

Oracle: The History Journal of Boston College

Volume VI | Issue I

Article 1

Triumphant Typists: Speed Contests and the Legitimization of Women's Work

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TRIUMPHANT TYPISTS: SPEED CONTESTS AND THE LEGITIMIZATION OF WOMEN'S WORK

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Abstract: In 1851, a census began circulating which brought to attention the surplus of unmarried, middle-class women in Britain. Gender norms of the time held that a woman's role was to be a mother; work, especially paid work, would degrade a woman and interfere with her sacred role. Yet, with the surfeit of men, there simply were not enough husbands to go around. Consequently, for those Victorian women with no fathers, brothers, or husbands to take care of them, destitution was their fate. Thus began debates about what to do with this so-called "odd woman," who could neither marry nor enter the workforce without sacrificing her status as a respectable lady. As these unmarried women began to search for jobs, the role of a typist became appealing, since it required little physical effort and was not *too* contrary to the conservative Victorian notions of a virtuous woman. At the same time, women competed in typewriting speed competitions alongside men. Frequently, they took home gold medals and proved to have superior typing skills. Demonstrating their skills at these contests generated dialogue about what physical and psychological attributes made women more proficient typists than men. Women's accomplishments in typewriting speed contests and the subsequent debates around their attributes highlight the process of transforming social attitudes that is required for lasting societal change. This paper seeks to demonstrate that by proving their superior typewriting skills in speed contests, these contest winners helped to legitimize their place not only as typists but also in the professional workplace as a whole.

Introduction

"[He] presented Miss Orr with the gold medal, whereat the whole audience [...] broke into a most enthusiastic applause, while the modest little lady carried off the token in triumph."²

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² "The Convention," *The Cosmopolitan Shorthand* 9, no. 8 (September 1888).

Champion of Toronto's 1888 typewriting speed contest, Miss Orr was one of many young women seeking work as a typewriter. The circulation of a census in 1851 brought to attention the surplus of unmarried, middle-class women in Britain. Gender norms of the time held that a woman's role was to be a mother. Thus, work would degrade a woman and interfere with her sacred role. With the surfeit of men, however, there simply were not enough husbands to go around. For those Victorian women with no fathers, brothers, or husbands to take care of them, destitution was their fate. This issue began debates about what to do with this so-called "odd woman," who could neither marry nor enter the workforce without sacrificing her status as a respectable lady. One solution to the odd women question required shifting the cultural mindset around what constituted respectable work through professionalization. In short, "women's work had to be professionalized" in order to make it culturally safe.³

As these unmarried women began to search for jobs, the role of a typist became appealing since it required little physical effort and was not *too* contrary to the conservative Victorian notions of a virtuous woman. In addition, as a piece of modern technology, the typewriter escaped the burden of gendered stereotypes and "allowed women to define themselves as workers with specialized technical skills."⁴ Women competed in typewriting speed competitions alongside men, frequently taking home gold medals and proving their superior typing skills. Demonstrating their skills at these contests generated dialogue about what physical and psychological attributes made women more proficient typists than men. Women's accomplishments in typewriting speed contests and the subsequent debates regarding their attributes highlight the process of transforming social attitudes required for lasting societal

³ Arlene Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Victorian England* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 4.

⁴ Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman*, 116.

change. This paper seeks to demonstrate that these contest winners helped to legitimize their place as both typists and in the professional workplace as a whole by proving their superior typewriting skills in speed contests.

Historians who focus on the role of female typists in spearheading women's entry into the professional field often ignore the critical role that speed contests played in the process of legitimization. Female typists quickly outnumbered male typists because their employers believed women to be better equipped for sitting still and focusing for long stretches of time. Additionally, as employers realized there was an abundance of young women ready to work for low wages, it became economical to hire more female workers. As other scholars have made clear, when women began to excel in these jobs, other positions, such as roles in the government, post office, and bookkeeping opened up to them. Clearly, the typist was a significant steppingstone for the modern female professional. The role of typewriting contests in shaping the public perception of a woman's capacity to work allowed for this process to occur.

