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**Susan Broomhall**, *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002. viii + 282 pp. Notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-7546-0671-6.

Review by Katharine J. Lualdi, University of Southern Maine.

Nearly twenty-five years ago, in her magisterial work *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein characterized the impact of the printing press on European society as an "unacknowledged revolution" which should be examined on its own terms. In doing so, she paid homage to her predecessors while opening up new avenues of investigation for future scholars. Susan Broomhall's *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France* testifies to the vitality of current research on the development and impact of the print medium in Europe. On the one hand, Broomhall acknowledges that Eisenstein's central argument has long since become commonplace; on the other hand, she challenges our complacency by posing a question that frames her analysis as a whole: what was the relationship between women and this "revolution" in sixteenth-century France?

A simple yet compelling fact guides her approach to this question: women's writing comprised less than one percent of the estimated total printed editions in sixteenth-century France. This statistic alone, which is based on Broomhall's considerable bibliographical legwork, signals a significant gap between male and female authors' experience of print publication. She is well aware, however, that such experiences were not limited to published authors. They also encompassed women who interacted with the printed word in other contexts as readers, owners, and collectors of books, and even as publishers and printers. Broomhall casts a broad net to catch all of these possibilities in her analysis, and the results are valuable to anyone seeking new insights into the diverse meanings and modes of publication in the lives of early modern French men and women.

Although the title of Broomhall's book accurately reflects its primary focus on women, it fails to convey the full scope of her study. The book trade is only one facet of the story Broomhall is trying to tell, which revolves around the far broader concept of "publication culture." She uses the phrase repeatedly without defining it specifically, but one hears echoes of *Annales* historian Roger Chartier throughout her analysis. For him, early modern "print culture" envelopes the transformations wrought by printing technology in private, public, spiritual, and material life as well as the new acts arising from them. To understand these transformations, he maintains, scholars must examine the ways in which they are historically contingent and culturally conditioned.[1]

Heeding Chartier's words, Broomhall does not focus exclusively on specific authors but gives precedence instead to the "contexts and conditions" that shaped women's relationship with publication culture in general (p. 11). For evidence, she relies principally on the writings of more than one hundred female authors who were born in France or resided there for a substantial portion of their lives. As the

"Checklist of First and Significant Editions" included as an appendix attests (pp. 215-40), Broomhall scoured countless sources to identify all types of women's writing. Her materials range from prefaces and laudatory verse to entire editions of poetry and prose, which were published between 1488 (when the first printed text that included writing by a French woman appeared) and the end of the sixteenth century. Broomhall intentionally broadens the meaning of "published" beyond the print medium to include manuscript texts since they were also often written for a public audience as they had been throughout the Middle Ages. In fact, she argues, the sixteenth century is worthy of special study precisely because it was a period of transition of the forms and understanding of publication from manuscript to print. As such, it opens a unique window onto continuity and change in women's participation in public discourse (pp. 4-6).

To direct our view through this window, Broomhall begins by exploring a range of "contexts" in which women participated in print culture (chs. 1-4). The threads tying all of these contexts together were socially constructed ideas about the appropriate roles for men and women, which were largely inherited from the Middle Ages. At all levels of society, women were expected to be pious and obedient wives, mothers, and household managers. These expectations, and the practical demands they placed on women, limited the type of education they received, the types of books and/or manuscripts they owned and read, their professional opportunities, and their ability to be authors themselves.

Drawing on a range of evidence to support these conclusions, Broomhall paints a rather gloomy picture of the constraints women faced. In chapter two, for instance, she explicitly challenges the widely accepted view that women found better opportunities and greater independence in the book trades than in more conventional professions. The existence of women working in the book trades is well documented, Broomhall concedes. However, most often their professional status depended upon their connection to men already working in the trade, such as a husband or father. Also, prefaces written by female printers and publishers reveal their keen awareness of contemporary hostility towards them as women in what was considered to be a man's world because of the high level of skill and literacy required.

Given such hostility, it is not surprising that women's entrance into print culture as authors was also challenging. This reality is underscored by the fact that women wrote only a tiny fraction of the estimated total print publications in sixteenth-century France. Female literacy was generally low at the time, but this number is still hugely disproportionate to the number of French women, particularly among the elite, who learned to read and write. The theoretical and practical constraints summarized above help to explain this discrepancy. Furthermore, as Broomhall describes in chapter four, even women who overcame these hurdles faced still more challenges, which were likewise based on societal notions of what constituted a "good" woman. Publishers decided what were suitable genres for women to participate in, for example, and some printers eliminated evidence of female authorship if they considered the subject matter to be outside the realm of female competence. Moreover, both printers and publishers made formatting decisions that physically conveyed the meaning and use intended for a specific work. By and large, almost all women's works were printed in small formats, which were cheaper and more portable than folio editions and as such were not considered works of lasting value (p. 110).

