H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences


**Heidi Brayman Hackel, Catherine E. Kelly, eds.**. *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800.* Material Texts Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. viii + 263 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4054-2.

**Reviewed by** Sarah H. Meacham

**Published on** H-SAWH (January, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Antoinette G. van Zelm (TN Civil War Nat. Heritage Area Center for Historic Preservation)

This collection of essays details the rise of women's reading and writing in early modern England and America. The phrase "Atlantic World" in the title, however, is misleading; the book is focused on urban England and New England and includes nothing on, for example, the West Indies. Editors Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly rightly point out that women made dramatic literary strides from 1500 to 1800. In England in 1500, "as much as 99 percent of women may have been illiterate"; by 1800, "nearly half of English and Anglo-American women demonstrated alphabetic literacy" (pp. 1, 2). Women were not only reading in greater numbers but also purchasing literature; shaping literature markets; and becoming, if we use the term very generously, authors themselves. As Robert Gross states in his excellent conclusion to the book, "the implicit narrative in this collection is progressive" and "the history of the book mainly reveals a new arena for an old struggle" for women's independence (pp. 248, 250). The collection includes essays by both literary critics and historians. Historians (for whom this review is written) will likely find the history essays provocative but some of the English essays baffling.

Women long faced major impediments to reading, let alone writing. Women were barred from learning ancient languages lest they unsex themselves, making them physically unable to read prestigious texts. Women who read anything other than pious literature found themselves mocked. Women who wished to write faced additional hurdles. Even girls who were taught to read were frequently not taught to write. By the 1800s, however, elite urban women were translating texts; creating new forms of literature, particularly the novel; and, in exceptional cases, even editing male works.

Few historians will accept that Mary Ellen Lamb has proven her claims in the book's opening essay, "Inventing the Early Modern Woman Reader through the World of Goods: Lyly's Gentle-

woman Reader and Katherine Stubbes." Lamb compares two descriptions of women readers in the late sixteenth century. According to Lamb, John Lyly's female reader acquired books much as she acquired other luxury goods, such as feathers, lapdogs, or sweets, and read mostly romances. In contrast, Philip Stubbes praised his dead wife because she read only devotional works before her death. Lamb argues that the two male writers displaced anxiety over the consumer revolution onto women's reading until "a woman defined herself by what she read" (p. 17). Lamb extrapolates from a fictional reader and the tale of a dead wife to conclude that women created female modes of literary consumption. Lamb does not explain what location she is discussing (Europe? England? America?), nor why she makes sweeping assertions about all early modern women in the Atlantic World based on a fictional character and a woman whom we know only through her husband's words.

Other essays offer conclusions and evidence more familiar to historians. In "Engendering the Female Reader: Women's Recreational Reading of Shakespeare in Early Modern England," Sasha Roberts notes that from the 1620s to the 1640s English women not only read William Shakespeare's dramas but also made marginalia on the plays, which she argues rendered them literary critics. By the Carolinian period, some authors recognized that women purchased their works and referenced women readers in them. Still, Roberts does not address issues that a historian would have discussed as a matter of course. She does not acknowledge that she is discussing a small group of wealthy, leisured, urban women. More frustratingly, she does not answer why it became acceptable for women to begin reading dramas, particularly given her lengthy statements that women had long been "characterized as vulnerable to the erotic temptations" of dramatic literature (p. 38).

Mary Kelley's "Crafting Subjectivities: Women, Reading, and Self-Imagining" demonstrates that by the early nineteenth century women in rural New England were not only reading books but, in a broad sense, also writing them. Rural New England women's diaries reveal that they read religious literature and secular pieces, including the works of Shakespeare, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, William Cowper, and Robert Burns. In the new seminaries for elite girls, women wrote commonplace books as well as diaries, letters, and journals. Schools sponsored literary societies and presented book awards, making reading, as Kelley asserts, a "***woman's*** enterprise" (p. 60). Women depended on reading and their recollections of books the rest of their lives to help lessen their loneliness.

In "'You sow, Ile read': Letters and Literacies in Early Modern Samplers," Bianca F.-C. Calabresi makes the fascinating conjecture that girls may have learned to read by sewing the alphabet in samplers rather than through primers, tutors, and schools, as boys did. It is not clear what location Calabresi is discussing, but her sampler examples come from England. Few scholars besides curators and costumers have used sewing manuals as a historical source, and Calabresi proves that they have much to offer. As she states, Calabresi does, indeed, challenge the conventional wisdom that learning to read and learning to write were separate activities.

