

Julia Kavanagh, English Women of Letters, and Public Opinion

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*I*rish reviewer and novelist Julia Kavanagh, perhaps best known for her two-part work of criticism and women's history, *French Women of Letters* and *English Women of Letters* (1862), began her literary career in London in the 1840s. At this time she was twenty-something, staying in various lodgings, and writing periodical pieces to support herself and her aging mother. In the nineteenth century, unlike today, Kavanagh was a known entity – a writer prominent enough to have an obituary in the *Athenaeum* (Fauset 6) and to be included in a volume of *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* that featured the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Ellen Wood, Dinah Mulock Craik, and Caroline Norton. Indeed, references to Kavanagh in Charlotte Brontë's 1848 correspondence demonstrate how interested the author of *Jane Eyre* was in the young Irish writer¹:

I was much interested in [the] account of Miss Kavanagh; the character you sketch belongs to a class I peculiarly esteem: one in which endurance combines with exertion, talent with goodness; where genius is found unmarred by extravagance, self-reliance unalloyed by self-complacency. It is a character which is, I believe, rarely found except where there has been toil to undergo, and adversity to struggle against it; it will only grow to perfection in a poor soil, and in the shade: if the soil be

too indigent, the shade too dank and thick, of course it dies where it sprung, but I trust this will not be the case with Miss Kavanagh; I trust she will struggle ere long into the sunshine..." (qtd Fauset 33)

As Brontë describes this fledgling woman writer who began in "poor soil" – perhaps a reference to Kavanagh's native Ireland – she might be a character in a novel. Moreover, as Eileen Fauset demonstrates in her recent biography of Kavanagh, to which I am indebted for this historical information, Brontë continued to follow the younger writer's career. Upon the publication of the novel *Nathalie* in 1851, for example, Brontë wrote to Kavanagh: "I have to thank you for a treat; the work merits success, and the favourable notices which have been given by the various literary journals may I trust be taken as evidences that it has secured it" (qtd Fauset 36). By the mid-1850s, Kavanagh was a name in the correspondence of additional women writers – including Brontë's own biographer Elizabeth Gaskell.

The interest that Brontë and Gaskell show in the young Kavanagh should not surprise us, perhaps, given the latter's keen eye for social analysis and noticeable focus on gender inequality. These preoccupations are present in Kavanagh's short fiction, in works such as "Louise Marchand; Or, the French Schoolmistress" appearing in *The People's Journal* in 1847, and in her longer novels, which Margaret Oliphant characterized as "all so many reflections of *Jane Eyre*" ("Modern Novelists" 559).² Such methodologies also manifest in Kavanagh's non-fiction prose. While many nineteenth-century literary critics began their analysis with "the ascription of particular characteristics to writing on the basis of its author's sex" (Wilkes, "Remaking the Canon" 35), Fauset points out that "Kavanagh is a biographer and a historian who draws attention to the cultural and social positioning of women and how this has affected their lives" (38). Alison Booth takes this point one step farther, labeling Kavanagh's "massive female prosopographies [...] antecedents of academic feminist criticism" (56-57). A preoccupation with gender inequality might be said even to have determined the subject matter of Kavanagh's work. Joanne Wilkes notes, for instance, that Kavanagh chose to focus on the novel in her literary histories because this genre was a relative newcomer to the literary

landscape that had not yet gained prestige (as Jane Austen so memorably demonstrates in her "defense" of novels in *Northanger Abbey*, which Kavanagh quotes at length in *English Women of Letters*³). Given its nascent status, novel writing presented more opportunities for women writers and women reviewers to play "a significant role in establishing and developing the genre" (*Women Reviewing Women* 73).

In this essay, I will trace a particular trope in Kavanagh's writing – the public examination or trial – and connect its use with a proto-feminist criticism. In *English Women of Letters*, I will argue, Kavanagh underscores the correspondences between publication of a novel and women standing trial in the courtroom of public opinion (a male-dominated public sphere in the nineteenth century), yet simultaneously works to re-envision that space as a venue for female judges such as herself.

