Principal Investigator's Name(s) & Title(s): Beth Ellen Torgerson, Assistant Professor  
Department: English  
Mail: Patterson Hall 250  
Phone: 359-6038  
Email: btorgerson@ewu.edu

Project Title: The Harriet Martineau Debate: Martineau, Mesmerism, Victorian Medicine, and Issues of Authority

Review this as Applied / Basic Research

Amount Rewarded $5,000

Original Abstract (Brief Project Description):

I propose to research and write a publishable article, on what I am calling “The Harriet Martineau Debate,” a topic that I have already started to explore through two inter-related conference papers. My primary area of research involves looking at the overlap and the interconnections between the world of Victorian literature and Victorian medicine. (My book, Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture, which has been re-released by Palgrave this summer in a paperback edition [August. 2010], has this focus—the interconnections between Victorian literature and medicine.) After Harriet Martineau’s own cure by mesmerism in 1844, she wrote a book, Letters on Mesmerism, which the Victorian public embraced, but which had the Victorian medical community up in arms, defending their own authority and prestige. Their attack on Martineau went public and created quite the scandal, with the reading public in England becoming familiar with the most intimate details of Martineau’s feminine health issues. (Not a pleasant experience for anyone, but especially not for a proper Victorian lady!)

In exploring the “Harriet Martineau Debate,” I look at how Martineau’s authority, based on her position as one of the most famous women writers of her time, clashes with—and yet attempts to negotiate—the authority of the Victorian medical community. And, in turn, how that medical community must take Martineau’s own literary and cultural authority into account. I want to establish what factors gave Martineau the extent of authority she had—with Parliament asking her help regularly in political decisions—as well as looking specifically at how Martineau rhetorically claims her own authority in Letters on Mesmerism, exploring what rhetorical strategies she uses, what topics she addresses and how, and what ideas, values, or beliefs allow her claim this new authority in a new area—that of medicine (and, by extension, science). In addition, I will explore how the medical world—and the general public—responded to her writings, specifically once the “debate” started after the publication of “A Medical Report of the Case of Miss H----- M----,” an attempt by Martineau’s physician brother-in-law to discredit her recovery by mesmerism.

Summary of Final Report for “The Harriet Martineau Debate: Martineau, Mesmerism, Victorian Medicine, and Issues of Authority”:

For this project, I combined one of the most important Victorian writers with one of the most important cultural phenomena in the Victorian world of medicine—the use of mesmerism as a healing method that challenged accepted ideas about the relationship between body and mind. Mesmerism’s role in the history of medicine is important since the Victorians’ fascination with mesmerism is the starting point for what became the modern fields of psychology and psychiatry. (Hypnosis grew out of mesmerism; the words “mesmerize” (verb) and “mesmerized” (adj.) are still used in the English language.)
In her lifetime, Harriet Martineau was one of the most famous Victorian writers. Her fame was on par with that of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Florence Nightengale, all of whom Martineau counted among her friends. Today, she is best known, not for her literature, but rather as the founder of sociology. She was one of the few Victorian women writers who wrote works other than fiction or poetry, and she was one of the first women writers who supported herself solely by her income as a writer. She was, in short, one of the very first professional women of letters. As such, she commanded a reading audience in the tens of thousands. She was a leading figure of her day—in politics, in economics, and in literature. Once she became sick and tried to extend her areas of expertise into the world of medicine, the resulting conflict is worth documenting in a published article.

Thanks to this research grant, I will be presenting my third paper on Martineau and medicine, the second on mesmerism for the Rocky Mountain MLA conference in October.

I am still following my original plan to explore the conditions that set up the debate that followed the publications of Martineau’s two 1844 and 1845 texts, conditions that I see are based on different claims to Victorian sources of authority.

What I have found in my research is that my original sense of the Victorian medical community being a fairly unified body with a specific stance on mesmerism is, in fact, not true. Not even remotely so. Thanks to Allison Winter’s book *Mesmerized: Victorian Powers of Mind*, I first got a sense of this. And as I’m reading the original Victorian medical journal articles, I am getting a stronger sense of each medical journals’ position, whether pro-mesmerism, anti-mesmerism, or simply more open to further study.

When I started first researching this idea, I thought the debate lasted only a few years, maybe from 1844 to 1846 or so. In terms of the time frame for my research for this grant, this has been the period (1844-1847) that I have currently placed the majority of my research efforts on since it sets up the major terms of the debate. However, towards the larger project, I have also been working to get an overview of the history of mesmerism and of Martineau’s relationship to it.

Because this project is based on the type of literary criticism called “New Historicism” or Cultural Studies, it requires a lot of historical research. As I’m getting deeper into my research, I’m learning that this project is requiring more archival work than any other project that I have ever done. So far, I’ve been successful at finding many of the related texts, such as the Victorian medical articles on mesmerism.

As originally foreseen, the product of this research will be a publishable journal article or a book chapter, probably the first. As a book chapter, it could appear either within an edited book on Harriet Martineau (or Victorian literature/culture/medicine), or within my own book, possibly entitled *Martineau and the Victorian Body*, that I could foresee as the longer projected project.

As you can see, this project is growing—in a good way. However, it means that this “final report” for the grant is not a true final report. It is only a report of the project’s progress.