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Alberto Gabriele, *Reading Popular Culture in Victorian Print: Belgravia and Sensationalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. xxvii +275. Figures, notes, appendix, bibliography and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-230-61521-2.

Review by Beth Palmer, University of Leeds.

Alberto Gabriele's monograph makes a useful contribution to the study of the periodical form in the nineteenth century. It takes the Victorian sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the monthly magazine which she edited from 1866-1876 as its case study. It aims to situate Braddon's *Belgravia* magazine in the larger print culture of the mid-to-late Victorian period and the discourses surrounding the fashionable sensation genre of novel writing. Its engagement with a range of theorists, including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Jonathan Crary, is ambitious. An impressive knowledge of European contexts is also brought into conjunction with the primarily British and Victorian focus.

The introduction explores the cultural trope, or mode, of sensationalism. Gabriele's reading of *Belgravia* suggests that "sensationalism can be identified with the intensely charged shocking effect of modernity" (p. 2). Scholars like Nicholas Daly define it similarly.[1] The sensational seems to Gabriele to be a transhistorical mode and gestures are made towards what might be described as twentieth and twenty-first century manifestations of sensation. Chapter one pays attention to *Belgravia*'s publishing networks and the features of the magazine and the second chapter compares Braddon's brand of sensation fiction with several of her contemporary rivals, Wilkie Collins and Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood. Like Deborah Wynne or, more recently, Matthew Rubery, Gabriele links sensationalism to the fragmented but dynamic nature of the Victorian press in which it was published. [2] Chapters three and four respectively discuss anonymity and advertising in the Victorian periodical press and try to understand Braddon's attitudes to both in wider contexts.

Gabriele rightly suggests that Braddon's *Belgravia* was unique in the explicit and self-conscious ways its articles described and enacted sensationalism. However further comparison with other similar magazines might have anchored the research more strongly in the periodical culture of the 1860s and 1870s. Braddon's magazine may have been unique in its self-reflexiveness, but it was certainly not isolated, nor was it alone in attempting to conceptualize and theorize the important cultural trope of sensationalism at this time. Comparisons with *London Society*, edited by a fellow sensation novelist, Florence Marryat, *Temple Bar*, edited by Braddon's contributor George Augustus Sala or even *Cornhill* and *Macmillan's* which started the trend for the literary monthly magazine, might have been fruitful. All of these texts thought carefully about the place of sensationalism within their pages, and within the wider print cultural context. On the other hand, the focus on a single magazine is admirable in its rarity. On the few occasions when a periodical title has commanded a monograph to itself, it has been the well-known works of canonized writers like Dickens. [3] Gabriele's book therefore stakes an important place for Braddon in the literary and print cultural history of the Victorian period.

More problematic though is the lack of in-depth analysis of Braddon's magazine itself. The references to specific examples and issues of *Belgravia* are present but unfortunately relegated to footnotes where the reader is often instructed to see a particular issue of the magazine without further explanation of what they might be looking for. The practice of relegating extra evidence to footnotes is of course a useful way of de-cluttering a text. Here

though, the strategy has been carried too far and the specific examples from *Belgravia* are too few. The aspects of the argument that move outwards from Belgravia to wider areas of popular culture like advertising or the history of the magic lantern would have been all the more convincing if rooted in a rigorous interpretative analysis of the primary text. Especially thought-provoking is when these connections between the specific and the general are more carefully made, such as in the linking of Braddon's novel, *Bound to John Company*, to industrial capitalism.

For scholars of French literary history the final chapters of the book will be of most interest. These are also the two most innovative parts of the book. Chapter five addresses the magic lanterns and other visual technologies "which capitalized on the sensational since the seventeenth century" (p. 113) to demonstrate an "osmotic exchange" (p. 114) between precinematic entertainment and sensational popular fiction. Gabriele points out that the illustrations for the periodical press were sometimes converted into magic lantern slides. The chapter provides striking examples of the same image in these different forms that suggest the dangerous nature of the domestic environment in which they were viewed. Both the magazine and the magic lantern show, he argues, asked its readers to sort fragmentation into order in their miscellaneous forms. Both appeal to their audience with sensational immediacy. The chapter then moves on to explore the relationship of sensationalism to the early silent film. It uses the example of Feuilliade's serial film *Les Vampires* and draws comparisons between its female protagonist and Braddon's literary anti-heroines. This interesting material might have been enriched further still by drawing in comparisons with the early filmic adaptations of Braddon's own works.

