TRACING WELLS'S NEW WOMAN THROUGH *THE WHEELS OF CHANCE* AND *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*

Brenda Tyrrell

Abstract. In two of his early novels, *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), we see H. G. Wells coming to terms with the New Woman movement that was forming around him. I argue that this struggle manifests itself most strikingly in the development of two of his earliest female characters: Miss Elphinstone (in *The War of the Worlds*) and Jessie Milton (in *The Wheels of Chance*). This article examines the ways in which Jessie Milton represents Wells's first attempt at portraying a New Woman in his oeuvre. Then the article draws upon notable differences between Jessie and Miss Elphinstone to argue that, although Miss Elphinstone appears far less frequently in her novel than Jessie does in hers, the former is still a more interesting and a more positive representation of the New Woman. In sum, this article explores how Miss Elphinstone and Jessie Milton demonstrate Wells's shifting aesthetic and political attitudes towards the late-Victorian New Woman.

On 21 November 1898, H. G. Wells draws a 'picshua' of himself and his wife Jane as they 'discuss[ed] about the spare bedroom fireplace.'[1] Wielding umbrella-type weapons as Boo the cat watches in horror, the couple try to settle what, at that moment, seems a history-changing dispute. Jane is clearly winning as she pulls Wells's hair, ready to whack him into submission. Coincidentally, that same year, this scene plays out in a much more serious example of Wells's work, his scientific romance *The War of the Worlds* (1898), as the less memorable Miss Elphinstone fends off the would-be horse thieves with a whip in order to escape the Martians. In this novel, as well as an earlier novel, *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), we see Wells struggle as he comes to terms with the New Woman movement gaining ground around

[1] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 365-6. Wells explains: 'These silly little sketches about this or that incident which became at last a sort of burlesque diary of our lives [...]. These may seem at the first glance to be the most idle of scribblings but in fact they are acute statements in personal interpretation.'

him.[2] This struggle manifests itself most strikingly in the development of two of his earliest female characters: Miss Elphinstone (in *The War of the Worlds*) and Jessie Milton (in *The Wheels of Chance*).[3] When looking closely at these women and their respective journeys, it becomes apparent that Wells strives to create his female characters with more independence and freedom from their restrictive lives; however, like many late-Victorian men, he does not quite understand what this freedom looks like.[4] Nor does he understand that women of this epoch more than likely had a different definition of freedom than their male counterparts. One example of this gender disparity is seen in the Marriage Question. Despite the efforts of front-line New Woman writers, such as Sarah Grand and Blanche Alethea Crackanthorpe, to defend adamantly the institution of marriage, the New Woman quickly gains a reputation of being resistant to the idea of marriage.[5] For the actual New Woman, however, this is an inaccurate summation, as Richardson and Willis point out, 'even by the *fin de siècle*, many New Women wanted to achieve social and political power by *reinventing* rather than rejecting their domestic role.'[6] The 'separate spheres ideology', in its mandate that a

[2] The defining features of the New Woman will be addressed below. For now, let it be said that several characteristics of the New Woman include appropriate dress, increased mobility (both due, in part, to the bicycle), and contentious issues of proper education, marriage reform, and sexual equality. It is also important to note that there are multiple areas of provocation between the New Women writers themselves in Wells's epoch of what *exactly* being a New Woman encompasses. Indeed, even the nomenclature of the 'New Woman' resists stabilisation: some scholars credit Sarah Grand (Nelson, ix), while still others (Ledger, 35) credit Ouida. Given this confusion, Wells can hardly be held to account because of his own misinterpretations of the New Woman.

[3] H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1898), ed. Leon Stover (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2001); H. G. Wells, *The Wheels of Chance* (New York: Macmillan, 1896). All citations will be from these editions. Page numbers will follow in parenthesis.

[4] Sarah Grand offers an example of this confusion when she refers to the 'Brawling Brotherhood' as asking 'If women don't want to be men, what do they want?' in her influential work 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *North American Review* 158 (1894): 270-6 (270).

[5] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 11. Crackanthorpe authors 'The Revolt of the Daughters' in 1894, which specifically addresses unmarried women and their (lack of) options.

[6] Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 9. Emphasis added.

woman's place is in the home and the man's is essentially everywhere else, is foundational to this 'reinventing'.[7] In short, the tangible New Woman does not reject marriage, or any other New Woman precept; she simply wants to equalise these precepts. Wells's interpretation of these gender disparities manifests itself in two of his earliest heroines: Jessie Milton and Miss Elphinstone.

This article examines how Jessie Milton represents Wells's first attempt at portraying the New Woman in his oeuvre. Then, the article draws upon notable differences between Jessie and Miss Elphinstone to argue that, although Miss Elphinstone appears far less frequently in the novel than Jessie does in her respective novel, the former is still a more interesting and a more positive representation of the New Woman. Lastly, I explore how Miss Elphinstone and Jessie Milton demonstrate Wells's shifting aesthetic and political attitudes towards the late-Victorian New Woman.

