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Introduction

Victorian women's writing and modern literary criticism

In 1852, G. H. Lewes published an omnibus review of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, George Sand's *oeuvre*, and the work of other nineteenth-century "lady novelists" in the *Westminster Review*. Lewes used the occasion to probe the significance of "the appearance of Woman in the field of literature" and to argue that "the advent of female literature promises woman's view of life, woman's experience ... a new element."[1] Although Lewes assumes gender differences that many readers today would question, most notably that intellect dominates in men, emotion in women, his recognition of a distinctive women's literary tradition expresses his personal view of an important trend in Victorian literature and a belief that became common among critics of the age. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill would echo Lewes's assessment of women's achievement in the novel – noting that "our best novelists in point of composition, and of the management of detail, have been mostly women" – though he would demur at the claim of "a new element," finding little "high originality of conception" in contemporary women's work.[2] Nonetheless, both men acknowledged the emergence of a category – women's writing – that has continued to influence our thinking about Victorian women writers to the present day.

It was not only male critics who highlighted the literary achievements of Victorian women. Throughout the century, women critics and biographers similarly assessed the work of their colleagues and traced the emergence of a distinctive "female literature," to use Lewes's phrase, especially in the novel. Prior to Lewes, Anne Katharine Elwood (1796-1873) produced *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England* (1841) out of a preference for "the literary performances of her own sex" and a desire "to obtain information concerning the lives and characters of those individuals in whose production she took an interest."[3] In 1863, Julia Kavanagh (1824-77) published *English Women of Letters*, concentrating on women writers who had contributed to the development of the modern novel.[4] Later in the century, in her two-volume

Literary History of England (1886), Margaret Oliphant would point to the appearance of Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, and Susan Ferrier as "three sister novelists" who "opened up for women after them a new and characteristic path in literature."[5] Oliphant expressed uncertainty about the origins of this new path: "Whether it was Rousseau and the French Revolution who did it, or whether it was the waking up in divers places of such genius among women as creates its own audience and works its own revolution, it is difficult to tell."[6] Yet for her, as for Lewes, Elwood, and Kavanagh, women's writing represented "a branch of art worthy and noble, and in no way inferior, yet quite characteristically feminine."[7]

This Victorian view of a women's tradition influenced – sometimes directly, sometimes subtly – the emergence of a feminist approach to literature in the later twentieth century. In her groundbreaking *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers voiced an initial skepticism about the value of "separating major writers from the general course of literary history on the basis of sex," but she acknowledged that as a critical approach, "it has turned out to be surprisingly productive."[8] In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), a title taken from Mill's *Subjection of Women*, Elaine Showalter similarly argued the importance of constructing a women's literary history; without it, "each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex."[9] Then, in their influential *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar began by asserting, "even when we studied women's achievements in radically different genres, we found what began to seem a distinctively female literary tradition."[10] Although these scholarly studies of the 1970s have different emphases – Moers and Showalter focusing on how women studied and developed the work of prior women writers, Gilbert and Gubar highlighting the struggle with a patriarchal tradition – they nonetheless established the critical value of considering women's writing as a distinctive body of work.

Of course, in the forty years since their appearance, the judgments of these feminist critics have been modified, challenged, and developed – including by themselves.[11] And all along we have recognized that there are other productive approaches to the study of women writers and their work. For example, women writers can be studied alongside their male contemporaries as contributors to a period or movement in literary history. Women writers can be treated as members of a regional coterie or professional group. Or women writers can be viewed within genre categories in conjunction with, or in contrast to, male writers. All these approaches appear in Victorian criticism, in scholarship of the late twentieth century, and in this volume of essays.

Illustrating the first approach, one of the earliest collective biographies of authors as a working professional group – John Watkins and Frederic Shobal's *Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland* (1816) – treats male and female writers alphabetically and even-handedly, giving more space to writers of both sexes who have produced substantial literary work than to minor figures with only a title or two. Thus, Mary Bishop gets two lines listing her books of verse (*Poetical Tales and Miscellanies* [1812], *St. Oswald and Other Poems* [1813]), whereas the achievements of Hannah More (1745–1833), poet, dramatist, educational and devotional writer, occupy well more than a page and include a career biography.[12] The same relative treatment applies to Thomas Moore, a novelist with one published work, *The Bachelor* (1809), to his name, who gets a single-line entry, versus Thomas Moore, the Irish poet, classical translator, and friend of Byron, who merits half a page. In a sense, a similar even-handedness emerges in this *Cambridge Companion*, given that highly productive, publicly prominent writers such as Harriet Martineau (1802–77), George Eliot (1819–80), and Margaret Oliphant (1828–97) appear in multiple chapters, and their achievements, often in multiple genres, receive substantial discussion. (The need to claim this achievement, however – as in Moer's subtitle, *The Great Writers* – is no longer a rhetorical necessity.)

