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Pretty Women Don't Drive: Early Women Motorists and the Taming of the Motor-Car



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“Ladies will not give up motoring, and they certainly will not give up smart frocks.”
–*Daily Telegraph & Courier* (2 July 1905)

“Why don't pretty women drive?” In a 1906 letter to *The Autocar*, a male correspondent wrote in disgust about women motorists—“the few I encounter are invariably either ladies of uncertain age, with wizened features and pince-nez, or of a pronounced masculine suffragite [*sic*] stamp” (*An Observer*). Another male writer, ironically signing his name as “An admirer of a lady,” accused women drivers of being unladylike “would-be men” from whose hands “motor cars will be wrested” because “the steering wheel is essentially a place for a man” (*An Admirer*, 2 Jun.). In a follow-up comment, he further insisted that “ladies should not drive, just like ladies should not stroll into the bar and noisily demand her half-pint. We all draw the line of distinction between the sexes somewhere” (*An Admirer*, 16 Jun.). *The Scotsman* insisted that women simply “have not the mechanical mind” (“*Women Motorists*”), while the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* dismissed the whole subject by concluding that “[I]t is quite a mistake to suppose that driving a motor car is ... as easy as pushing a perambulator” (“*Ladies as Motorists*”). Even the influential novelist Lady Violet Greville was against the idea of women motorists, admitting that “few women have the coolness, the nerve, the resourcefulness necessary to pilot through crowded thoroughfares and among the hundred and one suddenly arriving contingencies that try nerve and skill” (“*Should Ladies Drive?*” *Car*).

Women's access to machine-aided speed and automobility was always a touchy issue, and a good case in point had been the great furor over the woman cyclist during the mid-1890s bicycle craze (*Rubinstein* 51; *Marks* 184). Ten years later, after the British public had largely accepted the female cyclist and her expanded mobility, a new heated debate broke out in the pages of turn-of-the-century British mass press over the rise of women motorists. By 1905, their number had arisen to 2,500 in England (“*Should Ladies Drive Motor-cars?*” 12),¹ The debate was first started in motoring

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¹Dorothy Levitt claimed in her 1909 book that “there is no country in the world where women may be seen driving at the wheel so frequently as in England” (85).

journals like *Motoring Illustrated*, *Car (Illustrated)* and *The Autocar*, where both male and female readers wrote in to argue their cases. It was then “purloined by many papers” and spread to the general press (“*La Chauffeuse*” 30 Sept. 1905), where the attitude was much more negative, and “some of the leading dailies have even gone so far as to suggest that women should be prohibited from driving a motor-car at all” (“*Should Ladies Drive?*” *Gentlewoman*). Despite the relatively small number of women motorists, the debate attracted what automobile historian Hugh Barty-King calls “a disproportionate amount of publicity” (53). Some of the earlier anxiety over women’s “encroach[ment] ... on a man’s province” (*Iota*) was revived, but new objections arose and evolved along a different set of discourse, largely due to the distinct character of the early motor-car.

The early motor-car, sold at the prohibitive price of 800 to 1200 pounds apiece (“*Price of Motor Cars*”), was noisy, smelly, difficult to operate, and pursued by young aristocratic men for adventure, racing, and “fever of mobility”.² It sounded like “an avalanche of tea trays” to one critic (Brendon 54), and like “a wagon-load of tin-kettles” to another (“*Lady and Motor Car*”). When standing at rest, it “frets and fumes” (“*Ibid*”), and when running it caused great pollution by raising “extraordinary volume” of “clouds of dust” that left “windows, doors and gardens smothered in dust” (Rutulan, 29 Aug. 1903). The car’s open top, heavy weight, hand-operated cranks, explosive vibrations, constant breakdowns and unprotected exposure to wind, dust and rough roads made for a physically challenging driving experience.. Rudyard Kipling, one of the earliest car-owners in Britain when he began in the late 1890s, described his early motoring experience as beset with “agonies, shames, delays, rages, chills, parboilings, road-walkings, water-drawings, burns and starvations” (qtd. in Young 285). For women motorists, one specific problem was the physical strength needed for steering. “The greatest [problem with a petrol car] is the starting handle,” one woman motorist admitted in 1904: “Not one woman in a hundred has strength sufficient to turn the handle. It is hard work for a man. If a lady stops anywhere she will have to get someone to start the car for her” (Rutulan, 19 Oct. 1904). Another problem was the lack of mechanics and garages in those early years, forcing the motorists to do most repairs by themselves. For women, this “involves work both heavy and dirty” – “the mere male is willing to wade through oil, grease and many cog-wheels to his insecure seat” and was not averse to the “disagreeable task of crawling beneath the car to affect some adjustment,” but this would be “fatal” to “any self-respecting woman” (Peer). It was only by 1907 that motoring became increasingly safer and easier, with the advent of a series of technological improvements

²*The Time*, quoted in Shepherd 381. The word motor-car was coined by Frederick Simms when he acquired the British rights to the Daimler patents in 1893. Daimler had earlier invented the first high-speed, petrol-driven engine in the late 1880s (Richardson 14).

including the use of the electric starter, the quiet propulsion system, streamlined and interchangeable parts, and the rise of a national garage and maintenance system (Mom, "Civilized Adventure" 183).³ For most of the first decade, however, motoring was still an open-topped affair and offered quite a different experience from that of the mass car culture which came about after the First World War.

These obstacles did not, however, stop some adventurous-minded women from making their presence felt, first as passengers but increasingly as drivers. Many of them had been eager pioneers of women's cycling before but were now embracing the motor-car for the excitement of greater speed and range. Though manufacturers promoted the lighter and more stable electric car for women, most women ended up preferring the less reliable but much faster and more powerful petrol car (Scharff 76; Shepherd 384). In the "women's page" of motoring journals and in booklets, manuals and autobiographies, they worked hard to combat the public disapproval of women motorists. Often refraining from a direct identification with the suffragettes or confrontational assertion of women's rights, they sought greater persuasion by aestheticizing motor-driving and transforming it into a glamorous and safely feminine pursuit. Through a strategic emphasis on women motorists' fashionable elegance and status display and by linking motoring with an accelerating commodity culture of conspicuous consumption, they were able to argue for a place for women in early motoring culture. The women often played along with conservative stereotypes that seemed to belittle women, but managed to turn them round in an unobtrusive manner to garner more public support. Through these means, early women motorists launched themselves into the thrills and complications of motoring culture while also insisting on the pleasures of feminine elegance and fashionable display.

