



Alexis Easley, *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832-1860*.

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Alexis Easley's new monograph forays into the field of early to mid-nineteenth-century British (and US-American) periodicals by considering how the proliferation of the printing market in the Victorian-era United Kingdom (and United States) influenced the fate and fame of English and Irish women writers and, at the same time, enabled opportunities for creative participation in the literary market for women readers. Through an expert analysis, Easley puts into dialogue women writers' literary outputs and their respective receptions, highlighting the multitude of new possibilities opening up after the progressive reduction and ultimate elimination of the newspaper tax in the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain.

Most of Easley's six chapters are dedicated to the study of specific exemplary biographies, through which she constructs a history of women establishing the figure of the professional female writer: English Felicia Hemans, Eliza Cook, George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, and Irish Frances Brown are given particular spotlight. Complementing her reflections on these individual efforts, Easley further considers the *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* for women's participation in the nineteenth-century periodical culture. These and other outlets "provided women celebrities and amateur writers with remunerative work that enabled them to be, at least partly, self-supporting" (3). Finally, as Easley argues, the practice of scrapbooking anticipates celebrity culture and allows for creative engagement with new media, emphasising the role of the new mass-market woman reader (12).

Easley connects the popular writers with the “rise of cheap periodicals and newspapers during the 1830s and 1840s” (4), a phenomenon that enabled these women’s status as celebrities, consumed *by* the masses, and speaking *to* the masses on matters of common interest such as education and morality. The author considers the popular woman writer alongside the “mass-market woman *reader* from 1832 to 1860” (4), noting that “the appearance of miscellaneous columns in weekly newspapers and periodicals corresponded with the proliferation of advertising content directed specifically to women” (10). The market of cheap periodicals and mass readership, considered by Easley as entry points to study the re-structuring of gender roles in Victorian Britain, thus prove to have been key historical phenomena in terms of their potential to transform women’s vocational options in society.

In her research, Easley focuses especially on poetry in order to examine the implications of the widespread appeal, circulation and reprinting practices of poems. The latter publications were characterized by a marketing strategy that helped to establish key woman writers, such as Felicia Hemans and Eliza Cook, but potentially risked the loss of control over one’s intellectual property. Particularly, Easley’s research counters Hemans’s and Cook’s neglect in academic circles by highlighting their impact on future Victorian studies’ favourites Eliot and the Brontë sisters. Parallel to the women writers’ personal outputs, Easley puts centre stage the ways in which their reception influenced and made visible their dominance on the literary market. Cook’s personal biography, Easley suggests, worked towards establishing an interest in the writer herself, prefiguring and anticipating today’s celebrity culture thanks to gossip columns.

To illustrate the far-reaching opportunities that the expansion of periodicals enabled, Easley further focuses on the *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal*, a Victorian print outlet that frequently allowed women to contribute articles on commission. Submitting their works anonymously helped to prevent a loss of respectability (147), even though a number of writers insisted on using their name to increase their payment. Resisting the idea that the literary market was “a male-dominated publishing industry” (10), Easley argues, such women used the rise of the periodical in their favour. The growing popularity of this new media in the Victorian age thus strongly encouraged a proliferation in women’s professional presence in British society.

Highlighting the implications of being a professional writer within the periodical market, Easley inspects the life of blind Irish poet Frances Brown, dubbed “the ‘Blind Poetess of Ulster’” (183). Carving out “a celebrity identity” (184) for herself based on her disability, Brown rose to fame as a poet in Great Britain and her poems were widely reprinted in the United States. But, as Easley shows, due to the protracted lack of copyright laws, publishers in the US in effect had no legal obligation to compensate Brown, something which turned into a serious financial loss for the author. Via Brown’s biography and career, Easley demonstrates the risks that were attached to the vocation of professional writer.

In terms of the consumer’s role, Easley considers the practice of scrapbooking that showed women readers’ active engagement with the new media. By concentrating her analysis on a scrapbook by an anonymous woman reader, Easley demonstrates that the scrapbook presents a creative involvement in the texts, and thus sees its author “participating in a process of remediation that was the hallmark of an emergent mass-media culture” (238). Intertextual and adaptation practices are thus revealed to work towards establishing a consumer/reader-oriented impact on the rising market of the periodical press.

Via these considerations, Easley manages to call attention to an intricate web of women writers and readers, each working towards establishing a rising female presence and influence on the literary market. In this way, Easley re-contextualises women's status in Victorian society, stressing an early foraying into the literary market as a strategy to re-structure one's role and vocation with respect to the tradition. The profession of writer allowed women to pursue careers alongside – yet also outside of – more conventional trajectories. As a caveat, in her coda Easley notes that “[t]he stories of self-supporting women writers often ended in narratives of decline since their financial security depended on their ability to produce a constant stream of publishable work” (246).

Thanks to an accurate study of digitalized archives, Easley's monograph gives impressive insights into the careers and lives of celebrated early to mid-nineteenth-century women writers, as well as into the catalysts of such phenomenon, i.e. new mass-market women readers. In this well-researched book, Easley demonstrates that the popularisation of the (mostly cheap) literary outlets in the first half of the nineteenth century greatly accelerated, somehow anticipating fandom culture, the rise to prominence of women writers and readers. As Easley notes, a “discovery of ‘forgotten’ women writers of the early and mid-Victorian periods comes as much from our intentional efforts of literary archaeology as from the process of serendipitous discovery” (243), and hers are surely inspiring new insights in the field of popular periodicals and women's journalism.