

**Two Women of Mind and Purpose:
George Cruikshank's *My Wife is a Woman of Mind* and
Amelia B. Edwards' *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston***

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Abstract: The changing social agency of Victorian British women was often reflected through text and art. The pen and ink work of two artists -- well-known George Cruikshank and teenage Amelia B. Edwards -- reveal much about gender and agency for a woman in the mid-1800s. One particular Cruikshank's comic, My Wife is a Woman of Mind, satirizes the self-absorbed intellectual, challenging the established political and social gender roles. Edwards' The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston depicts a strong, motivated, and resourceful woman, not deterred by shipwrecks, wolves, or even invasion. Both comics serve as representative caricatures of Victorian women of disparate mindful purposes in a time of change and possibilities.

‘For poets as well as painters think it their business
to take the likeness of things from their appearance’.¹

British women found increased personal and professional agency in the long nineteenth-century, often chronicling their own actions in print through journals, autobiographies, and art. They also found their activities the source of much critical social commentary through the pens of male reviewers and well-known graphic artists such as George Cruikshank (1792-1878), who in his 1847 etching *My Wife is a Woman of Mind* satirizes the single-minded yet self-indulgent purpose of a be-speckled bluestocking intent only on her own poetic genius, ignoring home, family and all else. This, however, is not the full picture of Victorian women of mindful purpose. Through the teenage pen of Amelia B. Edwards (1831-1892), who as a child knew Cruikshank as he had offered to take

¹ Joseph Trapp, *Lectures on Poetry*, tr. William Clarke and William Bowyer (London, 1742), Lecture VIII, “Of the Beauty of Thought in Poetry,” quoted from W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 19-20.

her on as a gratuity-free pupil, and who later became a noted author, adventurer, and Egyptologist, we follow one Mrs Roliston, who ‘determines to see life by going to sea. And makes up her mind to travel’. She does so with agency and stalwart resourcefulness from Amsterdam to Moscow to Stockholm and even the North Pole throughout the thirty-eight-page 1848 graphic novel *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston*. Mrs R. represents the Victorian woman of purpose — complex, and intellectual — capable of riding a monstrous Kraken as well as organizing against a French invasion, one who does not allow society’s restrictions to determine her desire, even need, to move beyond the confines of traditional female expectations. And while there is marriage in the offing for Mrs R., it clearly comes on her terms. Single-minded poetic genius need not apply. This paper will examine representative caricatures of Victorian women of mindful purpose through the insightful pens of Cruikshank and Edwards as they reveal the social and gender concerns of the age.

Pictorial art and laughter became associated in the 1600s when the first caricature appeared, amusingly enough credited to the classic Renaissance painter Annibale Carracci, from which we get the term.² Carracci saw the classical artist’s role strikingly similar to that of a caricaturist’s, observing:

Both see the lasting truth beneath the surface of mere outward appearance. Both try to help nature accomplish its plan. The one may try to visualize the perfect form and to realize it in his work, the other to grasp the perfect deformity and thus reveal the very essence of a personality. A good caricature like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself.³

Indeed, as E.H. Gombrich and E. Kris note, the ‘real aim of the true caricaturist is to transform the whole man into a completely new and ridiculous figure which nevertheless resembles the original in a striking and surprising way’.⁴ It wasn’t until the late eighteenth century that William Hogarth and

² E. H. Gombrich and E. Kris, *Caricature* (London: Penguin, 1940), p. 10.

³ Gombrich and Kris, pp. 11-12.

⁴ Gombrich and Kris, p. 12.

followers James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson weaponized caricature by associating it with political-social satire, where the like or unlike of portrait caricature was reduced to a generic formulae of revealing weakness -- the protruding chin, the bulbous nose or the horsey brow -- ripping away the 'screen of 'manners', [where] education and civilization dwindled, and behind it appeared the everlasting impulses of desire, the animal in man'.⁵ For, as W.J.T. Mitchell argues, 'We can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen [...] not just the outward, visible world, but the very nature of the rational soul whose vision is represented'.⁶ It is to this visibly tangible yet more-than-meets-the eye tradition that nineteenth-century graphic artists joined the ranks of political-social caricaturists, often through allegorical imagery, making the hidden visible, the abstract idea concrete, and the inarticulate articulate. As added measure, so there would be no mistaking the hidden, they initiated the speech bubble and explanatory caption, marrying words and image, their work becoming in Tom Wolf's phrase a 'painted word',⁷ where viewers would be expected to 'read' the picture for meaning.⁸

If we create meaning from the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations, then method is key, and caricaturists often learned shortcut strategies for perspective, portraiture, and anatomy.⁹ The illusion of perspective was achieved through varying depth of etched lines around a vanishing point, scaling or raising central background figures, and setting background walls close to the front of the frame – all while keeping caricaturized figures recognizable through portraiture.¹⁰ Heads, even profiles or three-quarter views had to be recognizable. Comic panels often featured well-known profiles of figures sweeping from one side of the page to the other, only to meet in the middle. Graphic satirists classified head and body shapes into component parts, manipulating them into physiological categories. Phrenology, Renaissance humors,

⁵Gombrich and Kris, p. 19.

