

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Gender Studies in the Twenty-First Century: An Interview with [Christopher Lane](#) and [Alison Booth](#)

by [Ellen Rosenman](#)



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Questions of gender have always been central to Victorian studies, as they were to the Victorians themselves. The emergence of *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* testifies to their continuing relevance. In the first decade of the 21st century, gender studies is as rich as ever, although it would be hard to identify a defining focus or direction. After a series of paradigm shifts from Images of Women in the late 1960s to Queer Theory at the turn of the century, the field seems poised, once again, for reinvention. Where will gender studies go next?

NCGS asked two noted scholars to reflect on past trends, assess current thinking, and speculate about the future. Notable for their originality, these scholars work across the grain of conventional approaches. Alison Booth's work reanimates women's literary history, the recovery of non-canonical women writers, and historical models of womanhood. Christopher Lane has pioneered the use of queer theory and psychoanalytic theory to historicize Victorian thought. While their approaches differ, they share a fresh vision of Victorian studies, unconstrained by theoretical dogmas.

Alison Booth, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, specializes in women's literary history. From her earlier work on George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Cornell, 1992), she has turned to a study of collective women's biography-- a widely practiced 19th c. genre that is practically unknown today—in her recent book *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago, 2004), winner of the Barbara Penny Kanner Award for the best scholarly bibliographical and historical guide to research focused on women or gender history. In their variety, the subjects of these biographies—famous and obscure, exemplary and shocking—extend our understanding of Victorian definitions of femininity. She is also the editor of the essay collection *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure* (Virginia, 1993) and a co-editor of the *Norton Introduction to Literature*, 9th ed. (Norton, 2005).

Christopher Lane, Professor of English at Northwestern University, has been a pioneer in the use of psychoanalytic theory and queer theory in Victorian Studies, consistently testing the historical limits of our current models of gender and sexuality while clarifying the distinctive nature of Victorian thought through careful readings of canonical novels. He is the author of *The Ruling Passion* (Duke, 1995), *The Burdens of Intimacy* (Chicago, 1999), *Hatred and Civility: The Antisocial Life in Victorian England* (Columbia, 2004), and *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness* (Yale, 2007). He is also the editor of *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (Columbia, 1998), and a coeditor of *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis* (Chicago, 2001).

The interview was conducted by Ellen Rosenman, Professor of English at the University of Kentucky, author of *Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience* (Cornell 2003), an exploration of transgressive sexual pleasure across disciplines from medicine to fiction to pornography.

E: I'd like to welcome Alison Booth, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and Christopher Lane, Professor of English at Northwestern University, to this conversation about the current and future state of nineteenth-century gender studies. The two of you are in some ways very different kinds of critics. Alison, you've identified yourself as someone who does feminist studies of gender and literary history "with a peculiar attachment to the

archive,” in your own words. Chris, your work has been mainly with canonical authors and psychoanalytical theory, with an interest in queer theory. In a way you’re coming at gender studies from very different directions, but you share, I think, an iconoclasm about Victorian culture. You also resist the idea of a hegemonic ideology that determines all cultural possibilities, including the binary of containment and subversion. So, from that perspective, how would you characterize the current state of gender studies?