Early motoring is a burgeoning subject and recent scholarship has moved beyond viewing the motor-car as a technological and industrial product. Studies have focused on the socio-cultural aspects related to driving, including the motor-car as an icon of modern speed culture (Duffy), its symbiotic relationship with the mass press through a shared pursuit of speed, novelty and ceaseless change (Shepherd), and car-driving as an embodied process of mobility and experience of space-time (Merriman). Scholarship on early women motorists has carved out a detailed literary and cultural cartography of women's participation in modern motor culture and their enlarged mobility, enhanced sense of agency and mechanical know-how (Clarke; Clarsen; Mom, *Atlantic Automobilmism*; Scharff; Wosk). This article focuses on fashion

³Press coverage also suggests an explosion of interest in the first decade of the new century. A survey by this author of turn-of-the-century London newspapers shows that while there were 2000 mentions of the motor-car in 1896, a steep jump from 1895's 200, the number stood largely unchanged in the next few years until exploding in the first decade of 1900–1909, when it reached 104, 502.

and consumerist display and argues that these, too, played a crucial role in changing public perceptions of women motorists. Fashion and dress took up a prominent space in women's motoring press and constituted a major part of women's writings on early motoring. While this fashion-focus appealed to women readers and aligned women's motoring press more with mainstream women's periodicals rather than the heavily technical men's motoring press, it also served as an active strategy employed by women motorists to ease women's access to early motoring.

Men may criticize this as trivial and as evidence of women's lack of serious interest in expertise and know-how, but women managed to deflect opposition by emphasizing that in displaying fashion and status, traditionally women's role in the bourgeois gendered ideology of separate spheres, women motorists were working inside a safely feminine province and not traversing into male privileges. A second issue is that with the escalation of a modern culture of commodity display, the rise of modern advertising, the increasing appeal to visual stimulation in commercial urban space, as well as the greater public freedoms for middle-class women as they visited the department stores and other "fairy palaces" of consumption (Benjamin, *Arcades Projects* 37), the role of women as symbol of display and icon of consumerist modernity took on an unprecedented importance. Consumption "situated femininity at the heart of the modern," and was now "a familial and civic duty for the middle-class woman" (Felski 65). That role was now seamlessly transmitted into motoring as women motorists, offering a sea of information and a phantasmagoria of visual images of clothes, hats, veils and car upholstery in their motoring literature, used fashion and display to underline their integration into the key values and progressive tides of modernity. The motor-car offered unprecedented speed and fast motion, qualities traditionally denied to women who were linked with passivity, stasis, confining domesticity (Chen 610) or the premodern (Felski 61). But by highlighting fashion, display and ceaseless stimulation of consumerist desire, women motorists were aligning themselves with the incessant change and linear progress of consumerist modernity. A final, more important issue is that women motorists' fashionable display also helped to further embed the early motor-car in an escalating modern culture of commodity display. Women's entry into early motoring coincided with concomitant efforts by the car industry to popularize the motor-car and transform it from a machine of adventure and athleticism into a commodity of conspicuous display. With their expertise and iconic role in commodity culture, women recognized that the motor-car was not just a machine of speed but fast becoming an ultimate accessory of fashion that offered unparalleled opportunities of display. These women understood that spectacle and display, increasingly articulating identity in the modern era, not just glamorized women motorists but also the motor-car itself and the motoring movement

in general. Fashion and display was therefore crucial in popularizing the motor-car and further incorporating it within the broader tides of consumerist modernity.

“A bright butterfly of fashion”

The mass press had been crucial in aiding and spreading the popularity of the early motor-car. The *Daily Mail*, owned by car enthusiast Alfred Harmsworth, regularly covered motor trials and motor news since its first issue in May 1896, and ran a column “The Muse among the Motors” by Rudyard Kipling in 1900. Special motoring journals like *The Autocar* (November 1895), *Motoring Illustrated* (January 1902), and *Car (Illustrated)* (May 1902) were also launched. By the first years of the new century, regular columns on women and the car were published in society papers like *Tatler*, *Daily Graphic* and *Gentlewoman*. *Motoring Illustrated* ran two regular columns called “La Chauffeuse” and “Modes of Motoring” since 1902, and *Gentlewoman*’s fortnightly column “Motors and Motoring” started from 17 January 1903 and later changed to “Woman and the Car” on 2 March 1907. When the Ladies’ Automobile Club was founded in 1903, with an initial membership of three hundred lady motorists, *Lady’s Realm* published a 7-page special report. In 1906 journalist and popular writer Eliza; [Aria](#) published a book *Woman and the Motor Car: Being the Autobiography of an Automobilist*. In 1908 *Daily Graphic* ran a series of articles by the famed lady motorist Dorothy; [Levitt](#), later published in 1909 as a bestselling handbook *The Woman and the Car: A Chatty Little Handbook for All Women Who motor or Who Want to Motor*.

The actress Minnie Palmer was the first British woman to drive a car and to own her car, receiving delivery of her French-made Rougemont in September 1897 ([Wosk](#) 116). *Car (Illustrated)* reported on an 1897 ride made by the “plucky chauffeuse” Mrs. Bernard Weguelin two days after her husband bought his De Dion automobile, “to the utter mystification of all lookers-on, to whom the spectacle of a lady on a car was altogether new” ([An Expert](#)). In January 1898 *The Autocar* published “A Lady’s Experience in Motoring 1896–1898” by “Up to date,” who wrote that “I am fond of my horses, and like my bicycle, but I find a motor car far more convenient and pleasant than either.” She also claimed that “I found it quite easy” to drive a car and believed that a woman “would be a better driver than a man,” because she could steer a car “more delicately” and thus better “pass or get out the way of any obstructions” ([Up-to-date](#)). A week later, *The Autocar* published a response from another lady motorist who “confirm[ed]” everything “Up to date” had written and declared that “there is nothing to approach the motor car both for comfort, speed and safety” (“[A Lady’s Experience](#)”). In September 1899, *The Autocar*’s editorial “Notes” opined

that although “we fear the number of lady automobilists does not warrant the formation of an organization for their special benefit at present,” “we shall be only too pleased” if “[t]hat indefatigable young person Miss N. G. Bacon” should succeed in her plan for a ladies’ club after women members were rejected by the Automobile Club of Great Britain. Miss Bacon, suggested the editorial, had always been an enthusiast for women’s automobility and “was very indignant a few years ago because the National Cyclists’ Union dis-couraged bicycle racing for women” (“Notes”).

