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Achieving fame and canonicity

The literary canon was (and indeed is) not static but rather a series of uneven formations that retell the literary past using a variety of sources. Literary excellence was established, for example, by publications that asserted, directly or indirectly, the significance and worth of the author: biographies, memoirs, and correspondence; elegies and obituaries; anthologies and collected editions of literary works. Literary criticism also assessed excellence, whether in periodical reviews or books of literary criticism. Other cultural indicators of esteem included prizes, honors, memorials, and monuments. Determining exactly which women authors were considered canonical by the Victorians is difficult, but the process by which authors were canonized uncovers important information about what the Victorians prized about both literature and gender.

The Victorians deployed the term “canonical” to denote an “admitted” and “accepted” standard of literary value (*O.E.D.* 4). These values were not just those of aesthetics; rather, literary value accrued through other factors, such as appropriate politics, genre status, gender decorum, class affiliation, geographical identification, and national affiliation and patriotism. Increasingly, as the century progressed, canonical status for women was contingent on representations of personality, as the cult of celebrity was fueled through the explosion of print media and an insatiable appetite for access to the lives of famous writers. Victorian women certainly became acclaimed authors during their lifetimes, but often this acclaim was contingent on the writer’s popular reception rather than her own significant interventions in literary culture. Professionalism and professional success, as with popularity in general, did not necessarily translate into lasting canonical status; indeed, canonization (as the term suggests) was ultimately a posthumous achievement. Thus for women writers, as for men, achieving literary status was often contingent on factors outside their control, including the posthumous assessment of biographers and critics mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, women writing as critics, reviewers, and biographers were

invested in shaping a female literary tradition, and their efforts helped establish the canonicity of the prominent women writers who achieved status in the last fifty years of the century: Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61), George Eliot (1819–80), and Christina Rossetti (1830–94).

The Victorian marketplace and canon formation

What it meant to achieve acclaim was closely wrapped up in the production, circulation, and reception of literature, a business more hospitable to men than to women, based as it was in the public masculine sphere. Certainly, women's authorship increased with the expansion of the book trade, and many women successfully negotiated this masculine sphere in terms of literary professionalism, as Joanne Shattock's chapter (ch. 2) on "Becoming Professional" reveals. Yet achieving status in literary culture involved an accrual of value from external sources – through successful book publication, acclaim in literary reviews and criticism, and representation in high-profile anthologies and biographies – and, while women writers could often maximize their success in these modes in productive ways during their lifetimes, they could not control all the important markers of value.

For example, one of the distinctive markers of poetic status, the poet laureateship, was awarded on Wordsworth's death in 1850 to Alfred Tennyson, and then after Tennyson's death in 1892 to Alfred Austin (not considered a canonical poet even in his own day). Women poets were never serious contenders for this prestigious position, although Alice Meynell was nominated by Coventry Patmore in a *Saturday Review* column and Christina Rossetti was mooted as a possible successor to Tennyson. Jan Marsh, one of Rossetti's recent biographers, terms her "the lost laureate."¹ It was only in 2009 that Carol Ann Duffy was appointed the first woman poet laureate, a fact that illustrates the long history of the exclusion of women from the literary canon, or at least this particular canon of official public acclaim.

The Victorian literary establishment, and the very business of publishing, privileged male writers. The most influential literary periodicals were published and edited by men; the chief publishing houses were owned by men (Alexander Macmillan, William Blackwood, John Murray, the Chambers brothers, and others); and many of the publishers' readers of literature were male. Of course, there were exceptions. As Beth Palmer shows in ch. 4, women edited periodicals that helped shape literary taste, although often for a popular market (e.g., Mary Elizabeth Braddon's editorship of the *Belgravia* from 1867 to 1876). Some women, such as Charlotte Brontë unofficially for George Smith and Geraldine Jewsbury officially for Richard

Bentley, served as readers for publishing houses. And Emily Faithfull's female-run and female-operated Victoria Press was founded in 1860. Thus, women had opportunities to participate in public literary culture as writers, reviewers, and editors, but their activity in the business of literature did not necessarily translate into the cultural capital of literary canonicity.