In order to facilitate a discussion of Wells's New Woman, the societal and cultural context in which she exists must be established. The chosen texts for this article appear at a time when New Woman novels are flooding popular media.[8] Likewise, it is prudent to note that the New Woman is certainly not an original concept when Wells begins to write her into his novels. The lives of late-Victorian women had certainly improved significantly since Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, as evidenced by several reform acts in the matrimonial and educational arenas.[9] Similarly, education of a different nature appears on the question of sex: the double standard within the realm of sexual reform also interests the New Woman.[10] Despite these many improvements, however,

---

[7] According to Nelson, '[t]he New Woman, arguing that the separate spheres ideology was a construct of society and culture rather than a biological mandate, demanded that women be given the same opportunities and choices as men.' (Carolyn Christensen Nelson, *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2001), ix.)

[8] 'According to the *Westminster Review* in 1895: it is not possible to ride by road or rail, to read a review, a magazine, or a newspaper, without being continually reminded of the subject which lady-writers love to call the Woman Question.' (Richardson and Willis, 1.)

[9] For a succinct history of these reforms see Nelson, x, and Richardson and Willis, 6-7.

[10] As Nelson explains, late-Victorian women are held at different standards than their male counterparts and, as a result, a call for premarital education for women in hopes of providing them an opportunity to 'make intelligent choices about the men they marr[y]' is sought (Nelson, xi). See Ledger's discussion of the Contagious Disease

much work needs to be done during the time Wells is writing these two novels and, as the battle for equality rages on, the New Woman begins to make her presence felt in both fiction and circumstance.

Yet the lines quickly begin to blur between the 'real' New Woman and the fictionalised New Woman.[11] In fact, several contemporary scholars go so far as to ask if the New Woman even exists outside of fiction. Talia Schaffer observes that '[b]y 1895, "New Woman" [...] had become [a] wildly skewed, reductive media construct which did not represent the real lives and work of those people it purported to describe'.[12] To complicate matters further, each author (both male and female) puts their own unique spin on the New Woman, and Wells is no exception.[13] Immediately before he writes *The Wheels of Chance*, Wells witnesses the public gnashing occurring between Sarah Grand and fellow author Ouida as they fictionally and socially construct the New Woman. While Grand espouses the greatness that is Woman, Ouida caustically reminds Grand that 'the "Scum-woman" and "Cow-woman" [...] are both of them less of a menace to humankind than the New Woman [...]'.[14] More damaging still is the effect this diatribe has on the tangible women of this movement. These very real new women get lost in

---

Acts, the ensuing 'Anti-Contagious-Diseases campaigns' and their effect on sexual reform for women (Ledger, 111-13).

[11] Schaffer defines the 'real' New Woman as '[women] working as clerks, typists, teachers, college students, journalists, or perhaps even shopgirls [...]. They walked without chaperones, carried their own latchkeys, bicycled, and the more daring ones smoked cigarettes, cut their hair, or wore divided skirts and plain costume in accordance with the principles of rational dress.' (Talia Schaffer, '"Nothing but Foolscap and Ink": Inventing the New Woman', in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, eds. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 39-52 (39).)

[12] Schaffer, 49. See also Lyn Pykett, xi, and Schaffer, 39, both in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*. Gillian Sutherland quotes an 1898 issue of *The Persean*, a publication for the then Perse School for Girls, that identifies the New Woman as '"a sort of Bogey whom no-one has ever really seen."' (Gillian Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.)

[13] Schaffer posits that 'fictionalizing the New Woman allowed her to be defined in any way the author needed, at any time' (Schaffer, 45).

[14] Sarah Grand published her infamous 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' in the March (1894) *North American Review*, followed closely by multiple reactions, most notably, Ouida's 'The New Woman' in May 1894. Nelson provides the Ouida quote in *A New Woman Reader*, 157.

translation, as Schafer explains, '[b]y treating the New Woman as a purely imaginary caricature, Ouida and Grand were able to stretch, distort, and duplicate this figure for whatever rhetorical or psychological purpose they wanted'.[15] This distortion carries over into other media outlets, such as the humour magazine *Punch*, and the stereotypical image of the New Woman is created, a woman 'educated at Girton College, Cambridge, [who] rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress, and smoked in public: in short, she rejected the traditional role for women and demanded emancipation'.[16] Wells faces this tumultuous arena when he pens his first New Woman, Jessie Milton, in *The Wheels of Chance*.