Most Victorian critics took multiple approaches to women's writing – as did Margaret Oliphant within her comprehensive *Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth Century and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*. Like many contributors to this collection, Oliphant treats male and female writers together as part of historical movements, as members of literary coteries, and as practitioners of established or emerging genres, evaluating their work both quantitatively (by paragraphs allotted) and qualitatively (by comments inserted). For example, Anna Seward (1747–1809), the "Swan of Litchfield," is significant to Oliphant mostly as a member of a regional coterie, her memoir of Eramus Darwin and the Litchfield literary circle receiving more praise than her poetry: "It is a pity," Oliphant comments, "she had not left poetry alone, and given us more of those graphic if high-flown descriptions."[13] In contrast, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), though included in a chapter deflatingly titled "London: The Lower Circle" – receives substantial and respectful treatment for her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a "plea for women" that Oliphant describes as "of the mildest description": "All that Mary Wollstonecraft asks is education for her clients and an exemption from that false and mawkish teaching specially addressed to 'the fair.'"[14] As noted earlier, the "three sister novelists" whose innovations opened new paths in fiction receive an entire chapter – and detailed analyses of their

achievements – in Oliphant's *History*. Readers of this *Cambridge Companion* will find extensions, adaptations, and new versions of these approaches to women writers and their work.

Even so, the fundamental insight of Moers's and Showalter's studies – that attending to "the continuities in women's writing"[15] allows us to better understand Victorian literature and recognize a distinctive women's tradition within it – underlies many chapters. In her discussion of poetry (ch. 6), for instance, Linda K. Hughes notes the high esteem in which Felicia Hemans (1793–1835) was held by fellow poets, including William Wordsworth, and her significant impact on Christina Rossetti (1830–94) and Elizabeth Barrett (1806–61), whose plot in *Aurora Leigh* (1856) looks back to Hemans's *Records of Woman* (1828). Hemans's influence was felt well beyond England – as Mary Ellis Gibson and Jason Rudy demonstrate in their discussion of women's colonial and imperial writing (ch. 13). Periodicals in Australia and New Zealand frequently reprinted British poetry, with Hemans's verse as a favorite, and colonial poets paid tribute in their adaptations of her style. The Canadian poet Sarah Herbert (1824–46) "demonstrated her admiration for Hemans and expressed emotion through tropes of distance, whether from emigration, death at sea, or infant mortality." Similarly, Australian poet Fidelia Hill (1794–1854) channeled "Hemans's domestic affections in lyrics composed after arriving in the fledgling town of Adelaide in 1836," and Eliza Hamilton Dunlop (1796–1880), another Australian, borrowed stylistically from Hemans's "Indian Woman's Death Song" to evoke sympathy for Indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, in these chapters the continuities involving women poets are not restricted to female-female transmission. Hemans influenced Alfred Tennyson in England and H. L. V. Derozio in India; Barrett Browning drew on Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Hill on Wordsworth's landscape poetry. Thus, in new modes of literary history, influence crosses gender lines easily and frequently, making female-male influence and male-female influence part of the story.

This is not to suggest that all transmission came without struggle or that no woman writer had to resist patriarchal norms. Alexis Easley begins her account of women authors' careers, "Making a Debut" (ch. 1), by quoting Isaac Disraeli on the sorrows of the authoress and the difficulties of "find[ing] success in a male-dominated literary marketplace": "Women who chose the literary life often faced social censure, received substandard pay, and fell subject to a critical double standard," Easley adds. So, too, Carol MacKay, in her discussion of life-writing (ch. 11), notes a fundamental social obstacle faced by women who wished to write autobiographies: "A Victorian woman was in a bind when it came to writing her own life story, for her autobiographical impulse met with charges of pride or egotism for writing an

autobiography in the first place." Katherine Newey, in the chapter on drama and theater (ch. 10), points to the many "invisible" Victorian women playwrights, whose work was performed in their day but has been forgotten now. Victorian professional authoresses, female autobiographers, and playwrights certainly resisted patriarchal norms, or we would not have the rich body of literature on which to draw for these chapters.