Because overt engagement in business of any kind was associated with the masculine sphere of public life, women writers' superlative literary achievement often occluded acknowledgment of their professional activities. As Robert Southey famously advised Charlotte Brontë, "literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment & a recreation."² Thus for women, despite their advances in forging models of literary professionalism, achieving canonical status was represented in this period as a feature of their success as *women* writers – that is, as writers whose gender largely conformed to a middle-class ideology of femininity and domesticity. To put it differently, the status of women as writers in the period was unremarkable, so long as propriety was not flouted.

Linked to separate spheres ideology, Victorians assumed that certain kinds of writing were natural for women, such as affective, lyrical poetry and novel writing, because both genres were seen to draw on women's apparently natural capacity for empathy. Victorians also acknowledged that writing itself was an activity open to all educated people; indeed, many popular periodicals (provincial newspapers and magazines such as *Atalanta*) relied on this belief to encourage and publish contributions from readers. But the notion of the "literary" – that is, an authoritative, acclaimed, and elevated standard of literature – was perceived as an entirely separate kind of writing, distinct from the amateur, ephemeral, or journalistic. Many of the genres in which women wrote did not meet this elevated standard.

There were some awkward moments when this evaluative distinction between writing and literature broke down – awkward in that they exposed the fragility of the distinction, despite energetic and voluminous attempts to assert the boundary of the literary. One case came in 1859 when the Burns Centenary prize of fifty guineas for the best poem on Robert Burns was awarded at a public celebration in the Crystal Palace in front of an audience of more than 14,000 people. A total of 621 poems had been submitted, within the stated length of 100 to 200 lines. The prize announcement was preceded by a concert, an unveiling of a new commemorative bust of Burns, and the display of relics associated with the poet. Implicitly, the winner of the best poem on Burns was associated with one of the most canonical poets of the previous generation, a venerated literary figure. The prize winner was announced, in front of an eager and rapt audience, as Isa Craig (1831–1903).

After her poem on Burns was recited by an organizer of the event, as reported in *The Scotsman* for January 27, 1859, the audience called for the poet to reveal herself in person to receive acclaim (and her prize money), but no one appeared.³ In fact, according to *The Scotsman*, not only did Craig not appear that day, neither did she collect her check for fifty guineas, “from feelings either of timidity or poetic delicacy and pride.” One implication of this report is that Craig did not attend out of delicacy at popular associations of the canonical Burns with his reputation for sexual and other indiscretions, but looming even larger in this account is the indelicacy of a female poet accepting honors at such a public civic event.

At mid-century, when few women won any public literary honors or acclaim, the Burns Centenary Prize was a telling moment – and contrary to the myth of the acclaimed woman poet in Germaine de Staël’s 1807 novel *Corinne, Or Italy*. De Staël’s fictional poet-heroine Corinne receives public praise when crowned as laureate in the Forum at Rome. But in England, the separate spheres ideology that kept women in the domestic realm became more dominant in the early Victorian period, making Corinne’s own uncomfortable association of public acclaim and private unhappiness a more overt reason for disavowing public success. Women might win high-profile and lucrative literary prizes, but receiving acclaim in person and in public was indecorous. Barrett Browning’s novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856, date stamped 1857) registers this tension when the eponymous writer-heroine crowns herself privately in a garden with laurel leaves in a revision of Corinne’s Forum scene but is embarrassed when her male cousin catches her in the act.⁴ Later, when Aurora’s book of poems becomes a critical and commercial success in England, she receives the news of its acclaim in a letter sent to her in Italy (7: 551–71), but she denies that women care “for the crowns and goals / And compliments on writing our good books” (7: 742–43). In both cases, Barrett Browning underlines the discomfort that women writers feel with critical and popular success.

Isa Craig, winner of the Burns prize, was in fact one of the most prolific Victorian poets, publishing along with her 1856 collection *Poems by Isa* a huge quantity of periodical poetry, as well as novels and journalism. She was well connected in literary circles, prominent in the Langham Place Group, and an activist for women’s rights. Yet despite her official prize and her many publications in various print media and genres (including her editorship of *The Argosy* from its launch in 1865 and the prominent 1863 collection for the Victoria Press, *Poems: An Offering to Lancashire*), Craig was obviously not considered part of the Victorian literary canon. (Nor is she part of the teaching and research canon that we enjoy today.) Isa Craig, prolific, prizewinning, and successful as a professional writer, did not fit into

the Parthenon of Victorian literary greats, partly because she was too much associated with mere professionalism and partly because her Scottish working-class origins made her hard to classify as a high-culture woman writer.