Women Writers in the Courtroom of Public Opinion

As Deborah Epstein Nord and Hilary Schor have argued in their studies of Gaskell, the nineteenth-century woman writer who circulated her creations in print subjected herself to public opinion.⁴ Women writers straddled two worlds, the domestic and the professional, and thus opened themselves up to judgment in the courtroom of public opinion. Biographers were well aware of this, according to Wilkes. "In venturing into the public domain via their fiction or poetry," Wilkes argues, "women writers were going outside the realm of private domestic life to which many contemporaries thought they should confine themselves" ("Remaking the Canon" 37). Kavanagh's description of Fanny Burney's fear of public exposure mirrors this anxiety. When "Fanny learned that her book [*Evelina*] was out," Kavanagh writes, "Her trepidation was great; the work so jealously hidden from her best friends might now be in everyone's hands – it might be seen 'by every butcher, and baker, and cobbler, and tinker throughout the three kingdoms, for the small tribute of threepence!' as she herself writes in her diary" (1:87-88).

As this anecdote reinforces, the woman writer offered herself up to the public and to the corresponding "ordeal" of public examination merely

by publishing a book. Elaine Showalter, in her paradigm-shifting book, *A Literature of Their Own*, notes that nineteenth-century women writers had to “demonstrate” their abilities in ways that were significantly different from their male counterparts. Women writers did this, Showalter continues, on a practical level when they “met deadlines, edited magazines, and coped with the strenuous burdens of part-publication and serialization” (78). This was not enough, however, to pass muster in the courtroom of public opinion. In addition, their work was expected to conform to a double critical standard that divided literary qualities by gender. According to Showalter:

women writers were acknowledged to possess sentiment, refinement, tact, observation, domestic expertise, high moral tone, and knowledge of female character; and thought to lack originality, intellectual training, abstract intelligence, humor, self-control, and knowledge of male character. Male writers had most of the desirable qualities: power, breadth, distinctness, clarity, learning, abstract intelligence, shrewdness, experience, humor, knowledge of everyone’s character, and open mindedness. (90)

The double critical standard was replicated by the institutional structures of the literary marketplace, too. As Joanne Shattock has noted, women writers in the period “confronted an almost entirely masculine literary establishment, from editors and publishers’ readers through to publishers and reviewers” (“Introduction” 3). In this courtroom of public opinion, judges were men.⁵

In her work as a reviewer, Kavanagh underscores the conceptual alignment between public examination (the operation of a courtroom), and literary evaluation (the operation of reviewing). When writing of Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, in *English Women of Letters*, for example, Kavanagh includes a reference to the scathing reviews of Owenson in the public newspapers. Sympathizing with the woman writer on trial, Kavanagh writes:

The violence with which Lady Morgan was attacked was cruel as well as unjust. The most insulting coarseness was levelled against her. Her age, her personal appearance, her dress, her moral, religious, and political opinions, were commented upon in a tone which has fortunately passed away from literature. [...] She endured bravely what she had in some manner drawn on herself, and she returned with spirit and terrible effect the unmanly attacks of her countryman, John Wilson Croker. This war of words, though cruel to her whilst it lasted, has lost its interest now; [...] we can afford to judge for ourselves, without referring to bygone verdicts. Attack and revenge alike have lost their meaning. (2:296-97)

In this passage, Kavanagh weaves the language of the courtroom into the weft of her literary biography. By virtue of her writing, Kavanagh demonstrates, Lady Morgan is placed before all the world to see and comment upon, just as the female accused stands before the court at trial. Indeed, an evaluation of Owenson's literary work is said by Kavanagh to be a matter of "judging" and rendering "verdicts."

In adopting the language of the legal institution, Kavanagh essentially adopts an angle of vision first implemented by John Wilson Croker (mentioned previously). In his initial comments about Lady Morgan for the *Dublin Freeman's Journal*, Croker wrote:

As in the legal professions, the indictment is first read, and then discussed – agreeable to established forms, I accuse Miss OWENSON of having written bad novels, and worse poetry – volumes without number, and verses without end – nor does my accusation rest upon her want of literary excellence – I accuse her of attempting to vitiate mankind – of attempting to undermine morality by sophistry – and that under the insidious mask of virtue, sensibility and truth. Such are the charges, which I am daring enough to bring forward, unawed by a host of treacherous sentimentalists. (qtd Connelly 98)

