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Beth Palmer. *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-19-959911-0. Price: US\$110.00/£60.00.

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Beth Palmer's *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* contributes to a growing body of works that dismantle the notion of sensation as a faddish fictional genre of the 1860s. In the pattern of (editor) Andrew Maunder's invaluable *Varieties of Women's Sensation Writing, 1855-1890* (Pickering & Chatto, 2004, vols. 1-6), Palmer reads sensation through several rhetorical and ideological traditions, but she bases her interpretations in the context and development of the serial magazine. Palmer concentrates on three sensation novelists who also edited the magazines in which their own and others' sensation writing appeared: Mary Elizabeth Braddon (*Belgravia*), Ellen Wood (*The Argosy*), and Florence Marryat (*London Society*). The status of these author/editors as sensation novelists, she argues, not only secured their editorial posts, but in doing so merged the readers of sensation with those of the magazine serial. On the family magazine stage, then, Braddon, Wood, and Marryat performed a variety of roles that made sensation palatable—or at least marketable—to a respectable, largely middle-class audience. The concept of performance, as discussed below, is at once the most original and most uncertain part of this otherwise solid and engaging book.

In the first chapter Palmer examines the publishing foundations of the 1850s that sensation's practitioners were to inherit and reshape in the 1860s and beyond. Celebrity editors like Charles Dickens (*Household Words*), Isabella Beeton (*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*) and Emily Faithfull (*Victoria Magazine*) not only wielded great control over the content and organization of their magazines, but flavored them with their distinctive personalities, lending them the credibility that comes with familiarity. As Deborah Wynne has argued, too (in *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* [Palgrave, 2001]), Palmer shows that sensation and the serial magazine were not oppositional rhetorical modes so much as they were co-constructive. In the next three chapters of the book, her detailed readings of the magazines helmed by the female sensation writers/editors ably examine sensation as a moveable feast of technique, ideology, and political affiliation.

Palmer's three central chapters on Braddon, Wood, and Marryat open sensation to a wider field of signifiers; under the aegis of magazine publishing she shows how poetry, non-fiction, and illustration drew upon the sensational elements we associate primarily with novels. In the chapter on Braddon, Palmer's readings of the author's little-known novels serialized in *Belgravia*, like *Birds of Prey* (1867), *Dead Sea Fruit* (1868) and *Hostages to Fortune* (1875), offer a fresh perspective. Her attention to Braddon's "carefully considered plotting" (65) challenges the notion that serialization's extemporized process yielded slipshod novels that were short on narrative and technical expertise. Instead, Palmer identifies a Braddon who, as both author and editor, exploits her publishing platform and the literary and moral controversies associated with sensation, and whose often frenetic pacing in her novels was intentional, not modal. Palmer's analysis of Wood concentrates on the author/editor's merging of "two seemingly conflicting discourses: sensationalism and pious Christianity" (84), a feat Wood

managed by representing the sensational elements of her writing as states of authentic feeling. The chapter on Marryat provokes questions about why this illustrious and erratic literary celebrity is not better known today; her proliferation of identities (professional, political, and artistic) reinforces Palmer's interpretation of Marryat as a melodramatic, self-conscious, sexually daring, and unpredictable exemplar of sensation..

The final chapter's foray into the New Woman press of the 1890s is less successful at telling us what we do not already know. The New Woman's adaptation and politicization of literary and professional precedents, and more recently, the links between sensation fiction and proto-modernist, proto-feminist New Woman novels, is an interesting but relatively familiar subject. However, Palmer's references to little-known women's magazines of the 1890s could spark useful and further investigations into the political range of women's issues in this decade and their collusion with the popular press.

Palmer's extensive reading of women's magazines and her contextualization of their constituent pieces – among which fiction plays an important but not overriding part—add valuably to our understanding of sensation's heterogeneity and development. Her expert attention to primary sources surpasses the critical context of the book. I particularly missed attention to overlapping works like Linda Peterson's *Becoming a Woman of Letters* (Princeton University Press, 2009) and Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

On a conceptual level, the complex dynamics of publishing, editing and writing, and the personal and professional politics that each one of these ventures provokes, raise questions about the role of any one editor/author in gaming or strategizing the system. The "Strategies" of Palmer's title recalls Amanda Anderson's well-known invocation against the "aggrandized

agency” that modern critics are tempted to ascribe to historical figures; the retrospective perception of how a historical person changed the system can lead to inflated claims of his or her prescience in knowing what was wrong and how the problem(s) could be outmaneuvered (in the case of this book, the difficulties that editor/novelists had in situating sensation in respectable magazines). Palmer nods to this dilemma briefly when she writes that her book “does not argue that its Victorian subjects were thinking theoretically about the constructed nature of their subjecthood” (13) or, by association, about the editorial decisions that helped Braddon, Wood, and Marryat to transform a male-dominated marketplace. For Palmer, the concept of performativity seems to demarcate a difference between meta-historical consciousness—which she does not claim but sometimes implies, and canny empowerment—which is central to her thesis about these women writers/editors. But her use of performativity is slippery, and a more tactical and forthright engagement with the risks of “aggrandized agency” would have mediated her numerous statements about the author/editors’ knowing command of their historical situations, such as when she intuits that “[t]hese women consciously highlight sensation as performative by repeating or ironizing aspects of it, and by attempting to foster a consciousness of that performance in the readership or audience” (13-14), or when she claims “[p]ublishing sensation in Victorian magazines offered women writers a set of discursive strategies that they could transfer outwards, into other cultural discourses and performances. With these strategies they could explore, enact, and re-work contemporary notions of female agency and autonomy” (2). Since Braddon, Wood, and Marryat are credited with transformational successes, descriptions of their performances seem expedient in the story Palmer tells about a *before* and *after* in magazine publishing’s engagement with sensation.

Again, the concept of performance perhaps prompts more questions than answers. At times the connection that Palmer makes to theatricality and performance is literal: both Braddon and Marryat had experience on the stage and as playwrights, but where their deliberate theatricality ends and turns into a kind of unconscious femininity (one which Palmer links to Judith Butler's notion of gender as a constantly evolving social performance) is not clear. "Performance" and similar terms like "persona" and "role" cleverly extend across literal and metaphorical levels, but their facility obscures Palmer's stand on the issue of strategic agency by gesturing at once to these women editor/authors' savvy exploits *and* what can be perceived more broadly as Victorian femininity's on-demand use of naiveté, artful awareness, humility, and passion (for instance). Further, while Palmer's focus on Braddon, Wood, and Marryat yields three thoroughly researched chapters, each with detailed readings of their creative and editorial work, she might have benefitted from a wider lens that considered the woman-writer as fictional character (Anthony Trollope's Lady Carbury in *The Way We Live Now* [1874-75] and Charlotte Riddell's Glenvara Westley in *A Struggle for Fame* [1883], both of whom grapple with the complex loyalties and motivations of magazine editors, come to mind). Fictional characterizations could differentiate between wily professionalism and adaptable gender identity insofar as they narrate imaginatively the causes, effects, and thought processes that literary critics and biographers must construct inferentially when writing about actual people.

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