

**Authorship, Editorship, and Women's Sensational Power in Mid-Victorian England**

*Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies*. Beth Palmer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 206 pp.

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<1>Beth Palmer's *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture* is a welcome contribution to our understanding of the ways in which nineteenth-century women navigated the complex literary marketplace. This book is not only about women's authorship, editorship, and readership, but also about the emergence of the popular genre of sensation fiction at mid-century. Palmer identifies an important and often overlooked correlation between the serialization of sensation novels in periodicals and the growing power of women writers manifested in editorial positions that allowed them to bolster their reputations and increase their audiences. Focusing on Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Price Wood, and Florence Marryat - editors of *Belgravia*, *Argosy*, and *London Society*, respectively - Palmer argues that their "work as authors and editors in the periodical press" allowed these "women sensationalists to realize and hone their skills for sensational performance. The press was their stage, and imagining it as such allowed them to exert authority in a male-dominated magazine market" (1).

<2>Like other scholars before her, Palmer sets forth a convincing case that women writers benefitted from novel serialization because it offered a convenient way for them to balance their domestic and authorial duties and provided regular payments rather than less frequent lump sums. However, Palmer adds to this formulation the key point that engaging with the genre of sensation enhanced the notoriety of these women and thereby provided them with the opportunity to assert themselves in the periodical press. Palmer notes that considering "both sensation and the press as multiple, polyvocal, heterogenous, and interdependent makes for a more nuanced approach to nineteenth-century sensation fiction" even as it "transforms Braddon from a novelist trapped by the genre she created into the clever originator of a meta-narratological defence of sensation," "renders Ellen Wood a writer unafraid to court controversy by intervening in heated debates," and reveals Florence Marryat "to be an expert in self-performance whose work offers the possibility to examine fertile and fascinating connections between the role of author, editor, and actress" (184-185).

<3>In what is perhaps the most unexpected portion of her book, Palmer points to Charles Dickens and Isabella Beeton as model author-editors who paved the way for Braddon, Wood, and

Marryat by creating the vibrant magazine culture in which they flourished. For example, Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* were both unified by his persona in ways that these women writers imitated in their magazines. His celebrity status set a precedent, too, for their paths from authors to editors to literary icons. Palmer notes that "while their magazines were monthlies rather than weeklies and owed more to *Cornhill* than to *All the Year Round* for their format, Braddon, Wood, and Marryat were all soon to begin competing for a slice of the enormous fiction-reading audience which Dickens had helped to define and which he continued to inspire with enthusiasm" (23). Similarly, Isabella Beeton branded herself as the respectable "Mrs. Beeton" and cultivated women readers in a way that Braddon, Wood, and Marryat would later follow. Like Dickens, Beeton "built up a culture of the celebrity editor and consolidated the respectability of serial fiction" in the 1850s. Beeton was key to the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* because she "personified the magazine's attempts at balancing the pastry-making, practical woman reader with the fashion-conscious, leisured woman reader. In doing so, she gave her readers a model of femininity in her own persona" (34). Though "Mrs. Beeton" remained more shadowy and mysterious than Dickens, her performance of respectability was especially influential for women sensationalists attempting to simultaneously present images of themselves as feminine and autonomous. Shifting from these influences to the women writers that are the focus of her study, Palmer devotes a chapter to each woman, providing useful overviews of their authorial and editorial careers as well as arguing for the performative qualities that periodical sensationalism allowed them each to enact in their own way.

<4>Palmer explores how Braddon's experience on the stage was easily transferrable to her life as a sensation novelist and magazine editor. While Braddon was never given leading roles as an actress, she was quickly able to map out an authorial career in which she took center stage. After her early successes with *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1862-1863), Braddon and her lover and publisher John Maxwell were well on their way to establishing the much-maligned sensation novelist as a literary celebrity. With the launch of *Belgravia*, which Braddon edited from November 1866 until February 1876, Braddon had achieved the mouthpiece she desired and was able to launch a series of empowering sensational performances designed to take control of her image and her particular brand of fiction. Palmer examines how the novels serialized in *Belgravia* - particularly *Dead Sea Fruit* (August 1867-January 1869), *Charlotte's Inheritance* (November 1867-January 1869), and *Hostages to Fortune* (November 1874-November 1875) - reveal Braddon's efforts to "reclaim" sensation from its "negative critical associations" (65). Indeed, Palmer argues that it was the "Fleshly School" of poets and artists emerging in the 1870s that took some of the critical heat off of Braddon and sensation, a shift that Braddon used to her advantage in the magazine.

