



Women's Writing and Victorian Print Culture

[*The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*](#). ed. by Linda H. Peterson. Cambridge: University Press, 2015. 294 pp.

Reviewed by [Zsuzsa Török](#), Institute for Literary Studies, Research Centre for Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

<1>In chapter fifteen *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing* establishes through the voice of Margaret Beetham that 'the periodical press was the sea in which all Victorian writers, men and women, big fish and literary minnows, lived and worked' (221). Indeed, this claim has been confirmed by recent findings of periodical studies as they reinforce the idea that the growth of periodical literature had a determinant impact on the literary history of the nineteenth century. Whether they became canonical figures of literary histories or remained in the confines of contemporary popularity, Victorian writers, men and women, all shaped their literary careers through the medium of the printed press.

<2>This impressive collection of an introduction and seventeen essays examines careers and literary achievements of Victorian women writers with a primary focus on the print media of literature and the determining role of specific social contexts in the professionalization of women's writing. Its chief accomplishment is an expansive definition of authorship which broadens the canon and genres of nineteenth century women's writing.

<3>As stated in the introduction by Linda H. Peterson the authors in this volume seek to explore women's writing outside the boundaries of a feminist approach that has largely been influenced by the Victorian view of a distinctive women's literary tradition. Consequently, the collection concentrates on new approaches to women authors that have emerged with the rise of periodical studies, book history, postcolonial studies, celebrity culture studies and scholarship on authorship, readership, and publishing. Hence, the authors in this collection all investigate women and their writings which are configured in various familial, social, political and religious networks. However, the dilemma of writing women's literary history as a distinctive body of work or as an influential narrative of female-male interactions remains open in the introduction and throughout the volume. The collection still primarily tells the story of Victorian *women* writers despite the already formulated reservations of literary history about some aspects of 'gender-based interpretations of the creative imagination.'⁽¹⁾ Indeed, the idea of a distinctive feminine literary tradition established in the nineteenth century still impregnates our approaches to women's writing and can hardly be overcome due to the very nature of its subject.

<4>The book is prefaced by a historical chronology that features important events and major achievements in the careers of women writers from 1819 to 1901, the year of Queen Victoria's death. Following the introduction that situates the methodological concerns of Victorian women's writing and modern literary criticism, the seventeen chapters are divided into two sections. The first part containing five articles traces the stages of Victorian women writers' careers; the second part with its twelve chapters highlights their achievements in the most significant Victorian literary genres. Aimed primarily at an undergraduate audience but a highly informative reading for scholars as well, the volume concludes with a useful and fairly comprehensive reading list.

<5>Part I explores different phases of Victorian women writers' careers from making a debut to becoming a professional writer, working with publishers, assuming the role of editor and achieving fame and canonicity. Although the essays focus on different stages of women writers' careers, they all illustrate significant common agents that have consistently influenced the development of Victorian women's writing. For instance, social networks and the medium of print publication, especially periodical publications, were of paramount importance in the process of becoming a woman writer in the Victorian era. Similarly, supportive family members, social and professional networks, metropolitan contacts, helpful intermediaries all implied support and encouragement during women's attempt to establish themselves as writers. As a matter of fact, Victorian women authors were surrounded by male mentors throughout their careers, and the authorization of a patriarchal authority played a vital part in their becoming professional writers. On the other hand, as Alexis Easley points out, the convention of anonymous or pseudonymous publication adopted by most periodicals during the early mid-Victorian era 'enabled many women to begin their writing careers without having to assume "feminine" identities' (17). However, this practice declined in the 1860s when the movement towards signed publication initiated new possibilities of self-promotion. Again, the periodical press 'provided opportunities for women to engage in strategic self-marketing' (22-23). Moreover, periodical publication enabled the emergence of the role of editor among women. Editing a magazine (and writing) – observes Beth Palmer – 'could be carried out in domestic spaces or alongside familial duties,' (59) a circumstance that may explain why writing was one of the first professions to be performed by women. Thus, literature as an acknowledged profession for women emerged by the mid-1860s, but it remained a precarious one. As Alison Chapman stresses, a major concern of literary history should therefore be to make a clear distinction between the literary status and contemporary popularity of Victorian women writers (84).

<6>In Part II of the *Companion* the essays shift focus from the social historical contexts of writing to women writers' achievements in various Victorian genres. Women writers of the nineteenth century

contributed to a wide range of literary genres from poetry and novel writing to life and travel-writing, periodical contribution and reviewing, colonial and imperial writing, children's writing and even in genres invisible so far, such as playwriting and history writing. Most of these genres developed in the context of Victorian periodical publication. As Linda K. Hughes notices, skilled poets 'could earn steady incomes from individual poems in periodicals when sales of poetry volumes were less certain' (89). Furthermore, periodical writing's capacity for metamorphosis enabled the regular reissuing of periodical texts – poems, short stories, novels, etc. – in book form. Indeed, the constant 'recycling of texts,' (223) was a most significant feature of Victorian literature for both men and women.

<7>Even invisible genres may become apparent provided that the researcher knows how to look for them. Such was the case with women playwrights when thoroughly investigated by Katherine Newey through the organization of the theatre profession. As the structures and working practices of theatre companies combined domestic and professional relationships, women who were part of these networks could become successful playwrights within the commercial theatre (150). Moreover, challenges to disciplinary parameters have enabled scholars to recuperate the accomplishments of women writers in the realm of intellectual history, too. Few women wrote national history in the conventional sense, Harriet Martineau being one exception of the nineteenth century remarks Deborah A. Logan, but many of them composed alternative histories, including biographies, travel memoirs, studies of arts and crafts. With their complementary histories of famous women of the past female writers also contributed to the formation of historical knowledge and women's history.

<8>In general, the *Companion* addresses a wide range of texts and women authors using lively examples to illustrate points in the argument. However, two major aspects related to women's writing in the nineteenth century remain unexplored throughout the volume: women's contribution to literary translations and an extant scribal culture of literature in the nineteenth century. While Victorian England was busily colonizing the world, women writers assumed a significant role in a different type of colonization within the nation's own borders, translating foreign literature.⁽²⁾ Women writers participated in cultural mediations not only as readers and as contributors to foreign periodicals, but as translators as well. The role they played in mediating intercultural relationships is of paramount importance in understanding a more complex range of functions writing played in their lives and the translations' influence on native literary traditions. Furthermore, a short analyses of a still extant body of manuscripts of the nineteenth century could also contribute to a more thorough understanding of the functions of writing, suggested by the *Companion's* title as well. For women not only wrote for print publication during the nineteenth century. Extensive letter-writing and diary-writing for private, familial use also characterized their writing practices throughout the century.

<9>To conclude, the collection reveals instructive insights from a comparative point of view. While writing literature in Victorian England was considered to be primarily a middle class profession for women incorporating working class contributions towards the end of the century, in East-Central Europe, in Hungary, for instance, it remained an exclusively middle class (or occasionally aristocratic) profession without working class contribution till the beginning of the twentieth century. The explanation for this striking difference lies in the fact that the alphabetization was a much slower process in nineteenth century East-Central Europe.

<10>Overall, *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing* is both a valuable teaching tool and a relevant contribution to the study of gender and literary history. With its impressively wide range of examples of Victorian women writers and their works it reminds us of the immense work still to be

done in order to gain a more complex understanding of nineteenth century literature and its institutions.

Endnotes

(1) Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 1994), 3.[\(↗\)](#)

(2) Lesa Scholl, *Translation, Authorship and the Victorian Professional Woman: Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Martineau and George Eliot* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.[\(↗\)](#)