While *Ann Veronica* may come immediately to mind when discussing the New Woman and Wells's first depiction of her, I posit that this assumption is a miscalculation.[17] Wells demonstrates as early as 1895 in *The Wonderful Visit* that he is at least considering the New Woman Movement, when the curate states: 'The air is full of Social Movements, of economic changes, the *Woman Movement, Rational Dress* [...] all the great and moving Questions of the Hour.'[18] Keeping in mind that Wells has just been witness to the literary fisticuffs between Grand and Ouida, this statement succinctly summarises the political atmosphere and Wells's awareness of it. Indeed, Wells clearly identifies Jessie Milton as a New Woman through his protagonist, Mr Hoopdriver, when he first encounters her in *The Wheels of Chance*. Mr Hoopdriver determines that '[p]robably she was one of these here New Women. He had a persuasion the cult had been maligned. [...] Rational dress didn't look a bit unwomanly.' (39) Incidentally, Ann Veronica is also identified as a potential New Woman through the mention of another convention of the movement (the bicycle) and, although we do not actually see Ann Veronica on her bicycle in the novel, she does indeed have one, as evidenced by her father's accusatory '[h]ave I ever prevented you going

[15] Schaffer, 47.

[16] Nelson, ix.

[17] Sylvia Hardy suggests that *Ann Veronica* is 'considered by most commentators to be Wells's most feminist novel' (Sylvia Hardy, 'A Feminist's Perspective on H. G. Wells', *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society* 20 (1997): 49-62 (60)). Furthermore, Carey J. Snyder declares *Ann Veronica* Wells's 'belated engagement with the [New Woman] tradition' (H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica: A Modern Romance*, ed. Carey J. Snyder (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2016), 80-81). All further citations will be from this edition.

[18] H. G. Wells, *The Wonderful Visit* (New York: Dutton, 1914), 69. Emphasis added.

about at any reasonable hour? You've got a bicycle!'[19] This statement, combined with Mr Hoopdriver's ruminations, tells us that Wells, as both author and avid bicyclist, is undeniably aware of the New Woman and her assigned characteristics, and that his reactions are evolving from one novel to the next. Conspicuously absent from the above genealogy of Wells's New Women characters, however, is the heroine between Jessie and Ann Veronica: Miss Elphinstone in *The War of the Worlds*. She is the one exception to Sylvia Hardy's reflection that 'Another aspect of Wells's story-telling technique is that his women characters, even when they are making a case for freedom are ultimately subordinating themselves to the interests of men.'[20] Miss Elphinstone, as we shall see, defies and resists this subordination.

The most notable difference between Miss Elphinstone and Jessie Milton is the number of pages they are allocated in their respective novels. In *The Wheels of Chance*, Jessie Milton essentially gets an entire novel (approximately 321 pages) to establish herself as Wells's first New Woman, while in my edition of *The War of the Worlds*, Miss Elphinstone receives a mere seventeen pages. However, in these seventeen pages, Wells plants her firmly in the realm of a strong, independent, and intelligent woman in a way that makes clear his increased understanding and appreciation of the New Woman that he begins with Jessie two years earlier. Another distinction between the women is that while there have been numerous analyses related to *The Wheels of Chance* and especially *The War of the Worlds*, a review of many of these same articles reveals a conspicuous absence of any discussion of Miss Elphinstone. In fact, most scholars do not recall the heroic appearance and actions of Miss Elphinstone as she and her sister-in-law attempt to flee London when the Martians invade; most only recall the narrator's brother and his heroic deeds. For example, while Hughes and Geduld laud his actions as 'heroic beyond measure', there is no mention of the courageous Miss Elphinstone as she returns, revolver in hand, to save the narrator's brother.[21] And in the novel itself, Wells's narrator, while adopting a slightly condescending tone, boasts that his brother 'happen[s] upon the two ladies who became his fellow-travellers: He came upon them *just in time*

[19] Wells, *Ann Veronica*, 69. Notably, Snyder's accompanying footnote to this statement reveals that '[a]ssociated with mobility and independence, by 1909 the bicycle was a clichéd symbol of the New Woman.'

[20] Hardy, 59.

[21] David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld, *A Critical Edition of The War of the Worlds: H. G. Wells's Scientific Romance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 17.

to save them.' (155, emphasis added) He does indeed save them but is, in turn, saved by the women. My point here is not to dismiss the accomplishments of the narrator's brother, but only to add the impressive actions of Miss Elphinstone to the roster of heroic deeds performed in the novel.

Wells himself seems enthralled by Miss Elphinstone as he focuses on her courage and strength. When we are first introduced to Miss Elphinstone, she is driving a pony-cart and 'slash[ing]' a would-be horse thief with a 'whip' (155), as he tries to steal her mode of escape.[22] She initially flees but, after realising that the narrator's brother is in trouble, she returns to assist him. Later, as they fight their way through the 'hell' that is the road to Barnet, Wells's narrator reports that 'for the second time that day this girl proved her quality' (164). While the narrator's brother walks the horse, Miss Elphinstone 'dr[ives] the pony across its head' (164).[23] As the cart begins to rip apart, the narrator's brother, aware of the danger they are in, takes over the driving and hands the revolver to Miss Elphinstone, which she then directs towards another traveller's horse to prevent him from 'press[ing] us too hard', following the brother's direction (164). Clearly, Miss Elphinstone is worth her mettle in Wells's eyes, as he continues to keep her active in the escape. One of the last images we see of Miss Elphinstone is her witnessing the falling of the seventh cylinder: 'It fell while Miss Elphinstone was watching, for she took that duty alternately with my brother. *She saw it*.' (169, emphasis added) These sentences emphasise Miss Elphinstone's constancy and value to both Wells and the narrator's brother who trusts her enough to keep watch while he sleeps: she literally watches his back. The last three words are also significant in establishing her value. Miss Elphinstone *saw* the cylinder fall and, because of the value Wells places in her 'quality', we do not doubt what she sees. We do not see this deference towards Jessie Milton; in fact, Wells's tone with her is sometimes that of a tolerant big brother. Conversely, when scholars address Jessie in *The Wheels*