This reference to Miss Bacon’s previous history as an avid cyclist is significant because many early women motorists had been cycling pioneers in their youth. Miss Bacon had, in as early as 1886, welcomed the bicycle, “this dainty mechanism of steel,” for opening up such “new worlds” for women (qtd. in Hanlon 39). “Up to date” of *The Autocar* also admitted she was “fond of my horses and like my bicycle” but found the motor car “far more convenient and pleasant” (Up-to-date). Mrs. Edward Kennard, who wrote about her cycling experiences in her novel *The Golf Lunatic and His Cycling Wife* (1902), went on to write *The Motor Maniac* (1903) where she claimed that “once you take to motoring, it was all over with cycling,” because “[c]ycling seemed a lot of hard work for nothing (42).” In 1899, when the Rational Dress League held a parade in Reading and attracted many lady cyclists, “[s]ome few pioneers arrived independently and one ... came on a motor-car” (“Rational Dress Parade”). One pioneer lady motorcyclist was also known to have been “among the very first to ride a bicycle in and around Cheltenham” (“Lady Motorcyclist”).

Motoring may prove physically challenging, but the excitement of women motorists was palpable as they sang praise of motoring’s contribution to the creation of an expanded, more alert and healthier self, “bright eyes, clear, if somewhat tanned complexion,” “brisk, light footsteps” and “alert and graceful carriage” (“Motor Modes”). The women enthused unanimously over the “fine, careless rapture” of speed (Aria 56), “the glorious sensation of racing” (Kennard, *Motor Maniac* 59) and “the true poetry of motion” like “a powerful bird flying swiftly through the air” (12). Levitt best summarized this thrill of speed in a 1905 interview for the *Daily Telegraph*, as “[s]imply exhilarating” and “positively heavenly,” a thrill that came when racing “at about a hundred miles an hour for an hour at a steady, ceaseless flow, with the air roaring past one’s ears and the engine singing its song of triumph.” It would be, as she concluded, “a sensation worth years of ordinary life (‘Joy of Speed’).”

Motoring offered the exhilaration of transcending human limits, but also the almost erotic excitation of conquering and subjugating a powerful, masculine machine. *Motoring Illustrated’s* “La Chauffeuse” wrote in implicitly sexual terms:

Woman's love of power and tyrannizing over something stronger than herself is the reason for her love of motoring. Fascinating to subjugate power unto herself. She likes to hold in the hollow of her hand a huge, throbbing, twenty-horse motor – or its equivalent in masculinity. "This is my creature, this huge, pounding, vibrating powerful entity," was the exultant feeling uppermost in the mind of the writer on the solitary occasion she drives a twenty-horse Daimler. It was the pride of conquest. Serpent, man or motor must all in turn fall victims. Otherwise of what use would it be to be born a woman? (27 Sept. 1902)

This palpable excitement by women motorists, coupled with their increasing number, were perceived with mounting unease and alarm by many male commentators. When the debate over whether women should drive broke out in the pages of the mass press, some women motorists called out male critics for being behind the time and resorted to a rhetoric of modernity and progress. In a direct rebuttal to the condescending "admirer of a lady" in *The Autocar*, a lady motorist wrote in to accuse him of failing to "advance with the times" or to realize that "women of the present day are not the silly nervous creatures of the period of Jane Austin's novels" (*A Lady Driver*). Other lady correspondents declared that "modern women" were "no longer frail" "ninnies of the Victorian era" (*Onwarde*). *Motoring Illustrated's* "*La Chauffeuse*" column published lady motorists who protested that "[m]en always try to take away from women any sport or amusement that gives exhalation, nerve, courage, then they crush their spirt and laugh at them for sitting at home" (2 Sept. 1905). The column cited the example of early women's cycling and how it was "criticized strongly at first," implying that women's motoring would likely follow a similar path and become "an established fact" with the passage of time (16 Sept. 1905). In its March 4, 1905 issue, the column asserted that nothing better represented the woman of the future than the "motorienne," who was the archetype of the modern "twentieth century woman," with her "[e]ye hidden behind goggles, her temper crushing, her mind bent on reaching one hundred and twenty miles an hour, her taste wavering between the chain and cardan," "[w]orthy of the chariot of Venus on four wheels that is called a motor car" ("*La Chauffeuse*" 4 Mar. 1905).

Such direct rebuttal of male critics was, however, relatively uncommon, as most women commentators sought a safer path by linking women's motoring to reassuring traditions while at the same time claiming new possibilities. The most common tactic was to aestheticize women motorists, highlight their fashionable display and emphasize that this was always an appropriately feminine role. This fashion focus was partly a response to a frequent target for public ridicule, the women motorists' ugly appearance and the "unwomanly rags" they wore ("*La Chauffeuse*" 30 Sept. 1905). This was something unique to motoring, as the earlier rational costume for women cyclists, also attacked for its unwomanliness, was seldom referred to as rags because its

perceived ugliness derived more from its indecorum. For women motorists, however, the much faster speed of motoring and the exposure to dust and wind meant that women needed extra protection to shield their hair and complexion on top of the need to stay warm. As Virginia Scharf points out, women motorists had to wear first the motoring coat made either of leather or rubber or fur, then goggles and heavy veils and hats, and finally a waterproof rubber hood, shoulder cape and an “all-weather motoring mask” that “approximated a large bucket inverted over the head” (16). This led to a motoring outfit that was exceedingly ungainly, more objectionable on esthetic rather than moral grounds. Satirical press like the *Punch* jeered at the ugliness of the motoring costume in general but women motorists took more than their share of the ridicule; often they appeared as hideous aliens deprived of beauty and humanity (Figure 1), equated with a machine (the goddess from a machine) and smelling of odorous petrol (Figure 2).

To achieve greater public acceptance, most women columnists and writers went out of their ways to emphasize the graceful elegance of women motorists. Unlike the technically focused and information-heavy format of the motoring press targeting men, women’s motoring literature looked very much like mainstream women’s magazines. The pages were crammed with photos and illustrations of stylish lady motorists, fashion tips and news of fashion sales, imparting a message that to dress well and be in fashion was



THE ONLY WAY TO ENJOY A MOTOR-CAR RIDE THROUGH A DUSTY COUNTRY. ADOPT COSTUMES OF THE ABOVE TYPE, HERMETICALLY SEALED AND WARRANTED DUST-PROOF.

Figure 1. *Punch* 1901.



DEA EX MACHINĀ. THE GODDESS OUT OF THE CAR.

“But what is this? What thing of sea or land?
Female of sex it seems,
That so bedecked, ornate, and gay,
Comes this way, sailing
Like a stately ship.

• • • • •
An amber scent of odoriferous perfume
Her harbinger.”—MILTON, *Samson Agonistes*.

Figure 2. *Punch* 1903.

one of the chief pleasures of motoring. Writing a weekly column “Costumes and Chatter” under the pen name “The Goddess in the Car,” the wife of John Scott Montagu, founder of *Car (Illustrated)*, offered regular advice on “reversible tweeds and fur tartans, crepe de Chine veils and astrakhan wraps,” and best motoring coats made from the skins of “silver baboons, blue foxes, Russian colts, wild cats, chamois, racocons, otters, wombats or opossums” (Brendon 116). *Gentlewoman’s* “Modes and Motoring” and *Motoring Illustrated’s* “La Chauffeuse” also published in almost every issue photos of seductive-looking women motorists as well as illustrations of the latest motoring fashion (Figures 3–8).

