

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

2004

Review of Gender and the Victorian Periodical

Hilary Fraser

Stephanie Green

Judith Johnston

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Fraser, Hilary; Green, Stephanie; and Johnston, Judith, "Review of Gender and the Victorian Periodical" (2004). *The George Eliot Review*. 479.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/479>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. xiv + 255. ISBN 052183072 9

'We are dominated by Journalism' 'a really remarkable power', Oscar Wilde observed, not entirely neutrally, in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1891. Like many of his contemporaries, Wilde recognized not only the power of the press, but also its modernity. In this wide ranging and important study Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston argue that precisely because of its power the periodical press occupied a central position in the construction of gender in Victorian cultural history.

Journalism was gendered masculine by those who accorded it a lofty status within the profession of letters, they suggest. It was just as insistently gendered feminine by those who denigrated writing for the press. Hence Matthew Arnold's description of the so-called 'New Journalism' in 1887 as 'full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, generous instincts; its one great fault is that it is featherbrained', – all attributes conventionally associated with women. Ironically the increasing number of women who joined the ranks of journalists as the century progressed served to downgrade the periodical press still further, by emphasizing its femininity.

But for emerging writers like Marian Evans, Harriet Martineau, Margaret Oliphant and Eliza Lynn Linton earlier in the century the press provided a platform from which their careers were launched. Just as anonymity permitted men 'never meant for authors' to enter the writing profession, it gave women with literary ambitions an opportunity to write for publication. Fraser and Johnston quote Daniel Brown's comment that the periodical essay became 'the Trojan horse that allowed women writers to enter the male preserve of professional writing'. And their male counterparts were aware of their arrival. G. H. Lewes's article 'The Condition of Authors in England, Germany and France' (1847) despite its jocular tone, reveals anxiety about the infiltration of the masculine writing profession by 'speculators' – 'women, children, and ill-trained troops'. A subsequent article in *The Leader*, 'A Gentle Hint to Writing Women' (1850), continued the military metaphor, claiming that 'women have made an invasion of our legitimate domain' – 'they are ruining our profession' – 'My idea of a perfect woman', the article concludes, 'is of one who can write but won't', an unexpected comment, as the authors observe, by the man who was to become George Eliot's consort.

The raw materials for this study are the contents of more than one hundred and twenty quarterly, monthly and weekly magazines and reviews, some of them mandarin and high culture publications, others popular, and directed towards a mass readership. The study is part empirical, 'giving a firm grounding in the historical specificities of nineteenth-century culture and society', and part formal and rhetorical analysis of texts, 'informed by the theories and methodologies of cultural, media and women's studies'. The authors do not underestimate the difficulties of bringing together the empirical and the 'textual' in this way. Book reviews on the whole are avoided, having already been given prominence elsewhere.

So too is serialized fiction, and the regional press. The focus is on the general article and on London based publications directed toward the general rather than the specialized reader.

There are interesting juxtapositions. An article in the *Home Circle* for 1849 'A View of the Dwellings of the Working Classes, Taken from a Back Window', by Caroline Alice White, is compared with Marian Evans's review of Wilhelm Riehl's *Die Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (1851) and *Land und Leute* (1853), 'The Natural History of German Life' in the *Westminster Review* (1854). *The Edinburgh Review* is contrasted with *Eliza Cook's Journal* in their editorial policies regarding women and women's issues.

The more traditional or predictable aspects of the study are reflected in the titles of the first three chapters, 'The writing subject', 'The gendered reader', 'Editorship and gender', each considering the gendering of the periodical press from the perspective of the author, the reader, and the editor. The next four chapters look at more complex constructions of gender, in notions of the domestic and 'The politics of home', the role of the press in disseminating cultural imperialism, and the working through of feminist issues in the periodicals of the 1860s. A final chapter highlights the consumerist culture of periodical publishing at the end of the century, and considers how gender becomes a 'discourse of consumption'.

This is a challenging book and at times a difficult one, so tightly woven are its arguments. It is not a study of women and the periodical press, women's journalism, attitudes to women as reflected in the Victorian periodical press, women as consumers, producers and subjects of the periodical press. All of these elements are considered in the book, but the focus is on the construction of gender, which is often found, the authors argue, where it is least expected. They have trawled large areas of the Victorian periodical press, as is evident in the Appendix which provides brief notes on more than 100 titles investigated. One of the most refreshing aspects of the book is the discussion of articles from periodicals such as *Train* (1856-8), *Welcome Guest. A Magazine of Recreative Reading for All* (1858-64), *Wheeling* (1858-1901), *Windsor Magazine* (1895-1939), *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, the *People's and Howitt's Journal*, *Time: a Monthly Miscellany of Interesting and Amusing Literature* (1879-1901), the *Rational Dress Society Gazette* (1888-9), *Shafts* (1892-1900), *Photographic News* (1858-1908), *Lads of the Village, a Magazine of Universal Recreation* (1874), the *Family Economist* (1848-60), the *Colonist* (1848), and the *Dome* (1897-1900), as well as from more familiar titles.

The authors have been commendably ambitious in the amount of reading undertaken, but there are dangers inherent in the method. The discussion of the *Edinburgh* and *Eliza Cook's Magazine* runs into difficulty in trying to draw conclusions from a small sample of articles, in the case of the *Edinburgh*, from a publication which ran for more than a century. This section is at once too superficial, and the conclusions suspect. One wonders whether a more focused, case study approach might not have been more effective, viewing the contents of an issue, or a run, supported by contextual materials, rather than confining the evidence to the periodical 'text' alone, in what has to be a serendipitous reading experience.

One thing the authors have achieved is a seamless text, despite their joint authorship. We're told that the bulk of the writing was done by Hilary Fraser and Judith Johnston, with input from Stephanie Green. But any division of responsibility, appropriately, is cloaked in anonymity.

Joanne Shattock
University of Leicester