- A: The whole history of nineteenth-century studies, Victorian studies in particular, is hard to imagine without feminism. That goes back a good thirty years or more. One feature of its long and complicated history is that people have perceived themselves as advancing by repudiating earlier phases. Gilbert and Gubar, Elaine Showalter, Patricia Spacks, Nina Auerbach, and other people at different stages have been absorbed into a generalized Victorian studies that seems to think it no longer needs to do that kind of criticism anymore. We all know we have to take into consideration gender and then of course class and then of course race, but gender is a kind of code for a whole spectrum of possibilities including the study of women, the study of women writers—everyone takes for granted that this work has already been done and that focusing on the recovery of middle-class women writers or on patriarchal ideology is outmoded.
- E: I think femininity and masculinity have probably supplanted “women writers” and “male writers” as the privileged categories. Chris, what do you think?
- C: I agree with that assessment, and I think there’s a practical and theoretical explanation for it. It’s due in part to transformations within feminist and psychoanalytic theory: the category of “woman” (and, indeed, of “man”) began to be exploded in such a way as to make both elements appear untenable or, at least, to raise important questions about the kinds of identification that sustain them. Gradually, the differences between men and women in fiction did not appear as stable as a lot of the earlier models of theory had implied. I think we might all agree on that, but it’s more difficult to talk about what is emerging now, affecting the future of gender studies, when that self-undercutting impulse comes to the fore and complicates every category we’re used to thinking with. We might risk pulling the rug out from under our feet a bit and our ability to talk about the categories as meaningful could begin to evaporate. Consequently, I think there are big shifts emerging in Victorian studies in response to these theoretical interventions, which are trying to recalibrate our historical emphases and figure out how much instability was part of the culture and how much is due to our projection back onto nineteenth-century material.
- A: Could you be more specific about that? How are people dealing with this difficulty?
- C: Some of the effects of queer theory, for example, are broadly anti-essentialist—they encourage us to think about the categories “male” and “female” or even “masculinity” and “femininity” in broadly anti-identitarian terms. We have an invigorated theory now for analyzing Victorian literature, but at the same time we’re facing a conundrum about future research methods—in particular, what kinds of gaps open between the theories we’re articulating and the recovery style of research that many of us also want to pursue, which our work demands. It becomes an interesting tension.
- A: Right, because in any of the kinds of identitarian criticisms—from feminist criticism on through African American studies or ethnic literary studies—first you establish the category and then you theorize how to break it down because you realize it’s an essentialist category. But then what’s your motive for continuing to pursue the study of the writers who have that identity if that identity really is meaningless? Don’t you think there’s also an ongoing tension—let’s say you’re doing queer Victorian studies or you’re doing feminist

Victorian studies—in that Victorian studies itself has an empiricist bent that fancies itself as doing historical and materialist work. We're looking at objects in the past, we're looking at works by people who were historically men or women, we find ourselves going back to what we'd call strategic essentialism to identify what our subject matter is. Also, our methods are often bound to be fairly historically oriented, which leads people to wield facts without stopping to theorize what constitutes our facts or to question our approaches.

C: Exactly. So, what are the consequences of that?

A: Well, to return to Ellen's question about where the field of gender studies is going, at least in my line of work I would say two things. One is that the recovery of women writers may look old-fashioned, but I am seeing some theoretically sophisticated, historically strong recovery work featuring women writers that does resemble what Elaine Showalter was doing in 1977. The other is that the materials we study and our goals have changed enormously; no one is doing *a* or *the* female literary tradition any more, and all publications and cultural forms are relevant. There's more awareness of publication history and social and economic history in feminist Victorianist work.

E: So the reasons recovery work needs to be done, or why it's fruitful, still exist.

C: Yes, I think recovery work is sometimes mischaracterized as old-fashioned, and I agree with Alison that it really doesn't need to be. It's important to bear in mind that bringing texts back into the canon or re-interpreting them through our own modern lens reveals jarring, fascinating disparities between the way we might characterize certain issues and the ways that the Victorians did. If recovery work can pay attention to that disjuncture—that element of surprise, if you like, and even to the aspects of those works that can't readily be assimilated into our modern consciousness—then it's doing something very useful. It's breaking down some of our assumptions about canon formation, for instance, in ways that can be immensely productive. So, I don't want to dismiss that work.

E: This description sounds very much like the work you do.

A: I was just thinking the same thing.

C: Well, I do try to keep that element of surprise alive both in research and in the classroom because I've noticed repeatedly that undergraduates have a tendency to "translate" complicated moments in nineteenth-century fiction and dismiss them as if they were either irrelevant or poorly presented versions of contemporaneous issues. That assumption can obviously be immensely misleading yet it takes a great deal of effort to defamiliarize such expectations—to help students see the conundrums in a different light.

E: Can you give an example of recovery work, whether rediscovering an obscure author or re-reading a well known one, that complicates these stereotypes of Victorian literature for students?

C: They're often surprised by moments in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, for instance, that are incredibly radical philosophically. The whole structure of causation in that novel is completely counterintuitive, with effects described long before we have anything like a determining cause for them, so if you approach Brontë's novel in a conventional way you're not going to understand entirely what's going on. I suppose there are loose, formal parallels between *Villette* and, say, a recent film like Christopher Nolan's *Memento*. It's even possible that contemporary cinema has blunted students to what Brontë was doing.

E: Are you saying that when Brontë used those techniques in *Villette* they were

quite radical and they've now become commonplace in cinema so that now students miss what is radical about them, or that students misread those moments in *Villette* as being identical to what's going on in contemporary cinema?

