Introduction

Joanne Shattock

> No group of women, undistinguished by rank, unendowed by beauty, and known to but a limited circle of friends as unimportant as themselves have ever, I think, in the course of history – certainly never in this century – come to such universal recognition. The effect is quite unique, unprecedented, and difficult to account for; but there cannot be the least doubt that it is a matter of absolute fact which nobody can deny.[1]

Margaret Oliphant's assessment of the Brontë 'phenomenon', written in 1897, was accurate. The sisters' reputation was as high fifty years after their deaths as it had been during their brief lives. The occasion of her tribute, a collection of essays by living women novelists writing on their deceased sisters, was a public recognition of an equivalent phenomenon. *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: a Book of Appreciations*, commissioned by the fiction publishers Hurst and Blackett, celebrated nearly a century of achievement by women writers. Oliphant had heralded the achievement much earlier, famously declaring in 1855 that the nineteenth century, 'which is the age of so many things – of enlightenment, of science, of progress – is quite as distinctly the age of female novelists'.[2]

Her comment, and the Hurst and Blackett collection, told only part of the story. To a prolific novelist like Oliphant, and to many less partial observers, women appeared to have appropriated fiction as their particular genre. What the remark did not acknowledge was the extent and variety of women's contributions to nineteenth-century literary culture in its widest sense.

There was undoubtedly a heightened awareness, even a sense of excitement about women's increased presence on the literary scene. One of the ways in which this registered publicly was in the number of biographical dictionaries, anthologies and retrospective assessments of women writers which were published in the period. Early collections

such as Mary Hays's *Female Biography: or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (1803) and Mary Matilda Betham's *A Biographical Dictionary of the Celebrated Women of every Age and Country* (1804), while including few women writers, nevertheless established a model of female collective biography.[3] From them emerged a steady flow of publications concerned with women authors, which recycled biographical details and added a modicum of critical assessment. Mary Ann Stodart's *Female Writers, Thoughts on their Proper Sphere and their Powers of Usefulness* (1842), Anna Katherine Elwood's *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England* (1843), Jane Williams's *The Literary Women of England* (1861) and Julia Kavanagh's *English Women of Letters* (1863) promised, on the whole, more than they delivered in terms of critical acuity, or even factual accuracy, but collectively they conveyed the sense that at mid-century it was time to reassess, and to celebrate, women's place in literature. Inadvertently, of course, the collections also contributed to the creation of a literary canon.

Women poets were singled out for special treatment, often with the telling designation of 'poetesses'. Alexander Dyce's *Specimens of British Poetesses* (1825) and Leigh Hunt's 'Specimens of British Poetesses' 1847[4] were matched at the end of the century by E. S. Robertson's *English Poetesses* (1883), the last perfecting the art of damning with faint praise. George W. Bethune, *The British Female Poets* (1848) and Frederick Rowton's *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (1848) combined anthology with biographical notes. Elizabeth Sharp's *Women's Voices* (1877) and 'Sarah Tytler' [Henrietta Keddie] and J. L. Watson's *The Songstresses of Scotland* (1871) were two influential anthologies of women poets compiled by women. A. H. Miles in his ten-volume collection, *The Poets and Poetry of the Century* (1891–7) devoted one volume to women poets. Each of these publications, while outwardly celebratory, also separated the women poets from their male colleagues. As was the case with the other collections, they engaged in a process of canon formation.

What the biographical dictionaries, collections and anthologies did not register were the inroads women writers were making into a range of discourses outside the literary mainstream. Some of these were in traditionally masculine disciplines such as history, science and political economy. Women's contributions to children's literature, religious discourse and to the literature of domestic economy, traditionally feminine pursuits, increased in number and in profile in an age of mass publishing. Self-writing, which included autobiography and the domestic memoir, was another genre in which women made an impact, adding

these forms to the letters and dairies they had always written. Often the dutiful assemblers of materials for biographies written by their male relations and colleagues, they now published biographies themselves, both individual and collective. Women's established presence in the theatre, as actresses, patrons and as playwrights, was reinforced in the nineteenth century. They became journalists, historians of art, literary critics, translators and editors. It is the extraordinary richness and variety of women's contributions to nineteenth-century literary culture, their forays into an expanding range of discourses, which forms the subject of this book.

Women writers have traditionally written across a spectrum of genres. The opening up of more avenues for a writing life in the nineteenth century meant that the practice became almost routine. For every women writer who was recognized as a poet or a novelist, there were as many who combined one of these genres with output in at least one other. Another important factor in this period was the necessity of employment for women of the middle class.

