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Isabelle Lehuu. *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xii + 244 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4832-6.

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"Ephemeral" Media for a "Liminal" Period?

The 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s witnessed a veritable explosion of print in the United States. Commentators at the time remarked on this abundance, for better or worse. Researchers in the burgeoning field of book history have found this period rich, too. The development of new technologies of printing, paper-making, and binding; the rise of regional and national publishing firms; the expansion of literacy and the American reading public: all have attracted copious scholarly attention. Historians and literary critics have expanded their view outward from familiar genres, such as the novel, to the multiplicity of print forms and genres that proliferated after 1830. A dozen years ago, David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* showed the ways in which familiar authors such as Hawthorne and Dickinson drew on ephemeral publications, from sea stories to pornography, as they created the works that became "canonical." More recently, other scholars have untethered the ephemera from the literati: popular print forms are worth studying not simply for the light they shed on the classic authors and works, but also for what they reveal about American culture in these turbulent years. Thus, for example, David M. Henkin's *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (1998) considers the ways signs on buildings, handbills, penny newspapers, and paper money all helped construct a new, heterogeneous, spectatorial public sphere.[1]

Isabelle Lehuu's *Carnival on the Page* belongs to this latter camp. Lehuu examines four "new" print forms – the penny press, mammoth weekly newspapers, gift-books, and the women's magazine as exemplified by *Godey's Lady's Book* – in order to argue that the period's "new reading materials shared a festive and somewhat transgressive quality. They performed a collective spectacle in which producers and consumers, publishers and readers, came to participate." Underlying this argument about forms of print is a larger, if vague, contention about the antebellum years: that they were "a threshold in the development of American society and culture.... a period of unstable social order." As its title suggests, *Carnival on the Page* draws upon the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival as "a temporary suspension of all rules, privileges, and moral codes," when existing hierarchies could be "inverted and mocked" (pp. 3-4). Where Bakhtin applied the term to premodern society, Lehuu applies it to the 1830s and 1840s, with a twist: Jacksonian America's carnival was fundamentally shaped by an emerging market culture. New media were commodities for purchase, not just spontaneous productions of the street.

Lehuu's other theoretical touchstone is the social anthropologist Victor Turner's work on "liminality." Jacksonian America, Lehuu argues, was a "liminal" period, a break from the past but not simply a prologue to post-Civil War "consolidation." In her words, "It was a historical moment when the world of print was betwixt and between order and chaos, when polarities were exaggerated" (p. 4). Such vague statements pervade the book throughout. All too often, "carnival" (or "carnivalesque") and "liminality" become poorly defined catchwords, and the analysis of specific media forms seems forced into these two theoretical frames.

This is unfortunate, because Lehuu's close reading of texts often makes insightful points. She argues that the penny press transgressed traditional print culture

through its "format and content," particularly the way it made private scandals into public news, and the way its lurid descriptions of "the carnality that was attributed to the dangerous classes of the nineteenth century, including immoral women, blacks, and aliens such as Catholics" flew in the face of middle-class notions of bodily control (p. 53).

Lehuu examines the ways the papers presented the Mary Rogers murder case, and the ways Edgar Allan Poe tamed the papers' descriptions in his story, "The Mystery of Marie Roget." Mammoth weeklies, such as *Brother Jonathan* and the *New World*, existed only briefly in the late 1830s and early 1840s, offering a cornucopia of genres and information and serializing fiction. Arguing that these enormous papers "illustrate the temporary success of the aesthetics of the monstrous" (p. 59), Lehuu here focuses on format more than content. Although she never explains how this format was "the epitome of grotesque corpulence and a visual representation of bodily deformity, which was characteristic of a manly popular culture and a taste for street festivals" (p. 62), Lehuu does demonstrate that the mammoth papers asserted their size at the very moment when the page size of regular papers was shrinking, and that mammoth papers would not have been conducive to the sort of private, solitary perusal that increasingly characterized reading habits in this period.

Gender takes center stage in chapters on giftbooks and *Godey's Lady's Book*. "Sacred objects in a new domestic religion," giftbooks proliferated in the 1830s and 1840s (p. 77). Lehuu argues that these books subverted traditional print culture in several ways. In their copious illustrations, they drew upon a older Catholic use of art in the service of religion rather than the Protestant reliance on the word. They quickly became feminized, almost always by the late 1830s including iconic portraits of women.

Nonetheless, Lehuu notes, their ideological function proved contradictory: "once feminized and entrusted with the benevolent mission of gift giving and sentimental exchange, these embellished books implicitly bore the marks of commodities and could no longer escape the capitalist system they were designed to alleviate" (p. 98). As in other chapters, the analysis claims more than the evidence can sustain: how can we determine that giftbooks "significantly altered the world of print in mid-nineteenth-century America" (p. 76), and can we really believe that "through their overwhelming presence in giftbooks' illustrations" – the pictures of mythical female figures such as "Beatrice" – "women feminized American print culture" (p. 99)?[2] (By this standard, earlier illustrations of Columbia might be claimed to have served a similar function).