C: I think it's a bit of each. Students tend to underestimate how much philosophy informs a novel like *Villette* because they can view the nineteenth century in quite stylized and conventional ways, and consequently presume that there's very little formal experimentation in the work itself. At the same time, contemporary films like *Memento* are so dazzling in their formal ingenuity that they often can blind us to subtler depictions of similar cause-effect scenarios in much earlier works like *Villette*.

A: A stylized way based on some preconceptions about who the Victorians were in popular culture?

C: Precisely. And you've talked about that, Alison, in your work on separate spheres. Certain kinds of stereotypes about the Victorians abound, of course, that Foucault was very concerned to debunk, but they are still very much with us today.

A: There's a high version of that as well as a low. Theorists and critics have seen the Victorians in this way, not just our students. The notion of the Victorians with their covered piano legs is hard to shake, or the generalization that all women were repressed as angels in the house. It seems to me that all work should be self-critical about its own historic framework but also try, as much as possible, to rediscover something about the historical framework that existed then. That's the real challenge.

C: Yes. I suppose what I'm trying to do now is take that even further by thinking about the kind of moves that we as critics make when we try to historicize nineteenth-century works. A number of important but sometimes misleading maneuvers can occur that flatten what is most exciting philosophically about the fiction by rendering it as a form of historical narrative or something close to sociology. What's most "literary" about the work therefore tends to disappear from discussion. There's also enormous suspicion—which perhaps was appropriate at one time among new historicists—about what has been characterized as reverence for art, along with pleasure and literary ingenuity, all of which have been cast as forms of evasion, as depoliticizing and ahistorical. I am trying to resurrect interest in those philosophical conundrums in Victorian fiction without saying that they always need to be reducible to certain contextual moments. Brontë's reworking of causality in *Villette* would be just one example of this; another that has preoccupied me is Browning's fascinating way of mixing memories and historical events so that it's not exactly clear what is grounded as real and what is an emotionally charged or overdetermined reworking of actual events. In this way, Browning helps us take issue with certain strategies in new historicist criticism that are leery of the aesthetic or that want to translate them into a form of historical narrative.

A: That is one of the noticeable trends now. If you look at the MLA conference program, what you get is paper after paper "rediscovering aesthetics"—how risqué. I think it was back in 1985 when we all realized that we had to do "gender" and not "women." The political motivation of feminist criticism got flattened out. But the dominant approach was some form of ideological criticism, increasingly shaped by postcolonial theory. Dissertations focused on empire and race and/or economics and technology. Whether or not the project addressed women and men or gender difference, it seemed beside the point to mention literary value (no one was trying to get great women writers into the canon any more). Queer theory actually helped legitimize the pleasures of the text and showed that the criticism itself could be quite gorgeous. It didn't have to serve any clear socially affirming or liberatory purpose. Even if it could read

the text as performing some kind of political work, subverting representation, the criticism didn't have to lose what was most "literary," as you say.

C: Yes, I agree, in its best forms it does not. And I want to go back to an insight you had earlier, Alison, about the way each of these phases of a movement or methodology tends to repudiate its antecedents and everything gets absorbed into a generalized amorphous model. I'm struck by the Bloomian and Freudian implications of that process. In practice, something new and exciting is said that catches on for a while, and until the subject exhausts itself everyone wants to adopt a similar methodology. Something about the way the academy and possibly Victorian studies is structured makes that almost inevitable, but obviously the cycles speed up so dramatically that in one sense we have already exhausted a fair amount of queer theory. There may be concern that the best work is already behind us and everyone is anxiously awaiting a new model, a new paradigm, but it's not clear, given the anti-identitarian focus of feminist and queer studies, whether that would emerge in a viable, sustainable way—not clear, that is, whether deconstruction has made it impossible for a new model to remain with us. I'm pondering this in my work, particularly by engaging with nineteenth-century philosophy. That is, I am attempting to think about problems of historicism philosophically and to view a lot of literary texts as being fundamentally in dialogue with such philosophical arguments. I'm wondering whether you have different insights about what will emerge?

