

## “WE CAN DEVISE A THOUSAND HONEST WAYS OF MAKING A LIVELIHOOD”<sup>1</sup>

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Prompted by a sentence spoken by Agnes Grey's mother in Anne Brontë's title novel, “We can devise a thousand honest ways of making a livelihood”, I try to analyse the situation of middle-class women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as regards the possibilities of earning their own living. Whereas in previous centuries middle-class women could carry out a wide range of jobs without jeopardising their reputation of their families, a change in the idea of what it meant to be a member of the middle-class, especially the upper middle class, had left women with very few respectable and appropriate options: to become a writer or a governess. But even these occupations were not free from difficulties and could easily result in criticism and contempt on the part of their peers.

### INTRODUCTION

The Brontë sisters are probably one of the most extraordinary phenomena in the history of British literature taking into account that they were three writers who belonged to the same family and to the same generation, that they all became popular and reputed writers, having sold thousands of copies of their works over the years and that they were women. Of course, the three of them were devoted and gifted writers who had been read to or had themselves read books from their earliest years and who, along with their brother Branwell, had started to write and even to bind their own stories as children<sup>2</sup>. However, we might understand the phenomenon of these three women writers better if we take into consideration the situation of middle-class women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as regards their possibilities of earning their own living. Anne Brontë and her novel *Agnes Grey*, which deals with the life and experiences of a young governess in the Victorian period, are in our opinion a good example to show what the working opportunities of these women were.

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<sup>1</sup> Goreau, Angeline, ed. *Agnes Grey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte and Branwell wrote and bound, in small scale (4.75 to 6.4 centimetres by 3.5 to 5.1 centimetres), their own stories following the example of the popular *Blackwood's Magazine*. Emily and Anne also helped them in the invention of many other stories which made up a whole society with its own government, culture, laws and was populated by politicians, military officers, administrators, writers, musicians, etc. (Coperías 1996: 17).

According to the study carried out by Davidoff and Hall in their book *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class. 1780-1850* (1994<sup>3</sup>), at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the working situation of middle-class women had worsened in the sense that they had lost many opportunities to work outside their homes in comparison with previous periods, both in the countryside and in towns.

It seems that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century any farmer's or brewer's wife could ride miles on her own to the market to deal with any necessary business, whereas by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women who rode on their own were socially criticised unless they did so for health or leisure reasons (213). The introduction of new techniques or chemicals in farming also drew middle-class women away from the fields. The increase in the production and the new organization of work that the modern farming methods involved made it necessary to hire full-time workers who had few chances to become small independent owners and were therefore forced to remain on the lower levels of society. As a consequence of this, it was thought that young educated women, especially if they were single, should build physical and psychological barriers to prevent contact with these workers. At the same time, the massive presence of men in the fields made it difficult for women to exert authority (203), another reason for giving up their previous responsibilities in the organization of farms. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a farmer's wife world was limited to family care, church-going, visits to friends and some philanthropic activities (230).

For a long time, especially in the countryside, health care had been in the hands of women who picked or planted herbs which were later used for ointments or other remedies. Some changes in the social habits of the middle classes left women out of this field as well (Davidoff & Hall 1994:230-1). On the one hand, apothecaries took hold of the production of remedies for different illnesses as well as for cosmetic products. On the other, the thriving middle classes now preferred the expensive and prestigious services of doctors and consequently women were relegated to the role of mere caretenders.<sup>4</sup>

The establishment and consolidation of the textile industry during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century had given many women, some of them belonging to well off families, the chance to work as *spinsters*; however, at some point the chances to work in this field decreased and getting married was the only possibility of survival left to many women. That is the reason why the word *spinster* first referred to the person who spins but later started to be used to refer to unmarried women in a pejorative way (Davidoff & Hall 1994:202).

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<sup>3</sup> The book was originally written in 1987; however, all our references to the book (year of publication, pages) correspond to the Spanish version.

<sup>4</sup> Women were considered to have a natural disposition to take care of ill people, regardless the fact they were young or elderly, children, husbands or fathers (Hughes 1993:35; Davidoff & Hall 1994:268).

There is a contradiction, however, in the fact that the role of women in the family business was often essential, performing different important tasks, as long as this activity was carried out within the home, that is to say, as long as it was not seen by the rest of society. In many senses, women were the supporters of the family, not only taking care of its members, but also giving it dignity and status.