Beyond separate spheres ideology, another major feature of Victorian literary culture that affected women writers' status was the medium of publication. The print media in which most Victorians read poetry – the newspaper and periodical press – featured a large proportion of women authors writing in their own names, pseudonymously, or anonymously. For example, in one of the longest-running periodicals that published poetry, the middle-class magazine *Good Words*, around a third of poems published between 1860 and 1899 are known to be written by women (and this does not include the pseudonymous and unsigned poems for which the gender of the author is currently unknown).⁵ Serial publication of fiction also dominated the periodical market as a prelude to book publication, often in three volumes for the circulating libraries. Yet publication in ephemeral print media was associated with lower-status, popular literature, whereas publication in book form was considered more distinguished. Nevertheless, serial and book print were closely related because many authors published in both forms and because the success of a book relied on the reviews and advertisements published in mass print media. Ironically, the process by which the canon was formed in the Victorian era involved, in large part, the popular periodical press, and yet the kinds of literary publications that were seen to be high status were invariably books.

Certain kinds of books, though, were valued over others because genre was also part of the hierarchy of status and achievement. Books of single-authored original poetry and novels published in book form were prized more highly than genres such as biography, memoir, children's fiction, travelogues, or popular forms of publication such as anthologies, even though these genres and other media helped shore up ideals of literary excellence. As print culture and the reading public continued to expand, poetry and fiction were increasingly categorized according to their status as literary objects. Poetry by women was frequently assessed as "poetess" poetry, a category that implied hyper-feminine lyric effusions and domestic affections, and a term often used interchangeably with "woman poet," as Susan Brown has argued.⁶ Sensation fiction by prominent novelists such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood was dismissed as popular and journalistic, its emergence attributed to the "violent stimulation of serial publication."⁷

Although women poets experimented in a wide variety of forms, as did their male counterparts, their *oeuvre* was often evaluated not in terms of their

innovations but for their achievements in “feminine” genres. At the end of the Victorian period, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was hailed, often along with Christina Rossetti, as the period’s preeminent British woman poet. The poetry for which Barrett Browning was praised, however, in criticism, biographies, and reviews was her lyrical and semi-autobiographical *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, rather than her epic *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning’s political poetry (*Casa Guidi Windows* [1851] and *Poems before Congress* [1860]), which dominated the final decade of her career and garnered criticism for breaking the model of the poetess because of its outspoken support of a political cause, the Italian Risorgimento, was largely ignored in assessments of her status after her death – despite the fact that her revisions of what a woman poet could achieve were hugely influential on the poets who followed her. Moreover, a publication that helped cement her canonical status – Frederic G. Kenyon’s two-volume 1897 edition of her *Letters* – excises many references to politics that dominated her letters after her move to Italy (a fact obvious when the edition is compared with the typescript in the British Library); Kenyon explains away any remaining political opinions she opines as a “hysterical” aberration caused by her illness.⁸ In his introduction, Kenyon suggests that the correspondence illustrates her “character” rather than her “genius” (1: ix), and then goes on to assess her poetic worth as part of her biographical persona: “her best poetry is that which is most full of her personal emotions” (1: x). He includes her Italian poems as well as *Aurora Leigh* on these grounds, and of course also *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Ironically, the canonical status of this sonnet cycle was created, in large part, by a forged edition that Henry Buxton Forman and Thomas Wise published after Barrett Browning’s and Robert Browning’s deaths, widely referred to as the “Reading” edition because of its purported private printing in Reading, England.

