

The Return of the Manifest: Celebrated Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century

Women Writers and the Artifacts of Celebrity in the Long Nineteenth Century. Ed. Ann R. Hawkins and Maura Ives. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 280 pp.

Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: The Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender. Brenda R. Weber. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 259 pp.

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<1>Many of the women writers featured in these two richly researched studies were household names and faces, a century ago. Two transatlantic volumes, both issued by Ashgate in 2012, could be seen as contributions to an ongoing centennial commemoration — not pinned to individual anniversaries since we inherit several generations of successful British and North American women writers in that era. The collective commemoration, indeed, is asynchronous, or in a sense both timely and timeless. Arguably, it has been under way at least since Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* of 1977 (cited by Brenda Weber in *Women and Literary Celebrity*), and has recently occasioned Alexis Easley's *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* (2011) and Linda H. Peterson's *Becoming a Woman of Letters* (2009), books that I have reviewed elsewhere. As a participant in decades of such recovery efforts, I have an unavoidable sensation of déjà vu. Yet one reads these distinctive contributions to feminist literary history, to periodical studies and book history, and to reception history not with impatience but with some of the acquisitive and inquisitive pleasure of the contemporary fans who read series of "Celebrities at Home."

<2>The editors Ann R. Hawkins and Maura Ives, and contributors to their collection (including Easley and Peterson), as well as Brenda R. Weber in her single-author book, for the most part set aside one longstanding preoccupation of feminist literary studies: what were the standards and practices that edged out women such as Fanny Fern and Marie Corelli from subsequent literary history? Although these books document some of the biased biographical constructions of women's works, they are more interested in demonstrating agency than injustice. These revivals of manifest and manifold careers appear impelled not to give voice to the repressed but to recognize savvy managers of their own success, some of whom had fierce senses of humor, and some who were forerunners of feminist critics and theorists. These books focus less on the constraints of gender and more on the many facets of literary production freshly opened to our view by new tools and revived methods of research. Thus, it is the new archival and textual scholarship, and the transatlantic and low-as-well-as-high-culture scope of both projects, rather

than the familiar feminist approach, that makes reading these books fresh, informative, and gratifying.

<3>I begin with the edited collection, which appears to have been published in time to be cited in Weber's book. Both books, it's worth noting here, have impressive bibliographies to plunder: twenty-eight pages in Weber's book and twenty-three in Hawkins's and Ives's. *Women Writers and the Artifacts of Celebrity in the Long Nineteenth Century* is a varied exhibit of writing careers that flourished from the late eighteenth century through the Regency and Victorian periods, as the title indicates. This is a notable difference from many studies; Weber's, in contrast, focuses on Victorian women writers and their less-studied successors at the fin de siècle. Without fanfare, the collection spans aspects of literary production in North America and Britain. Its all-female cast of contributors hail from universities in Canada, Scotland, England, and the United States, and several are specialists in bibliography, digital humanities, and American as well as English literature. Ives's introduction notes the interdependence of "celebrity culture" and "print technology, visual and material culture in the nineteenth century" (2). Women writers encountered specific gendered conditions in an age when the biographical persona became a circulating commodity in periodical series of interviews and visits, anthologies, family memoirs, portraits, facsimile signatures, birthday books, calendars, and other celebrity goods such as cigar boxes.

<4>Among the more unexpected and rewarding chapters is the first, Stephanie Eckroth's quantitative analysis of notices in the *Monthly Review* (1790-1823): 50.1% of the novels reviewed were "written by women or by authors who presented themselves as women" (17). Perhaps ironically in a volume on celebrity, this opens up a vista of unknowns: novels published under female or male pseudonyms, many known at the time to be either the same sex as the real author or cross-dressed, and some still unidentified. Next, Katie Halsey's meticulous rereading of a century of Jane Austen reception shifts and extends our view of the familiar reprinted "contexts" in college editions, with fresh research in the periodical reviews and editions on both sides of the Atlantic. Hawkins's chapter, subtitled "Celebrity and the Countess of Blessington," sets a high standard for the volume's correction of later, derivative assessments of women writers. Hawkins rightly italicizes her claim to restore this writer's positive reputation "*during her lifetime*" based on a "review of *all* the available notices...through 1850" (51). Blessington was considered a "right-minded woman" (55) in spite of marital scandal, and her beauty took on a life of its own in a famous portrait, "an obsession...of the time" (58). Much as one appreciates Eckroth's tables, the portraits of Blessington, the first of many excellent illustrations in this collection, are irresistible.

<5>Catherine Blackwell traces the production and reception of Louisa May Alcott's controversial and radically revised novel, *Moods* (1864), in a definitive account that reveals much about celebrity, the publishing business, and a woman author's need to conform plots to public expectations. Ives, in an excellent chapter on birthday books, continues the previous chapter's interest in bindings and other features of books and the business strategies of the people who publish them. The birthday book genre unites selected texts with a calendar; by 1899, of nearly one hundred single-author birthday books, sixteen collected quotations from a woman writer, Frances Ridley Havergal filling three of them (101). Instead of writing the history of a

genre, Jennifer Harris fleshes out an episode of history and history-writing, as she follows the story of the New England celebrity of scandal, Elizabeth Whitman, the original of Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), through its recuperation by three women writers whose careers extended into the twentieth century: Caroline Dall, Sarah Knowles Bolton, and Mary C. Crawford.