This identification of women with the home brought about a situation in which middle-class women could only work outside the house out of necessity. Whereas for men working was a means of self-fulfillment and prosperity, for women it could become a source of shame for herself and her family. In fact, a contemporary journal pointed out that

If a lady has to work for her livelihood, it is universally considered to be misfortune, an exception to the ordinary rule. [...] The theory of 'civilized life' holds that women of the upper and middle classes are supported either by their fathers or husbands. All our laws are framed strictly in accordance with this hypothesis; and all our social customs adhere to it more strictly still. We make no room in our social framework for any other idea.<sup>5</sup>

The only occasion when a woman could assume the economic role of a man, and not always completely, was when she became a widow. It has been documented by means of wills, for instance, that some middle-class women (mothers, step-mothers or even aunts) took over the temporary responsibility of the family business until one of the sons came of age (Davidoff & Hall 1994:211). Very often, though, even if completely capable, women would not be allowed to thrive but just to keep the family business in the state in which the husband had left it.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then, the working opportunities middle-class women had got became more and more meagre. In previous centuries, they could be found working in many different positions; apart from the ones we have pointed above, according to Davidoff and Hall (1994:237) there had been women prison warders, tinsmiths, plumbers, butchers or harness makers. By 1850, sewing and teaching were the main activities performed by middle-class women. In García Doncel's opinion (1988:240), there were only two trades that seemed to comply with the requirements of respectability and appropriateness that would make them perfectly acceptable for middle-class women: writer and teacher; however many of them would end up performing a less valued task, that of a seamstress. Later, we will focus on the difficulties women came up against if they wished to perform these two trades: that of a writer and that of a governess.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Market for Educated Female Labor" in *The English Woman's Journal*, IV/21: 145-6; quoted by both Goreau (1988:40) and Peterson (1980:10).

## 2. THE WORKING SITUATION OF VICTORIAN MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN

As we have pointed out above, middle- and upper-class women were supposed to be supported by their husbands or fathers; however, there were some circumstances that made this impossible.

Around the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Britain there were some concurrent factors which notably increased the number of single women, especially among the middle class. The 1861 census revealed that there were 1,053 women for every 1,000 men (Hughes 1993: 31), a fact which left some women with no chances at all of getting married. There might be different reasons for this unbalance: to start with, women seem to have lived longer, which consequently made their numbers to grow. Secondly, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, although not directly invaded, Britain had been involved in the Napoleonic wars, where the life of many soldiers had been lost. Finally, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain underwent a serious economic crisis. During the Napoleonic wars, which affected the whole of Europe, Britain had become a supplier of many goods for most of the continent; however, at the end of these wars in 1815, many factories had to close down. The new agricultural methods also made the need for labour in the countryside decrease. Unemployment became such a serious matter that a new “Poor Law” was issued in 1834. As a consequence of the economic crisis, part of the population decided to emigrate to one of the many colonies that at the time were part of the British Empire. Sometimes, it was whole families that risked starting a new life in an unknown place, but –due to the hardships they had to endure in the colonies– men used to go on their own, leaving the country without an important part of its male population. Another circumstance we should take into account to explain the unbalance between female and male population is the fact that, especially among the middle classes, men did not usually get married before they were thirty, an age at which a woman was inevitably considered a spinster.

If a woman could not get a husband to support her, fathers were not always a reliable resource either. Fathers were supposed to provide their daughters with a dowry big enough to allow them to get married; however, they might fail to do so for different reasons. It has been proved that the daughters of many merchants, surgeons, military officers, civil servants, solicitors or clergymen<sup>6</sup> were often left destitute. Some of these fathers seem to have been incompetent or unlucky in their professional activities, and the bank failures between the 1820s and 1850s do not seem to have helped much. This is the case, for instance, of Agnes Grey, whose father –a clergyman– lost an important amount of money in an unfortunate trading

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<sup>6</sup> These are the trades most often mentioned as occupations of governesses' fathers in an 1848 Report of the Board of Management of the Governesses' Benevolent Institution (Hughes 1993:28).

investment, leaving his family in a difficult economic situation and his two daughters without a dowry that might provide them with a husband. On other occasions it would be the lavish expenditure in order to prove the personal and public status that would lead these men to bankruptcy. Having an unusually large number of daughters also created a difficult economic situation for some fathers and these women.

However, the single most likely circumstance in which a young middle-class woman could find herself in a difficult economic situation was following the death of her father (Hughes 1993:29). As we have said above, middle-class men did not usually marry before they were in their thirties, but quite often they died when they were in their fifties, leaving behind them teenage children: girls who had not married yet and boys who could not take over the father's business or trade. In fact, life insurance became quite popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and men in the professions were their best clients, as it was they who could leave their families in the worst situation, used as they were to a life of leisure (Hughes 1993:29; Davidoff & Hall 1994:149).