This fashion emphasis appealed to women readers, but it also served the serious purpose of promoting a fashionable, attractive image of women’s motoring in order to thwart conservative attempts at tarnishing women motorists. When women motorists found that the Savoy Theater productions still featured ugly female motorists in goggles, masks and overalls (“*Modes for Motorists*” 20 Sept. 1902), or when the *Punch* caricatured female motorists dressed in mother-goose-like calf-skin costumes, they responded with great fury and dismay—“I would explode him!” – declared one commentator (7 Mar. 1903). They accused the popular press, which “make us wear ugly winter clothes” and “repeat parrot phrases about women long after they cease to be fact” (7 Mar. 1903), to be guilty of “inventing” a “libel” in order to dissuade women from motoring (Annesley 67). Such was their eagerness to



Figure 3. Gentlewoman July 6, 1907.



Figure 4. Gentlewoman July 6, 1907.



Figure 5. “Mrs. Randell, Who is an enthusiastic Motorist” *Lady’s Realm* 1904.



Figure 6. “Attractive motor veils” *Gentlewoman*.



Figure 7. Motoring illustrated.



Figure 8. Motoring illustrated July 5, 1902.

make women's motoring attractive that they turned on the "early examples" of some women pioneers and accused these of "dress[ing] like divers down under the sea, golly-wogs, and bogies" ("*Modes for Motorists*" 31 May 1902). Ugly pictures of women motorists were sometimes printed as a warning (*Figure 9*), while the columnists urged earnestly that "[w]e should impress the public this is the past" ("*Grave Face*" 5 Jul. 1902). The Ladies' Automobile Club was praised for having "a goodly company of graceful and beautiful womanhood," who showed that "beauty and skill in motoring go so frequently hand in hand" (8 Aug. 1902). Levitt presented herself as "a bright butterfly of fashion" (*Byng-Hall* 7), and stressed in her interview that she did not believe in "making a Polar-bear exhibition of herself;" she had long ditched goggles for mica mask and chiffon veil, and was always able to alight from her car after the longest expedition like any "well-dressed Englishwoman, unruffled and neat" ("*A Lady Motor Racer*").

This was a shrewd tactic because, for one, feminine display was traditionally an important means of showing off middle-class status and respectability. An emphasis on fashion would have subsumed the otherwise menacing women motorists under the established Victorian norms of gendered divisions of labor whereby men were associated with the serious world of



Figure 9. "A Grave Face" *Motoring illustrated* July 5, 1902.

production and industry and women relegated to consumption and leisure (Veblen 132). The message would be that, although these women may be new and daring in mastering the powerful motor-car, they still followed patriarchal norms whereby women were valued for their beauty, youthful attraction and elegant display.

This foregrounding of fashion in women's motoring press suggests the increasing power of desire-stimulation and commodification permeating modern mass press in general. By turning their motoring columns into a phantasmagoria of visual stimulation, women motorists were also aiding the transmission of modern commodity culture, where women were increasingly the crucial icon, into the field of early motoring. Women's insistence on the importance of fashion means that they recognized that clothes and display increasingly make or break the woman driver. Fashion and codes of dress, which Jennifer Craik argues are technical devices that articulate the relationship between a lived body and its milieu and create a "face" that not only passively reflects but also helps to articulate and construct the subject (Craik 4), had entered a new level of escalation by the modern era. With the advent of modernity and industrialization, societies became more mobile and appearance and display increasingly replaced land ownership as key indicators of status and identity. Fashion also enjoyed an accelerating eminence in the material life of more middle-class people as they could afford to participate in the conspicuous display of clothes and new identities (Spooner 2). As the "tireless agent" of industrial modernity's endless production and consumption of the always-the-same dressed up as the ever-new (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 172), fashion's ceaseless change and movement places itself at the center of consumerist modernity, while also at the same time underlining the fluidity of identity and subject. The importance of the right clothes in making or breaking the woman motorist, for instance, demonstrates the performativity of gendered and classed identities.

By emphasizing fashion and consumption and aligning themselves with the tides and progress of an increasingly consumerist modernity, women motorists were cementing their own claim to a legitimate place in early motoring culture, itself a movement that claimed to move with the time. What is more important, however, is that along the way women motorists were also transforming the image of early motoring and using fashion to glamorize the motoring movement. Early motoring as a new form of auto-mobility sustained a less than desirable image at the beginning and encountered considerable resistance by the British public. For most bystanders and pedestrians, the heavy, noisy and polluting motor-car awakened fears of the maiming machine and its destruction of the organic human body. The noise and smell also aggravated associations with industrial pollution and destruction of nature, in much the same way that the railway train had met with resistance half a century earlier. In this sense, the prohibitively expensive

motor-car was not only linked to arrogant wealth, but it was also resented for its dangerous speed and lethal threat to other road-users. One correspondent complained to the *Times* on 9 June 1903 that pedestrians were forced to “fly to the hedges and ditches for refuge” to avoid the piteous fate of the unsuspecting dog, which was often “reduced to amass of blood and bones” by some speeding motor-car (qtd. in [Shepherd](#) 381).⁴ Treated more like the monstrous, de-humanizing machine, the car and its driver were compared in Marie [Corelli](#)’s novel *The Devil’s Motor* (1901) to the Devil from Hell, “clothed in black and crowned with fire” (15), with “large bat-like wings flared out on either side of him in woven webs of smoke and flame” (2); it would “tear at full speed along the pale line dividing the Darkness from the Dawn” (1), leaving in its wake “men and women and little children” “trampled down one upon another and killed in their thousands” (15). ([Figures 10 and 11](#))

This resentment by the British public, whereby “the motor-maker and all his works are regarded as public enemies and snubbed unmercifully” (“[La Chauffeuse](#)” 9 Jan. 1904), was reflected in successive legislations that sought

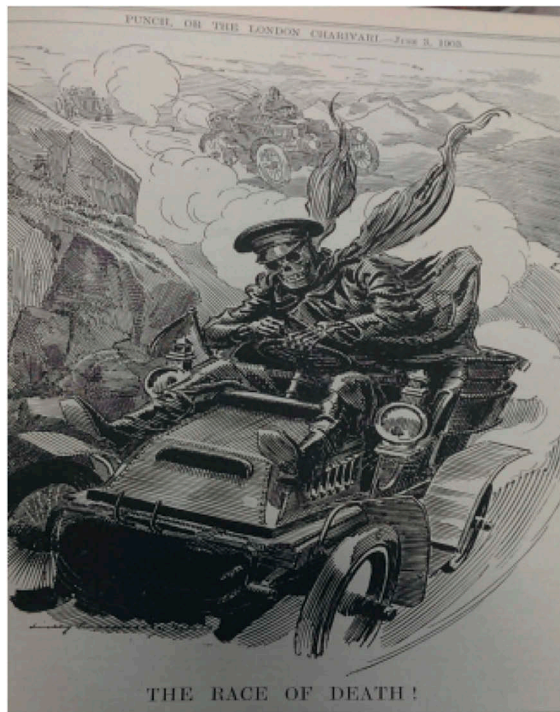


Figure 10. “The race of death” *Punch*.

