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Review of Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900

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Joanne Shattock (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). £40.00; US \$59.95 (hardback). ISBN 0 521 65055 0. £14.95; US \$21.95 (paperback): ISBN 0 521 65957 4.

This book of thirteen essays by leading scholars in the field is an impressive and valuable contribution to the study of nineteenth-century women writers. Canonical figures such as Austen, the Brontë sisters, Gaskell and Eliot are examined in the wider context of the social, cultural and economic conditions which influenced the production and dissemination of their work and reputations. In addition the very nature and construction of the canon of nineteenth-century woman writers is interrogated.

These essays reveal the tremendous extent and variety of women's contribution to the expanding range of discourses that helped to form the culture of the nineteenth century. Fiction, poetry and drama are strongly represented but space is also made for biography and other forms of life-writing, religious fiction, journalistic polemic, scientific and political essays, and writing for children. The studies are contextualised within a broader examination of women as consumers as well as producers of print, and revelations concerning the process of canon formation that accompanied the mid-century celebration and reassessment of their extraordinary rise to literary prominence.

Joanne Shattock's focus on Wollstonecraft, Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Eliot reveals the seminal role played by contemporary biographies in establishing a sense of literary community among women although the emphasis was placed on notions of 'womanhood' rather than literary talent. Joanne Wilkes contributes to this theme in her discussion of the impact of the sexual politics of the canonizers on the literary reputations of their subjects. Margaret Beetham reveals how industrialization and imperialism transformed the market in print by targeting the new generation of women readers and writers. She identifies the 'cultural anxiety' stimulated by the question of women's intellectual and physical responses to the 'pleasure and power to create new ways of being in the world' that literature afforded them.

Lyn Pykett's essay reveals how 'masculinist' publishing houses and gendered critical discourse shaped women's representations of gender, sexuality and motherhood in fiction, poetry, magazine articles, conduct books, pamphlets, and life-writing. Her readings of work by Brontë, Nightingale, Eliot, Caird, Cholmondeley, Gaskell and Braddon demonstrate how women writers reacted and responded to the 'often deeply contradictory stories that their culture told about themselves'. Valerie Sanders examines the influence of 'the male clubland of editors, publishers and reviewers' on women's literary careers and suggests that by the middle of the century women handled their careers with a greater degree of professionalism. Mounting a strong challenge to the triple-decker novel women also overturned what H. G. Wells described as 'the prevailing trivial estimate of fiction'.

Focusing on the work of Martineau, Marcet and Power Cobbe, Barbara Caine examines women's extensive involvement in journalism as a medium for the dissemination of opinion on a wide variety of social and political subjects including women's emancipation, anti-vivisection, political economy and religion, Utopian Socialism, Liberalism, Irish Home Rule and

the Boer War. She demonstrates how Martineau's prodigious interest in economics and considerable skill in analysing census data initiated a whole new debate on women's work by revealing the inaccuracy of the popular middle-class belief that the majority of women did not earn a living.

Elizabeth Langland provides a fascinating analysis of how the domestic fiction of Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell, Oliphant and Eliot – coupled with the contributions made by Isabella Beeton and Queen Victoria – helped to shape the very discourse of domesticity that both enabled and disabled their own literary efforts. Her essay is distinguished by its analysis of Cranford's 'elegant economy' which empowers 'old maids' as 'society's semioticians against the grain of traditional ideology that positions them on the margins of productive economy'. Virginia Blain's essay highlights the influence of Wordsworth's revolution in poetic language on a broadening band of nineteenth-century women poets who embraced its links with oral culture as well as its demotic style. A comparison between Caroline Bowles and Caroline Clive, Emily Brontë, Felicia Hemans, Christina Rossetti, Eliza Hamilton illustrates this. Blain suggests that Victorian women's poetry covered a wide variety of subjects from poetic vocation ('Michael Field') to slavery, imperialism and women's rights (More, Roberts, Opie and Barbauld) and marital rape and Highland clearance (Pfeiffer). An interest in the 'psychology of couples' displaced the more Romantic preoccupation with the glorification of love and, she concludes, evidence of its interaction with male poets and the assumptions underlying male-authored poetry suggests that women's poetry should not be seen as part of an isolated female tradition.

Katherine Newey's essay investigates the cult of female celebrity in the theatre among well-known actresses and successful actor-managers such as Madame Vestris. She isolates Braddon and Wood as 'counter canonical voices' against representational realism and makes a claim for the liberatory role of the theatre in its provision of a space in which to represent female desire and its offer of 'cultural citizenship where political was denied'. Elizabeth Jay makes a strong pitch for the empowering potential of religious writing for middle-class women who nevertheless persisted in urging their working class sisters to embrace the protestant work ethic and woman's 'especial capacity for self-sacrifice and longsuffering'. She accounts for the popularity of Eliot's domestic fiction by interpreting the genre as 'a performative instance of female religious witness...within the home'. Although she dismisses religious verse as tedious in its sentimentality and limited postures she suggests that the genres of religious biography and moral tales allowed woman to cross between the domestic and public spheres. Whilst questioning the *mauvaise foi* of Eliot and Mary Ward Jay highlights the 'gender-liberating power' of the protestant spirituality espoused by the Brontë sisters. She also counsels against the temptation to regard the nineteenth century as a Christian hegemony, mentioning Eliot's interest in the impact of being raised a Jew, Dissenter or Catholic on a woman's sense of religious duty, and the Jewish writers Grace Aguilar and Amy Levy.

Linda Petersen traces the development in the genre of autobiography from the 'transgressive self-writing' of the *chroniques scandaleuses* to the redemptive authorship of the spiritual autobiography or missionary memoir. Judith Johnston and Hilary Fraser demonstrate how fiction gave women the opportunity 'to deploy the discourses of those areas they were excluded from

– science, history, philosophy and politics’ by domesticating them in the form of ‘conversations’ or talks in the ‘female mentorial tradition’. They conclude that the growing diversity of women’s output was an important factor in their struggle to professionalize their status.

The collection concludes with Lynne Vallone’s witty and informative essay on ‘Women writing for children’. This highly didactic genre she claims, contributed to a bourgeois invention of womanhood ‘in the stylish new mode of enlightened domesticity’. Vallone highlights the hybridity of children’s literature and examines the construction of the child both as reader and as an influential protagonist advocating social change.

This book adds new dimensions to prevailing models of nineteenth-century women’s writing and opens up intriguing areas of further study such as the religious and ideological dissidence of Margaret Oliphant and the active roles played by unmarried women. Meticulously researched and lively it will be of interest to undergraduate students as well as to more established scholars of the range, variety and status of nineteenth-century women’s writing.

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