If women found themselves destitute, as we have described above, why could they not go out and earn their own living? Whereas a woman belonging to a lower social class and who had received no education could work as a servant, cook, washerwoman, cowgirl, factory worker or even shop-assistant, a middle-class woman could only perform these tasks at the cost of her position and respectability, and also putting her family's in danger. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there had been a change in the idea of what belonging to the middle class, especially the upper middle class, meant. As the better-off members of the middle class tried to become the moral, political and intellectual leaders of the country, they decided to take on some aspects of the nobility and aristocracy. Consequently, the terms *lady* and *gentleman*, which up to then had been used to refer to people born in the landowning classes, were revised and expanded so that members of the middle classes could be included. Although during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century it had been a common practice to acquire titles, and the younger sons of the gentry had started trading or professional activities and the daughters of rich merchants had married into the nobility, providing an important source of money, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century many of these men were excluded from the definition of gentleman. However, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to their professional success and by paying careful attention to their dress, speech or behaviour, they managed to secure themselves a place in the status of gentility (Hughes 1993:11-13).

The situation of women, though, was quite different, since any paid working activity would make them lose their status. As a contemporary writer pointed out<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ellis, Sarah. *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. London, 1839: 463; quoted by Hughes (1994: 13).

gentlemen may employ their hours of business in almost any degrading occupation and, if they but have the means of supporting a respectable establishment at home, may be gentlemen still; while, if a lady but touch any article, no matter how delicate, in the way of trade, she loses caste and ceases to be a lady.

In fact, the leisured classes in the Victorian period were defined in opposition to the working classes not so much by the work carried out by men, since most of them did work, but by the leisure of women (Peterson 1980:10). The amount of servants in a house, who took over most of the work and even the responsibilities of women there, turning them into “women of leisure”, was a symbol of wealth and status for a man and his family. Subsequently, women of the middle classes became more and more excluded from any kind of jobs, especially those paid and “visible”, and became more and more associated with the unproductive domestic sphere (Langland 1989:24; Davidoff & Hall 1994:204).

This situation can be easily seen in the differences in education between girls and boys. Even if girls attended a school or were educated by hiring a governess, their commitment was always to a lesser extent than that of their brothers. The goal of women’s education was mostly to provide them with a finishing polish and some showy accomplishments which might help them to get an appropriate husband (Langland 1989:25). For boys, education was part of their training as businessmen in their adult life; consequently, they attended school for a longer period and the contents of their education were sounder and more practical. Even regarding more leisured activities, such as drawing, there were differences between girls and boys. Gifted girls might even be trained in the skill of drawing and get some of their work exhibited; however, they would never be considered “professional” painters and have their paintings sold,<sup>8</sup> as could be the case with their fathers or brothers (Davidoff & Hall 1994:232).

Constrained then to working in the domestic sphere, middle-class women were left with few opportunities, and even these were not free of difficulties. We want to focus now on the situation that writers, like Anne Brontë, or governesses, like her heroine Agnes Grey, had to face.

### 3. WRITING: KEEPING WITHIN PROPRIETY

The general attitude towards women writers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was not favourable at all and there seemed to be only two reasons for a woman to write with

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<sup>8</sup> In *Agnes Grey*, Mrs. Grey suggests her elder daughter Mary to do some paintings to contribute to the family economy, and Helen Graham, the protagonist of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, when she leaves her husband, manages to survive for some time thanks to selling some of her paintings; however, it was difficult that a woman could make a living out of her work as a painter.

a view to publication: moral zeal and economic distress. As long as women wrote in their roles of caring “mothers” or “sisters” to other women, that is to say, setting an example and offering guidance, they were allowed and even encouraged to write books, as this would be a way to reach more people. They might also be accepted as writers of children literature or light fiction. But there was a rejection towards the public evidence of their creative ability; it was more acceptable for them to be translators of other people’s texts than if they claimed to be the authors of their own writings (Davidoff and Hall 1994:229).

Women writers were not supposed to have any literary ambitions and they were rejected even by their own colleagues. In the late 1830s, Charlotte Brontë sent the poet laureate Robert Southey some of her poetry asking for his opinion. In his letter answering her, he said that

Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation.<sup>9</sup>

As Southey points out, a woman had “her proper duties” and she was thought to be the source or keeper of moral idealism. In fact this was the idea defended by many women, as can be seen in the countless amount of manuals written on womanhood. The most popular writer of these manuals was probably Sarah Ellis, who wrote the series *The Women of England* (1839)<sup>10</sup>, *The Daughters of England* (1842) and *The Wives of England* (1843). The first one is considered by some scholars as a blueprint for many novels written at the time on woman, home and family, some of them written by Sarah Ellis herself (Ewbank 1966:40).