[22] For the sake of clarity, it is important to note that there are two Elphinstone women. The elder *Mrs* Elphinstone, wife to Dr Elphinstone, and *Miss* Elphinstone, sister to Dr Elphinstone. Our heroine is *Miss* Elphinstone. (Wells, *The War*, 156-157.)

[23] It is interesting to note that within the first few minutes of our interaction with Miss Elphinstone, Wells immediately identifies her as an unusual late-Victorian woman: she drives a cart, she handles a whip, and she resists the assumed feminine benevolence towards animals, all in order to escape the Martian invasion.

of Chance, she is at least acknowledged as a supporting cast member, albeit secondary to the bicycle.

Lest we forget, the bicycle is a key motif in the earlier phase of the New Woman movement, and Wells himself is immersed in the bicycle craze (c. 1894-1897) at the time *The Wheels of Chance* is written. The novel represents his celebration of the alluring freedom of two wheels for both sexes, and, as he develops Jessie Milton's character, we see his first attempt at representing the New Woman, not only by putting her on a bicycle, but also by dressing her in rationals. In addition to these two conventional emblems of the New Woman, Wells adds to the story another tenet of the movement: the question of women's education, a subject of high import for Wells himself.[24] Jessie's stepmother is an authoress who writes a 'witty and daring' book (168) in which she wants 'people to *think* as I recommend, not to *do* what I recommend' (227). Jessie not only reads this book (much to Mrs Milton's dismay), she 'went on from that to a feast of advanced literature' (169). This 'deleterious' literature (306), according to the clergyman, is the root of Jessie's adverse actions that include an insatiable thirst for knowledge.[25] Put simply, Jessie desires a more advanced education than thought prudent for late-Victorian women. Despite his interest in education, however, Wells is not happy with his first attempt at the New Woman, as evidenced by a later letter in which he bemoans: 'I've spent weeks over the penmarked book of the Wheels of Chance & given it up at last. *That young woman is a dummy of wood*, & the construction reeks of the amateur. It's beyond repair.'[26] Similarly, in a later work, Wells also expresses his dissatisfaction with Ann Veronica, writing that '[s]he is a woman who soliloquises and rhapsodises incessantly [...]. The book is not a dialogue, simply because no one answers [her].'[27] As for Miss Elphinstone, Wells does

---

[24] 'For *Punch*, cycling and rational dress provided visual emblems of the social, sexual and political disquiet caused by women's demands for equality.' (Richardson and Willis, 24.

[25] The clergyman is an interesting character in that he initially meets Mr Hoopdriver and Jessie during their escape, assuming that they are on a 'tandem' (281), and thus accepting of their travel together. However, when he is later brought by the querulous Miss Mergle, Jessie's former 'strong-minded schoolmistress' (304) and 'only hope' (258), he essentially fulfils the role of both judge and jury in regard to Jessie's scandalous behaviour (305-9).

[26] David C. Smith, *The Correspondences of H. G Wells*, in 2 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. 1, 333. Emphasis added.

[27] H. G. Wells, *Babes in the Darkling Woods* (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1940), xii.

not mention her in either his surviving correspondences or any further work he writes: when she disappears from the novel, she also disappears from Wells's mind, perhaps indicating that he is content with this character and does not wish to change anything about her. Regardless, as the above letter indicates, Wells remains unhappy with Jessie and his uncertainty about her as his first New Woman is found within the pages of the novel.