Women writers most commonly received acclaim posthumously, often as a worth enshrined in the language of homage and tribute and a value that, as with the case of Kenyon’s assessment of Barrett Browning, was closely tied to gender conventions. Another example is afforded by the first major biography of Charlotte Brontë, written by her friend Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–65). Gaskell, for the first time, fleshed out the context of the Brontës’ family life and its multiple tragedies, drawing heavily on Charlotte’s unpublished correspondence. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published in 1857 by Brontë’s own publisher George Smith, suppressed many nonconventional details of Brontë’s life that would have affronted middle-class Victorian morality (especially given the contemporary reviews of her work that accused her of coarseness); it aimed, as Gaskell explained to her publisher, to inspire readers to “honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer.” As Linda

Peterson argues, Gaskell's biography aimed to reevaluate Brontë's genius within middle-class gender norms, in particular arguing that Brontë was not "unwomanly" (a charge flung at her from the critics) but rather that she possessed a genius compatible with her deep sense of feminine virtue, domesticity, and duty.⁹ This representation of Brontë's literary value proved extremely attractive to contemporary readers.

Charlotte had herself deployed biography to secure her sisters' posthumous literary status in her "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell" that prefaced the 1850 edition of Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey*. Charlotte's biographical account was the first to confirm definitely the writers' gender as female, as well as to attempt to absolve both women from the charge of coarseness – first by representing Emily as a strange, wild romantic figure inspired by the landscape of the moors, and then by presenting Anne as a dutiful, innocent, and sensitive Christian woman. Biographical representation of these women writers' lives was critical in securing their literary accomplishments and posthumous status. This often involved the suppression or retelling of controversy to satisfy dominant gender norms. Thus, what many critics registered as the uncomfortable strangeness of *Wuthering Heights*, its refusal to fit neatly into generic conventions, was explained as a product of Emily's romantic yet naïve character: "stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone."¹⁰ By explaining Emily's novel in terms of its writer's personality and environment, Charlotte implies that her sister's writing was a reflection of her persona, a position reinforced with Charlotte's "Preface" to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*.

Biographies of George Eliot, another woman writer whom contemporaries praised for greatness, appeared shortly after her death, and these, too, made a bid to secure the writer's personal character and literary achievement. Mathilde Blind's account, in the *Eminent Women* series, appeared three years after Eliot's death in 1880, followed by the 1885 biography by John Cross, Eliot's husband, in *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*; the latter was especially influential in shaping her posthumous persona because of his intimate access to its subject and her papers. Making a bid for canonical status, posthumous biographies of women writers often molded the writer's persona and her works into the form acceptable to Victorian literary culture. This came at a cost of full disclosure. Cross, in his pitch to confirm Eliot's genius, was eager to suppress details of her unconventional life, such as her long affair with the married George Henry Lewes. Contemporary readers, however, noticed his omissions; William Gladstone, for example, termed the biography "reticence in 3 volumes."¹¹ Moreover, Cross's dry account of George Eliot's life may have

kept safe her acclaimed and highly moral place in Victorian fiction, but one consequence was to make her deeply unappealing for the next century until revisionist biographies uncovered her radicalism.

In the case of Christina Rossetti, such a conjunction of canonical literary worth with biographical representation established her as “Santa Christina,” a great woman poet who was, as Tricia Lootens argues, sanctified even while living because of her self-abnegating retreat from the public sphere and her sage religious writing. Rossetti was represented as performing her canonicity – and, indeed, given the term’s underlying religious connotations, she appeared to be sanctified even while publishing some of her most powerful later poetry (such as her 1893 *Verses*).¹² After Rossetti’s death, this representation of her literary greatness, an estimate contingent on her saintliness, was affirmed by the Irish poet Katherine Tynan’s hagiographical essay for *The Bookman* in January 1912, entitled “Santa Christina.”¹³ As Lorraine Janzen Kooistra points out, even the approach to producing books by Christina Rossetti changed after her death, when her portraits began to appear as frontispieces to signify her saintly beauty and to underscore the personal in her poetry.¹⁴

