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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Responding to the woman questions: rereading
noncanonical Victorian women novelists**Nicola Diane Thompson*

“She fought for Women: yet with women fought.” In this extract from his obituary of conservative Victorian novelist Eliza Lynn Linton (*Queen*, July 23, 1898), Walter Besant encapsulates profound contradictions in the lives and careers of Victorian women novelists regarding what the Victorians called the “woman question,” the ongoing Victorian discussion about woman’s nature and societal role. This same duality is now evident among contemporary feminist critics working to reclaim forgotten Victorian female novelists. In effect fighting both for and with Victorian women writers, they often instead actually hinder their entrance into the canon.

Women writers dominated the vast novel market in Victorian England. Yet from the hundreds of women novelists popularly and critically admired in the nineteenth century, twentieth-century critical conversations have revolved around the canonical few: George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and, more recently, Elizabeth Gaskell. Here I argue that Victorian women novelists’ inherently complicated and conflicted positions on the “woman question,” in conjunction with the evolving horizon of expectations toward what we now call feminism, are responsible for their noncanonical status. By recognizing unconscious prejudices, we may now give renewed and sustained critical attention to neglected novels by Victorian women.

We might expect Victorian novels by women to benefit from the interest of feminist critics in the Victorian period in general and Victorian women in particular. Studies by critics such as Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey have provided important perspectives on conventionally acclaimed women novelists such as the Brontës. Nevertheless, when one ponders the ambivalence and the relative scarcity of contemporary writing on noncanonical Victorian novels by women, it becomes evident that the ideological agendas of twentieth-century feminism are incompatible with the unstable, fluid, and fundamentally *different* posi-

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tions of Victorian women writers on the woman question. Very often, the heroines of these popular novels, created against the backdrop of shifting nineteenth-century debates about the woman question, stubbornly resist appropriation by twentieth-century critics as subversive role models for women. While feminist criticism makes it possible in principle to recover forgotten women novelists, its ideological basis has limitations: what, for example, do you say about a conservative woman novelist like Charlotte Yonge once you've discovered her?

In the classic work on Victorian woman writers, *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter argues that women's literary history has been deprived of the enormously diverse range of Victorian women novelists because of the traditional insistence upon the greatness of the elite few.¹ Before Showalter's reassessment, noncanonical Victorian women writers were largely ignored. More surprisingly, however, feminist critics have since continued to overlook or examine cursorily the work of most Victorian women novelists. In the last few years, a small number of books have emerged that begin to address noncanonical Victorian women writers in more depth. However, none provides an overview of the spectrum from conservative to radical women novelists, and no studies focus on how the novelists' positions on feminism have in turn influenced critical attention. While no work yet exists that focuses on both conservative and radical Victorian women novelists, critics have recently begun to write a few studies or biographies of individual women writers; occasionally, criticism directs attention to women writers as a group.² Most of the (still relatively few) studies that exist look at New Woman or sensation novels, those genres most apparently compatible with feminist readings, thus revealing how our own "woman questions" shape current interpretation and evaluation. And New Woman and sensation novelists, whilst they have received the most critical attention, are still inadequately represented in literary studies.

Given the prominence of discourse and discord on the woman question in Victorian England, Victorian women novelists were centrally concerned with the developing debates over women's proper role and status in society. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century there was passionate discussion and agitation on matters such as marriage and divorce laws, women's property and custody rights, and educational and employment opportunities for women, as well as a vocal debate on female suffrage, which gained intensity later in the century. To name simply a few of the dramatic events forming the

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material for lively debate on women's issues, one could cite the 1857 Divorce Act, the foundation of the Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women in 1859, the opening of Cheltenham Ladies College in 1856, of Girton College in 1869, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in 1869, and the apocalyptic fears and apparent ideological threat of the New Woman in the 1890s. It was impossible for educated people not to be aware of such developments and not to form opinions and take a stance. In fact, the complexity and multifariousness of the debates about women's nature, role, and literary status, in Victorian and twentieth-century discussions, make it more appropriate to pluralize the term "woman question," changing it to "woman questions."

