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Kirkpatrick, Melanie. *Lady Editor: Sarah Josepha Hale and the Making of the Modern American Woman*. New York: Encounter Books, 2021. 323 pp., $29.99 (hardback). Reviewed by Paula Hunt, independent scholar, pdhunt27@icloud.com.

When Sarah Josepha Hale (1788-1879) began her professional association with publisher Louis Godey in 1837, she was almost 50, a widow with five children, and on the verge of shuttering her financially troubled *American Ladies' Magazine*. Their partnership would produce an enormously successful publication and cement Hale's position as one of the most notable personalities—male or female—in American magazine history. *Godey's Lady's Book* became a touchstone for white, middle-class women on issues of domesticity, morality, and fashion as well as a promoter of expanding opportunities for women in public life.

Interest in Hale began while she was still active at *Godey's*, and she and her magazine have remained subjects of interest to popular and academic writers ever since. Hale's long tenure at the top of the masthead (40 years), the magazine's extraordinary popularity (150,000 subscribers at its peak), its widespread availability to researchers, and the survival of her correspondence have contributed to *Godey's* attractiveness to scholars across a range of fields including literature, journalism, and gender.

Melanie Kirkpatrick's *Lady Editor: Sarah Josepha Hale and the Making of the Modern American Woman* expands Hale's sphere of power and authority by arguing she was "the most influential woman of the nineteenth century" (p. xi). By drawing parallels between Hale's activities as an editor and contemporary events, highlighting her philanthropic efforts, and underscoring her advocacy of women's employment and education, Kirkpatrick places Hale as a driving force of American cultural, political, and social change in the nineteenth century.

Kirkpatrick's narrative of Hale's life offers little that hasn't been covered in other biographies: her birth in Newport, New Hampshire, in 1788; her marriage and subsequent widowhood at 33; her early literary career and establishment of *Ladies' Magazine*; the publication of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"; her partnership with Godey; her editorship of *Godey's* during the Civil War; and her remaining years at the magazine and her death barely 16 months after retiring.

The most tangible and enduring of Hale's accomplishments were her successful spearheading of campaigns to erect the Bunker Hill Monument, restore Mount Vernon, and establish a national day of Thanksgiving. Like her magazines, as Kirkpatrick relates, these drives were directed at a primarily female audience and employed similar expressions of the attitudes associated with true womanhood, such as moral guardianship, separate spheres, and republicanism. The philosophy that women had intrinsic, distinct, and valuable qualities that differentiated them from men shaped Hale's world view and guided her editorial decision-making.

It is Hale's female essentialism, however, that Kirkpatrick grapples with throughout *Lady Editor*. Rather than tackling the knotty subject of Hale's complex and often inconsistent ideology, Kirkpatrick too often resorts to ahistorical labels and explanations, such as calling the editor's separate spheres philosophy "archaic" and describing her anti-suffrage views as "show[ing] her to be...a person of her time" (p. xvii). Not only does this denigrate qualities that are fundamental to understanding Hale, they don't help support Kirkpatrick's ambitious claims about the editor's enduring legacy and influence. Part of Kirkpatrick's struggle is a misreading of the cult of true woman and separate spheres, which were not nearly as circumscribed as she conceives them to be. Critically, the social messages that women received—not just from magazines like *Godey's*—did not necessarily reflect how women actually behaved, but were understood

how they should behave. This misconception of a central organizing principle in *Lady Editor* points to a larger problem with the book.

Lady Editor suffers from a shaky grasp of nineteenth-century American historiography, a familiarity that could have provided valuable context to Hale's story and possibly avert some of the book's errors. For example, there is almost nothing about the industrialization in nineteenth-century America that fueled the economy, incited the rapid growth of a national publishing industry, sparked the need for an educated workforce, and inspired philanthropy—all developments central to Hale's activities. A deeper dive into secondary sources might have headed off claims such as that Hale was an outlier in promoting the study of the sciences for women at a time when physics, chemistry, and biology were, as Kirkpatrick writes, "subjects that traditionally were considered too taxing for the female intellect" (p. 35). In fact, there is abundant scholarship that examines the popularity of science curricula for girls from the late eighteenth through nineteenth centuries. Other than Patricia Oker's *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), the wealth of writing on Hale and *Godey's* is virtually ignored. Because *Lady Editor* doesn't have a bibliography and most of the footnotes point to primary sources, it is difficult to discern where Kirkpatrick drew support for her assertions but does illuminate weaknesses in her research.

Hale's ability to blend personal vision and commercial viability into a going concern was a hallmark of her success. But she was hardly a cultural trailblazer or catalyst of social transformation. Rather, she made her most significant mark as a popularizer of established and developing trends for women during an era of upheaval and change. This put her at the center of American cultural life—not out in front of it. *Lady Editor* is an easy-to-read popular biography that would fit nicely in a high school or public library for readers less interested in historical rigor than a good story about a remarkable woman.