A: Perceiving that we don't have a paradigm at the moment is probably an illusion; the paradigms that govern our work now just might not be obvious. I think most graduate students think that they have to respond in some way to postcolonial theory or questions of nationhood, borders, and hybridity. A lot of this pressure comes from the studies of the Americas. Obviously, there has also been a long tradition of this approach in Victorian studies including the work of Patrick Brantlinger and others, and just as obviously there's a reason for a focus on imperialism in Victorian studies, but it's been happening for about 20 years. What feels new to me is the increasing interest in transatlantic studies. I hate to be an optimist, but I do think there really is a lot of good work going on. I'm looking right now at two books on my desk. They're not Victorianist, per se, but they strike me as the kind of work that has been done in Victorian studies and is happening now in American studies. The models are the same, and they're finding out more about what was really going on in American but also transatlantic women's discourse in the nineteenth century. One is Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry*, which is interesting in part because it focuses on poetry and not fiction. I suppose it may be naturalizing the concept of a woman and naturalizing the concept of the United States, but it's doing quite substantial recovery work. It does not romanticize the women writers as heroes, but it can stomach sentimentalizing. It can stomach anything, and it can read newspapers and poetry with equal aplomb. And another book that could be called a form of historical recovery, though more theoretical than Loeffelholz's archival project, is Amanda Claybaugh's *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Although it doesn't mention the Americanist Cathy N. Davidson's definitive *Revolution and the Word*, it does look closely at print culture and nation-building in the new republic, and adds the international and comparativist dimension.

C: That's interesting. What prompted my statement about the differently exhausted paradigms was that I was amazed just a couple of weeks ago to hear from a colleague that postcolonial theory has more or less exhausted itself—that diaspora studies is its new ascendant form. The question that affects us as Victorianists is the degree to which that emphasis on diaspora studies and transatlantic work can take place in ways that aren't anachronistic, that don't simply appropriate present-day thinking and slap it onto an earlier model. Another problem is that transatlantic work is enormously difficult for graduate students and, indeed, for colleagues to do because it presupposes knowledge of

two obviously related but distinct traditions. Although in the Victorian period there is a great deal of exchange and traffic among major thinkers and writers, it is still a problem for graduate students to become sufficiently adept in both areas. And though I hear a great deal about interdisciplinarity, I think it's very difficult to do successfully. It certainly requires dual knowledge of two distinct disciplines rather than a reduced version of each.

- A: Right. I would add that the nineteenth-century traffic in Anglophone discourses was all-encompassing, far beyond such well-publicized visits as Dickens's to America; it was even more crucial among abolitionists, Unitarians, reformers of all kinds. That's part of why my work has been transatlantic and across periods, because women's cultural history makes no sense when studying only one nation or period. But it's true, when graduate students take on transatlantic dissertations, they need to begin preparing themselves a long time in advance. Also, though I'm overgeneralizing about diaspora studies, what is gained in breadth is sometimes lost in depth. Someone could apply the same paradigms to the South Asian diaspora and to Harlem—the only difference is the input. The method, theoretical orientation, and output may be remarkably homogeneous no matter what you're studying. I find hope in the nitty-gritty hard work that looks untheoretical in the sense that it's historical, archival work, but that is at least informed by exciting theoretical approaches. My graduate students a few years ago became very excited by Anne McClintock. *Imperial Leather* really did it for them. The excitement over that kind of hard-hitting theoretical work combined with the discovery of material that people have not already looked at seems to me the way to go.
- E: So, though we may think that certain paradigms are exhausted, we've become exhausted with them prematurely, or oversimplified issues they raise. There may still be interesting work to be done in imperialism/colonialism/post-colonialism, but a paradigm has taken over that has reduced the kinds of questions that can be asked and that has effaced the historical and geographical specificity of different cultures and contexts.
- A: And let me just tie that to an earlier point that it's really difficult for graduate students because the pressure on speed precludes their doing more than borrowing from someone like Homi Bhabha. But to do the kind of archival work I would want or the kind of historical specificity Chris discusses is very difficult to accomplish in the four years or so between beginning to write the dissertation and preparing a book for publication.
- C: I agree with the way you've outlined these pressures. I fight the same constraints with my graduate students. At the same time I share with Alison some optimism that there are people working who aren't necessarily satisfied with the apparent exhaustion of these paradigms and who still have quite surprising or ingenious ways of recasting some of the problems they pose. I remember Garrett Stewart talking about his own work as a kind of clean-up exercise. After a great deal of work had taken place on one particular subject, he would reflect on its arguments and attempt to engage what was most arresting about them, without necessarily being satisfied by the conclusions people previously had reached. I'm not saying that these interpretations have exhausted themselves; I think it's more that we have to fight certain kinds of intellectual complacencies that might say, "This model is adequate for my needs so I'm just going to apply it to certain texts where I see it resonating most strongly." If we can actually look at blind spots in the theory itself as we're trying to use it to engage with texts, a great deal of really important interpretive work could still take place. I'm confident that literary studies is going to continue mixing and jostling to some degree with cultural studies—that they both bring crucial emphases to bear on material. They aren't necessarily reconciled in their methodology, and I'm quite happy about that, because it seems to me that as soon as they appear reconciled one tension, which can be enormously productive, disappears.