It is notable here that Owenson's literary works subject her to a trial not only of her "literary excellence," but also of her "morality." It is the woman, as well as her literary work, which stand trial in the courtroom of public opinion.⁶

Kavanagh's pointed reference to the trial of Owenson by reviewers in the pages of journals such as the *Quarterly Review*, *Literary Gazette*, and *Athenaeum* (2:298) brings to mind other familiar trials of women of letters. Perhaps most famously, when the authenticity of poems written by Phillis Wheatley, an African-American slave, was challenged, she was subjected to "an oral examination conducted by eighteen white men of standing who then signed a document attesting to Wheatley's authorship" (Glazener, 146). As a woman, and especially a woman from a marginalized social position, Wheatley's intellectual capabilities were subject to verification in a public forum. A similar event accompanied the movement of women into the teaching professions, as Charlotte Brontë vividly depicts in *Villette*. To be certified to run a school, the female teacher was required to undergo the ordeal of public examination (Poole 269).

By the time Kavanagh wrote *English Women of Letters*, she had already explored the trope of public examination in her fiction. In the fictional sketch "Louise Marchand; Or, the French Schoolmistress" (1847), Kavanagh's working-class, Parisian heroine makes the move from starving seamstress to successful schoolmistress. Becoming a teacher is not a straightforward proposition in the story, however, for a teaching license is a professional credential, one that requires a public competency examination. As Louise learns from another teacher, "to have a school like this, it is not only necessary to *know* a great deal, but even to pass two public examinations" (167). Success cannot be self-determined in this legal environment, but must be sanctioned by external forces. Thus, we see Louise moving into a professional class, and also moving into a quasi-public sphere.

To emphasize the social critique at the heart of this story, more specifically, the intersection of gender and power within professional institutions, Kavanagh's description of the examination underscores the

discomfort Louise feels at being on display in the public realm, as an object of spectacle. True, there is some effort to soften the masculine dominance of this fictional courtroom, as "ladies alone have the right of being admitted" to the "apartment" where the examination occurs. Still, the public nature of the examination exceeds Louise's comfort level. Much like a courtroom, the examinee is on display:

The examiners, three gentlemen and two ladies, are seated at the head of the table near the fire; the *postulantes*, or candidates, have chairs opposite them, at the lower end. Behind and around them, benches are disposed for the accommodation of the spectators of this scene; which, though it might appear simple enough to an indifferent observer, is generally fraught with deep interest for future candidates, and the friends of the ladies on the point of being examined. (169)

During the Inquisition-like "ordeal" (169) – and that is the word Kavanagh uses – Louise is subjected to the public gaze as spectators read her poverty in "her thin cotton dress, faded shawl, and plain white cap" (169) and dismiss her as an "ambitious dressmaker" (169). Louise is simultaneously subject to the "feverish gaze" (169) of her adoring and vulnerable sister, which has an equally powerful force.

Like the public "reviews" of Lady Morgan, this examination scene highlights the ways in which the whole woman is under the judges' scrutiny. The emphasis on Louise's poverty also anticipates one stereotype that would develop around women writers by the time of George Eliot's well-known essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," written in 1856. According to Eliot, the general public "imagined that destitute women turned novelists, as they turned governesses, because they had no other 'lady-like' means of getting their bread" (302). For this reason, she continues,

vacillating syntax and improbable incident had a certain pathos for us, like the extremely supererogatory pincushions and ill-devised nightcaps that are offered for

sale by a blind man. We felt the commodity to be a nuisance, but we were glad to think that the money went to relieve the necessitous, and we pictured to ourselves lonely women struggling for a maintenance, or wives and daughters devoting themselves to the production of “copy” out of pure heroism, – perhaps to pay their husband’s debts, or to purchase luxuries for a sick father. (302)

While Eliot ultimately rejects this assumption about female authors, and asserts instead that the vision of women authors rising from the “working-classes” is a myth (302), the description overlaps not only with Kavanagh’s protagonist, Louise Marchand, but with the biographical details of Julia Kavanagh’s own life. As Fauset points out, Kavanagh did turn to writing to support herself and her invalid mother.⁷ Moreover, correspondence from the period shows that Kavanagh’s penury was in fact public knowledge (Fauset 37). Like Louise Marchand standing before the examiners with the symptoms of her poverty for all to see, Kavanagh became a kind of spectacle by virtue of assuming the status of struggling woman writer. When later becoming a reviewer of other female writers, Kavanagh shows a sensitivity to the trauma provoked by the courtroom of public opinion, as well as a desire to change the terms of the typical examination.

