Review of The Cambridge Companion to English Literature

Joanne Shattock

This anthology, edited by Joanne Shattock, with an introduction and contribution by her, contains a rich variety of essays by scholars from British, American and Canadian universities. It begins its survey of Victorian culture in the seven years before Queen Victoria came to the throne, because that allows for discussions on the influence of Romanticism, and ends with 1914, because, in the two decades or so before the outbreak of the Great War, it is argued, Victorianism overlapped Modernism, at least in some parts of the English speaking world. Along the way, the Companion considers the enormous range of texts – novels, essays, poetry, newspapers, magazines, journals, monthlies, weeklies, lives, biographies, autobiographies, various types of criticism, religious writing, accounts of scientific investigations, 'street literature', and more. It explores how these, as well as visual texts, such as cartoons, both sprang from and informed the attitudes of English metropolitan culture, thanks to changes in technology, economic concerns, social thinking and parliamentary reform. And it investigates the subtle interplay of that literature not just with English provincial culture, but also with the literature of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the United States, Europe, and the colonies of the British Empire.

It is not possible to review each of the fourteen essays that comprise the Companion. But in order to give a sense of the volume's many points of interest, the first essay, 'Authors and authorship', by Josephine Guy, is as good to choose as any, since it is also full of absorbing and often fascinating detail. Guy considers the various, often unexpected, sometimes quirky, forces that gave direction to Victorian publishing. For instance, changes in type setting and printing resulted in cheaper editions of books but also lower profits, especially for publishers of poetry, essays and criticism, because such books necessarily had low print runs – and because successful, widely-read poets and critics, capable of generating healthy profits, resisted association with popular presses for fear of damaging their reputations. That particular market force, as it were, helped determine the sorts of books publishers were sometimes forced to identify themselves with – fine books, cheap books, risqué books, and so on. Guy also deals with pseudonyms that writers adopted. A typical explanation for Mary Ann Evans choosing 'George Eliot', says Guy, is that the name forced critics to read and properly evaluate her early work and not simply dismiss it as the tedious product of yet another woman writer. Think of Eliot's own essay, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (Westminster Review, October 1856). However, Guy adds, the pseudonym was also useful in hiding from inquisitive eyes Eliot's private life with George Henry Lewes: gossip-mongers might have damaged sales. Such concerns extended to male writers, too. If Eliot wanted to find refuge in anonymity, Oscar Wilde needed to: at the end of the nineteenth century, he could only publish The Ballad of Reading Gaol in the United States when his name was replaced 'by the gnomic “C.3.3.”', Wilde's prison number' (p. 21). Guy refers to Eliot again when illustrating how new, cheaper typesetting may well have influenced the production of one particular piece of work. She reminds us that Eliot's publisher, John Blackwood, very shrewdly, gave Eliot a printed version of the early parts of The Spanish Gypsy: he did that so she could see how it would look, once she completed the project in which she had lost heart. It is a moot point, says Guy, whether or not The Spanish Gypsy would have been finished without Blackwood's visual prompting, but
it is likely that changing technology played a part in Eliot’s motivation.

Not surprisingly, Eliot features in a number of discussions throughout the *Companion* – besides ‘Authors and authorship’, see ‘Life writing’ by Alison Booth, ‘The culture of criticism’ by Joanne Shattock, ‘Writing in the past’ by Hilary Fraser, ‘Science and its popularization’ by Gowan Dawson, ‘Body and mind’ by Jenny Bourne Taylor, ‘Visual culture’ by John Plunkett, ‘Empire and nationalism’ by Patrick Brantlinger, and ‘European exchanges’ by Alison Chapman. However, there is a great deal more in the *Companion* than things George Eliot. Essays are organized under three headings, ‘Modes of writing and their context’, ‘Intersections and incursions’, and ‘The centre and the periphery’, and each essay delves deep and wide into its chosen topic. Sally Ledger’s ‘Radical writing’ serves to illustrate that depth and width. It considers how satire and melodrama inform the anti-Poor Law movement of the 1830s-1840s, how a subtly revised form of melodrama features in the literature of the Chartist movement in the 1840s-1850s, and how melodramatic radicalism gives way to ‘utopian socialist literature’ in the late nineteenth century, although not always, especially not in the literature of a fair number of women writers.

In sum, the *Companion* deals with familiar and unfamiliar writers, artists and texts, offering general readers new and exciting ways to see the literature of the eighty-four years between 1830 and 1914, and presenting specialists with fine contributions to recent, developing trends and interests in nineteenth-century studies. It is an impressive addition to the highly regarded *Cambridge Companion* series, a welcome contribution to Victorian scholarship, and always a wholly accessible and interesting read.

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