The polarization of the 'public' (male) and the 'private' (female) sphere is part of Victorian ideology, but, as historians remind us, it was a very real part of nineteenth-century experience. One of the ways in which women negotiated this seemingly rigid barrier was through writing. As work of all kinds gradually moved out of the home and into a public workplace, writing remained one means of employment which could be conducted from within the domestic sphere, 'with only the name and the product of the author being necessarily in the public domain' as Dorothy Thompson has pointed out.[5]

Valerie Sanders, in her study of the literary marketplace as it affected women writers of fiction (ch. 7), shows how they confronted an almost entirely masculine literary establishment, from editors and publishers' readers through to publishers and reviewers. She focuses on a number of significant relationships between women authors and male publishers, unique combinations of talent and temperament which had an impact on each partner. She shows too how women networked in a 'hit-and-miss' fashion to facilitate this particular rite of passage into a male world. Earnings were important to women authors, not least because they were the key to becoming professional, and few women remained long as innocents in the commercial world. In chapter 8, Virginia Blain identifies the poet Letitia Landon as a shrewd manipulator of the literary marketplace, and points out that, whereas in the 1830s poetry was a

profitable genre for poets like Landon and Felicia Hemans, this was not the case for others like Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind, writing later in the century.

One vital arena for the woman writer in the nineteenth century, and one of which her eighteenth-century predecessors had only a foretaste, was the expanding periodical press. The role of journalism as an adjunct of a literary career for women, and later a career in its own right, the opportunities the press offered to the emerging woman writer, and the impact of reviewing, on both the reviewer and the subject, are themes which run through many of the chapters in this book. Virginia Blain sees the press as a forum through which women poets could encounter each other's work for the first time, and through which they could become known to one another or at least begin a 'conversation' among themselves. Barbara Caine, in her discussion of women's contribution to public debate (ch. 5), notes the extent to which women used journalism and their access to the periodical press to 'shift the framework of discussion' about women, to give women the public forum they lacked, and to make their voices 'a significant part of public culture'.

Joanne Wilkes (ch. 2) writes of the ways in which male reviewers ascribed particular characteristics to writing on the basis of the author's sex, and how insistently reviewers wrote with definite preconceptions of the authors as women. Virginia Blain sees the advent of female reviewers, particularly of poetry, as decidedly helpful in improving the treatment of women poets. Hilary Fraser and Judith Johnston (ch. 11) emphasize the crucial role of the press in the professionalization of women's writing. However, they and Barbara Caine independently make the point that, while the periodical press offered women opportunities to write on subjects from which they had hitherto been excluded, such as political economy and science, they were regarded as popularizers of those subjects, rather than the instigators of new ideas. The role of writers like Harriet Martineau and Frances Power Cobbe, both of them eminent 'women of letters', was to explain and distill the ideas of (male) political economists and scientists, rather than writing on these subjects in their capacity as professionals. Periodical writing, Johnston and Fraser argue, thus became feminized.

Work and home, the domestic and the professional, were competing pulls in the lives of nineteenth-century women writers in ways recognizable to the modern woman. The power structures inherent in the domestic household, and the codes of social conduct, on the other hand, were aspects of life from which no nineteenth-century woman was

immune. Elizabeth Langland writes (ch. 6) of an extensive 'discourse of domesticity' in the form of household manuals and conduct books written by women, which regulated authority and established power networks within the domestic sphere. The 'social capital' generated by middle-class domestic managers was the equivalent of the economic capital earned by their husbands. She also demonstrates the ways in which novels by women from Oliphant and Gaskell to George Eliot 'inscribed and exposed' the dynamic of the domestic household.

Work is inscribed in a variety of ways in women's writing. In her chapter on self-writing (ch. 10), Linda Peterson shows how women autobiographers variously represented their writing lives, particularly in relation to their domestic lives. She identifies missionary autobiographies as important accounts of women engaged in serious work outside the home, undertaking heroic action. Katherine Newey (ch. 9), writing of nineteenth-century women's involvement in the theatre at several levels, sees this as a visible instance of 'women's increasing autonomy and self-definition through work' in the period. Judith Johnston and Hilary Fraser note a focus, in the biographies of some women writers, on the life only as it served the career, rather than the way in which the profession may have framed the life. Joanne Shattock on the other hand (ch. 1) sees biographers of women writers varying in their emphases, some deliberately presenting the writing life, others determined to reveal or to explain 'the woman behind the books' to a reading public eager for this revelation.

Margaret Beetham (ch. 3) focuses on the woman as reader, the consumer of a vast and increasing print culture directed to her. She identifies 'a set of cultural anxieties' around the figure of the female reader which were to do with class and race as well as gender and sexuality. The analogy of the consumption of food and the consumption of print was 'endemic' in nineteenth-century discourses of reading. She sees the growth in magazines addressed to women as consumers as one indication of the interconnectedness of the domestic and the public worlds, of production and consumption, 'whether of books, roast beef or Paris fashions'. Lyn Pykett (ch. 4) argues that women's participation in the cultural domain, and particularly writing, was one of the most significant ways in which nineteenth-century women could shape and change how they understood their own gender and sexuality. Her chapter examines the multiplicity of discourses, medical, legal and historical, which contributed to that process. One of her concerns is the way in which nineteenth-century constructions of gender and sexuality intersected with those of class.