Opening the Door: Female Typists and Women's Work

At the time of the odd woman debate, the typewriter was gaining prominence as a useful workplace tool. In *Gender, Technology, and the New Woman*, historian Lena Wånggren writes that "...from the 1880s onward the typewriter had a firm place both in office and popular culture."⁵ With its place established in professional life, the typewriter opened up new avenues for middle class women seeking work. Wånggren argues that as a result, "the typewriter has been read as a technology of emancipation."⁶ While the typewriter may have helped open the door for opportunity, the culture regarding women's work had yet to shift. Thus, "when women first

⁵ Lena Wånggren, *Gender, Technology and the New Woman* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 34.

⁶ Wånggren, *Gender, Technology and the New Woman*, 34.

started to work in offices, their presence was regarded pretty much as an oddity, and either praised as a courageous experiment or castigated as a ridiculous mistake.”⁷ Women who had already entered the workforce still needed to validate their role as respectable, professional, and compatible with motherhood.

Historians such as Carole Srole define two main approaches that women used to legitimize the female typist. In one, women emphasized their femininity. Victorian polite society insisted a proper lady managed her household gracefully and without complaint, devoting her life to obeying her husband and raising her children. In congruence with these norms, some female typists portrayed themselves as fragile and charming, dressing up for the office and segregating themselves from the men. Many of these women intended to marry, but wished to work to support themselves in the meantime. In an effort to ensure that their marriageability was not compromised, they stressed their femininity and propriety in the workplace. However, Srole proposes that “the image of the physically fragile, modest, and ornamental woman, guided by the rules of etiquette and the expectation of achieving her real calling of marriage, threatened her fitness for the office.”⁸ Following this argument, if professional work could compromise a woman’s respectability and virtue, then she should not be there at all. In effect, those who overemphasized stereotypes of femininity helped to strengthen the argument that women did not belong in the workplace.

The second method through which women sought to legitimize their place as typists was to “[turn] to a feminine version of the self-made man, the New Woman, to shift the balance closer to manliness and the male work ethic.”⁹ Essentially, women tried to prove their physical

⁷ Margery Davies, *Woman’s Place Is at the Typewriter* (Temple University Press, 2010), 79.

⁸ Carole Srole, *Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 145.

⁹ Srole, *Transcribing Class and Gender*, 159.

capabilities and their equality to men in terms of their ability to work. While Srole's first approach leaned into Victorian values, this method sought to uproot the basis of Britons' understanding of women and women's roles. It intended to use women's inherent capabilities to prove that like men, they could be tenacious, rational, and competent.

Typewriting speed contests and their role in justifying women's work fall into the latter category. In *From Spinster to Career Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Victorian England*, Arlene Young uses speed contests as evidence of women who attempted to equalize their roles in the Victorian office through "consistently [demonstrating] their superior skills in typewriting competitions in Europe and North America."¹⁰ Young fails to elaborate on what the general public reactions to their "superior skills" were, however, and what impact that commentary had on perceptions of women's work as a whole. She later argues that "commentaries in the media that associate women workers with typewriters in the 1880s stress the promise of the work and the capabilities of the machines and operators, not the personal qualities of the women workers."¹¹ However, a close analysis of speed contests challenges this assumption. The media, specifically typewriting periodicals, began to point out specific qualities that women possessed which made them superior typists, such as their nimble fingers, neatness, and steady hands.

This paper illustrates that, for women to be viewed as legitimate workers without sacrificing their status as respectable ladies, two shifts in the conceptual schema were required. First, women needed to be seen as physically capable of taking on the demands of the workforce. If work was too difficult for a woman – demonstrated by an inability to keep up with her male counterparts or cope with the pressure of a fast-paced environment -- she could never be

¹⁰ Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman*, 13.

¹¹ Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman* 113.

respected by employers. Secondly, the impact that work would have on a woman's purity and virtue required re-evaluation. Fears abounded that a young woman's innocence would be tainted in a male dominated sphere. More severely, there was widespread fear that partaking in work, a male duty, would unsex women by removing them from their natural role as mothers.