- A: Keeping that tension alive takes a certain courage and originality. Graduate students need to be working with certain structures that they can borrow because there's not time to invent them anew. On the other hand, they need to have some sort of fire or originality that would make the project seem new.
- C: The propensity for detachment also is invaluable, I'd say, to help see around a theory and notice where it might be contradicted.
- A: I was thinking about originality because it's a theme in another book I'm reading, Paul Saint-Amour's *The Copywrights*. It isn't quite apropos because it's not a contribution to Victorian gender studies, but it does some very interesting work, historical, theoretical, literary, with modernist texts. I bring Saint-Amour up because he was so successful moving from his dissertation to his first book, and he made himself something of an authority in another discipline. This often happens in Victorian studies: you see someone working in "law and literature" or "medicine and literature." Admittedly, the work in the other discipline is somewhat secondary, but there are many good examples of this approach for the first project as a dissertation or book.
- E: Are there areas that might be ripe for discovery or rediscovery? In what areas would you like to see more work done?
- C: That's a good question. Well, I think there's more to be done on philosophical approaches to gender represented in the nineteenth century. For example, Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature*, Spencer's *The Man versus the State*, and even, though they're not completely apropos, Tönnies's *Community and Society* and Mary Kingsley's *West African Studies and Travels in West Africa*. The first two touch on gender but extend far beyond it to engage with evolutionary theory and ethics, so they aren't obvious touchstones for colleagues and graduate students wanting to focus on Victorian gender studies, who might turn instead to Mill, Martineau, Ruskin, or even, earlier, to Wollstonecraft. But that's partly my point: there's a great deal of fascinating but apparently tangential discussion about gender in works that are slightly off the beaten scholarly track.
- E: Something may be off the beaten track but still have something important to say about gender, especially if it would have been widely read at the time. Do you see other opportunities along these lines? Are there untapped resources out there?
- A: Much as I love and teach the novel, it has taken up more than its share of attention. It's been very slow for work on women poets to get underway and even slower has been work on women's non-fiction prose. We're still operating on a narrow definition of what is literature that was ossified around the 1890s, as opposed to a broader notion of literature. Certainly in the early nineteenth century people rented a far broader selection at the library. They would happily sit there reading history, travel literature, and biographies. Lots of women were writing in different genres and not necessarily getting credit. It might be a family enterprise, to write some sort of encyclopedia or history. Certainly I've succeeded in developing a high tolerance for reading a whole lot of things I would have never read before (laughter). It's great to think we might not be so attached to the marriage plot. In fact, I'm finding non-fiction prose by women of the nineteenth century really worth pursuing, and a lot of it is just languishing in libraries.
- E: Given how long cultural studies and Victorian studies have gone on, it's amazing that so much material is untouched. We do keep recycling the same sort of fiction and non-fiction: Ellis, Mayhew, and so forth. One of my classes did a project on the nineteenth-century canon, and they found that, well into the twentieth century, anthologies published by major houses included a lot of

women's poetry and devotional writing. The range of material, the range of authors, and the range of genres, and the number of women represented was much greater than it is now. So in some ways we're not really blazing a greatly original path here. Readers were aware of these now-obscure texts and writers at the beginning of the century.