Yet, as Joanne Wilkes's chapter (ch. 16) on reviewing makes clear, some forms of struggle involved two women with opposing views, not women opposing male reviewers or cultural codes of proper feminine behavior. The now famous *Quarterly* review of *Jane Eyre* chastises the novelist for "violat[ing] every code human and divine abroad, and foster[ing] Chartism and rebellion at home," and then speculates that the author could not be female, or if a woman, then she must be "one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex" – these harsh words were composed by another woman writer, Elizabeth Rigby (later Lady Eastlake). Clearly, these two Victorian women writers – Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Rigby – held different views of Christianity, morality, femininity, and fictional conventions.

Within this volume, most discussions of women writers emphasize supportive or enabling aspects of their relations – and here some new approaches to women's writing emerge. What Oliphant labeled a "coterie," several contributors to this volume treat as a "network" – a group of writers tightly or loosely linked by region, religion, politics, or shared interests. As Alexis Easley reminds us in "Making a Debut" (ch. 1), networks often enabled women to enter the literary field and place their work. Mary and William Howitt helped Elizabeth Gaskell publish her first piece of fiction (in *Howitt's Journal*) and place her first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), with Chapman and Hall. Joanne Shattock further describes, in "Becoming a Professional Writer" (ch. 2), the importance of networks in advancing a professional career. Eliza Meteyard belonged to "a circle of radical Unitarians at W. J. Fox's South Place Chapel that included a number of women writers, among them Mary Leman Grimstone and Harriet Martineau." Meteyard used her membership in the Whittington Club, a self-improvement society founded in 1846, for meeting other writers and networking with professional women such as Mary Howitt and Eliza Cook, who befriended and aided her. Informal networks were crucial to women's success because, as Shattock explains, they "had fewer opportunities to participate in the interlocking networks of writers, publishers, editors, and proprietors that operated in the capital than their male colleagues."

Some networks emerged from specific social movements and generated forms of literature that advanced the cause. *Howitt's Journal* (1847–49),

coedited by William and Mary Howitt, and *Eliza Cook's Journal* (1849–54), edited as its name suggests by Eliza Cook, were radical mid-century "magazines with interests in the intellectual and social progress of 'the people,' and in humanitarian and progressive causes";[16] they featured biographies of successful artisanal and middle-class figures and poetry that voiced the sentiments of "the people." As the century progressed, women came increasingly to edit such periodicals, and many Victorian women writers (and some who were not writers) moved into political editorships. In her discussion of women editors (ch. 4), Beth Palmer traces the routes by which participation in a "political or activist group ... presented opportunities for women to extend their personal convictions through editorship." One early example is Christian Isobel Johnstone (1781–1857), who became editor of the reformist *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (1832–61) in 1834 and used her position, as Palmer notes, to "express her convictions on class reform and gender equality by encouraging contributions from the artisan classes and from female writers such as Mary Russell Mitford and Eliza Meteyard." A later example is Annie Besant (1847–1933), who after losing her Christian faith assisted Charles Bradlaugh in editing the *National Reformer* and then, when her socialist convictions crystalized, moved on to edit her own periodical, *Our Corner* (1883–88).

If we can illumine the careers of women writers by locating them within literary, social, and political networks, we can also place them within larger literary movements and recognize their contributions to established and emerging genres. In her *Literary History of England*, Oliphant, as we have seen, emphasizes the importance of Austen, Edgeworth, and Ferrier for the development of domestic fiction (what she terms novels "considered suitable for domestic reading").[17] In her *Blackwood's Magazine* reviews and essay in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897), Oliphant highlights Charlotte Brontë's enduring achievement in *Jane Eyre* as it changed the treatment of romantic love in English fiction: "Charlotte Brontë was the first to overthrow this superstition" (that a woman should "maintain a reserve in respect to her feelings").[18] Chapters in this volume explore the contributions of women writers to other forms of fiction, including silver-fork, industrial, and Gothic fiction (ch. 7), the realist novel (ch. 8), and sensation and New Woman fiction (ch. 9). In "The Realist Novel" (ch. 8), Deirdre d'Albertis highlights George Eliot's central role as a practitioner but, more importantly, as a theorizer of realism: "Surprisingly few writers in the English tradition referred directly to, much less theorized, realism until the great work of mid-Victorian fiction was underway. ... George Eliot (1819–80) changed all of that." In Eliot's thought-provoking essays in the *Westminster Review* and her novelistic practice from *Adam Bede* (1860) to