Caroline Winterer's insightful essay, "The Female World of Classical Reading in Eighteenth-Century America," illuminates how difficult the learned woman's social position could be. By the mid-eighteenth century, elite women in America were expected to know ancient history well enough to gather in salons dedicated to discussion of it. Yet their access to schooling or books on these topics was limited and depended on male largesse. In addition, women were not supposed to know classical languages, and they certainly should not have thoughts on modern statecraft,

no matter how obvious the lessons of the past for the present.

Kelly's "Reading and the Problem of Accomplishment" also focuses on the difficulties of learned women, this time in the early American Republic. "Daughters of Columbia" were supposed to be sophisticated readers--within reason. "Too much learning produced a pedant," Kelly explains, "too much refinement produced a coquette; and too little of either produced a drudge" (p. 125). Reading was thus really another accomplishment, one that complemented elite young women's embroidery, drawing, and commonplace books. Reading provided scenes and themes for girls to embroider and draw. Women were not to take their learning beyond the decorative realm though, and certainly not to use it to claim citizenship.

Some women continued the transition from marginalia, letters, diaries, and commonplace books to other forms of writing. According to Ian Moulton in "'Who Painted the Lion?' Women and *Novelle*," women took the novelle, a form of medieval literature composed by male writers that focused on titillation (think of Chaucer's Wife of Bath) and turned it into novels that focused instead on the danger to women in love affairs and the importance that women make careful marital choices (think of Jane Austen). Moulton's piece is another essay that will frustrate historians because it offers no explanation of why this change occurred.

In "The Word Made Flesh: Reading Women and the Bible," Janice Knight looks at Puritan New England and the cases of three women. Anne Hutchinson and Mercy Short "figured centrally in transformations of Puritan typological self-understanding," while Mary Rowlandson was a "new corporeal 'type' of communal suffering and deliverance" (p. 171). Knight argues that through these women the word of God became literally flesh for Puritans and that these women found a way to publish. Short and Hutchinson made men write down their words and experiences; Rowlandson's captivity and her understanding of it were also published.

In "'With All Due Reverence and Respect to the Word of God': Aphra Behn as Skeptical Reader of the Bible and Critical Translator of Fontenelle," Margaret Ferguson examines Behn's 1688 translation of Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle's ***Entretiens sur la pluralite des monds*** and finds that Behn changed the text, in a sense authoring a new work, Ferguson claims. Behn's first work as "author" was to decide to make Fontenelle's work available to English readers. She then altered his title and tone, and "add[ed] a little" (p. 207). She highlighted her role as translator and asked the readers to identify with her rather than the original author. While we should not perhaps call Behn an author in this case, Ferguson convincingly proves that Behn's work is no "mere" translation.

Finally, Susan Stabile examines the case of Philadelphian Deborah Norris Logan (1761-1839) in "Female Curiosities: The Transatlantic Female Commonplace Book." Logan preserved the correspondence of her dead husband, James Logan, who had served as secretary to William Penn. She "carefully transcribed, annotated, and published" this correspondence, working, Stabile concludes, as an editor (p. 218). Stabile describes Logan's home, which she ran as a museum and historical repository, as a curiosity cabinet writ large. Logan also kept multiple commonplace books and diaries, making her as much of a historian and keeper of the Republic as her husband.

By the early nineteenth century, elite women had claimed a place in the world of letters. During the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, greater numbers of women would learn to read and write. And yet modern women still face some of the same obstacles as early modern women. Gross notes in his conclusion to the essays that "women were obliged to engage texts, whether in manuscript or print, through a male frame" (p.

247). And they still are. In many societies, women continue to face entrenched cultural bias against becoming too learned. Girls are still told, at least in the United States, that "showing off" learning will make them unpopular; they are encouraged to restrict their demonstrations of their knowledge just as did the early modern girls studied by Winterer and Kelly. And every woman who has entered graduate school has surely been informed that the greater her education, the more difficult it will be to "find a man." Women are still fighting for equality in the world of letters.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh

**Citation:** Sarah H. Meacham. Review of Hackel, Heidi Brayman; Kelly, Catherine E., eds. *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25206