Rossetti’s canonical status was further affirmed by a flourishing of posthumous essays, editions, biographies, and other memorials. For example, Henry Mackenzie Bell, who had sent his book of poems to Rossetti in October 1893, wrote a memorial poem just after Rossetti’s death on December 29, 1894, “To Christina G. Rossetti (Greater as a Woman than even as a Poet),” and sent it to the *Literary World* for publication on January 4, 1895. Having smoothed the way and proved his hagiographical credentials, on February 8, 1895, Bell offered to write Christina’s biography, and her brother William Michael accepted swiftly. With William Michael’s help and approval, Bell’s *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (1898) effectively became the official biography. This was just one of the biographical accounts that flooded the market with praise of Rossetti’s piety and poetic achievements, but the speed with which Bell acted to memorialize her and his setting of womanly greatness above poetic genius represent a pattern intrinsic to the canonization of women writers. Literary status, conceived in this period as dependent on a writer’s genius but given only to women whose lives could be taken to demonstrate their exemplarity, was nonetheless produced and sustained by the book market.

How Victorian women writers shaped the canon

From the middle of the nineteenth century, women writers became more prominent in contributing to the discourse of canon formation. To begin

with, women wrote biographies and literary studies of other women writers, and publishers developed book series designed specifically to assess and promote literature by women. One example, the *Eminent Women* series, edited by John H. Ingram and published by W. H. Allen, matched a contemporary biographer with a deceased woman writer, and women frequently contributed to the series: Mathilde Blind wrote on George Eliot (1883), A. Mary F. Robinson on Emily Brontë (1889), Charlotte Yonge on Hannah More (1888), and Lucy Madox Brown Rossetti on Mary Shelley (1890). In her introduction to the Brontë volume, Robinson self-consciously refers to the process of deciding what books are worthy of attention. She begins her biographical study by declaring that contemporary popularity does not often predict literary greatness: “there are, perhaps, few tests of excellence so sure as the popular verdict on a work of art a hundred years after its accomplishment.”¹⁵ For more recent authors, however, battles must be fought and reputations staked: “these we reserve to them for whom the future is not yet secure, for whom a timely word may still be spoken, for whom we yet may feel that lancing out of enthusiasm only possible when the cast of fate is still unknown, and, as we fight, we fancy that the glory of our hero is in our hands.”¹⁶ Robinson pitches her book as a fight to secure the victory of recognition for her subject, whom she admits is not popular and has untypical writer’s qualities. Brontë’s claim to canonical status is made by virtue of her “different class,” her “imagination of the rarest power” that is “fearless” and “passionate,” “narrower, but more intense” than that of other writers.¹⁷ Even for Robinson, however, the logic of canonical inclusion is gendered: Brontë’s power as a writer depends on her exceptional difference, yet this artistic genius is nonetheless a product of her “high noble character” and her faithful record of her own experience. Indeed, Emily Brontë’s character and writing are so intermeshed that the claim to achieving literary status in this biography depends overtly on conveying accurately her persona: “to represent her as she was would be her noblest and most fitting monument.”¹⁸

Robinson’s biography partly depended on her access to previously unpublished material, including Ellen Nussey’s notes on Emily and Charlotte, as well as the Brontë family correspondence and literary manuscripts. Similarly, Blind’s biography of George Eliot and Lucy Rossetti’s on Mary Shelley in the same series drew overtly on unpublished material. Reaching the subjects through their papers was important at this time before letters and full editions were published. When Christina Rossetti was approached in April 1883 by Ingram to write a biography of Ann Radcliffe, Rossetti decided to decline after hunting fruitlessly for biographical material; she had already rejected a proposed volume on Elizabeth Barrett Browning (her preferred

subject) because Robert Browning refused to give permission to view family documents. (Ingram himself wrote the volume on Barrett Browning.) The *Eminent Women* series suggests, by its very title, that a claim to literary distinctiveness and status is connected to gender. But the series also associates the women who wrote biographies with their precursors, and suggests that they were writing themselves into the canon when they participated in the formation of literary knowledge and women's literary history. Robinson identified herself with Brontë's Romanticism, Blind with Eliot's Darwinism, and Rossetti with Mary Shelley's place in a male artistic circle.