Historians such as Srole, Young, and Wånggren emphasize the typewriter and typist as drivers of female emancipation, but they neglect the critical role that speed contests played in legitimizing women's work. In secondary literature on female typists, contests are either alluded to as a negligible facet of the typewriter craze, or simply ignored. Reports and commentary on specific contests, advertisements, and debates in which women's statistics were invoked as proof of women's dexterity are subjects worthy of further evaluation. This evidence reveals that far more than a passing fad, contests were instruments of ideational progress. Specifically, speed contests provided an arena for women to prove to a wide audience that they could handle, even excel, in terms of manual dexterity and that they were no less feminine, respectable, or ladylike when working. Analyzing the perceptions of the female typist through the lens of the speed contest provides a more nuanced understanding of the cultural elements at play as women's world expanded into the 20th century.

Nimble Fingers and Exemplary Women: Speed Contests

Reports and commentary on speed contests illustrated to a contemporary audience that women could be proficient typists while maintaining their respectability. While there is ample evidence that typewriting speed contests were popular and frequent events, few are recounted in detail. The main sources for typewriting speed contests and typewriting in general come from periodicals such as *Bengough's Cosmopolitan Shorthander*, the *Shorthand Review*, the *London*

Phonographer, the *Phonographic World*, and *Browne's Phonographic Monthly*. Each of these periodicals had international audiences, with the United States, Canada, and England being the primary publishing sites. Contests were also international, taking place in New York City, Toronto, Chicago, and London. Two contests which were given detailed reports and commentary are the Metropolitan Typewriter Contest on August 2nd, 1888 and the Toronto Speed Contest on August 13th, 1888.

Important contestants in these competitions included Miss Mae E. Orr, Miss M. C. Grant, and Mr. Frank E. McGurrin. The *Evening Mail of Toronto*, referenced in the *Phonographic World*, gave details on Miss Orr's life outside of her participation in speed contests. It was reported that she "owns a very prosperous copying office in New York. Her nimble fingers bring her an income of about \$3,000 per year."¹² A successful business woman, Miss Orr fascinated typewriter periodicals and was a frequent contestant in speed contests of the late 1880s.

On August 2, 1888 in New York, the Metropolitan Typewriter Contest took place. Described as the "long-looked-for speed contest on typewriting machines," there were four total contestants: Ms. Grant, Ms. Orr, Mr. Myerson, and Mr. McGurrin.¹³ Each contestant had five minutes to type a letter that they could either have dictated to them, or could write from memory. At 479 words written, Mr. McGurrin placed first, followed by Ms. Orr, then Ms. Grant.¹⁴

Although McGurrin won the competition, the description of the contest is indicative of how female contestants challenged the perception of women's physical capabilities. In particular, the author described McGurrin as "one of the most expert in the United States, although it will be seen from the above that he was hard pushed by his fair lady opponents."¹⁵ To all those who

¹² "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," *The Phonographic World* 4, no. 1 (September 1888): 16.

¹³ E. N. Miner, ed., "The Metropolitan Typewriter Contest," *The Phonographic World* 3, no. 12 (August 1888): 263.

¹⁴ Miner, "The Metropolitan Typewriter Contest. 263

¹⁵ Miner, "The Metropolitan Typewriter Contest. 263

witnessed the contest, the skill of McGurrin's female peers was evident. The author made it a point to recognize that this win was a challenge for McGurrin, with both female contestants following close behind. Orr and Grant's performance, and the following commentary on the contest, highlighted to readers of the *Phonographic World* that these women provided fierce competition to an "expert" in the typewriting field. It could be of no doubt that in terms of physical capabilities, these women possessed skills worthy of notice.