Approaching the Bench in the Constructed Courtroom of Literary Biography

Although Kavanagh shows a relatively powerless examinee in her fictional story of Louise Marchand, she shows a more empowered position for women in the constructed courtroom of her literary biography. This makes intuitive sense, for the women featured in Kavanagh’s prosopography hail from more privileged backgrounds. Although Kavanagh makes a point to highlight the inferior educational opportunities of these women, they are not women rising out of the working classes, as we see with the fictional Louise Marchand. As such, they are in a position to aspire for greater gender equality. When writing of Amelia Opie, for example,

Kavanagh shows a woman who happily ventures into the public sphere. Interpolated passages from Opie's autobiography capture her excitement and participation in the local assizes:

As years advanced, I began to wish to enter the assize-court, and as soon as I found that ladies were allowed to attend trials and causes, I was not satisfied till I had obtained leave to enjoy this indulgence. Accordingly some one kindly undertook to go with me, and I set off for court. It was to the *Nisi Prius* Court that I bent my way. [...] By some lucky chance I also soon found myself on the bench by the side of the judge. Although I could not divest myself of a degree of awful respect when I had reached such a vicinity, it was so advantageous a position for hearing and seeing that I was soon reconciled to it, especially as the good old man who sat then as judge seemed to regard my fixed attention to what was going forward with some complacency. (2:241)

As she recounts this event in her autobiography, which is in turn included by Kavanagh, this initial taste of the courtroom raises Opie "in [her] own estimation" and inspires her to return the following day. At this juncture, the perils of a woman in public become obvious. Opie anticipates and plans for a struggle with the courtroom crowd, but she is faced in addition with a gendered attack that is less anticipated. She writes, "While thus struggling with obstacles, a man, not quite in the grade of a gentleman, pushed me back rather rudely, and said, – 'There, miss, go home – you had better go away – what business have you here? – this is no place for you; be advised – there, go, I tell you!'" Rather than cower under the attack, however, Opie demands a place in the public forum. Writing of herself in third person, she recounts:

But Miss was obstinate, and stood her ground, turning, as she did so, towards the judge, who now perceived and recognized her, and instantly ordered one of the servants of the court to make way for that young lady. Accordingly

way was made, and at his desire I took my place again by the judge's side. It was not in nature, at least not in my weak nature, to resist casting a triumphant glance on my impertinent reprove, and I had the satisfaction of seeing that he looked rather foolish. (qtd 2:241-42)

Although Opie does not take on the role of judge in this particular vignette, she does challenge the gendered dynamics of power in the courtroom by insisting that she has a right to inhabit the public space. Moreover, Opie turns the tables when it comes to visibility in the courtroom. Instead of being an object of spectacle which even a man below the grade of gentleman feels entitled to control, Opie takes a place where she can gaze at others on trial, and in this way approaches the vantage point of the judge. This is not full autonomy, however, for her ability to share the bench depends upon the goodwill of the judge.

Like Opie, Kavanagh the reviewer creates a space for herself within the metaphorical courtroom of literary criticism. Also like Opie, she does not do this as a radical feminist, but instead by accepting the guidance of powerful male critics and using that agreement as a cloak of protection. Borrowing a tactic that Showalter highlights in her discussion of the double critical standard, Kavanagh, "while deferring to male knowledge and power, [...] subtly revise[s] and undermine[s] the world from which [she] is excluded" (84). Like Opie perched next to the judge, Kavanagh positions herself next to legendary critics such as Samuel Johnson and Sir Walter Scott by referring multiple times to the unchallenged authority of their voices.