<6>The following three chapters, by Easley, Troy Bassett, and Peterson, respectively, resemble most closely the approach and materials of Hawkins's revival of Blessington. Easley leads us through periodical series of tours and interviews at home with the likes of Marie Corelli or Mary Elizabeth Braddon, while Bassett focuses on the journalist Helen C. Black's series, *Notable Women Authors of the Day* (1893), which created "an immediacy between the authors and the readers" (155) in second-person descriptions of house and hostess. The hooded-eyed Alice Meynell comes to life in Peterson's illuminating study of the fin-de-siècle poet's self-fashioning and dissemination in portraits, books, and a calendar. Jennifer Phegley's chapter on memoirs by the sons of Ellen Price Wood and Braddon, and Lizzie White's chapter on Marie Corelli, together amplify the biographical resonance of writers who belonged in those series of celebrity news. Last but not least, Carole Gerson calls attention to the hybrid roles of E. Pauline Johnson, sometimes Tekahionwake, the Canadian-Mohawk writer who toured in Native costume and appeared on a postage stamp. The effect of this sequence of illustrated studies is reminiscent of the contemporary articles on fascinating women writers, yet each author has also contributed to a rigorous history of the press and reception.

<7>Weber, a professor of gender studies, communication and culture, as well as English, draws more extensively on a long tradition of feminist criticism and theory and attends less to the materiality of printed objects than contributors to the essay collection. Whereas Hawkins's and Ives's collection includes essays on American as well as British women writers without declaring a transatlantic method, Weber's book, subtitled *The Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender*, appears in the Ashgate Series in Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Studies, and Weber reviews the implications of such studies in her introduction. Indeed, literary culture, celebrity, reform movements, and debates about gender communicated internationally during the nineteenth century, as both volumes confirm. Weber touches on important critical themes in literary gender studies, and she is always informative about the notable studies on those themes, if she does not always sharply carve the crux of the matter or her unique contribution. She traces "representations of famous author-characters" (11) in periodicals and books, 1850-1900. Literary history is reconfigured when it includes "close readings of Fanny Fern's newspaper columns as well as her novel *Ruth Hall*" (11). Almost inevitably examining Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Weber is more pioneering in combining the canonical with the once-celebrated; genres from the novel to reviews, essays, and autobiography; and varied career patterns and represented personae. Among the British women writers, she features Mary Chomondeley, Margaret Oliphant, Rhoda Broughton, and on the international and North American side (besides Fern), Elizabeth Robins, and, in an energetic chapter, the paired examples of freed African Americans Eliza Potter and Elizabeth Keckley, who wrote memoirs of their service as hairdresser and dressmaker, respectively, in elite circles and demonstrated "their ability to determine what constitutes a lady" (162).

<8>The author of *Makeover TV*, Weber is an observer of embodiment as well as cultural circulation of personal image. Thus, her book turns attention to gender and New Woman debates that are less centered on the theme of celebrity. We may not need to be reminded that “it is not the ‘real’ person but the ‘idea’ of a person that animates the salience of celebrity, and it is not ‘real’ gender as enacted in a socio-historical context but prescribed gender as inculcated” through print (21). Nor did we learn yesterday what Weber articulates well, that “writers could turn maternal sex imperatives to their advantage by birthing texts rather than children” (174). Yet Weber uncovers valuable insights from her case studies that challenge “the presumed mutual exclusivity between fame and femininity” (172) — fame carrying the positive connotation of merit, in contrast with celebrity, which suggests specious circulation. In Chapter Five, Weber discovers unexpected resonance in writers’ negotiations with the trope of text as child, noting that “the mother figure, much like the celebrity, carries meaning that often operates free of cultural scrutiny”; “the sheer range of possibility problematizes a seemingly monologic sign system” (192). She caps off her substantive discussions with a conclusion subtitled “Literary Hermaphrodites and the Exceptional Woman,” and adds an Afterword recalling her skeptical pilgrimages to the Brontës’s Haworth.

<9>Decades of feminist studies of women writers have contributed to both books on celebrated women writers of the nineteenth century, the canonical and the once-successful. Now and then the authors in both books seem to reinforce the cultural and interpretative construct that female embodiment and genius were antithetical. Mary Poovey, cited by Weber, helped us recognize the duality of the proper lady vs. the woman writer. Many reviews of the time seem to confirm that nineteenth-century culture regarded a writing woman as a freak, even as writing by women found public favor. And many nineteenth-century representations of female literary celebrities comforted readers with images of domestic femininity, well into the twentieth century. Yet these studies show that the writers themselves devised strategies that critiqued the norms, as in perhaps the most facetious portrait of the woman writer ever penned by a masquerading woman writer, Elizabeth Robins’s *George Mandeville’s Husband* (published under the pseudonym C. E. Raimond in 1894), astutely deciphered by Weber. It may be that even the most thorough-going recovery of popular reception, exemplified by these books, can only deal in blunt or soft typologies. In the twenty-second century, I would not rely upon today’s multimedia to tell the actual variety of gender roles and constructions of literary personalities.

<10>Ironically, the print era is alive and well in the age of digitization. That’s the news to celebrate in welcoming these books. Word and image, periodical and books studies now join forces with feminist studies of women writers. All the methods and theoretical commitments that we bring to the study of literate culture in material context are manifest in both these entertaining and instructive, admirably executed publications. One becomes acquainted with witty and resourceful women writers such as Lady Blessington, Fanny Fern, Alice Meynell, E. Pauline Johnson, and Elizabeth Robins – to name only those with whom I am on less familiar terms. The Penguin or the Norton college editions still scant such once-famous figures, and no longer should do so. The more secure Brontë and Austen and Alcott (among others) appear restored to their original contexts by this team of scholars. The timely and the timeless converge. Future harvesters of a swath of Anglophone women writers, some of them dazzling celebrities, will be able to glean from these books.

