

# “Petticoated police”: Propriety and the Lady Detective in Victorian Fiction

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**Abstract.** Through an examination of nineteenth-century stories and articles featuring female detectives, this essay examines the figure of the Victorian female sleuth, focusing on the class and gender politics governing the entrance of women, real or fictional, into this area of work. The author’s analysis includes interpretations of the cultural content of both text and images from the stories.

Early in the development of the detective fiction genre, the woman detective/investigator played a fairly prominent role. As early as the 1860s (twenty years after the first appearance of Poe’s master sleuth Auguste Dupin and more than twenty years before the appearance of his most celebrated successor, Sherlock Holmes) there were two fictional women police detectives: Mrs. Paschal (*Revelations of a Lady Detective*, attributed to W. S. Hayward, 1864)<sup>1</sup> and Mrs. Gladden (*The Female Detective*, by Andrew Forrester, 1864). Professional women investigators also appear in the 1890s, in the wake of Holmes, whose exploits reinvigorate interest in detective fiction in nineteenth-century culture. Critics of these works are divided, seeing the women detectives variously as literary and cultural nonstarters: as female figures abandoned by their creators, finished off “not at Reichenbach Falls but at the matrimonial altar” (Slung xx); as more “neuter than female” (Klein 29); as guarantors of the “extension of ‘police’ discipline into the realm of the private and domestic” (Kayman 129); as subjects of “a fantasy of female empowerment completely at odds with actuality” (Kestner 13); or, more

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positively, as early versions of the New Woman (Thomas 184; Willis 3). There is some truth to these interpretations, and the wide divergence of the views that they encompass suggests one of the artistic flaws in representations of female detectives, especially in the earlier nineteenth century, and that is inconsistent characterization. Artistic flaws, however, are often cultural wellsprings. In this case, the fictional Victorian lady detective incorporates often conflicting elements of nineteenth-century class and gender politics that illuminate some of the issues that governed how, when, and why nineteenth-century ladies, real or fictional, could enter the workforce, especially in relatively new fields of endeavor such as policing, and how—or perhaps more to the point, if—components of work could be balanced with conventionally defined expectations of respectability and femininity.

Thus, whereas a woman might have distinct aptitudes for detective work—such as an ability to infiltrate domestic environments without suspicion—exploiting those aptitudes would stretch the bounds of propriety. An incident in the adventures of Mary Ambush, a fictional lady detective from the 1890s created by Lucy Farmer, illustrates this very issue. Mary is earnest in her investigations but highly ineffectual, although both she and her creator seem oblivious to her limitations. In one robbery case, for example, the victim, Sir Thomas Broadmead, and a detective from Scotland Yard, Mr. Eglington, are far more instrumental in solving the crime than is Mary (who in this caper uses the unoriginal alias of Mary Bushe). Near the end of the case, Mary, Broadmead, and Eglington together question a nursery-maid suspected of being an accomplice. As the three set off for the interview, Eglington playfully but tellingly defines their respective cultural significance: “Propriety, Property, and Authority, all together: in other words, Miss Bushe, Sir Thomas, and myself” (Farmer 871). That Mary can be designated as the exemplum of propriety is the result, I would argue, of her incompetence as a detective. Throughout her adventures, she conforms to the conventions of romantic heroine rather than sleuth, as she is young, attractive, and prone to fainting when faced with real danger. Mary may dramatically wield a revolver, but it is a “tiny” one (870), as inadequate as a weapon as she is as a sleuth. Both weapon and woman are able merely to hold the enemy at bay—which is what happens when Mary is accosted in the woods by one thief—until Property and Authority (that is, Sir Thomas and Eglington) arrive to rescue and protect her. It is not, however, this version of the lady detective—the young woman who, in the course of her investigations, falls “gently into [... the] arms” of the Scotland Yard professional (870)—who presents a cultural challenge; it is, rather, the less alluring but more self-sufficient lady detective who finesses gender, class, and propriety in the successful pursuit of an unconventional career. This essay will accordingly analyze the unromantic but accomplished lady investigators in *Revelations of a Lady Detective* and Catherine Louise Pirkis’s *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1894) to reconsider and re-

evaluate the controversial fictional female detective, contrasting her as she first appears with her later incarnation in Victorian literature.