When profiling the life of Fanny Burney, for instance, Kavanagh provides an anecdote in which Dr. Johnson shares his initial response to *Evelina* with an acquaintance, the diarist Mrs. Thrale, including protestations that "there were passages in it that would do honour to Richardson, and that Henry Fielding never drew such a character as Mr. Smith" (1:88). This was not the only aspect of Burney that Johnson approved of, either. According to Kavanagh, "He praised her dress, [...]" and this was a matter on which the universal man could be critical and nice

to the discomfiture of untidy ladies" (1:92). Johnson, the unquestioned male authority, is used in this instance to approve Burney as a person as well as a writer.

Kavanagh also inserts the words of "the great Doctor Johnson" prominently at the beginning of her analysis of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, in a move that is both deprecating and empowering. Recounting another conversation between Johnson and Mrs. Thrale, she writes: "He confessed to her that the progress made of late years in literature by women amazed him; and he added 'that he well remembered the time when a woman who could spell a common letter was regarded as all-accomplished, but now they vied with the men in everything'" (2:45). Taking Johnson's backhanded compliment as a starting point, Kavanagh describes the achievements of one professional woman of letters – Elizabeth Inchbald – within her historical milieu. Mrs. Inchbald "did not care to be" a woman vying with men, Kavanagh asserts. Instead, "She wrote plays and novels but she held her sex a sufficient excuse for any literary deficiencies. She enjoyed severe criticism, and did not object being subject to it. 'Perhaps I should if I were a man,' she added, 'but for a woman to expose the want of literary talent I conceive no reproach, provided she is not led to publish merely through self-conceit'" (2:45-46). Moreover, Kavanagh continues, the lack of "delicate refinement" that would be produced by a superior education adds to Inchbald's "power" by giving it "concentration and force." The genius of this female writer is her pathos, according to Kavanagh, which she describes as "still irresistible" (2:46). Although Kavanagh seems to be deferring to male power here, she simultaneously challenges the double critical standard by rejecting refinement, a female quality, in favor of power, a male trait.

Scott's criticism is interpolated many times within Kavanagh's book as well, especially in the sections dealing with Maria Edgeworth. Not only does Kavanagh include a quotation from the preface to the *Waverly* novels acknowledging the author's debt to Edgeworth's national novels, she also replicates the text of a letter from Scott's publisher, Ballantyne, praising Edgeworth's "wonderful power of vivifying all her persons, and making

them live as *beings* in your mind” (2:107). Again, Kavanagh subtly challenges the double critical standard by attributing to Edgeworth, via the male critic, complete knowledge and command of both male and female characters.

While the use of letters is typical for writers of biography, Kavanagh’s engagement with Scott extends beyond this source material and includes direct reference to his professional reviews of the novelists that Kavanagh is herself assessing. When providing a negative assessment of Owenson’s novel *O’Donnell*, for example, Kavanagh essentially defers to Scott’s prior critique: “In ‘O’Donnel’ it is not really the story that fails, as Sir Walter Scott said, it is the hero who unworthily fills it” (2:332). Kavanagh also quotes Scott’s opinion on the merits of Ann Radcliffe when introducing her own broader observation that the women writers she has profiled have often been pioneers in the development of the novel. According to Scott, as quoted by Kavanagh, “The praise may be claimed for [Radcliffe] of having been the first to introduce into her prose fictions a tone of fanciful description and impressive narrative, which had hitherto been exclusively applied to poetry [...] Mrs. Radcliffe has a title to be considered as the first poetess of romantic fiction” (2:122). Amplifying this observation, Kavanagh adds that Elizabeth Inchbald represents “one of the earliest instances of a modern innovation; the interest of a story no longer resting in its incidents, but in the strongly-drawn characters of the hero and heroine” (2:122). Edgeworth is acknowledged as the writer responsible for “opening [...] what has proved a very important branch of modern literature: the national novel” (2:122). Harkening back to her volume on *French Women of Letters*, Kavanagh further points out that “Mademoiselle de Scudery is the acknowledged foundress of the psychological novel,” while “Madame de La Fayette first taught how to express natural and delicate feelings in simple language” (2:122).

What is important to note here is the way that Kavanagh aligns herself with an acknowledged authority – Sir Walter Scott – when writing as a reviewer. To follow the metaphor of the courtroom, she designs a space in which she and Scott share the bench. Kavanagh does get the final word,

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however, for Scott's voice is only heard through her own. In this way, she assumes the position of final authority.

