Women’s Reading in the Nineteenth Century: A Symposium

Thursday 26 March 2009, 10am-6pm
Institute of English Studies, University of London

Organised by the Reading Experience Database 1450-1945, the Open University Book History and Bibliography Research Group, and the Institute of English Studies

10:00-10:30 Registration

10:30 – 12:30 Panel 1: Reading and Society


Mark Towsey, University of Liverpool: ‘Read and Walked with the Ladies of Lethen’: Reading and Mutual Self-Education in Rural Scotland.

Ella Dzelzainis, King’s College, London: ‘Ticklish Topics’: Harriet Martineau’s Illustrations of Political Economy and the Woman Reader.

David Finkelstein, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh: Response.

12:30-2:00 Lunch

2:00-4:00 Panel 2: Reading and Institutions


Rosalind Crone, The Open University: The uses of reading for female convicts in the nineteenth-century prison.

Naomi Hetherington, London Metropolitan University: Scriptural interpretation and women’s rights in the late nineteenth-century British women’s advocacy press.

Gill Sutherland, Newnham College, Cambridge: Response

4:15 Leave for Women’s Library, Whitechapel

5:00-6:00pm Visit to Women’s Library, and tour of exhibition Between the Covers: Women’s Magazines and their Readers
Abstracts

Christina de Bellaigue: ‘Only what is pure and exquisite’: schoolgirls and reading in England and France, 1800-1870

Regulations concerning girls’ schools in nineteenth-century France sought to ensure that pupils’ reading was closely supervised; daygirls were forbidden to bring books to school, and libraries were regularly inspected. English schoolgirls were also frequently restricted in their access to literature, with novels often being regarded as unsuitable reading for girls. However, the English conception of the educative purpose of reading for girls seems to have differed from that prevailing in France. Young French women were advised to read ‘only what is pure and exquisite’ and to ‘take care to re-read … always to read attentively, … never to leave a book without having finished, and never to finish a book without summarizing it in writing’. For girls in France, reading was conceived of primarily as a kind of devotional exercise, intended to encourage studious habits rather than intellectual curiosity. In England, there seems to have been more emphasis on the benefits of reading as a means of training the mind and broadening a young woman’s experience. This paper will explore the contrasts between these two approaches, uncovering how the divergent attitudes to girls’ reading reflected differences in French and English conceptions of feminine adolescence. At the same time, it will demonstrate how on both sides of the Channel, young women at school successfully overcame the restrictions placed on their access to books, and frequently contested prevailing understandings of girlhood through their reading.

Biography
Christina de Bellaigue is University Lecturer, Tutor and Fellow in Modern History at Exeter College, Oxford. Her first book, based on her doctoral work at Cambridge, was published by Oxford University Press in 2007. Behind the school walls: women, education, and identity in England and France, 1800-1867 explores differences between the experiences of women in the two countries and uncovers the interaction between gender, religion, ideas of the state, and notions of national identity. She is currently working on a comparative study of adolescence in nineteenth-century France and England, and beginning a new project on gender and social mobility in the two countries.

Rosalind Crone: The uses of reading for female convicts in the nineteenth-century prison

During the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, as incarceration rose to become the most predominant form of punishment, penal reformers, inspired by evangelical thought which promoted the notion of spiritual revival, believed that the prison could act as a moral school in which depraved inmates would be transformed into Christian and industrious members of the community. Instruction in reading became central to this goal, as many of the new prison chaplains took seriously their legal mandate to provide elementary education and religious reading matter to inmates. Yet although the legislation which stipulated the duties of the prison chaplains made no mention of a gender-bias in their application, at a significant number of penal institutions instruction in the basic skills and even the provision of approved reading material was limited to male prisoners. At least one prison chaplain in the middle of the nineteenth century remarked that, unlike the men, the female inmates did not have time for reading because they were concerned with completing the domestic chores in the prison. This paper explores the nature of this gender bias alongside the efforts of a small number of prison chaplains and a larger network of women’s charitable societies, all of whom had a firm belief in the power of religious texts to transform the lives of female inmates. In particular, it focuses on the work of Elizabeth Fry at Newgate prison during the 1810s and 1820s, using her detailed journal to explore the ‘success’ of her programme of reading which she embarked upon with the female prisoners, from her own point of view and from that of her students. Despite the restrictive environment of the prison, and the strict censorship of reading material, this paper seeks to illuminate the uses of reading for female prisoners beyond those prescribed by the authorities.

