

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Special Issue:

Gender and Journalism: Women and/in the News in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by F. Elizabeth Gray and Nikki Hessel

### **Read All About It: Newspapers and American Women's Writing**

[\*Between the Novel and the News: The Emergence of American Women's Writing\*](#). Sari Edelstein.  
Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2014. 226 pp.

Reviewed by [Jean Marie Lutes](#), Villanova University

<1>In this ambitious and deftly argued study, Sari Edelstein shows that from its earliest beginnings, American women's fiction has been distinguished by its productive dialogue with the mainstream press. According to Edelstein, newspaper-connected male realist writers such as William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, and Ernest Hemingway were "latecomers to a literary project that women had been carrying on for close to a hundred years" (148). To chart the relationship between women's writing and the news industry, *Between the Novel and the News* studies literary works and journalism in five historical periods over the long nineteenth century. It begins in the 1780s with Judith Sargent Murray, the first American newspaperwoman and author of one of the first American novels, and it ends at the turn of the twentieth century with social activist and feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The afterword briefly analyzes the role of the newspaper in two twentieth-century works: Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). A welcome addition to recent scholarship on periodical culture and literature, this book will be of special interest to feminist critics, scholars of nineteenth-century American fiction, and press historians curious about journalism's impact on imaginative literature.

<2>Edelstein's readings of literary texts – from Murray's little-studied seduction novel *The Story of Margaretta* (1798) to Gilman's well-known feminist masterpiece "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892) – are judicious, well-informed, and nuanced in their treatment of race and class, as well as gender. But the book's primary value probably lies more in its tendency to focus on understudied texts and in its broad scope. It demonstrates that American women writers adapted and revised print-culture conventions at every watershed moment in nineteenth-century press history. Edelstein's flexible but genre-centered methodology allows her to preserve the book's thematic coherence despite the daunting historical sweep. Her perspective has been shaped by poststructuralist theory; as she charts women writers' various forms of engagement with the popular press, she draws on Michel de Certeau, Mikhail Bakhtin,

Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner, among others. But her main interest is in thick literary history. *Between the Novel and the News* gathers force when it traces the intricate connections between historical context and literary form. Along the way, Edelstein introduces us to an array of fascinating women journalists, including the spectacularly successful editor and publisher Mrs. Frank Leslie, who legally changed her name to “Frank Leslie” after her husband died in 1880, revived their newspaper empire on her own, then left her million-dollar fortune to the suffragist movement.

<3>The first chapter reads early American seduction novels by women as warnings against the rhetorical excesses of newspapers, which are figured as purveyors of seductive words that threaten the nation itself. In a young, patriarchal nation fearful about the new freedoms of speech and press, women writers fought their outsider status by describing the threat of sedition and, particularly in Murray’s case, aligning themselves with the Federalist cause. Seduction novels such as Murray’s *Margaretta*, Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), and Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) created a viable civic discourse to make up for the failings of political newspapers. The second chapter reads sentimental novels as a deliberate counter to the meteoric rise of the penny press in the 1830s, which replaced partisan journalism with profit-driven papers that sought to cultivate readership without regard for political leanings. Edelstein shows that the penny papers’ fascination with female bodies in general and “fallen woman” stories in particular coincided with – and belied – a supposedly new emphasis on facts and impartiality. She argues that the bestselling sentimental novelists, not Nathaniel Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe, offered the most significant literary rejoinder to the popular press’s salacious tone and blatantly misogynist content. To make her point, Edelstein analyzes the way two lesser-known works, Catherine Williams’s *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative* (1833) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Live and Let Live* (1837), valorized the logic of sympathy over claims to factuality and accuracy.

<4>The third chapter takes up the subscription-fueled story-papers of the 1840s and 1850s, which featured a mix of fiction, news items, editorials, and letters from readers. Focusing on E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* (1859), which was serialized in a story-paper as the nation moved toward the cataclysm of the Civil War, Edelstein argues that the miscellaneous nature of the story-paper emblemized the nation’s instability even as it gave women access to mainstream print culture. Because *The Hidden Hand* manifested the hybrid style and content of the story-paper in which it first appeared, it can be read as a text of fundamental breakdowns, cracking the divisions between fact and fiction, male and female, and ultimately anticipating the breakdown of the nation itself. Its tremendous popularity, Edelstein suggests, was less a sign of its ability to unify the nation than a testament to its multiple contradictory messages.

<5>The book then turns from novels to memoirs and shorter fiction. The fourth chapter reads texts by Louisa May Alcott and Elizabeth Keckley as contrasting models for the eyewitness correspondence of the Civil War. In very different ways, both authors dramatize the limitations of the neutral, fact-based ethos of war reportage. Edelstein argues that *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a fictionalized account of Alcott’s work as a Civil War nurse, highlights the inadequacies of war dispatches, and suggests that Alcott’s heroine, Tribulation Periwinkle — Trib for short — figures the influential *New York Tribune*: “Ultimately Alcott turns the *Tribune* into ‘Tribulation,’ suggesting that real reportage necessitates personal risk and a

radical decentering of the self" (97). Edelstein finds less newspaper critique and more explicit media manipulation in *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868), Keckley's memoir of her time as Mary Lincoln's dressmaker. Keckley used her position as seamstress to make herself into a disembodied eye, a correspondent whose own body was invisible. This move, Edelstein shows, authorized Keckley, an African American woman, to claim an objective position that the dominant culture otherwise denied her. The fifth chapter contextualizes the gender and race politics of turn-of-the-century "yellow journalism" and offers a richly detailed reading of Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as a commentary on the sensational press. Here Edelstein's precision as a critic allows her to turn a potentially gimmicky reading about an overly familiar text into a rewarding meditation on Gilman's relationship with mainstream journalism. The chapter also includes a discussion of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett's engagement with the popular press and Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far's critique of the journalistic conventions that governed coverage of the Chinese-American community.

Edelstein is careful, throughout, to observe that the print marketplace was more of a disciplinary site than a liberatory space for women. Although the daily press gets a lot of respectful attention in this book, it is ultimately cast as a powerful antagonist that talented, ambitious writers find ways to resist, appropriate, or re-invent. The daily paper itself is portrayed as a genre that makes no demands on its readers and rarely, if ever, disrupts cultural hegemony. In this way, Edelstein's alternative account is, to some degree, an illustration that successful women writers did precisely that same thing that successful male writers have been celebrated for doing. They rose above the commercial and political mandates of the news industry and produced a literature that could "tell all the truth but tell it slant," as Emily Dickinson put it. Repeatedly, Edelstein finds female authors turning to literary work to dramatize or compensate for the failings, corruption, and misrepresentations of newspaper discourse. It's telling that the book opens with an epigraph from Dickinson about the superiority of poetry to news ("The Only News I Know/Is Bulletins all day/From Immortality") and closes with an epigraph from Adrienne Rich that articulates a similar sentiment ("False history gets made all day, any day, the truth of the new is never on the news"). Women journalists who did *not* actively seek oppositional positions – such as the celebrity stunt reporter Nellie Bly – are invoked primarily to be dismissed in favor of more oppositional writers such as Gilman, Wells-Barnett, and Eaton. Perhaps this dismissal is justified, especially from the vantage point of the critic who seeks to recover a politically and aesthetically challenging counter-tradition. Certainly, Edelstein makes the case that American women novelists did not, by and large, write in apolitical solitude. Rather, they forged a vibrant, politically charged literary tradition that was deeply indebted to the mainstream press.