⁴[Shepherd](#) wrote that a 1905 Royal Commission on Motoring mentioned complaints that the dust raised by motorcars led to “an increase in throat and eye infections, the ruination of crops, the inability to hang washing to dry, and even the irritating clogging of at least one lady novelist’s typewriter” (380).



Figure 11. *Punch* Aug 5, 1903.

to restrict motoring.⁵ Motorists attributed this resentment to the British distrust of “anything new as dangerous,”⁶ and some even blamed women’s bad driving for being “a deathblow to the automobile movement” and further aggravating the already bad image of the motorist (*Steady Man*).

Seen in this context, women motorists were using fashion to glamorize and popularize the motoring movement and highlight women’s indispensable contribution because of their more established and accepted role as displayer of fashion and status. The fashion focus underlined women’s links with the broader trends of modern commodity culture and brought motoring as a whole into this culture where it became a crucial icon of conspicuous display. A sense of mission and duty could be discerned in many of these women’s writings, as they went out of their way to emphasize that women motorists, far from hurting the image of the motoring movement as had been claimed by male motorists, actually helped to dispel the public’s “*motorphobia*” and enhance motoring’s reputation because of their fashionable elegance. *Gentlewoman’s* “Woman and the Car” columnist *Rutulan* wrote that “[t]here is much in the suggestion that if every motor-car

⁵Until 1896, the “Red Flag Act” limited the speed of all machine-driven vehicles on public roads to four miles an hour, and required a footman to precede the car holding a red flag. The 1896 “Light Locomotives Act” increased the speed to 12 mph, and the 1903 “Motor Cars Act” stretched the limit to 20 mph (*Shepherd* 183).

⁶“The Vogue of the Motor-Car.” *Motoring Illustrated* (23 Jan. 1904): 226.

contains a lady most of the prejudice against motorists would disappear. Nothing adds more to the beauty of a car than the appropriate dress of its occupants, and the best dressed people are usually ladies." The presence of "well-dressed ladies" was "guarantee" that "the antipathy to the pastime on the part of many people would quickly disappear" (12 Mar. 1908). *Motoring Illustrated* also joined in, urging women to dress beautifully out of a sense of duty, because this would be crucial to greater public acceptance of motoring. "Every woman with a love of our delightful sport should 'dress to the part.' Nothing helps more toward popularizing the pursuit of motoring than the attractive object-lesson of a charming woman-kind on the car." Women motorists should do everything to "[r]emove the stain" on "motorina" caused by her ugly, "appalling," "fossilized motor clothes of three years ago" and dress as elegantly as possible ("[Modes for Motorists](#)" 8 Aug. 1902).

Here a fundamental difference in perception is discernible. Male motorists had objected because they still saw the motor-car as predominantly a machine of speed, one that scared and inconvenienced the public because of its dangerous speed. Women adopted a different strategy by bringing motoring into the modern culture of commodity display and transforming its image to one of glamor. They recognized that the motor-car was fast becoming an ultimate accessory of fashion that offered unparalleled opportunities of display. No longer a nuisance, it was instead a desire-stimulating product promising style, glamor, happiness, and social aspiration, a must-have symbol of conspicuous display for the rich and upward mobility for the less well-off. It had become what [Barthes](#), commenting on a Citroën DS on display in a car fair, called "a purely magical object" promising perfection (88). With their expertise in the broader culture of commodity consumption, women motorists seemed more attuned than men to what [Felski](#) calls "the dramatic ways in which modern commodity culture and its retailing strategies are altering the everyday social relations between people and things" (64). Motoring was now an increasingly sensuous, luxurious and pleasurable experience of upper-middle-class life.

"A pretty spectacle"

This was best seen in the pretty spectacle of the first car meet organized by the Ladies' Automobile Club in London in June 1904, when a huge crowd gathered to gawk at "London's fairest daughters" dressed in "bright dresses and pretty hats" but "no unsightly goggles or hideous masks." The cars seemed to outshine the women in glamor; "tastefully decorated with tiger lilies tied with yellow ribbon," the cars "emulated their gentle occupants in smartness, their brasswork shimmering in the afternoon light, and their paintwork ... spotless as a drawing-room mirror." A band played lively music, the thronging public had to be "kept on the pavement by police," and even the King and Queen were enticed by the "pretty spectacle" when they came to the window of Buckingham Palace to see the cars pass by ("[Ladies' Automobile Club](#)").

By consciously emphasizing motoring as a desire-stimulating spectacle, epitomized by the aestheticized and eroticized woman motorist, women motorists were trying to train the public to respond to and appreciate a changed image of motoring as elegant and fashionable. In this mission they found themselves working in tandem with the concomitant efforts by the motoring industry. The motor-car was not just getting easier and safer to drive with the series of new motor technological improvements, but it was also set up to look more fashionable by car manufacturers, who were keen to transform its image from a machine of adventure for reckless cads or a powerful but cumbersome vehicle for “trade people” (Kennard, *Motor Maniac* 10). Early motorists sacrificed comfort to pursue maximum speed, adventure and masculine courage, but by 1904, two years after King Edward VII granted the Royal Warrant to the Daimler Company and was widely known to be a car enthusiast, having bought three Daimler cars in 1900 (Richardson 29), more people from the fashionable circle joined in. These people were very different from the early pioneers, and they wanted comfort and luxuries like “sash windows with blinds of oiled silk, walnut veneers and fitted cabinets,” “seats of Morocco leather, West of England cloth or Bedford cord, usually obtained from Connollys in the Euston Road” (Richardson 42). The cars catering to their needs, particularly those made after 1904, were more comfortable and elegant, with streamlined bodies and brightly colored paintwork and upholstery. They were dismissed by early car pioneers and banned from the annual London to Brighton run, which only allowed pre-1904 models to participate in the race (Richardson 42). But their transformation from a car of adventure into one of comfort was also the greatest reason for the motor-car’s popularity as it evolved toward a much-sought-after commodity of status and display. The interest was surging so fast that in 1904 *Gentlewoman* predicted, perhaps over-optimistically, that this “will be the year of the motor” and that the automobile boom would “pale to insignificance the ‘cycle boom’ of eight years ago” (Rutulan, “Prospects of 1904”). Such a boom did not happen until decades later, but by 1906 the industry had grown “so vast” that separate motor shows had to be held for the commercial and pleasure sections (Rutulan, “Modes and Motoring” 10 Nov. 1906). At the 1906 Olympia Motor Show, “a large assemblage of the wealthy class” was there and a big proportion was fashionably dressed women, offering “a study in toilettes” (“*Olympia Motor Show*”).