The final chapter again crosses into France to discuss some of the "sensation novels" written by Émile Gaboriau and published by Vizetelly in English translations. Vizetelly provides a useful cross-over figure, responding to demands from the popular market on both sides of the Channel and cannily marketing French novels to suit English readers hungry for sensation. He argues that "Detective novels in France are perceived as sensation novels in Britain" (p. 143) and that British markets displayed a broader conception of the sensation genre. He suggests that the generic indeterminacy of many texts labeled as sensational, like Émile Gaboriau's *Other People's Money*, Aléxis Bouvier's *Bewitching Iza* or George Grison's *Dispatch and Secrecy*, has excluded them from a place in the canon. While such novels help us to guess at contemporary readers' ideas about what was "sensational", they do not fit into critical paradigms mapping the development of detective fiction. Canonical writers like Balzac, Zola, and Eugène Sue are also briefly compared with Braddon's sensation novels in this chapter.

Gabriele's print culture focus is brought to the fore as the Vizetelly catalogue is trawled to demonstrate the publisher's strong penetration of the growing market for serialization in regional papers towards the end of the nineteenth century. Here the monograph connects interestingly with the work of Graham Law whose *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Periodical Press* (2000) sets a high standard for book historical research of this kind. The chapter also provides some useful details on Braddon's translation into French. She was a keen reader of French fiction, an occasional purloiner of French plots, and also contributed to the translation of her successful novel *Aurora Floyd*. These final two chapters, as well as expanding the focus into continental Europe, also work to demonstrate that sensation, in its various manifestations, was not just a phenomenon of the 1860s but continued to flourish in response to print cultures and markets during the following decades. *Belgravia* itself continued to run up until the end of the century, although Braddon bowed out of the editor's chair in 1876. Connecting the ideas explored in the final chapters to the subsequent history of this, and perhaps other, sensational magazines might have drawn out some interesting intertextual comparisons. There are some presentational difficulties in this chapter and elsewhere in the book. For example the eye continually snags on the mistaken use of the

word “Chunnel” (the twentieth-century nick-name for the tunnel between Folkestone and Calais) to describe the Channel.

Readership is a key word in the title of this monograph and in its entire research project. The history of reading is, of course, a difficult scholarly terrain in which differing methodologies and theories of reading compete. In *Reading Popular Culture in Victorian Print* the reading under consideration was more often the author’s own scholarly process than nineteenth-century readership of the periodicals and novels under question. It is difficult, if not impossible, to recapture contemporary reading experiences. However, attempts might have been made to find historical evidence for the large assumptions made about the effect of Braddon’s *Belgravia* on its contemporary readers. Diaries and letters are two of the more obvious sources through which the text might have balanced its ideas about the ways in which Braddon wanted her sensation to be read, and the ways in which readers *actually* read her work and her magazine. The monograph does demonstrate real scholarly rigour in its examination of variant runs of *Belgravia* held in the British Library and elsewhere across the British Isles. This practice may well become increasingly rare as the digitization of Victorian periodicals expands in scope. *Belgravia* itself has been digitized and is available via *C19: The Nineteenth Century Index*.^[5] Very few digital editions provide regional variants of newspapers or magazines, although the *Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition* is a notable exception.

Despite its deferral of specific and detailed attention to the primary text, it is encouraging to find a monograph that brings to the fore Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Belgravia* magazine and emphasizes its importance in Victorian print culture. This book may well inspire other studies of Braddon and her contemporary author-editors.

NOTES

[1] Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology and Modernity, 1860-2000* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2] Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001) and Matthew Rubery, *Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[3] For example, Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens’s Household Words: the social life of goods* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008).

[4] Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Periodical Press* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2000). See also Graham Law and Jennifer Carnell, ‘“Our Author”: Braddon in the Provincial Weeklies’ in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (New York: SUNY Press, 2000).

[4] *Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition* [<http://www.ncse.ac.uk/index.html>]

[5] *C:19 The Nineteenth Century Index* [<http://0-c19index.chadwyck.co.uk.wam.leeds.ac.uk/home.do>]

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