For example, when Jessie becomes more comfortable with Mr Hoopdriver, her rational dress disappears. Just a few pages after she declares passionately, 'I am resolved to Live my own Life' (189), the narrator notes that 'Jessie by some miracle had become a skirted woman in the Cosham inn' (197). This moment is Wells's *deus ex machina*: at this point in his own New Woman education, Wells does not see Jessie as achieving any sense of independence from the societal constrictions from which she is fleeing without the protection and guidance of a male figure.[28] Bechamel is revealed to be a cad; however, Jessie is now in the hands of a true 'knight errant' and she no longer needs her rationals (162). Wells places her heroically in the care of Mr Hoopdriver, who will keep her from harm. This inability, on Wells's part, to understand the true New Woman's desire to achieve a sense of freedom, with or without a male figure, backs him into a corner: he simply does not know what to do with Jessie next and, as a result, he returns her to her skirt. To make sure, Mr Hoopdriver only recognises Jessie's status as a New Woman by two facts: her bicycle and her rationals. When Wells takes away her rationals, he also removes part of her New Woman status and, thus, Jessie loses her right to be the first *positive* representation of the Wellsian New Woman. Before readers get the idea that Jessie is not a strong heroine, however, Wells allocates this 'plucky' young woman to reinsert the evil Bechamel back into his proper place when he attempts to seduce her.[29] Jessie rightly points out: '*Man*!... Man to *my* woman! Do *men* lie? Would a *man* use his five and thirty years' experience to outwit a girl of seventeen? Man to my woman indeed! That surely is the last insult!' (140) She also does her best to stand up to the enclave of protestors against her irresponsible actions as she 'surprised herself by skilfully [*sic*] omitting any allusion to the Bechamel episode. She completely exonerated Hoopdriver from the charge of being more than an escapade.' (305) Wells succeeds in giving Jessie a strong voice but, unfortunately, these attempts of seeking independence do

[28] Wells's misunderstanding of this societal constriction is demonstrated when Jessie admits her disappointment in Bechamel's actions to Mr Hoopdriver, stating: 'That man promised to help and protect me.' (160)
[29] Wells, *The Wheels*, 195.

little for her cause as Wells returns her to the folds of her constrictive social status.

Turning now from these bicycling escapades of Jessie to Wells's next attempt at creating a New Woman, Miss Elphinstone, the reader immediately senses that *The War of the Worlds*, published two years later, is not the same type of novel as *The Wheels of Chance*. First, as mentioned above, the New Woman loses her bicycle. Jeremy Withers explains the significance of this difference:

> [E]ven though scholars overwhelmingly perceive Wells's earlier *The Wheels of Chance* as sounding clear notes of praise for the bicycle's technological progress and of approval for what the bicycle has done to help liberate women and the British working class, his perspective on the bicycle in *The War of the Worlds* manifests itself as much more dismissive and much less celebratory.[30]

Wells's opinion of the bicycle does indeed diminish in the novel but, simultaneously, his embracing of the New Woman flourishes. He removes the formulaic *symbol* of a New Woman but, in turn, he replaces this symbol with a more positive version in Miss Elphinstone; in short, he replaces the *illusion* of the New Woman with a stronger, more tangible woman. Withers applies this (d)evolution to the bicycle as well: 'Once the Martian invasion is underway in earnest, Wells moves more towards depicting the bicycle as representing an *illusion* of technological sophistication and spatial mastery.'[31] Lastly, we see another type of this 'illusion' in *The Wheels of Chance* with Jessie's chimerical flight to freedom, epitomised in the escape from the evil Bechamel, as Jessie directs Mr Hoopdriver to get both bicycles, stating: 'Mine alone is no good.' (147) Wells not only takes Jessie out of her rational dress, but he also reduces the importance of her bicycle when he insists that she needs both a man and a woman's bicycle to escape. As Withers demonstrates, in *The War of the Worlds*, we see the bicycle crumble under the stress of alien invasion. But we also see, emerging from the debris, a stronger, more independent, and free-thinking young woman: Miss Elphinstone.

---

[30] Jeremy Withers, 'Bicycles, Tricycles, and Tripods: Late Victorian Cycling and Wells's *The War of the Worlds*', *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H.G. Wells Society* 36 (2013), 39-51 (39). Interestingly, even as a 'social leveller', the bicycle fails in *The Wheels of Chance*: Jessie Milton sees no hope in pursuing Mr Hoopdriver because he is a mere shop assistant. (Wells, 314-315.)

[31] Withers, 44.

When placing the women side-by-side textually, the first thing we notice is the uncanny physical likeness between Jessie and Miss Elphinstone: Jessie is 'rather slender, [and] dark' (30); whereas Miss Elphinstone is a 'dark, slender figure' (155). We may postulate that Wells had a particular look in mind that he wanted to assign to his heroines. However, pictorially, these two women could not be more different. In the one image I have found of Miss Elphinstone, she is skirted, her hair loose and blowing away from her face, aiming the revolver with determination and courage etched in the lines of her face as she saves the narrator's brother from the would-be horse thieves (see Image 1). Notably, Miss Elphinstone remains dressed as a traditional nineteenth-century woman, despite the courage and mettle Wells gives her. Returning the New Woman to her skirt may be misconstrued as backsliding; however, I posit this return indicates Wells's struggle with how the New Woman should be represented on the pages of his novels. As noted in the above discussion of Jessie and her rationals, the rational dress does not, in reality, depict the true New Woman accurately. Perhaps the more traditional dress will.[33] In sharp contrast, Wells clothes Jessie Milton in the infamous Rational Dress, face tilted down, as she demurely accepts her fate, so it appears in the image, creating a much different, and less positive, image of a Wellsian heroine (see Image 2). Jessie's flight to freedom is dependent first on Bechamel and then on Mr Hoopdriver. In this image, we recall Sylvia

