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978-0-521-88288-0 - The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1830-1914

Edited by Joanne Shattock

Excerpt

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JOANNE SHATTOCK

Introduction

This *Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1830–1914* comprises a series of newly commissioned essays that offer fresh perspectives on a literary period bounded at one end by the Romantic movement and by Modernism at the other. Debates about periodization, as we know, can be both intense and contentious. The parameters of what has become known as the ‘long’ nineteenth century and the divisions within it are regularly contested. Studies of Romanticism have variously adopted the 1770s or 1789 as their starting point, tracing the origins of the movement in the poetry of the late eighteenth century or highlighting the French Revolution as the context for an equally revolutionary period in literature. The transition to the Victorian period is generally marked by the end of the 1820s, the decade that witnessed the deaths of the second generation of Romantic poets, with 1832, the year of the first Reform Bill, sometimes chosen as the end date, rather than 1830.

The Victorian period has similarly porous boundaries. The dates of Queen Victoria’s reign, 1837–1901, are sometimes adopted, as in the volume of *The New Cambridge History of English Literature*, which follows the divisions of the original *CHEL* (1907–27), although arguments about the artificiality of these dates are vigorous. The century (1800–1900) is sometimes used to circumscribe an area of study, as in the recent volume of the third edition of *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (1999), which followed the pattern established by the original *CBEL* in 1940. Opposition to this particular arrangement turns on the differences between Romantic and Victorian writing and the need to recognize their distinctiveness as well as the unsatisfactory nature of century divisions in literary study.

The *Cambridge Companions* have set out to challenge conventional period boundaries. Thomas Keymer and John Mee’s *Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740–1830* (2004) emphasized the advantages of approaching the Romantic period from the longer perspective of the mid-eighteenth

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century, ending their study less controversially at 1830. Earlier, Stuart Curran's *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (1993) focused on the forty-year period from 1785 to 1825.

This *Companion* begins with the 1830s, a formative and by definition 'pre-Victorian' decade, and one which has only recently begun to receive the attention it merits. The advantages of having more flexibility to consider the links and overlap with Romanticism and the transition from the Regency to the Victorian age are clear. The early work of Dickens, Tennyson and Carlyle, each of whom made his mark in the 1830s, features in several chapters, along with writers like Walter Scott, Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau, Pierce Egan, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Douglas Jerrold, Frederick Marryat and Catherine Gore, all of whom had an impact on later decades, and were shaped by earlier ones.

Several contributors to this volume emphasize the importance of the 1820s and 1830s to our understanding of the Victorian period as a whole. Katherine Newey sees Victorian popular culture as having been forged in these decades. Gowan Dawson identifies the beginnings of the popularization of science in the same period. John Plunkett, in his exploration of 'Visual culture', notes the growth of interest in physiological optics in the 1820s and 1830s, which led to a prevalence of optical and pictorial tropes in literature – part of the 'fascination for all things pictorial', he argues – which persisted throughout the century.

The advantages of carrying the discussion forward through the 'high Victorian' period of the 1870s and 1880s, and across the century divide to the First World War, are many. It facilitates a discussion of the emergence of Modernism in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a point made by Mary Hammond, who notes the growing division between 'good' and 'popular' literature in the perception of late nineteenth-century readers. She notes too the length of time it took for the works of Modernist writers like D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, all of whom wrote in the period covered by this *Companion*, to be published in formats which could be afforded by non-middle-class readers.

Recent nineteenth-century scholarship and criticism have seen a conscious widening of the focus from English metropolitan culture to include provincial cultures, and in particular the literature of Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Outside Britain, the geographical boundaries of literary study have been pushed even further to embrace the literature of the British Empire and its colonies as well as that of the United States. The interchanges between what might be called the 'centre' and the 'periphery' have become crucial to our understanding of the period 1830 to 1914, as have literary relations with continental Europe.

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The impact and legacy of empire, the roots of which are in the eighteenth century, was felt from the mid-century onward. The concepts of empire and nation are central to both Romantic and Victorian writing, as Patrick Brantlinger points out. His chapter demonstrates the influence of the British Empire on writers as diverse as Walter Scott, Douglas Jerrold, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley and Wilkie Collins through to Kipling, Rider Haggard and Joseph Conrad, the last three writing well into the twentieth century.

Alison Chapman, in her chapter on 'European exchanges', notes the complex responses to European literature and culture, particularly to those of France and Italy, which developed throughout the long nineteenth century, and which challenge the 'Anglocentric disciplinary formations' of Victorian literature. She notes those points at which British national identity was seen to be challenged by continental Europe, while literary relations were close and reciprocal.

