

Women and Nineteenth-Century Periodicals

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Kimberly Jo Stern, *The Social Life of Criticism: Gender, Critical Writing, and the Politics of Belonging* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 248 pp., \$60.00 cloth.

Marianne van Remoortel, *Women, Work and the Victorian Periodical: Living by the Press* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 190 pp., \$90.00 cloth.

Over the past twenty years, the study of British nineteenth-century women writers has expanded beyond examining – or recuperating – their *oeuvre* as novelists and poets, to consider their involvement in other aspects of the print culture of the period. In particular, there has been a focus on women’s writing for periodicals and magazines, as attested by the work of (among others) Margaret Beetham, Marysa Demoor, Fionnuala Dillane, Alexis Easley, Linda K. Hughes, Judith Johnston, Barbara Onslow, and the editors of the recent multi-volume *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant*. The two books under discussion here represent valuable additions to this scholarship: both of them extend the field, but in different, if equally rewarding, ways.

Kimberly Jo Stern’s concern is to complicate the history of British women’s critical practice over the period by showing that the “history of the female critic is not teleological, moving consistently and inexorably towards victory” (20), and that this is because women’s critical work depended on “negotiating a complex system of social protocols that cannot

easily be classified as prohibitive or empowering” (6). She begins by exploring the interventions by women in the eighteenth-century critical world, where the imagined community (in Benedict Anderson’s sense) was based on the all-male club, and goes on to suggest the continuities between this environment and those encountered by later generations of women. From these later generations, Stern investigates the critical careers of Anna Jameson, Marian Evans (later George Eliot), Eliza Lynn Linton, and Vernon Lee. She also contends that, for feminist critics today, the critical forebears her book covers adumbrate current questions about “essentialism, gender crossing, performativity, and the canon” (168). Stern develops this argument in a forthright Epilogue.

Stern gives some attention to the actual lives of the writers she covers, but her primary interest is in the rhetorical implications of the critical environment in which they found themselves and to which they contributed, especially as regards constructions of gender. On the other hand, Marianne van Remoortel calls for renewed interest in the specifics of the lives of women such as those dealt with in her own book. Despite the opportunities for periodical studies opened up by recent developments in digital technologies, she believes that sources yielding biographical data, such as census records, Post Office directories, and the archives of the Royal Literary Fund, have been under-used. I can attest to the value of census data, from my own effort to identify a female periodical writer called Annie Gladstone who was not connected to the famous family of that surname, and the deployment of such resources is shown to be particularly useful in treating several of the figures in van Remoortel’s study. Some are now obscure (only Christina Rossetti is a canonical writer); more importantly, biographical research reveals how women performed particular kinds of identities in their published work, identities that did not necessarily fit their personal circumstances. In addition, this investigation brings out the financial precariousness of the lives of those women lacking family support: in the absence of a reliable welfare system, they could face penury when illness or old age disabled them from working. Cut off from the rhetorical community of periodical publication,

such women might also be isolated from any stable real-life community – as the Royal Literary Fund archives testify.

The earliest of the nineteenth-century critics covered by Stern, Anna Jameson (1794-1860), worked in a critical environment where the élite often either maligned women or praised them extravagantly. In her analysis of Jameson's *Shakespeare's Heroines*, which was originally published as *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Political and Historical* in 1832, Stern demonstrates how Jameson used the long introductory dialogue between "Alda" and "Menon" to counter the conventional male habit of gallantry in dealing with women. What Alda wants is for Menon to take her views seriously, and both the posturing of gallantry, and the exclusion of women from organizations like clubs, academies, and literary and scientific societies, militate against such a move. Especially fascinating is Stern's discussion of the complex history of the earlier work Jameson eventually published in 1826 as the fictional autobiography *cum* compendium of art criticism, *Diary of an Ennuyée*. Its prior versions were "Sketches on the Road" (*London Magazine*), adopting the voices of young men writing to each other, and the anonymously issued *A Lady's Diary* (1825), where the female voice was, Stern observes, "solitary, demure, and introspective" (71). The final text, published under Jameson's own name, laments that the female critic is excluded from the domain of real critical exchange, but also suggests that this predicament may lead her to venture outside the limited preoccupations of some male critics who have more scholarship at their disposal. This paradoxical position in relation to male-dominated scholarship was to characterize Jameson's later career as an art critic.

