

FOREWORD

## *Better Things to Do*

ELAINE SHOWALTER, *Princeton University*

As an academic who occasionally publishes in women's magazines, I've learned first-hand that they are both widely read and openly disparaged by my feminist peers. When I wrote an essay for American *Vogue* on my love of shopping malls, lipstick colours, literary makeovers and fashion catalogues, my colleagues in various English departments around the country wasted no time in letting me know either that they had secretly loved the piece, or that they deplored it as a sign that I was frivolous, politically incorrect, and under-theorized.

I suspect that my contribution to *Vogue* fell into the category of the 'humour column' described by Lisa Nevárez in this issue of *Media History*. Certainly it was self-deprecating, but even so, some of my smart women readers in the academic world were not taken in by its humour, page placements, or cosmopolitan sophistication. They were adamant about their belief that I should have 'better things to do' than to write for these magazines, and their insistence that they had better things to do than read them, and would not have even read my article except in the line of feminist theoretical duty.

Why are 'intelligent, successful' women so guilt-stricken or self-righteous about reading women's magazines? Why do those who work for them, write for them, subscribe to them, and study them continue to feel apologetic and defensive?

There are three reasons, I believe, why women's magazines, a force in shaping women's political and social culture for centuries, should still elicit such mixed and moralistic reactions. First of all, the prose in women's magazines is brief, or at least brevity is favoured instead of expanse. As feminist critics since Virginia Woolf have pointed out, there is an unconscious psychological association in people's minds between the length of a work and its intellectual stamina. George Eliot prided herself on the massive size of her novels, and today, Camille Paglia boasts that she has written the longest non-fiction book of any woman in her generation. These arguments about whether size matters operate to the disadvantage of any magazine, which is regarded as lesser, as a digest, as abbreviated rather than written to order.

Second, magazines carry advertising, and for many feminists, they are much more guilty than, say, academic journals, of associating their readers and writers with the corrupt worlds of business and commerce. When I wrote for *Vogue* about enjoying paper dolls as a little girl, I was accused of supporting sweatshop labour. In other words, any woman involved with women's magazines is suspected of being either a victim or an oppressor of the commercial systems that allegedly compel us to consume.

Third and most important, the concept of women's play is still underdeveloped. That reading magazines, trying on make-up, or doing needlework could be relaxing, pleasurable, or amusing for busy, bright, successful women seems to go against an unstated belief that women should always be working—caring for others, improving themselves, and casting a rosy glow of morality on all about them.

I myself believe that when I am reading *Vogue* I should not have to be worrying about whether I have 'better' things to do, and that pleasure and play are as necessary for women as for men and children. Thus I welcome this special issue on women's magazines, and hope it ends up in some beauty parlours alongside *Mademoiselle*, *Red*, and *Vogue*.

*Correspondence*: Department of English, Princeton University, McCosh 22, Princeton, NJ 08544-1016, USA.