Religion offered an alternative network to women who were excluded from masculine literary circles and contacts. The writing of tracts and the editing of Christian journals and magazines for women presented another point of entry into literary culture, as Elisabeth Jay suggests (ch. 12). She identifies translation, religious verse and the writing of religious biography as three additional genres through which women engaged with religious discourse and from which they sometimes moved into the literary mainstream. Both Jay and Lynne Vallone in her discussion of writers of children's literature (ch. 13) point to the Evangelical educational agenda for women which was such a formative influence on a number of women writers. Vallone notes a concern for separate, gendered fiction for girls and boys which emerged in children's literature from the mid-century.

The range of writers discussed in these chapters offer incontrovertible evidence of the growing professionalization of women's writing in the nineteenth century and their indelible presence in a variety of discourses. The women writers we have come to regard as canonical: Austen, Shelley, the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, are present in many of the essays. As biographical subjects they are discussed in chapter 1 where it is argued that biographies constructed the woman writer inherited by the next generation of writers and readers. They offer evidence in chapter 2 of the influence of reviewing and contemporary reception in the formation of a canon. They feature in discussions of the marketplace, women's poetry, women's reading, self-writing, and writing for children. By placing them in context with their less well-known colleagues, and by situating their literary production alongside an enormous body of non-canonical writing by women, their achievement is given a series of important new perspectives.

The scope and variety of women writers and texts discussed in this book, from the authors of household books, domestic memoirs, girls' stories, religious verse, to the writings of feminist campaigners, playwrights, journalists and historians of art, alter irrevocably our perception of the terrain of women's writing in the nineteenth century. No longer can we accept without qualification the assertion that this was *the age of female novelists*.

The essays in this volume are focussed, as the title suggests, on women and literature in *Britain*. It is a truism that the ramifications of women's contributions to literary culture in the nineteenth century extended far

beyond these shores. Relationships with women writing in North America were strong. The influence of both major and minor figures extended to Australia and other colonial centres, and, as was the case with North America, the relationship was reciprocal. We have not attempted a study of what might be termed the centre and the periphery, nor of women's literary relations with the continent. These subjects are sufficiently complex and also vast as to warrant a study of their own. Nor have we considered in detail non-metropolitan literary cultures within the United Kingdom, although representative figures from centres outside London figure in many of the chapters. This subject too awaits an independent study.

As is the case with other volumes in the *Women and Literature* series, the essays are preceded by a woman-centred chronology of cultural and literary events, legislation and public debates affecting women in the nineteenth century. A Guide to Further Reading is organized according to the major themes and topics covered in the book.

NOTES

1 Mrs Oliphant, 'The Sisters Brontë', in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign. A Book of Appreciations* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1897), p. 6.
2 [Margaret Oliphant], 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small', *Blackwood's Magazine* 77 (May 1855), p. 555. Valerie Sanders discusses the implications of her remark in Ch. 7, p.142.
3 There had been earlier collections, such as George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) and John Duncombe's *The Feminiad; or Female Genius: A Poem* (1751), but Hays's and Betham's collections appearing within a year of one another were important influences on what followed.
4 In his *Men, Women and Books: a Selection of Sketches, Essays and Critical Memoirs from his Uncollected Writings*, vol. II (London, 1847).
5 Dorothy Thompson, 'Women, Work and Politics in Nineteenth-Century England: the Problem of Authority in Jane Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 69.

CHAPTER 1

The construction of the woman writer

Joanne Shattock

'A woman and her book are identical' – or so Edgar Allen Poe reflected when reading an early collection of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.[1] Remembering the autobiographical nature of much of Barrett Browning's early work, his comment is not surprising. But it has a more general relevance for nineteenth-century women writers. The charge that they could only write of what they knew, and that what they knew best was themselves, was made regularly by reviewers. The easy association of the life and the work, or, more accurately, a refusal to separate them, was crucial to the reading of these writers by their contemporaries. In this chapter I am concerned with the reading of Victorian women, how they were read in the nineteenth century, particularly how they read one another, and how we read them today. More specifically I am interested in the role that contemporary biography played in this process: how, in a number of celebrated instances, a biography constructed the woman writer inherited by the next generation of writers and readers of both sexes.