The Toronto Speed Contest was a highly anticipated international speed contest hosted by the Canadian Shorthand Society to determine the "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World."¹⁶ *Bengough's Cosmopolitan Shorthand* and the *Phonographic World* each provided unique commentary on the competition and contestants. They both agreed that on August 13th, 1888, five women and four men, including Ms. Orr, Ms. Grant, and Mr. McGurrin, gathered to compete on a worldwide stage. Considered one of the largest attendances for a speed contest, with "seventy-five being present in the afternoon,"¹⁷ the results were highly anticipated by typewriter-enthusiasts and laymen alike. Each participant had five minutes to type- then their work was examined by a committee. After four hours of deliberation, the committee pronounced Miss Mae E. Orr as the winner. She took home a gold medal and \$50 prize (no small sum) for her impressive average of 98.7 words per minute.¹⁸

To begin with the description from *Bengough's Cosmopolitan Shorthand*, the writer noted that "the male operators had an advantage over the ladies" because they could peel off their coats and roll up their sleeves so nothing would interfere with their movements.¹⁹ Yet, Ms. Orr obtained first place and Ms. Grant fourth. Here, the writer admitted these women proved

¹⁶ "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," 16.

¹⁷ "The Convention."

¹⁸ "The Typewriting Tournament," *The Cosmopolitan Shorthand* 9, no. 8 (September 1888): 213.

¹⁹ "Tournament Notes," *The Cosmopolitan Shorthand* 9, no. 8 (September 1888): 214.

their skills, even at a marked disadvantage. No claims were made to defend or excuse the men's loss. Instead, the female contestants' success was made to be more impressive and undeniable.

Following the summary of events were sketches of the contestants. The article reported that Ms. Orr had a "most modest and unassuming manner," and Ms. Grant "sat with quiet dignity amidst the excitement of the conflict."²⁰ Significantly, Grant and Orr were described in ways that highlighted their propriety. These descriptions helped prove that professional work and feminine traits were not mutually exclusive; the female typist could both excel at her trade and possess important Victorian traits such as modesty and dignity. On the other hand, eighth place contestant Ms. Berry was described as having "unusual pluck and determination."²¹ Though considered "unusual" for these traits, she was sketched with professional terms that were stereotypically masculine descriptors. Notably, these traits were deemed "unusual," yet that was as far as the author is willing to draw conclusions- her "determination" is merely "unusual," not threatening or subversive to her propriety. This speed contest and the subsequent commentary in *Bengough's Cosmopolitan Shorthand* demonstrated to a wide audience that the female typist could be both ladylike and professional.

In a similar way, commentary on the 1888 Toronto Speed Contest and its contestants in the *Phonographic World* helped to legitimize the female typist's ability to work. On account of Orr's win, the author wrote that she "...has proved her claim to the distinction [Champion Typewriter Operator of the World], at actual work, in International contest."²² Here, the word "proved" is especially important. Ms. Orr verified in a categorical fashion that in fair competition with the greatest speed typists in the world, she was the best. In a society grappling with how to

²⁰ "Sketches of Contestants," 214.

²¹ "Sketches of Contestants," 214.

²² "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," 16.

correlate women's skill with preconceived notions of her inferior abilities, Orr gave undeniable proof that women were physically capable of typewriter work.

In addition to its own commentary, the *Phonographic World* reported on what other news outlets had to say about the contest. In terms of her demeanor, the author of the *World* reported that Orr "...sat as straight as an arrow right through the contest. One could observe the signs of unusual mental activity in her face, but her bearing was calm throughout. And how her nimble fingers did fly over the key-board of the Remington!"²³ In many ways, this report exemplified both how Orr challenged preconceived notions of a woman's capacity to work and the ways in which her contemporaries rationalized her superior performance. Primarily, the author took notice that neither the pressure nor the physical work of the contest was detrimental to Orr's physical bearing or calm disposition, indicating that she endured such an environment without consequence. Perhaps in an effort to understand how Orr prevailed over McGurrin and the other male contestants, the writer pointed to her "nimble fingers" and "unusual mental activity." Similar to Ms. Berry, Orr was deemed "unusual" for her intellect, but not dangerous or subversive. Further, focus on her "nimble fingers" was an explanation based on something unique about women that made them quick typists. Through her performance and bearing, Orr showed that women could work successfully without detriment on the basis of features unique to them.

