic Comedy in Four Acts* (1908), ed. Diane F. Gillespie and Doryjane Birrer (Toronto: Broadview, 2003), 77, 89.

36. Anonymous, "The Case of Amy Parker," *Leisure Hour* (November 1890): 55–60, quotation on 57.

37. Michael Pritchard's *Directory of London Photographers, 1841–1908* (Bushey: ALLM Books, 1986) includes several studios owned by women, though most of these proprietors, titled "Mrs.," are either married or widowed or are perhaps claiming the relative social freedom of that title.