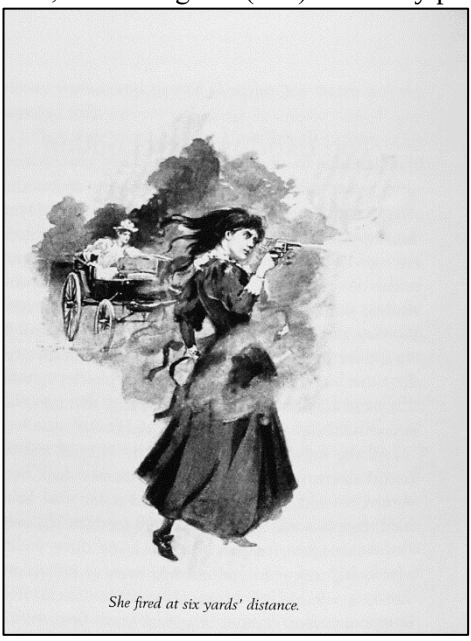

Image 1. Miss Elphinstone[32]

[32] H. G. Wells, 'The War of the Worlds', *Pearson's Magazine* 4 (1897), 334.

[33] According to Sutherland, 'despite *Punch*, "rational dress" aka bloomers never caught on.' (Sutherland, 160.) Bonnell adds: 'Rational dress in general, and knickerbockers in particular, provoked some to the most vehement objections to women cycling.' (Bonnell, 218.) The fact that Wells does not put Miss Elphinstone in rationals suggests that his understanding of the true New Woman is improving.

Hardy's summation that the women in Wells's novels must 'ultimately subordinate themselves to the interest of men'. Jessie is unable to support her escape financially; thus, she must 'subordinate' herself to the men in the novel. Miss Elphinstone, however, with her head held high, revolver raised, and defending her own, is not ready to accept her fate, demurely or otherwise. She is strong, wilful, and free-thinking – the one exception to Hardy's observation. In placing these two images side-by-side, the reader sees the fundamental differences between the two women – all by the way they are clothed. Once again, rational dress and bicycling (or lack thereof) become important when transitioning between Wells's first attempts at the New Woman in Jessie and his new version in Miss Elphinstone.

Image 2. Jessie Milton[34]

Although we do not know Miss Elphinstone's age, her behaviour is much more mature than the eighteen-year-old Jessie's.[35] We see this disparity repeatedly throughout the pages of both novels. In *The Wheels of Chance*, Jessie always seems to be looking down on Mr Hoopdriver, either physically or socially. Of course, Jessie's aloofness may have more to do with class than gender, given that she is previously identified by Mr Hoopdriver as 'a Lady. And rich people, too!' (39). Given this fact, accompanied by Mr Hoopdriver's difficulty in maintaining his role as a 'bloomin' dook' in lieu of his true status as a draper's assistant, it is little wonder that Jessie unconsciously assumes a dominant position with him

[34] Wells, *The Wheels*, 315.

[35] Wells seems to have difficulty remembering exactly how old Jessie is. When she is introduced, she is a 'girl of 18' (99); however, Jessie herself admits she is a 'girl of 17' (140).

(23).[36] Furthermore, Jessie acts in a condescending way to Mr Hoopdriver during their first meeting, observing: '"I ought to have seen you were a Novice" – with a touch of superiority.' (34) One final illustration of Jessie's immaturity is apparent when she finally reveals her mission to Mr Hoopdriver. Wells represents her disturbingly close to an incredibly sheltered young woman, determined to live her life, yet, still dependent on both Mr Hoopdriver and Bechamel to accomplish this independence. There is no earned respect or trust between Jessie and Mr Hoopdriver; Jessie uses him to escape Bechamel, and Mr Hoopdriver is so smitten with Jessie that he is unable to think lucidly. In this respect, Mr Hoopdriver represents a late-Victorian man who is not quite sure how to deal with the New Woman, and Wells makes him look weak in Jessie's shadow.[37] For example, when he first sees her in rationals (thus identifying her as a New Woman), Mr Hoopdriver experiences a 'sudden [...] impulse to bolt' (32) and, after falling off his bicycle, declares that '[t]he glory of life had departed', indicating '[t]hese unwomanly women' are the cause of his upset (33). Their entire relationship is based on Mr Hoopdriver's lies, much like Jessie's encounter with Bechamel, which also harkens back to Jessie's vulnerability and immaturity as a New Woman. She truly believes that both Bechamel and Mr Hoopdriver have her best intentions in mind, even though both men manipulate her in ways that she does not see.[38] Wells puts Jessie in a position in which she must be dependent on the men in the novel because she has very little money: she must remain dependent on them because she cannot finance her own flight to freedom. Money constantly hovers in the background of the novel as a concern for both fugitives, and, once their adventure together begins in earnest, Mr Hoopdriver introspectively reveals his anxiety about his own

[36] For example, at their initial meeting, Mr Hoopdriver starts to address Jessie as 'Miss', which he 'knew [...] was wrong, but it was [a] deep-seated habit with him' (34).