Biography
Rosalind Crone is a postdoctoral research fellow in literature at the Open University working on the AHRC-funded project, the Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945. She is currently completing her first book, entitled Violent Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century London, and has recently begun a new research project exploring the education of criminals in the nineteenth century. She has published several articles on Victorian popular culture and working-class readers.
Ella Dzelzainis: ‘Ticklish Topics’: Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* and the Woman Reader

With sensational estimated monthly sales of 10,000 copies, Harriet Martineau’s twenty-five part series, *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-4), was discussed widely in the national press. Whether fulsome in their praise or insultingly hostile, reviewers persistently focused on gender – commenting not only on Martineau’s achievement as a woman writer, but also on the *Illustrations* themselves as a new genre that combined a ‘masculine faculty of abstraction, with a feminine power of illustration’ (Eclectic Review, 1832). Explaining the more controversial reviews, recent scholars have concluded that, in writing tales that zealously urged a specifically Malthusian form of political economy, Martineau had transgressed several gender boundaries. However, this paper inspects the controversy through the lens of reading rather than writing to argue that press hostility was also an inevitable reaction to the feminist manifesto that was woven into these radically subversive stories. It focuses on three aspects: firstly on the gender implications of Martineau’s own description of herself as a woman reading the scientific texts of ‘gentlemen’ economists and ‘minc[ing] their strong meat’ into fictional tales for consumption by the public; secondly, her depiction of reading by women characters in the tales themselves as a means to developing a feminist and radical understanding of political economy; and thirdly, it considers the reviewers’ anxieties about the corrupting influence that reading the *Illustrations* will have on the minds of ‘the young and the fair’ (Fraser’s Magazine, 1833).

**Biography**

Ella Dzelzainis is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English at King’s College London. Her work is interdisciplinary, located at the intersection between feminist history, economics and literature. In addition to working on her British Academy project, ‘Fictions, Feminisms and Malthus, 1798-1916’, she is currently completing a monograph, *Manufacturing Gender: Women, the Family and Political Economy in English Industrial Fiction, 1832-1855*, and is co-editing (with Cora Kaplan) a collection of essays, *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire*, for Manchester University Press.

Katie Halsey, “‘Written by a friend, edited by a friend, lent by a friend, or associated with a friend’: reading in three nineteenth-century female literary networks.”

In this paper, I will consider the ways in which both formal and informal literary networks affect the reading practices of nineteenth-century women. Formal literary networks might include professional relationships such as those between editor of and contributors to a literary magazine, miscellany or anthology; formally-constituted societies, such as subscription libraries and reading groups; and, in the late nineteenth-century, women’s colleges at the universities. Informal networks are, by their nature, both more common and less easily definable, but include the family circle, informal book clubs, epistolary networks, and circles of patronage. Female literary networks function in many ways. Members lend books to each other, and recommend them to one another, they present them as gifts, or counsel against particular works, but more interestingly, they also often define the ways of reading them. In this paper, I shall focus closely on first-hand accounts of reading within three different female literary networks, over a broad chronological period, though in a limited geographical area, and will attempt to tease out some of the unwritten rules and assumptions involved in such reading practices.

The literary networks under consideration will be firstly, the informal circle surrounding the Austen family in and around Steventon, Chawton and Southampton in Hampshire in the period 1790 -1820; secondly, the professional and informal networks of Mary Russell Mitford, herself based in Three Mile Cross, near Reading in Berkshire in the period 1820-1850, and lastly the women of the Twelve Club Book Group, a Quaker book group based in Reading, and founded in 1895. I shall discuss reading practices in a “long” nineteenth century, beginning in the very late eighteenth century, and finishing at the end of the First World War in 1918.