Nationhood and national culture are underlying themes of several chapters. Bridget Bennett, in her discussion of 'Transatlantic relations', argues that transatlantic approaches to literary texts can provide ways of challenging more nation-based definitions of writers and their work. There were cultural models constructed on both sides of the Atlantic, she suggests, that interacted with one another significantly throughout the period of this volume. In her chapter on 'Popular culture' Katherine Newey notes that while in the eighteenth century artists, critics and audiences shared a sense of a British national culture, by the time of Queen Victoria's accession in 1837 that national culture appeared 'fractured and contentious'.

The intellectual vigour of Victorian Studies, which first came to prominence in the 1950s, is in great part due to the way in which scholars and critics from a range of disciplines have engaged effectively with one another. Just as the nineteenth-century educated reader regarded works of history, philosophy, political economy, art, theology and science as 'literature' in its broadest sense, along with the traditional genres of poetry, the novel and drama, so the essays in this *Companion* demonstrate the fruits of an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach.

Gowan Dawson writes of the new cultural and political importance which science acquired during the nineteenth century, and of the consequences of this for other aspects of nineteenth-century culture. He argues that literature and science were more closely related between 1830 and 1914 than in subsequent periods, when the notion of 'two cultures' became entrenched. Jenny Bourne Taylor's chapter on 'Body and mind' shows the ways in which medical discourse, particularly that of the nascent science of psychology, influenced the work of novelists and also of poets, in their

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attempts to render legible the inner, emotional life. John Plunkett traces the impact of new modes of visuality in the period. He emphasizes the ‘creative cross-over’ between literature and painting, and the existence of a vastly enlarged visual field, ‘created by the desire to be able to picture, and consequently observe, every detail of the physical environment’.

It would be ‘wildly inaccurate’ to describe Victorian Britain as multicultural, Andrew Sanders cautions, but in his chapter on ‘Writing and religion’ he argues that, as the result of a gradual evolutionary process, Victorian Britain could be described as a ‘plural’ society. He traces the fascination with ‘the other’ in terms of religion, a fascination that sometimes resulted in an ‘open embrace’, and he ranges widely over the representation of religious diversity in the nineteenth-century novel.

Hilary Fraser reminds us that ‘the past as we know it was largely created by the Victorians’, that historical terms and concepts and the idea of periodicity were invented in the nineteenth century. Our modern historical consciousness and historiographical methods were inherited from our Victorian predecessors, who first defined and professionalized the study of history. She considers the impact of the historical past on a variety of writers, from major figures such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Hardy, to the work of Vernon Lee, Alice Meynell and the late nineteenth-century poet ‘Michael Field’.

Biography as we know it was largely the creation of Victorian biographers, as Alison Booth emphasizes, and it was the ‘Victorian model’ that was challenged by Modernists like Lytton Strachey. Booth emphasizes the variety of life writing in the period 1830–1914, from the multi-volume ‘life and letters’ to the family memoir, the diary, biographical dictionaries, ‘brief lives’ and travel writing. She notes too the close association of life writing with the stories of the rising professions, especially authorship.

The innovative approaches to literary studies offered by the *History of the Book* – the study of authorship, readerships, literary production and print culture in its widest sense – are reflected in several chapters of this *Companion*. Josephine Guy considers the status of authorship and the gradual professionalization of writing from the 1830s. She notes the emergence of literary lionism and celebrity culture, and she emphasizes the impact of new technologies on the process of writing.

Mary Hammond’s subject is the reader and the consumption of literature in the period, beginning with the enormous growth in the numbers of readers and their expectations. Reading practices, solitary and shared, the physical conditions for reading, whether by candle, gas or electricity, and the stratagems adopted by publishers to reach the new, mass readerships are central to her chapter, as is the growth of public libraries.

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Several contributors consider literary production in a period of technological change, the importance of serialization, the development of cheap reprints, and the emergence of an extensive and diverse periodical press. Susan Hamilton links the growth of periodical outlets with the increased opportunities offered to women writers, and the ways in which they used these to engage with political, legal and feminist issues. Joanne Shattock considers the changing life of the man (and woman) of letters, the emergence of a reviewing culture which enabled writers of both sexes to make a respectable living through journalism, and the consequent professionalization of literary criticism in the period.

The close connection between literature and politics is a common thread in several chapters: the impact of the Italian Risorgimento on English writers, the fears of invasion, literary responses to war, encounters with American democracy. Sally Ledger's chapter on 'Radical writing' explores three points in the century when political concerns were uppermost in writers' minds: the literature of the anti-Poor Law movement in the 1830s, the impact of Chartism and the debates surrounding the 'Condition of England Question' in the 1840s, and the emergence of the Socialist movement the 1880s.