After speaking about Miss Orr's personal attitude, the author of the *World* article compared her actions to the other lady contestants. The writer broadened Orr's behavior, and noted that "what has been said of Miss Orr as to her bearing before the machine, may be said also of the other ladies. They didn't stoop at the shoulders and make faces."²⁴ In one sense,

²³ "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," 17.

²⁴ "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," 17.

pointing out that these women retained a good posture and a calm countenance indicates that this disposition was unexpected. They defied assumptions about their behavior, setting a new example that women could excel at typing without detriment to their posture or attitude. Broadening this insight to all the female contestants suggested to the audience that Miss Orr's demeanor was not merely a fluke, perhaps permitting a generalization to how most women would act.

Typewriting speed contests created a space where women could not only showcase their talents, but also quell fears about the unwomanly woman through being both respectable and skilled. The article "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World" in the *Phonographic World* devoted a significant amount of space to Miss Orr and her personal achievements following a description of the speed contest. The author observed that in terms of personal qualities, "she combines with business ability an unassuming and attractive manner; but is possessed of a quiet determination, the exercise of which carried her successfully through the Toronto contest."²⁵ In this statement, the author acknowledged two ideas which had been seen by many as incompatible within a woman: "business ability" and "determination," with an "attractive manner." Through her character, Orr proved that engaging in typewriting and business did not unsex her. Importantly, the writer believed Orr's "quiet determination" helped her win the competition. In a subtle way, attributing her win to professional, rather than nurturing characteristics, helped to legitimize Orr as a respectable worker. Orr's success, attitude, and praise qualified her as a typist and businesswoman who was both feminine and skilled, setting an example for what all typewriter women could be.

²⁵ "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," 16.

Furthermore, contemporaries believed that speed contests were fundamental to advancing women's work. "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World" took Ms. Orr's praise a step further by suggesting that "such women are ornaments to the profession, and do more every day toward advancing the interests of, and removing the prejudice against, female labor, than does a "Woman's Rights" Convention."²⁶ While taking a somewhat cynical view of women's rights conventions, this statement nonetheless emphasized the importance of speed contests in legitimizing women's work. Orr, Grant, and the other female contestants demonstrated to a wide audience two key ideas: their capacity to excel at manual labor, and that they retained their propriety in a professional setting. They remained calm, proper, and agreeable, never once flinching under the pressure. When given the opportunity, Orr and the other female contestants categorically proved that they were superior typists to their male peers. Evidently, contemporaries viewed speed contests as indispensable evidence towards a woman's cause as she fought for her place in the workforce. Effectively, speed contests served as evidence to advocates of women's labor that a woman could work without physical consequence, excel at her job, and do so without threatening to unsex herself.

The QUEEN and the TYPEWRITER.

During the recent Royal Visit to the Glasgow Exhibition, her Majesty evinced considerable interest in the **REMINGTON STANDARD TYPEWRITER**, as exhibited by the Proprietors and Manufacturers, *Messrs. WYCKOFF, SEAMANS, and BENEDICT, Gracechurch-street, London, E.C.* Her Majesty and most of the Royal suite honoured the operator by having special slips written on the machine for their benefit, which they carried away as souvenirs.

At the recent speed contest for the championship of the world the Gold Medal was awarded to Miss Orr, who wrote on the **REMINGTON STANDARD TYPEWRITER** 987 words (exclusive of errors) in ten minutes, an average of about 99 words per minute. For full particulars of the Remington Standard Typewriter, **THE CHAMPION OF THE WORLD, ADDRESS,**
WYCKOFF, SEAMANS, & BENEDICT, 100, Gracechurch-street, E.C.

Figure 1.²⁷

²⁶ "Champion Typewriter Operator of the World," 16.

²⁷ "The Queen and the Typewriter," *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 15, 1888, British Library Newspapers, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BA3200412921/BNCN?sid=bookmark-BNCN&xid=838a16b2>.

