

**Peter and Ana Lowens University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections Student Fellowship Application**

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The Scientific Imagination: Illustration in *The Strand* magazine (1893)

In the Netflix documentary *Behind the Curve*, “flat earther” conspiracy theorists attempt to prove that the earth is flat using “scientific” methods. While it can be tempting to suggest that science-related misunderstandings are a modern problem, this project suggests by contrast that diverse interpretations of science have been a part of popular discourse since the nineteenth century, when the discipline was first professionalized. As this proposal outlines, this project will use illustrations from monthly magazine *The Strand* located at the McPherson Library at the University of Victoria to educate audiences about the history of science-related speculation in a digital exhibition.

Context: *The Strand* in the 1890s

*The Strand* (1891-1960) is a useful resource for studying representations of science because fiction and non-fiction texts were published alongside each other, often without paratextual clues about genre (Tattersdill 420). For instance, in the 1893 short story “Monarchs and Muscle” by Phyllis Bentley, the female protagonist lifts European monarchs using knowledge from physics experiments. Though clearly fictional to twenty-first century readers – one illustration (see fig. 1) depicts a Victorian woman casually holding four monarchs on a chair – there are no paratextual indicators denoting “Monarchs and Muscle” as a work of fiction. On the contrary, the text is written in the first-person, with the speaker relaying their “real” encounters lifting monarchs with physics.



Fig. 1. Illustration from “Monarchs and Muscle”. Bentley, Phyllis. “Monarchs and Muscle.” *The Strand*, December 1893, 590-599.

Did readers believe the fig. 1 “Monarchs and Muscle” illustration depicted a real scene? If perceived as fictional, did readers imagine that physics could eventually provide superhuman strength? While reader responses are unknown, the illustration is a useful tool for speculating on the nineteenth century scientific imagination.

### Project Methodology

My project methodology involves closely studying illustrations in 1893 issues of *The Strand* and selecting five examples for further analysis and presentation in a digital exhibition. I will be attentive to paratext (where the illustrations appear, how they are displayed) and to maintaining the integrity of the cultural artefact while creating digital facsimiles. In the digital exhibition, I will present illustrations, insights, and historical context to showcase the diversity of science discourse in the nineteenth century. As part of my knowledge mobilization strategy, I will emphasize both the risks and possibilities that imagining science facilitates. Without paratextual context, a story like “Monarchs and Muscle” could lead to misunderstandings about science, like those misunderstandings purported by the flat-earther community. On the other hand, the short story could be interpreted as comical, or as a hopeful story that imagines how physics could empower women.

### Statement of Need

As I have never worked directly with primary sources, support from a mentor in this program would be invaluable for exploring my questions about archival research. With this fellowship, I hope to gain knowledge about how to safely handle nineteenth century cultural objects, and how to be attentive to their material properties in the process. These skills will be directly applicable to my Master’s research project on nineteenth century periodicals, which I will begin in September 2022. In addition, the financial award provided as part of this fellowship would support my studies, as I am financing my education independently.

## Works Cited

*Behind the Curve*. Directed by Daniel J. Clark. Netflix, 2018.

Bentley, Phillis. "Monarchs and Muscle." *The Strand*, December 1893, 590-599.

Tattersdill, Will. "Looking at the Issues: Science and Fiction as Genres in the fin de siècle Magazine." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 417-431.