It was this trend of thought which established when a book could be considered “womanly” or “unwomanly”. And that is the reason why many women would rather sign as “a lady”, in order to protect their privacy and try to be judged without prejudices. This was, no doubt, the case of the Brontë sisters, as Charlotte explained in the “Biographical Notice” which preceded the 1850 edition of her sisters’ novels *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; ...we did not like to declare ourselves women, because –without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’– we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise (quoted by Ewbank [1966:1])

<sup>9</sup> *The Shakespeare Head Life and Letters (The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, four volumes edited by T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, Oxford, 1932: 155; quoted by Ewbank (1966:5).

<sup>10</sup> See note 7.

According to Charlotte Brontë, then, 19<sup>th</sup> century critics had what could be called a double “morality” in the sense that they judged a book differently depending on whether it had been written by a man or a woman, as women had to remain within certain limits proper to their womanliness and which states that a pure feminine mind must know no sin, no evil and no sexual passion (Ewbank 1966:43). As Ewbank says in her book about the Brontës (1966:46) the word “coarse” was often used to refer to their novels since they present “realism of action”, including brutal fights, nasty children or unpleasant young ladies; show a “lack of prudishness in language”; use “scriptural quotations and images for profane purposes” and make evident the authoresses’ “insight into human passion and human evil”.

In spite of all the difficulties and prejudices, more and more women were writing. *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* mentions over forty women novelists who published some three hundred new novels between the 1830s and the 1840s. To these figures, an important amount of anonymously published novels should be added, as well as new editions of earlier novels and translations of novels by foreign women writers. And there was also an important number of women’s magazines which published the work of many female authors (Ewbank 1966:6).

One question we should take into account is the parallel increase in the amount of female readership. In spite of all the difficulties and all the shortcomings that affected the education of women, it is true that more and more girls, especially those belonging to the middle classes, had the chance to get some kind of education. At the same time, as we have been showing throughout this paper, middle-class women, having been denied some of their previous activities –even those related with the organization of the house– enjoyed a greater amount of free time, part of which they would devote to reading novels.

Although women novelists at that period seem to have written all kinds of fiction, they showed preference for some novel subgenres, more adapted to their own taste or that of their, mainly female, readers. The Gothic romance, later to develop into the historical romance, became very popular among women writers. The “fashionable” novel offered a detailed account of high-society life, sometimes including satirical comments. The moral, religious or didactic novel had an established tradition, which had started with the Irish writer Maria Edgeworth in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it fitted the role middle-class women were given in society at the time. The new economic and social reality created by the Industrial Revolution and the conditions of working-class women had opened new possibilities for the social problem novel. However, the distress of these women was unknown to, or at least unacknowledged by, middle-class women writers, unlike the distress suffered by another group of “working” women: governesses. Although some authors consider that it is not accurate to speak about the “governess novel” as a subgenre (Hughes 1993:2), it is also true that only in the

period between 1814 and 1835 governesses appeared in different degrees of relevance in at least one hundred and forty novels, although some of the most popular ones were published in later years: Mrs. Sherwood's *Caroline Mordaunt* (1835), Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* (1839), Lady Blessington's *The Governess* (1839), Mrs. Sewell's *Amy Herbert* (1844), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847).

#### 4. TEACHING: BEHAVING LIKE A LADY

Governesses had been popular figures in noble households since the Middle Ages; in the same way as the middle classes acquired some of the habits and attitudes of the aristocracy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we have explained in section 2, they also started to hire governesses as a token of their economic power. A governess, like the rest of the servants, proved to what extent the mistress of the house was a lady of leisure thus showing to what extent her husband was a rich man. At the same time, as mothers, these ladies had been up to then in charge of teaching their daughters how to run a house, abilities which became useless as they did not need them any longer. Instead, young middle-class girls were in need of new accomplishments, such as playing an instrument, singing, drawing, and a smattering of French or German, that would allow them to move smoothly in high society and attract a rich husband, and that most of their mothers could not teach them. These governesses became more and more popular among the middle class and by 1851 there were about 25,000 governesses working in England (Peterson 1980:4).

The problem was that to teach a young girl how to become a lady, another lady was necessary, as it was not just a question of knowledge or contents, but a question of attitude and behaviour. But, as we have explained above, a lady was not supposed to work for money; who could, then, be a governess? According to Lady Eastlake, a contemporary writer and an expert on the subject,

the real definition of a governess, in the English sense, is a being who is our equal in birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth. Take a lady, in every meaning of the word, born and bred, and let her father pass through the gazette [bankruptcy], and she wants nothing more to suit our highest *beau idéal* of a guide and instructress to our children.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, it was destitute young middle-class girls who mostly occupied these positions, and many of them grew old working as governesses. This was the case of Anne Brontë, whose father –a clergyman– never had the means to keep his three daughters and they all had to work as teachers, governesses or, later in life, writers.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Peterson (1980:10).