It was the feminist critic Ellen Moers who first made the point that nineteenth-century English women writers sought and created the sense of a literary community by reading one another's books. 'The personal give-and-take of the literary life was closed to them', she wrote, 'Without it they studied with a special closeness the works written by their own sex, and developed a sense of easy, almost rude familiarity with the women who wrote them.'[2] Of course these were highly intelligent women reading the work of other highly intelligent women. They knew better than to look only for self-representation in these texts. They were astute critics of one another's work and conveyed their views, sometimes in personal correspondence, sometimes in published reviews. But to these writers, reading one another's books made them feel that they knew the authors. It was an alternative to a female literary society.

This reading culture was not confined to women writers as readers. It

extended to all women readers. In her study of attitudes to women's reading in the Victorian period, Kate Flint notes the sense of community felt by women readers of fiction and the emergence of female heroines as role models.[3] I am suggesting that both the seeking of role models, and the felt need for a personal knowledge of these women, governed the reading of biographies as well as the works of women writers by one another. To the wider reading public, both male and female, the biographies attracted the curious and the prurient as biographies have always done, but for this wider readership too there was a sense of wanting to know the woman behind the books.

Richard D. Altick in his *Lives and Letters: a History of Literary Biography in England and America* notes the post-Romantic enthusiasm for literary biography, a process driven by an instinctive 'quest for the creator behind the creation'. He suggests that the lives of writers, as distinct from other biographical subjects, acquire their appeal from the seeming remoteness of the literary life from ordinary experience, a sense derived from the Romantic poets that the writer was a person apart from society, and in some way 'special'.[4] In the case of nineteenth-century women writers, the search for the woman behind the books acquired a particular fascination because relatively few people knew these women personally. Although professional writers, they did not inhabit the public sphere. They were not members of the universities, they could not frequent the clubs and societies which were the haunts of male writers; they did not give readings or lectures; their connection with politics and the professions was tangential, through family connections; even opportunities for travel were circumscribed. Their increasing contribution to the world of journalism was conducted from home. Details of their lives were often the subject of gossip and speculation. And it was often to pre-empt further gossip and the circulation of erroneous material or to control the way their lives were presented to the public that biographies were commissioned. This was Patrick Brontë's reason for asking Elizabeth Gaskell to write the life of his daughter Charlotte. It was also one of William Godwin's reasons for writing a memoir of his wife Mary Wollstonecraft. And it was the reason why friends and supporters of Letitia Landon conducted a campaign to rescue her reputation after her premature death, a campaign conducted by writing and rewriting her life – and her death – for more than thirty years.

Most women writers, like many of their male colleagues, shunned biography and took steps to prevent any such posthumous publication, or their families did it for them. Cassandra Austen destroyed many of

Jane Austen's letters because she regarded them as too personal. Maria Edgeworth reacted against a proposed biographical preface to her works with the argument that 'as a woman, my life, wholly domestic, cannot afford anything interesting to the public'.[5] Elizabeth Gaskell secured her daughters' assurances that there would be no biography after her death. Margaret Oliphant extracted a deathbed promise from her literary executors that there would be no account of her life, a somewhat ironic injunction from the author of five biographies and numerous biographical sketches. Harriet Martineau recalled and destroyed her own letters. Yet Oliphant and Martineau were two of the few women writers in the nineteenth century who wrote autobiographies, possibly to pre-empt the biographies they so opposed. George Eliot resolutely refused to contribute personal biographical information to various collective biographical projects of the period. She expressed her opposition to biography on several occasions, the last on the death of her partner G. H. Lewes when she announced that there was to be no biography. 'The best history of a writer is contained in his writings: – Biographies generally are a disease of English literature', she wrote to a friend.[6] Yet, as their published correspondence reveals, both Lewes and Eliot were avid readers of contemporary biography.

Victorian biography, it is fair to say, has received a bad press of late. The burgeoning of literary biography both inside and outside the academy, as we are presently experiencing it, has brought with it a new self-consciousness, an interest in the development of the genre, although it trails behind the intense critical and theoretical focus on autobiography.[7] In these assessments the so called 'Victorian model', by which is meant the two- or three-volume 'Life and Letters', is regarded as a primitive form, representative of the dark days, before Freud's theories were common currency, and before Lytton Strachey's iconoclastic reworking of the genre. In other words it is a form which modern literary biography has left behind. I do not want to spend time defending the 'Victorian model', but I would caution against the assumption that there was a standard one, that they were always reverent, that there was 'no sex, no scandal, no self-doubt on the part of either subject or writer', as one modern practitioner has described them.[8]

Comparatively few women writers were memorialized by full-scale biographies. Collective biographies of women writers, on the other hand, were published in profusion. Alison Booth has written of the exemplary element inherent in collective biographies of historical figures.[9] Those devoted to women writers had the additional effect of