- C: This doesn't exactly answer your question in terms of nineteenth-century gender studies, but I'm excited about work that addresses relations between the novel and certain ethical quandaries, not exactly to replace existing political structures but perhaps to re-imagine them. So, again, different works think about the problem of community or the problems of relationality that touch upon the differences and similarities between men and women, but they pose those differences as a broader ethical question about how one should engage with the world. What are one's responsibilities to the community and to the world as a whole? And how might one dispute certain commonsensical or conventional structures in order to transform or think outside them? You began by saying that we're both slightly iconoclastic, which I like. My aim in *Hatred and Civility* was to revise that tradition of iconoclasm and misanthropy from the eighteenth-century, in particular. It doesn't exactly play out along gender lines but it definitely engages with gender, because the reasons men and women might hate could vary quite dramatically. You see a form of female misanthropy in, say, Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The causes of it (at least as named by the novel) are marital disharmony, conflict, and trauma. But some of the implications of Brontë's depicted misanthropy open into a bigger conversation that many Victorian readers didn't want to pursue—namely, what were the broader stakes of this argument for intimacy and relationality at the time? So I'm excited by what the turn to ethics makes possible.
- A: And I'm hearing you finding renewed justification for novels, for what novels can do better than philosophy perhaps.
- C: Yes, exactly. How novels—and fiction, in general -- transmutes philosophical problems to see them in a different light.
- E: For a woman writer, was the novel the available means of connecting her immediate experience of specific social conditions, the disabilities caused by gender ideology, with broad matters that had been the exclusive domain of philosophy, history, religion, discourses dominated by men? Do you see any novels and poems doing this, and perhaps in a different way than non-fiction prose?
- A: I think what *Villette* attempted was so mysterious that even though Virginia Woolf called it Brontë's best work, it has been a dark horse for a long time. Admired as it was, people didn't see the ways in which it was so radical. Brontë strained against generic conventions, which were tied to gender and class conventions, and whereas in *Shirley* this strain almost broke the book, in *Villette* Brontë devised Lucy Snowe's negative mastery, her abstinence from agency, as a way to triumph over the romance plot. It becomes a speculative fiction, in part about perception and consciousness as well as about education and vocation, and gender and desire.
- C: There are obviously differences in genre and discourse between Brontë and pure philosophy, and there's nothing so systematically attempted in *Villette* as, say, a treatise on female subjectivity. Nevertheless, *Villette* contains amazing meta-moments in which Lucy steps outside the narrative frame and comments on philosophy both as an older Lucy and, to some degree, as a novelist. It seems as if she's trying to register different kinds of perspectives between what she feels compelled to do in order to conform and what in fact she insists on doing quite differently. In those gaps or moments of surprise, something very intelligent is being worked out in the novel that breaks with convention and readers' expectations.

- A: In a bit of a stretch, you could say *Villette* has its progeny in the consciousness-raising memoir of the 1970s. Now we're in the golden age of women's memoir -- the first-person narration of trauma, which is simultaneously conscious of the "I" in the present writing the memoir and the "I" of the past experience. What I find so fascinating in *Villette* is the narration. In narrative studies, it's a favorite instance of under-reporting. A peculiar relationship develops between this character narrator and her narratee, who doesn't get key information until the narrator is willing to give it. And by extension, flesh-and-blood readers become aware of a distance between unreliable Lucy and Brontë, and by comparison, between all subjects performing their personae on social stages. It's a kind of autobiography by a damaged but righteous subject, a vindication. Everyone else's script has it wrong. In a way, its later generic outcome would be non-fiction autobiographical narration of trauma, illness, recovery.
- E: It would be interesting to do a comparison of *Villette* and contemporary women's memoirs. It's my sense that the idea of trauma has become ossified; it's become an obligation, without that element of strangeness or surprise that we get when we read *Villette*.
- A: That's right. What's scary in *Villette* is her resistance. She goes to confession but it's adamantly non-therapeutic. The trauma—"I will permit the reader to picture me . . . slumbering through halcyon weather" but "Something must have gone wrong . . . I must somehow have fallen over-board, or . . . there must have been a wreck at last." Her dry humor at the reader's expense: "I'm not going to tell you, because you obviously don't want to know."
- C: The irony for many Foucauldians is that Lucy's quasi-confession to Père Silas in fact precipitates her illness or collapse, rather than resolving either. At the same time, responding to Alison's point about the elder narrator being in control, it's interesting that there's the additional complication of the elder narrator describing the mysteries of auto-genesis, if you like, or how Lucy is agitated and provoked into seeing herself anew. There's obviously a great deal of antagonism and violence in that process, with Madame Beck being deeply intrusive in rifling through her clothes and M. Paul also going through her desk and trampling on other proprieties, yet there's something about that intrusion that's welcome to Lucy, in ways that surprise her and us.
- E: This reading certainly departs from the more formulaic versions of gaze theory, in which women are always cast as objects of a proprietary male gaze and don't have the power to look back.
- A: I always read in Charlotte Brontë a strain of sadomasochism that covets being the object of the gaze, that just wants to be skewered with a piercing look. Lucy certainly likes the surveillance. Lucy is a busy-body herself, surveilling everybody, but she loves nothing more than to be mortified in front of somebody else. Surely, you can get your students interested in that.
- C: Yes, easily so! In those odd oscillations when she says she "was by nature a cypher," she's trying to detach herself from what's going on and to observe invisibly interactions among other characters. And there's her deep frustration with being called a wallflower -- she's appalled that Dr. John characterizes her in that way. What she's saying about these options or ways of being in the world is ambivalent and intriguing.
- A: *Villette* is also a strong counter-example for any facile version of Victorian gender ideology in the way that it represents relations between women. The novel keeps offering and refusing sisterhood. There's no sense that Lucy likes women. She obviously gets quite intimate with some—there's the Polly relationship that's very, very odd—but by and large we're given horrible