In a period in which there are so many major literary figures, writing across all genres, and a period, too, in which so much has been done to reclaim less well known writers, women writers in particular, but also radical and working-class writers, and practitioners of other genres such as biographers, autobiographers, historians, scientists, travel writers and critics, it has not proved possible to devote chapters to individual writers or even to movements. Readers of the *Companion* will find fresh interpretations and perspectives on well-known authors and texts, together with an introduction to less familiar authors and writing in a range of genres, reflecting the constant revision and reconfiguration of the canon which has been, and continues to be, an ongoing process in nineteenth-century literary studies, and one which signals its intellectual health and vigour.

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PART I

Modes of writing and their contexts

I

JOSEPHINE GUY

Authors and authorship

Nineteenth-century British historians tended to analyse historical causation in terms of the agency of individuals: in this historiography, then, events were understood as having been brought about by human actions rather than by large-scale impersonal forces. In keeping with this trend, literary historians writing during the same period also tended to understand authorship in relation to personal qualities which they attributed (accurately or otherwise) to a particular writer's character. This typically involved a delineation of what Edmund Gosse towards the end of the century termed (in his *A Short History of Modern English Literature* (1898)), in a comment made about Ben Jonson, 'temperament'; or, in Walter Pater's more famous definition made in the 1880s, 'soul': literary representation, Pater explained in his essay 'Style', could best be understood as the expression of 'a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition'.¹

Such a view was not in keeping with contemporary European thinking, however. For example, in his widely read *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863) the French critic and historian Hippolyte Taine elaborated a hereditary and environmental theory of authorship, defining creativity in terms of a conjunction of 'la race, le milieu, et le moment' – a proposition not dissimilar to that of Goethe's pithy injunction, as paraphrased by the English journalist John Morley, that to 'understand an author, you must understand his age'.² By contrast, even in a writer as self-consciously cosmopolitan as Matthew Arnold, who was famously critical of English parochialism, we find a residual belief in the power of the individual. So although Arnold argued that the critic should attend to the wider intellectual culture in which a writer was working, there is a pervasive sense that the creation of an Arnoldian 'master-work' required not just Taine's 'power of the moment', and the availability of appropriate intellectual 'materials', but crucially also the 'power of the man' to transform them.³ Thus Arnold attributed the singular qualities of, say, Heinrich Heine's 'genius' not so much to the alleged 'wealth of ideas' and 'culture' of early nineteenth-century

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Germany, but rather to a peculiarity in Heine's own 'character' – his want of 'self-respect' and 'true dignity'.⁴ Looking back from the vantage-point of 1900, another critic and poet, Lionel Johnson, could sum up the significance of nineteenth-century poetry as having derived from an 'age of intense individuality', one which was 'rich in personalities'.⁵ He could have been thinking here of the career of Oscar Wilde, one of the century's most notorious and iconoclastic writers who had also, unsurprisingly, insisted that 'art springs from personality'.⁶

A modern literary historian, however, would be inclined to look at matters in a different way: he or she is more likely to attempt to deconstruct this Romantic valorisation of individual expressivity by focusing instead on institutions, technologies and economics, such larger forces being viewed as more significant historical factors shaping the way individual writers were (and still are) able to express themselves. More precisely, a modern historian would be inclined to view this celebration of personal difference as itself the product of a growing institutionalization of authorship in the nineteenth century. 'Personality', in this argument, was merely an anxious defence against – or possibly, and more cynically, a valuable commodity to be exploited in – a pervasive process of professionalization and commercialization in which authorship was being absorbed by an all-powerful culture industry. This context makes it easier to understand the protestations of one of the century's most seriously minded but (certainly in terms of sales) least successful literary authors: Henry James. In his 1884 essay 'The Art of Fiction' James drew a revealing comparison between literature and painting: the painter, he argued, is able to 'teach the rudiments of his practice' but the 'literary artist would be obliged to say to his pupil ... "Ah, well, you must do what you can!"'. And what made literary authorship unteachable, for James, was precisely the formative role of what he too termed 'temperament', a novel being in its 'broadest definition a personal ... impression of life', one which required, for its execution, 'freedom to feel and say'.⁷ The reality of nineteenth-century authorship, as James himself could not help but be aware, was that such 'freedom' was at best only partial or at worst only notional.