Other literary criticism, biographies, and histories that placed women writers in a prominent literary position similarly identified and categorized the writers primarily through their gender. Eva Hope's *Queens of Literature of the Victorian Era* (1886) offers chapters on Mary Somerville, Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Felicia Hemans as varied examples of "queenly" writers, or paragons of their gender, in relationship with the queenly example of Victoria herself. While this rhetorical move might seem deeply conventional and even patronizing, Hope in fact deployed the queenly metaphor to argue for her women writers' power and influence. For example, she concludes the chapter on Martineau by stating that "no woman, either before or since, has done so much for the people of England . . . She made it possible for women to fill more exalted positions and do nobler work than before."¹⁹ Thus, rather than merely illustrating gender ideals, the women writers' lives and works magnify and amplify the sphere of the woman writer.

Some books of criticism further implied that the claim for canonicity redefined the cultural expectations of women's writing. At the end of her introduction to the anthology *Women Poets of the Victorian Era* (1890), Elizabeth Sharp declares: "who shall predict what women shall do in the future? Daily, yearly, prejudices are being broken down, fetters are falling off; women are being ushered into knowledge and to experiences of life through wider doors."²⁰ The attested aim of Sharp's anthology is to "further emphasise the value of women's work in poetry" and to prove "a steady development of intellectual power, certainly not unaccompanied by artistic faculty – a fact which gives further sanction to the belief that finer still work will be produced in future by women writers."²¹ Sharp dedicated the volume to the feminist writer and campaigner Mona Caird (1854–1932), "the most loyal and devoted advocate of the cause of woman" – a dedication that underlines the cultural work the volume does in promoting the excellence of a body of women's poetry defined by gender, and yet that aims to prove that the limitations of gender are being progressively dismantled.

Sharp's critical appraisal of women's poetry at the end of the century indicates the importance of anthologies in promoting a canon of Victorian women's writing, as well as the importance of women in their role as editors. Indeed, women had a long tradition of editing literature, beginning with the prolific editing of literary annuals by Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Mary Mitford, the Countess of Blessington, and others in the early Victorian period. Toward the end of the century, several anthologies defined the field as part of a wider attempt to articulate the achievement of poetry in the Victorian age – exemplified by Edmund Clarence Stedman's *Victorian Poets*, which had a generous selection of women poets, and Alfred H. Miles's *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, Charles Kingsley to James Thomson, which did not.²² Women novelists, too, produced anthologies that consolidated their achievements in fiction – as in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897), a collection of “appreciations” written by living novelists about the achievement of earlier women. The “Publishers' Note” underscores the aim of the collection to commemorate and canonize: “the eminence and permanence of the Brontës, George Eliot, and Mrs. Gaskell”; “the popularity of Mrs. Craik and Mrs. Henry Wood”; “Mrs. Crowe and Mrs. Clive [as] pioneers in domestic and ‘sensational’ fiction”; and so on.²³

In addition, women played an active role as literary reviewers in periodicals and newspapers, an activity that often evaluated criteria for establishing literature's value and worth. Important examples include the unsigned essays by George Eliot for the *Westminster Review* (most famously her 1856 “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”) and Geraldine Jewsbury's and later Augusta Webster's reviews for the *Athenaeum* (see Joanne Wilkes's chapter [ch. 16] on reviewing for other examples).²⁴ The practice of anonymity in the press meant that women could write with the same authority as male reviewers, although it also meant that the capacity of women as literary critics, able publicly to evaluate and shape value and taste, was hidden. After the 1860s, the practice of anonymity, which had privileged the personality of the periodical above the identity of the writer, became less common. Nonetheless, women writers continued to publish reviews and essays about female contributions to the canon, often claiming the authority of their own gender to adjudicate the achievements of women's writing. Amy Levy's influential signed essay on Christina Rossetti for *Woman's World* (1888) was part of the magazine's promotion and publication under editor Oscar Wilde of contemporary women's poetry to demonstrate its artistry and spirit of the age to a middle- and upper-class female audience. Levy, who published five of her own poems in *Woman's World*, judges the artistry of Rossetti's poetry as “not great” but “good” but again asserts Rossetti's uniqueness as a poet, overtly aligning her with the poetry of her brother Dante Rossetti.²⁵ Levy's

critique of Christina Rossetti seems to be heavily qualified, yet the fact that her precursor's poetry is given serious literary evaluation in comparison to other literary greats such as her brother (as well as the male poets Shelley and Coleridge) should be juxtaposed to the tendency (as the scholarship of Alexis Easley demonstrates) to celebrate women writers in the popular press as celebrities whose value rests on transient popularity.²⁶ As this chapter has noted, literary status and contemporary popularity are not the same. Wilde pointed to this irony when he termed the series "Men of Letters" (published by Macmillan) and "Great Writers" (published by Walter Scott) as "cheap criticisms" in "cheap books."²⁷