Harriet Martineau, Geraldine Jewsbury, and Elizabeth Gaskell were among many who signed activist Barbara Bodichon's petition to support the Married Woman's Property Bill in 1854. Most women novelists, while stating their approval of single women's financial independence, or the usefulness of education for women, made sure that they differentiated themselves clearly from the excesses of the "shrieking Sisterhood," as Eliza Lynn Linton called them, or from the personal extremes and unconventionality of activists such as Mary Wollstonecraft. Harriet Martineau asserts in her *Autobiography*: "The Wollstonecraft order . . . do infinite mischief; and for my part, I do not wish to have anything to do with them."³ In her chapter for this book, "Gendered observations: Harriet Martineau and the woman question," Alexis Easley argues that Martineau attempted in fact to gain credibility and to distance herself from stereotypes of "public women" by developing narrative strategies intended to create an omniscient but politicized perspective.

Twentieth-century critics have tended to label women novelists as feminist or antifeminist, even classifying whole genres or subgenres according to their position on the woman question; a closer examination of Victorian novels demonstrates divisions and tensions concerning women that make such judgments simplistic. The lives and the fictions of Victorian women writers reveal endlessly contradictory perspectives on the woman question. All Victorian women novelists, whether we now label them radical or conservative, were fundamentally conflicted in their own beliefs about women's proper role, and I believe that the critical reception of their novels from Victorian times to the present has been filtered through the ambivalence of the novelists themselves as well as their critics on the complex of issues which constitute the woman question.

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Novels by Victorian women writers tend to be melting-pots of ideological conflict and exploration of attitudes toward women's nature and role, full of the dialogic interplay of voices that Bakhtin identifies as central to the novel genre. Traditionally and currently, we nevertheless tend to classify Victorian women's novels as either radical or conservative. For example, the domestic novel written by writers such as Charlotte Yonge is often disparaged as conservative and antifeminist, whereas the sensation novel by writers such as Mrs. Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon is celebrated as explosively radical; the New Woman novel of the end of the nineteenth century is reputedly the most apocalyptically feminist type of all. All of these definitions are essentially labeling the novelists according to our perception of their ideological position and the labels unfortunately serve to distort the complexity of the historically specific discourses and contexts in which the novels are embedded. To some extent such categories are inherited unquestioningly from our Victorian critical predecessors, but I hope in the following brief exploration of some representative novelists to show how misleading such distinctions can be.

Whatever the ostensible ideological position of novels by Victorian women, a dialogic interplay of competing voices can be glimpsed below the surface of the plot. Novelists such as Margaret Oliphant and Charlotte Yonge, for example, have been labeled as antifeminist, even though, beneath the overt conservatism of their plot-lines, their novels reveal distinctly empathetic identification with the limitations women faced in Victorian society. Monica Cohen's contribution to this volume, "Maximizing Oliphant: begging the question and the politics of satire," argues that a close examination of Oliphant's "rhetorical caginess" and stylized syntax in her treatment of the woman question reveals an ironic questioning of conservative authority.

Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) is another case in point: the novel shows sympathy for the protagonist, Rachel, desperate for an outlet for her energies and intelligence: "I have potted about cottages and taught at schools in the dilettante way of the young lady who thinks it her duty to be charitable; and I am told that it is my duty, and that I may be satisfied."⁴ Rachel's hubristic attempts at independent action end in near-apocalyptic tragedy, however, when a child dies under her care. The novel ends with Rachel's reform as she becomes engaged to a military man who promises to make her "a thorough wife and mother"⁵ and to whom she confesses that she was never "a Clever Woman" after all; "'I never thought you one', he quietly returned."⁶

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While the plot does on one level clearly indicate disapproval of Rachel's ambitions, a substantial part of the book is devoted to exploring Rachel's aspirations in a sympathetic way, as is apparent from the first quotation above. And simply the novel's title itself raises subversive expectations on the part of the Victorian or contemporary reader about Rachel's distinctive intelligence, juxtaposing "clever" with "woman." (Yonge's perspectives on marriage and woman's work are explored further in Valerie Sanders' and June Sturrock's contributions to this book.)

