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*American Little Magazines of the Fin de Siècle: Art, Protest, and Cultural Transformation* by Kirsten MacLeod  
(review)

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## Reviews

*American Little Magazines of the Fin de Siècle: Art, Protest, and Cultural Transformation.*  
By Kirsten MacLeod. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 508 pp. \$67.50  
(cloth or ebook).

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When Gelett Burgess published his nonsense lyric about a purple cow in the inaugural edition of *The Lark* in 1895, he produced such a sensation that the middle of the 1890s became known as the “purple cow period.” *The Lark* was only one of hundreds of little magazines that flourished during this time, arguably beginning with *The Chap-Book* in 1894. Nevertheless, despite some attempts at recovery, these little magazines have remained largely unexplored in cultural and literary history; much more attention has been devoted to the iconic modernist magazines such as the *Little Review* and *Poetry*. Kirsten MacLeod provides a welcome reexamination of the fin de siècle American little magazines, and she makes an argument for their importance as a field for scholarly inquiry and in the history of collecting. Her project is ambitious in scope, comprehensive in detail, and rich with illustration. Her aim is to demonstrate how the American little magazine of the 1890s “both makes and is history” (18). She examines the material conditions of the times by asking who made, contributed to, and consumed these magazines and what accounted for their emergence at this particular historical moment. In doing so, she refutes the two common conceptions—that they are curious but useless (or insignificant) and that they are valuable only for consideration as precursors to modernism. She also notes that innovations in digital humanities and new media studies in the twenty-first century, along with an increased interest in the cultural work performed by these “old media” artifacts, have made these magazines more accessible to scholars.

MacLeod has extensively studied over 60 percent of 334 titles identified in the comprehensive bibliography of little magazines in the 1890s she includes in this volume. She defines three distinct classes of these magazines: those that are aesthetic in nature (by far the largest), those that are protest oriented, and hybrids of the two. In the aesthetic class are *The Chap-Book*, *The Lark*, *The Lotus*, and *M’lle New York*, whereas Elbert Hubbard’s *The Philistine* is in the protest camp, and *The Papyrus* is a hybrid. Given that most commentators have lumped all the fin de

siècle little magazines together, MacLeod's classification and extensive bibliography are important contributions to periodical studies in themselves. She also makes a distinction between the contributors and audience for the fin de siècle little magazines and those for the later, more studied, explicitly modernist little magazines. She argues that the 1890s little magazines had both a larger and wider audience than those that followed two decades later, and that, while many of their contributors were from an artistic or literary avant-garde, they were also from a broader professional-managerial class. In contrast, the modernist little magazines were written and produced by and for a small, select audience. Thus, she concludes, the fin de siècle little magazines should be viewed as a "cultural, rather than strictly literary phenomenon" (12). The fact that they sprang up all over the country, not just in elite coastal centers, further supports her contention that they, alongside mass-market media, document the transformation of American cultural life at the turn of the last century. In particular, MacLeod sees the little magazines as a critical reflection of the cultural interests and values of a growing professional-managerial class.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, "Social, Media, and Little Magazine Contexts," situates the little magazines into their social and print milieus. In chapter 1, MacLeod contextualizes how the emerging professional-managerial class transitioned from older, genteel concerns with social improvement and reform to a capitalist culture of consumerism. This transformation, she argues, provided conditions for the little magazines to offer new forms of expression. She examines print culture more closely in chapter 2 and describes many of the specific achievements of the fin de siècle little magazines, such as adapting principles of the fine press movement, participating in the transatlantic poster revolution, and developing innovations in editorial style. Many of the little magazines emulated the aesthetic of the book: beautiful, with rubrication, decorated initial lettering, handmade paper with deckle edges, and older typography. *The Lark*, for example, was printed on bamboo paper, and *Le petit journal des refusées* on trapezoidal wallpaper. While producing cultural capital from older forms of print media, the little magazines also benefited from new print forms—in particular, the art poster. Art posters did not appear in the United States on any wide scale until April 1893, when Edward Penfield's "Harper's for April" appeared on newsstands to promote that issue of *Harper's Monthly*. Such posters were clearly more than advertisements; they were art, even as they melded artistic efforts with commerce. The producers of little magazines used free posters to entice subscribers and sell their products, commissioned articles about posters and collecting, conducted design contests, and started magazines devoted entirely to the form, such as *Poster Lore*. Ultimately, the collectability of posters as art contradicted their value as advertising, so the movement was relatively short lived. MacLeod concludes that the linkage of posters and the little magazines demonstrated an optimism about the relationship between culture and commerce. Also in this chapter is a discussion of how the editorial identity of the little magazines was presented as "personal"

and “intimate,” with the goal of pleasing oneself, as opposed to filling any larger social responsibility.

While the first two chapters of part 1 address broader social and cultural perspectives, chapter 3 examines several of the most significant magazines in some detail. MacLeod begins with a precursor, *The Knight Errant* (1892–93), which along with *The Mahogany Tree* (1892) preceded *The Chap-Book*, which was launched in 1894. Several contributors to the earlier magazines also wrote for *The Chap-Book*, which was founded by Herbert S. Stone and Ingalls Kimball, who had already started a publishing house for fine books and conceived of the magazine a sort of elegant house organ. MacLeod describes how *The Chap-Book* mediated between art and commerce and thus was appealing to the professional-managerial class. This chapter also includes extended discussions of *The Bibelot*, Gelett Burgess and his various publications, and Elbert Hubbard’s *The Philistine* and his engagement with the Roycroft Community. I would have appreciated a more in-depth analysis of *M’lle New York*, perhaps the most radical of the group, although MacLeod includes that magazine later in discussions of specific content.

Part 2, “Inside the Magazines,” includes six separate chapters, each examining a particular type of content: fiction, poetry, visual art, literary criticism and editorials, social and political commentary, and sayings (a category that includes epigrams, aphorisms, proverbs, and the like). These chapters all provide a full picture of the 1890s little magazines, and MacLeod situates her analysis in relation to broader issues previously discussed. A clearer rationale for organizing the book in this way would have been valuable, but the sheer volume of material makes some such division undoubtedly necessary. Chapter 6 is of special interest, as it shows how important these little magazines were to the development of graphic and visual arts, serving as an experimental medium for both new and established professional artists; the chapter is also followed by a series of nineteen beautifully reproduced color plates.

The afterword to the book reemphasizes MacLeod’s argument about how the magazines may have been “little” but were a “big” part of American cultural history, for they “mediamorphosed” into other media forms in the next century. Their legacy, she says, “lies not so much in the magazines themselves, but in the opportunities they represented, and the outcomes they realized, in the way of their maker’s contributions to American cultural life” (306).

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