Advertisements spread the news of women's triumph in speed contests to wide audiences. For example, on September 15th 1888, a notice was published in the Pall Mall Gazette, a London newspaper (fig. 1). Advertising the Remington Standard Typewriter, it used Ms. Orr's win in the 1888 Toronto Speed Contest as evidence for the typewriter's superior performance compared to other models. Here, the audience was much broader than a stenography and typewriting periodical. Individuals from around London, on any side of the women's work debate, would see that Miss Orr was the gold medal champion. Speed contests and advertisements like this one allowed for evidence of women's success in typewriting to reach a broader audience, spreading notice of women's achievements, thus providing support to the women's work movement. In this way, Orr and her success was broadcasted widely, serving as proof that women were just as talented and physically capable as men at speed typing.

Contests in Commentary

Not only was commentary on specific speed contests useful for legitimizing women's work, but references to them as evidence for women's capabilities contributed to the advancement of women's labor. These contests became useful examples of the female typist's skills and her manual dexterity. Mr. Caswell, employer of Miss Grant, was interviewed in *Browne's Phonographic Monthly* (1887), and expressed that Miss Grant and Miss Orr were the fastest typists he knew. He supported this idea by using a speed contest they competed in, where "Miss Orr won a prize offered by Remington [...] by writing 385 words in 4 minutes and 30 seconds."²⁸ His conclusion, based on Miss Orr and Miss Grant's performances in speed contests, was that, "there are a number of ladies who are expert stenographers as well as typewriters." Due

²⁸ "The Bridal Art," *Browne's Phonographic Monthly* 12, no. 12 (December 1887): 375.

to the fact that Orr and Grant consistently proved their skills in these contests, influential men like Caswell began to advocate for the fact that there were many ladies who were expert stenographers and typists. In this example, Caswell was able to make a larger argument about all female typists because he could use speed contests as compelling evidence to fortify his case. The skill which female contestants exhibited in speed contests provided ammunition for advocates of female typists and women's work more broadly.

In an article titled "Women" from the *Phonographic World*, an unknown author promoted speed contests as a means to validate typists' skills. The author observed that:

"Women rank as equals with men as the best and most rapid type-writers, which certainly calls for the highest possible degree of skill, both in deftness of fingers and quickness of brain; in fact, it is an open question to-day as to whether the very best operators are not women rather than men."²⁹

The author followed this bold claim by wondering, "why should not some of our women court writers enter the lists at the coming Speed Contest and prove their claim to recognition as the equals of men in phonographic proficiency?"³⁰ Significantly, this author believed speed contests had the ability to prove that female typists could be equal to male typists. Additionally, she held that they reinforce the idea that women possessed "deftness of the fingers and quickness of brain." In this instance, speed contests functioned as the means to prove these women's capabilities since they served as concrete evidence that women could compete equally with men based on their inherent traits.

Women setting records in speed contests contributed to the legitimation of the typist as a proficient worker. For instance, in the December 1888 edition of Bengough's *Cosmopolitan Shorthander*, *The Office* announced a typewriting speed contest to take place on January 9th in

²⁹ "Women," *The Phonographic World* 3, no. 10 (June 1888): 204.

³⁰ "Women," *The Phonographic World*. 204

London. Unfortunately, later editions of the *Shorthander* from after 1888 to see the results of the contest are unavailable. However, the notice advertised the contest by noting that a “...special prize of \$20 to an operator exceeding Miss Orr’s speed of 98.7 words per minute” would be awarded at the contest.³¹ Here, Miss Orr set the new standard for speed typing. Not only did she succeed in contests, but her remarkable speed became a goal for other typists to strive towards. In this way, Orr’s recognition continued to spread, and with it the notion that women were setting the new bar for speed and excellence within the field. Though subtle, Orr’s record functioning as the benchmark helped to further the idea that women were indeed capable at typewriting, if not superior to their male counterparts.