Though apparently inimically opposed to the radical sensation novel genre of the 1860s and 1870s, Yonge's novel can be viewed, from one point of view, as analogous. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) also explore transgressive actions on the part of their heroines, albeit more dramatically than Yonge.⁷ Lady Audley is bigamous, pushes her first husband down a well, thinks about poisoning her second husband, and deserts her child, among other things. Lady Isabel Vane in *East Lynne* leaves her husband, and runs away with her lover, who then deserts her. After she is disfigured in a train accident, she returns as governess to nurse her own children unrecognized. While the nature of the transgression and punishment differs, the structure of Yonge's plot is similar to that of Braddon and Wood: in all three novels the heroine rebels from convention and in each case the behavior is dramatically condemned, though Yonge's novel ends finally with the heroine's marriage, which could be viewed as punishment or reward. Both Braddon and Wood thoroughly punish their heroines for their subversively willful actions and conventional order is restored at the end of all three stories, with stern admonitions by Wood to readers never to leave their husbands regardless of the provocation.⁸ Problematics of divorce and marriage play complex roles in society and in literature throughout the Victorian period; Anne Humpherys' interesting exploration of the early Victorian divorce novel in this volume considers *East Lynne* among other novels, examining the effect of the introduction of divorce into the conventional marriage plot.

Just as Yonge's novel can be seen as parallel in some ways to the sensation novel's flirtation with women's independence and power, with similar moralizing conclusions, so can we view other apparently conservative productions like Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) as more confused and transgressive than meets the eye.⁹ Linton is famous for her ardently antifeminist essays collected in *The Girl of the*

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Period (1869) and certainly *The Rebel* purports to be a satirical expose of the evils of the woman's movement, epitomized by the sinister figure of Bell Blount, Lady President of the West Hill Society for Women's Rights. While Linton is consistently negative toward Mrs. Blount, whom she compares to "the Prince of Darkness clad as an Angel of Light . . . the cloven hoof well covered by the shining garments,"¹⁰ she is more sympathetic to Perdita's independent thinking and desire to get a job at the Post Office. Perdita, the heroine, is "murderously direct in thought and daring to give an opinion on matters whereon young women of properly constituted minds have no opinions at all – she crowned her iniquities by taking an interest in politics and having views of her own."¹¹ And in fact *The Rebel of the Family* reveals a definite sympathy with Perdita's failures to fit in to the conventional marriage-obsessed mindset of her family, a sympathy which subverts the ostensibly conservative didactic message of the story. Linton herself in her youth was the rebel of her own family: her father threatened to disinherit her when she told him of her plan to leave home and go to work in London as an authoress. Her later conservatism seems to have been fueled in passion and intensity by her own earlier radical tendencies.¹²

My final example of the limitations of clear-cut classification according to ideology involves a New Woman novel, the late-century genre usually considered most radically feminist. Sarah Grand's *Ideala* (1889) tells the story of Ideala, an unusual woman who eventually leaves her abusive and adulterous husband and falls passionately in love with Lorrimer, a man she considers her soul-mate: "You have been the one thing wanting to me my whole life long. I believe that no soul is perfect alone, and that each of us must have a partner-soul somewhere, kept apart from us – by false marriages, perhaps, or distance, or death, but still to be ours."¹³ Despite idealizing the depth of Ideala's and Lorrimer's mutual devotion, the novel takes a conventional turn: the male narrator, a close friend of Ideala's, convinces her not to live adulterously with Lorrimer as this would be socially wrong: "You would have society turned topsy-turvey, and all for what? Why, simply to make a wrong thing right for yourself! . . . There must be moral laws, and it is inevitable that they should press hardly on individuals occasionally, but it is clearly the duty of individuals to sacrifice themselves for the good of the community at large."¹⁴ Ideala finally devotes herself to the moral improvement of fallen or "useless" women, agreeing with her friend Claudia that "an unwomanly woman is such a dreadful creature."¹⁵ Thus, even a reputedly radical genre provides a typically conformist

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resolution. And of course the genre itself contains a spectrum of perspectives on the woman question, as Ann Ardis and Lyn Pykett discuss in their contributions to this volume on New Woman novelists.

