

# *Stunt Girl* JOURNALISM

## Eva McDonald Valesh and the Rhetorical Enactment of the Labor Movement



Eva McDonald Valesh, circa 1886.

*Kate Zittlow Rogness*

In March 1888, 21-year-old Eva McDonald left her job as a typesetter and began her career as a journalist for the *St. Paul Daily Globe*. As her biographer, Elizabeth Faue, notes, McDonald was tasked by the *Globe's* editor, John Swift, to “go and work in the factories, live in the homes, and give an all-round picture of how working people live.” While it was common for “stunt girls”—women working as underground investigative journalists—to subject themselves to dangerous situations (such as visiting opium dens or seeking illegal abortions), McDonald differed from most of her contemporaries in that she advocated for women’s labor rights, both on and off the page. Prior to her work with the *Globe*, she had joined the Knights of Labor Building Association, which likely influenced Swift’s decision to hire her. Following her year reporting on women’s labor conditions in Min-

neapolis, McDonald became a central figure in Minnesota’s labor rights movement. She would continue this work after her marriage to Frank Valesh in 1891.<sup>1</sup>

McDonald’s focus and writing in the late 1880s reflected the goals of the *St. Paul Globe*, a Democratic newspaper that sought to win readers with coverage of labor issues. Her column highlighted the poor and sometimes hazardous working conditions alongside the dismal salaries the women earned. In so doing, her articles rejoined labor rights with women’s rights. The two causes had been conjoined in the 1830s, when women working in the mills of the northeastern United States had begun advocating for labor rights, well before the woman suffrage movement began. In 1848, delegates to the first women’s rights convention, held at Seneca Falls, New York, passed the Declaration of Sentiments, which detailed the oppressive conditions

women experienced that were underwritten by the Constitution. Included in the Declaration of Sentiments is a series of resolutions, including one “for the securing to women an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce.” Yet, following the Seneca Falls Convention, women’s rights activists fixed their attention on securing civic rights to receive an education, to own property, and to vote—issues that mattered most to white upper-class women. By centering her efforts on labor rights in the context of women’s rights, McDonald reunited women’s rights with labor rights in the pages of the *St. Paul Daily Globe*.<sup>2</sup>

In her columns, McDonald seamlessly blended these two movements in a way that was intelligible, relatable, yet unthreatening. She did so by appropriating a feminine style of writing—a discursive style that many suffragists also used to lend credibility to their advocacy. Unlike suffrage

advocates, however, McDonald didn't advocate by advancing arguments. Instead, she enacted the role of narrator-witness to relay working women's experiences. McDonald thus established the moral imperative that justified the women's labor strikes.

In her analysis of nineteenth-century women's rights rhetoric, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains that women generated their personae as public actors by embracing norms of femininity that had previously been used to justify their exclusion from the public sphere. The feminine style "reflect[ed] the learning experiences of women who were speakers and

audiences in this period, . . . because, as a less authoritative and aggressive style, it was a less confrontational violation of taboos against public speaking by women." Women presented their arguments inductively, as observations and anecdotes of their personal experiences. In so doing, women did not challenge the

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feminine norm of submissiveness, because they did not present themselves as experts or authority figures. Instead, they built their credibility on the feminine norm of piety by becoming public arbiters of morality.<sup>3</sup>

As McDonald began reporting for the *St. Paul Globe*, women's public personae began to transition into the New Woman. Belinda Stillion Southard, a professor of rhetoric, explains, "The 'New Woman' ideology emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, as more women felt liberated from conventions of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity." This New Womanhood was emphasized in women-run newspapers and magazines such as the *Woman's Journal*, published from 1870 to 1920. These publications helped women envision their lives anew, providing advice on clothing, identity, and standards of behavior. This transition generated career opportunities for McDonald and other women in more mainstream publications, including the *St. Paul Globe*, which were run by men.<sup>4</sup>

While many women were relegated to reporting on "women's interests"—stereotypical topics such as fashion and society news—some women became stunt girls. Stunt girls drew attention to the expanding role of women by providing insight into the experiences of working-class women—including those in journalism. Jean Marie Lutes, who studies



The *St. Paul Globe* Building, on the corner of Fourth Street and Cedar Street, about 1902.

the lives of newspaperwomen in history and in fiction, notes, “Stunt girl reporting gave women journalists a way to profit from the attention so frequently focused on their bodies. Acting, in effect, as the sensation heroines of their own stories, they redefined reporting and used their bodies not just as a means of acquiring the news, but as the very source of it.” This genre of journalism reflected many of the characteristics of feminine style: the centrality of personal experience as evidence, and the moral adjudication of the conditions which degraded women’s lives.<sup>5</sup>