To see these fictional lady detectives as some kind of icon of the Victorian middle-class woman worker may seem quixotic, given that critics generally point to the entirely imaginary nature of such characters. Women, they note, were not employed in any capacity by the police until the 1880s, and then only as guards for female prisoners (Cadogan and Craig 16; Slung xviii; Kestner 5). It was not until the 1920s, moreover, that women were employed as police detectives (Lock 342). As Chris Willis points out, however, the Victorian lady detective may not have been “entirely a figment of fiction-writers’ imaginations” (3). Willis cites four articles published in *Tit-bits* between 1889 and 1891 that acknowledge that women were employed by private detective agencies “on certain delicate missions” (“Queer Feminine Occupations” 146), a euphemism implying that these women were used primarily in divorce cases and similar domestic scandals. The limited scope of the female detective’s work and even the dubious authority of the claims in the articles is underscored by Willis’s assessment of one of these articles as “portraying detection as an interesting (if rather eccentric) profession for an educated woman” and as perhaps owing “a fair amount to journalistic licence” (3). A more authoritative discussion of the topic, “Women as Detectives,” appears in *Queen: The Lady’s Newspaper and Court Chronicle*, a year before the first of the *Tit-bit* articles. “Women as Detectives” is a credible account of the employment of women as investigators, appearing as it does in a prestigious weekly newspaper. The author is anonymous, as most of the *Queen*’s contributors were, although those who have been identified were, as Erika Rappaport attests, “among the top-ranking names in Victorian and Edwardian journalism” (113). This particular author is careful to affirm the authenticity of his information, declaring at the outset that “the writer has carefully investigated the subject of this article, on which he has received some appreciable information from those who are the most competent to speak with authority on the question” (“Women as Detectives” 507). Some of the specific sources he mentions are a government report by the Inspector for Constabulary for Scotland and interviews with “the principals of two important private inquiry offices in London.”

“Women as Detectives” calls for the increased use of women investigators by the police, the author pointing out that “female detectivism has but occasionally been employed in the United Kingdom for public purposes.” The “employment of women as private detectives in London” has by contrast “made great progress.” While the employment of women in crime detection was fairly limited (for example, “a large firm of omnibus proprietors always engaged women to find out the dishonesty of the conductors”), a “great number of women are employed,” the author claims, “for private detective work in England—as that required in divorce cases, tracing missing friends, and other secret inquiries.” The article provides no exact fig-

ures, but asserts that the “number and services [of women detectives] have immensely increased during the last ten years or thereabouts,” indicating that female detectives date back at least to the 1870s; it is not unlikely that some form of female detective work dates back even further and that although a full-time female police detective may be a completely imaginary being in 1861, the concept of a female detective working in some kind of official or semi-official capacity is likely rooted in reality. Indeed, Begg and Skinner relate a criminal case in which the CID “decided to try a little French police trickery” and used the wife of a retired constable as an undercover agent (86). Certainly the real and the imaginary versions of the Victorian lady detective are confronted with similar social and cultural misgivings about their respectability. Police officials, according to the author of “Women as Detectives,” claim that “competent and trustworthy women are difficult to secure for secret services in police forces” (507). Women working as private detectives may, by contrast, be “superior as a class, both in education and social standing” but they remain morally suspect, as the concluding comment in “Women as Detectives” indicates: “As to how far their duties are consistent or in conflict with a refined mind and social status is one of those casuistical questions upon which much difference of opinion may prevail” (507).