Male motor pioneers often blamed “the feminine influence” for the loss of the car’s earlier rough edge when “muscular force” had been necessary (Rutulan, “Motors and Motoring” 24 Nov. 1906), or complained bitterly that “comfort” and “elegance” had now trumped “engine” as the primary consideration for buying cars—“it is immaterial how splendid may be your mechanical features,” for “if your exterior falls short of woman’s commendation, your car is handicapped” (“*Power of Women*”). Yet the taming of the motor-car and its increasing “combination of the useful and ornamental” (Rutulan, “Motors and Motoring” 12 Mar. 1904). underlined not just the

increasing improvement in motor technology but also the car's gradual incorporation into the modern commodity culture of consumption, a culture that coalesced around the image of the fashionably dressed woman. This was attested to by the fact that all major coach-makers, which had catered to the carriage-owning public since the second half of the nineteenth century, were by this time doing great business in building "very luxurious" and "handsome" quality car bodies, fitted with "rich and costly linings," for a small but prosperous motor market ("Olympia Motor Show"). The horse-driven carriage was a nineteenth-century means of mobility used often to showcase the status of the owner, but the motor-car was fast becoming an early twentieth century follower. As [Richardson](#) points out, much of the accepted custom of the carriage trade was carried over into the motoring business, when the car-owner would order the chassis and motor from a few noted manufacturers but then order a car body to his own specification from the coach-makers (43). The motor stood for the car's performance, but the car body, fitted with all the ostentations of luxury and taste, was the best means of conspicuous display. Car manufacturers may pamper to women's needs by adding comforts like "cunning pockets hidden away in the upholstered sides" of the motor-car for women's "dainty toilet requisites" (43), but looks and status display were sought after by both men and women. As [Kennard](#) writes in her novel *The Motor Maniac*, the car-buying public are "caught ... by paint and varnish ... cushions ... plenty of plating and something bright," and "judge a car as they would an ordinary carriage" (22). To them, the most important thing is "a stylish, handsome conveyance that all their neighbors would envy" (22).

In this transformation of the motor-car into an enviable commodity of conspicuous display, women motorists played a crucial role of symbolization. A significant part of this symbolization still reinforced patriarchal sexualization of women's bodily display. This explains that while in reality the number of women motorists was small, their presence on the motoring scene was disproportionately large because their beautifully-clad images were often used in car ads and posters to attract attention and increase sales. Minerva, Humber and Argyll car ads, for instance, featured women drivers behind the wheel in 1907, and one 1904 Ulysses car ad, captioned as "Mythology Modernized," portrayed the motor-car as offering the mythological power of speedy escape from a "one-eyed giant Polyphemus" of a policeman, but this modern-day "Ulysses, the great traveler" was now cast as the woman driver sitting behind the wheel. Even the Automobile Club of Britain and Ireland, which had refused to take in lady drivers as members, used a poster featuring two fashionably dressed women drivers, one in red and one in white, both wearing pretty hats, for its 1899 Automobile Club Show at Richmond Park, and again a lady driver in red for its 1900 show ([Figures 12–17](#)). They may not like the company of women drivers among



Figure 12. Argyll car ad, 1906.

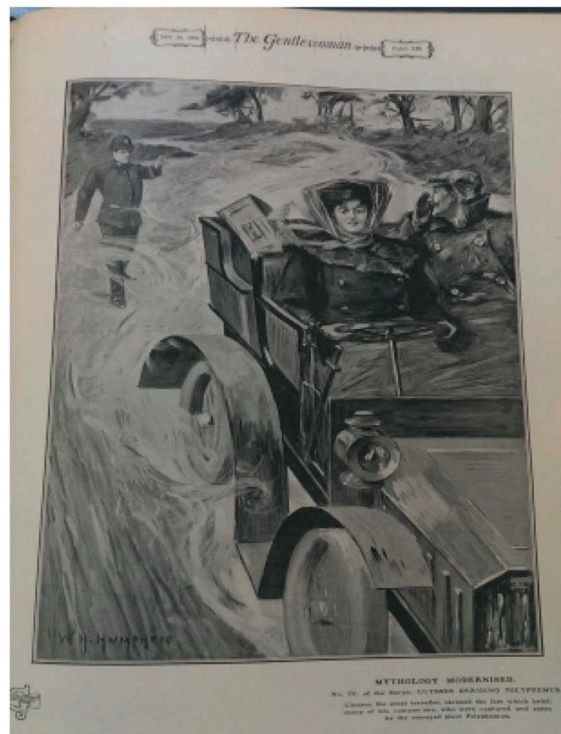


Figure 13. "Mythology modernized".



Figure 14. Minerva car ad, 1907.

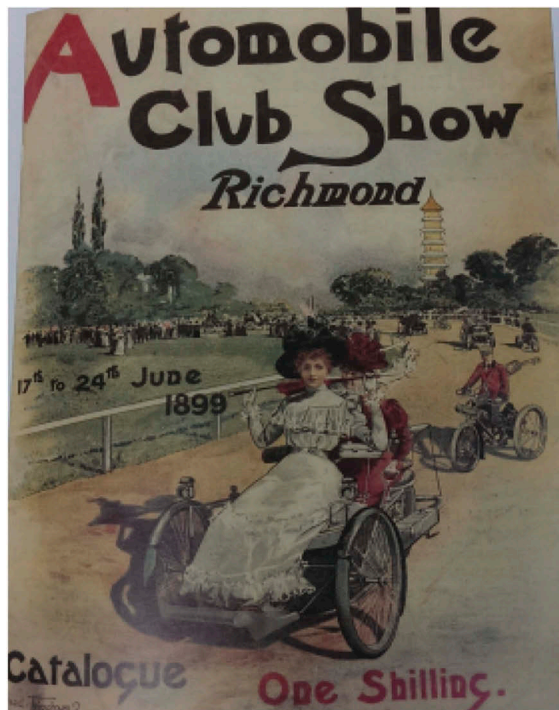


Figure 15. Richmond Show 1899.



Figure 16. Richmond Show 1900.



Figure 17. Humber car ad, 1907.

themselves and even banned women to take part in most of their races, but they were not averse to using the images of women drivers as a selling point.