It is tempting to see in these different assessments an opposition between what might loosely be called an expressive and an institutional theory of literary authorship. However, and as I have already hinted, this opposition is more apparent than real, for in practice authorship involves a complex interplay between individuals and institutions. All writers who wish to place their work in the public domain have to negotiate with the institutional forces (whether legal, economic, social or religious) which have always controlled the process of publication. At the same time, however, it has also

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been the case that local circumstances have enabled individual authors to negotiate that relationship in a variety of different ways.

An author supported by private means, such as the poet and translator Edward FitzGerald, could be careless of issues such as sales figures or royalties, and therefore take risks with his material which authors who needed to earn their living with the pen could not. Such insouciance may explain why FitzGerald embarked on no fewer than three translations of medieval Persian poetry – he had both money and time to indulge an enthusiasm careless about whether or not it would be shared by the Victorian reading public (FitzGerald's translations of works by Jami and Attar today, as in the nineteenth century, are unknown by most admirers of his rendering of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*). More exactly, and as I shall show in more detail below, the increasingly entrepreneurial elements taken to be characteristic of nineteenth-century publishing could result in a wide variety of authorial experiences and practices.

For a writer like Charles Dickens, they were liberating and empowering. Dickens's ambition to control both the production and the dissemination of his work (he co-owned and edited some of the periodicals in which his fiction was published, occasionally even ghost-writing contributions), together with his alertness to the value of self-promotion (as evidenced, for example, in his remarkably successful public readings of his work), seem strikingly modern: Dickens, we might say, was one of the first self-fashioned literary celebrities, exploiting the institutions of publishing to make of his writing a highly profitable business. Yet for a figure like George Gissing, similar conditions appeared debilitating: at least some of the failures which characterized Gissing's early career – such as his stubborn faith in an outmoded form of publication (the three-decker novel) and his misplaced loyalty to the under-capitalized publishing house of Lawrence and Bullen – can be attributed to his inability to understand or take advantage of the commercial realities of late nineteenth-century publishing. Finally, even when writers responded to publishing conditions in similar ways, achieving broadly similar successes, their efforts could elicit quite different reactions, a circumstance which also seems to owe something to their particular circumstances, to perceptions about their 'temperaments'.

For example, both Mary Ward and Marie Corelli achieved best-sellers with early works which are rarely read today, *Robert Elsmere* (1888) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) respectively. Though at the time neither woman was poor, both needed the income from their writing to support increasingly costly life-styles. Both also showed evidence of a significant business acumen, not only in their negotiations with publishers, but in their ability to engage the interests of the general reading public. Yet where the

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well-educated and well-connected Ward (she was the niece of Matthew Arnold) was widely praised for the seriousness of her literary ambition, the illegitimate Corelli was derided as ‘incurably common-place’ appealing only to the ‘unthinking classes’.⁸ Corelli’s assiduous self-promotion – she invented for herself both a name and a literary heritage, claiming affiliation with Shakespeare – appeared to many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators as irredeemably vulgar; yet it is difficult to see how Ward’s exploitation of her family connections, both in finding a publisher and in eliciting favourable reviews for *Elsmere*, was any less a self-conscious or self-interested manipulation of a career. What is significant here is not so much whether *Robert Elsmere* is a better literary work than *The Sorrows of Satan* (however we might define ‘better’); but rather that each novel, as both women were well aware, owed some of its initial success less to the ‘genius’ of the author than to clever marketing.

The complexity of this interplay between individuals and institutions means that the historian must be cautious in making generalizations about the nature of nineteenth-century authorship. Those institutional forces – legal, economic, social or religious – referred to above are best understood as defining only the preconditions of writing, and not as determining the course of the career of any particular individual. Nonetheless as preconditions they are important, for they help us to understand in what ways the overall character of nineteenth-century authorship differed from that of previous centuries.

The author and the market

We can get a purchase on this difference by first considering some of the terms by which historians have typically described the nineteenth-century writing environment, that complex series of relationships between authors, publishers and readers. Of these, ‘capitalism’, and more especially ‘consumerism’, predominate, an indication that financial interests and an alertness to the economics of writing are being taken as the most important defining features of authorship in this period. (We might note here once more that, despite his celebration of the autonomy of intellectual life in works such as *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold’s correspondence is peppered with anxieties about his earnings and with the financial, as opposed to intellectual, value of his works.) Confusingly, however, one will also find the term ‘consumerism’ being applied to writing conditions in other centuries, so it is not unusual for historians to claim to find evidence of consumerist attitudes in, say, eighteenth-century practices of book-buying. To understand the specificity of publishing conditions at any one moment