The ambiguities inherent in this assessment of the lady detectives, the doubts about the compatibility of detective work with personal integrity, also color the representations of their fictional counterparts, at times producing problems in characterization. The fictional lady detective as she first appears in 1864, in Haywood’s *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, is poorly differentiated both socially and culturally; her later incarnation in the 1890s, while more clearly defined, is nevertheless socially marginalized. One character in *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke* labels lady detectives in the same way that Jane Eyre does governesses, as “a race apart” (Pirkis 93). Unlike the long-suffering governess, however, the female detective uses her dubious social status to her professional advantage—that is, to advance her detections. Unlike the governess, accordingly, the lady detective is a problematic figure not because of her potential to be a sexually disruptive presence in the Victorian home (Poovey 127) but because she exploits her femininity and apparent respectability to earn a living.

It is important to note that the figures considered here are not ladies involved in amateur sleuthing—not antecedents of Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple or contemporaries of Marian Holcombe in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*—but professional detectives, full-time employees of the Detective Department of the Metropolitan Police or of established detective agencies. These women, according to Mrs. Paschal, the protagonist of *Revelations of a Lady Detective*,<sup>2</sup> are the descendants of the “petticoated police” employed by Joseph Fouché, Napoleon’s minister of police, to “assist him in discovering the various political intrigues which disturbed the peace

of the first empire” (Hayward 2). Fouché was a wily character who had risen from humble origins to become one of the most feared and powerful men in France during the Revolution and the postrevolutionary period. He was a zealous member of the revolutionary government under Robespierre before switching his allegiance to Napoleon Bonaparte, aiding in the coup of the Eighteenth Brumaire (9–10 November 1799). Under Napoleon, Fouché was in charge of the reorganization of policing and intelligence gathering for all of France. He was especially interested in political maneuvering and state security—in other words, in surveillance, spying and intrigue, carried out by, among others, women working as undercover agents (Forssell, esp. 102–10, 153, 164–66).

The term Mrs. Paschal uses—*petticoated police*—encapsulates some of the troubling dimensions and denotes both the strengths and weaknesses of the female detective’s position. To be part of the police force is to have ... well, *force*, while to be petticoated is to have none; it is, rather, to be frivolous and culturally encumbered, both literally and figuratively. The literalness of this encumbrance is manifested in one of Mrs. Paschal’s investigations, when she feels impelled to remove her crinoline while tracking a thief through a narrow passage (Hayward 20). The idea of petticoated police, moreover, suggests disguise—policing as not only feminized and weakened but also as misrepresenting and insinuating itself through subterfuge, distasteful characteristics made all the more compelling through their association with Frenchness and specifically with a Frenchman who, again in the words of Mrs. Paschal, “united the courage of a lion with the cunning of a fox [... and] the sagacity of a dog” (Hayward 2). Fouché’s petticoated police, moreover, would seem to fit the mould of household spies and paid informants, rather than of regularly employed professional detectives.

The text of *Revelations of a Lady Detective* incorporates further associations of policing with a dubious past. After noting the proximity of Detective Police headquarters to the halls of political power—Whitehall—Mrs. Paschal comments on the location of its offices “in a small street, the houses in which cover the site of the once splendid palace of the Stuarts, where one king was born and another lost his head” (Hayward 1). These allusions to the politically turbulent seventeenth century raise the specter of an English past uncomfortably reminiscent of the more recent revolutionary turmoil in France—a time of intrigue and bloody civil war, when even the head of a monarch could roll. Police headquarters literally occupies the same ground as the former home of a highly problematic line of kings, a place that had fostered treachery and treason, a location that reifies the suspect dimensions of detective work—danger, forbidden knowledge, questionable tactics, and, as a consequence, questionable status.

Mrs. Paschal, however, remains largely untainted by all this dark potential, which is countered initially by details suggesting her status within the

police department and the businesslike relationship she maintains with her superior. When she arrives at police headquarters, the porter recognizes her, bows, and escorts her immediately to the police chief, Colonel Warner. The description of the ensuing interview with Warner employs an amalgam of literary conventions and cultural assumptions that define Mrs. Paschal and with her, inevitably, the female detective:

I was particularly desirous at all times of conciliating Colonel Warner, because I had not long been employed as a female detective, and now having given up my time and attention to what I may call a new profession, I was anxious to acquit myself as well and favourably as I could, and gain the good-will and approbation of my superior. It is hardly necessary to refer to the circumstances which led me to embark in a career at once strange, exciting, and mysterious, but I may say that my husband died suddenly, leaving me badly off. An offer was made me through a peculiar channel. I accepted it without hesitation, and became one of the much-dreaded, but little-known people called Female Detectives, at the time I was verging upon forty. My brain was vigorous and subtle, and I concentrated all my energies upon the proper fulfilment and execution of those duties which devolved upon me. I met the glance of Colonel Warner and returned it unflinchingly; he liked people to stare back again at him, because it betokened confidence in themselves, and evidenced that they would not shrink in the hour of peril, when danger encompassed them and lurked in front and rear. I was well born and well educated, so that, like an accomplished actress, I could play my part in any drama in which I was instructed to take a part. My dramas, however, were dramas of real life, not the mimetic representations which obtain on the stage. For the parts I had to play, it was necessary to have nerve and strength, cunning and confidence, resources unlimited, confidence and numerous other qualities of which actors are totally ignorant. They strut, and talk, and give expression to the thoughts of others, but it is such as I who really create the incidents upon which their dialogue is based and grounded. (3)

This passage both acknowledges and invalidates many of the negative associations that could accrue to something as *outré* as a female detective. In having his protagonist compare herself to an actress, Hayward, in effect, confronts issues of dissembling and subterfuge—some of the evils aligned with the suspect profession of acting as well as with the supposed wiles of women. Haywood, through his protagonist, also acknowledges that the female detective will be engaged in misrepresentation in the line of duty; she will play a part to gain access to people and information. In other words, she will spy and inform. What distinguishes the female detective from a mere paid informant is that she is not paid *by* the police, she *is* the police, and in fact has paid informants of her own.<sup>3</sup> She is a professional and she acts—literally—in the line of duty, not inclination<sup>4</sup>: “I could play my part,” Mrs. Paschal attests, “in any drama *in which I was instructed to take a part*” (emphasis added). She thus raises herself and her work above acting. Playing a part becomes taking a part; she is an active agent not in mere “mimetic

representations” but in “dramas of real life,” following instructions from a commanding officer rather than from a stage director. Spying and misrepresentation have moved out of the realm of the sneaky and underhanded and into the realm of the heroic, where “nerve and strength, cunning and confidence” are prerequisite.

Mrs. Paschal’s other credentials also establish her professionalism and a level of respectability that no stage actress could attain. As an impecunious widow “verging on forty,” she cannot be assigned the role of ingénue or seductress, which some critics may read as androgyny, but which could more plausibly be read as maturity and discretion. She is “well born and well educated” and has, by her own admission, a “vigorous and subtle” brain and a commitment to work hard and “gain the good-will and approbation of [... her] superior.” These attributes suggest a level of respectability verging on stodginess were it not for the “strange, exciting, and mysterious” nature of her career, which means, among other things, that gaining the good will and approbation of her superior does not require the submissiveness conventionally expected either of women or of subordinates. It requires, rather, assertiveness, even boldness, as represented by her frank and unflinching return of Warner’s gaze. Her respectability makes her above reproach, but her gaze testifies that she will “not shrink in the hour of peril.” Mrs. Paschal clearly has confidence and force. Given her declaration that she concentrates “all [... her] energies upon the proper fulfilment and executions of [... her] duties,” it is little wonder that the “little-known people called Female Detectives” are “much-dreaded.”

The characterization of Mrs. Paschal in the opening pages of *Revelations*, although employing contradictory elements, would seem to be anything but what I initially claimed—poorly differentiated. Certainly, the sense of vigor, confidence, and professionalism that emanates from this initial portrait continues to color the reader’s assessment of her character throughout the text. At the same time, Mrs. Paschal’s success in solving criminal cases consistently rests in her ability to spy and deceive. Her wardrobe, she admits, is “as extensive and as full of disguises as that of a costumier’s shop” (9), and she dons various disguises in the course of her investigations. In one rather mundane case, she takes on the role of a letter-sorter to discover a thief taking small amounts of cash sent through the mail. In a more sensational episode, she poses as a novice in a convent to uncover the abbess’s plot to cause the death and so inherit the fortune of a wealthy young heiress who has taken vows. In three separate episodes, she presents herself as a lady’s maid or servant to bring high-class thieves to justice: a countess who robs the vaults of a bank by means of a connecting passage in the basement of her house, a duchess who sells the diamonds she claims were stolen to pay her gambling debts, and a femme fatale who swindles unsuspecting men. In her role as lady’s maid in this last instance, Mrs. Paschal particularly impresses her erstwhile mistress with her ability to open a bottle of



