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Martha McMillan and Victorian Periodicals and Poetry (1868)

Adam J. Wagner

Cedarville University, adamjwagner@cedarville.edu

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The [McMillan Journal Collection](#) is an archive of the journals of Martha McMillan of Cedarville, Ohio, who maintained a daily journal from 1867 until her death in 1913.

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. Martha McMillan and Victorian Periodicals and Poetry (1868)

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In her essay “Literary Women,” Caroline Kirkland questions what qualifies a woman as literary:

“But we have hitherto neglected to inquire what it is that entitles a woman to the appellation of literary [...] Must she have written a book? [...] If not a book, will a poem be sufficient? Or an essay? Or a magazine article? [...] Or does writing letters make one literary? [...] How is it with keeping a journal? Does that come within the canon? Might it not be maliciously interpreted into writing a book in disguise?” (Kirkland 196-197)

So does writing a journal make one literary? The journals of Martha E. McMillan support Kirkland’s inquiry. A lifelong native of Cedarville, Ohio, McMillan kept a written record of every day of her life, starting on her wedding day in 1867 until two weeks before she died in 1913. Recently recovered by scholars at Cedarville University, Martha’s journals are a treasure trove of information for literary scholars and historians of the nineteenth century. In the 1868 journal, Martha quotes many female poets of the day, including Fanny R., Susan Archer Weiss, and Elizabeth Akers Allen. An analysis of Victorian periodicals and sentimental poetry help prove the thesis that McMillan is a literary woman. Influenced by the empowering, domestic ideas spread through nineteenth-century periodicals, Martha McMillan’s journals demonstrate she is a literary woman by her intentional ownership of poetry and Christian home ideals.

Nineteenth-century periodicals were a literary avenue where women were able to explore domesticity and subjectivity. Beginning in the 1830s and continuing until the 1890s, the growing American marketplace and emerging literary sphere increased periodical publication. As early as

the 1830s, women started to become writers, critics, and editors for periodicals, and were able to earn a living by writing (Trela 90). Even though magazine writing was beneficial to women, they were still subject to men in the literary sphere. D.J. Trela, in “Introduction: Nineteenth Century Women and Periodicals,” writes, “the success they enjoyed was generally uncertain, temporary, and frequently dependent on masculine overlordship” (92). Separate spheres ideology reinforced such patriarchal structure in the magazine workforce. Despite these masculine restrictions, periodical writing was a liberating field for women. Aleta Feinsod Cane and Susan Alves, in their book “*The Only Efficient Instrument*”: *American Women Writers & The Periodical, 1837-1916*,” argue that Victorian periodicals were “the only efficient instrument” for women to “make themselves and their ideas known” (1). Magazines and journals allowed American females to have a voice in American society and gave them “further dissemination of their political, social, and moral ideas” (Cane and Alves 89). Because men were in charge of the most influential American periodicals, like *Westminster, Quarterly*, or *Blackwood’s*, women were often in lesser-known, “second-tier” periodicals (Cane and Alves 90). However, even this obstacle proved to be a benefit for women—because the periodicals they wrote for were smaller, it gave them stronger editorial control and ideological influence. This helped women “develop and sustain a constituency within the dominant culture,” and allowed them greater cultural sway (Cane and Alves 2). Women’s work as editors and writers for Victorian periodicals shows that women did have a part in scholarly, moral, and intellectual discourses of the day.

Many of the women’s periodicals gave women power through the domestic sphere. Cane and Alves emphasize *Godey’s*, a magazine formed after the merger of *Ladies’ Magazine* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. *Godey’s*, and domestic periodicals like it, were “instrumental in instructing women in the Victorian politics of gender and in inscribing separate spheres of

influence for men and women” (3). Separate spheres ideology was the nineteenth-century American thought that relegated women to the home and men to the workplace. Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's*, strongly believed in the antebellum Cult of True Womanhood and concomitant domesticity discourses, and such cultural, gender-specific, political ideas spread across the country through *Godey's* and other domestic periodicals. From a twenty-first century view, relegating women to the domestic sphere seems limiting, but for Victorian American women, it actually gave them power and control in the sphere of their own home. Such influential ideologies spread throughout women's magazines, and thus domestic periodicals empowered the female gender.

In the nineteenth-century, religion reinforced a woman's place in the domestic sphere, and many periodicals were religious and Protestant in nature. In her article “‘The Christian World Magazine’: Christian Publishing and Women's Empowerment,” scholar Julie Melnyk emphasizes that despite Christianity's historic reputation of patriarchy, religious Victorian periodicals used religion to empower women in the home. According to cultural discourses of the day (The Cult of True Womanhood, domesticity, separate spheres ideology, etc.), Americans considered women more virtuous and spiritual than men, and it was their job to raise moral children and protect their husbands and home from the evils of the secular world. Because American culture considered women pure and spiritual, they were able to participate in and take power from the area of religion. The domestic sphere was an area that women could personally control and establish subjectivity in, and religious periodicals supported such beliefs: Emma Jane Worboise, editor of *The Christian World Magazine* in the 1860s, writes, “I purpose myself to devote a page or two monthly to the consideration of housewifely duties. Surely it is the Christian duty of a Christian woman to order her household decently, *comfortably*, and as

elegantly as rank and station warrant” (qtd. in Melnyk134). As this example of a woman’s writing shows, women valued their sphere in the home and took power from it. Religious, female writing also justified women’s domestic work on economic and moral grounds: women must work to eat and save themselves from the temptations of laziness, and they must reject “the standards of gentility that bar middle-class women from lucrative occupations” (Melnyk139). Women wrote that they should have “mercantile talent equal to that of men,” and emphasized that every woman should be able to accomplish her job successfully (Melnyk139). Women’s writings in domestic, religious periodicals gave women subjectivity as the owners of their homes.