Or the case of Agnes Grey, the title protagonist of Anne Brontë's novel, the bankruptcy of whose father –also a clergyman, by the way– leads her to take up a position as a governess with two different families.<sup>12</sup>

There was a contradiction, though, in this situation, because as soon as a lady started working as a governess, she lost her status as such. Middle-class families, which up to then had not been used to having governesses at home, had great difficulties in knowing how to treat them.<sup>13</sup> They were not a relative, a guest, a peer or a servant, although they were sooner treated as a servant than as a peer.<sup>14</sup> However, it was necessary to acknowledge the governess's ladyhood, as they represented the confirmation of the family's, and especially the young girls', gentility. But, at the same time, to treat a governess as a full family member was to drag the girls in the family down to her own status (Hughes 1993:88). They also suffered the treatment dispensed to them by the servants in the house, who considered governesses as dependent as they were but belonging to a higher level, something that created distrust in maids or butlers, for instance.

Another problem governesses had to face was, in fact, how to perform their own work. On the one hand, parents –especially mothers– might be some kind of a hindrance rather than a help in their educating task. Governesses were required to teach children some manners and rules of behaviour, but very often they were not granted the authority to do so, or even worse, they were deprived of their authority in front of the children. On the other, although they had all the accomplishments proper to a lady, they had no specific training about how to deal with their young pupils or how to teach them. Getting any training as teachers would have meant that they expected to have to work at some stage in their lives, which would have meant the immediate loss of their status as ladies. This situation started to change in the 1840s: in 1843, the Governesses' Benevolent Institution was established with the aim of coping with the different needs governesses might have during their working years or after retirement; in 1848, Queen's College was founded in London in order to offer governesses a better training and, consequently, better working opportunities.

Finally, they also had to face the problem of low salaries. Between 1830 and 1890 governesses' salaries varied from 20 to 100 pounds per year, although the average was something between 35 to 80 pounds (Hughes 1993:155). Although it is true that they did not have to worry about lodgement expenses, they had to pay for their own laundry, travel and medical care. They were also required to dress with

<sup>12</sup> Some authors consider *Agnes Grey* an autobiography of Anne Brontë; see Coperías (2000:28-40) for a further analysis.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, several etiquette manuals appeared between 1840 and 1860 advising both the governess and her employer on how to deal with one another (Hughes 1993:xii).

<sup>14</sup> In *Agnes Grey*, Agnes must address the children she is in charge of as "master" and "miss", which shows that she is considered a servant, otherwise, she would address them by using their Christian names.

propriety, which meant spending an important amount of money, and quite often they were in charge of buying the teaching material (books, musical scores, etc.) they used in their classes.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Around the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a movement to increase the working opportunities for middle class women<sup>15</sup>, although –in general– they were aimed at procuring different kinds of jobs for low middle-class women –the daughters of clerks and tradesmen–, so that the governing profession would not be too crowded and could be left to those women belonging to a higher status. The situation, then, improved slightly in the sense that there was a wider distribution of middle-class women working in different jobs and, for instance, governesses, once competition had been removed, could demand higher salaries or at least more appropriate to their duties and responsibilities.

Nonetheless, the situation of middle-class women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century deteriorated notably with respect to the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as they had lost an important part of their legal rights –for instance, regarding property– as well as working opportunities. According to Davidoff and Hall (1994:10-13, 147), throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, male identity became linked to the concept of a profession, whereas the female identity was linked to domestic life and the household; men belonged to the “public world” and women to the “private world”; men were related to “production” and women to “reproduction”. Thus, women could not be considered “active economic agents”.

In spite of the words of Agnes Grey’s mother, “we can devise a thousand honest ways of making a livelihood”, when Mr. Grey complains that his daughters will not manage to find a husband because his financial incompetence has left them without a dowry, as we have tried to explain, this was not an easy task for middle-class women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due –especially– to the restrictions imposed by the middle-class society itself.

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<sup>15</sup> A group of women known as the “Ladies of Langham Place”, who published their own journal (the *English Woman’s Journal*), suggested jobs such as shop assistant, clerical worker, hairdresser, wood-engraver or jewellery-maker for lower middle-class women (Hughes 1993:188-191). One of the members of this group, Barbara Leigh-Smith, also published in 1854 “Women and Work, a statement of the necessity for paid work for middle-class women” (Shaw 1994:129).

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