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Review of Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices

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Mark Turner

Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices edited by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Literature in the Marketplace is a significant contribution to nineteenth-century studies and an important addition to recent work in the field of cultural production. The essays in this collection draw on a range of theoretical positions (materialist, historicist, feminist, poststructuralist) in discussing the publishing history, readership, modes of production, market trends and authorship of several literary artifacts including triple-deckers, periodicals, valentines, illustrations and advertisements. There is something of interest here for all students and scholars of Victorian literature and culture.

As the editors note in their introduction, the broadly defined field of publishing history is not unified; there is no agreement on what constitutes the field of study or what methodological procedures and tools ought to be brought to bear on literary culture. They carefully map out the diverse work that has already been undertaken, from studies of institutions, such as publishing houses and circulating libraries, to studies of modes of production and bibliography. As the increasing amount of work in the field indicates, there is a complexity of issues which need to be considered: the relation between text and image, the impact of market forces on production, the intertextual connections between genres and across literary forms, the role of gender and class in textual interpretation, to name a few.

Catherine A. Judd's essay, 'Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England', is of particular value to those interested in George Eliot. She argues that we need to refigure our assumptions about Mary Ann Evans's use of 'George Eliot' in the literary marketplace. Her premise is that there is 'a cluster of mythic images surrounding the Victorian woman writer – especially the Victorian domestic novelist' which have, among other things, led us to assume that 'the use of a male pseudonym was a necessary mask due to the prejudices and exclusions of the literary marketplace'. Judd complicates the issue, asserting that 'publishing under a male pseudonym was a choice – it was not forced or deemed necessary solely by the publishing climate – and it was a choice that few writers made'. One of her arguments is that writers like Charlotte Brontë and Mary Ann Evans were savvy enough to know that a pseudonym could not hide their identities from a curious press and public:

the cult of authorship and the commodification of the signature had been growing throughout the nineteenth century, the two key examples of the marketability of the personal name in literature being Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. No doubt both Brontë and Evans learned lessons in authorial commodification from these two celebrated examples, both male, one using pseudonyms and the other publishing under his given name after briskly dropping his original pseudonym of 'Boz'.

This is an interesting proposition, although I think we need to know what differences there might be between literary celebrity early in the century and at mid-century, when debates about anonymity were resurfacing in the periodical press. Through insightful readings of Evans's 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' and Lewes's 'The Lady Novelists', Judd shows how the use of the pseudonym 'George Eliot' was ironic, a device which 'is not a usurpation of the patronym, rather . . . a creative appropriation of the possibilities inscribed in the nineteenth-century myth of subjectivity's division into distinct public and private realms'.

Other essays in the volume discuss George Eliot and give us much to reconsider, especially about her serializations. Robert L. Patten, in an essay primarily on Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, believes that in reading serials we need to consider them not only as forward-looking, but also as retrospective and backward-looking. If serial instalments contain a pre-history as much as a sense of futurity, what might that mean in reading novels which are themselves set in the past – like *Pickwick*, or George Eliot's *Middlemarch*? Patten proposes that 'George Eliot, reinvoking a past time in the service of a humane understanding of historical processes, consummated and exploited the backward-looking dynamic of periodical fiction'. It is a fruitful suggestion worth pursuing.

In their essay 'Textual/Sexual Pleasure and Serial Publication', Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund assert that the serial form 'more closely approximates female than male models of pleasure' because of its periodicity and its emphasis on anticipation and delay. If not quite an example of *écriture féminine*, serials at least posit female patterns 'which allow women authors to inscribe the female body in the silent spaces between numbers that answered to the silencing of female experience in the larger culture.' So, for example, in *Daniel Deronda*, there is uncertainty about an unwanted pregnancy by Gwendolen after Grandcourt dies in Book Seven which is not made clear until a month later in Book Eight: 'for women readers this month-long interval could have gestured toward bodily functions signalling pregnancy or menses so familiar as not to require verbal articulation'. Such an analysis requires us to reconsider our assumptions about serial reading in an attempt to fill in the gaps between instalments.

Other strong essays in the collection include J. Hillis Miller's fascinating study of valentines and of Dickens's critique of love in *Pickwick*, Kelly Mays's piece on late-Victorian reading practices, Laurel Brake's chapter on the different contexts for the periodical publication of Pater's *Renaissance* essays, and Gerard Curtis on the connections between literary and visual images and commodification. While not every essay touches on George Eliot, the collection as a whole is provocative and suggestive of ways we might take material culture and theories of production into account when looking at her works.