On March 18, 1888, McDonald published her first column under the pseudonym Eva Gay. In “Mong Girls Who Toil,” she introduced her readers to what would become a weekly column. She first justified the focus and scope of her column by pronouncing, “Working girls and their lives. How little the outside world knows of them. And yet there are thousands in the city of Minneapolis.” She then centered herself as a narrator by proposing “to carry *GLOBE* readers with [her] through a series of articles and show the life, home life and shop life, of the working girls and women of Minneapolis.” Although this first article focused on three unnamed factories in Minneapolis, she identified both the name and location of the factories in her later articles. Doing so was confrontational, but the specific details enhanced her credibility: the material reality of her reporting could not be treated as fiction. As a result, McDonald’s columns had the power to evoke public sympathy for working women while communicating solidarity with their cause.<sup>6</sup>

McDonald began her articles by narrating her experience and observations entering the factory. For example, in her column “Song of the Shirt,” she described the precarious conditions the girls faced when

arriving at the factory. “A flight of stone steps lead [sic] down from the sidewalk to the factory below. The steps were narrow and icy. ‘Look out there, you’ll fall,’ came a warning voice but too late. I had already arrived at the foot of the stairs with more speed than grace.” By centering her experience, she prompted her readers to evaluate the condition of the steps and draw their own conclusions about the level of safety at the workplace.<sup>7</sup>

McDonald then used her obser-

ventions to seek further information from the workers. For example, at the shirt factory she continued by asking one of the women, “Why don’t you have those steps cleaned off?” McDonald reported the interview as a dialogue, emphasizing the narrative quality of her reporting. The girl responded, “Oh, the proprietors, when they come down, always say: ‘We must have those steps cleaned, some girl may fall and get hurt.’ You see, they do not have to climb up and down the steps several times a day

*In “The Toiling Women: Eva Gay’s Trip Through Bag and Mattress Factories of Minneapolis,” McDonald approvingly described the conditions at Salisbury, Rolph & Co., demonstrating that it was possible to provide women with decent working conditions and wages.*

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At Salisbury, Rolph & Co.’s factory the room where the girls are employed was bright and clean, walls and ceiling being finished with matching boards. It was heated by steam, well lighted and ventilated. Altogether it looked like a decent, comfortable place for the girls to work in. Bed ticks and mattresses are made on steam sewing machines. One of the girls told me that an ordinary worker could earn \$1.50 a day, and experts as high as \$2.75. “Steam sewing machines have lately been put in here,” she said, “and the price by the piece cut a little, but we work faster now, so that makes it about even.” I heard no complaint of any sort; the employees seemed well satisfied.

—*St. Paul Daily Globe*, April 1, 1888



Salisbury, Rolph & Co., 101–103 Main Street Southeast, Minneapolis, about 1885.

like we do, so they go off and forget all about it, and we girls crawl up and down the same old way.”<sup>8</sup>

By framing the observation as a conversation, McDonald presented the factory girls’ experience as anecdotal evidence of the proprietors’ negligence. She described the interactions between the workers and proprietor in language that suggested a familial relationship—husband and wife—rather than a professional relationship. She did this by portraying the workers as polite, submissive, pious women who trusted their proprietors to take care of them: “In answer to my questions as to why they didn’t insist on having a better workshop, one said: ‘Why, you see the proprietors are always real kind and polite to their help. We don’t like to be always asking. I guess they’ll get us a better shop after a while.’ I admired her patience.” While the workers were fulfilling their feminine role as help-meets, the proprietors were failing their moral imperative as husbands to protect their family. Similar anecdotes were invoked in suffrage rhetoric to justify women’s transgressive efforts to secure their civic rights. McDonald thus compels her readers to witness the proprietors’ moral depravity and sets the stage for action.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after McDonald began writing, the factory girls she covered in her first article went on strike. McDonald recognized these efforts in her columns by providing updates on public sentiment. For example, in the article “Eva Gay Travels,” she reported, “The strike at the overall factory this week has shown the public that my statements in that case were not only true but many other facts could have been told.” By focusing on public sentiment, McDonald was able to blend her reports of factory conditions with news about the labor movement. In coupling the two, she emphasized both the humanity of

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the women and the injustice of their working conditions.<sup>10</sup>

McDonald used her journalistic agency to fuel women’s efforts in the labor movement. She admitted that her reports transgressed journalistic norms placed upon women reporters

both for content and for method of gathering information. In the late nineteenth century, it was still uncommon for women to serve as witnesses in court, because doing so communicated an expertise of opinion or experience. In enacting the

*In “Working in the Wet,” McDonald wrote about visiting the Cascade Laundry on Second Avenue South between Third and Fourth Streets. She heard “the dude bookkeeper” tell another woman, “No outsider allowed any further than the office.”*

It seemed to me that it must be pleasant to be shut off entirely from the outer world during working hours.