⁶W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), p. 39.

⁷Mitchell, p. 41.

⁸Richard A. Vogler, *Graphic Works of George Cruikshank* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), p. x.

⁹Robert L. Patten, *George Cruikshank's Life, Times, and Art, Volume 1: 1792-1835* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 48.

¹⁰Patten, I, pp. 48-49.

and even Gillray's 1798 *Doublûres of Characters* guided artists in contour characterization.¹¹ The anatomy of caricature required not the correct proportion of the Royal Academy but the energy of line. Crosshatch, stipple, scribble, zig-zag, and even distinctive dot-and-lozenge shading convey movement, depth, and animation, with an "S" curve rhythm underscoring action. Line design moved from the medieval and Renaissance hieroglyphic tropes to more recognizable symbols, particularly clothes.¹² Clothes added to this movement – the distinctive hat or the voluptuous gown, the thrust of a beribboned chin or the stoop of a padded shoulder – all work to draw the viewer's eye and propel the narrative forward.¹³ Though many caricature comics were penned or etched in black and white, colour was also important as it directed movement of the eye to reinforce the drama of the panel. From the green of the outdoors, to greys and whites for shadows and clouds, to intense red, white, and blues for uniforms or flags, colour heightened dramatic scenes and created political-social context.

Pictorial representations of women, particularly in caricature, depicted the drastic changing role of women during the Victorian age. From the rigid gender behavioral expectations described in Sarah Stickney Ellis's popular 1845 book on conduct *Daughters of England* to John Ruskin's later 1865 lecture 'Of Queens Gardens', women were expected to be 'content to be inferior to men'¹⁴ – inferior in mental power as well as in conduct. A man was 'the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect was for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure'.¹⁵ Similarly according to Ruskin, a woman's 'intellect was not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision'.¹⁶ It is he who goes to battle, for she must be protected and guarded from the harshness of life.¹⁷ Trapped in the home by large crinoline skirts, she would have to wait until 1881 for the Rational Dress Society!¹⁸

¹¹ Patten, I, pp. 50-51.

¹² Patten, I, p. 54.

¹³ Patten, I, pp. 58-59.

¹⁴ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character & Responsibilities* (New York: Langley, 1845), p. 11.

¹⁵ John Ruskin, *Of Queens' Gardens* (London: G. Allen, 1902), p. 20.

¹⁶ Ruskin, p. 21.

¹⁷ Ruskin, p. 21.

¹⁸ Kathryn Hughes, 'Gender and 19th Century Britain,' online video recording, British Library, <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos/gender-in-19th-century-britain>> [accessed 1 February 2022].

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall assert that women carved out separate and private spheres, while men pursued public lives.¹⁹ Victorian women were, in reality, more complex than the stereotypical image of the ‘angel in the house’. By 1869 John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women*, decrying this rigid gendering of boundaries, wrote with hope that social, professional, and personal opportunities for women, particularly for the middle-class, would increasingly stretch and even break.²⁰ Martha Vicinus cautions that ‘while we can now judge Victorian women to have been more varied, active and complex than previously considered, we must not create a new stereotype that ignores the limits within which Victorians lived and changed. Rather, we should recognize the struggle to achieve independence – economic and personal – within the framework of traditional social values as being a hallmark of the times’.²¹

It is in this crosswind of change that conservative George Cruikshank pens his caricature panel *My Wife Is a Woman of Mind*.²² Luis James writes that, ‘Cruikshank, as a good mid-Victorian was both appalled by and attracted to change’.²³ Contemporary biographer Blanchard Jerrold observed that though Cruikshank reveled in the fun, and sought to extract wisdom from it, ‘[...] he had an old-fashioned idea of woman and her rights, and was sharp with his needle over female suffrage, ladies in pantalettes, and women of mind’.²⁴ Cruikshank did, indeed, take his etching needle to lampoon the learned woman by illustrating editor Henry Mayhew’s poem ‘The Woman of Mind’ in *The Comic Almanac for 1847* (Figure 1). The poem, narrated by the husband in ten iambic tetrameter stanzas, ironically details how his wife truly is a woman of mind. Sporting the blue spectacles of a blue-stocking and the trendy phrenology bumps of intelligence, she exhibits the poetic genius of a learned woman who pays no regard to appearance, husband, screaming ‘units’, or household

¹⁹ Leonore Davidoff, and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Public Spheres and Private Lives*, 3rd edn (1985; London: Routledge, 2018), p. xviii.