Change of Venue, Situated Knowledge, and Kavanagh's Proto-Feminist Criticism

In writing *English Women of Letters*, Kavanagh picks up the trope of the courtroom that originates in the metaphor of reviewer as judge. At the same time, Kavanagh significantly reorients the work of the reviewer so as to move away from the context of a simple, one-sided competency examination.⁸ Perhaps this can be attributed to the role of the literary biography at this period of time. According to Shattock, who references the earlier work of Ellen Moers, "these women, denied access to metropolitan literary society, universities and clubs, sought and created the sense of a literary community by reading one another's books... autobiographies and biographies, even more than fictional texts, purported to offer real-life heroines and role models" ("Victorian Women" 141-42). Kavanagh, acting as a judge in this new venue, emphasizes the strength of her women of letters – access to affect – and the biggest weakness – insufficient educational opportunity. In so doing, she moves away from the legalistic style of Croker and toward a proto-feminist criticism.

In an early chapter of *English Women of Letters* on "Miss [Sarah] Fielding," Kavanagh similarly interpolates the prior words of the eighteenth-century literary giant, Samuel Richardson, but this time as the launching pad for her reworking of a critical standard that makes sense for the women writers she chronicles. In comparing Sarah Fielding, author of *David Simple*, with her more famous brother Henry Fielding, author of *Tom Jones*, Richardson (according to Kavanagh) concludes: "What a knowledge of the human heart! [...] Well might a critical judge of writing say [...] that your late brother's knowledge of it was not (fine writer as he was) comparable to yours. He was but as the knowledge of the outside of a clockwork machine, while yours was that of all the finer springs and movements of the inside" (1:54). Kavanagh builds on this perceptive kernel of recognition – of a sister writer's particular ability to move from

the exterior to the interior within her fictional world – when she constructs a reviewing style that attends to an affective or moral layer. What Kavanagh praises in the work of the women she profiles is generally not style, but rather moral qualities, most especially “truth.” Like the influential nineteenth-century critic Anna Jameson, who adopted standards in which “a woman’s ‘qualities’ are more valuable than her ‘attainments,’ the ‘poetry’ of religion is superior to its dogma, and popular moral response to art is superior to ‘mere connoisseurship’ of the collector” (Booth 189), Kavanagh redefines the criteria of evaluation to privilege what Alison Booth has called “affective interiority” (189).⁹

Kavanagh embeds this framework into the structure of her literary biography, the first to use the professional term “women of letters” (Peterson 4), as well as her discussion of individual writers, by highlighting the woman writer’s connection with “knowledge of the human heart” and by giving ample space to both the life and the works of each woman. It is only after an overview of the individual lives of Aphra Behn, Miss Fielding, Madame D’Arblay, Mrs. Charlotte Smith, Mrs. Radcliffe, Mrs. Inchbald, Miss Edgeworth, Miss Austen, Mrs. Opie, and Lady Morgan that each woman’s works are considered. Michael Benton has demonstrated in his defense of literary biography as the “Cinderella story of literary studies” that biography always provides “twin timelines of a writer’s life” because it involves factual events and “the construct we have formed, however hazily, from the meanings, values, and emotional content of their works of art” (51). In *English Women of Letters*, Kavanagh emphasizes this doubleness, rather than masking it. In a sense, Kavanagh demonstrates a biographical basis for affect and then moves on to show how that expertise functions in literary works. Her critical authority thus takes root in a similar ethos as the feminist objectivity that Donna Haraway has characterized as “situated knowledges” in the context of scientific inquiry (581). For Haraway, “objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility” (582-83). Kavanagh, too, resists a universal or transcendent vantage point as

reviewer. In so doing, she accomplishes a change of venue away from the existing courtroom of public opinion and into the metaphorical courtroom of collective biography.