The prominent activity in the last decades of the century to produce a literary canon of the age included the evaluative capacity of women as editors and critics, but this must be understood in the context of a mass of critical studies and anthologies that attempted to define the status of the literary. Some of those attempts, such as Miles's *Poets and the Poetry of the Century* (1891–97), which he terms "an Encyclopædia of Modern Poetry" (1: iii), devote only one out of ten volumes specifically to women poets (volume 7, "Joanna Baillie to Mathilde Blind"). One of the most ambitious projects to define literary worth, the voluminous series "English Men of Letters" edited by John Morley, and published from 1879 to 1942, issued the vast majority of its volumes on male writers throughout English literary history. Morley included three women writers: George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Christina Rossetti. Although women did not fit easily into the category "Men of Letters," a distinctly masculine term for the literary canon, they did achieve canonicity and recognition in this series. Nonetheless, in most Victorian discourses of literary acclaim, women writers were evaluated primarily in terms of their gender.

Women writers were well aware of the gender ideology that defined their work within norms of femininity and middle-class decorum. Since the feminist recovery of a canon of women's writing in the last decades of the twentieth century, critics have identified strategies by which women writers were able to achieve success by negotiating gender conventions and sometimes subverting them. Victorian women writers themselves registered the logic of gender and writing, by which women were assumed to write as women; for example, Barrett Browning termed *Aurora Leigh* "an autobiography of a poetess—(not me)"; Augusta Webster's essay "Poets and Personal Pronouns" asserts "as a rule, I does not mean I."²⁸ Pseudonyms that implied a male writer (George Eliot) or that were ambiguously gendered (Acton, Currer, and Ellis Bell) aimed to protect women writers from judgments of literary worth based on gender. One of the ironies of the digital revolution, which has made out-of-copyright Victorian texts widely available on the

web, is a new reckoning of literary value that comes with this recovery, which now must take into account the fact that many women writers concealed or disguised their identities in ways that make a quantitative reassessment of Victorian women's writing extremely challenging, if not impossible. In the current critical reformations of Victorian literary histories, negotiating gender conventions continues to play a crucial if problematic role.

NOTES

1. Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1994), chap. 12.
2. Margaret Smith, ed., *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995–2004), vol. 1, p. 166.
3. *The Scotsman*, January 27, 1859, reprinted in http://gerald-massey.org.uk/massey/cmc_burns_centenary.htm.
4. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), book 2, lines 1–60.
5. These figures are taken from the *Database of Victorian Periodical Poetry*, ed. Alison Chapman, <http://web.uvic.ca/~vicpoet/database-of-victorian-periodical-poetry/>.
6. Susan Brown, “The Victorian Poetess,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 180–202.
7. The phrase is Margaret Oliphant's, qtd. in Joanne Shattock, ed., *Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 383.
8. F. G. Kenyon, ed., *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1897), vol. 2, p. 306.
9. Linda H. Peterson, “Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 59–61. For Gaskell's defense of Brontë, see Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 68.
10. Currer Bell [Charlotte Brontë], “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 35.
11. Cited in Nancy Henry, ed., *The Cambridge Introduction to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 107.
12. Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), chap. 5, pp. 158–82.
13. Katharine Tynan, “Santa Christina,” *The Bookman* 41 (January 1912), 185–90.
14. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti and Illustration: A Publishing History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p. 175.
15. A. Mary F. Robinson, *Emily Brontë* (London: W. H. Allen, 1889), p. 1.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 7.

19. Eva Hope, *Queens of Literature of the Victorian Era* (London: Walter Scott, 1886), p. 101.
20. Elizabeth Sharp, *Women Poets of the Victorian Era* (London: Walter Scott, 1890), pp. xxxii–xxxiii.
21. *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.
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