An understanding of Victorian periodicals, especially those edited by women with domestic and religious emphases, helps readers clearly understand McMillan’s 1868 journal. Because she was a first-year mother and second-year wife, Martha focused on building a Christian home. The poem “Between Two Years” by Susan Archer Weiss, which Martha clipped out of a newspaper and put between pages 54 and 55 of her 1868 journal, is under the title “THE HOME.” Martha’s quotation of Fanny R.’s poetry (see January 15, 1868) comes from Fanny R.’s Essay “Home,” which outlines the importance of keeping a godly, Christian home, a refuge for the family. Martha’s quotation of Elizabeth Akers Allen’s poem “Little Feet” (see February 8, 1868) was also published in a collection entitled *Poems of Home* (1866), and was published in many national newspapers and magazines. All of these poems and the journals/books they were published in emphasize the home, reflective of the domesticity discourses of her day. Although it is near impossible to know which specific periodicals Martha may have read, other publications of the above poems are included in journals such as *The Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake: Volume 6* and *The Medical Missionary* of Battle Creek, Michigan. Reading

periodicals and poems that featured domestic ideals empowered Martha McMillan and gave her subjectivity in her home.

In women's periodicals, sentimental poetry was a genre primarily written by and for women. Women used domestic periodicals to publish single works of poetry that they usually did not publish in larger print collections. However, newspapers and magazines in the nineteenth-century would not often copyright poems, causing what Meredith L. McGill calls "the culture of reprinting" (Sorby 421). When magazines published poems, the periodical did not give credit to the real author, and so readers usually gave recognition to the magazine itself. Because individual poems were so widely circulated, readers felt like the poem belonged to them. This sense of ownership and authorship of poetry was "empowering for the masses, because it [gave] them the means to express themselves" (Sorby 422). The collapse of authorship in nineteenth-century poetry let readers connect personally and emotionally with poems, and "at any moment the reader [was] ready to turn into a writer" (Sorby 422). The genre of sentimentalism was perfect for this attitude of authorship—because of its emphasis on emotions and nostalgia, "anyone who can feel [...] can read *and write* poetry" (Sorby 427). Especially for first-person poems, readers were able to situate themselves into the "I," and thus poems became part of a reader's own biography (Sorby 426). The emotional sphere of sentimental poetry invited readers to participate, and thus women readers of religious and domestic periodicals simultaneously became writers.

Angela Sorby's analysis of sentimental poetry informs McMillan's own poetry, quoted and original, in her 1868 journal. Martha's entry on January 15, 1868 features a poetic quotation from Fanny R.'s "Home" essay: "I sit alone, alone in thought / And thronging visions come' / I feel myself a girl again / A girl at home." The first two lines of this poem are directly from

Fanny R.'s hand; however, Martha writes her own two lines afterwards. Just like Sorby's research shows, Martha felt a sense of ownership of Fanny R.'s poem; also, the mysteriousness of Fanny R. shows how periodicals did not give full credit to the real authors of poems and essays. Although Fanny R.'s poem applied to an essay about the home, Martha uses it to comment on her own biography; although she was alone at home, she felt like a girl again thinking of James and their first year of marriage. The newspaper clipping of "Between Two Years" in Martha's journal does not feature author Weiss' name, but "N.Y., *Independent*." This shows the lack of copyright that Victorian newspapers gave to authors, producing the complicated reader/writer relationship. Sorby writes that "many nineteenth-century poems celebrate [...] babies," which is evident in Martha's journal (424); on Fannie's birthday, Martha quotes Allen's poem "Little Feet:" "who may read the future? / For our darling we crave all blessings sweet-- / And pray that he who feeds the crying ravens-- / Will guide our daughter's feet." In Allen's original poem, the last line reads, "Will guide the baby's feet." However, Martha intentionally changes the phrase to "our daughter's" to fit her own life and the birth of Fannie. Again, Martha reflects her culture's attitude of individual poetry authorship, and her position as a reader transforms into a writer as she includes sentimental poetry in her journal entries.

In response to Kirkland's proposal that women who write journals can be literary, McMillan's journal gives a resounding affirmation. The religious, domestic periodicals that Martha would have read gave her subjectivity as a woman and offered her power over her home. Her status as a reader also contributed to her position as a writer, and Martha's integration of sentimental poetry with her own life events shows that she had creative energy and an emotional connection to words. Martha McMillan: the literary woman of Cedarville, Ohio.

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