soda water without popping the cork and spraying the contents around the room. In moments like this, Mrs. Paschal's ability to enter her assumed identity so completely threatens to undermine the integrity of her character and of her putative identity as a well-born and well-educated woman.

It is clear from the variety of Mrs. Paschal's undercover maneuvers that there is no sanctuary—not government bureaucracies, not religious orders, not the home—that this woman cannot and will not infiltrate, and her success is clearly related to her gender. As a woman adopting subservient roles, she can seem inconspicuous and unthreatening. In other situations, as Colonel Warner notes, she is valuable “because men are thrown off their guard when they see a petticoat” (57). But just how much petticoat is the respectable, highly professional, and fortyish Mrs. Paschal willing to show? She does remove her crinoline without a blush, and although there are no witnesses to this event, relating it to the reader is nevertheless daring. She may claim to be well born and well educated, but she consistently passes herself off as a maid or low-level worker, never as a lady. She also admits to a previous position “as a barmaid at a large refreshment saloon at one of the railway stations” in her “younger days”—it was while in this position that she perfected the technique of opening bottles of soda water (276). Little wonder, then, that she has no compunction about turning up at a rather seedy establishment called the Pig and Whistle in Seven Dials to meet with an expatriate French thief turned informant (247).

It is perhaps this version of Mrs. Paschal—the one who apparently feels at home at a disreputable alehouse—that the illustrator had in mind when

he produced the cover image for the 1864 edition of *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (see figure 1). In this illustration, Mrs. Paschal looks much younger than her professed age (“verging on forty”) and more likely to fulfill the potential mentioned by Colonel Warner—that is, the ability to throw men “off their guard when they see a petticoat.” The picture shows Mrs. Paschal as fashionably, even extravagantly dressed, with an elaborate hairstyle and a bonnet tied under her chin with a large red-and-white striped

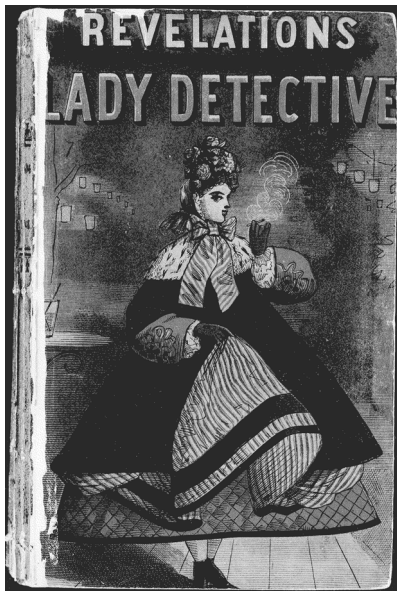


FIGURE 1. Cover of *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, London: Vickers, 1864. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.



bow. She wears what appears to be a fur-trimmed cape that she lifts coquettishly to reveal billows of blue-and-white striped material that in turn do not quite cover another bright red quilted garment—a petticoat, perhaps? None of these volumes of fabric manages to cover her ankles, and although her hands are daintily gloved, she is holding a lit cigarette close to her mouth. Beside her on a small table is a drink. As unlike the no-nonsense textual Mrs. Paschal as this image seems to be, it does retain her unflinching gaze: Although her face is in profile, the woman in the illustration has turned her eyes to meet the glance of the viewer boldly. As Joseph Kestner observes, Mrs. Paschal and her creators had no need of Laura Mulvey to instruct them in the power of the gaze (7). Thus, although the text of *Revelations* leaves Mrs. Paschal untainted by the dark potential of treachery, the cover image plays on the sensational and salacious potential of a profession that might require a woman to don any disguise from her “costumier’s shop” of a closet and use any means to obtain information. As if to emphasize the chameleon nature of the lady detective, the cover of the 1884 edition of the *Revelations* pictures Mrs. Paschal as believably fortyish, dressed unremarkably, even drably. This image stresses the threat her work poses to her person, rather than to her reputation, as she is accosted by a crazed-looking, but respectably dressed, man (see figure 2).