²⁰ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), p. 1, 141.

²¹ Martha Vicinus, ‘Introduction: New Trends in the Study of the Victorian Woman’ in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. by 1977 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. xix.

²² George Cruikshank, ‘My Wife Is a Woman of Mind,’ in *The Comic Almanac for 1847 with twelve Illustrations by George Cruikshank* (London: Tilt & Bogue, 1847), p. 22.

²³ Luis James, ‘Cruikshank and Early Victorian Caricature’ *History Workshop*, Autumn, 1978, p. 115.

²⁴ Blanchard Jerrold, *The Life of George Cruikshank* (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1883), p. 199.



Figure 1. *My Wife Is a Woman of Mind*, 1846, George Cruikshank, etching on paper, 134 mm x 352 mm (plate-mark) The Trustees of the British Museum.

duties, but waves all away as she contemplates her next line and her love for ‘the millions’ who are waiting for her aid. While her love for ‘the whole human fam’ly’ fails to encompass her own family’s well-being, she does manage to gossip, name-drop, and spurn the spirituality of church in favor of the elitist mind.²⁵

‘Cruikshank is at his best when he plays on word and images in multiple variations’,²⁶ creating space between what is stated and what is graphically represented. It is through this that Cruikshank injects his irony and humour.²⁷ The caricature employs all of Cruikshank’s artistic skill in perspective, portraiture, and anatomy. Against the defining wall of tattered curtains and broken blinds, stands the husband commanding little else except the central vanishing point. He holds a screaming baby while pleading with his wife and gesturing to the three older children grouped

²⁵ Henry Mayhew, ‘The Woman of Mind,’ in *The Comic Almanac for 1847 with Twelve Illustrations by George Cruikshank* (London: Tilt & Bogue, 1847), pp. 24-25.

²⁶ Gül A. Russell, ‘The phrenological illustrations of George Cruikshank (1792–1878): A satire on phrenology or human nature?’ *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*, 29:1, 119-149, <DOI: 10.1080/0964704X.2019.1695455> p. 142.

²⁷ Russell, p. 130.

in the lower right corner, while two of them sob amidst the chaos of a fireplace accident, only the oldest attempting to help. The viewer's eye is drawn from the husband to the tableau of children right across to the wife, head tilted, pen to stained mouth, and left arm raised towards the husband to ward off his interrupting pleas. This triangular arrangement boasts deep etched lines that create shadows of perspective and depth — the crosshatching of shawl, the zig-zagging of window panes, and the dot-and-lozenge shading for curved motion of the crying infant. Heads are in profile or three-quarters, recognizable, but also denoting movement. Even the wife's bumps are framed by hair scraped back in an untidy bun, although the rest of her anatomy is obscured by a draping shawl and figureless skirt.²⁸

A response to the Victorian woman pushing boundaries, this comic, which was on the forefront of the Almanac's efforts to publish more on women's affairs,²⁹ nevertheless, takes aim at both the woman and the man's role, addressing women's 'concerns and potentialities' yet also adopting 'a patriarchal attitude for what is fitting for the distaff sex'.³⁰ While the woman may ignore all when deep in poetic genius, her husband does nothing but stand and complain. Neither are people of action and agency. The angel is not at home and neither is it harmonious. The joke, perhaps is on both, and that is powerful. Patten, echoing Gombrich and Kris, agrees:

The humor within caricature reinforces its power. Whether political or social in content, these images attack their targets. They are a form of aggressive behavior that certain societies allow even though they transgress the boundaries established by that society. At the same moment the joke evades restrictions and, because it is a joke, is perceived as a permissible way to discharge impermissible impulses.³¹

²⁸ George Cruikshank, *My Wife Is a Woman of Mind*, 1846, etching on paper, 134 mm x 352 mm (plate-mark) The Trustees of the British Museum.

²⁹ Patten, II, p. 198.

³⁰ Patten, II, p. 198.

³¹ Patten, I, p. 94.