**Biography**

Katie Halsey is an AHRC postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute of English Studies, working on the Reading Experience Database 1450-1945, having previously taught at the Universities of Cambridge and St Andrews. She is the author of a number of articles on nineteenth-century reading, co-editor (with Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Towheed) of the Routledge reader in the *History of Reading*, which will be published in 2010, and her book, *Jane Austen and her Readers*, will come out with Anthem in 2010.
Mark Towsey, “‘Read and Walked with the Ladies of Lethen’: Reading and Mutual Self-Education in Rural Scotland”

In August 1775, Henry Mackenzie advised his cousin Elizabeth Rose, lady laird of Kilravock, that she would soon be acquiring new neighbours in rural Nairnshire. Mrs Brodie and her daughters “need hardly go thither to find solitude, as they live uncommonly recluse in Edinburgh. I fancy there is a natural shyness runs thro’ the Family; yet I am told the eldest Girl is far from wanting Parts, & has considerably improv’d them by reading”. Over the next forty years, these ladies forged a strong relationship through shared reading, part of an extensive network of women readers with the lady laird of Kilravock at its heart. My paper will attempt to reconstruct key elements of this reading community through various sources, including fragments of surviving correspondence, personal diaries and castle library circulation records. Most importantly, I will discuss how these women might have influenced each others’ reading practices, comparing the reading strategies and priorities apparent in Mrs Rose’s late reading notebooks (1806-1815) with those implicit in the library collected by the Brodie sisters. In the process, I will posit shared reading as a fundamental feature of Scottish gentlewomen’s lives in the early nineteenth century.

Biography
Dr Mark Towsey completed his PhD at the University of St Andrews in 2007, and has published a number of articles on books, readers and libraries in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Scotland. Reading the Scottish Enlightenment, the revised version of his thesis, is currently under consideration for publication. He was the Past and Present Society’s Postdoctoral Fellow at the IHR in 2007-8, and took up a three-year Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at Liverpool University in October 2008. He has been invited to participate in the Bibliographical Society of America’s New Scholars Program, and has held visiting fellowships at the Grolier Club (New York) and at Yale University.

Naomi Hetherington, Scriptural interpretation and women’s rights in the late nineteenth-century British women’s advocacy press.

This paper considers the nature and function of biblical interpretation in two late nineteenth-century British women’s advocacy papers: Henrietta Müller’s Women’s Penny Paper (1888-1890) and Shafts (1892-1900), edited by Margaret Sibthorpe. It argues that debates about the authority and meaning of scripture provided a way of theorising women’s emancipation and the role of the church historically in institutionalising the civic and sexual subordination of women. These debates are of wider interest to both print and feminist historians on account of the extent to which they were played out within and were directed from the papers’ correspondence columns. They point up both the open and discursive nature of the women’s advocacy press and the importance of the Bible in reconfiguring women’s status not only for prominent women’s rights activists, but for a wider readership of predominantly middle-class women. Their competing tools and methods of scriptural interpretation can be used to plot the religious lines along which it has been argued that women’s activism continued to be structured well into the twentieth century.

Biography
Dr Naomi Hetherington teaches in the Department of Humanities, Arts & Languages at London Metropolitan University where she also previously held a Visiting Fellowship at The Women’s Library. This paper presents research from her fellowship funded by the library to examine religious debates in its special collection of nineteenth-century women's advocacy journals. Naomi is currently working on a book length study of the religious structures of New Woman fiction and has previously published on the juvenilia of Jewish New Woman writer Amy Levy in The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf ed. Christine Alexander & Juliet McMaster (C.U.P., 2005). A collection of essays on Levy co-edited with Dr Nadia Valman (QMUL) is forthcoming with Ohio University Press later this year.