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The Advantages of Anonymity

First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and the Victorian Print Media, 1830-70. Alexis Easley. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004. vii + 209 pp.

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<1>When Harriet Martineau died on June 27, 1876, she left behind a self-authored obituary that was, shortly thereafter, published in the *Daily News*. Martineau wrote the obituary in the third person in the hopes that it would be published anonymously, but the publishers at the *Daily News* titled it “An Autobiographic Memoir” and included Martineau’s name in the by-line. In *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and the Victorian Print Media, 1830-70*, Alexis Easley characterizes Martineau’s obituary as a last-ditch effort in the “project of indirect self-representation” that had preoccupied Martineau throughout her career (179). Within the obituary, Martineau oscillates between “the ultimate act of self-effacement by writing her own obituary in an anonymous journalistic voice” and an advertisement for her forthcoming *Autobiography* (179). The duality at work in Martineau’s (posthumous) literary self-construction is at the heart of what it meant, according to Easley, to write as “first person anonymous” (2). “To be a woman author in Victorian society,” she argues, “was to be ‘first person anonymous’, that is, to both construct and subvert notions of individual authorial identity, manipulating the publishing conventions associated with various print media for personal and professional advantage” (2). Easley argues that anonymous authorship allowed women to discuss issues traditionally considered masculine and, simultaneously, to avoid the restrictive (and often disparaging) association with feminine authorial voice. While both men and women were publishing anonymously, Easley’s book contends that anonymity was a particularly liberating rhetorical mechanism for women writers and instrumental to their professionalization.

<2>Easley’s book extends critical work on the recovery and definition of the woman writer and the significance of journalism in nineteenth-century Britain, merging feminist and materialist analyses of this important figure. Her account of the ways in which women writers moved between signed and unsigned publications in order to harness literary authority and, thus, extend the scope of their authorship builds on the well-established feminist scholarship of Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar and on recent Victorian periodicals research by Laurel Brake and David Latane. Easley’s work is, in part, a response to feminist scholars who correlate anonymity with self-repression. *First Person Anonymous* problematizes this critical position by suggesting that anonymity also functions as a means for women to resist “notions of essential gender” (6). Most noteworthy is the breadth of periodical source material that the book covers. While Easley’s primary focus is middle-class periodicals published between 1830 and 1870 such as *Fraser’s Magazine*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, and the *Westminster Review*, she also, albeit to a lesser extent, references radical, religious, and women’s periodicals like the *Monthly Repository*, *Howitt’s Journal*, and the *English Woman’s Journal*. One of the book’s strengths is Easley’s sophisticated analysis of how women’s largely anonymous contributions to periodical literature helped shape the better-known works that they published in their own names.

<3>The book is arranged chronologically and Easley’s argument hinges on historical shifts in publication practices and notions of cultural authority. The period of the 1830s and 40s saw an increase in the number of women writers contributing to the periodical press, ushering in the “golden age of women’s journalism” in the 1850s (5). Until this point, most periodical articles were published anonymously, a practice that allowed women writers to publish on a range of topics that would have otherwise been considered inappropriate. According to Easley, anonymous publication offered writers such as Martineau and Christian Isobel Johnstone a means by which to participate in contemporary debates – including debates about women – from a “depersonalized” perspective (57). The cultural dialogue about the condition-of-England in the 1830s and 40s, Easley suggests, provided a cogent rationale for middle-class women’s contribution to the periodical press. By publishing anonymously, women were able to position themselves as reformers in the public sphere without risking their feminine respectability. Easley also makes



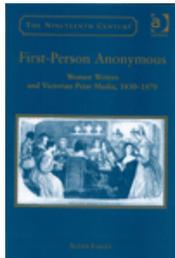
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compelling links between the increase in women's journalistic authorship and the increased popularity and availability of periodicals. She argues that because the periodical was "[c]onsumed primarily within private spaces" it "came to be associated with a feminized domestic sphere" (26). The positioning of periodicals within the domestic sphere not only contributed to the rise of Victorian women writers but also complicated popular notions of cultural authority by ideologically linking politics and domesticity. What is striking about this critical maneuver is Easley's reading of women's participation within what has traditionally been considered a male-dominated profession as liberating, rather than marginalizing. More interesting, though, is how her argument puts pressure on the notion of separate gendered spheres of authorship by questioning the degree to which periodical journalism was, in fact, dominated by men and associated with the public sphere.

