

Nineteenth Century Feminisms: Press and Platform

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<1>Historian Barbara Caine has suggested that women's political writing – from speeches and platform addresses to essays, newspaper editorials, and broadsheets – tends to be assessed primarily as part of specific political campaigns rather than approached as specific forms of writing. Recent scholarship on women's political work as journalists, including writers such as Elizabeth Banks, Frances Power Cobbe, Harriet Martineau, Margaret Oliphant, and Eliza Lynn Linton, has begun to address this oversight, paving the way for new contributions to this field. At the same time, broadly-based research on women and the literary politics of anonymity and signature, women's work as editors of both large and small-scale publications, and accounts of individual periodicals and the production of "women's space," suggests the need for more investigations into the gendered culture of nineteenth-century print journalism. The articles in this special issue address the relations between nineteenth-century feminisms (broadly defined) and the press, including the public culture of speaking, clubbing and organizing which often turned to the press as a critical tool.

<2>In "Thinking Back Through Our Mothers' Magazines," Margaret Beetham reads the work of seriality and the relation to readers through time in the mid-century magazines aimed at mothers. Taking up Jane Rendall's exploration of the relations between modern feminism and evangelicism, Beetham sees an alternative female authority, based in mothering, for women's participation in the world of public print that gave women a powerful voice in defining motherhood and themselves. In these magazines, motherhood is presented as a shared, collective activity that transcended the bounds of time and place, and presented Christian motherhood as normative femininity. Examining the work of letters to the editor, the practice of reprinting both within and across national boundaries, and the reports from local Maternal Associations, Beetham demonstrates how these magazines both recognised and created a community of readers, whilst allowing a space for readers to become writers of public print.

<3>Like Beetham, Michelle Tusan's "Gleaners in the Holy Land," explores the evangelical journalistic landscape through a focus on the flagship journal of the Church Missionary Society, the *Gleaner*. Asking what the missionary press can offer historians of gender, Tusan explores both the expected and unexpected ways in which the *Gleaner* offered women's voices a space to be heard, bringing news of women's travel and activities in the missionary field of the near-East. Of particular interest to Tusan is the place of the Christian Missionary Society and its periodical

in the Holy Land, where the liminal status of the Ottoman Empire in British imperial thinking put the missionary project of conversion and philanthropy on distinctively broader terms than those of formal empire. Tusan's work raises intriguing questions about the role of journals like the *Gleaner* in how we understand the place of women in British imperialism.

<4>In "The 'Orbit' of the Feminine Critic," Joanne Shattock explores women writers' understandings of their "orbit" as critics in the periodical press, examining how writers Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot used journalistic practices and forms – such as anonymity, the form of the book review, and their own relations to editors – to strategise for their work in the literary marketplace, creating distinctive literary signatures and writing lives as they did so. Reading Gaskell and Eliot's separate reviews of the life of the Marquise de Sablé, a celebrated seventeenth-century Parisian salon hostess, Shattock highlights the very different investments each writer brought to the review: Gaskell's delight in adroitly adapting materials to distinctive readerships; Eliot's keen comparative analysis of nationally distinct forms of "feminine" culture and development in France, Germany and England. The distinctive textures of these two writing lives tell us something about the possibilities of print journalism for nineteenth-century women.

<5>Where Beetham notes the creation of a broad, border-crossing definition of motherhood that was evident in the reprinting of American materials for an English audience, Teresa Zackodnik explores the practice of reprinting, amongst other forms of recirculation, as one way in which socially marginal writers could create a powerful cultural presence. Through a close study of Maria Stewart's journalistic strategies, from letters to the editor to reprinted platform speeches, Zackodnik examines the ways in which early African American feminism used recirculation as a means through which to create a public for its politics, as well as to create the impression of a movement that punched well above its weight and was national in scope. The importance of mutual and literary societies for early Black feminists, like the importance of Maternal Associations for middle-class British mothers, was an important training ground for women's leadership – political and cultural – as well as one place where a speech or a paper delineating a political claim could kick-start the process of reprinting and recirculation that was so vital a form for early Black feminism.

<6>Complementing Beetham's exploration of mothers' magazines, Solveig Robinson's article on feminism and eugenics at the fin de siècle examines the high stakes of mothering (as a biological capacity) in the eugenics world view through a close look at Victoria Woodhull-Martin's *The Humanitarian*. In Woodhull-Martin's successful late century serial, the idealised woman and her perfect offspring are at the centre of her "humanitarian" vision of a world marching forward towards a disease-free and progressive future. Where the mid-century mothering magazines in Beetham's study produced copy and readerships concerned with the moral and spiritual upbringing of their children, Woodhull-Martin's mothers have an evolutionary responsibility to bring whole, healthy bodies into the world. Robinson's study raises the critical question of what we define as "political" in our search to understand feminisms' origins. Seeking to understand fin-de-siècle ties between eugenicism and progressive thought, Robinson explores the pages of the *Humanitarian* to better understand the context in which late century debates about sexuality, feminism, personal liberty, and national self-interest unfolded.

<7>Like Zackodnik’s work on early African American feminist journalists, Maria DiCenzo’s “Pressing the Public” contributes to new efforts to examine nineteenth-century feminism not simply as a separate or specialised political movement – with its attendant societies, conferences, associations, and press – but as a movement deeply aware of and engaged with the broadest possible publics, including the mainstream or established press. Taking up the ways in which feminist newspapers tracked representations of feminism (persons, events, activities) in “the Press” as a case in point, DiCenzo explores how feminist newspapers sought to engage “the Press” in the questions of media privilege and media bias. Her examination of the ways in which feminist newspapers tracked, retorted, and reframed “the news” shows a highly reflexive feminist press determined to use the forms of the press (including staples such as publishing extracts and commentaries from other media) as a way to encourage subscribers to read the world through a feminist lens.

<8>Taken together, the essays in this issue demonstrate the range of public conversations about “women,” who appear here in the often-overlapping roles of mother, missionary, author, editor, and political leader. It also reveals the extent to which women were involved in the restructuring of “the Press” itself – an ever-shifting public whose dominant forms and modes of address shaped the production of “woman” in her various public guises. Serial forms we now tend to discount or overlook – letters to the editor, reprinted material, speeches, and critical reflections on recent publications and events – are here shown to be vital spaces for the continual reshaping of nineteenth-century feminisms, and femininity.

Endnotes

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