This display of the commodified and eroticized female image reinforced patriarchal objectification of women, but it must be noted that women motorists appeared as agents of active consumption, too. Women's increasing power as consumer was amply demonstrated by their huge presence at motor shows, where new booths were set up to cater to the ladies, after some complained that, as women were used to being "pampered in ordinary shops," they would be reluctant to "spend 2000 pounds" at motor shows with "nowhere to sit and rest or to have refreshments" ("[La Chauffeuse](#)" 2 Apr. 1904). *Motoring Illustrated's* "[La Chauffeuse](#)" chastised "average men" for ignoring "women's influence in automobilism," but commended Mercedes for recognizing women's power and "ha[ving] a free tea for all at the stand, to woo the ladies." "[W]ise men know," the column concluded, "it is women who open the purse" (19 Dec. 1903). The Scottish car-maker Arrol-Johnston may complain bitterly that they had to advertise in women's journals "between blushful frilly announcements and pictures of pearly pendants" because a woman "often wheedles or bullies her poor old husband into buying the car SHE wants," but women's growing clout as consumer was increasingly recognized by more and more manufacturers (qtd. in [O'Connell](#) 184). In their turn, by recognizing the motor-car as a commodity of display and emphasizing the importance of spectacle and glamor in boosting its popularity, women motorists were also demonstrating a shrewd sense of the new forces at play in modern commodity culture and their own active role within that culture.

The motor-car's new fashionable status was sufficient to turn it into a popular symbol of social aspiration for the wider public. This was evidenced by the fact that despite its earlier reputation for being ugly and cumbersome, motor fashion was increasingly impacting on female fashion in general, even influencing women who were not motorists. In Paris, where motor passion took roots earlier than London, a new color was christened "automobile" to reflect the popularity of motoring, "a lovely deep shade of red or crimson," "equally patronized by gentlemen for ties as by ladies for toques and gowns" ("[Ladies' Letter](#)"). In Mrs. [Aria's](#) autobiography *Women and the Motor-car*, while fretting over how not to look ugly when motoring, she notes wryly that so many non-motoring women are following the motor fashion and wearing her veil and scarf tied under the chin and wrapped around hat and face, that even the street boy recognizes the fraud by now and would not take her for really owning a car (161). These women copied motoring fashion not because it was beautiful but because motoring denoted status and fashionability.

Motoring became such a tell-tale sign of glamorous status that some women committed further acts of sartorial fraud to pass off as car-owners. In an article

entitled “Petrol as Hair Wash,” the *Luton Times and Advertiser* reported that petrol was often used on tour by lady motorists who wanted to easily remove the dust of the road from their tresses before going down to dinner:

The only precaution needed against fire is to stand for ten minutes before an open window. The petrol must be of the finest specific gravity. It is whispered that some women, anxious to pose as car owners, sprinkle a little petrol on their hair so as to produce a faint whiff of the odorous motor tank, and deceive the bystander into a belief that the trail was left behind by the lady’s own property. (“[Petrol as Hair Wash](#)”)

Petrol was certainly no fragrance, but some ladies were more than willing to put up with its smell to attain that enviable status. For those further down the echelon of class and privilege, even a chance to read about those motoring ladies and their expensive attire was sufficient to set going one’s aspirational fantasy. At the much more affordable price of one penny, the *Penny Illustrated Paper* accounted in meticulous detail to its mass readers that white coats for the motoring races, despite their great impracticality and a tendency to accrue dust and dirt, were the most fashionable wear of the season. Half way down its virtual tour of the great shops of London where “motoring coats are quite a feature now,” the article spoiled the fun by reminding the reader in an inserted parenthesis “I mention pretty things to please those who love to read about smart clothes which they can never possess.” The illusion may be partially broken, and the mass female reader, consisting mostly of shopgirls, milliners and domestic workers, may never ever need motoring garments. Still, they would not object to being told the exorbitant prices (at the “moderate price” of “six, eight, ten or twelve guineas”) of the white canvass coats “lined with white silk” and “with a deep collar of lovely guipure Irish lace,” the black hats to go with them, made of “alternate rows of white cloth and ring-spotted net,” the “thick gauze veil which covers the entire head and face,” or the fact that to be “smart and economical in London” was impossible and that to “keep fashion in view is impossible without money, and plenty of it” (“[World of Women](#)”). Motoring was now equated with an unparalleled platform for conspicuous display and the construction of a new female identity predicated on broadened mobility and fashionable modernity, but this new femininity was class-specific and inaccessible to other, less privileged women.

Made “more the woman” by the car

Just as women motorists used fashion and display to ease their access to early motoring, so they also resorted to safe tropes and even played along with conservative stereotypes. This was seen in their efforts to emphasize the reassuring femininity of the woman motorist and disavow any links with the

women's rights movement. Motorists like Mrs Edward A. Riley, who had won a gold medal and a "non-stop certificate" in the 1907 Scottish Trials, may defend the capability of women motorists and protest against their exclusion from the 1908 Royal Automobile Club or Scottish Trials, but they often hastened to add that they were no suffragettes, and could not "understand the comparison between 'Suffragette' and 'Lady Motorist'" ("[Ladies in Royal](#)"). In order to win greater public support, some women were not averse to appealing to conservative norms of feminine decorum and insisted that motoring enhanced, rather than threatened, a woman's innate femininity.

In the same way that Ford's motor ads asserted that motoring made a woman "more the woman" (qtd in [Clarke](#) 15), women motorists eagerly celebrated motoring, which allowed the woman driver to sit for long periods behind the wheel, as a "gentle, womanly art," the most "becoming" and feminine form of outdoor sport for "pretty and charming women," "so calculated to improve the feminine physique and appearance." This reference to stationary sitting and the gentle feminine physique sounds perilously close to conservative rhetoric during the debate over women's cycling ten years earlier, when conservatives had argued that cycling and vigorous exercises would destroy women's delicate, inactive, domestic-bound physique and turn them into mannish, energetic Amazons. Whilst in their youth and as cycling enthusiasts these women motorists had resisted such objection, ten years later they themselves used the same rhetoric to caution women away from other "rough athletics" like riding, hunting, tennis or golf, which turned women into "stalwart," "sturdy" "Amazons" "as hard as nails," something "we do not want" ([Rutulan](#), "Women and the Car" 14 Mar. 1908). In her *Gentlewoman* column, Rutulan announced that motoring, unlike other sports, brought "vitality and womanly strength without the solidity of the muscles," and accentuated women's innate femininity by making them "softer and more refined" in line with "nature's plan." She went on to claim that motoring actually made women more beautiful, the "rapid improvement in their appearance" being "little short of remarkable" --"Take a beauty census of lady motorists and if you do not find the percentage of attractiveness uncommonly high I shall be very surprised" ("Women and the Car" 14 Mar. 1908). *Motoring Illustrated's* "La Chauffeuse" also reiterated this sentiment, praising motoring for "materially add[ing] to a woman's beauty" without "harden[ing] a woman's face" or "giv[ing] her a flavor of masculinity and muscular strength" ("[La Chauffeuse](#)" 2 Aug. 1902).