The details of Madame D'Arblay's life are sketched in one chapter, for example, and then separate chapters are devoted to *Evelina* and *Cecilia*. We learn initially that "Frances [...] was a shy, demure, grave little creature, whom the friends of the family called 'the old lady,' and who beneath that solemn exterior concealed, not merely an unusual amount of talent, but an exquisite sense of the ridiculous, and a rare and penetrating knowledge of character" (1:80). Kavanagh attributes her success as a novelist to these personal qualities in the subsequent chapters. *Cecilia* capitalizes on Burney's sense of humor, Kavanagh concludes, for it "is admirably adapted to display Miss Burney's faculty for bringing out forcibly the weaknesses and ridicules of men and women" (1: 146). *Evelina* benefits from Burney's seriousness, shyness, and quiet domestic life as "the old lady," for it presents "a woman's picture of English life and society in the year 1778 [...] which] is assuredly the offspring of domestic life" (1:143-44).

While the theoretical "death of the author" has rendered biographical criticism the target of skepticism today, Kavanagh's reliance on life experience plays a role in her feminist assessment, for it asks readers to consider the literary *oeuvre* of each writer in context. Rather than autonomous texts that float in a literary landscape that has been unmoored from the historical moment, Kavanagh's review style embraces Haraway's feminist plea for situated knowledge and binds texts to the material circumstances of their production. This is, in fact, one way to give her subjects full honor, for the texts that Kavanagh profiles (many of which have been largely forgotten today) tend to be significant as the "first" of a type, rather than its best example under universal standards.

The originally conceived but flawed stories of Ann Radcliffe and Sydney Owenson, for example, are noteworthy because they lay the groundwork for the technically perfected novels of Sir Walter Scott. Kavanagh writes of *The Sicilian Romance*:

In his search for Julia the Duke de Luovo meets with an adventure which Sir Walter Scott transferred to *Ivanhoe*. The duke, on knocking at a convent gate, is informed that the monks are engaged in prayer, and that he cannot be admitted. He enters by force, and finds a rosy superior and a company of friars feasting in the refectory. Who does not remember Friar Tuck and Richard Coeur de Lion in Sir Walter Scott's delightful romance? In Mrs. Radcliffe this is told without spirit, and is simply indecorous, and not amusing. (1:270)

Similarly, Kavanagh points to Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* as a necessary precursor to Scott's fantastically successful *Waverley*; according to Kavanagh, "though he cannot be charged with imitating it, we think that he found 'The Wild Irish Girl' a suggestive book" (2:321).

Importantly, Kavanagh both acknowledges the technical deficiencies of the works created by the women she reviews, but also emphasizes the social structures that produce those deficiencies. Here, Kavanagh approaches her subjects in a way that is strikingly similar to feminist sentiments from the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf.¹⁰ Writing of Radcliffe's short tale "The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne," Kavanagh notes:

The interest of the story rests on the most improbable incidents; but there is a feeling for nature, a power of imagery, and a command on attention, which betray the genius of one who, had her judgment and taste been early cultivated, would certainly have been a great writer. Had Ann Radcliffe been John Radcliffe, and received the vigorous and polished education which makes the man and the gentleman, we might have a few novels less, but we would assuredly have some fine pages more in that language where, spite their merit, her works will leave no individual trace. As one from whom much has been borrowed, and who left her stamp on many great minds, Mrs. Radcliffe will ever remain eminent. (1:255)

If the famous women of her biography fail to rise to the top of the literary hierarchy, Kavanagh asserts, it is because the educational playing field has not been level. Kavanagh writes of Miss Fielding that "her merit [...] may have been limited by imperfect education" (1:53). Of Frances Burney, Kavanagh notes, "the child grew into girlhood with few advantages of education. Self-educated she appears to have been" (1:80-81). Charlotte Smith "was put to school in Kensington, then a fashionable place for education, but she was considered too great a genius to study. She learned a few accomplishments – was eminent in dancing, could draw, acted with great effect in school theatricals, and left, at the ripe age of twelve" (1:188). Elizabeth Inchbald, the great beauty, "received the narrow education which her sex and station in life rendered adequate according to the feeling of the times" (2:1). As for Amelia Opie, liberty was granted, but her education was neglected; "her careless and incorrect style alone would prove that she did not receive solid or genuine instruction," Kavanagh concludes (2:243). Jane Austen stands slightly apart, having received at least a "solid education" (2:182).

