

**Strategic Authorship: Revising Histories of Women's Writing**

*Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market*. Linda Peterson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 289 pp.

Reviewed by **Linda K. Hughes**, Texas Christian University

<1> In *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market*, Linda Peterson does more than offer a meticulously researched publishing history of six telling case studies that concern Harriet Martineau, Mary and Anna Howitt, the Brontë myth fashioned by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Riddell, Alice Meynell, and Mary Cholmondeley. She does this, to be sure, but her study is more sweeping in its purpose, implication, and achievement. She rewrites the history of women's writing in two respects: she situates women within a model of professional authorship that involved impersonal market forces also operating on male authors, including (in addition to demand or changing production modes) the very need to engage in a self-construction of authorship before the public; and she identifies three different models of authorship taken up by the women writers in her case studies and traces their lines of descent.

<2> I adopt the title "Strategic Authorship" because Peterson demonstrates that women not only were but had to be strategic in their roles as authors, especially if they aspired to become women of letters, who attained authority both as authors of books and public intellectuals. George Eliot, subeditor, journalist, premier novelist, poet, and eventually sage, is the paradigmatic instance. But Peterson does not aim to tell us what we know but what we don't know — and to remind us that there were many successful women of letters beyond Eliot. Her introduction and first chapter are vital reading for anyone interested in publishing history as well as issues in gendered authorship. Though (as the very title of this periodical testifies) scholarship has come to question the division of Romantic and Victorian literature within the nineteenth century, Peterson distinguishes eighteenth-century and Romantic women's authorship from Victorian because of a vital shift in the means and modes of production (one of her "facts" of the market). The burgeoning publication of periodicals beginning in the 1830s that resulted in a mass media era before the century's end meant that women had more outlets for authorship than ever before and new genres in which to write. Professional women authors were thus enabled by and firmly entrenched in an expansive nineteenth-century publishing industry. But they had to address three problems: adopting male or female models of authorship, deciding either to take positions on material professional goals (status, pay, copyrights) or to emphasize idealized notions of service to humankind, and negotiating the relation of economic success to critical esteem.

<3> Harriet Martineau, Peterson contends, invented the Victorian woman of letters, her career becoming almost a textbook exemplification of Roger Darnton's "communication circuit" that involves mutually interactive authors, editors, printers, distributors, sellers, readers, and cultural forces. Martineau first broke into the periodical market, which gave her a base for successive essays and involved her in direct relationships with editors and readers. Some of her earliest essays, on Hannah More, Anna Barbauld, and Walter Scott, further acquainted Martineau with models of authorship. And she acquired in-depth knowledge of the marketplace when she self-financed *Devotional Exercises* (1823) and then sold the copyrights. Already a shrewd analyst of current market conditions, as indicated by her shift from the premier Romantic venue of poetry to prose, she brilliantly assessed it again in relation to *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-1834). Partly inspired by Scott, an exemplar of authorial modesty who spun tales that cumulatively broadened readers' moral insights and horizons, she devised stories that could entertain while empowering readers, acquainting them with economic principles just when the 1832 Reform Bill made the dissemination of powerful reformist ideas feasible. In these respects, Martineau's early career proceeded in step with facts of the marketplace. But she created a powerful myth of authorship modeled along masculine lines in her *Autobiography*, begun in 1855, representing herself as an author heroically struggling forward in the absence of female precursors or a network of support until her first political economy tale was a triumphant success. In fact, as Peterson shows, Martineau's *Illustrations* were modeled in part upon Hannah More's *Cheap Repository* tracts; but by 1855 Martineau had moved far beyond the Evangelical ideologies and publishing networks she initially shared with More and could better shape her heroic account of authorship by effacing More's instructive example. Martineau was succeeded in this heroic, largely masculine model of authorship by George Eliot, Frances Power Cobbe, and Eliza Lynn Linton, all of whom were prominent intellectuals writing across multiple genres and presented themselves as unique writers who prevailed through sheer talent and earnest effort.

<4> Peterson provides similarly detailed analysis in her other five case studies, not all of which involved Martineau's triumph. A prolific writer well known in her day, Mary Howitt exemplified a collaborative approach to authorship within the family. She began by writing with her sister, next co-authored and co-edited books and journals with her husband William, and finally collaborated with her children (who provided both subject matter and an initial audience for some of her children's writing). Anna Mary Howitt, her eldest daughter and a talented artist, provided illustrations for several works and wrote letters from Germany, where she was studying painting, that her mother edited for periodical publication. If this collaborative model did not provide the lasting prestige that Martineau claimed, and if it entailed some tensions between individual aims and collaborative output, the Howitts' shared enterprise was highly significant in three ways. It provided a good income; it merged rather than opposing domesticity and professionalism; and it provided a legacy of female collaborative authorship that was to underlie the Langham Place group — of which Anna Mary was a member.