images of women, including the dead nun. There are all sorts of images of womanhood that are sinister beyond belief or disgusting to her. Those round-cheeked Brussels peasants—talk about hatred!

- C: Certainly, that emphasis in the novel complicates that model of female friendship or sisterhood in Shirley. We've talked about *Villette* at some length, I'd say, because it's such a useful novel for complicating conventional assumptions about Victorian femininity or womanhood.
- E: Lucy's modes of communication have nothing to do with that kind of sympathy—she uses identification in entirely different ways.
- C: I've unearthed and written about similar issues in Eliot, too. Some of her novels wrap up with these rather orchestrated conclusions. They try to resolve a tension that is far in excess of any concluding mode. In a novel like *Silas Marner*, for instance, the strains of antipathy keep proliferating to such a degree that it's impossible for a redeeming sympathy or resurgence of fellow-feeling to cancel them out. So often something extraordinary has to occur such as an unexpected death (as in *Deronda*, with Grandcourt's drowning, or in *Marner*, with Dunsey Cass's similar accident for a certain structure of resolution to come about.
- A: I think you're absolutely right about these kinds of tensions in Eliot. We seem to be noting in both Brontë and Eliot some mixture of effects that defy the reader's desires for identification or for the resolutions of genre. But we need to be wary of twisting the women novelists into champions for our side. It's easy to get Eliot to be our theoretical ally. She's the female philosopher par excellence, using the novel as "experiments in life," working out a theory of the subject and of ethics so well that she became recognized as a sage. But critics have mistaken her philosophy as if it were straightforward and consistent. Readers glean from a few of her letters and essays the principles of Eliot's thought, then find passages that supply evidence for the claims of sympathy, and then misread the other messages. Also, they can find evidence for Eliot's view of women as repositories of that kind of fellow-feeling—I more or less wrote a book about that. Because of gender difference or what Eliot believed was a maternal instinct, women can be alleged to have a selfless, self-sacrificing capacity that is the only balm on the wounds of humanity. In this as in other matters, though, it's clear that Victorians could say one thing and do another, or, as we do, that they possessed certain ideological convictions or assumptions that are belied by all kinds of complexities in social arrangements. Eliot herself belies the idea of feminine moral superiority and creates fascinating figures of demonic or ambitious agency (before punishing them). In my more recent book I was preoccupied with this sort of contradiction in Victorian representations of heroines of history. In the hundreds of popular collections of biographies of women, there were celebrated models of quite appalling behavior, like Vashti or the Cleopatra in *Villette*—famous murderesses, crimes of impersonation, cross dressing, or just egotistical queens. All sorts of behaviors that would be seen today as some kind of cool agency were being commended to women readers in these quite pious books often published by religious school committees. Because they were historical and famous—you know, Great Women of History—they stretch the definition of gender roles. The genre of biography helped to resist the conservative plotting and closure of the novel, in a way not unrelated to Brontë's experimentation with Lucy Snowe's narration, or Eliot's elaboration of her implied author as female sage. And it does help to remember that Victorians were quite capable of admiring women who had nothing to do with that ability to be the font of selfless empathy.
- C: That's a very salutary reminder, yes.
- E: That idea goes back to some of the conversations we had earlier about history. It's not so much that the Victorians say one thing and do another; they say a lot

it's not so much that the Victorians say one thing and do another; they say a lot of things—they say everything. If all you read is a handful of conduct books, you get a very skewed view of the models of women and femininity that Victorians actually entertained very comfortably.