According to Kavanagh the reviewer, even the best of women writers have been stuck in the position of pioneers who are eventually supplanted by their better-educated "brother" writers. This is attributable in large part to the educational norms. As Kavanagh writes in her chapter on Maria Edgeworth, whose education differed significantly from the other profiled writers:

Nature has set a difference, and a great one, between man and woman, but education has set one still greater. It is not the Greek and Latin of boys that gives them a future advantage over their more ignorant sisters. It is that they are trained to act a part in life, and a part worth acting, whilst girls are either taught to look on life, or, worse still, told how to practise its light and unworthy acts. (2:87)

At this moment, Kavanagh channels the central claims of Wollstonecraft's early feminism. In pointing out the social structures behind the production of literature by women, Kavanagh charts a course of her own as a reviewer.

After studying hundreds of prosopographies, Alison Booth has claimed that “collective biography of women could be said to be the generic form that dominates feminist discourse” (“Lessons of the Medusa” 257), and Julia Kavanagh deserves to be reconsidered as a critic who furthered feminist discourse in the nineteenth century by suggesting an alternative way to evaluate women of letters. In her collective biography, Kavanagh constructs an alternative to the male-dominated courtroom of public opinion in which women writers may be examined and judged against a set of standards that acknowledge situated knowledge and thus redefine what constitutes relevant evidence for reviewers. What Kavanagh praises in the work of her English women of letters is “truth,” rather than artifice, “affective interiority” rather than technical brilliance.

Reading Kavanagh’s collective biography from the perspective of the twenty-first century, one might be disappointed by the moral judgments and feminine norms that are tacitly accepted, if not championed, as criteria of evaluation. In a sense, Kavanagh is writing in the tradition of moral exemplars, and as Lori Ginzberg has noted of Booth’s findings, “celebrations of notable women can serve conservative goals” (212). Nevertheless, if Kavanagh continues to subject the intellect and character of female writers to the gaze of the public, she at least alters the nature of the qualifying exam to coincide with the lived experiences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women of letters. In this way, Kavanagh commandeers the courtroom of public opinion and demands the authority to set a new agenda.

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Notes

¹ Although Kavanagh does not include Brontë in her collective biography, she does mention *Jane Eyre* in her entry on Jane Austen, noting: “[In *Persuasion*] we see the first genuine picture of that silent torture of an unloved woman, condemned to suffer thus because she is a woman and must not speak, and which, many years later, was wakened into such passionate eloquence by the author of ‘Jane Eyre’” (2:231).

² While Oliphant is quick to dismiss Kavanagh's works as derivative, critic Shirley Foster goes so far as to suggest that Kavanagh's *Nathalie* was in fact a source for Brontë's later *Villette* (179).

³ Quoting directly from Volume 1, chapter 5 of *Northanger Abbey*, Kavanagh writes:

"Yes, novels; for I will not adopt this ungenerous and impolitic custom, so common with novel-writers, of degrading, by their contemptuous censure, the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding; joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally takes up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! If the heroine in one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it..." "It is only a novel" found no favour with Miss Austen; she justly and indignantly exclaimed, "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda, or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language." (2:185-186).

⁴ In particular, see the chapter "Elbowed in the Street" in Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets* and Schor's *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*.

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of gender and the literary marketplace, see Valerie Sanders, "Woman, Fiction, and the Marketplace."

⁶ The conflation of woman and her literary output is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's famous commentary on Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "A woman and her book are identical" (qtd Shattock, "Construction of the Woman Writer" 8).

⁷ Judith Johnson and Hilary Fraser similarly clarify, in response to Eliot's hyperbolic rhetoric, "of course many women writers did write out of necessity, even if that was not their only motivation" (233).

⁸ For a discussion of general shifts in reviewing style, including a movement from "superior" critic as judge to critic as "advocate and interpreter" (390), see Shattock, "Reviewing Generations."

⁹ Here we see Kavanagh participating in a trend that Barbara Onslow has followed: "In their critical capacity [... women] gradually rewrote the rules, gradually altered the consciousness of their age" (62).

¹⁰ See *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and "A Room of Her Own" on the limits of female education in Britain.

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