These women motorists had earlier championed the rejuvenating influence of cycling and outdoor exercise upon a female body confined to stationary domesticity, but this time around sitting for long periods as opposed to vigorous exercise was actually extolled as a virtue. This same opportunistic approach was also seen in their use of the perceived modesty of

the motoring costume to argue for the suitability of women's motoring. Motoring could be undertaken in long conventional skirts worn under protective outerwear without the need for radical costumes like the rational cycling dress. Some women motorists may have fought passionately for women's cycling costume against conservative notions of female sartorial decorum, but the very same conservative notions were now appealed to when they argued that driving's more modest, ladylike costume made it more appropriate and feminine. Indeed, while women's clothes took a center stage for both women's motoring and cycling, the controversy over the latter revolved around its perceived immodesty and impropriety while objections to the former underlined its laughable ugliness. When women motorists urged others to adopt more elegant motoring costumes to dispel motoring's negative image, fighting on the grounds of esthetics rather than morality was much easier, as they hearkened back to more conventional ideas of beauty as the rightful feminine province.

A similar gesture of appeasement was seen in the women's division of the car into the motor and the interior, and their emphasis on women's exclusive interest in the comfort and elegance of the latter. Sitting in the open-topped but half-enclosed car while popped up by cushioned seats was often compared to sitting in one's boudoir or domestic parlor, an alternative form of domesticity that was always constructed as suitable for women. Lady Duff Gordon, offering a testimonial for Chalmer's Motor Company, claimed that she was not interested in the car's exterior nor its motor – “My only interest is in the vitally important thing – the interior. It is my sun-parlor on wheels, and if colors clash or upholstery fabric grates on my nerves, how am I to love the car?” (qtd in [Flower and Jones](#) 72).

Indeed, while both the conservative press and motor advertising reiterated gender stereotypes of women's obsession with the superficial and the decorative and their lack of interest in mechanical knowledge, evidenced for instance in the *Punch* cartoon below ([Figure 18](#)), women motorists were prepared to go along with such belittling rhetoric in order to sidestep any controversy over the supposedly unwomanly effects of motoring. “La Chauffeuse” described a perfectly understanding husband who, upon hearing his wife's explanation that she had smashed her car because she “saw a woman pass with one of those lovely, new Paris hats you know the kind – and – spared her the embarrassment by interrupting and saying “Oh yes, dear, I know, you needn't say more” (“[Her Husband Understood](#)”). Calling this husband a man “who understands women,” the columnist painted a picture of a superficial, easily distracted woman motorist who was really more interested in fashion than in motoring and thus very womanly and harmless.

Motor manufacturers often used slogans claiming that motoring was so simple and so easily controlled that a lady could drive it without



Figure 18. "My sister has bought a beautiful motor-car." "really! What kind?" "Oh, a lovely sage green, to go with her frocks." *Punch* Jan 31,1906.

difficulty" ("Adams"), but women motorists themselves echoed this implied derogation of women as weak and ignorant. In "A Lady's Motorcar," *Gentlewoman* recommended the Humber car for ladies because of "its extreme simplicity" – the car "is particularly light and easy to handle, and no particular technical knowledge is needed" (108). The pioneer woman motorist Mrs. Selwyn Edge, the first woman in England to drive a De Dion motor tricycle and one of the earliest female automobile drivers, was featured in *Car Illustrated* where she made a point of emphasizing her fashionability as well as her lack of technical knowledge—she "modestly professes to understand nothing of the mechanism of her motor" ("Another Lady Expert"). Women were able to drive not because of their innate mechanical skills but because of the advancement in motor technology, which made motoring foolproof even to mechanically ignorant women. This transferring of skill and power from the driver to the motor-car alleviated any emasculating threat attributed to the woman motorist.

In the relatively few reports where women did not shy away from admitting to mechanical knowledge, they were cautious to link such knowledge to skills traditionally defined as feminine. Miss Sheila O'Neil, the first

professional woman chauffeur in London, endeavored to convince the public of her motoring skills by mentioning her previous employment as a hospital nurse in the South African War. Insisting that she was “capable of attending to the mechanism of the car in case of break-down” because “I know as much about the anatomy of a motor car as I do about that of the human body,” she nevertheless hastened to add that she did not like to wear the tri-colored King’s medal for her war efforts, “for fear of being mistaken for a suffragist.” Driving did not turn women into those mannish, shrieking suffragettes, for taking care of the car was likened to taking care of patients, with its requisite qualities of patience and nurturing care, qualities traditionally gendered as female. Here Miss O’Neil advertised her competitive advantage over male cabbies not on the strength of her mechanical skills *per se* but on her extra feminine skills as a nurse, an advantage she further pressed by stating that she kept a “finely-fitted” first-aid kit in her cab, which would be extremely helpful in accidents and emergencies (“[Coming of the Chauffeuse](#)”).

These tactics may be “opportunistic,” but as historian Georgina Clarsen points out, such “backhanded affirmations” of stereotypical disparagement of women proved to be rather effective in fortifying a legitimate place for women’s motoring (23). For the ultimate aim of public acceptance, women motorists resorted to means that seemed to play both ways. Early women’s motoring was thus fraught with the complications of gender and class, complications which worked to both reinforce conservative prejudices of women’s physical, mental, and technological limitations but also weave out a new, uncharted place for women in modern motor culture. Machine-aided automobility enabled by the motor-car, with its associations of speed, power, freedom and technology, had traditionally been gendered as a masculine province, and early motoring’s unique set of physical and mechanical challenges, exposure to the harsh elements, bad road conditions and intolerant legal restrictions raised the bar even higher for women participants. But women motorists managed to stake a claim to the thrills and expanded freedom of accelerated speed. By emphasizing their own fashionably elegant image and working in tandem with an accelerating modern commodity culture where the motor-car was fast becoming a crucial icon of conspicuous display, they managed to turn motoring into a safely feminine and glamorous pursuit and a crucial means of staging a new, expanded female self predicated on free mobility and enhanced knowledge. As the *Daily Telegraph* wrote in 1906 in its report of the Ladies’ Day in the Olympia Motor Show, “[t]wo things are quite certain, that ladies will go in more and more strongly for motoring, and that they will continue to look charming in the pursuit” (“[Olympia Motor Show](#)”).

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