The woman who crosses male boundaries, and the man who cannot find them are both condemned in this caricature. Not quite as Mary Wollstonecraft envisioned: ‘Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience’.³²

While there is no material evidence that Amelia B. Edwards saw George Cruikshank’s work, and in particular *My Wife Is a Woman of Mind*, there is great probability. The Edwards family were around-the-corner Wharton Street neighbours of the Cruikshanks,³³ though the families met albeit by literary and artistic chance as Edwards recounts in an 1881 letter to the editor of *Literary World*:

I had made some little story or article which I made bold enough to drop into the Editor’s box of *Cruikshank’s Omnibus* – an illustrated serial of which he was himself editor, artist, and proprietor [...] I had chanced to scribble some pen & ink heads of the characters on the backs of some of the pages of my ms, & these attracted the great man’s attention. The next evening he walked in, while we were having tea – introduced himself & asked to see ‘the author & artist’. When he found that the important personage was a little girl in short frocks, he was greatly amused. By & by, he offered to take me as a pupil, gratuitously, & train me for the profession. But my parents with their old prejudice against the artist life, hesitated, objected, & finally let the opportunity drift by.³⁴

It is highly probable the Edwards family would have subscribed to their neighbour’s popular *Comic Almanac* series, and Edwards, whose eclectic reading ranged widely, ‘devouring Wilkinson’s *Ancient Egyptians* and Stephenson’s *Central America*’³⁵ and whose own artistic talents would

³²Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792; Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2010), pp. 49-50.

³³Brenda Moon, *More Usefully Employed* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2006), p. 12.

³⁴Oxford, Somerville College, MS Amelia B. Edwards, 351; Moon, p. 12.

³⁵MS Edwards 351.

have drawn her to the 1847 edition which came out a year before *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston*.



Figure 2. *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston*, 1848, Amelia B. Edwards, pen and ink on bound paper, Principal and Fellows of Somerville College, Oxford.

Edwards certainly employs Cruikshank's 'two narrative paradigms – the recapitulative verse and the progress [...], breaking down a plate into successive scenes, [...to] make each image speak a part of the story in its own right'.³⁶ Whether it is in an earlier seventy-seven panel strip comic of *Patrick Murphy* (1845) or in the more developed thirty-eight page *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston* (1848), we can see Edward's artist's eye, her love of imaginative adventure, and humorous travelogue storytelling, often in up to five panels a page. It is a rollicking tale of a woman — of a certain age and complete with double chin — who, with hand firmly pointed at an unfurled map, 'determines to see life by going to sea. And makes her mind up to travel'.³⁷ And with that, Mrs R.

³⁶Patten, I, p. 67.

³⁷Oxford, Somerville College, MS Amelia B. Edwards, 424.

packs up her household, purchases a sturdy cannon in route, sails to Amsterdam, trains to Danzig and Moscow, encounters fields of skeletons and corpses, and though starving, is saved from eating the corpse of a frozen Frenchman by a sleigh-bound Russian gentleman, escapes a pack of wolves by throwing them bottles of rum, slides down a wooden ski slope, meets Emperor Nicholas I at a ball, is not amused by the national amusement of chopping the head off — in her honour — of a political prisoner, whisks herself off to Stockholm where Jenny Lind invites her to the opera, sails to Iceland only to be shipwrecked by a marauding sea-Kraken, survives on the back of it, surveys the panoramic view of the globe from the North Pole, sails for London and a meeting with Prince Albert who arranges a procession to her Peckham home, saves her ‘Semi-Detached’ from an invading French army by hoisting ‘the British flag as a symbol of distress’, and though ‘Might conquers right’, accepts the hand of the French colonel and ‘his share of England when it is taken,’ living happily ever after!³⁸ The traveling adventures of Mrs R. end with a General Summary on the back-cover pages told in pictograms.³⁹ Adventure and imagination, indeed!

³⁸MS Edwards 424.

³⁹MS Edwards 424.



Figure 3. *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston*, 1848, Amelia B. Edwards, pen and ink on bound paper, Principal and Fellows of Somerville College, Oxford.

Perspective, portraiture, and anatomy are deftly delineated and character is clearly revealed through swift, sure stokes of pen and ink. Framed by walls and windows (Figure 2), ready cargo, bandboxes, canons, ballrooms, crowds, or mountains, Edwards uses the same tricks of perspective as Cruikshank. The main character Mrs R. invariably commands the foreground although aerial views provide a dramatic perspective when Mrs R. departs Berlin and when she lands on the North Pole. Profile or three-quarter angles for Mrs R., aided by the lace cap or distinctive coal-shuttle bonnet, provide recognizable portraiture. Edwards, connecting the fantastical to the historical, pens Emperor Nicholas I, Prince Albert, Sir Robert Peel, the Duke of Wellington, and others with authentic detail. Moustaches, hook noses, bedecked military uniforms, and even aloof body posture closely echo reality. The cross-hatch of draping shawls and voluminous skirts add volume, the zig-zag with dot and stipple adds shadow to night-time strolls, and the ‘S’ curve scribble of angry waves creates dramatic tension -- all work to provide shape, weight, and movement to Edwards’ narrative. Geographic space is also detailed and specific. The panel of Napoleon’s retreat from