I didn’t wait to ask permission, but watched [for] an opportunity when that obliging young man was otherwise engaged, [then] I slid past the outer office and wandered around in the laundry. The building is three stories high, brick wall, unfinished ceilings, and is pretty clean except the wash room.

On the second floor were the starching and ironing machines. A number of girls were standing at the various machines and busily working.

“How much are you paid a day?”

“We don’t get paid that way; we get 10 cents an hour if we are good workers.”

“That’s about \$6 a week, isn’t it?”

“No, we never have work but five days in the week, so the most we can earn is \$5 a week.”

“Do you stand all day?”

“You bet we do; ten hours a day straight,” said a stout Swede girl.

“Yes, and get lots of work running the machines,” said another.

“How can you endure such work?”

“It’s awful hard,” answered one, “but we have a better time here than in a good many other places.”

“How so?”

“You see we get our pay regular, an’ the place is clean, besides, we get ice water to drink in summer. Some places there’s nothing but river water.”

—St. Paul Daily Globe, April 15, 1888

persona of witness, then, McDonald transgressed her role as a woman, but she buffered her stunt reporting with a feminine style of writing. She justified her approach by calling forth her feminine moral authority. As a woman, she felt compelled to advocate for what was morally right, even if that meant she transgressed traditional norms of femininity. She wrote, "Let them treat their employees fairly and justly, there will then be no work for me to do."<sup>11</sup>

By evoking values of fairness and justice, McDonald framed her transgressions as a moral imperative, capitalizing on her feminine piety. She placed the burden, then, on the factory owners. When they improved conditions and increased wages, she would no longer be compelled to testify as a witness to women's working conditions; she could resume her life as a "proper" woman, reverting to the accepted topics of fashion and society news.

Writing as Eva Gay, McDonald continued her series on factory girls

for the next year. Her column took on the form of a serial, but instead of inventing a dramatic fiction, she exposed the dirty underbelly of Minneapolis's factories. McDonald's reporting repurposed the feminine style that was typically used by the suffrage advocates of her era. She narrated her experiences and relayed the factory girls' perspectives as one might write a dialogue in a dime novel. These conversations served as testimony to the dangerous conditions and poverty-level wages and justified the factory girls' protests and strikes.

While her focus never strayed from labor rights, by writing in the feminine style of her suffrage contemporaries, McDonald enjoined the labor movement with the women's rights movement (which included suffrage). Her stunt girl journalism in 1888–89 reflected early efforts to integrate women into the labor movement and served as a harbinger of labor unions' advocacy of woman suffrage. After her marriage, she moved

to the East Coast, where she worked for William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and for Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, continuing to publish stories of working women under the name Eva McDonald Valesh.

In addition to her political efforts, McDonald's career as a stunt girl highlights the risk-taking, skills, and courage that women journalists demonstrated in order to transition from the society pages to the front page. Nelly Bly, famous for her reporting on the conditions of Blackwell insane asylum in New York City, is often called up in singular for her avant-garde journalistic approach. Yet, as historian Kim Todd notes in her book, *Sensational: The Hidden History of America's "Girl Stunt Reporters,"* many other women were similarly risking their health and livelihood to expose society's ills. Minnesota's own Eva McDonald contributed to the labor movement's efforts to secure safe working conditions and fair wages for women.<sup>12</sup> □

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## Notes

1. Elizabeth Faue, *Writing the Wrongs: Eva Valesh and the Rise of Labor Journalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 17.

2. Faue, *Writing the Wrongs*, 17; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Woman's Rights Convention, Lucy Stone, and the National Woman Suffrage Association Collection, *The First Convention Ever Called to Discuss the Civil and Political Rights of Women*, Seneca Falls, NY, July 19, 1848, [www.loc.gov/item/27007548](http://www.loc.gov/item/27007548). The Declaration of Sentiments has been recognized as a catalyst in the history of women's rights activism. The document paralleled the Declaration of Independence by outlining the US government's tyranny over women and commanding that women's rights be recognized and protected.

3. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, vol. 1 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989), 14.

4. Belinda Stillion Southard, "Militancy, Power, and Identity: The Silent Sentinels as Women Fighting for Political Voice," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2008): 403; Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming, *Women and Journalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 149–50, 158.

5. Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming, *Women and Journalism*, 17; Jean Marie Lutes, *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 14.

6. Eva Gay, "'Mong Girls Who Toil,'" *St. Paul Globe*, Mar. 18, 1888.

7. Eva Gay, "Song of the Shirt," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Apr. 8, 1888.

8. Gay, "Song of the Shirt."

9. Gay, "Song of the Shirt."

10. Eva Gay, "Eva Gay's Travels," *St. Paul Globe*, Apr. 22, 1888.

11. Gay, "Eva Gay's Travels," Apr. 22, 1888.

12. Kim Todd, *Sensational: The Hidden History of America's "Girl Stunt Reporters"* (New York: Harper, 2021).

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