<4>Easley's elucidation of this phenomenon is particularly interesting in what is arguably the strongest chapter of the book, chapter two, which deals with the lesser-known work of Johnstone. As silent co-editor of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1834 to 1846, Johnstone illustrates Easley's point about the power that women were gaining not only as journalists, but also as participants in the behind-the-scenes aspects of the journalistic enterprise. Central to Easley's argument is the idea that women not only contributed to the periodical press but also played a more direct instrumental role, as writers and editors, in its cultural delineation. In her political contributions to *Tait's*, Johnstone links the oppression of the working classes to the struggles of women. Johnstone, whose editorial practices "established a link between class and gender politics, a connection that would lead to the development of politicized reviewing practices, including a proto-feminist literary criticism," also laid the groundwork for later reformist periodicals as diverse as *Household Words* and *People's Journal* (77). Within Easley's historical narrative, Johnstone provides a link between the investigatory journalism of early Victorian women writers like Martineau, and, to a lesser extent, Gaskell, who most often discussed gender in the context of a (radical) reformist agenda, and later writers such as Eliot and Rossetti, whose writings on gender reflected a concern with "self-culture and literary taste" rather than reform (117).

<5>Following this historical trajectory, Easley traces an ideological shift within women's journalism wherein the discourse of the abused worker is supplanted by the discourse of the "abused woman author" (83). Easley underscores the dialogic relationship of periodicals and literary works by also analyzing this discourse in non-journalistic writing by women. She contributes the discursive shift from worker to woman author to the "general decline in working-class radicalism and the development of an organized women's movement during the 1850s" (110). Whereas in the 1830s and 40s, the working-class home was the chief site for journalistic investigations, in the 1850s and 60s it was replaced by the home of the female author. Easley astutely defines the discursive contours of the "abused woman author" genre in her analysis of Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The biography, along with other texts within the genre, "had the effect of rescuing women writers from obscurity" while simultaneously "mythologizing and sentimentalizing their life stories" (111). In the final two chapters of the book, on George Eliot and Christina Rossetti respectively, Easley links this particular construction of the woman author to the cultural debates over the ethics of anonymous publication. By shifting the emphasis from gender to "self-culture" in debates about authorial success, Eliot and Rossetti participated in a larger conversation about the politics of authorship and the parameters of cultural authority. Most anonymous publication ceased in the 1860s as debates over signed authorship intensified leading most editors to require signed publication. By this time, though, Easley suggests that women had, through the use of unsigned publication, established themselves as "serious" writers by complicating "notions of 'feminine' writing and identity" and "redefining themselves within and against the narrative and social conventions of their age" (184).

<6>In the afterword, Easley widens the scope of her project by addressing issues of canonization. She argues that in the ongoing study of Victorian authorship, "our object must not be merely to 'make visible' a separate canon or tradition of women's journalism or literature but to interrogate notions of obscurity and fame themselves in the history of women's writing" (184). *First Person Anonymous* certainly addresses the latter topic by outlining the significance of notions of obscurity and fame within Victorian women's journalistic writing but it provides relatively little discussion of the impact of such notions on the Victorian literary canon. The study would also benefit from more comparative analysis of men's and women's anonymous publications. Nonetheless, though Easley has left to others the more difficult question of canonicity, her well-researched and documented study of women's anonymous publications introduces important criteria for reevaluating our understanding of the professionalization of the woman writer and the

gendered politics governing notions of cultural authority. It also, appropriately, contains a wonderful bibliography of women's journalistic writing.