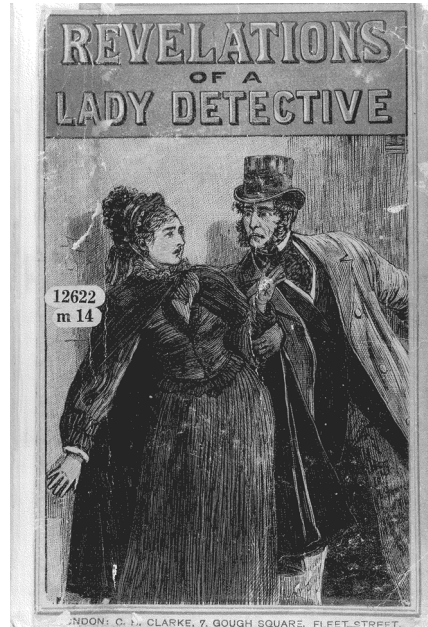


FIGURE 2. Cover of *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, London: Clarke, 1884. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

After Mrs. Paschal and her contemporary, Mrs. Gladden (*The Female Detective*, 1864),<sup>5</sup> the professional female detective disappears from British fiction for more than thirty years, re-emerging much altered in 1894 in the person of the protagonist of *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective*.<sup>6</sup> This later representation reflects the greater professional development of the detective and indeed conforms in many ways to the characterization of female private investigators in “Women as Detectives” as numerous and “far more efficient for their duties than men would be.” In the wake of Love-

day, as well as of the plethora of male detectives who follow the appearance of Holmes, even amateur lady detectives at the end of the century—such as Grant Allen’s Lois Cayley (*Miss Cayley’s Adventures*, 1898) and Hilda Wade (*Hilda Wade: A Woman with Tenacity of Purpose*, 1899)—are more businesslike than their predecessors. These latter-day lady amateurs seem indeed to have more in common with professional investigators than they do with the amateur lady sleuths of Mrs. Paschal’s generation, the heroines of the sensation fiction of the 1860s—the eponymous protagonist of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Eleanor’s Victory*, for example, or Wilkie Collins’s Marian Holcombe (*The Woman in White*) and Magdalen Vanstone (*No Name*).

Although the lady detective has clearly evolved in the years between 1861 and 1894, there remain numerous parallels between Mrs. Paschal and Loveday Brooke, especially in the kinds of cases they undertake. Most of Loveday’s cases involve theft, in one instance of a blank cheque that was cashed for £6000, but more usually of costly necklaces. She is twice engaged to track down missing persons, in one episode a maid and in the other a wealthy and nubile young woman. One case involves the murder of the elderly lodgekeeper of a country estate. Loveday’s cases tend to be more convoluted than her predecessor’s, however. The investigation of a missing necklace, for example, unravels a tale of impersonation and elopement rather than of theft. Although Loveday does on occasion investigate a case without recourse to disguise or impersonation, she, like Mrs. Paschal, is generally relegated to undercover work in which she gains access to domestic sanctuaries and so to private information. And like Mrs. Paschal, Loveday is one of a contingent of lady investigators and is much prized by her employer, Ebenezer Dyer, as “one of the shrewdest and most clear-headed of my female detectives” (Pirkis 2). But although Loveday has been forced to work for reasons similar to those of her impoverished widowed predecessor—because “by a jerk of Fortune’s wheel” (the nature of which is left unspecified) she “had been thrown upon the world penniless and all but friendless”—her entry into her line of work is at once more mundane and more professional (2). Mrs. Paschal responded to an offer “made [...] through a peculiar channel” (Hayward 3); Loveday, by contrast, chooses her work—a choice albeit limited by her lack of marketable skills—and rises through the ranks:

Marketable accomplishments she had found she had none, so she had forthwith defied convention, and had chosen for herself a career that had cut her off sharply from her former associates and her position in society. For five or six years she drudged away patiently in the lower walks of her profession; then chance, or, to speak more precisely, an intricate criminal case, threw her in the way of the experienced head of the flourishing detective agency in Lynch Court. He quickly enough found out the stuff she was made of, and threw her in the way of better-class work—work, indeed, that brought increase of pay and of reputation alike to him and to Loveday. (Pirkis 2–3)

Loveday's experiences thus encompass some of the forbidden nature of an unorthodox line of work—she “defied convention” and has been “cut her off sharply from her former associates and her position in society.” Like many of her contemporary fictional colleagues, she is not a member of an official body, not a police detective, but an employee of a detective agency. She is no female Holmes, however; there is nothing of the bohemian about her, nor does she solve crimes by unconventional means in defiance of police methods. Although she admits to perceiving things that “a great many other people [... do] not,” she works with rather than against the police and solves crimes “step by step in her usual methodical manner” (11). She is, moreover, the perfect subordinate, achieving higher status and pay by working diligently and consequently bringing distinction to her employer as well as to herself.

Loveday accordingly lacks the cachet and flair of most fictional detectives of her era and so it is not surprising that she completely outclasses Mrs. Paschal in terms of respectability. She is younger—“a little over thirty”—but otherwise much less assertive and, except for her Christian name, much less flamboyant than her predecessor. For one thing, she does not tell her own story, which is presented as experiences rather than as revelations, and the narrator is anything but poetic about her appearance, describing her as “altogether nondescript” and her “invariably black” dress as “Quaker-like in its neat primness” (2). Dyer, like Colonel Warner, values his female detective for her shrewdness, but couches her particular talent in what can only be called exuberantly mundane terms: “[S]he has so much common sense that it amounts to genius—positively to genius” (3). Dyer does not rely on Loveday to throw men off guard with the sight of her petticoat; he understands the special potential of a female detective to be quite other than her ability to divert men with feminine wiles. In some situations, he acknowledges, “women detectives are more satisfactory than men, for they are less likely to attract attention” (31). At the same time, he is sensitive to the fact that sceptics might question Loveday's suitability for detective work because she is “[t]oo much of a lady” (3). She is, after all, not just a *female* detective—the term used for Mrs. Paschal everywhere but in the title of her *Revelations*; Loveday is a *lady* detective, and her rather more austere professionalism is reflected in the cover image on the single-volume edition of her experiences as it appeared in 1894 (previously serialized in the *Ludgate Monthly*). The dark red-cloth cover is entirely plain except for the title, embossed in gold letters, and the image of a simple white business card placed obliquely across the front, which reads “Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective—Lynch Court, Fleet Street.”

Although Loveday's professional status would thus seem more firmly grounded than Mrs. Paschal's, the commission of her investigations is remarkably similar. Like Mrs. Paschal, she gathers information by gaining the confidence, or sometimes the indifference, of her prey. She adopts sim-

ilar roles, although the range of careers available to women by the end of the century allows Loveday greater scope. She accordingly poses as a nursery governess, a housekeeper's studious niece, a lodger, an amanuensis, and a house decorator. Loveday may seem to command a higher and more secure class position than Mrs. Paschal, but the characterization of lady detectives as a race apart is telling; like governesses, their class position is precarious, but for the lady detective this is an advantage rather than a personal and professional limitation. The female—or lady—detective's ability to pass as a member of the servant class provides her with access to secrets of the personal and domestic lives of her quarry; it also makes her virtually invisible, seemingly too inconsequential to be suspect or threatening. At the same time, her real identity—and higher class position—provides her with the confidence and authority to carry out her covert investigations, as well as the power to bring the guilty to justice.