[37] Mr Hoopdriver's uncertainty is not surprising, given the exposure of late-Victorian men to popular media outlets such as *Punch*. As Willis explains, '*Punch* joked about the New Man of the future as the anxious, downtrodden house-husband of the emancipated wife.' (Willis, 57.) This anxiety, coupled with his draper's assistant background, creates an image of weakness in Mr Hoopdriver, who exclaims: 'Am I Man *enough?*', when Jessie points out that he is a 'Man' and 'free' (276).

[38] For example, after escaping from Bechamel, Jessie tells Mr Hoopdriver: 'I am sure you are honest to me. And I don't even know your name. [...] I have lost an Illusion [Bechamel] and found a Knight-errant [Mr Hoopdriver].' (162) Neither man, in reality, is honest with her or attempts to help her to achieve her freedom, a further clue to Jessie's immaturity in comparison to Miss Elphinstone.

limited funds.[39] Certainly, the lack of an ability to generate capital is a driving force behind Jessie's return home, as noted when she mourns: 'I never thought of money coming in to stop us like this' (289); Mr Hoopdriver is thus limited by his working-class status and Jessie by her gender. This financial dependency is another clear difference between the two women: Miss Elphinstone not only has her own money, but she also combines it with the money belonging to the narrator's brother in order to fund their escape aboard a paddle steamer. Interestingly, she does not hand over the money without thought; it is only after they make their escape from the would-be thieves that she quietly offers her money, continuing to hesitate while evaluating his trustworthiness with 'astonishingly quiet and deliberate' scrutiny (158). It is only after meeting the brother's eye, with some form of unspoken communication passing between them, that 'her hesitation ended' (157). Wells also gives Miss Elphinstone a significantly larger amount of money than he does the narrator's brother, which speaks not only to her social class, but also to her active role in saving herself and her sister-in-law, as well as the narrator's brother.[40]

In contrast to Jessie, Miss Elphinstone is assertive and undaunted when need be, but she also accepts unquestionably the directives made by the narrator's brother, while, at the same time, issuing her own. For example, when she returns to defend him from the potential horse-thieves, she first shoots a revolver and then surrenders it to him voluntarily. He then orders her to 'go back to the chaise', while she, in turn, commands him to 'give me the reins' as they finally elude the thieves (156). This finely synchronised dance between the two characters showcases not only the actions of the narrator's brother, but also those of Miss Elphinstone: she has no idea, at this moment, whether he will turn on her and attempt to take the cart; she discerns from his previous actions that she can trust him. This act of trust speaks not only of her intelligence but also of her determination to take an active role in their survival against the Martians. What she does *not* do is hand over the revolver and allow the narrator's brother to take over the operation, and this is an important distinction when discussing Wells's earliest New Women.

[39] Mr Hoopdriver begins his holiday 'with a five-pound note, two sovereigns, and some silver' (26), whereas Wells allows Jessie 'about two pounds seven shillings' (171).

[40] The Elphinstone women have 'as much as thirty pounds in gold besides a five-pound note' (157); whereas, earlier in the novel, Wells allots the narrator's brother 'ten pounds altogether' (143). The fare total for all three passengers was thirty-six pounds (170).

This active role is much different from the passive role we see with Jessie. Indeed, Jessie is vocal about her discontent but she still succumbs to the societal expectations imposed upon her, with good reason. Earlier in the novel, Bechamel sums up her situation succinctly when he observes: '"It's one of two things: go back to your stepmother, or – trust to me."' (103) When Bechamel corners Jessie, she verbally recounts her options, which are meagre: go to the [train] station, go to the police, involve the hotel staff, or go to the local clergyman. All these represent Jessie's safest options. From there, the choices spiral downward as she contemplates 'wander[ing] about the streets all night' (138-9). To each course of action, Bechamel answers back with a (rational) explanation of why none of these choices present Jessie's reputation in a positive light. In fact, in a moment of doubt, even Mr Hoopdriver thinks Jessie must go home to her stepmother and constrictive life.[41] Wells does not offer Jessie any other solution, perhaps because he himself, in his realist view, cannot see any other option for the New Woman at the time of writing Jessie's story. However, as Wells's understanding of, and appreciation for, the New Woman increases, his heroine becomes stronger and more self-reliant, as we see with Miss Elphinstone. The narrator's brother potentially could not have escaped London and the Martians without Miss Elphinstone's pony-cart, rescue, and money, which clearly suggests a newer progression of thought towards the New Woman, as Wells understands her at that particular moment.