Similar to typewriting periodicals, the success of Miss Orr’s 1888 Toronto Speed Contest was used as evidence towards the legitimization of work in women’s journals. For instance, the *American Woman’s Journal* reported that “it is only by special mental qualifications, combined with manual dexterity, that Miss Orr and other expert operators have acquired such a wonderful degree of skill.”³² The *American Woman’s Journal* described its cause as to “prove woman’s ability to manage large enterprises.”³³ While selecting stories for the journal, the editors believed that Orr’s triumph fit their mission to prove women’s capabilities. The mental and physical qualities which Orr demonstrated in the competition furthered the woman’s work argument across many fields, and in this case, business and stockholding. The physical and mental attributes requisite of speed contests were transmutable to other fields. Thus, Orr helped substantiate women’s work as a whole based on her performance in contest.

³¹ “Typewriting Speed Contest,” *The Cosmopolitan Shorthander* 9, no. 11–12 (December 1888): 258.

³² “The World’s Champion Operator, Miss Mae E. Orr,” *American Woman’s Journal, the Business Woman’s Journal* 5, no. 1 (October 1, 1892): 39.

³³ “An Investment for Women,” *American Woman’s Journal, the Business Woman’s Journal* 5, no. 1 (October 1892): 1.

Into the twentieth century, women's performances in speed contests were cited as evidence for their manual dexterity and typewriting skills. For instance, C. E. Smith, early twentieth century author of *Practical Course in Touch Typewriting*, advocated for women's physical capabilities in the workforce. To support his argument, Smith observed that "...many women had won typewriting speed contests," which led him to conclude that women should be considered "equal, if not superior, to the opposite sex as typists."³⁴ Approximately twenty-five years after Miss Orr won the Toronto Speed Contest, Smith used women's performance in speed contests to justify their role as superior typists to men. Since contests were empirical evidence of speed and dexterity, they served as proof of proficiency for decades after they took place. Orr, Grant, and other winning women, though unnamed by Smith, created a significant enough impact that a quarter century later their successes were still used as justification for female typist's abilities.

Denigration of the Typist and Speed Contest

Speed contests helped legitimate a new field of respectable work for women and their position in the workforce as a whole, but their prestige soon began to decline. Towards the end of the 19th century, perceptions of female typists began to shift yet again. From fearful assumptions that typewriting would unsex women, to the industry flooded with eager applicants, by the 1890s, "the work [...] was fast gaining notoriety as an occupation debased by underselling among workers and by exploitation on the part of employers."³⁵ An imbalance of uneducated typewriter women created "intense anxiety about the erosion of the typewriter's status," as more

³⁴ C. E. Smith, "Are Men Better Typists than Woman?," *Scientific America* 109 (1913): 411.

³⁵ Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman*, 121.

women sought clerical work than there were positions.³⁶ While the typist lost status, the stenographer gained distinction. The typist became regarded as an uneducated and unskilled worker, whereas the stenographer position required intellect, education, and focused skill. The stenographer moved upward into more honorable positions, such as within law courts, while the typist moved downward into a position scarcely above sweated labor. As the typist fell from grace, so too did typewriting speed contests suffer a loss in prominence and credibility.

For instance, in 1893, the validity of speed contests as a means to measure competency came under scrutiny in the *Shorthand Review*. Reporter W. J. Guest argued that “it is safe to say that no reporter who has made any reputation on his own merits will ever have anything to do with these fraudulent ‘speed’ contests.”³⁷ For Guest, since the contests only served to measure speed and not intelligence or stamina, they could not be considered true measures of a typist or stenographer’s capabilities. The central debate had shifted from wondering if women could work, to which professions should they be relegated to. As Guest diminished the speed contest to a “fraudulent” activity, he also diminished the value of the typist. Speed and manual dexterity alone were no longer satisfactory qualifications for higher professions such as reporting, court stenography, or bookkeeping. These premier roles required a certain level of intellect to, in Guest’s words, “produce an intelligent report...”³⁸ Having proved their physical capabilities in contest, this narrative shift meant that the traits (women’s nimble fingers and deftness) which helped them enter the field now functioned to keep them from rising in their careers. If women were proficient typists because of their quick fingers, then professions requiring intellect and

³⁶ Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman*. 119

³⁷ W. J. Guest, “A Review of Speed Contests,” *The Shorthand Review* 5, no. 7 (July 1893): 117.