Consistently, Victorian and modern critics tend to label works by women novelists according to their apparent position on the woman question, creating such categories as domestic novels, sensation novels, and New Woman novels. If we look briefly at Victorian reaction to these three genres, we can see how Victorian critics focus on the treatment of the woman question, praising writers like Yonge for their didactic and uplifting portrayal of women, while attacking sensation and New Woman novels for the dangerously debauching effects they might have on female readers.¹⁶

Despite the existence of a critical double standard, discussed elsewhere,¹⁷ Victorian readers read, reviewed, enjoyed, and gave critical acclamation to works we now consider noncanonical alongside those we now consider great. George Eliot was frequently reviewed with and compared to Dinah Mulock Craik and Mrs. Oliphant, though she herself objected to such connections. G. H. Lewes reviewed and related Geraldine Jewsbury, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë, while Jewsbury reviewed Craik with Eliot. A diary survives of a Victorian reader who admitted to liking *Jane Eyre* but preferring Gaskell and Martineau, with her favorite author being Oliphant. Sally Mitchell describes the popularity of Ouida's *Moths* in 1880 with "serious young women" who "spoke of it in the same breath with *Villette* or *Ruth*."¹⁸ A French critic apparently preferred Rhoda Broughton's novels to Ouida's and George Eliot's, believing her heroines "much truer to nature than Ouida's and more impassioned than Eliot's."¹⁹ Later in the century, Mrs. Humphry Ward was taken extremely seriously, described as "the greatest living English writer" by Tolstoy and seen as Eliot's natural successor, while popular spiritualist writer Marie Corelli was told by the Prince of Wales that "you are the only woman writer of genius we have."²⁰ Beth Sutton-Ramspeck's "Shot out of the canon: Mary Ward and the claims of conflicting feminism" and Annette Federico's "An 'old-fashioned' young woman: Marie Corelli and the New Woman" (both in this book) explore the multilayered issues involved in the Victorian popularity and subsequent invisibility of Mrs. Humphry Ward and Marie Corelli.

As Tricia Lootens states in her recent work on Victorian women poets and the canonization process, "attention to canonization, widely conceived, can open up new understandings of specific conflicts over literary and cultural value."²¹ In order to account for the status of

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Victorian women writers, we need to examine trends and elements in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism and culture. Some of the principal factors at work during the Victorian period which contributed to the eventual exclusion of women writers from the canon include the increasing distinctions being made between popular and serious novels, the view that works by women are subjective and biased, especially in terms of their position on the woman question, and the increasing use of George Eliot as a touchstone against which other women writers would be compared and found wanting.

By the 1860s, with the phenomenal popularity of the novel, and its dominance by female writers and readers, a division began to emerge between popular and “serious” literature. The more popular a novel, the more appealing to a mass audience, the more suspect the quality of the work.²² Popular works by women dealing with issues concerning women and often addressed to women were thus dangerously in line for the critical guillotine. W. L. Courtney’s *The Feminine Note in Fiction*, written in 1904, epitomizes many of the clichés about Victorian women and their writing – that they are simply imitative, concerned with detail, and overly involved in their works emotionally – coming to the conclusion that “the novel as a work of art” is disappearing because of its dominance by women. He singles out for particular attack what he sees as the tendency of women novelists to be overly didactic and subjective, a criticism still used in recent discussions of Victorian women writers. Here, as elsewhere, we see the strangely self-perpetuating nature of Victorian critical positions on women novelists:

A great creator like Shakespeare or Dickens has a wide impartiality towards all his puppets . . . If a novelist take sides, he or she is lost. Then we get a pamphlet, a didactic exercise, a problem novel – never a work of art. The female author is at once self-conscious and didactic. For reasons which are tolerably clear . . . the beginning of a woman’s work is generally the writing of a personal diary.²³

Over time, we can see that exclusion from the canon was in part the result of the popularity of novels by women in conjunction with their complicated explorations of the woman question.

The novels’ popularity with female readers also became problematic. Virginia Woolf’s assessment that books about “the feelings of women in a drawing-room”²⁴ are automatically assumed to be more trivial than books about war is certainly true of the Victorian age and still true today. Terry Lovell argues that throughout history, literary works addressed to women are more likely to be omitted from the canon.²⁵ Works

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by women addressed to children, especially those addressed to girls, are thus particularly susceptible to critical neglect. In her chapter for this book, “Phantasies of patriarchy in Victorian children’s literature,” Alison Chapman argues that its association with women and children continues to lower the status of children’s literature; by assuming the disjunction of children’s fiction from political issues such as the woman question, contemporary criticism is guilty of reinscribing Victorian gender ideology.

