H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sharon M. Harris, ed. *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands: Women Editing Periodicals, 1830-1910.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004. xxxvi + 279 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55553-613-8.

Reviewed by Janet Dean (Department of English and Cultural Studies, Bryant University)
Published on H-Amstdy (March, 2006)

Women on the Masthead

An aphorism variously attributed to Elbert Hubbard and Adlai Stevenson holds that the role of the editor is to separate the wheat from the chaff–and to see that the chaff is printed. Such negative views may explain why scholars have largely downplayed the function of editors in the creation of literary culture in the United States. The role of women editors of popular periodicals, in particular, has been considered either a sideline for a handful of famous female writers or a capitulation to conventional gender roles through magazines focused on fashion or domesticity. *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands: Women Editing Periodicals, 1830-1910*, a critical collection ably edited by Sharon M. Harris, goes far to correct this view and to expand our understanding of both the scope of women's editing activities and the extent to which editorships gave women a platform from which to challenge the status quo. This welcome contribution to a growing body of scholarship on women and the popular presses covers a wide range of periodicals and editorial experience, exposing the richness of this largely unexplored vein of literary culture.

Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands adds to recent scholarship by June Howard, Jane Marek, Patricia Okker, and others in revealing how the periodical publishing industry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged American women in complicated and potentially empowering ways. As Ellen Gruber Garvey's foreword points out, citing Okker's *Our Sister Editors*, over seven hundred women editors may be identified in the nineteenth century alone.[1] The context in which women performed as editors varied widely, and *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands* reveals the full range of possibilities. Part 1, "Apprenticeship," offers two essays on amateur editing performances, a Boston girls' school newspaper and "women's editions," special issues of local newspapers produced by women volunteers in the interest of raising funds for charities. The essays of part 2, "Editing as Impetus," examine the social and political agendas of women editors of commercial and noncommercial ventures, evident in examples ranging from Frances Wright's utopian *Free Enquirer* to Gertrude Bonnin's *The American Indian Magazine*. Part 3, "Career Editors," offers close analysis of the experiences of women for whom editing was their primary professional role.

In each of these contexts, women editors acted variously as gatekeepers defining content of commercial and noncommercial periodicals, as copyeditors shaping the look and style of texts, as writers contributing editorials or other materials, and, in some cases, as business managers keeping a close eye on the bottom line. These roles suggest the authority invested in editorship, and it is this authority, in its various incarnations, that makes knowledge of women's work editing periodicals crucial to a full understanding of the ways women functioned in and shaped the American cultural landscape. Women editors "wielded the editorial pen to influence public opinion," notes Harris in her introduction, and as such they "became an integral part of the redefinition of women's roles in U.S. culture" (p. xxxv).

Indeed, the cultural authority invested in editorship, the potential it held, and the problems women faced in assuming it, is at the heart of each essay in this fascinating collection. To begin with, editorship allowed women entry into the marketplace that was nominally denied them under the ideology of separate spheres. For instance, Ann Mauger Colbert notes how women's editions of local newspapers, though produced by amateur editors and writers, often became part of sophisticated commercial campaigns. Steven Fink's essay on antebellum lady editors shows that editors like Caroline Kirkland were required to play the market to keep magazines profitable. Engaging in the commercial aspects of publishing presented a problem for women editors hired to produce conventional, genteel femininity for public consumption, and Fink notes the "bifurcated discourse" Kirkland and others had to negotiate as they strove to remain

both ladylike and businesslike (p. 212). In Fink's reading, the authority granted women editors to cross into the marketplace in no way absolved them from the strictures of conventional gender roles.

Women editors also claimed cultural authority in more obvious ways, by using the periodical as a medium for voicing opinion on subjects ranging from public citizenship, to women's rights, to race issues, to class conflict, and the essays exploring these efforts are among the most interesting in the collection. In some cases, this meant simply building a platform from which to be heard, as do the students who publish the long-running school paper, *The Jabberwock*, examined in an essay by Lucille M. Schultz. In other cases, claiming cultural authority meant creating a forum for "conversations" among like-minded women, as Linda Frost's essay on Miriam Frank Leslie's "Ladies Conversazione" demonstrates. Elsewhere, women editors like Ann S. Stephens, the subject of an essay by Jennifer Blanchard, created an ideal of nineteenth-century womanhood that belied their own marketing genius. Katharine Rodier's essay examines a similar paradox in the work of Lucy Stone, whose editorship of *The Woman's Journal* at once reinscribed conservative social values and articulated a need for change.

Essays on Pauline E. Hopkins (by Hanna Wallinger) and Gertrude Bonnin (by James H. Cox) reveal how women could employ their roles as editors for political activism, though doing so was not without complications. Hopkins and Bonnin both fought for racial reforms through periodicals directed at African Americans and Native Americans, but their positions both within publishing hierarchies and against the dominant culture required them to negotiate these issues carefully. In contrast, Marianna Burgess used her editorship of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School newspaper to exert a chilling control over Indian students. The subject of Jacqueline Fear-Segal's incisive essay, Burgess adopted a fictional persona, the "man-on-the-band-stand," to construct a panopticon-like power mechanism designed to intimidate and subdue through the columns of the newspaper.

Career editors exerted cultural authority most strikingly by assuming leadership roles in a male-dominated profession. Paula Bernat Bennett's essay demonstrates how Mary Louise Booth made *Harper's Bazar* more than a fashion magazine. Marking the complete control Booth exerted over the magazine, Bennett argues that it served as an instrument of advocacy for gender reform. Similarly, Gary Scharnhorst examines the professional life of Kate Fields, a pioneer journalist and publisher whose *Kate Field's Washington* gave voice to her opinions on a range of political and social subjects.

Each of the essays in the collection is supplemented by a short selection from the publication under discussion, an editorial or column that demonstrate some of the issues addressed in the critical assessments. Because so much of the material discussed on the pages of *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands* is unknown to contemporary readers, these additions offer a valuable glimpse at the materials that have engaged the critics represented here. In fact, the brief appearance of these primary texts is something of a tease, given the absorbing discussions that precede them. Readers of *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands* will no doubt be left hoping for a future anthology that collects more of these primary texts, perhaps one shaped by the adroit (and thankfully not hidden) hand of Sharon Harris. That a collection of critical essays can leave a reader eager to peruse the archives for more women-edited periodicals is testament to its achievement. This volume will generate excitement among scholars of U.S. literary history, gender, and popular culture, and will bring attention to a neglected body of texts.

Note

[1]. Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Janet Dean. Review of Harris, Sharon M., ed., *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands: Women Editing Periodicals, 1830-1910.* H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11477

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.