³⁸ Guest, “A Review of Speed Contests,” 117.

advanced education ought to be left to the men. In effect, women's success in typewriting speed contests had become a detriment to their ability to move up in the professional world.

Compounded by the increasing value placed on stenographers over typists, speed contests became further denigrated. Editor of the July 1893 volume of the *Shorthand Review* commented that:

“It is not so very long ago that the “Speed contest” craze was in “full blast,” and accounts of the wonderful performances that it engendered filled the columns of shorthand journals with fish stories and the minds of beginners with amazement. It then fortunately died out, for the shorthand world very soon decided that speed contests were of no practical value.”³⁹

Speed contests, as quickly as they had gained popularity, lost their repute as measures of proficiency. Now, with accuracy all the rage, short bursts of quick typing were deemed “utterly unworthy [...] [of] the attention of competent stenographers.”⁴⁰ With stenography placed above typewriting in terms of professional legitimacy, speed contests were relegated to the silly games of novice typists, leaving the real work to skilled stenographers. Devalued, speed contests no longer provided compelling evidence of a woman's capacity to work. What did it matter if Miss Orr was champion typist of the world, if speed contests no longer proved any sort of expertise?

Into the 20th Century: Legacy of Speed Contests

In the *Shorthand Review*, an article written by “one who typewrites,” brought a new perspective to the devaluation of typewriter women. In defense of her fellow typists, she wrote:

[Female typists] have, by dint of perseverance and ability, made a niche in this very high wall of woman's progress for themselves, and now they claim it as their right to hold the place they have won regardless of the jibes, caused by the fear of being left in the race than for any other reason. The typewriter is not an abused person, neither is she an inane, giggling piece of sweetness, but an earnest, brave toiler in

³⁹ W. E. Carson, ed., *The Shorthand Review* 5, no. 7 (July 1893): 112.

⁴⁰ Carson, *The Shorthand Review*, 112.

the ranks of bread-winners, asking but justice and sure of obtaining it, and willing to give in return intelligent, honest service.⁴¹

The “one who typewrites” demonstrates why it matters that women proved their capabilities in speed contests, regardless of how contests came to be perceived. It is because she has persevered; against insults and assumptions, fears and stereotypes, with determination and grace, the female typist used her innate abilities to stake her claim in professional life.

Typewriting speed contests, the female typist, and more broadly the perception of a woman’s legitimacy in the professional world went through major shifts in the latter half of the 19th century. Debates about whether or not women could work, from a moral, physical, and mental perspective, morphed into discussion of where a woman could work, provided that she lacked the higher intellect necessary for professional life. However, as the “one who typewrites” suggests, “by dint of perseverance and ability, [they] made a niche in this very high wall of women's progress for themselves.”⁴² The struggle for legitimacy in the workforce remained an ongoing battle, yet the female typist helped open the door for women to step into the arena.

At the heart of the struggle, typewriting speed contests were essential to creating this niche for women. Women’s proficiency in these contests, evident through Miss Orr, Miss Grant, and others, provided undeniable evidence that women did possess the physical capacity to work without impeding their womanhood. With the world as an audience, these contestants exemplified that women could be both successful in the business world and retain their femininity. Efforts to denigrate speed contests and typists could only go so far; women prevailing triumphant could not be unwritten from history. The legacy of the triumphant typist fueled arguments for a woman’s capacity to work for decades to come. Venturing into uncharted

⁴¹ One Who “Typewrites,” “Truth About Typewriting,” *The Shorthand Review* 5, no. 9 (September 1893): 163.

⁴² One Who “Typewrites,” “Truth About Typewriting,” 163.

territory with bravery and elegance, the female typist encapsulates the spirit of the women's movement as she sought to legitimize herself as an intellectual, capable, and respectable professional.

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