Daniel Deronda (1876), she developed a form of realism that attended, in d'Albertis's words, "both to the neglected surfaces of the world and to underlying truths they body forth." Eliot also influenced other novelists, including Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy. This new direction in realism involved, however, a rejection of the techniques and genres of prior women novelists, whose work Eliot (then Mary Ann Evans) dismissed as "frothy ... prosy ... pious, or ... pedantic" in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," published anonymously in the *Westminster Review* before she made her own debut in fiction.[19] Ella Dzelzainis discusses the actual achievements of these earlier women novelists in ch. 7, including their pioneering work in social reform.

Contemporaneously with Eliot's practice of realism, women novelists pioneered the development of sensation fiction and stage melodrama. As Lyn Pykett points out (ch. 9), sensation fiction allowed women novelists to explore the same social and political issues that essayists discussed in periodicals such as the *English Woman's Journal* (1858–64) and the *Englishwoman's Review* (1866–1910):

> Concerns about the nature of women's role within the family; the limited opportunities available to middle-class women outside of the family; the economic and emotional dynamics of marriage and its unequal power relations under the current state of the laws governing marriage, inheritance, and women's property rights; the desirability (or otherwise) of divorce, and the circumstances under which it might be obtained; the operations of the sexual double standard (in which chastity before marriage and sexual fidelity after it were expected of women but not of men).

The transgressive heroines of sensation fiction, notably in such avant-garde novels as *East Lynne* (1861) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), "are propelled into marriage by the pressure of their unfortunate financial and parental circumstances and ... subsequently misunderstood, infantilized, and abandoned or neglected by their respective husbands." These marital discontents lead to their crimes and misdemeanors. When these novels were adapted for the stage, as Katherine Newey shows in "Drama and theater" (ch. 10), they – and other melodramas like them – "shifted the Victorian theater into a new period of creativity and change." New Woman fiction, so called because its heroines embody or act on the principles of intellectually advanced women, extended the techniques of realism and sensationalism to expose the plight of women trapped in degrading marriages or in unsatisfying jobs – or facing a choice between one or the other.

The innovations of women novelists in Victorian fiction are well known and well documented in this collection. Other chapters treat women's

writing that innovates in surprising, previously unknown ways and whose significance was unrecognized by the Victorians. One reason for our current recognition of these women's achievements lies in recent scholarly interest in print culture and the various media in which "literature" appeared during the nineteenth century: magazines, newspapers, literary annuals, and so on. Victorian women writers were active participants in all these print media. Another, related reason stems from a renewed interest in the history of authorship, readership, and publishing, and its attendant concern with women's career trajectories (the focus of Part I of this volume). Finally, modern scholars tend to reject (or at least resist) the hierarchy of genres that Alison Chapman discusses in "Achieving Fame and Canonicity" (ch. 5): whereas Victorians valued original poetry and serious fiction published in book form, we tend today to explore the various, multiple genres that comprised the literature of Britain. This broadening of the sense of literature has brought other Victorian women writers to the fore.

In discussing one of these other genres, "History Writing" (ch. 14), Deborah Logan treats the remarkable achievement of Harriet Martineau, the only Victorian woman writer "whose history can be called *national*" and whose work would thus have been considered "real" history by Victorian norms. Otherwise, as Logan notes, "the masculine professionalization of History as a rarefied scholarly discipline cast Victorian women historians as unprofessional, amateur, and intellectually shallow." In fact and contrary to this Victorian view, Logan argues that we can see today how women writers were not unprofessional but pioneered in forms of "alternative history," most notably "biographies of individual figures and dynastic reigns, in both English and European contexts, which furthered the work of interpreting human social experience." These forms anticipate the mid-twentieth-century movement to produce social history, sometimes called the "new social history," which attends to the experiences of ordinary people and undercuts the assumption "that History can only mean national history (wars, conquests, reigns, politics)."