Despite the progression of Wells's ideas of the New Woman, Jessie and Miss Elphinstone share one final similarity when Wells falters at our young ladies' elusive happy endings. This likeness raises the question *why* Wells returns Jessie to the constrictions from which she fled, albeit with 'capitulations' (310), and allows Miss Elphinstone to drift from view after the battle between the Martians and the Thunder Child takes place.[42] The answer may be found, not in Wells or even in the women themselves, but in the world in which they are created. Strong, self-assertive heroines such as Jessie Milton and especially Miss Elphinstone, with their increasing freedom and their resistance to oppression, represented everything many *fin-de-siècle* women could *not* be: free to move as they like. To put a finer point on this dichotomy, the 'Victorian woman wanted to be the scorcher in the high street – and she did not care what anyone thought about the matter'.[43] As Withers points out, '[t]he verb "scorched" would have been a loaded word for the

[41] Wells, 187.
[42] Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, 170.
[43] Bonnell, 228-9.

contemporary Victorian reader, for "scorchers" was a derogatory term used often at this time to refer to cyclists reviled for their reckless and dangerous high-speed racing through crowded streets.'[44] Although not on a bicycle, I offer that Miss Elphinstone encapsulates this description of scorcher when she first appears in *The War of the Worlds*. However, her 'wheels of chance' take the form of a pony-cart instead of a bicycle.

When she and the narrator's brother initially meet, Wells writes, 'One of the ladies, a short woman dressed in white was simply screaming; the other, a dark, slender figure, slashed at the man who gripped her arm with a whip she held in her disentangled hand.' (155) While the elder Elphinstone only screams at the danger at hand, the younger wildly drives the pony-cart, whip in hand, aggressively confronting the three more powerful men attempting to steal her means of escape. After the narrator's brother steps in, Miss Elphinstone initially flees in the pony-cart that is moving so swiftly that it is 'swaying from side to side' (156), driving in what Withers would definitely consider 'reckless and dangerous', until she realises that the brother is in trouble. She then returns to save him, not only driving frantically, but also 'fir[ing] [the revolver] at six yards' distance, narrowly missing' the narrator's brother (156). Wells's language here is ambiguous: is she inept with the revolver, or is she accomplished? Withers's observation that scorching usually carries a 'derogatory' connotation becomes complicated by Miss Elphinstone's ambiguity in both her driving and shooting skills; she is able to save herself, her sister, and the narrator's brother by her 'scorching', and, at this point, the 'derogatory' connotation of scorching becomes problematical. Perhaps this problematising, along with Miss Elphinstone's failure to fit into any societal box, explains why Wells's contemporaries, and even modern Wellsian scholars, do not consider her in discussions about the New Woman or *The War of the Worlds* in general: they are not quite sure what to do with her, which reminds us of Wells's *deus ex machina* with Jessie. Regardless, Miss Elphinstone achieves her goal: she and her sister-in-law escape the Martians.

[44] It is important here to note that Withers refers to the scorchers near the end of the novel, who are described by Wells as 'lean' and 'unkempt' (244), as they scorch 'in a manner suggestive of self-importance and of swagger' (Withers, 50). There is no 'self-importance' or 'swagger' in Miss Elphinstone's actions; hence, I believe 'scorching' is still an applicable term to describe metaphorically her actions. Indeed, Withers concedes: 'Wells's "scorchers" could be said to be doing something praiseworthy', which is clearly demonstrated in Miss Elphinstone's successful rescue of the narrator's brother (Withers, 50).

In the end, Jessie's escapades accomplish nothing; hence, neither has the New Woman. Wells's first attempt at depicting the New Woman, albeit entertaining and charming, fails at allowing young women of his time to achieve any sort of independence, on a bicycle or not. However, two years later, Wells takes a much stronger stance on the New Woman in his portrayal of Miss Elphinstone by allowing her to not only be strong and free-thinking, but also fulfilling the role of a heroine as she scorches in to save the day. If we follow this trajectory, *Ann Veronica* promises to be an even stronger representation of the New Woman; yet, Wells disappoints. He is determined that women in his epoch must have freedom in all things, so long as they return to the one thing he believes will allow women equality: motherhood.[45] Both Ann Veronica and Jessie Milton, in one form or another, return to the box whence they came; only Miss Elphinstone escapes this fate. She represents Wells's closest appreciation for the tenets constituting the New Woman. Unfortunately, she gets lost in the midst of ferocious alien invaders, heroic medical students, and smashed antiquated bicycles.[46]

[45] Wells, *Ann Veronica*, 75: '"We are the species," said Miss Miniver, "men are only incidents."' See also Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 83: '[S]uppose the Modern Utopia equalises things between the sexes *in the only possible way*, by insisting that motherhood is a service to the State and a legitimate claim to a living.' Emphasis added.

[46] Here, at the end of things, I would like to thank my friend and mentor, Jeremy Withers, for his invaluable and inexhaustible assistance with this article and for believing I could when the majority believed I could not.