<5>In contrast to Braddon's efforts to court controversy, Palmer claims that Wood "wanted to present herself as a pious and domestic woman, whose work reflected these characteristics. Wood's story becomes interesting when we recognize how large and complex a part sensation played in her writing and how hard she tried to ameliorate its presence through performing but re-packaging its most exciting elements" (82). Wood did this by positioning herself "between two seemingly conflicting discourses: sensationalism and pious Christianity" (84). Though many critiqued what they saw as Wood's false piety, she succeeded in unifying the emotional aspects of both sensationalism and evangelicalism in her fiction and her magazine. Palmer points out that Wood was able to do this precisely because the anxieties caused by sensation fiction and

religious revivalism had a great deal in common. Thus, “Wood’s career allowed her the perfect forum to play out these twin influences in her writing in order to perform a respectably sensational persona” (90). Her editorship of *Argosy* was key to this enterprise as it allowed her to take a controversial magazine still recovering from criticism for its serialization of Charles Reade’s *Griffith Gaunt* (1866 -1867) and transform it into a morally upright venture fit for the entire family. Wood’s own serialized sensation novels were balanced with her wholesome Johnny Ludlow stories as well as selections written by a circle of women writers - including Anna Maria Hall, Mary Howitt, Julie Kavanagh, and Hesba Stretton - who conveyed an “overtly Christian outlook” (102). Palmer concludes that Wood’s rhetoric “not only contributed to [her] financial success, but also goes some way to explaining how sensation fiction, while usually represented as transgressive, often provided a conventionality and conservatism that left its critics conflicted, while it satisfied a middlebrow mid-Victorian readership” (116).

<6>Marryat’s editorship of *London Society* brought her experiences as a novelist, actress, and spiritualist together in a multi-vocal performance that featured not only her words, but her physical image. Marryat’s novels, including *Love’s Conflict* (1865) and *For Ever and Ever* (1866) inspired a great deal of negative press coverage despite the fact that they were latecomers to the sensation party. While the genre was no longer a new shock, Marryat’s fiction was more overtly erotic than Braddon’s or Wood’s had been, making “sexual impulses (rather than greed for money, status, or revenge) the driving force of the narrative” (123). Yet, “like Braddon and Wood, Marryat found that this critical disapproval did not bar her from popular success”; indeed, it launched her career (119). As editor of *London Society* from 1872 to 1876, Marryat added “an element of flirtation to the ladylike and sociable model” of editorship by incorporating illustrations of herself into the magazine (131-132). In these images, Marryat is presented as the director of a team of “mostly male contributors” who is “in center stage and in control of the action of the scene” as well as a “hostess who has laid out literary delicacies for consumption” (134-135). Palmer ultimately argues that Marryat’s editorship reveals the performative nature of “conventionally feminine roles by enacting them in ways that exaggerate and expose their artificiality” (147).

<7>As the serial novel and the shilling monthly magazine faced their demise, so too did the Victorian woman sensation novelist/editor. By the end of the century the remarkable accomplishments of Braddon, Wood, and Marryat were obscured by the fact that serial publication in monthly magazines was considered “old-fashioned” and “dangerously feminized” (164). The emergence of New Woman fiction, the popularity of short stories, and a growing distaste for mass-market journalism rendered Braddon, Wood, and Marryat obsolete. Palmer’s clearly written and convincingly argued book brings these women and their savvy strategies for success back into the spotlight as important trailblazers in the mid-Victorian periodical press.