

REBECCA HARDING DAVIS AND MEDIA

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Davis was the most well-known member of a prominent media family. Her husband, Clarke, was a working journalist who, at different times, edited *The Legal Intelligencer*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The Philadelphia Public Ledger*. The Davises were a media power couple of their day—attending publishers’ dinners at Theodore Roosevelt’s White House and entertaining international literary celebrities like Oscar Wilde at the *Ledger* offices in Philadelphia. It is unsurprising that the Davis sons also went on to pursue careers in print culture. Charles Belmont Davis wrote short stories, novels, and was an editor at *Collier’s Weekly*. Richard Harding Davis grew to great fame as a journalist covering the Spanish-American War. He became a celebrity beyond his duties as editor and writer at *The New York Herald*, *The Sun*, *Harper’s Weekly*, *Scribner’s* and *The Times of London*. He also served as the model for Charles Dana Gibson’s illustrations of dashing, young “modern” men. Rebecca and Richard’s correspondence is the record of an exchange not only between mother and son, but between an experienced media mentor and her protégé.

While Davis and her family made careers and, indeed, lives out of their involvement in print culture, she was also a sharp critic of the tendencies of the media to exploit and sensationalize its subjects. She paints a sardonic portrait of a reporter in “Life in the Iron-Mills” and Hugh Wolfe is subject to a brutal treatment in the popular press after he is convicted of theft. Ware, a reporter for “*The Daily Critic*” in her novel *John Andross*, is a media charlatan. Other characters in her stories struggle at the hands of oppressive, mercenary editors she associates with the prejudices of the patriarchy, such as the titular character in her short story “Marcia.” A musical critic for “*The Review*” in the story “Earthen Pitchers” opines of the periodical press, “now the book, the poem, or the article is manufactured and offered by these—these venders . . . just as a clown turns a summersault or plays a fresh prank—for the sake of a few pennies.”

Davis was a shrewd businesswoman when it came to selling her work; nevertheless she felt strongly about media ethics. She refused to be paid in advance for her writing and did not consent to puff profiles that focused on her personal life or her physical appearance. In her 1889 editorial “A New National Trait,” she tells an anecdote of a Virginia family humiliated by the newspaper coverage of their daughter’s wedding, equating that kind of personal reportage to “[being] turned out in the street at noon-day in their night gear.” In 1911, the Davis family would suffer their own media scandal. A maelstrom of newspaper coverage of Rebecca and Clarke’s daughter Nora ensued after her husband, the Rev. Frederick Percival Farrar, was dismissed from his post as domestic chaplain to King George. Though Rebecca would not see this unsavory drama play out—she died the year before.