The professional female detective is a fascinating anomaly in Victorian popular literature. She does not gain the obsessive following of Holmes, nor does she inspire significant imitation. She does, however, fuse some of the most pressing issues regarding women in the 1860s and 1890s with one of the most inventive forms of popular literature of the period. She first appears when social commentators are pondering issues of women's redundancy and subjection, and she resurfaces when the New Woman seems poised to take on the world and any job that writers are prepared to assign to her. The character that results from this fusion is not in the end particularly coherent. Even in her incarnation as Loveday Brooke, she is an amalgam of too many contradictions; a lady, after all, would not demean herself in many of the ways that Loveday does in her undercover roles. The female detective does have a place, however, in the consideration of women in the venues of work and of fiction in that she allows writers to explore and experiment with ways of imagining what in the Victorian period was another anomaly—the middle-class working woman.

The inconsistencies in characterization that mark the fictional lady detective in many ways reflect the uncertainty of the middle-class woman's place in the nineteenth-century workforce: Like the lady detective, the middle-class woman who wanted to work generally had to undermine her social status. The roles the lady detective assumes suggest the limited kinds of options open to most women—amanuensis, decorator, or low-level positions in the postal service. To the end of the century, there remained "much difference of opinion" not just about the duties of a detective but indeed about the extent to which any paid employment for ladies was "consistent or in conflict with a refined mind and social status" ("Women as Detectives"). And well might the lady detective give pause to a culture as conservative as that of Victorian England. The lady detective as represented by Mrs. Paschal and Loveday Brooke takes the concept of the working woman to its extremes, for she is defined solely by her job, existing entirely

outside the domestic sphere that normally defines middle-class women in this period: The Victorian professional lady detective is never seen in her own home; she has no family or relations. In her way, she is as wily as Fouché, masking, with an inconspicuous persona and an unobtrusive manner of conducting her investigations, a radical version of female independence.

*Keywords:* feminism; middle class; respectability; Victorian fiction; women's employment

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to express my thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding for the research of this article.

### NOTES

1. Although there is some disagreement about the dating and authorship of *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, most critics accept 1864 over 1861 as the date of the first edition, and the British Library attributes *Revelations* (or rather, the 1884 *Experiences of a Lady Detective* edition) to Hayward. See Cadogan and Craig 15; Klein 30n2; Kestner 6; Slung xvi.

2. The 1870 edition is subtitled "A Tale of Female Life and Adventure."

3. Mrs. Paschal anticipates Holmes's penchant for using street urchins as informants. She "invariably employed a boy to discover minute and petty details," such as her employee Jack Doyle, a young orphan who was stealing to survive until Mrs. Paschal offered him an opportunity to "lead an honest life" by spying for her (101–03). Like the Baker Street Irregulars, Jack is invaluable as a spy with his street smarts and ability to be virtually invisible within the context of bustling London thoroughfares.

4. The significance of the distinction between acting in the line of duty versus acting as mimetic representation for the purposes of entertainment is more readily accepted when the agent is male rather than female, even if he is not a regular employee of the state. Readers uncritically applaud and admire Holmes and Lord Peter Wimsey, for example, when they use subterfuge, misrepresentation, or role playing to insinuate themselves into the hearts and minds of the rogues they trap and expose. Mrs. Paschal, by contrast, has to explain and justify her acting.

5. Mrs. Gladden is cast in much the same mold as Mrs. Paschal—a mature woman who is employed as a detective by the police department and who gains access to the personal lives and information of her quarry by posing as a domestic servant, milliner, or dressmaker (34, 41).

6. There are fictional lady detectives ca. 1890 who predate Loveday, but they lack her credentials, either as a professional woman or as a fictional character. Miriam Lea in Leonard Merrick's *Mr. Bazalgette's Agent* (1888) is not regularly employed and therefore is not fully professional. Mrs. Cox in George Sims's "The Mysterious Crossing-Sweeper" (1890) is underdeveloped as a character and is as much the source of mystery in her story (she is the crossing-sweeper) as she is a contributor to its solution.

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