<5> Charlotte Brontë was the exception to the rule of Victorian women of letters insofar as she identified authorial creativity with genius and worked apart from the periodicals market (though her concept of authorship was influenced by *Blackwood's Magazine*, to which her father subscribed). Yet Brontë's example, as represented by Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), established a new myth of authorship that managed domestic and social claims upon a middle-class woman by positing the "parallel currents" of her life as a woman and life as a

heroic genius. This paradigm diverged from Martineau's insofar as it incorporated normative domesticity into the myth yet also from Howitt's in making individual effort and achievement supreme. Charlotte Riddell, in contrast, suggested in life and literature how difficult it was to realize the Brontëan model after the 1860s. Riddell enjoyed critical recognition for her fiction and was editor and half-proprietor of *St. James Magazine*; yet it became impossible for her domestic and professional lives to proceed in parallel when, following the mortgaging of her copyrights to secure a loan from her publisher, her husband went bankrupt before the loan was repaid. Peterson forcibly demonstrates that in the novel *A Struggle for Fame* (1883) Riddell follows the Gaskell-Brontë model into the second volume, then in the third subjects her genius-protagonist to new pressures arising in the 1880s literary market. Facing the growing fissure between high and popular art due to increasing commodification and the demands of celebrity culture, the widowed Glenarva Westley repudiates remarriage to preserve her career. Domesticity and professionalism, Riddell's novel suggests, could no longer work in parallel.

<6> At the *fin de siècle* Alice Meynell and Mary Cholmondeley represent alternative negotiations of the tensions between critical success within a restricted field of cultural production and economic success at a time when the periodicals market increasingly began to splinter into little magazines and niche journals versus mass-marketed titles. Meynell, like Howitt, engaged in the "family business" of co-editing *Merry England* with her husband Wilfrid but attained the stature of a "classic" and "genius" nonetheless. These respective terms bestowed on her by George Meredith and Coventry Patmore resulted from her ability to circumvent the binary of literature versus journalism: she produced in the *Scots* (later *National Observer*) and "Wares of Autolycus" column in the *Pall Mall Gazette* distinctive essays marked by the compression, intensity, and gravitas of poetry. Even so, the facts of the marketplace caught up with her myth of "distinction." Her essays and poems on children were notable for unmaternal, detached observation, but she began to be marketed as a mother and decorous woman by John Lane after Oscar Wilde's 1895 trial made publishers clutch at signifiers of propriety.

<7> Mary Cholmondeley won immense critical esteem *and* popularity with her New Woman novel *Red Pottage* (1899). Its representation of authorship merges female genius with the sororal feminist relationships associated with the earlier Langham Place group. Cholmondeley also evades a binary between Grub Street and her aspiring author by muting the protagonist's negotiation of the market in favor of the moment Hester Gresley discovers her call to the vocation of authorship. If momentarily eminent, Cholmondeley could not sustain her breakthrough success, in part because the market's interest in the New Woman had peaked around the time of *Red Pottage*, especially for an author disinclined, as Cholmondeley was, to the self-display and London networking by then required of successful professional careers.

<8> My title "Strategic Authorship," however, refers not just to the deliberate strategizing of Victorian women of letters, but also to Peterson's authorial project, which intervenes in feminist literary history. She declares at the outset her resistance to the arc of rise and fall that characterizes many studies of women authors. Rather than charting a pattern of efflorescence and decline, she observes that even early in the century Mary Howitt succeeded yet remained marginal while Meynell could still find a firm anchorage in literary histories of the *fin de siècle* and beyond (albeit largely as a minor author). Above all, however, Peterson intervenes to

challenge the binaries — of professionalism versus domesticity, access to voice versus marginalization, and transgression versus silencing — that dominated feminist literary histories beginning in the 1970s and have not entirely disappeared today. Her case studies of the Howitts and Meynell establish that domesticity and professionalism could mutually enforce each other; indeed, she repeatedly cites Anna Jameson's *The Communion of Labour* (1856), possibly influenced by awareness of the Howitts, which argued that all work — both fathers' and mothers' — originated within the family, then extended into the world to contribute to communal well being. Peterson's first chapter on authorship makes clear that women were always a force in literary professionalism and never entirely silenced or sidelined. If the 1830s *Fraser's Magazine* published a sketch of all male "Fraserians" at a Round Table in 1835, for example, it published "Regina's Maids of Honour" the following year, representing women authors as similarly sociable and intellectual. Though initially excluded from the executive board of the Society of Authors, founded in 1884, women were among charter members of the society and soon exerted organizational influence as well. Women were, it is true, forced to negotiate codes of femininity from which men were exempt. Peterson speculates that Martineau was pilloried as a witchy spinster in her *Fraser's Magazine* sketch of November 1833 less because she dared write about the "unfeminine" topic of political economy than because she publicly embraced her own professionalism instead of masquerading under the guise of decorous femininity.

<9> If her study identifies the hybridity of Victorian women of letters who operated between the poles of the market and authorial myths, her study itself occupies a hybrid space between male-dominated publishing histories and separate studies of women writers. For on one hand it argues that we cannot understand the ideology or actuality of Victorian female authorship without seeing women in relation to male professionals and the literary market they shared; yet it also documents the specific conditions women faced. Yet another important contribution of *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, then, is to demonstrate why it remains important to acknowledge both women's access to the "republic" of letters and their specific conditions as women writers.