As already noted, another perhaps less visible factor working in the creation of literary reputations in Victorian England was the exaltation of Eliot as the great woman writer and the tendency to use her as a touchstone of artistic excellence, expecting other women novelists to measure up to Eliot’s particular strengths and denigrating them when they did not.²⁶ We see in George Eliot’s own essays (such as “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”) as well as in her letters how determined she was to distance herself from other women writers and from the mainstream audience for novels. She reacted bitterly to the comparison of her work with Dinah Mulock Craik’s, arguing that hers were a very different kind of novel, not simply read by “novel readers pure and simple.”²⁷ Her novels, often written with an androgynous or even masculine narratorial persona (alongside her masculine pseudonym, of course) who takes authoritatively erudite stances on matters of public concerns, are directed at educated readers, male as well as female.²⁸ In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1869, Eliot makes it clear that her novels are intended primarily for a select few rather than for a popular multitude.²⁹

Margaret Oliphant’s *Autobiography* throws an interesting light on how women novelists internalized the constant comparisons with Eliot, usually to their own detriment:

George Eliot’s life has . . . stirred me up to an involuntary confession. How I have been handicapped in life! Should I have done better if I had been kept like her in a mental greenhouse and taken care of? . . . I am in very little danger of having my life written, and that is all the better in this point of view – for what could be said of me? George Eliot and George Sand make me half inclined to cry over my poor little unappreciated self. . . . These two bigger women did things which I have never felt the least temptation to do – but how very much more enjoyment they seem to have got out of their life, how much more praise and homage and honour! . . . I do feel very small, very obscure, beside them, rather a failure all round. . . . I acknowledge frankly that there is nothing in me – a fat, little, commonplace woman, rather tongue-tied – to impress anyone; and yet there is a sort of whimsical injury in it which makes me sorry for myself.³⁰

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So despite the real merit and strengths of her novels, Oliphant devalues herself by measuring herself against Eliot as a standard and type of excellence, influenced in part by the assessment of so many critics. Much of her self-abasement specifically relates to her sex – she is a commonplace woman, while Eliot is an extraordinary woman, almost an honorary man by implication. Tricia Lootens argues that nineteenth-century female canonization typically dichotomized women writers, either “casting them as honorary Great Men” or “lauding them as vessels of the unitary, eternal, and ultimately silent sanctity of womanhood.”³¹ Charlotte Yonge is an example of the latter category, as I argue elsewhere.³² And Margaret Oliphant ends her autobiography, in which she plaintively describes her decision to focus on supporting her family rather than literary excellence, with an abrupt breaking-off from her narrative and a lapse into silence.

Most pre-feminist studies strongly emphasize that Victorian women novelists do not reach the high canonical standard, as if to justify their own critical project. W.L. Courtney’s assessment of woman writers in 1904 set the tone for much of the twentieth century. Amy Cruse, writing of Ouida in 1935, declares that “neither she nor any other of the sensational novelists had the qualities that make the works of the Great Novelists immortal.”³³ Vineta Colby takes pains not to make any aesthetic claims for works by Victorian women novelists. Like her Victorian predecessors and later critics, Colby compares Victorian women novelists unfavorably to Eliot:

The trouble with these “singular anomalies” is that they wrote with their brains. George Eliot described a truly cultured woman as one “whose mind had absorbed her knowledge instead of being absorbed by it.” Unhappily, the woman novelists who imitated her were absorbed by their knowledge. They displayed it at times gracefully and attractively but more often heavily and clumsily. They used the novels as a medium of instruction; often they exploited it. They were women of intellect, tact, and talent, but they were not artists. That they should have been so widely acclaimed, as most of them were, so honored and influential, is a comment on the power and prestige of the novel itself.³⁴

Similarly, Colby makes the following revelatory comment about Mrs. Humphry Ward: “No creative thinker or artist in her own right, she was endowed only with high intelligence, fervent moral conviction, and a warm feminine sympathy for the sufferings . . . of others. The Victorians often confused such talents as these for genius.”³⁵ Thus even critics like Courtney and Colby, who devote entire books to Victorian women