Women writers innovated in other Victorian genres, throughout the century but especially toward its end when increasing numbers entered journalism. In her discussion of periodical writing (ch. 15), Margaret Beetham traces women's contributions to religious journalism and leader (editorial) writing for social and political causes; she also highlights their seminal work in such journalistic genres as the "special columns or causeries, which might include gossip, snippets of news, and moral stories or jokes," and the "celebrity interviews," which became an important aspect of the "New Journalism." *Fin-de-siècle* authors such as Rosamund Marriott Watson and Alice Meynell wrote regularly for the "Wares of Autolycus" column in the *Pall Mall*

Gazette, with many of Meynell's essays later collected in beautifully produced books such as *The Children* (1897) and *The Spirit of Place* (1898). Indeed, the aesthetic essay is another genre in which Victorian women made important innovations. Meynell came to prominence as an aesthetic essayist by publishing brief, brilliant, highly wrought pieces for the *Scots Observer*, and this work led to the invitation to write for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and publish books of essays with the prominent aesthetic publisher John Lane at the Bodley Head press.

In some genres, women writers were essential contributors, both as originators and as continuing innovators in the form. As Tamara Wagner notes (ch. 12), travel writing by British women predates the nineteenth century, with its particular emphasis on domestic manners and "the details of everyday living arrangements." Without losing this emphasis, Victorian travel writers reflect a growing "interest in 'unbeaten tracks' about which little had then been written," with Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley "epitomiz[ing] the solitary woman traveler who sought to leave civilization behind and write about unknown places." In "Children's Writing" (ch. 17), Claudia Nelson similarly observes both continuity in and development of the genre. On the one hand, Victorian women writers "were already well ensconced in this profession, having inherited a thriving tradition of women's writing for children from their Georgian predecessors"; often their tales fulfill the assumption that "children's literature would communicate something worthwhile – morals or information or both – to its young consumers," whether the lesson be "setting a virtuous example," as in Anne Maria Sargeant's "Edith and Her Ayah," or treating animals humanely, as in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. At the end of the century, however, women (and men as well) often employed fantasy and fairy tales "to comment on the shortcomings not of children but of the adult world."

As I have read – with many an eye-opening moment – the chapters in this collection, I have been reminded of the recuperative impulse that has generated, and continues to generate, important scholarship on writing by women. "Recuperation" is a tricky term – not one much used by the scholars who contributed the following chapters. As Susan Stanford Friedman noted twenty-five years ago, "The word *recuperation* means to 'recover from sickness of exhaustion', to 'regain health or strength', to 'recover from loss'. Embedded in the term is a notion of disease."[20] The sense of Victorian women's writing conveyed by the contributors here is quite different: it is of authors and works brimful of vigor and vitality, of imagination and innovation, of optimism and confidence in what women achieved. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering the recuperative aspect of scholarship published by both Victorian women writers and modern feminist scholars

who have "recovered from loss" the literature of the nineteenth century. As Betty Schellenberg, a scholar of eighteenth-century women's literature, observes, "the formation of literature as one discipline within a newly professionalized system of intellectual labor" involved a "great forgetting" – a forgetting that women wrote in many different genres (not just the novel), that they wrote with popular and often critical success, and that they were fundamental to the establishment of literature as a profession.[21]

Schellenberg notes that eighteenth-century women writers were sometimes complicit in this "great forgetting," whether by destroying their personal papers, erasing public knowledge of their lives, or maintaining silence about the career achievements of fellow women writers. Victorian women writers, I believe, were less likely to forget, more likely to remember and document their achievements. They edited collective biographies, as did Elwood and Kavanagh; they wrote literary histories, as did Oliphant; and they assembled critical collections about their predecessors and contemporaries, as in the multi-authored *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897) and Helen C. Black's *Notable Women Authors of the Day* (1893). Of course, we can quote Elizabeth Barrett on strategic forgetting ("I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none"),[22] or cite Harriet Martineau on destroying personal correspondence ("I made up my mind to interdict publication of my private letters").[23] But these individual decisions go against the Victorian norm of documenting achievement as part of the record of the professionalization of authorship, women's as well as men's.

The chapters that follow extend this documentation. In Part I, the chapters trace the stages of a woman writer's career, noting women's engagements within the Victorian publishing world and their efforts to professionalize their work. In Part II, the chapters turn to women writers' achievements in important Victorian literary genres. All testify to the remarkable achievements of Victorian women in many arenas.

NOTES

1. [George Henry Lewes], "The Lady Novelists," *Westminster Review* 58 (July 1852), 129, 131.
2. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), pp. 128–29. Online at www.gutenberg.org.
3. Mrs. [Anne Katharine] Elwood, *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber, 1845), p. 3. This is a pirated American edition of the 1841 London text published by Henry Colburn.
4. Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1863).