In her final work, *Sisters of Charity* (1859), as Stern notes, Jameson highlighted the limited views of women found in men's critical writing, adducing as one instance the anonymous 1856 essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." Jameson did not know that this had been written by a woman, *Westminster Review* critic and co-editor Marian Evans. Fionnuala Dillane's *Before George Eliot: Marian Evans and the Periodical Press* (2013) has explored the different personae Evans deployed in writing for various

periodicals, and how she accommodated the narrative persona of her stories, later published as *Scenes of Clerical Life* by “George Eliot,” to their initial venue in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. Dillane’s study would have appeared too late for Stern to take advantage of it, but her chapter on Marian Evans/ George Eliot ends up complementing Dillane’s work. She argues that “Silly Novels,” in its condemnation of the patronizing praise given to inferior fiction by women, counters “a closed system of literary production incapable of admitting progressive views” (117). In criticism, Evans/ Eliot sought above all, heterogeneity – an ideal she struggled with in her early editorial role, but then especially celebrated in her neglected last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, to which Stern gives detailed attention. As regards women’s roles, Eliot uses Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to suggest the drawbacks, for social and intellectual progress, of excluding women from the critical arena; she also came to value the European salon, where women might participate in literary discussion and encourage the expression of diverse views via their special capacity for sympathy.

The question of whether the two sexes had distinctive mental and emotional characteristics continued to be at stake in the late nineteenth century. Stern contends that the later critic Violet Paget (1856-1935), publishing under the androgynous pseudonym “Vernon Lee,” eschewed a clear subject position, and thus sought to open up imaginative spaces in her critical work. She was concerned, too, that feminist activists might overlook the differences that existed among women. Like Evans/ Eliot, Lee welcomed heterogeneity; as a corollary, she aimed at creating a mind-expanding kind of social intercourse via the written word. Her ideas are explored in her series of dialogues in *Baldwin* (1885) and *Althea* (1894).

Not adopting a clear subject position or objective standard was of course consonant with more general critical trends in Lee’s lifetime. For the other figure whom Stern discusses in tandem with Lee, Eliza Lynn Linton, born in 1822, achieving a critical identity as a woman was more difficult. Although her long career as a critic made her a professional woman, and one aware of the performative nature of writing, Linton remained, as Stern shows, caught between this position and an attraction toward the domestic ideal that one of

her critical voices celebrated in the notorious "Girl of the Period" articles in the late 1860s. So her autobiographical novel *Sowing the Wind*, which appeared just before the articles, was actually very critical of the domestic angel stereotype, yet shows the protagonist Jane Osborne compelled to perform what Stern calls "a kind of attenuated masculinity" in her professional life (145). Taking solace from the theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, Linton could only hope that things would be clearer for later generations of women – that the activist women who so perturbed her represented just an unappealing but unavoidable stage in the developmental history of intellectual life.

A major reason why women such as Jameson, Evans, and Linton adopted a range of literary personae, and adapted these to a variety of publishing outlets, was of course financial necessity. This priority is much to the fore in the lives of the women discussed by Marianne van Remoortel. So Christina Rossetti, a poet with high literary ideals, sold some poems to *Macmillan's Magazine* for the sake of the immediate income. Thus she bought time for longer-term, higher status book projects, but in so doing lost any right to further remuneration from these poems. In this context, van Remoortel traces the fascinating later history of one of the *Macmillan's* poems, "A Birthday." It owed its fame – and arguably still does – partly to the fact that it was reprinted repeatedly in newspapers, periodicals, and anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic, and was often set to music. It was only the musical settings that needed the author's permission, but even then, Rossetti could not prevent unauthorized changes to the text. Yet the poem was also sufficiently recognizable for novelists to feature it in singing scenes in their romantic plots, without having to spell out the words.

Nonetheless, Christina Rossetti's profile as a pious spinster meant that she fitted one acceptable model of Victorian womanhood. The situation was different for the woman who represented herself as "Mrs. White" in both publications and official records. In a career that spanned seven decades as a writer, mostly in magazines, Caroline Anne White (1811-1912) posed as a married woman, and then as a widow: only at the age of ninety did she

vouchsafe to the census enumerator of 1901 that she was in fact single. In 1877, after more than thirty years writing for periodicals and magazines, she applied for succour to the Royal Literary Fund, listing seventeen outlets to which she had contributed, and then made a second application two years later. She evidently felt, as one-time editor of the *Ladies' Companion*, and contributor to periodicals directed at women (*Illustrated Family Journal*, *Family Friend*, *Keepsake*, *Home Circle*, *English Girls' Journal*), that posing as a married woman or widow created a more marketable image than acknowledging her single status would have done.

