

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Easley, Alexis. *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer 1832-1860*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 297 pp.

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<1>In *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer 1832-1860*, Alexis Easley provides us with an origin story for the figure of the popular woman writer who became the driving force that produced much of the popular literature in the Victorian period. Easley invites us to look to the early decades of the Victorian period for the women writers of short form content whose popularity was made possible by revolutions in printing technology, and women's roles in the new media print culture as writers and reader/consumers. Easley posits that the affordability of print media and increased literacy rates which democratized reading and writing in the early nineteenth century were coupled with the practice of cut and paste reprint journalism to create a unique environment in which women writers of poetry and short form prose gained celebrity. Cut and paste refers to the editorial practice of collecting and reprinting short form content that could easily fit into scrapbook-style columns with titles like "Facts and Scraps" or "Varieties". Her use of the term "new media" and comparison between the fan culture of home scrapbookers and the "viral" nature of early Victorian reprint journalism with our current interactive relationship to digital media, brings a sense of contemporaneity to this examination of an historic period in print media.

<2>Easley's chapters fall into two general categories. Three chapters are devoted to the work of individual popular women writers, Felicia Hemans, Eliza Cook, and Frances Brown, who "fell subject to gender bias, obsolescence and decanonisation" (3) and consequently remain understudied today. Easley's apt comparison of the similar career trajectories of these popular women writers illustrates her argument that the period between 1832 and 1860 provided ideal conditions for women writers to gain success and fame through a process not unlike what we would call "going viral" today. Easley points to the mobility of poetry, that is to say the ease with which it could be shared by readers and reprinted by publishers, as a main factor for the virality of these short form works, which enjoyed immense popularity with

transatlantic and American audiences as well. Additional chapters focus on how this print media environment was beneficial for successful women writers who began their careers in the late 1840s, and two aspects of women's engagement with print culture as content producers for *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal*, and as content consumers reading popular periodicals.

<3>In her chapters on individual writers, Easley reveals commonalities in the way each woman achieved celebrity as their work moved through multiple publications facilitated by the practice of cut and paste, or reprint, journalism. Hemans' poem "The Better Land" is an apt case study for the virality of poetry in this period as Easley traces its life from initial publication in an annual, through reprints in religious papers, children's periodicals and ladies' magazines, with each stop reaching a new readership demographic. Cook's early career poetry followed a similar path, despite challenges posed to her public image by her gender non-conforming dress and publicly acknowledged romantic relationship with another woman. Like Hemans, Cook's work enjoyed immense popularity at home and abroad due to the reprint culture that allowed for widespread circulation. Cook's sentimental poem "The Old Arm-Chair" went through over a dozen reprints and was eventually set to music and became "the most popular song in America" in 1840 (62). Frances Brown was one of the women writers *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* helped to launch, and who in addition to writing poetry produced other short-form content such as short stories and serials. Brown turned her physical disability, blindness as a result of childhood smallpox, into a media asset by marketing herself as "The Blind Poetess of Ulster," and provides a third instance of a woman writer rising to fame through effective navigation of a system that allowed women writers to gain celebrity. In the cases of Hemans and Cook, Easley illustrates the beginnings of celebrity culture as supported by the new technology of the woodcut image that allowed women writer's portraits to accompany their work. For Brown, it was the shrewd decision to "construct a brand" based on personal tragedy that provided a springboard for her successful career (182). Easley shows how each of these popular women writers leveraged the new media environment of this period into great success, while also describing the reprint practices of the periodic press that made success possible.

<4>In Chapter 3, Easley situates George Eliot and the Brontë sisters as beneficiaries of the cut and paste literary marketplace pioneered by Cook, Brown, and Hemans. By showing the way in which these writers used their experiences as "fans" of poetry and periodicals to eventually market their own work and manage their own celebrity, Easley brings the reader back to her use of new media and virality to describe the movement of poetry through the periodic press. She argues that earlier women

writers provided a blueprint for Eliot and the Brontës to follow in order to become successful writers. Images from Eliot's school notebook of copied poems and other literary "scraps" provides evidence of her early engagement with print culture, while Charlotte Brontë's instructions to publishers Aylott & Jones for the marketing of *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* reveal extensive research into a wide variety of periodicals and their different readerships. By tracing the relationship between these women writers and the "burgeoning, convergent print culture" (129) of the 1840s and 50s, Easley suggests that beginning their careers with poetry was a savvy and logical move based in knowledge of the industry they were attempting to join.

<5>The remaining chapters on the *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* and women readers' scrapbooking practices move away from focusing on the careers of individual women writers, and instead offer insight into women's engagement with print culture more broadly. In these chapters, Easley focuses on what she calls "interrelationships between individuals and the structures, [and] innovations" (17) of new media and technology that enabled women writers to flourish, and women readers to become participants in a kind of fan culture built around "literary commodities" (201). *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* was an innovator both as an early adopter of new printing technologies that allowed for a wide readership, and in its practice of employing a stable of staff writers, many of them women, to produce original content. Archival research conducted with the journal's ledgers between 1839 and 1855 reveal the consistent presence of 136 women writers in the journal's pages, contributing short form content such as essays, poems, and cover stories. In this chapter, Easley focuses on the careers of a few writers represented in the ledgers and discusses the import of women writers in bringing the Woman Question to middle-class women readers in the 1850s. She effectively links the *Chamber's* practice of employing women writers to the broader successes of women's writing during this period, and to the network of women reader/ consumers she discusses in her final chapter. Turning her attention to women readers and the practice of scrapbooking, Easley makes a compelling case for her comparison between this nineteenth century media ecology and our own. Newly targeted as a profitable reading demographic, middle-class women who kept scrapbooks of short-form content recreated the miscellany of columns like "Facts and Scraps" by collecting their own scraps "that enshrined the works of their favourite writers while at the same time offering opportunities to repurpose this material" (204). Easley distinguishes the scrapbook from its predecessor, the commonplace book on the basis that scrapbookers drew material from the ephemera of inexpensive print material and inserted it into their own collections. Scrapbooks, Easley argues, are generative. They show what women readers read, but also provide records of what

resonated enough to keep, how they juxtaposed works within their scrapbooks, and what is cut and pasted rather than copied in by hand. This chapter contains images from scrapbooks held by John Rylands Library and the Harry Page Collection dated between 1825 and 1860 that Easley uses to illustrate her argument. The timeframe for the scrapbook fad coincides with the time frame for the careers of the women writers covered in previous chapters. Bringing scrapbooking into her new media argument, Easley shows that by creating and sharing these books, women readers added an additional aspect to the circulation of short form content in a new mass media culture.

<6>Easley's book is broad in scope, containing material that will be of interest to scholars of the individual authors covered, those working on print culture and the periodic press, as well as anyone generally interested in the popularity of women writers and their audiences in the first half of the nineteenth century. Additionally, Easley's comparison between the new media environment created by technological advances such as the steam powered printing press and innovative publishing practices, and our contemporary new media environment through the framework of virality and celebrity, makes this work especially timely in ways that would appeal to new media scholars working within any period.