- C: It's possible to assert a very simplified version of hypocrisy, but when you engage with figures like Oscar Wilde you begin to see the ways in which that model of hypocrisy and sincerity is exploded or appropriated, so that something more complex manifests in terms of compulsory hypocrisy.
- A: It's not a matter of conscious lying, for the Victorians or for any age that contradicts its own expressed ideals or ideology. You can't avoid hypocrisy. On the other hand, historical critics, whatever our methods are, cannot help but make stories that simplify. Ellen says, "they said everything," but we need to be able to say, "Those Victorians were different from eighteenth-century folk." There are long-term trends that are worth summarizing in a few generalizations: the Victorians were this way or that way. We can't avoid that.
- E: How do these concerns play out in your teaching?
- A: It's a challenge to reconcile our research with pedagogy because our research interests also may not translate into easy things to teach. I wasn't able to teach the book I worked on for ten years. There's no way I'd have my students do my kind of archival work during a course and assign them those collections of lives of women to read. They just don't work as classroom material, so I went on teaching the Victorian novel while I was working on something else. There's always that tension. Do you find you are able to teach your research, Chris?
- C: In limited ways, yes. There's not a complete overlap but there's always some compromise, in part because I tend to teach quite canonical material, finding it richest at the level of textual and narrative difficulty. It's material that encapsulates philosophical, cultural, or political problems that most intrigue me. In saying that, I'm thinking back to the exchange between Margaret Homans and Mary Poovey, in "Recovering Ellen Pickering" (*Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 13 [2000]: 437-68). There's an interesting moment when Mary Poovey says that Pickering's *Nan Darrell* is actually not that interesting a novel; it's hyperbolic and predictable. I was also thinking back to some neglected novels about misanthropy from the start of the nineteenth century that I unearthed at the British Library. They are amusing, in part, because they are intensely derivative and predictable, warmed-over Byron and Bulwer-Lytton that aren't very useful except they help us see how the affect they portray resonates in the culture as a whole. You have to make a different kind of argument, then, about why such books are picking up on that affect and why it's becoming so pervasive in the culture, which means presenting the material (in class or in research) in a way different than for more canonical material. But there are other reasons why I tend to teach a fairly canonical syllabus. I think Terry Eagleton put this well when he said that canonical works put ideological conflicts in their most sophisticated form. I'm not saying I'm looking only for ideological conflicts, but you can see a range of arguments put forward in sophisticated fiction that simply is missing from other kinds of writing. Of course there are other interests in that fiction, but for me the latter material just doesn't teach or excite research questions as successfully.
- A: That makes perfect sense to me. The only thing I'd add is the point Homans makes in response to Mary Poovey, namely that Jane Tompkins, early on, did a lot of revision of the idea of "quality" to include a wider range of rhetorical strategies and styles, and I really do think we aid our students if we trouble their notions of quality. So I have seen some purpose in teaching non-canonical works to get students past an automatic rejection of anything that is sentimental. If you are going to teach women writers, you have to get students

sentimental. If you are going to teach women writers, you have to get students to read women writers beyond the Big Four. Surprising your students with foreign works is good for them.

- E: Alison, did you find that, even though you weren't able to teach the texts you were reading for *How to Make It as a Woman*, your changing notion of landscapes of Victorian gender and women writers found its way into your teaching?
- A: Yes. My work on biography led me to design an undergraduate course called "Lives of the Victorians" that used various genres to get students thinking about the conventions of life writing. So I made them read a few collective biographies like Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* and Carlyle's *On Heroes*, works following the Plutarchan model of a series of comparative lives to make a point. In that course we read *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Leigh*, and different genres to consider questions of gender and narrative. Theorizing life writing and biography also fed into a graduate course. But I didn't want to make them labor over archival material that they had no motive for reading.
- E: As we finish up, I'd like to ask, why do you think at this moment, given the current state of gender studies, however complex it may be, that two graduate students could get a journal off the ground?
- C: I think the journal is responsive to a lot of work that's going on, particularly recent theory in gender studies. It's clear that there's a great deal of excellent work on gender studies in the nineteenth century that needs representation.
- A: I completely agree and it appeals to me tremendously to have an online journal — so wise to initiate now. People come to graduate school at University of Virginia just raring to go in nineteenth-century studies. They've studied it in high school and college. There are a lot of good faculty all around the country teaching people to want to be Victorianists and do gender studies, and they and their students want to participate in this journal. It's a great opportunity right now.
- E: Thank you both so much for participating. This has been a wonderful conversation.

