

L'Eponge / The Sponge: a cross-cultural wordplay by editor Rachel Beer during the Affaire Dreyfus

Eloise Forestier
Ghent University

Rachel Beer (1858-1927) was the first woman editor of two British national newspapers, the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times*. She remained widely unknown until her biography was published in 2011 (Negev & Koren 2011). Beer developed a unique style which crystallizes, in this analysis, around the effect she instilled in the word “sponge”, translated from the French expression “passer l'éponge” in the context of the *affaire Dreyfus*.¹

Beer championed Dreyfus and criticised French militarism which she likened, alongside W.T. Stead, to a kind of totalitarianism (Stead 1899). In the *Observer*, she exposed the scandal with a neologism pregnant with irony and humour.

The paper will propose two angles of approach. First I will lead a linguistic survey around the reception and translations of “l'Eponge” in the international press to show that Beer raised the word “sponge” to a new meta-level in a way other newspapers didn't. If the expression “to pass over the sponge” is traceable in writings of the time, *The Dictionary of Modern Slang* (1860) has only one entry for “sponge”: the expression “to throw up the sponge” (Camden 1860: 224). Beer's play on the word is unique. In five of her leaders (4, 11, 25 June, 23 July and 24 September 1899), she twists and toys with it to ridicule its initial purpose.

Secondly, I will study the effect of Beer's wordplay through the lens of periodical studies. According to James Mussell, “periodicals manifest the logic of repetition that defines the practice of print” (Mussell 2013: 1) which distinguishes itself from the “seduction of exceptionality” (Mussell 2013: 1) found in conventional literary productions. Beer takes the logic of repetition a step further. She repeats, comments and transforms a piece of news. She thus creates exceptionality from repetition.

The implications of Beer's use of “sponge” capture her transnational perspective on the Dreyfus case, highlight her talent as an editor, and contribute to research on the Dreyfus case because this approach is unprecedented.

References

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¹ As the French Government was struggling to move on, journalist Jules Cornély published an article in *The Figaro* on May 23 1899 entitled “l'Eponge” which reflected the aspiration of many French officials: clear Dreyfus and forgive those who condemned him.