Thus is the fact that women were able to write and publish, even in such relatively small numbers, a tale of success or failure? Broomhall is careful not to portray women as victims, yet her message is clear in the first four chapters: even if the printing press was an agent of change, it was also an agent of continuity, for it reinforced the "gendering of public discourse" that was already well entrenched in European society. The second section of her book (chapters five to seven), however, is markedly different in tone. Because the print medium could transcend the exclusive social circles where scribal transmission traditionally took place while simultaneously tapping into a broad reading public, it offered women unprecedented opportunities to surmount geographical, social, and attitudinal barriers to female

authorship. As a result, Broomhall contends, despite their minority status, women were able to contribute to publication culture in creative and significant ways. Throughout this section, she uses the voices of individual female authors to bring their cultural contributions to life as well as to illuminate how they varied over time, place, and even physically within texts themselves.

Chapter five provides a good example of the ways in which Broomhall puts a new spin on a well-established feature of the French printing industry. As Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin noted decades ago in their important work, *L'Apparition du livre* (1958), sixteenth-century France was divided into two printing zones, with Paris dominant in the north and Lyons in the south. Yet neither their book nor any subsequent bibliographical studies capture the full significance of this geographical divide. When gender differences are taken into account, it becomes clear that proportionally a greater range of women's writings were published in Lyons than anywhere else in France. In addition, women in southern France produced more whole literary works than did women living in the north (pp. 127-30). Among the many factors that may have contributed to these phenomena, Broomhall accentuates Lyons' lack of a university and *parlement*, which were exclusive domains of male authority, as well as the distinctive traditions of female participation in literature, spirituality, and politics in southern France, such as *trobairitz* poetry. Together, these elements, Broomhall suggests, allowed women greater access to publication. By contrast, the closer women were to the socially elite circles of male political and intellectual power in Paris, the less likely they were able to craft a public identity as published authors.

Just as geographical location and social status shaped patterns of female publication in sixteenth-century France, so too did the passage of time. For example, as Broomhall discusses in chapter six, in the last quarter of the sixteenth century more and more women framed their authorial voice within the context of contemporary notions of family life. Broomhall links this trend to the Catholic church's concurrent emphasis on the importance of the family as a cornerstone of Christian society. Female authors adopted this emphasis to their advantage by casting themselves as mothers dutifully instructing their children in the Christian faith, for example, or as obedient daughters submitting to male authority. They thereby acknowledged contemporary expectations while using them to justify their participation in public discourse.

Here Broomhall's argument falters somewhat by attributing these expectations largely to the fact that Catholics had "taken on the notion that parental duties included religious education for their children: a duty largely adopted by mothers" (p. 157). Although sixteenth-century humanists and reformers did display a heightened concern for the importance of mothers as teachers of Christian virtue, this notion was not as novel as Broomhall's statement implies. Rather, it was a centuries-old feature of Christian motherhood, which is poignantly illustrated by Joan of Arc's description during her trial of how her mother had taught her the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Creed. Over the course of the fifteenth and especially the sixteenth centuries, even as they praised domestic sanctity Catholic authorities became increasingly convinced that church institutions, not the family, should assume the primary responsibility of formal Christian instruction.

Viewed as a whole, *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France* presents a sound case that, in Broomhall's words, gender mattered in sixteenth-century publication culture. Yet she leaves an important question largely unanswered: why did she choose to focus specifically on France? Was this culture, and women's relationship to it, unique, and, if so, why? Broomhall scatters hints across her study that both differed in significant ways from other parts of Europe, thereby inviting detailed study, but she does not draw out this facet of her argument sufficiently. The fact that two of the three most productive printing centers in sixteenth-century Europe, Paris and Lyons, were located in France made it unusual indeed, to say nothing of France's decades-long civil war. Broomhall herself points to these distinctive features and the ways in which they informed the lives and writings of the women which she examines. A more explicit and extended discussion to this effect would have strengthened what is already a compelling book.

## NOTES

[1] See Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

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