Also discussed in van Remoortel's book, another woman who manipulated various names over her publishing career was best-known as "Mrs. Warren." She edited the *Ladies' Treasury* for nearly forty years (1857-95), as well as producing manuals of household management, such as *How I Managed My House on Two Hundred Pounds a Year* (1864) and *How I Managed My Children from Infancy to Marriage* (1865). The chapter on this figure is written by van Remoortel in conjunction with Jolein de Ridder.

In reality "Mrs. Warren" (1810-1900), née Eliza Jervis, was married to Walter Warren for only about eight years, as he died in 1844. In 1851, she became Mrs. Francis, but lost her second husband five years later. For the rest of her long life she was a widow and needed to support herself. Moreover, despite the claim in one of her books to have managed her children from infancy to marriage, she had no surviving children from either union. What emerges from this chapter is that due to a combination of publisher pressure and the wish to deploy a range of names and personae to her best advantage, the literary identities of Eliza Warren Francis by no means map straightforwardly onto her roles in real life. Hence, when by the time of her second marriage she had established a profile as a writer of fancywork manuals and contributor of fancywork patterns to magazines, her publishers insisted that she appear as "Mrs. Warren" through the 1850s. But as editor of the *Ladies' Treasury*, Warren Francis deployed a range of signatures that concealed just how much of the copy she wrote, and gave the impression of a large range of authorial voices – gendered and genderless signatures, and signatures that draw on her three surnames

of "Jervis," "Warren" and "Francis." Unfortunately, however, the flip side of all this was that when afflicted by illness and old age, and having sold her book copyrights to survive, the real Mrs. Francis lacked the literary connections that would have supported her application to the Royal Literary Fund.

Writing needlework patterns was clearly a properly feminine form of literary endeavor, and women who engaged in it tended to endorse, implicitly and explicitly, conservative notions of women's proper sphere. Van Remoortel provides, in Matilda Marian Pullan, another instance of a woman who adopted this mode of earning a living, and who also engaged in various forms of performance. Because of her family's military background, Pullan blurred as much as possible her financial motives for writing on needlework, and indeed, for offering direct instruction in it. According to Victorian norms, her life was less conventional than that of Warren Francis. After being widowed in her twenties, Pullan gave birth to an illegitimate son in 1852, and then made an unhappy second marriage; she could only escape her husband by travelling to America with her son, and posing as a widow. In New York, however, she embarked again on a career of writing on and teaching fancywork. Although Pullan was to die of uterine cancer at the age of forty-two (in 1863), the American venture had freed her from British class expectations. She was thus able to embrace "a confident, ambitious discourse of entrepreneurship and female self-empowerment" (69-70), and hence a persona that was closer to how she was in real life than those she had been obliged to adopt in the British press.

Another chapter in van Remoortel's wide-ranging book deals with the careers as magazine illustrators of the sisters Florence and Adelaide Claxton. The focus here is less on their private lives than on the opportunities afforded by the "dialogic" format of magazine illustration in the late 1850s and 1860s. This was a period when women artists were campaigning for membership in the Royal Academy and had also formed their own Society of Female Artists. Magazine illustration offered the potential to explore "the everyday private and public spaces of respectable

society,” and the Claxtons developed a penchant for satire, including “self-satire” that related to their position as women employed in an art-world dominated by men (94). Van Remoortel fills in the topical contexts that allow us to identify the Claxtons’ illustrations as satirical, whether of abuses by clergy, upper-class contempt for the poor, social inequality, nationalistic prejudice, or consumer culture itself.

The Claxtons’ careers demonstrate some of the opportunities available to women in the art world, even in the face of exclusions and prejudices. On the other hand, close attention to another arena where openings for women expanded – the printing press itself – shows that the gains here were more apparent than real. Concluding her project, van Remoortel turns to women taken on as compositors at Emily Faithfull’s Victoria Press. What her research discloses is that not only was Faithfull a negligent employer, but the women employees’ lives were not obviously improved long-term by their years of employment in the firm. As Vernon Lee believed, there was no magical female solidarity that overcame all barriers between women.

These two monographs complement each other. Stern’s is the more integrated, in that her analysis of the women critics she deals with forms a narrative, although not a straightforward trajectory of progress; rather, it points to recurrent issues in women’s critical practice that are still with us today. Her subjects, too, are all figures familiar to scholars of nineteenth-century women’s writing. Van Remoortel’s subjects are less obviously linked, except in that they are all women engaging with the Victorian periodical press. On the other hand, apart from Christina Rossetti, they have none of them received much attention in previous scholarship, so the coverage they receive here is very welcome.

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