Godey's Lady's Book has often been examined from one of two vantage points: earlier scholars denigrated its fashion plates and domestic contents as "trivial," while more recent feminist scholars have seen in its stories and editorials a proto-feminist response to a rigid "cult of true womanhood." But the latter group tends to ignore "the frivolous elements apparently at odds with republican simplicity and the "matriarchy of the kitchen", especially the illustrations (p. 103). Lehuu insightfully targets this neglected area: arguing that the fashion plates were the magazine's chief drawing card, she focuses on how these visual tableaux presented their female subjects. Analyzing their posture and grouping, Lehuu notes that the fashion plates resembled the period's popular parlor theatricals.

The strongest chapter of *Carnival on the Page* examines the antebellum advice literature against popular reading. Here the claims are less sweeping, and the evidence is far more solid. Middle-class writers of advice manuals – many of whom also wrote fiction and other genres of popular print as well – worried that too much reading, especially of the wrong sorts of fare, would undermine Americans' self-discipline, men's masculinity, and workers' industry. In wonderfully evocative passages, they likened improper reading to alcohol addiction and used sensationalistic language to show the consequences of bad reading. Particularly as "private, individual leisure activities were no longer the prerogative of the well-to-do," middle-class moralists worried about how working-class readers would employ their leisure (p. 151).

Two larger conceptual problems recur throughout the book. The first concerns class and social distinction. Lehuu employs two vocabularies of distinction: one dealing with socio-economic class, the other (drawn from Lawrence Levine) the language of highbrow/lowbrow. As she notes, giftbooks, *Godey's*, and mammoth weeklies were too expensive to become working-class staples. (Thus to link the mammoths to Richard Hoggart's notion of the "working-class baroque" [p. 69] seems questionable.) Moreover, much of the advice literature decrying improper reading was aimed squarely at the emerging middle classes, or aspirants to those classes. If so, to what extent were the strictures against bad reading actually aimed at the working classes? Conversely, if the moralists who championed "legitimate" reading were in fact

targeting the working classes (as they imagined them), were they really discussing the middle-class print forms of Lehuu's preceding chapters? Those critics were clearly drawing distinctions between different sorts of texts, which Lehuu terms "legitimate and popular" or "highbrow and lowbrow." Among her key arguments is that the high/low bifurcation actually originated much earlier than the late nineteenth century, as posited by Lawrence Levine. But were giftbooks or *Godey's* "lowbrow" in antebellum terms? Was the "popular," by definition, distinct from the "legitimate", and if so, in whose eyes?[3] The relationships between the discourses of class and of "brows" (or of "the popular") might have been made clearer.

The second conceptual problem is a pitfall that all historians of the book (and of texts) face: the issue of human agency. Early on, Lehuu describes her study in these terms: "For the purpose of contextualizing the practice of reading, the new, popular printed texts and the prescriptive literature on uses of print are set against the mental outlook of men and women readers...." Yet just paragraphs later, she eschews the very evidence one would need to probe that mental outlook: "Priority is given to a textual analysis of what was read, whereas readers' diaries, journals, and letters are used only occasionally", because "accounts of periodical reading are rare" and because "the success, however short-lived, of the new print media is believed to be a more telling response than the isolated comment by individuals" (pp. 10-11). Perhaps so. But with very little evidence from the actual "producers and consumers, publishers and readers," all sorts of other claims become suspect: for instance, that "this study considers the multiple ways people read and used printed matter" (p. 29); or that the mammoths were "an attempt by the popular classes... to mock and subvert the traditional print culture" (p. 60); or that women's enjoyment of *Godey's* fashion plates "resulted primarily from the portrayal of women in full-page water-colored engravings" (p. 107).

Carnival on the Page will introduce readers to several forms of print they might not have known, especially the mammoth weeklies and giftbooks. The penny press and *Godey's* are certainly more well-trodden ground. Several additional difficulties mar what might have been a superb study of these new print media. As already noted, Lehuu's penchant for sweeping generalization – and the often strained attempts to subsume everything under the "carnivalesque" –raise more questions than they answer. In what sense, precisely, was the antebellum period "liminal"? What specific aspects of existing print culture (which is rarely discussed) did each form here seek to subvert? On what basis, indeed, do these four forms represent "popular print media in antebellum America"?

Notes

[1]. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[2]. For an examination of giftbooks that uses material evidence to consider actual readers' uses of them, see Cindy Dickinson, "Creating a World of Books, Friends, and Flowers: Gift Books and Inscriptions, 1825-60," *Winterthur Portfolio* 31:1 (1996): 53-66.

[3]. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

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