Russia recalls an earlier Cruikshank etching ‘The Retreat from Moscow’,⁴⁰ with similar images of carnage and devastation reflected in Mrs R’s flight across Russia. A map of the polar ice cap is quite close to prevailing 1846-47 maps of the John Rae expedition.⁴¹ Even country-specific customs are highlighted. When Mrs R., complete with straight back and hand-held-high umbrella, practices the popular amusement of ice hill sliding, we see Russian gentlemen at the foot of the slide dancing the Kalinka.⁴² This detail grounds the comic in the real.

In every adventure and tight situation, Mrs R. remains a force to reckon with. Shipwrecks, wolves, frozen Frenchmen (Figure 3), even kraken do not fail to shake the imperturbable English sangfroid of Mrs R. She is an independent Victorian woman, albeit within a framework of the traditional social values of behaviour, dress, and marriage; yet, at seventeen, Edwards knew that British women, particularly British women travellers of a certain age, were capable of meeting any challenge...and surmounting it. Mrs R. is not a woman in the throes of poetic thrall, oblivious to blackened blinds, her husband’s pleas, and squalling children, and Mrs R’s travels, while full of misadventures, are not those of Cruikshank’s 1821 satirical print *Mer de Glace*, which was part of the series ‘Inconveniences of a Trip to the Continent’, complete with stormy weather and Alpine tourists clambering and stumbling across a ‘sea of glass’.⁴³ As Dorothy George notes, ‘the Grand Tourist had shown a lordly indifference to dangers and discomforts’,⁴⁴ and so it is with Mrs R. Although her epic adventure ends in a romantic wedding, the reader feels sure that the French colonel has more than met his match. He may have promised to share his portion of England with her when it is taken, but knowing Mrs R., she will soon have his share and more.

⁴⁰ John B. Brown, *The Book of Illustrations of George Cruikshank* (London: David & Charles, 1980), III. 3.

⁴¹ John, Rae, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Shores of the Arctic Sea in 1846 and 1847* (London: T. & W. Boone, 1850), frontispiece map.

⁴² MS Edwards 424.

⁴³ George Cruikshank, *Mer de Glace*, 1821, etching on paper, 204 mm x 266 mm, The Trustees of the British Museum.

⁴⁴ Dorothy George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire* (New York: Walker and Company, 1967), p. 217.

Biographer Brenda Moon notes that, *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston* presents a ‘racy chain of adventures in the manner of the picaresque novel; they show a love of storytelling, an interest in situations rather than in personalities, a love of travel, an amused and detached interest in current events, and an extravagant imagination’.⁴⁵ Edwards’ young hand is sure, her pen strokes are swift, and her humour is pointed. While Edwards’ youthful graphic novel was most likely for intimate family enjoyment, it nevertheless, provides a very colourful and clear picture of a Victorian woman who, through determination, agency, and resolve, triumphs in her adventures. Edwards may have married Mrs Roliston off to a French colonel, but times were changing. Women in the mid-1800s were finding their voice and as Claudine Hermann notes, women were finding their own physical and mental space within the freedom of personal travel.⁴⁶ It is clear that these youthful romantic sensibilities were later translated into very real explorations of self-discovery and independent female empowerment through Edwards’ own travels detailed in *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys: a Midsummer Ramble in the Dolomites* (1873) and *A Thousand Mile Up the Nile* (1876).

The words of Gombrich and Kris ring true – ‘A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself’⁴⁷ – and so it is with the graphic comics of George Cruikshank’s *My Wife is a Woman of Mind* and Amelia B. Edwards’ *The Travelling Adventures of Mrs Roliston*. These two works reveal the changing Victorian attitudes towards women’s agency and rights. The Woman of Mind, representing society’s prevailing attitudes towards the bluestocking, cares only for her own purposes, her own needs, and though she embraces the idea of humanity, all else, including her family, are held at bay. Mrs Roliston, illustrative of increased gender possibilities, determined of purpose and resourceful in action, interacts globally and locally. She may equally meet princes and peasants, but when her local home is threatened by invasion, she musters recruits and mounts an offensive. These two women of mind and purpose reveal much about the social and gender concerns of the age.

⁴⁵ Moon, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Claudine Hermann, *The Tongue Snatchers*, trans. Nancy Kline (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 6.

⁴⁷ Gombrich and Kris, p. 12.

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